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by September 1, 1999
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Patricia Hackett Prize

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 1998

Josh Wilson

for his story ‘The Twice-Dreamed Panther’ that appeared in the no. 4 Summer, 1998 edition.
Charles Sturt is asleep in his boat. He is dreaming of floating in a large inland sea. Dreaming of the warm fresh waters. Lying on his back and looking up at the flocks of birds circling overhead. Looking at the wide acres of green grass around him. The water embraces him tenderly. He can feel the warmth around his loins. Gently stroking him. Arousing him.

He floats on his back and smiles. Feels the waves lapping over him.

Then he is blinking his eyes. Slowly waking up. He licks his parched lips. Tastes the desert's dryness in his mouth. Feels the warm stickiness in his pants. Knows he has had a wet dream again. He lifts his head a little and looks out of the boat. Sees the sun rising over the stony desert wastes before him. Wonders if they might sight the inland sea of his dreams today?

* * *

In his 49th year, Charles Sturt marched into the interior of Central Australia, determined to find the inland sea that he knew lay hidden there. Determined to prove himself and find his destiny. Determined to earn promotion and a pension. One last expedition, he told his wife Charlotte. Just one more.

She clasped her hands before her and listened patiently to his theories. How the rivers of the inland would have tributaries flowing towards the centre of the continent. How they would gather into the large basin area. How the flight of birds heading inland confirmed it. How vast the waters would be. How prosperous the lands around it would be. How he would be rewarded. How it would provide for their future.

He promised he would write regularly.

The expedition set off from Adelaide at a slow walking pace, cheered on by a
hearty crowd. Three bullock drays, 16 men, over 20 horses, 200 sheep and one whale boat. By night's fall the expedition had travelled perhaps ten miles and could still see the lights of Adelaide.

* * *

After 100 miles of travelling the expedition reaches the Murray River. Two native guides tell Captain Sturt that there are broad rivers north of the Darling. Tell him that they flow westward into the interior. Tell him whatever he presses them to tell him.

At nights Captain Sturt sits in his tent, surrounded by sheep, writing up the events of the day in his journal. Carefully recording the landscape in neat well-formed words. He squints over each sentence by candle-light. Carefully considers what to say and what to leave out. And all the while he writes he pictures the broad rivers that no white man has ever seen. Dreams of their warm waters lapping around him. Wakes up aroused and filled with an urgent desire to press on.

On some nights Sturt tells the men how, while charting the Murray 15 years previously, he had witnessed large flocks of birds flying in a north westerly direction. And he tells them that around Adelaide he has observed the same birds flying northwards. He draws a map of the continent in the sand and then draws the two flight paths of the birds with his index finger.

"This is where they meet," he says, "And this is where we shall find the inland sea!" And he jabs the point on his map. Jabs the dry dust.

* * *

By mid-September, after six weeks of travelling, they are nearing the Darling River. Sturt writes: "...nothing certainly could have been more cheering or cheerful than our first camp on the Darling River. The scene itself was very pretty. Beautiful and drooping trees shaded its banks, and the grass in its channel was green to the water's edge. Evening's mildest radiance seemed to linger on a scene so fair, and there was a mellow haze in the distance that softened every object."

The men note that it is not quite the majestic river that Sturt had described to them. The waters are muddy and the current scarcely perceptible.
By 10 October they reach the waterholes of Laidley's Ponds on the central Darling. The natives there are friendly to the explorers and Sturt asks them to show him the broad river flowing to the west. He is disappointed to find one single dried up creek flowing out into the desert and disappearing.

The men set up camp, watching the dark shadowy bodies of the black women from a distance. Sturt however, by the last light of the setting sun, rides back and forth along the broad water hole, as if somehow he had missed the river and if he only looks harder he will see it.

Sturt writes: "Tomorrow we start for the ranges, and then for the waters - the strange waters on which boat never swam, and over which flag never floated. But both shall ere long. We have the heart of the interior laid open to us, and will be off with a flowing sheet in a few days."

* * *

The expedition now strikes out into the desert. The bullocks move slowly. It rains clouds of dust upon them. The weather turns very hot and one morning the men awaken to find that their guide is gone. He has fled back to the waters of the Darling, where all the natives of the area are heading for the summer season. Sturt orders the men to push on.

Each morning Charles Sturt awakens and stares northwards. Straining his weak eyes. Sees the water there. Heat shimmering on the horizon. Tells his men, "It's out there. I can see it."

The men shield their own eyes and follow his pointing finger. Try to see it as he sees it.

November 4: "... I think it more than probable that at no great distance we shall find the hills dip to the north until they fall to a level with the sea or nearly so. There can be no doubt that the plains between us and the Darling were at a more recent period than ordinarily covered by the waters of the Ocean and that they partake of the same character as the Banks of the Murray and the Australian Bight."

* * *

Moving through the red sand dunes is hard going. The men can only see as far as the next ridge. They roll on and on like waves before them. The expedition presses
on until they reach a well-watered creek at the foothills of the ranges. Sturt names it Flood’s Creek, after Robert Flood, who has discovered it.

The expedition is still camped there on Christmas Day, a month later, when the temperature rises above 110°. The desert in front of them is proving too dry to cross. Without water they cannot proceed. Rations have been reduced. The men sit around their fire and think wistfully of their loved ones at home. Dream of the embraces of wives and girlfriends. Sigh heavily into the ashes.

Sturt sits in his tent and writes personal letters to his wife Charlotte in his journal. He tries to remember the look of her face. The smooth coolness of her skin. The soft touch of her breast. But he finds the memories evaporate from him as he reaches out for them.

Later that day Sturt receives a present from his assistant, Mr Poole. He returns from a scouting expedition and tells him that they have found another series of low ranges to the north where they could move their base camp to.

“And water?” asks Sturt.

Mr Poole looks back at him in surprise, as if it is a word he has forgotten the meaning of.

* * *

Sturt rallies the men once more to head into the desert wastes with him, and after travelling non-stop for three days they cross the dry barren wilderness and reach the water hole he names Depot Glen. The expeditioners set up camp and spend their days never straying far from the water, sitting in the shade, wiping the sweat from their eyes. Trying to remember something they were just about to get up and do.

It becomes so hot that the men dig a deep pit and cover it, and sit in it through the day.

“This is more like it,” says Mr Poole, leaning against the cool earth.

* * *

But Sturt can see the waters in front of them and orders the expeditioners to press on. Into the dry low mountains. Whipping at the bullocks and spurring on their horses. Rations are reduced again. He writes: “... before we advance 50 miles further we shall have to take to the Boat when the whole nature of our operations will change.”
By May the expedition is back at Depot Glen. The men are done in and Mr Poole is showing the first signs of scurvy. He is slowly turning black. The men are hoping that Captain Sturt will order Mr Poole to be sent back to Adelaide. They hope they will be ordered to accompany him.

An old native appears in the camp one evening. He is emaciated and weary. He makes the sign for water with his hands. The expeditioners give him something to drink and feed him and ask him to stay with them. They are eager to have somebody who has survived the terrible deserts amongst them.

13 May: "The old Native is still in the camp quite satisfied. He has been greatly attracted by the Boat, and explained to the men that it was topsy turvy and pointed to the north-west as the place where it would be wanted.... I took him this afternoon to the Boat, the use of which he evidently understands and he pointed directly to the northwest as the point in which there was water, making motions as if swimming and explaining the roll of waves, and that the water was deep."

Mr Poole worsens and Sturt finally decides to send him back to Adelaide. On 14 July he bids Mr Poole farewell and the bullocks pull the dray slowly to the south. Towards the Darling. Towards water. Towards life. By nightfall they have barely gone three miles and are still in sight of the expedition.

Two days later one of the party rides back to tell Captain Stuart that Mr Poole has died. Sturt orders the body to be brought back and buried in a cool grave. Then he retires to his tent and sits in front of his journal. Doesn't know what to write. Decides to name one of the nearby mountains Mt Poole.

Sturt is now more determined than ever to press on. He has begun sleeping in the boat. Dreams of the inland sea incessantly. A large sheltered pool of water is found on the far side of the ranges at a site he names Fort Grey, and the expedition is brought up.
August 13: “I have ordered Morgan to prepare the Boat and to paint her inside and out. She may or may not be required and as she has stood the summer wants another coat of paint. Should we find any body of water we shall require her immediately, and I fully anticipate that such will be the case. This dreadful desert cannot surely last much longer.”

It has now been a year since the expedition departed Adelaide. Charlotte and the sponsors of the expedition will be looking northwards. Expecting news of their successes any day now. Captain Sturt determinedly sets his own sights northwards. With four men he rides slowly out of the camp, heading towards the very centre of the continent. He will find the inland sea. Those men remaining at Fort Grey don’t wave or cheer, but watch them fade slowly away, merging with the dry landscape.

The land they cross is dry and sandy. Captain Sturt begins cursing it regularly, wishing they were rid of it, and soon they leave the sand behind and enter the stony desert.

The men and horse’s feet crunch on the tightly packed stones that wears away the horse’s metal shoes. Sturt stops to examine the ground. Looks around and suddenly understands it. It is like the stones on an English beach. He is standing on the bed of a lake where a large body of water has been. It feels to Sturt as if it might have drained away just a day or two previously.

Finally they cross the stony desert and enter a new land. Vast clay pans, where the tree roots show signs of extensive erosion. As if from flood waters. Sturt knows the water is around them somewhere. Taunting him. Running away in front of him as he approaches.

Sturt curses this land too. Wishes they were rid of it. Finally they enter a new land. It is the Simpson Desert. It is so dry that there is not even a mirage of moisture to be seen. The horse’s feet sink into the sand. It gets stuck in the men’s hair and eyes and mouth. They shit sand each morning.

It is like walking on the bottom of an ocean, Sturt thinks.

Captain Sturt leads the party onwards, always expecting that beyond the next ridge they will see the fertile valley they have been seeking. Like Moses looking down on the promised land. Entering the lush lands of Canaan from the desert. But at the top of each ridge he sees land more desolate and bleak than that they are walking through.

Then he stops to urinate. Squeezes his bladder. Shakes his penis. But not a
single drop will emerge. He sits on the ground and stabs the dry sand with his finger. Wonders if the land here has ever felt the fall of moisture in its eternity of existence.

He opens his journal and closes his eyes. Tries to conjure up that image of the blue sea he had once seen. Or at least some memory of it. The warm fresh waters lapping around his loins. He jots the words on the page, determined to create the inland sea there. But when he opens his eyes, nothing is written. He looks at the pen. It is quite dry.

He turns to one of the men and signs with his fingers in a southwards direction. Makes the signs for water.

Later Sturt writes: "Seeing the absolute inutility of persevering in any further attempt to penetrate either to the north or the west... I have determined on returning to the Depot with all possible speed. The farthest point to which we have penetrated is to longitude 24.4 south and I may with truth affirm that man never wandered in a more gloomy and hopeless Desert."

* * *

The small party returns to Coopers Creek and Sturt sits and stares at the water. He thinks of the disappointment that would be on Charlotte's face. Thinks of those distant blue eyes. Stretching away before him. Lapping gently over him. And he wishes he had brought the boat with them.

Then he tells the exhausted men that they are going to trace this river and find the large body of water that it flows out of. But barely have they travelled a few miles beyond the water holes when the land turns back to barren desert again. They encounter a large band of natives who greet them and give them water and tell them that there is no water ahead. They make the signs with their hands. No water.

Sturt watches them and nods his head. Understands the meaning. Feels he would cry if he had tears.

6 Nov: "I had no hope to whatever quarter I turned my eye—a country utterly impracticable, a creek from which it was vain to expect a supply of water, exhausted and leg weary horses, and feeling myself the effects of constant exposure and continued riding... I resolved therefore on returning to the main Creek, and making the best of my way back to the camp."

* * *
Heat follows the men mercilessly on their return journey, felling their horses and bursting the glass in Sturt's mercury thermometer as it tops 115°. Rations are reduced and the men look towards the heathazed horizon in front of them and feel their eyes melting in their heads.

They finally gain Fort Grey to find it deserted. The expedition has retreated southwards as the waters there have evaporated. And Sturt sees they have taken the boat with them! Sturt stumbles on through the wilderness and finally reaches Depot Glen once more. The thin and weary men there surprised to see they are still alive.

Sturt collapses into the boat. He is unable to stand. His legs are turning black. He is contracting scurvy, and when he looks up over the gunwales he can see Poole’s grave.

* * *

The men discuss their options while Sturt lies in the boat, dreaming it is rocking beneath him. The muddy water at the Depot is falling daily and they will have to push on soon, says one. They have to reach the Darling River, over 400 kilometres away, or they will die, says another. But if they wait it might rain and make the journey more possible, says a third. But if they wait and it does not rain it will enter mid-summer and they will have no chance of escaping, says the next.

Finally they turn to their leader for guidance. He has them launch the boat into the rapidly diminishing brown waters of the Depot. He sits rigidly upright as it drifts across to one side of the pond and then drifts back again, bogging in the mud. Then he climbs out and proclaims that they should break camp at once.

December 7: "I only pray we may be fortunate and that we shall reach Flood’s Creek in safety. I must ride in the cart instead of being able to cheer the men on, and even in that I fear my poor bones will be shaken to pieces..."

Sturt is too sick to walk. His cart moves over the sand with the motion of travelling over large waves. Occasionally he calls out for the men to turn around and row back upstream. Tells them they’ve missed the river heading north and into the interior. Tells them they must look for hidden waterways.

The men press on. Ever onwards. Almost three weeks later they finally reach the banks of the slow moving river. “Darling!” the men cry, and fall into the embrace of dark and shadowy waters. Staring in awe that such a vast body of water could
truly exist and was not just a dream they had once had.

Sturt smells the water and sits up. Squints towards it. Rubs his aching eyes. He looks at the men and sees their joy. Squints harder at the muddy sluggish river. Wonders why he is the only one who cannot see it as a large blue shimmering sea stretching away before them.

* * *

"The land itself is a land in the mind. We make up the idea of it as we go. The explorers are our poets." (Rodney Hall)

In recent years accounts of the discovery, exploration and settlement of Australia have become fertile ground to be ploughed by post-colonial critics in the search of new insights into the circumstances under which the empire created and extended its colonial reach. Journals of Australian inland explorers in particular have been scoured by commentators such as Robert Dixon, Paul Carter and Simon Ryan for evidence of the way in which explorers acted as the vanguard of the empire, and the manner in which the textual, pictorial and cartographic records contained in the journals helped prepare the land for occupation. At the same time commentators such as Robert Sellick and Ross Gibson have stressed the extent to which the journals were also literary accounts of the explorer's travels, which included imaginative and metaphorical flourishes alongside the objectively observed scientific and geographic detail.

It is hardly surprising that writers of fiction have also turned to the story of Australian exploration as they continue the ongoing task of embedding the European mind in what is still a new environment awaiting 'discovery'. One such novelist is Rodney Hall. In a number of his novels Hall has engaged in a re-examination of Australian history through an interrogation of alternative experiences of the process of discovery and settlement. In particular he finds in the myths and facts of nineteenth century exploration, with their constant reiteration of the gulf which separated desire from fulfillment, an adequate representation of the difficulty faced by post-colonial societies in feeling at ease in their new homeland.

At the point at which Hall's explorer figures seem about to engage with the land it inevitably slips from their grasp, taunting them with their inability to know it properly or overwrite it with their own version of 'home'. Hall's fiction brings a post-colonial sensibility to bear on the story of the discovery and exploration of Australia. By doing so, he continues the exploration of his homeland and the task of completing the tantalisingly unfinished maps of its spiritual terrain.

Hall's three novels commonly referred to as the Yandilli Trilogy, Captivity Captive (1988), The Second Bridegroom (1991) and The Grisly Wife (1993) are only loosely connected in terms of plot and characters, but they are united by a shared sense of place and recurrent themes. One of these unifying themes is the extent to which the last discovered habitable continent has been resistant to imported modes of seeing and thinking. All three novels make extensive use of tropes derived from exploration.

The Second Bridegroom opens in the mid-1830s, as a boatload of convicts arrive at the scene of a proposed new coastal settlement. The unnamed central character, who is narrating the action in the form of a journal, has recently been transported for forgery. As the narrator reveals more of himself, we learn that he is a young man with some education who has previously worked as a printer, and is a native of what he describes as the oldest English colony, The Isle of Man.

The form of the novel itself is mimetic, indeed parodic, of an explorer's journal. Hall has structured the text so that the allusions to journals of exploration are unmistakable, and serve to underline that this is a journal which points to a new form of 'exploration' of the Australian landscape. The journal incorporates a series of inversions of the conventions expected of the genre of the exploration journal, to the point where the narrator's concluding boast, referring to his time in the Australian bush, is that "in my life up there I discovered nothing" (194). He is an explorer who is not concerned with discovery of a sort which prizes significant landmarks or the charting and acquisition of land for economic benefit, but rather he is acutely interested in discovering the spiritual essence of the land and the landscapes he encounters.

The narrator arrives in New South Wales as part of a colonial power prepared

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to take whatever action is necessary in order to indulge its appetite for profit.

We lived for the future. Any piracy, any theft, any evil would be made all right by the future: isn't this the truth of our colonial philosophy?... From the Governor down to his scullery maid we became Australians, a race with one foot in the air, caught stepping forward.(17)

The narrator shares the sense of opportunity, and in phrases recalling those used by Australian explorers, he describes the site of the chosen settlement as “an untouched place” (3), and how the participants in this venture “knew we had arrived at a new beginning” (8). The new land is apparently a *tabula rasa* which offers hope for a new future and a past “never tainted by our sort of knowing” (18).

With the benefit of hindsight, however, the narrator is able to see that the land is far from a blank slate. He understands that it is replete with signs which resist interpretation because they require a different sort of knowing, a knowing which eludes those who came to occupy the land in the cause of the growing empire. Whereas the settlers look gleefully to the future, the narrator understands that the land demands they deal with its past.

Even the trees are strange to us and the animals are those useless freaks the whole world hears of... Instead of taking us forward, what we see takes us back to the beginning of time. (17)

The narrator also realises that the new arrivals are tied to their own past, that they bring with them the taint of their particular brand of corrupted ‘knowing’. Rather than being free to create a new life in this Edenic setting, most of the arrivals come in bondage with the intention that they recreate the social, economic and political circumstances of the old world. They bring into the apparently unsullied wilderness the knowledge of “human livestock”(20) kept in chains; of men bought and sold into servitude; and of a colonialism which condones cruelty in order to expand its reach. The narrator accepts that he too has played a part in the process by which this new place will be corrupted. In the night before the landing he believes he has killed another convict, Gabriel Dean. Certain that he will be executed for his crime, he escapes into the forest as the landing party comes ashore at the site of the new settlement. In doing so he carries into the wilderness his own “sickness of the conscience” (10).

From the moment of his escape the narrator evolves into a new kind of
Australian explorer. He is the first non-Aboriginal person to walk through this place, and he does so with the curiosity of a conventional explorer. The particular circumstances under which he encounters the land, however, and his history as a native of an island familiar with colonial occupation, create a very different type of exploration. He is not the detached and objective observer of scientific, zoological and anthropological phenomena, attempting to describe, survey and map the land; neither is he the expander of empire leaving the requisite marks of ownership on the landscape; nor the incipient landowner assessing the material value of the land and its products; nor the fledgling hero, shaping a journey which will endear him forever to an expectant public. He is thrown into his situation as somebody attempting to escape from civilisation rather than expand it, and in the process he undertakes a new type of exploration. Rather than constructing what he sees in a manner which imposes alien conceptions of order and knowledge, he attempts to explore the land truly by seeking to understand the unseen meanings which lie behind the initially puzzling surfaces.

It is clear from the start that the narrator is ill equipped to be an explorer of the usual type. He announces when introducing himself that “I am near-sighted” and “a man who sees no details at a distance” (3). This near-sightedness is clearly at odds with what Simon Ryan has described as “exploration methodology’s heavy reliance on sight”. The acquisitive gaze of the explorer was the principal means by which space was brought within the realm of the discovered, and the processes of mensuration and appropriation commenced. The narrator’s inability to observe what he encounters inhibits his capacity to travel and therefore to ‘explore’ objects and places, and it serves as a metaphor for the failure of explorers to really see and understand the land they discover. As the narrator moves through vistas which seem to offer no change or sense of progress he wonders if he has really ‘travelled’ at all.

You know how it is in a forest: ...the nearby trees sweep past you, a bow wave arcing around on either side, while behind them an outer band of trees moves your way... Both the near band of wheeling forest and the outer band counter-wheeling slowed down. When I stopped they stopped. I was a beaten man. They were trees in a land never used. (30)

The narrator’s failure to see the new land is not only a result of his near-

sightedness. When he first encounters the group of Aboriginal men with whom he will keep company, he literally does not see them. This is not solely because his eyesight fails him, but also because to this newcomer figures such as these silent hunters “had not yet been imagined” (28). Explorers notoriously judged their discoveries by the inadequate yardsticks of that which they knew to exist elsewhere, and therefore imagined might be possible in the new place. As a result, they were often incapable of recognizing features or worth in a new land because they did not anticipate what might await discovery. Hall’s narrator must learn to ‘see’ again with an imagination tempered by his new environment before he will begin to know the place.

Hall further deconstructs the claim that space can be acquired simply by possessing it visually, by employing various tropes derived from the development of new forms of ocular aids and means of obtaining visual records. The Yandilli Trilogy features a succession of magnifying lenses, spectacles, daguerreotypes, engraving machines and fixed lens cameras, which help the new inhabitants to visually possess and record their surroundings. As Paul Carter has noted, fixing visual images of the land “was not only a means of recording space but of manipulating it. Scaling down horizons to the width of a page, it enabled one to model reality, to plan invasions”. By using modern lithographic and printing technology to mass produce images in accordance with established European aesthetic traditions and in support of their empire-expanding texts, explorers furthered the appropriation of the land by making it visually desirable and therefore ready for ownership. But as the Yandilli Trilogy makes clear, these aids to seeing and recording the land produce an improved view or a fixed image of carefully framed landscapes without adding to the settler’s capacity to comprehend the true nature of the land.

Forced by his near-sightedness to dispense with the priority of visually possessing the land, the narrator finds he can also forego another of the explorer’s primary tasks; that of interpreting and describing discoveries within the framework of imported knowledge. By rendering discovered places in terms which utilised prevailing standards of scientific measurement and aesthetic values, explorers ensured that their texts were accessible to governments and the reading public. The narrator, however, declares that “I had arrived at a place where all my knowledge was useless” (37), and thereby abandons the explorer’s claim to assess the places
through which he travels from the privileged position of an educated, civilising — and by implication, superior—agent. Whereas the nineteenth century scientific mind sought to assimilate discoveries by classifying them within existing hierarchies of knowledge, the narrator chooses to discard these imported constructs.

I promised not to try reading the messages I heard and smelled and touched, tasted and saw. I would respect them as having no use. None of them would be the same tomorrow. Nor were they the same yesterday. Each moment is the present: it sounds and smells and tastes only of itself. (21-22)

He realises that “I must accept what the world sent me” (25).

Not only does the narrator choose to empty himself of his prior knowledge, but he peels away the explorers’ pretence of ‘knowing’ the discovered land through the forms of scientific and aesthetic appropriation of space upon which their craft was based, such as collecting specimens.

Such curious creatures we are, to be so fascinated by discovery, to have such a passion for things we can collect as items of strange behaviour. (40)

As he travels across the land with his Aboriginal companions he conspicuously fails to indulge in the any of the explorer’s pastimes of collecting or recording data. His journal is devoid of detail of a geographic or cartographic nature, and he contests whether ‘discovery’ of the type required in the cause of imperial expansion is even possible.

I dare say you will be curious to hear what I did out there during that tribal journey... The answer is nothing... The knack was admitting that there can be no such thing as the discovery of a land. Does this surprise you? Granted we hear tales pitched at having us believe that there is nothing in the world so interesting, from big discoveries by Marco Polo and James Cook and company, down to little places called Somebody’s Folly. (191)

By the close of his own ‘explorations’ and the creation of his journal the narrator realises that the notion of discovery of a place is futile, and that it is only another fleeting moment in the ongoing process by which the land creates itself. Not even the most celebrated of explorers can claim to have discovered the land.

As for James Cook being rowed ashore by sailors with hats and striped
vests. You can see them in your mind’s eye... You can watch the great man leap out—success makes him young and springy—wading ashore to print the sand with the first boot mark ever made here. Well, aren’t a hundred other eyes also watching? Don’t the ocean wash away the imprint?

Nevertheless the first boot, being the first boot, you argue, must have been important.

Did it not take aeons for this place to be created, I reply, is it not as old as the stars? So what about a boot mark in the sand now? (193)

In particular, the narrator denounces two of the explorer’s most potent weapons of appropriation, the name and the map, both of which are a means of laying claim to land which is ‘unknown’ because it lacks these vital elements of description and mensuration by which supporters of empire ascribe meaning to the spaces they occupy.

But what do discoverers do? They put names to landmarks unknown to them and not named by anybody they ever heard of. But do we imagine the Cape of Good Hope came into being just to be called that Name? We might as well talk about the discoverers of ignorance.

All that happens is that words and numbers are written down. The chart is a big blank except for a squiggle of coast here and a river mouth there: a scatter of names on a clean expanse of ignorance. (191-192)

In assigning names which have no foundation in the prior history of the places to which they are haphazardly applied, and in creating maps which sketch narrow paths across continental spaces, explorers were not so much asserting their dominion over a space as revealing their ignorance of it. The narrator challenges the explorer’s right to name places based on insufficient knowledge, and also suggests that the imported language which gives rise to those names is an irredeemably inadequate means of expressing any understanding of a foreign space.

Botany Bay, for example, was discovered by Cook because no other Englishman landed there before him in time to call it Dog Inlet. True enough. But what did he do when he chose the name? The place knew nothing of Botany Bay. (192)

Tropes derived from language, and in particular the construction of names, are used in The Second Bridegroom to suggest both the narrator’s sense of isolation, and the difficulty any settler must face in creating a home in a new land. The narrator is
distinguished from other convicts because he possesses language skills. He proudly declares that "I am a word man" (18). But whereas the power over language is usually seen as a liberating force, the narrator believes that his imported language signifies ongoing bondage to an alien system of knowledge.

... Mr Atholl knew he and I were shackled to the same bond of words, words to be broken out of before the new kingdom could find its airy regions among the clutter of old misfitting uses. (19)

Images of incarceration and enclosure are central to the novel, and as in this case they are frequently linked to language as a means of suggesting the narrator's continued bondage to his inherited culture. He is aware that he is imprisoned by his language to the knowledge of the old world, just as the manacle which remains on his wrist symbolises his ongoing subjection to English law. The narrator's father has been imprisoned and executed by the English and he is portrayed in his son's journal as the victim of a foreign law which is encoded in a language which he cannot comprehend.

My father spoke no word of English in my hearing ever. Manx was his language and he stood by his own folk... As for the English, how should poor father even know the law when he had no word of their rules in his head? (59)

The narrator is taught English by his mother, but it is this very accomplishment which renders him a convict after he is found guilty of the forgery. It is, he claims, a crime which resulted from his "love of English" (26); but it is his identity as a foreigner, revealed through his native language, which leads to his arrest:

A professor came to question me on my knowledge of the Manx language, which I was proud to prove I spoke. And then I was charged, as a foreigner in England, with theft of a national treasure. (101)

The narrator is therefore sensitive to the role of language in identifying a people and the space they occupy. Having been part of a territory which experienced invasion by the English, whose tyranny was represented by their language, he now finds himself part of an English colonising force carrying those "alien words of English" (37) into yet another foreign environment. This sensitivity to the inappropriateness of English to this new environment means that he is reluctant to
do what any good explorer should: provide names. Naming was the practice by which explorers brought new places and species into being. A name created their identity and provided a signifier whereby they were differentiated from similar discoveries.

The narrator, however, believes that applying names of English derivation will efface those elements which make each discovery unique by denying them the name which is already theirs according to the language of their own land.

If my names for these marvels do not convince you, this is not to say that the marvels are not there—simply that English has nothing to know them by... And don't you see? If once we give things our own names we would have to begin destroying them. (69)

When he reluctantly provides a name to his companions he is aware that the word he uses is an intrusion on a space which knows no English.

I even caught myself giving them a general name: Men. Well... this was cleaner than clumsy dodges with roundabout words, which would lead to an even greater plague of English spreading in a world which English has no right to. (41)

Despite the importance of language to the narrator, in the time he spends with the Men he learns nothing of their language and they learn nothing of his. As a result he is again taken prisoner, this time because his inability to speak their language makes him a fetish object to the Aboriginals.

The fact that we had no speech in common warranted my greatness, you see, and their need to serve me. If I had been able to make myself plain how could they fail to see me as a man like themselves.
  The Men kept me as their King. (76)

The narrator realises that his inability to speak the native language not only isolates him from the Men, but also separates him from an understanding of their land. The native language is intrinsic to an environment which remains foreign to the narrator.

I realised that what I had taken for murmurous foliage was the speech of these creatures. Talk flew among them, alighting on one and a moment
later on another, till it took up a rhythm. The pulse of the sea drifted into their mouths and out again as chanting. (27)

The narrator's separation from language and his ensuing isolation is further emphasised when he begins to lose his grasp of English. In one incident he attempts to call out to his old Master.

My mouth opened and I shouted.
No shout came; only a gasp of something stale.
I swallowed to get my voice back... Disuse robbed me of power. (54)

He realises that having lost the power over English and not having learnt the Aboriginal language, he now belongs to neither group. In this he becomes an exemplar of the explorer and of the post-colonial condition, isolated from both his imported culture and his new world. His inability to communicate leaves him “marooned” and “untouchable” (55).

Hall introduces a further inversion of the explorer-as-author genre, in that his narrator's journal specifically sets out to deconstruct the narratives of the imposition of the order and the benefits of empire which were central to the explorers' journals. The explorers and settlers of inland Australia saw the forces of order represented by agriculture, science and commerce as a means of making the wilderness productive. It rarely occurred to them that the incursion of imported concepts of order and productivity might destroy a pre-existing and productive order of a type they could not recognise. The narrator, however, differs in that he learns to recognise the finely tuned balance which exists in the apparently chaotic wilderness.

After arriving at the settlement the narrator retains his nostalgic affection for the tightly ordered landscapes of his native island.

Let me show you my notion of perfect order. There it is, a tiny island...
There has been time for everything. Order rules. Fields are ploughed in furrows straight as combs. Orchards are planted in rows... You see how perfect it is, and how complete. (134-135)

What the narrator encounters in this new land, however, is something quite different, where the ‘civilising’ hand of European man is unknown, and it disrupts his preconceived notions of the scale, colour, distance and variety he expects in a landscape. “How” he asks, “could I be expected to imagine what I found here” (138).
The narrator realises he has entered a realm where "the rational world of my upbringing [did] battle against the allure of a thing without form" (14). First he must learn to accept this "hub of chaos" (36) and then embrace it as a form of order which simply differs from the one which he has inherited. He admires his Aboriginal companions for their "perfect chaos" (41), and he comes to see "with joy how disordered they were" (68). He eventually realises the colonists' idea of order is simply another alien construction by which they attempt to possess a newly encountered environment.

I began to see what order is. Order is a way of trapping anything wild, tricking us into the game of thinking we understand. When you come down to it, the need for order is the mark of a coward. (41-42)

And although the narrator has been convicted of the crime of forgery by the English courts, it is forgery by the English which he in turn sees being perpetrated in the colony as the settlers attempt to bring their own sense of order to what they see as an intrinsically disordered place.

But what happens if again we draw back from the detail and take more of the wild land into our view?... Your vision widens to reach a hamlet perched on the shore, an outpost of stone and shingles like any little English port (forgery), its church a smaller copy of the very church you were baptized in (forgery), the citizens on the street respectable in full skirts and frock coats (forgery). But spare a moment to see past the fashions, the fences and straight roads, to see marooned folk lost and longing for the comfort of their bosky county home and hedgerows and Sunday rambles... Is this order? (102-03)

While the narrator is learning to recognise that there is a different and natural form of order in his new environment, the settlement from which he escaped is beginning to impose this foreign conception of order upon the land. The first mark his former master, Mr Atholl, makes upon the landscape is to "put up a fence because he feared his herds might cheat him of power by running away" (19).

Fences and roads serve throughout the novel as symbols of the settlers' desire to possess and regulate the land for their exclusive use. Whereas explorers frequently used their journals to express their delight at the anticipation of the advent of civilisation, the narrator is appalled when he first encounters the fences
and roads which have been constructed by the settlers:

Well, from the crest of the ridge the sight was blinding and so strange I could make no sense of it... The natural aspect of the place was wiped out. The soil gaped with lacerations. Alien to itself, the land lay wounded. (43)

The narrator sees that the fences and roads are not only physical incursions on the land which alter forever its shape and use, but they are also a means of mapping the landscape in more fundamental ways, by marking those areas which have been civilised from those which remain primitive and undisciplined.

The fence marked a boundary across changed land. Grass inside the fence, though it might look like grass outside, was not at all the same: that grass was Property, as this was Nature. Trees had been cleared from the paddock. And the soil, yielding a lusher crop, was being fertilized by cattle. (86)

The narrator is aware that enclosing property not only protects pasture and livestock, but also serves to ensure exclusive access to the land. He believes that whereas his Aboriginal companions have “refined the notion of brotherhood” (73), the building of fences by the settlers indicates that they have very different values.

What is society at bottom? Must there be fences—some people inside and others outside? The closer a family grows, does this mean that anyone who is not kin will be all the more unwelcome and kept out? (73)

In the narrator’s responses to the appearance of roads, fences, buildings, crops and farm animals, Hall is working another inversion of the conventions of the explorer’s journal, a mainstay of which was the turning of the exploratory eye upon the Aboriginals. The ethnographic gaze in The second bridegroom is reversed. The narrator increasingly identifies with his Aboriginal companions, and begins to see the signs of trespass, through their eyes. It is with this new sight that he views the settlers and their productions and assesses their impact upon the landscape.

Please do not imagine I have forgotten what civilization is. I saw the road clearly as a road. The buildings as buildings. But I also saw, with the sight of Men, the horror of it, the plunder, the final emptiness. (43-44)
Although he now knows enough of the land to comprehend the destruction being wrought upon it, he must also accept that seeing "with the sight of Men" will not be enough to make him part of their world. The lack of a common language has been only an indication of a deeper separation of cultures between the narrator and his companions. The realisation of the extent of his isolation comes in an incident in which a young Aboriginal girl strays across the path of the Men, and in doing so breaches a law of the group. The narrator realises in that moment that all communities have their fences:

She was caught facing us. In a manner of speaking she had fetched up against a sort of fence too—a fence no eye could see. She was one of the tribe, so already she knew what was to come. (88)

She is slain with spears before the stunned narrator. He accepts the incident as "part of the chaos and true to it" (105), but it is now obvious that he will always be a stranger to the ways of the Men.

To me she was innocent. But to her own people she was not. Right until that moment I could be proud of having fitted myself into their world. (104)

With its emphasis on the narrator's isolation and dislocation between his old world and the new, *The Second Bridegroom* invites being read as an allegory of the post-colonial condition, of the suspension of belonging that occurs as the settler society strives to come to terms with the forms of seeing and expression demanded by the new land. By constructing the narrator as an explorer Hall points the way to the scale and nature of the challenge involved, as the land awaits the discovery of the nuances of meaning contained in alien geographic and topographic features. *The Second Bridegroom* is the journal of the explorer that colonial Australia never had; the explorer who tried to see the layered meanings beneath the surface of his new environment, and who struggled to understand the land as it existed beyond those features which could be 'discovered' or possessed in the cause of the Empire.
A Story of English

Early this century
my grandfather
left Italy for the States.
When he returned
he savoured
the bit of English
that once chafed his mouth.
"Sonofabitch,"
he'd shout at recalcitrant cows.
"Sonofabitch,"
he'd mutter against winter cold.
"Son-of-a-bitch!"
he'd exclaim
tasting a good vintage.

His children
eager to break
into this new language
rehearsed the epithet
in games.
"Sonofabitch,"
my mother'd hiss
to sisters at play
"Sonofabitch,"
they'd screech in reply.

Till overheard
and punished.
Just Then

Put my hand against
his striped pyjamas
feel his chest and ribs
the sunken cage
his heart is stopped in
and the body is
indifferent that held
its ninety years
to every millionth part.
Outside his room
bees are small vibrations
through the ribs
of branches. I cannot
forget: his breath
gasping off for minutes
then returning
the room of us sucked back in,
then look up
from a sentence and he's:
gone. I tell
him how small he has
become, as if
this attests to something,
and lets me in
through one more shock
doing this
like everybody else
unused to death
must do: improvising.
Having been so much
he's free to take
our intermittent afterlife
as his own.
His sense and memory unload.
In the back-chant
he is dead. Gone from man
to stranger to simulcrum,
our emotions
wrenched as these wrench
sense out of subject.

The Windmill and the Hill, Flying

The windmill spins and tail-swipes
in sudden wind, and blades
that were silver shoe-horns
blurring like axe-heads
and the man they hit hanging
to the sole-width ladder his
head bleeding, and filled with
pain even to see the ground
plunging up to him in clover
and water that has gulped over
the mill-head is effortless rust
down the pipe into the red
down-sky he might fall into
so very easily, he must resist.
It’s the same kind of seeing he
felt in the air when he drove
flat-out downhill and hit sunset
shadows like strips of camouflage
head-first into the contour bank
the LandRover bucking up
blunt as a black cockatoo
hanging, engine downwards.
in float without a seatbelt the
sunset flaring his right eye
like aneurism through the glass
—as it smashed back down
he banged in the clutch, just,
thought he’d hear the front
shattering... then rolling fast
in angel-gear, a wheel scraping
like a hole cut in romance:
trepan of images, not Hans
Heysen basking in the pink
like a sentimentalist, but trees
like skinned chicken flesh
each tree-shadow like a boot
fallen over by the back door.
Then easing the clutch, the
head pressure ease into his
hands on the wheel shaking
his body like a poem, faint
as air above the windmill
the easy, unbroken turning
as he drove and as he climbs
down that shaking end of it:
the terrible licence of it all.
Raymond Carver On The Bus

Woke feeling anxious and bone lonely

Gusting through the windy streets of spring,
pink petals chasing our fine green bus
under Kew's grey slate roofs
and Edwardian terracotta, dragon-guarded
I stare down at the American poems darkening
as we sink into the iron light of Collingwood.

Life was a stone, grinding and sharpening

We hunch like hostages tumbrilled
through a hard place. The guy with tats
and the fascist salute, strap-hanging
gives us the mal occhio. Sparrow-sharp and lost
she breaks the rules — 'Nobody wants to know you
when you're old.' The spike haircut stares ahead,
headphones hissing. Our brakes shriek
like crash victims outside the Tote Hotel —
'Live Band Tonight: Bone Orchard'.

Daughter, you can't drink.
It will kill you. Like it did your mother, and me.

The two Asian boys get carried past their stop.
Carver says his lungs are heating up like ovens.
Lone-handed I lift this bus up Johnston Street
into the kinder light of Carlton.
Party

They leave the crowded room, stroll to the terrace, their siamese-shadow splayed across the lawn.


‘We are what we do’ she says. ‘So what do you do?’ He hesitates, teasing out the implications. ‘It’s hard to say,’ he says, watching their drift towards defeat, yearning for the old movies where Tracy and Hepburn skate in fluid coupling on a silver rink of words.

Their sentences become like borrowed books, shelved elsewhere, with penalties for late returns.

Cramped into silence they turn back knowing they have not been missed.

Working With Words

Inside the pearl and purple cathedral of Oaxaca I saw the sacred serpents and jaguars of the Zapotec stitched into the lace of the altar cloths. That flash lay dormant in the synapses until a word (‘irony’) permitted a connection. Our world, it seems, is never trapped until it flows along the grooves cut for us by language.

Later, resentful, I cramped the moment into poetry, subjecting the pulpy thing to the handsaw carpentry of verse, the old hammer beats of stress, syntax sawn into timber lengths — all as useful as a gazebo, a folly facing out to Mexico.
Today I saw the poem inside a small magazine. What is that font? Who owns those words, black splinters etched in public rows? Do they carry the magic of stone serpents and eagles? Or the power of prayer flags of Tibet giving up their signs to the wind and weather?

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As a teenager I deplored nationalism. I read Marx, Kropotkin and Bakunin, and wondered what it was to be an “Australian” in a “settler society”. I had seen enough racism, both in the city and in the country, to know that white Australians were so uncertain about their place there that they had established what amounted—politically, socially, and economically—to systemic discrimination against any who threatened their hegemony. I didn’t believe it was possible to excuse any white, myself included, from complicity in this exploitation and marginalisation.

As I grew older I realised that even within this white community there were degrees of racism; an Anglo-Celtic background was socially more acceptable than an Italian or Greek one, despite the fact that a system of discrimination also existed within the Anglo-Celtic binary. Then, toward the final years of my schooling, the prejudice against Asian immigrants by all other “Australians” was in full swing. This prejudice had come with settlement, of course, and after all, “ours” was a country that had developed a White Australia policy just for the purpose of excluding Asians. When I left school I would take to removing right-wing anti-Asian propaganda from lamp-posts and fences, propaganda that had been posted by Jack Van Tongeren’s National-Front-inspired “ANM”, which operated in Perth and Fremantle. On one occasion an associate of mine had her foot broken by an ANM soldier. Australia is and has been since settlement a nation of division.

Some of my earliest poetry explored the divisions between the “Irish” and the “English” on the Goldfields of Western Australia. In the poem “Voices from a Region of Extraction”, I wrote, in the persona of a miner’s wife:

And I said that if my church isn’t good enough, then I’ll be damned if I’ll go into hers.
I often talk about International Regionalism—the preservation of regional identity and integrity while being part of a global village. I emphasise the need for lines of communication between regions, for the formation of a common space for discourse, a "neutral zone". For me, nationalism is the coagulation of a group of independent regional identities into a block with more common interests (whether real or perceived, chosen or imposed) than others in the global village; a coagulation that absorbs the power of each region in order to build up the strength of a "centre". Up until now, nationhood has been spatial and identified with a particular area (country) containing varying degrees of internal regionalism—the world wide web may well be changing this. I would argue that nationalism is the natural enemy of regionalism. Nations have capitals. Regions might have, but it's not implicit in their definition.

I say this because for me, as a poet often identified with a particular space (wheatbelt Western Australia), questions of regionalism and conversely nationalism often arise. Even more so now that I am based in Cambridge, England—a fact that particularly confuses the binary. Does my absence from the space I primarily represent lessen the "authenticity", relevance, and integrity, of work associated with this, especially in terms of work written about that space in (or from) Cambridge? For me, the key is the global village, and how dislocation might increase the focus on the originating space. It's that "further one moves away the closer one gets" thing again. And being in a situation of having ambivalent, if not confused, notions about belonging in the first place, this becomes doubly true. Being there, wrapped up in the guilt of occupation, of one's relation to a disinherit process, precludes a genuine feeling of belonging in any case.

I remember as a child being told by rural friends and cousins that The Farm was Australia. This says a lot. Apart from the occupation of Aboriginal lands, wheatbelt Western Australia was fairly racially homogeneous—that is, Anglo-Celtic and wanting to keep it that way. I recall jokes about Italians, market gardeners and red Dodge trucks. Of Sicilians with penchants for knives and stabbing people (Anglo-Celtic whites) in the back, and so on. Then, it was the Italian or Greek market gardener as the Other. Later, it would become the Asian market gardeners with their "exotic" vegetables, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, etc. One of my strongest memories from childhood is the association of the flag with guns. A friend of the family would often take me into his "reloading room" in which he kept an arsenal. He was a competition shooter and a collector. He had a huge Australian flag hanging from his wall. Not unusual. I was to see it again in my teenage years, often accompanied by
a Eureka Stockade Southern Cross and, not as strange as it seems, a Confederate flag. A school friend from Geraldton High School (a town about five hours’ drive up the coast from Perth) whose father was a gun fanatic (right word), regularly mixed jargon of a perceived (American) “South” with separatist (WA has always been strong on this) and Nationalist talk into a rightwing convert-the-young rave. The son read Michael Herr’s Dispatches over and over and over—ignoring its irony for his own racist and paranoid purposes: a worry!

While being, on and off, part of this environment, and deeply attracted to “the land”, and wanting to translate its seemingly indifferent beauty, I was trapped in a negative appraisal of place. I just didn’t like its nationalism, the way “its” people thought of themselves. The pride and exclusionism. Still, I respected tenacity and the ability to adapt—the strange combination of conservative flexibility. These traits are so much part of the Australia’s self-perceived national identity, and consequently “our” nationalism, that they are clichés of complicity. I am an Australian, no matter where I am, and despite my fear and loathing, I’m part of the place. It’s a love-hate relationship. Even now, years later, I have to go back to rural WA to get my landscape fix!

For a couple of years in the early eighties I worked on wheatbins in the northern wheatbelt town of Mingenew. This was a popular way of making money for students—and it was during summer holidays that I did my stints. I had spent much of my childhood and teenage years in rural spaces so it seemed the natural thing to do. I was comfortable among wheat and trucks. I loved the landscape. I knew and understood the farming community. I left partway through my second tour. The racism, or maybe one should say nationalism, was rampant. I would later write in the poem “The Millenarian’s Dream”:

Intaglioed on the silo walls
the cat and its litter inflected
the bloodier face of wheat: ASW, Australian Standard White.

They hooted and cheered
in the pub that night, washing
it down straight from the tap,
while in the limelight
a stranger had sat, marking
dust and twisting a glass,
clenching a fist, wiping
rust from his lips.

I had become a stranger in my own community. When I heard of a bunch of “the boys” burning out a local Aboriginal family I decided to leave, but not before I was beaten up. A visiting South African white who spoke of shooting “Kaffirs” with his AK47 was lauded as a hero. A visiting “Pom” was persecuted, and “if any gook sets foot in this town we’ll blow his fucking head off”. They were going to defend “their patch of ground”! These were “the boys”—early twenties—so possibly unrepresentative of the community as a whole, but where there’s smoke...

One way of resolving these issues poetically for me has been through palimpsesting the landscape I now “occupy” with that I’ve left. I’m often tempted to think of myself as being involved in some self-imposed exile, but that’s disingenuous. It would be truer to say I feel exiled through not being able to identify completely with the national character; but then again even the most misrepresented “redneck” would have difficulty identifying with what it is to be an Aussie, that media-constructed, socially-constructed ID that could just as well be an advertising logo created by Saatchi and Saatchi in London! This “palimpsesting” is a kind of reverse colonising process. I impose a reading of wheatbelt Western Australia over fenland Cambridgeshire. [The results of this have appeared in Imagined Commonwealth, ed. Tim Cribb, Macmillan, 1998.]

The pastoral I write has always been “radical” or “anti”. I don’t seek to idealise this community. But I am part of it. The poetry wrestles with this dichotomy. It is poetry of paradox. To illustrate the issues I’m outlining I’ve written a “Virgilian” eclogue using an Australian rural scene but subverting the regional “identity”, or at least the nationalist reading of this identity. For Australian “pastoral” we might read settler bucolics of self-actuation. In this “Second Eclogue”, I have the “voices” working against the hegemony of rural identity and its attendant patriarchy. Race and gender issues are at the core of the “conversation”; the eclogue works consciously against its competitive origins.

Second Eclogue
(Paul is delivering a load of grain to the local wheat bin. He is at the weighbridge, talking with Jenny, the weighbridge officer.)
Paul

This load will be slightly under, the cops are up the road—
last year I went for a pile—they don’t give you a break!
Is that a new guy down there on the grid?
Have they taken on an extra hand or are they replacing
someone who didn’t pull his weight? Looks Chinese to me.
Gee, they’ve got half the world working in this place.

Jenny

Yeah, and the weighbridge officer’s a girl! What’s the world
coming to, eh? Soon it’ll start affecting the yield.

Paul

Eh, steady on, there’s no need to be like that. I was
just making an observation. I know there’s some people
around here that like things to remain the same, to not
let others in, but I’ve always said, give a bloke a go.
And a sheila too, for that matter! After all, we’re pretty
lucky when you consider that this was once somebody
else’s country. We’ve got to make room for others,
and respect the rights of those that came before us.
It’s a bit of a balancing act, but better than being
at each other’s throats. All I care about is that when people
look after their patch of ground they remember they
have neighbours. Mind you, all my mates say
I talk too much, and reckon I should get a soapbox
and set up in Supreme Court Gardens. But I never
go down to the city—I’ve enough trouble keeping up
with what’s going on in the district. It’s been a good
season though—give me a drought and I’d
be complaining. It’ll be a magical sunset.

Jenny

What I love about it here, and I’m from the city,
is the distance between horizons. It’s as if anything
is possible. The other day I was sitting in the shade
down by the A-type bin, listening to the parrots
laughing as they feasted on spilt grain. For a moment
it was as if I could understand their language.
And though I can't recount what it was they said,
I'm sure they made me welcome,
that they accepted me amongst them. Though I don't mind saying, I can barely stand the heat. There's been some talk of storms later in the week, that it's brewing up that way—it'll be a welcome relief! The ground seems as if it's gasping for a drink.

Paul

Yeah, I agree, it's been a stinking week, but a storm can wreck the harvest. Apart from damage to the crops by wind and rain, there's always lightning ready to spark the tinder fields. Most years I've had to drive my water truck out to a neighbour's place and take to the flames with wet hessian. I've been lucky, the lightning's avoided my spread—touch wood!

Jenny

Well, I suppose you're right. Maybe I'll just sit back with a nice cool drink this evening and think about Antarctica. Though it'll be hard, as conversation gets heated in the hut after work.
The blokes find it annoying having a girl—a sheila!—living amongst them. What's worse, they're two to a room and I have a room to myself. Though I point out that I'd prefer the odds were stacked the other way!
But don't frown so much, they're not a bad bunch. Just take getting used to, or a skin thicker than cow hide!
I'd like to yarn with you all day, but if we don't get this truck moving through to the grid they'll be at me for slacking off. Enjoy the sunset!

Paul

Thanks for that. And you're right, I'd better get a move on—some other trucks have just rolled up to the sampling stand and will be on your doorstep soon. Though I'll leave you with lines from a song that's long been dear to me:
When the harvest sun sinks low,
And shadows stretch on the plain,
The roaring strippers come and go
Like ships on a sea of grain.

In the Australian context, the work of David Campbell is uppermost in my mind when dealing with these issues. Campbell's work plays with "things as they are", occasionally employs irony, but doesn't allow for the ironising of "his" voice by the reader. His are not poems in which the reader is invited to participate. As with the poetry of Les Murray, theirs is sacred ground. Human values may be questioned, but not the authenticity of setting. They are poems that internalise landscape. The reader observes as the poet observes—through the poet's eyes. The persona speaks with an authoritative voice. It's not that the observed isn't questioned—of course it is. But it's mystery of things, (or in the case of Murray, maybe also the energy evoked by "the rapture"), that works at our imaginations, always remaining subservient to this authoritative voice. The process of questioning is essentially a "naive" construct. The critical faculty might be exercised in the georgic sense of right and wrong, but this only occurs within the framework of the constructed voice. It gives the illusion of self-questioning. In Campbell's poem "Sowing" taken from "Works and Days" we read:

It's all right on a still blue day sowing down a paddock
When the skyline shimmers and lifts as if the grain
Had sprung to life already. It's like the grateful
Shudder of conception in a big blond woman.

This is a poem of primacy (the patriarchy) and exclusion (the national purity of the European ideal). It is classically Australian pastoral. It is a polemic of national identity without announcing itself. It is a product of the nostalgia for a rural interior.

There is a poem by Les Murray, "Brief History" from Subhuman Redneck Poems, that could be seen to illustrate the easy movement of the georgic into the polemic. Here is a poem that might well be polemical yet proffers itself as not only satire, but satire on satire. Satire might disguise polemical intent. The poem has something in common with Bruce Dawe's urban pastoral tone. Dawe is not generally recognised as writing "pastorals" and in many ways might be seen as representing the consciously "urban" voice. Or, if not the urban, at least the country town, as
opposed to the voice of the countryside. Wherever the backbone of the People is, so is the Dawe voice. What is it that Les Murray has found so inviting in his work?

Murray is quoted on the back cover of the fifth edition of Sometimes Gladness as writing in The Age: "Dawe is universally loved... he’s the senior poet of Australia. He’s a first-rate human being—not that that would necessarily make him a good poet. His poetry has an unfussed kind of eloquence, wonderfully pitched so it will speak to people of little education or great education. He has a perfectly judged middle voice." One recognises in this the classic tropes of nationalism and nationalistic writing. There is the authority figure, representative and custodian of the common good, the mouthpiece through which all may speak, etc. It is interesting to juxtapose this with Murray’s role as rural shaman, preserver of the spiritual heartland, and translator of the natural. Here the chthonic meets with the ethical; in Dawe ethics are derived out of the common and national good. Dawe might be read as a variety of georgic poet.

With the oversimplification of what the Australian pastoral is (i.e. anything not urban!), the finer categories of pastoral are easily ignored. Radical pastoral, neo-pastoral, urban pastoral etc. In England the urban pastoral is not rare. Peter Larkin has discussed the urbanisation of rural spaces and the emergence of a new kind of "landscape" poem from this, as I too have done on the British poetry email discussion list through May, June, and July 1997. Pastoral, primarily, becomes a form in which the spatial interacts with the "moral". It is the ethical exegesis of space and its rendering into form—visual, musical, and linguistic.

The Murray poem might be read as a polemic dealing with what it is that constitutes the "Australian", as a poem of national identity. In the poem we confront a play with the ironising faculty of the authoritative voice. This voice is feigning self-irony but is actually retaining its moral high ground. It is a poem that works within the postcolonial discourse by working against the "othering" process, though it also mocks a system of thought that establishes such a discourse. It classically has its cake and eats it too. It refuses the label of "racist" or "nationalistic". It has to do with cultural sovereignty.

The question becomes: what constitutes a national sovereignty? The Murray poem is about the discourse concerning the "preservation" of space. And a space whose "short history" is supported by a history longer than the colonising spaces that "created" it. It is potentially a pastoral point of confluence between the dreamings of the settler culture and the Dreaming of the indigenous—an act of giving the dominant culture an authority through connection with the colonised
cultures. Consequently, the satire is linked with a semi-mystical tone that distracts the reader from this legitimising process:

Our one culture paints Dreamings, each a beautiful claim.
Far more numerous are the unspeakable Whites,
the only cause of all earthly plights,
immigrant natives without immigrant rights.
Unmixed with these are Ethnics, absolved of all blame.

All of people's Australia, its churches and lore
are gang-raped by satire self-righteous as war
and, from trawling fresh victims to set on the poor,
our mandarins now, in one more evasion
of love and themselves, declare us Asian.

Either way, it is the irony that destabilises any specific reading.

Recently I was asked by Antislavery International to support an Indigenous response to unsympathetic legislation going up before the Australian Senate regarding land rights for Australian Aborigines. At a press conference I read the following poem:

**To The Non-Indigenous Peoples of Australia**

It's the great excuse—it wasn't us, you can't blame us for what happened two hundred, a hundred and fifty, or even a hundred years ago.
We didn't hunt them down and remove their children.
We didn't come in and take the place.
But in truth, that's what we're doing—all over again.
Everything we do is based on suppressing their interests.
Who'll take the blame for what's happening now?
Who'll accept that lock-ups and jails are still places of death?
Here's our chance to be different, to have a conscience,
to know the difference between wrong and right.
For it's that simple. The rest of the world can see this—why can't we?
Let me tell a story, a story close to the bone —
about a white family that was forced to sell up after working the land for a hundred years —
leaving it nearly tore them apart.
They'd cleared and shaped the place, it was a portrait
of themselves, they'd poured their hearts and souls into it.
On a summer evening they'd look out over
the paddocks, over the burnt stubble, over
the stands of mallee, through a flock of sulphur-crested
cockatoos, into the rich red sunset.
They left to slaps on the back and sympathy
and the words, “It's a hard place—beautiful
but unforgiving.” Their sorrow was understood.
They were not hated for their loss.
But what if this land was them?
What if this land had invested its spirit in them?
What if the land and these people couldn't be separated,
were one and the same. That when plant grew
or animal died it grew and died in them.
That by tearing them apart we left a dead place,
a place without spirit, destroyed the reason for its being.
Until we face up to what we've done and are doing,
until we make moves to put things right,
we'll be less than a people. History for us
begins with facing up to what we are.
Two hundred years back we thought we had it
to ourselves. Now, the world is watching.

In this poem the settler nation is brought to account by itself. The “Us” is a conscious
play against our internalised “Other”. It intones guilt by usurping authority—
authority is not denied but made collective responsibility. National traits of a “fair
go” and the classless society are played upon. The voice of the poem doesn’t
externalise, or condemn without condemning itself.

What is unusual about this poem in terms of my own poetics is that it is
blatantly polemical in approach. I had once said I would never do this and it has, in
fact, since become part of a larger more metaphoric poem. The poem seeks to
outflank the actions of metaphor and structure by “speaking” directly. Interestingly,
the responses I've had to it have primarily come from Aboriginal writers asking me
to discuss the issues or to look at their work. Another poem dealing with similar
subject matter but set in a far more “ambivalent” light, meta-textual in its
equivocation regarding the nationalistic aspects of the pastoral voice, is the poem
On the last day of November
I journey to see my brother,
the tyres sticky on the asphalt
as the ground thunders
with grain trucks.
The fly-blown carcasses
of kangaroos fester like boils
and I think of the times
I worked on the wheatabins,
twenty seasons in hell,
trapped in a hut with a bunch
of boys who had to be boys
even though they probably
found it hell as well.
It leads me to think of Tom Flood,
and his mother Dorothy
who grew up in this territory,
who set the dead sea of wheat
against itself, growing green
under the sapping sun
long before belly-dumpers
and tip-trucks rolled
along this road. The grain here
is mainly oats and barley
though some wheat spills
from the augers—but not Oceana Fine
which belongs to another place
and another time. Soon I'll hear
how the cover of my book
was ripped from its spine
by some Nyoongah mates
of my brother's—they reckon
that tractors and ploughs
are bad for the land,
and they're right.
But this is the heritage
I bring with me,
and there's no denying it.
The windrows layer the hills
like enormous elegant snakes —
the art of humans is always
deceptive. I shouldn't be 'saying' this
but intimating or illustrating
by allusion or association —
I should find a new language
that will burrow deep
into the conscience
as if it were a maggot
in a sheep or kangaroo carcass,
as if the conscience
were a piece of mangled meat
hit again and again by trucks.
Knocking some sense into it
some smart arse might say.
But this language would have to be
like everything I see,
but understood by those
who can't or haven't seen.
For it's them I'd want to tell.
For it's a story, it's my story
as well. Like eucalypt blossom
luminous in the upper atmosphere,
like another season laying
itself over this one,
like unspoken family histories
that might account for it
but don't need to. I pass
a silo, and a dead numbat.
They're rare, and the stripes
are like a warning. Later
my brother will tell me
there've been heaps
around this season; he's
been out in the bush
with his girlfriend, maybe
near the Devil's Backbone,
which is a place sacred
to her people, but now called
what the farmers in the district
call it. And as I drive
through the long paddock
glass wheat stalks deflect the sun
and the paddocks shimmer;
dams glower like blue windows
in a false surface. The long paddock —
where sheep are grazed in a hard season,
where dogs work the space
between fence and road,
and a red-capped parrot sits
among a flock of twenty-eights.
And nearby, wandoo brilliantly white
strikes the already hollowing sky,
while dense stands of mallet —
once an industry in Narrogin —
stand bolt upright, seeded
into chained scrubland,
the moon like a damaged ball-joint,
crops fox-red, hawks over the hay.
Here, with only the wind
rushing through the car window,
my language is of sight
and words merely compressions
of what I see: parrot flocks
seething on the ragged edge
of the soon-to-be harvested crop,
the header comb set low
and a crew getting ready
to spot that night. The images
crash into each other. Distantly
an old Nyoongah woman sings echidnas
out of their tree-stump hollows,
balled and spined
they walk out, struck by song.
The wheels hit a rupture in the road.
I struggle to maintain control.
Everything here is like something else,
because it is not as it was.

This poem has aroused most interest in readers from outside Australia who recognise the ambivalence of the “authoritative voice”. Which is not to say that the ambivalence can’t be seen by the “internal” reader, but that it is a poem where the external and internal spaces meet. It is unsure of its space. The “long paddock” is the land on either side of a road that “doesn’t belong to anyone” (that is, it belongs to the Crown). It is considered a neutral space. The invasion of the “neutral” space (actually very much part of Aussie mythology) by the agents of occupation, the settler-invader binary, is the engine driving the poem’s metaphorical content. It is the “same” poem as the polemic. And this introduces interesting questions about reception, and perceived or targeted audiences.

It would be easy to suggest that the polemic is written for easy access and consequently a broad audience. But this isn’t the case—the poems are both written with the same audience in mind. What makes the difference between the two is our application of the notion of national identity, and what it is that the nation is capable of absorbing. An apparently direct attack as in the polemic becomes immediately threatening while the “disguised” attack in the “long paddock” poem is seemingly lost through a lack of comprehension. Why is this? I’d argue: because the reader expects to find in the pastoral poem sympathy towards settler culture. After all, isn’t that what Australian pastoral is? The polemic, while including rural material—that is, material of rural space—is clearly external. It avows knowledge and participation/interaction with this space but implies that the “voice” is now externalised. It claims kinship but betrays the national spirit.

Questions such as those addressed in this paper are at the core of my poetics and my understanding of the Australian pastoral. This “form” is a vehicle of nationalist yearning and either through it or against it we might read all Australian poetry. It lurks in the background regardless. I used to discuss this issue many times with John Forbes who argued that the Australian pastoral is a nostalgic folly and
entirely unrepresentative. But this is its strength, and this is what makes it the ultimate tool of nationalistic sentiment—it is always there, allusive, chthonic, and entirely predictable in its reception, if not its content. It is my project to subvert this reception and consequently the blind nationalism that supports it.

Ode to John Forbes (or, Ring of Bright Water)

The interior fights back
like the inoculated rabbit
in the Flinders Ranges
as you watch an adult movie
just to find that it doesn't
do the trick, despite a view
from the hotel window
out over the sweeping coast,
and summer fashions
in the bar that might be
pure Sydney. In Melbourne
you don't get as much of the beach
as you'd like and have probably
forgotten what bright water
really is; well, from Bondi
I write that Dupain's bathers
wear style like suncream,
and despite the risk
wear little else.
Consider the resilience
of the pastoral
in the management of guilt
in which diocesan support
helps you through such
difficult times: when drought comes
or the wool prices are down
they improvise, live off their wits;
and despite the concentration
of the population on the edge
they still look inwards
when fluctuating prices
upset the budget—
those yokels from Ironbark
need a city bloke like you
to put them in their places!
And in that crucible of post-modernity,
where you helped invent the
“Sydney Poem”, they forget
the immediacy of nostalgia
that wasn’t borrowed
from the post-atomic “Fifties”,
or the belief that it was
the Americans who led
the coasties away
from the grim idyll
of the interior.
The challenge for an
Aussie otter is to glow
like neon on the balmiest
evening, to swim in company
in the unsublime waters
of the Harbour
listening to “Good Vibrations”
as container loads
of manufactured goods
make their way towards
the centre of the Empire.
The Border is a Place

On arrival you feel the slap that it's not easy to be nowhere, stripped of a home, dispossessed of money, power, roots. You may even feel despair, God knows the landscape is forbidding, you could unpack your bag but in it there is nothing but the truth. The border instructs: peer ahead yet look back over shoulder; hold your ground, yet ponder all directions; hold your ground.

The border has no name, cannot be seen, can be difficult to know the air is thin, may be sharp you must inhale the unfamiliar. Acuity is best when place is strange, it is not easy to be nowhere in the pleasure of surprise, some compensation.

Hold to your ground, the border will instruct you in the rhythms of not-belonging. Sharpen your eyes, unpack, the truth is you will make life over in the margin; the border is a place, a certain state you can move into.
The border is a place without a name or set dimensions; there is no end and no beginning; there are no customs but the freedom of the threshold, and it is true that on arrival it is frightening. Steady your gaze, and ponder all directions; hold to your ground, the frontier falls away.
“So on the fifth day sped his departing the goddess Calypso,
Bathing him first and arraying him freshly in fragrant apparel.
Then to the raft she conveyed dark wine in a bottle of goat-skin
—One was of wine and another, a greater, of water- and viands
Stowed in a wallet; and many a toothsome relish she added.
Then did she send him a favouring breeze both gentle and kindly.”
(From the Odyssey, translation H.B. Cotterill)

On the southwestern fringe of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia,
Dussy stumbles over sand dunes. A gunshot wound blossoms like a red
carnation on his right shoulder. A smoke of bushflies seethe over his
blood-soaked shirt. Seaman’s legs, thick as old pines, stumble him over a reddened
ocean of sand. Dussy wipes his stubbled chin with a dusty wrist and gingerly
touches his parched lips. He staggers to a halt for a moment, fighting off a wave of
delirium. So it comes to this, he thinks. Death by exposure in this godforsaken
wilderness. An ironic death for a son of a son of a fisherman.

Five miles away, an old Landcruiser, rust and rattletrap, bumps carefully,
methodically, over the spinifex moonscape. Three 44-gallon drums stand, lashed
together, in the trayback. A shovel, steel toolbox, handpump, roll of shade cloth,
and two spare tyres bounce and clatter in the back like excited schoolkids. Scoaply,
a heavy equipment operator at Mt. Newman, serene as a sage, pink as a peach, fat
as a cherub, ugly as a Pekingese, grips the wheel, sweat-palmed and serious. Her
Cinderella locks bound and stuffed under dusty Akubra, Scoaply defocuses her eyes
crazily, purposefully, letting rippling heat waves dance the desert horizon sea-wise
into a mirage of rusty swells.

A sinuous rocky outcrop rises like a snake’s backbone from the wine-dark plane
of desert to her left. Scoaply angles towards the rocks following well-worn tyre tracks. The Landcruiser's wheels spit sand, slip, then grip the weathered rock. Scoaply straddles the long narrow finger of stone, bumping over the rocky vertebrae for several kilometres before dropping into a hidden declivity of boulder and sand dune. Weathered, leafless, grape vines peek from a crack in the rock, first sentinel of her contrived oasis. The grotto. A secret shared by fewer than half-a-dozen people on the face of the Earth. And two of them dead now, she muses.

Scoaply parks next to the water tank which is wedged into a small gorge and piled over with rocks. A hollow cairn of stone and aluminium. She hefts her walrus frame onto the trayback with an exhausted grunt. Do it now, she self-advises, while you still have the energy. She hand-pumps 120 gallons of water into the tank from the drums. Arms like a Barbary pirate beneath womanly sheath of fat. Sweating. Batting the flies from her eyes and mouth. Finished, chest heaving, she finally allows herself to approach the cave entrance: a thick timber door set into a rock wall, incongruous and disconcerting as a burning Dali giraffe.

Scoaply opens the door quickly and slips through, closes it against the flies and heat. Inside, mercifully, ten degrees cooler. Hector and Homer, the peachfaces, warble their greetings, flap their pleasure at her return. Later, under moonlight, flies gone to wherever flies go, stars the only witness, Scoaply bares her body, watermelon breasts and swollen stomach. She lets down her auburn tresses, which fall calf-length, and bathes from a tin pale of bore water. Voice as rich as butter, as sad as a Holocaust victim, she sings: ... I'll eat your strawberries, I'll drink your sweet wine, a million tomorrows will all pass away, ere I forget.

The joy of this small concession to comfort. Scoaply sleeps on a queen-sized waterbed. A bladder of wetness, cavern-hidden in this ocean of rock and sand. By 8:30 pm, full of cheap chablis and dolphin-dreaming, Scoaply skinny-dips into sleep, where ugly ducklings grow to swans and handsome princes rescue love-lorn maidens.

At 4:30 am, the Landcruiser slips off the snake's skeleton and plops into the desert floor. Passes within two hundred metres of Dussy, who reels between hallucination and lucidity, death and dreaming. Dussy croaks out an anguished plea to the receding tail-lights.


A man, thinks Dussy, as the roar of the Landcruiser dies in the distance. A man.
What's he doing so far off the highway? Hiding? Like me? Lone prospector? Fugitive? Will he return this way soon? Soon enough? One day, Dussy thinks. I can last one more day. He crawls towards the path of the Landcruiser.

Early evening. Scoaply, half-soused from Saturday afternoon's ritual booze-up, wends her way home. Up ahead, a slumped form lies directly across her wheel-tracks. A roo? A sack? A man! Her heart races, confused, suspicious. Way out here? Smack on her private track! No vehicles in sight. Strange. She stops, leaves the motor running, climbs out of the cab to inspect. Fears a dead body. Has seen a few in her time. Never pretty. This one covered in a black blanket of flies. She kicks it softly with her dusty boot, revulsion churning in her stomach. A groan and a twitch in response. She starts, shocked. Bends down, waves the flies away, sees the blood-saturated shirt. A city bloke. City clothes. She turns him over. Two-day growth pokes through the sand-covered chin.

Scoaply ponders her options in a drunken haze. Camp nurse at Newman? Long drive to Port Headland. The grotto? Take him home? Risky. None of her business. He's probably bad news, shot up, on the lam, escapee. Still, she can't leave the poor bugger out here. Too plastered, not thinking clearly, she bundles him into the trayback with an effort. He's a heavy bastard. She drives back to the cave all excitement and apprehension.

Back in the grotto, Scoaply throws back a glass of chablis to steel herself. Strips him, wincing at the crusty crenulation of the wound. She washes him, every inch. Pours kerosene over the shoulder, old antiseptic tried and true. Drinks more chablis and watches him closely. Chides herself for her silly boldness. Pours some water down his throat. He wakes once, fixes her with sky-blue eyes, glazed with madness, passes out again. She sits back, inspects his nakedness with self-conscious curiosity. Has rarely seen a naked man in the last decade. Admires the sprinter's legs, broad shoulders. He's a handsome bastard, she chuckles to herself.

What now? Not like taking in a stray cat. She swallows a lump of fear lodged in her throat. Options flit around her dulled sensibilities like bushflies around a dead camel. What if he dies?

Bury him. Who would know, she muses, amazed at her own matter-of-factness. Tomorrow is Sunday. Lucky. Her only day off. Homer and Hector fuss and twitch, not used to strangers. Unnerved, Scoaply gulps more chablis and falls asleep in the chair. Dreams herself a sea-nymph, lithe and beautiful, on a far-flung isle amid an azure sea.

In the morning Scoaply is up before dawn, like usual. Body-clock tuned to a
decade of life as a rock-ape, cruncher of stones, mover of mountains. The man snores. A good sign. Scoaply fixes her staple breakfast beans and eggs on toast with black coffee. The smell wakes him. He must be house-trained, she thinks. Noticed the ring when she washed him. He grunts and clears his throat.

‘Water,’ he croaks.

‘Water it is then,’ she says, and pours him a cupful. He drains it and motions for another. She grabs the cup and refills it. ‘Take it slow, love, steady as she goes.’ Moments later he can talk. Looks around him curiously.

‘Where am I?’

‘East of Nullagine. In a cave. I live here. Name’s Scoaply.’


‘I reckon I did.’

‘Thanks.’

‘No worries. What’re you doing out here?’

‘Long story.’

‘Righto. We got plenty of time. You hungry?’

‘Not yet. Reckon I will be though.’

Later, he eats. Whatever she can throw at him. Appetite like a starving horse. Dussy can’t believe his luck. Secret sanctuary and a dutiful samaritan to boot. He feels obliged to tell her everything. Why not? He owes her that, beyond all else. Sees her lone hermit’s life and bemused interest in him shine from liquid eyes. Tells her of the family vendetta, the gun fight in Dampier, his wife and son in Ballina, the death of his brother at the hands of crooked cops. She smiles fit-to-burst at these revelations. Not frightened of him at all. Sympathetic. A refugee from society, like himself. Kindred spirit. Tough as old boot-leather.

Scoaply listens, dresses his wound, silently keens to his litany of bad luck. Poor bastard. Cops will kill him sure enough if they catch him. His only immediate options: lay low, heal up, sneak back to the east coast in ... what? Weeks? Months? The possibilities dance before her eyes like startled moths. The titillation of it all a welcome balm to the staid sameness of her life.

On Monday, Scoaply rings an old mate from Newman — Sherm, a retired surveyor. A wizened old digger, out to-pasture in Adelaide, ex-lover, father-figure, closest thing to family she’s known. She gets him to ring Dussy’s wife, Penny, and relay a message. Sherm is sullen on the phone, worried, dubious, compliant. Scoaply knows she can trust him.

In the weeks that follow, Dussy and Scoaply share the waterbed. Platonically at
first. Desperation and desire, fuelled by casks of chablis, lead to nocturnal couplings. Scoaply drifts on currents, giddy with sweet aches and regular fulfillment. Dussy pines for his wife and settles for this heaven-sent surrogate. Nightly, Scoaply porpoises through swells, gasps at new ecstasies. Dussy staggers through the wasteland of his life, thrusts his frustrations home in frantic grappling. Cold lover with an ardent maid. Evenings, Scoaply sings to him: 'You'll know who I am by the song that I sing, I'll feast at your table, I'll sleep in your clover, who cares what tomorrow will bring ...

Months pass. Scoaply in heaven. Dussy in hell. He knows what he does to her, berates himself his weakness. She knows what he does for her, forgives him his adultery. Love beds anguish and begets pathos.

One summer Sunday, Dussy out wandering, the low growl of a diesel approaches the grotto. Scoaply, a wink this side of hysterical, sighs with relief to spot Sherm's green Landrover shambling along the snake's back. He arrives, shy and dusty, concern stamped on his wrinkled face.

'You scared the living shit out of me you old bugger!' Scoaply yells in greeting. 'Good! You need a little excitement out here,' he jests in response.

They hug. Oh no, there's no shortage of that, she thinks, grinning, relieved. Sherm enters and plops on her rattan chair. A few pleasantries. A cuppa. Finally she can't stand it anymore.

'Why did you come all the way out here, Sherm?'

'I dreamt about you, Darlin. I still got the sight. Why would I drive for days through the centre? It calls, I obey. You with a man in a cage. The key was around your neck. Him and kid drowning in a fishtank nearby. You gotta let 'im go, he's not yours. It'll come to no good.'

'He's not under lock and key! I saved his life. He needed a hideout. I've known about his family all along. He came didn't go out and catch him! I've bought his tucker, got clothes, that's all. I've looked after him.'

'You sleep with 'im, mate?'

'So what?! What's it to you?'

'Has he got any money? Or a car?'

'No.'

'Coppers want 'im bad, don't they?'

'I guess.'

'You know!'

'So? What am I supposed to do? Kick him back out in the desert?"
'Send 'im packin, darlin. However you can. You have to. I dreamt it.'


Two nights later, over dinner, Dussy stares a hole in his wine glass, morose, closed up. Scoaply is a raw nerve ending. Has vowed to tell him tonight.

'What's the matter?' she asks.

'Just missing the wife and kids, mate.'

'I know, love.'

'Don't know how I'm gonna get back.'

'I could help.'

Dussy looks up, startled, suspicious. Has borne her fevered pleas to linger too many steamy nights. 'How?'

'There's an old Holden ute at Newman. Abandoned a couple of years ago. Nobody really owns it. I asked around. It's still got plates on it. Needs a couple of tyres and a new fuel pump. I could lend you the money for petrol. You could sneak back in it. They're probably not looking as hard for you now. Send me the money later...' she trails off, looks down, eyes brimming. Dussy looks at her hard, sceptical, suspects treachery.

'Bullshit! An unregistered ute? All the way across country? Who have you told about me?'

'No-one! I swear!' Looks him in the eye, tears streaming, knife in the gut.

'I don't believe you! Why are you doing all this for me?'

'Why do you think, you bastard! Shows the way your mind works! If I had a husband and child I loved and I couldn’t get back to them on my own I’d be grateful if someone offered to help. My heart’s not a block of bloody ice like yours! At least I know what pity is!'

Scoaply leaps from the table and runs into the starry night, sobbing, stung to the quick. Dussy sits, head in hands, misery incarnate. How could he not trust her? Has she ever done a single thing to deserve his mistrust? Has she ever done anything but give and give and give? He runs to the door, calls her name into the black ether. No answer but the wind.

Later, she returns, cool, resigned. Avoids his gaze. Sits in a chair, huddled with the peachfaces. Drinks hard. Won't speak. Silently, Dussy draws up a chair behind her. Unties her long hair until it spills out like a dark waterfall. He brushes it for her,
wordlessly, gently. A clumsy apology she accepts with her acquiescence.

After a time, Scoaply speaks: 'I know it will be a dangerous trip in the ute. I'm sorry. It's the best I could do. I know you want to go home. I bet she's pretty. Must be to catch a bloke like you. I've always been fat and ugly. Only blokes that are ever interested in me are either shit-faced drunk, desperate, or lecherous old farts.'

'You're beautiful, mate. You've got lovely hair and skin,' Dussy tries. 'You sing like a bird, you cook better than Penny. Know a lot of blokes that'd marry you in a minute.'

'Rubbish you lying git.'

And so it goes, Dussy flattering, Scoaply deflecting.

Four days later, Scoaply drives him to Newman. At the Mobil station on the edge of town sits a dusty Holden ute. Four new tyres, new fuel pump, filled with petrol, more fuel in the back in jerry cans. Dussy opens the door. Boxes of food, thermoses of water and coffee, change of clothes, cleaned and folded, two sets of mine-issue work boots, a radio, a cask of chablis, sunglasses, a brand new Akubra.

Dussy, blown out, lump in throat, turns to thank her. She won't accept a mouth-kiss, turns her cheek. Presses a wad of fifties into his hand.

'There's a thousand there, love, that should get you home,' she croaks, shaking, biting her lip.

'I don't know what to say, Scoaply. Thanks. I ... I

'Don't say nothin. Go on. Sod off.' A peck on the cheek and she turns, waddles towards the Landcruiser, doesn't look back.

That night, Dussy passing through Mundawindu, Scoaply cuddles her peachfaces, throws down another glass of chablis, wipes her eyes, sings sweet and clear: 'I can't live on promises, winter to spring. Today is my moment, now is my story, I'll laugh and I'll cry, and I'll sing.'

[Song lyrics from “Today” (traditional)]
Today I walked the whole length of the main city square with my eyes shut. Maybe I had taken a good look at where I was headed in the instant before I shut my eyes, because when I opened them I had barely veered to the left or the right, instead I had gained the length of the square with little error.

But what was strange was that no one was looking at me. I had imagined that it would be impossible to perform such a feat of false blindness without arousing interest and curiosity, or even public abuse, but when I opened my eyes no one was watching. In fact it had just begun raining and there was almost no one in the square. Two women and a child entered the public toilets on the far left. A man wearing a deep blue overcoat crossed the square on a diagonal and disappeared out one end. For a moment I was totally alone at my arrival point. I had been blind and not a single person had noticed.

The place I had reached with my eyes shut was the bottom of the stairs that led to the wooden overhead bridge. The wooden bridge is always a good place to stop for a few minutes. It spans a main arterial road leading out of the city, turning to the left one looks back towards the square, to the right is the harbour and a man-made lagoon used for dinghies and kayaks. Beyond the lagoon lies a boatshed, a car park is behind that, and then finally the waterfront.

Two years ago I spent a month on holiday in Dunedin. My boyfriend and I had drunk all the way down on the train. The boyfriend had friends down there, stacks of them, and when we hit town we looked every single one of them up, staying drunk all week as we staggered from pub to pub along streets with names like North Leith, Glenleith, Lowleith, and MacLeith.

One night we’d fucked in the Botanic Gardens whilst trying to find our way over to North East valley. We’d started kissing when we got to the statue of Snow White in the children’s garden, and ended up being copulating dwarves beneath her
nine foot copper skirts. Smooching and kissing and rolling in the damp grass, I'd got funny grassy skid marks on my chin from all the violent movement, and the green stain on the back of my white dress had never totally washed out, keeping that night a green memory for me.

It had been good, making love outside at night is like pissing outdoors, there's a remarkable feeling when you look up and see the heavens curving above you that you are doing something you've been made for. It wrenches you back to some deep primeval beginning and suddenly you are at one within the natural, savage environment.

Steam was almost coming off our bodies by the time we'd finished. We'd laughed and helped each other up and beaten grass off our backs while we hugged and loved each other a little more, a little more for participating in such a secret night time outrageousness.

Later that boyfriend went on a plane to America, I'd had no money for a fare, and so I was left behind to fill in postcards that featured the copper Snow White on the front. In those days I absorbed life like a sponge, soaking up matter for the memory banks, matter that would help to form my perceptions of life here on earth.

Our eyes work like a camera, light passes through the eye and its lens and onto the retina, and the lens focuses the image for us. From the retina a rapid process sends signals to the optic nerve further back in the eye, and from there to the brain, and then finally we can perceive what we are looking at. For a human, vision is said to be the most important of the five senses. Loss of vision can lead to anxiety and even mental illness.

I had walked across the square with my eyes shut, but whilst crossing the bridge with both eyes open, I slipped and fell down the wooden steps that led to the street below. I rolled and bounced. Still no one was around. It hadn't stopped raining and the stairs were wet. A little embarrassed, I sat on the bottom step rubbing my sore ankle.

The bridge has been built with old pieces of shipping timber, thick grey lumber studded with rivets and rusted red iron bolts. The side of the bridge facing the road is decorated with carved whales, on the other side there are two enormous birds with great curled beaks, like albatross or taiko, the petrel that lays only one egg a year but can live up to forty.

Above me was the shark. The newspapers often write about the shark. Its skin is a layer of peeling verdigried material, it eternally faces the sea with its mouth braced open to show off its teeth. The local journalists are fond of using the shark
as a kind of gauge with which to measure other events around town, saying things
such as But will the Shark respond? or But does it get the thumbs up from the
Shark? or more offhand Go tell it to the Shark.

The shark has one large eye hewn into its head, an eye as large as a plate, and
with this eye it had witnessed me rolling down the bridge stairs like a drunk. I
rubbed my ankle. It seemed I was only blind when I had my eyes open.

The next weekend I tried my false blindness out at home. Unable to find my cat
in the garden with my eyes open, I decided to search for her with my eyes shut.

The first thing I felt I should do was to get down on my hands and knees in the
grass. This would enable me to feel my way and also put me on the same level as the
cat. It felt good, being down amongst the weeds and dandelions and the strong ripe
smell of the soil. Wearing nothing but my nightie, I advanced on all fours into the
undergrowth. Miaow, miaow, I said. Miaow, miaow. I could hear birds up above
me. A helicopter flew overhead, its shadow a flicker that momentarily blotted out
the light.

I was down in the dock and paspalum, the wandering willie and buttercups, the
oxalis and the yellow nettle. I could feel damp, dead leaves, and the soil under the
leaves was moist, it smelt rich, my pink nylon nightie was getting dirty. You could
describe the life I usually led as being more indoor, pertaining to covered floors and
furniture and heating appliances, and lived at five foot of height above the ground.

Miaow, miaow. I was down on the forest floor weaving my way through the
deep green light, above me the wind sighed through the leaves of the apple tree
and climbing banksia roses. I could smell the roses and lemon balm. I kept going.
It was darker. Miaow, miaow. I was fine without my sight. Now I could smell the
sweet rotting scent of kitchen waste and knew I must be near the black compost
bin that was kept tucked in the darkest corner of the garden.

Miaow, miaow. My mews were more guttural. Suddenly I was seized with a
desire to roll in the leaf decay and wet earth, to feel the heavens curving above
me. I wanted to get that smell in my hair and all over my body, but then I heard
strange noises behind me. My whole body froze. Something was approaching
from the side entrance into the garden, and it was far too big to be my cat.
Someone was laughing at me.

‘What on earth are you up to with your bum sticking out of that daisy bush?’ It
was my friend, Euphemia. I recognised her laugh.

‘I’m blind,’ I said.

‘Look at your nightie, you’re covered with nature shit,’ she told me.
‘Miaow, miaow,’ I said. (My cat still hadn’t turned up.) I was forced to open my eyes. The rush of light into my irises hurt. I sat back on my haunches, Euphemia towered over me. Around her the colours of the garden were lush and vibrating. A bee as large as my own nose glided past.

‘I’m being blind,’ I told Euphemia. ‘When I have my eyes shut I seem to see more than when I have them open.‘

‘That’s because you’re in the bloody buggery blind tank, my girl,’ said Euphemia. ‘Look at the mess you’re in. Look at your clothes, your hands, your knees. You want to pull up your socks.‘

‘I’m not wearing socks,’ I said. ‘I’m only wearing a nightie.‘

‘When you’re in the blind tank you can’t see out, you refuse to see out.‘

‘So how am I supposed to know that I’m in it?’ I asked.

‘You know because I’m telling you, and I know because I’ve been watching you my girl,’ said Euphemia. ‘You can’t let the downs get to you, you have to get on top of it.‘

I knew Euphemia was talking about my mother but I wanted to tell her she sounded more like a sex manual, or even a guide to gymnastics.

My mother had been staying with me. She’d come on the bus all the way from her pink slate tiled house in another town where she lived by herself. She was old.

When I took her a cup of tea in the morning and knocked on the door of my spare room, she never answered. When I knocked again she still didn’t answer. I opened the door and she was lying there in the bed with her back facing me, her dressing gown was hung at the end of the bed and her slippers were placed one, two, next to each other. So precise, so accurate, it was an irritating gene I was glad I hadn’t inherited, this ability of hers to be neat, to plan, to organise to the nth degree.

When I walked to the bed she still didn’t move. I felt trepidation. After all she was old. My brothers and I had discussed all these things at a family meeting last Christmas in a revolting Italian restaurant that my eldest brother had chosen. We had drunk cheap red wine until it had totally gone to our heads and then finally we had been able to talk about the possibility of our mother dying.

I reached the bed and touched my mother’s body. She still hadn’t moved. She felt cold, so cold. You never normally think about all those tiny subtle nuance movements of the body and how beautiful they are. The richness, the generosity, the downright opulence of life that is held in the warm moving body of a human.

I had walked slowly around the bed to the other side. Her eyes were shut. I can’t say her name when I think about it. To me she was always more, she was a symbol,
like the Japanese kanji character for mother. Her eyes were shut and she looked just as if she was asleep. I had never seen a dead body before. I noticed I still had the hot cup of tea in my hand.

I sat down next to the bed and drank it. It wasn't as hot as I'd imagined it would be, it wasn't hot enough. I remembered my mother explaining to me why my tea was always cold. She said it was because I never warmed the cup. Cold cup, cold tea. When she made it she poured some hot water from the kettle into the cup first, left it for a minute, poured it out, and then poured in the tea. Hot cup, hot tea.

When I remembered that I began to cry in strange dry rasps. I was angry that she had left me in this way, in my own house, under my own roof, leaving me sitting remembering stupid blankety blank facts about making hot tea. And instead of seeing her arrival here and consequent death in my spare bed as a politeness, a kindness to me, a generosity, a beautiful act of sharing, I took the death as a slur on my house, an impropriety, an embarrassment. I had always felt she would do something like this. And there would be no one again who would ever be able to make tea as scalding as my mother. It didn't matter that I hated tea that way, when death came I realised there was a need for a good strong hot cup.

After Euphemia left my garden I thought about the Blind Tank. I imagined one of those flotation tanks they have in the health clinics. You are shut inside the tank, which is then floating in water (inside another tank). They say it takes you back to the womb.

The lights are dimmed but you can't really see out because it's dark, and so you aren't really aware of being in a tank. But then I reasoned that you wouldn't really want to look out, the thing is you wouldn't really want to be able to see everything because if you did, then you would know that you were in the bloody buggery Blind Tank.
Varsity Vac Work
1964

Eight hours at the conveyor belt,
three minutes for a sandwich and thermos
on the reedy creek bank
— a industrial sewer but
I'm dipping in a book of Latin verse
to wet my throat all afternoon,
syllable by liquid syllable, where
dactylic rivers are murmuring over the rocks of caesurae.

Pieces of gumboots flow past stamped in rubber
dusted with french chalk
that makes the tongue stick
to laboured grunts: I
lift and lay
lift and lay
black shapes of a foreign alphabet
in a book of wide cloth pages
the boot makers will piece together
for heavy feet.

I hide the Eclogues in my knapsack
half attempting to pass as a native
in this outpost slagheap
far from the urbanity of my provincial town:
there above the varsity battlements
a shred of imperial purple
marks out for me
the civil cloisters.

The women on the belt turn a deaf ear
to my posh accent and big words
out of regard for my mum
who runs her machine hot
next door in the sandshoe room
— out of suspicion that their kids
might have crossed the Rubicon too
    if they'd found a bridge.

(It's only much later, setting foot on the approach,
  I'll know how the patrician guards
will challenge me:
    a colonial and a woman!)

But still I choose to get by heart
a poem by an Irish monk
    whose yearning for his homely stream
shimmers in the afternoon
    long mirages.

Late Storm

After we'd cleaned up —
mother and daughter on hands and knees
sweeping, scrubbing, picking up after him

— after her ex (since last night)
stoked with anger and bourbon had
stirred rice grains, coffee, flour with eggs into a stucco
    rough cast inside the fridge
slashed curtains and papasan cushions
hefted a hammer
smashed oven door glass
    — dank breath of past heat escaping —
splintered every window
axed table and chairs
    into drunken grotesques of themselves;
after he gave vent to windy gusts of rage
    through holes chopped in every wall
tore her apart
from friends' arms  
in happy photos  
(her smile still quirky round the edges)
spilled junk jewels to crunch like gravel
spun plates and cups out into the night shrubs
brief lunatic rivals of the moon

— after we'd bent our backs
to clean up his mess
and clear out her gear

at the last I unscrewed the mantel mirror he'd missed
and with it his chance to see how
with one stroke
he could turn
into an avenging angel of

light

splintering from glassy wings.

Home, I carry it round the side:
it muses on moments of the path
like so many memories
— the freeze frames of hallucination
veering with each step —
gives me back shards of blue porcelain
ripping the clouds ragged:

a bowl empty of regret.
all this day she has been silent about her bread-making, the kitchen was warm, yeasty sour where she stood at the table kneading the floured lump till it took on form and muscle to push back at her hands. when later she took up the bowl from the hob she nodded at its secretive inner rising then, always expecting it, always surprised, she pushed her fist into the smooth wall to punch it down and (ah) fibrous tissue filled the ball.

freed into the air of the kitchen, drifting and teeming in the currents of a thousand bread-makings, these cells of yeast could be drawn back into the dough. she twisted firm braids and knots. the air was more alive than she could see with wild native spores; there’s no telling how they might work to bubble or go flat or turn sour. better mistrust them, debar them and control the leavening.

there are other silences too and sour fermentation. the syllables nudge and jostle wanting to puff into plosives in the air between.

but in the dark of the bed when sleep will make each a warm yielding mass, they will knead into each other, her knees into his softened back, his hands reaching to press hollows between her breasts, the spoon of his buttocks scooping a place in her belly, her arms moulding him to her shape, while the yeasts of dreams grow in the fibres of their flesh.
After her funeral, driving through Montmartre in the back seat of a taxi. It was a late summer, he thought, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He hadn’t slept. Outside everything flashed past, unresolved. This day, he murmured, at last to be delivered ... Staring out at the white glare of heat, a fume of hemorrhaged faces ...

The phrase pity never helped the dead mouthed itself in his mind over and over, changing momentum with the harsh whirring of car tyres ... Meaning is eclipsed, he thought, like the face beneath its death-mask. And the self becomes the anti-self. Becomes an echo only. A conjurer’s cheap trick. As if to say: open sesame! and there she was, that pale wax figure, lying in a box or gazing from a window of the hospital at Charenton ... As though she had seen a ghost. The way she might have expected a saviour, like Cortez, to suddenly appear on the gravel driveway wearing flowers in his hair. She might have run outside one day as if to greet him, like a moth flying blindly into light, and that was death ...

And he thought he had seen her lying there, still alive, trying to touch his hand, to speak to him: promise me, she’d said. But he didn’t know what to promise. He could promise nothing. He promised nothing ...

But when did it end ... did it end? The hours of waiting outside the ward until they finally let him in, and felt as though he were being pushed downward, his head, his whole body, submerged. As though their voices were coming to him underwater, further and further down. An illusion, was it an illusion? The priests, the doctors, the bureaucrats? In his coat pocket, in an envelope, her tedium vitae, attested to before God, science and the government ... Death ennobled nothing, he sneered. Death was merely a parody, a demeaning reprise of everything already falsified in life ...

The wheels of the taxi turned dismally beneath him. Promise me, she’d said ...
promise me ... Gravel beneath the tyres. A feeling of disgust gagged in his throat: you can't pretend you're actually sorry for her, he hissed to himself. He caught sight of his reflection in the window ...

He closed his eyes ...

He felt the sunlight beat across his face. Red light and then darkness again. He wondered about all the things he had ever forgotten. Long white days in the Faubourg Montmartre. His childhood. His mother's kitchen, with windows opening onto a courtyard. The floor was white and red like porphyry, and her hair, long and pale, hanging down as she sat at a table patiently separating egg yokes. Did he really remember her that way ...

But there was nothing he could have done ... that day, or any other day. Nothing he could have ever done.

At three in the morning, they said, she had been able to walk, to move. She must have staggered across the room, to the window. When they found her, there were slivers of glass stuck up under her fingernails. He tried to imagine her clawing at the window pane, her black eyes, sobbing. She must have been naked, except for the blue hospital tunic, and a grey plastic wristband. He saw her, like that, clawing with bloodied nails at her own reflection, as though she were trying to set herself free somehow. But the body that she saw in the window was no longer her body: it was a stolen body, a body possessed by others and which she despised ...

But when did it end, exactly? Slumped against the glass, eye on eye, pressing cold lips that were no longer hers. Dying ... He imagined her, pushing a listless hand upwards, across her breasts? her throat, flesh like wax ... Her fingers, stretched around her chin, and nails touching the tongue through the face. Her nails, through her face, touching her tongue ... Blood flowing in her mouth, an abyss where nothing but her silent screams were reflected ... I hate you for making me live. She had said that. She had said that while he stood there, in that same spot, staring guiltily through that same window. To love you, but make you live, he thought. To make you live ...

In the ward, a chorus of respirators. The endless bouquets of blackened carnations, unkempt in brown water. Death blossoming in a glare of fluorescence ... It was raining then. In solemn congregation the trees sending the last yellow plaques of leaves to ground. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine ...

Why did they bury her, the suicide? A faint ironic smile as he mimicked inwardly the priest's solemn gurgling, how it reminded him of the plague-stricken. Religion was a plague, he thought. Plague victims should be burned, not buried ...
And the vague expression of absence he thought he’d seen on her lips before they closed the coffin lid. The mute epiphany of her face ... Its vague memory vaguely recollected was something within him, something at once serene and appalling ...

The four walls of a room. In a desk drawer a pile of photographs. Strange images. They seemed to represent ... Not real things, but others, semblances. Fake objects which looked like ... Chairs, a table, a pair of shoes ...

Or rather, he thought, these images didn’t exist at all. Mimicking the grotesque instance of mortality suspended ad aeternitatem. ... Each with a kind of nakedness, like a nightmare, which at the moment of waking reveals itself in the full horror of its negation ... The idea of belonging to an image ... The words to be came into his head. He was looking at a photograph and thinking of the superstitious Indians afraid of losing their souls ... As if, he thought, the image itself was a kind of infernal essence: it beat silently in the dark, silently beating into existence all things ...

And there she was at the Louvre ... She was standing in front of Delacroix’s Ophelia, with her hands raised to her face in a gesture of remorse. Beside her there was a blank space, as though something had been carefully erased from the negative ... Other spectres. There were words, too, that still wrestled somewhere in his mind, making the recollection unbearable. Somebody had taken her picture just at that moment. When? He couldn’t remember. It might only have been yesterday. Only a thousand years ago. Only a moment ago.

At the bottom of the pile, some photographs taken during the summer at Charenton. Figures in white sitting on a bench beneath a tree on the hospital lawns. Their features had become obscure. Paper ghosts ... There was the pungent smell of disinfectant. Formaldehyde ...

He wiped his forehead, brushing back the hair from his eyes. A film of perspiration covered his hand. Open sesame, he thought, staring at his own grey face. He would close his eyes and forget, and all the features of the dead would vanish. Names only. Words for death ...

He closed his eyes again. Elsewhere a black Citroën crept by through a steady drizzle, wreaths pressed up against the side windows ...

Humid, with the cheap perfume of decomposition. In the chapel the air was thinner, rarefied, seeping almost through the cold limestone. For how many centuries had the fearful come here to prepare for death? Passing from the vaulted darkness out into the blinding daylight of ...? The shadows of candle light played against the columns. Gestured mutely. The flames tapering upwards to a heaven of smoke and incense, the stained-glass stained black with time ... Beside him on the
wall a trail of ants, their narrow black bodies in melancholy communion, a stream of tiny coffins ...

Outside the clouds unstrung their harps. *Requiescat in pace* ...

Six orderlies carried the bier from the front of the hospital chapel down to the cemetery ... Lowered it into a hasty sodden shaft ... The last inches of rope slackening ...

The witnesses departed.

He saw their shapes divide slowly around him, and the sickness ... Above the couch his own inhuman face glided across the mirror. The twisted, bloodless mouth. He tossed the photographs onto the desk ... The objects in the room seemed to regard him, their bent accusing-faces. He pressed his temples between the palms of his hands. It was hard to breathe in that room ... The air seemed thick with sentiment. He took out a cigarette and lit it. The smoke turned yellow against the ceiling, coiled about the light. He felt his mouth turn dry and a dull sensation of nausea rise up from the pit of his stomach ... Somewhere a siren, a distant & continual clamour. And on every side the relentless catechism of darkened walls ...

It was late afternoon when the taxi rounded the last bend ... The street was narrow, shadowed on both sides. They came to a stop in a courtyard, in front of a small garden. There were vines tangled about the gate. Beyond, a pale stucco façade stretched upwards indefinitely. A broken windowpane glinted in the sun from between two shutters. He opened the door ...
Over thirty years ago (December, 1966) *Westerly* devoted an edition to the work of Seaforth Mackenzie. Included were short stories, poetry and pioneering bio-critical work by Diana Davis. Since that time there has been remarkably little comment of any kind on Mackenzie or his work. The reason for this comparative silence is partly explained by Davis' observation at the time that Mackenzie's was a "paradoxical achievement", his reputation wavering between a writer of considerable promise and one who has arrived.\(^1\)

The terms of Mackenzie's "arrival" are spelt out by Davis in her introduction to "The Genesis of a Writer: The Early Years of Kenneth Mackenzie":

> When he died at the age of forty-one, Kenneth Mackenzie had published four novels and two volumes of verse; he had been the recipient of no less than three Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowships between 1948-55; he had edited *Australian Poetry 1951-2*, delivered radio talks, including one on poetic craft, and written innumerable reviews, blurbs and newsreel commentaries; and he had a swag of unpublished manuscript (sic) weighing down an old tin trunk in the bark hut in which he lived.\(^2\)

My interest in this article is in the contents of the "old tin trunk", and in particular a manuscript which suggests that (had it been published) Mackenzie's reputation might well have rested on narrative innovation, rather than where it is usually situated, as the first in line of the "precocious talents" from the West (to be followed by Randolph Stow and Tim Winton).

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There are in fact two unpublished manuscripts of some substance. One is in the Mitchell Library, a document headed “Manuscript of unfinished novel by Seaforth Mackenzie” which is signed by Mackenzie’s wife, Kate, and accompanied by her address in Seaforth. The other, in the Fisher Library, is a manuscript which Diana Davis describes as “Uncompleted novel—undated, no title but dedicated: For my Mother, Margeurite Christina Mackenzie with love. (45 pages)” Kate Mackenzie believes this manuscript was an early work written before Mackenzie left Perth in 1933, when he was twenty years old.

The two manuscripts have much in common: they are set in Western Australia (recognisably Pinjarra); they contain strong autobiographical elements; they are, in differing degrees, about writers and writing; there is a powerful evocation of place; and they contain descriptions of the minutiae of personal relationships. In these ways they are consistent with the concerns of Mackenzie’s four published novels: The Young Desire It (1937), Chosen People (1938), Dead Men Rising (1951) and The Refuge (1954). However in regard to the “unfinished novel” in the Mitchell Library, this is where the similarities end. It represents a radical departure from anything else that Mackenzie wrote.

Part of the intrigue (for me, at least) of this document is that its provenance is unclear. Why this is of interest is because of the degree of experimentation evidenced in the writing—and the earlier the date of composition, the more unconventional it appears to be. At first glance, there is no problem about when the manuscript was written. At the bottom of the title page Mackenzie has written, with curious precision, 1-8-1938.

Diana Davis seems to accept this as the correct date, both in the discussion of Mackenzie’s activities at this time, and in the bibliography of his work, where the entry reads “Uncompleted novel (with synopsis) dated 1/8/1938 (47 pages)”.

However Evan Jones, in his monograph on Mackenzie, reveals some doubts (in spite of being aware, one presumes, of the date on manuscript). He describes it as “the manuscript of half a novel of uncertain date which Mackenzie abandoned. It reads uncommonly well, and has some further interest because it is accompanied by

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4. An uncatalogued manuscript held in ‘Box 1’ in the Fisher Library.
5. For this information—and a number of following references—I am indebted to Diana Davis who generously provided a copy of her unpublished MA Thesis “Kenneth Mackenzie”, Melbourne University, 1967, after the library copy had gone missing from Melbourne University. 145.
an initial synopsis which shows how he worked out the theme”. Jones does not elaborate on his doubts about the date of composition, but there are reasons to query it—primarily on biographical grounds. In much of his writing Mackenzie drew directly on characters, events, and settings from his own life. The manuscript in question is undoubtedly set in and around Pinjarra, the site of his childhood home, “The Cottage”. And this is where Mackenzie stayed on his return trips to Western Australia—which occurred in 1948 and 1954. This manuscript is, in part, about a writer who returns to his home state and re-establishes a relationship with his sister “whom after fifteen years separation he has come to know again and love as he had in their childhood”. Mackenzie did, in fact, have a very close relationship with his sister Catherine, and it was exactly fifteen years since he had last seen her (in 1933) when he returned in 1948. However, against what looks like persuasive evidence for the manuscript to have been written almost exactly ten years after its stated date, one has to ask why it would be (deliberately?) misdated, and to note also that within this period he was at work on Dead Men Rising. Would he have started another, “experimental”, novel at the same time? There seem to me to be two possible explanations. Either it was written in 1938, somewhat atypically drawing on a setting that he had not lived in for at least five years, and displaying remarkable prescience about future events. Or that the precise date is to be read as part of the fiction, bearing a significance which is not immediately apparent from the narrative. In this case the more likely date of composition is August, 1948.

Perhaps the date is one of the various levels of “fagade” displayed in this manuscript which is characterised by modernist—and arguably postmodernist—dimensions which are not evident in any other writing by Mackenzie. The fact that it remained (probably) incomplete, and is exceptional in Mackenzie’s oeuvre, may be to do with his assessment of its chances of publication, and that he was often so financially pressed that he needed to produce work that paid. What follows is an account of the manuscript which places it in the context of Mackenzie’s other work, but more importantly draws attention to its differences: Its use of self-reflexivity, the instability of identity as it is constructed in the narrative, and the elements of play.

8. Mackenzie, Kenneth Seafirth, MLMSS 503/3, p.iv. Following page references are manuscript numbers and appear in parentheses.
and intertextuality within the writing. Such characteristics constitute an exceptional voice for the time in the degree to which it challenges the dominant realist modes of the 1930s and 40s.

To begin with, the writing is not untitled: it is called Frontispiece, (literally “façade”). This point may be easily overlooked because the writing contains a “frontispiece” in the form of a synopsis. Because Mackenzie was writing in a highly self-conscious fashion, I do not think this synopsis was written for the author as an aide-memoire. Instead it constitutes a significant part of the play with the concept of “frontispiece”, which is clearly Mackenzie’s intention throughout the manuscript. In keeping with the primary meaning of “frontispiece”, this first summary page is designed as the “illustration” to sit opposite the title.

The opening paragraphs are:

Heron is a writer in flight from the dangers of his growing popularity which he has just enough sincerity left to see as dangerous. He goes to Waterford, a mountain village in his own state.

Here he meets two women. Each of them, in a different way, interferes fatally with the difficult task he has set himself—that of writing with absolute truth his autobiography up to the very time of his flight. (iv)

The passage states that the work “goes well at first” but as Heron becomes more involved with the human world round him, this so interferes with his project that he becomes “desperate, and almost insane”. We are told that, craving encouragement, he shows the work to both the women he meets, one who is named Catherine Herbert (the manuscript later changes her name to Campbell) “M.A.L.I.B, who merely laughs kindly at it as no better than any of his later books”. The other woman named, remarkably, Jean Rhys also disappoints him with her response. As a result, we read that to Heron’s “intellectual despair is also added a species of physical shame”. The nature of this shame is not made clear. The concluding paragraphs tell us that Heron’s sister, whom he hasn’t seen for fifteen years, dies suddenly. Left alone in the world, Heron,

in a final despair...wanders alone and goes blindingly over the edge of the giant bluff down the valley, which from the windows of his cottage he has for months seen and admired. (iv)

As noted, in all of Mackenzie’s fiction there are strong autobiographical elements, and Frontispiece is no exception. Born in 1913, he died early in 1955, by
drowning. The circumstances surrounding his death are unclear, but Mackenzie was frequently depressed and had a significant problem with alcohol. In this context the “death of the author” recorded in the final paragraph of the above synopsis, takes on a particularly poignancy. Also of interest in the synopsis is the implicit critique of Mackenzie’s other work in the foregrounding of the triangular relationship, Heron-Catherine-Jean, and that the two women interfere “fatally”. In almost all of Mackenzie’s fiction, the identity of the main character is established through constructing a “self” and two “others”—either men or women.

To briefly summarise: In his first novel The Young Desire It, published in 1937, but the first draft of which was written at the precocious age of seventeen, the affections of the adolescent Charles Fox are divided between the homosexual teacher, Penworth, and a girl of his own age, Margaret. In the following novel, Chosen People, Richard Mawley (also a character in The Young Desire It) is in love with Marjorie, but is intrigued by the elusive and wealthy Deborah, a Jew. As if to underline the erotic dangerousness—if not corruption—of European women, Mackenzie establishes a further threesome in Chosen People. The beautiful Ruth, Deborah’s mother, provides her daughter with Levy (her own lover) as Deborah’s future husband. In his final novel, The Refuge, Mackenzie inverts this pattern: Lloyd Fitzherbert and his son, Alan, are both bedded by the seductive Irma, another “mysterious” European. A further dimension to this triangulation is the presence of Barbara who, although not romantically involved, at one point states to Lloyd Fitzherbert: “In fact, I love you altogether, probably because I’m nearly old enough to be your mother—your sister, anyhow.” In Dead Men Rising the triangular relationship is configured in more explicitly Oedipal terms. John Sergeant’s girlfriend, Cathie, says that if she does have a baby, “... you and I would be one person... I thought of it as triangle. It can’t be a triangle without a third point to sort of summarise the other two. It’s us and it.” In fact the idea of the unborn child is a source of division between the two; Johnny believing that, “Very likely you want your baby more than you want me, from now on” (141). And when Cathie does become pregnant, she writes “Everything is changed, Johnny...If we got married now... it would seem as though we did it because we were afraid” (252).

Mackenzie’s account of such relationships would appear to be anchored, once again, in his own experiences. In what reads like a text-book description of

dependency, his wife Kate wrote:

Kenneth's relationship with his mother was a very close and emotional one... His mother was very silly and encouraged this and he said he sometimes slept in her bed, when he was grown-up. I'm sure this made life much harder for him (and others)... 12

His friend and colleague, Norman Lindsay, said:

Poor Ken had an adoring mother... the adoring mother murders her offspring... 13

Mackenzie's repetition of the triangular structuring of relationships in his fiction draws attention to the split self of his protagonists. The lines of division are generational, sexual, professional, and racial; and this results in the construction of an identity which is highly provisional.

In Frontispiece the triangle consists of a man, Heron, and two women. We are introduced first to Catherine (Campbell) who has “startling greenish-blue... eyes... in deep settings” (14) and who speaks “with a strange accent and intonation not English yet not very foreign” (14). She is educated, not Australian, and sophisticated. Set against Catherine is the down-to-earth milkmaid, who is not named in the manuscript proper but is presumably the “Jean Rhys” of the synopsis. She is warm and direct in her dealings with Heron, and he sees her as “young and ripe and untroubled” (25). After his first meeting with her, he writes “City eyes suspect, country eyes respect and say less!” (19) On the surface, Mackenzie has established a simple polarity between the two women. However by naming his milkmaid Jean Rhys, he evokes the sophistication of Jean Rhys, novelist; and perhaps, in particular, the Europe of her novel After Leaving Mr Mackenzie (1930) in which Julia's life—a mirror image of Heron's—is “fatally” interfered with by two men. It concludes with her sitting in a Paris café, with no sense of a future life, at the age of thirty-six. The intertextual allusion to Rhys' work suggests the hybrid status of Mackenzie's narrative. At one and the same time the characters are situated within the conventions of realism, but are also the “constructed” figures of the literary, textual world; so the Heron-Campbell-Rhys triangle signifies beyond the

material world of Waterford/Pinjarra. The “simple” Australian milkmaid becomes something other.

A further example of Mackenzie’s interest in triangulation and gender roles is evident in a short piece written in 1941, “I Have Three People”, which reflects on the narrative position of the observer. It begins:

Here in the sunlight of mid-summer, almost in the palm of my hand, I have three people. Two girls and a boy—sisters and brother; that’s why they’re allowed to bathe naked together. If it had been two boys and a girl it would have been different.14

The narrator considers the way the children have been created from his body and states that of the three only the boy “is innocent.” This is a view that is consistent with Mackenzie’s misogynistic attitudes to women, young or old. Women are, typically, aware and “guilty”; men are, typically, unaware and “innocent”. The text foregrounds the position of the narrator: “That illusionary fourth, the diving white reflection, just possibly might be myself; but since there is the feeling that while observing and admiring them I contain them as well, maybe this fourth is only a take-it-in-turn reflection of myself, which is all they have in common” (40). The self-consciousness evident here about the narrative position—as both creator and created—is indicative of the modernist impulse in this early work. In Frontispiece the narrative scaffolding is even more exposed. At the top of the first handwritten page we read:

I

‘One’ he wrote at last at the top of the first sheet of paper, taking some care to place it fairly in the centre, and doing it neatly. Then he sat back, watching it, as though it might move; it might settle there, become engraved under lamplight into the impermanent stone of the page, and take into itself the true and vital permanence of an inevitable beginning. Instead it lost its meaning entirely...

He thought again of madness, but turned his face, with effort, away from the bare page so that his eyes left the word One and noted on a typed envelope addressed to himself: Peter Heron, Esq. Myself, he thought. Myself when young, myself now, myself when old. Am I to go mad? (1)

Apart from possible references to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Heron), and Henry Handel Richardson's *Myself When Young*, there are multiple layers of self-reflexivity evident in this cleverly constructed opening. Mackenzie's "I" at the top of the manuscript page is indistinguishably from how one would print the first person pronoun; and "one" is not only page one, a beginning, but also suggests "oneself". The inability to distinguish between the commencement of the narrative and the commencement of the construction of the self so disorder the creating—and created—persona that the space inhabited is one of potential madness. A minimalist definition of the self—pointing to one’s name—is all that is available; at this point the written construction of the self does not allow the personal pronoun because the sense of self is so unstable. That is, the conflation of the narrator and the narrated self produces a deep anxiety; one that could be read as a conflict between a liberal humanist sense of the self (and the “author”) and a more postmodern view of a textual self.

By page three of the manuscript (approximately two thousand words of Mackenzie’s minute handwriting), the writer Heron has still not made a beginning. In fact the word “one” is under erasure:

The word One stood out without boldness... stooping, he took the pencil, resting in his left hand, and blackened out the word, slowly, with great deliberation. The paper became empty again, but the blackened shape whispered of defeat. (3)

In this passage the linguistic construction of the self has been displaced by the spatial. However the boundaries between the two realms are blurred and the self that is mirrored back is “blackened”, "empty" and speaks of defeat. The language suggests the world of the psychotic individual discussed by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*, where she cites Callois’ description of the dispossessed soul pursued by space, and finally replaced by it: “He feels himself becoming space, **dark space where things cannot be put**” (emphasis in original). For Heron the “dark space” is the empty page which defeats his attempts to construct a self through language—a space where words cannot be put. If a humanist sense of self is seen as no longer viable, and the textual self not available, then this is indeed a moment of crisis, a

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15. This work was first published in 1948. If Mackenzie is referring to it here, this would confirm the later (1948) date of Frontispiece.

moment of defeat. Identity is disturbingly de-centred.

Following this account of yet another attempt to begin, Heron opens a letter from his publisher which requests a photograph of the author as a frontispiece for his new book, *The Queen's Land*. (There is an element of irony in this title which, later in the manuscript, is described as a “damned travel book,” although elsewhere in correspondence Mackenzie plays on the homosexual significance of “queen” in referring to Queensland). Heron, who is in the doldrums as a writer, uncertain about past successes and with no clear sense of a future, is provoked by this request:

He was not a fool; he knew where he had gone wrong, even though he still did not understand why. His present bewilderment was part of a suspicion that he could now never make amends to himself, that the past was beyond invocation, the state of good integrity never to be enjoyed again. It seemed that he was not to be permitted to change. His very face, the photographed face of a known writer, was to be used to defeat him; he was bound to a style, secured within the structures of a type, and could not escape. (4)

The language of this passage suggests more than a preoccupation with stylistics; it invokes strongly the moral sphere in relation to the seriousness of high art. And (once again) it conflates art and the artist through both the language and the image of the photograph. The fixity of a visual frontispiece represents a “fixing” of the written product, which is further suggested through the play on the word “type”. To escape what he sees as artistic and personal entrapment, Heron replies that he will provide a frontispiece, “the hell of a frontispiece—the real thing—words not half-tones” (5). Heron says that he is unable to write any more, that everything has gone, “But I can write you a frontispiece... I’ll show you a picture of failure” (5). This is, of course, not quite the sort of picture that the agent, Hodge, had in mind.

Heron concludes his reply by observing that:

Autobiography is a necessary but secret vice with most writers... But this autobiography I plan is no secret. It’s possibly the last thing I shall do. (5-6)

Statements such as this insist upon the constructed nature of the text we are reading—through foregrounding both the genre and the act of composition. But in *Frontispiece* even the genre conventions are not secure. Apart from the thinly-disguised links between Heron and Mackenzie, Waterford and Pinjarra, the text
employs actual place names such as Guilford, and makes reference to historical figures such as Mackenzie’s friend and colleague, the poet Ronald McCuaig. Through this intermingling of historical and fictional worlds, Mackenzie poses questions about what constitutes “the real” world; how stable it is; wherein lies the centre.

Later, Heron writes to a friend in Sydney that his writing “isn’t ordinary autobiography, because for one thing it’s properly honest, and for another I’m mixing past and present according to a recipe I’ve thought out” (8). This description of the autobiography accords with the text *Frontispiece*. The first person autobiographical sections constitute the past; the third-person account of Heron’s activities (apart from writing) the present. Heron’s statement that autobiography is a “secret vice” is itself commented on by the mixture of actual figures, events and places and thinly disguised others. Notions of truth and honesty are contested in a similar fashion: to what extent can Mackenzie talk about himself more truthfully through construction of the character Heron? To what extent did he see this writing as “…possibly the last thing I shall do?”

Heron concludes a section which summarises much of his earlier work with a statement about his current task:

Old Hodge wrote asking for a frontispiece for it, and that put the lid on my bad temper: hence this self stuff, which I call *Frontispiece* by way of a gibe at both Hodge and myself and the rest of the world as well; because the rest of the world’s just as much to blame as Hodge and I am, for putting up with such haloed muck as we’ve supplied it with, between us. (9)

Reader beware! The words of Heron’s—and, by extension, Mackenzie’s—frontispiece may not be the “real thing” but yet another set of “half-tones” for which the reader is, in part, responsible. The elusive, *mise-en-abyme* elements of the text are best represented by the account of Heron beginning his task:

Taking a pencil, drawing to him the virginal block of paper, he wrote on the second sheet the title, *Frontispiece*, of a work destined to be left unfinished in the end; but this he could not foresee, and how with the word written, should he hesitate now? In the selfless, unalterable innocence of the creative mind, he began to write. (8)

This passage reiterates the reader’s experience of the opening of Mackenzie’s
text (versus Heron’s). On the first page of Mackenzie’s manuscript, he printed the title FRONTISPIECE in capitals. Within the text (about 5000 words into the manuscript) Heron prints his title, FRONTISPIECE, in an identical fashion. In a literal sense we are now reading the already-written, the frontispiece within Frontispiece.

The awareness of Heron in the excerpts quoted above echo Mackenzie’s own embattlement with writing. In a 1936 letter to his wife, Kate, he wrote that it was

a dreadful effort for me to write prose, of the acutely self-conscious kind I do want to write. I struggle and struggle, and the result seems heartbreakingly thin...I want to plunge in deep and wide into my own mind and memory...17

And in the self-conscious Frontispiece, it is the mind and memory of the writer that is being explored.

In announcing that Heron’s manuscript will remain unfinished, Mackenzie raises, somewhat paradoxically, the question whether his manuscript of the same title is also unfinished. At one level it is self-evidently so: there are chapter headings for some sections and not others; at times words are not crossed out, and alternatives are written in above. The answer to the more important question of whether the end of the manuscript is where Mackenzie intended to leave it is less clear.

On first reading, the conclusion does seem abrupt, unfinished. On the second last page of the manuscript Heron summarises in his mind what he has achieved, and sketches in what is to follow. He has finished with the “narrow, mawkish part of his life” as a young man. He has traced his (and in fact, Mackenzie’s) journey from Perth by boat to Melbourne, and later, Sydney. He has described his arrival in that city and his search for the artist whom he calls “Summerwell” (not his real name in the text—and probably a reference to Norman Lindsay). Heron’s task now is,

to draw with long slow strokes the gradual change that made the careless boy of the first chapter the careful man of the last. It must be shown that a man’s fate is in his own hands from the beginning, even if towards the end it should, because of earlier acts of his, be taken from his command. (45)

Once again Mackenzie’s language evokes a visual modality. It is as if language is being challenged to go beyond the denotative and connotative boundaries that it conventionally inhabits. The passage also suggests that Heron’s life is governed by forces beyond his control. He recalls his “young despair... of himself considering ways of taking his life and believing... that it was inevitable” (45). Given that Mackenzie’s life ended in ambiguous circumstances, it’s difficult not to read such references as a conscious foreshadowing of the death of the author.

Towards the end of the manuscript Heron’s behaviour suggests a mounting sense of crisis; an insoluble conflict between life-as-text and life-as-lived. He becomes even more uncertain about what his writing has achieved. He takes up “sheet after sheet of typed words, and read them with some kind of terror. Everything, everything must be said...” (45). But as if to underline the impossibility of “saying everything” Heron goes to seek the company of “the girl” from the farm, whom the synopsis tells us is named Jean Rhys. When he meets her, their conversation moves quickly to talk about themselves.

‘As I get older,’ [Heron] said suddenly, ‘I find it more and more difficult to make friends... I’m only here because I had to run away from friends and an easy life—I was getting an easy habit of mind.’ She laughed aloud, very friendly now. ‘Don’t let the cows and horses hear you. They’ll think you’re dangerous yourself. No one ever talks that way in these parts.’

Her kind laughter warmed him like the firm touch of a friend’s hand.

‘I suppose not,’ he said. ‘But for a good while talk was my life. It’s a habit hard to lose.’ (46-47)

And this is where the manuscript ends, once again suggesting links between language and identity. It is abrupt, but at the same time there is a sense in which the narrative is complete in its apparent incompleteness. We know that the next section would take Heron up to the present, to the point of his departure from Sydney. We know, too, that he does not complete the task that he has in mind, because he becomes involved again with people, and in particular with two women, who interfere “fatally with the difficult task he has set himself”. The manuscript takes us to the point where he has begun that process of moving back into society, which is to prevent him from completing his writing and, ironically, leads to his suicide.

In this reading, the synopsis is an integral part of the manuscript. It ensures, almost literally, that the text is a “writerly” one; from the sparse outline the reader must fill in the details of what happens between the moment of Heron’s contacting
the girl from the farm, and what follows; the interference she constitutes to the autobiographical task, the despair, and the suicide. Self-evidently, this is not a story that Heron can complete—and to the extent that author and character are inseparable, nor can Mackenzie.

Frontispiece is probably not finished in terms of where the writing stopped—but it could be. It is a text with a high degree of self-reflexivity: it comments on the act of writing, on Mackenzie's life, on other works. It contains a "picture" of the writer which is inseparable from the writing. The traditional notion of author is interrogated here through constructing the writer as a product of the writing, as much as its creator. Above all, the text questions the ability of language to convey "truth". Typical of postmodern texts, it makes demands on the reader to fill in the narrative gaps, particularly in regard to its projected shape or structure. As Mary Lord has said of a contemporary story by Michael Wilding: "It is both an argument about the nature of narrative and a demonstration of the argument."18

In anticipating Mackenzie's death, it could be read as an endpiece as well as a frontispiece. Its modernist-postmodernist characteristics place Mackenzie at the very beginning of these impulses in Australian narrative. The fact that it stands, boldly, alone in his literary output may be put down to the publishing climate of the time—and to his premature death.

Jennifer Coleman

the real thing

the first sighting. svelte in a black 7-eleven t-shirt injected with a red hot collar that sends my pulse galloping more effectively than any slap on the rump. and then that smile. that smile sexily teasing me from the other side of an aloof plastic counter. or is there somebody standing behind me.

i want him. i want him so bad the heat from my hands melts chocolate frogs and i fog my way towards the cash register with sticky fingers. sticky. oh my boy. my boy with a gaze so slippery so smooth yet just sharp enough to make me squirm under its point. my boy with a voice like freshly turned wood with an arse so grabbable i could...if only you were my boy.

your name. arthur. and you are. donna with a tremble in my groin. and you are divine my boy your gnawed fingers pushing change into my palm into my heart. see you later he says and you bet you will. as soon as possible. target practice has begun.

out comes the rust-bitten razor and off comes the underarm hair. i do it for myself of course not for arthur for myself. but it does mean i can wear those strappy little numbers cleo assured me are in vogue this season. too much money too many hours in the bathroom too much primping and preening trying to find just the right shade of lippy mascara that won't clump and outfits to flatter my figure. a trick from an old school friend is put into action. skimpy clothes in cool breezes. guaranteed to keep you on high beam all day long. what does it matter that my legs are mottled purple -with cold, his eyes won't get that far.

time to take aim. i've got sweaty armpits next day dolled up to the nines and arthur has failed me. a pubescent imposter stands in his place a snuffling acned fool who doesn't half satisfy my gaze. i loiter in hope for hours but $19.00 later he still hasn't appeared and it's time to leave fuming aching labouring under the weight of my groceries under my quiver of sharpened arrows.

that night i fill my room with panting dreams of black lingerie adorned with
crimson 7-eleven logos and arthur's coin-bitter hands. a copy of his roster dances enticingly on the window sill. just out of my reach of course. wet sheets wet dreams i'm wet behind the ears.

then i'm a week older a week wiser. trial and error freddos and milk rain hail and shine. i've cracked the code with true dedication. arthur is a six-till-midnight man it seems seven days a week and i'm only out of pocket $48.70. so far.

i become a junkie to support my other habit. magnums donuts chips and chocolate i sample them all. until they start manifesting themselves as dimpled cushions on my hips. thunder thighs and suddenly generosity is my middle name and bulimia its fail-safe pseudonym.

my memory becomes wonderfully perforated. the basics slip from my shopping list and well thank god for that convenience store. where would i be without you arthur. butter bread yoghurt noodles but never the same thing twice in a row you understand. i wouldn't want to seem predictable. flour coke cream milk. oh milk milky smooth the skin that cloaks the back of your neck arthur as you turn to get my change.

it takes you longer now doesn't it. now i've become crafty adopted new tricks. i've never got the right money now do i arthur but wait yes i do sorry and a smile and will i won't i or will i have a bag with that. an extra five seconds in his presence is a luxury and i'm almost happy my dreams well furnished for the night.

new enemies appear at the rate of american sitcoms. the girls that drive those zippy little chick-mobiles with lots of leg room but not much head space in an array of luscious twenty-something colours. the cars that are just designed to get their drivers from a — to b yet still manage to turn up at my 7-eleven far too often. and far too often the slick babes they encapsulate are far too friendly to that one boy i can't get close enough to. simpering bitches devoid of body hair bitches that know how to work an outfit paying for unleaded petrol with crisp $100 bills and fuck-me giggles. my arthur he soaks up the smut they exude like it's oxygen. sucker.

then he's flinging me a heartlessly casual grin. i want meaning arsehole. what've you forgotten this time he jokes and my pride flinches. i'd like to scratch the grin off his smug face. just so i could lick it better.

the traditional rival hits the scene. big sister. enemy no. 1. she's the girl who always buys hi-lo isn't she he asks my grimace. seems pretty nice he says pretty nice pretty nice. well nice means nothing means jackshit we can scrap the nice can't we wipe it so she seems pretty does she arthur. pretty. well you obviously haven't seen her first thing in the morning my boy.
he's into appearances it seems. It's obviously time to improve my image. You want glamour you want ritz well watch out. I'm going to turn on my feminine charm with a fluorescent blaze that'll leave you snow blind arthur.

I invest in some wardrobe essentials. Some bait a push up bra a little black dress a pair of stylish sunnies. I even indulge in some spine-wrecking heels. Party girl. That's how I want to look. A good time girl. Happy and carefree with clear skin and a social life to die for. Just like the chicks on the tampon ads.

My purchasing habits change. Now it's chips and dip a few people just dropped in or 2 litre cokes on my way to a party. Me and jatz become the ultimate entertaining team. See my boy I have a life away from you I have friends by the absolute dozen.

Bloody phone's been cut off and I'm one big sigh as arthur loads my palms with shrapnel. Guess I'll be using the blue one such a hassle while inside I'm gloating over this devious stroke of brilliance. Cos I've so many calls to make an endless stream of fictional banter and chit-chat that keeps my boy safely within the confines of my sultry gaze.

It's starting to work and I'm feeling fine. Me and arthur we have a thing. Something going. It's hi donna how're you going now as if we're old friends as if we're close. Intimate. Tuesday night and a wino stumbles in with a stench that makes my perm limp. My boy he rolls his eyes at me wrinkles his perfect nose and smiles that smile. And oh god the chemistry. It's a moment a real moment. Special you know and I'm weak in the knees. As weak as if he'd felt me up or something. So ripe I'm aching.

My plan is unfolding like a goddamn rose. I'm cruising into summer with a glint in my eyes and spring in my step. All strut and slippery wiggle. As for my dreams. Well. They're almost cluttered with material. Arthur bending over to pick up the coins I spill pants so taut across that arse my palms itch. Arthur's back all muscled up as he heaves a box of tinned soup onto the shelf. Arthur winking yes winking at me saucy thing when some bronzed guy strolls in without a shirt. As if I'd be interested in anyone else. And then that smile. The smile that colours my dreams purple steamy affairs strictly X-rated and I know they're all going to come true real soon. I'm flying high and my boy he's falling. Bigtime. I can see it in his swoony brown eyes.

Decked out in spray-on satin and a pout like a promise I flounce in to get some hmmmm bread tonight I think. My arthur's chatting to some smooth-skinned boy Brad he goes Brad this is donna the girl I told you about and the grin on his adorable face says it all. He wants me. He wants me so bad he's telling his friends about me.
the smile i radiate deserves a uv rating and i almost bruise my hips as i swing out that hallowed doorway. sweet victory is mine all mine and nothing is going to sour it for me.

until my sister steps in with her malice more destructive than fucking bacteria. where are you going she mocks where are you off to this time. my sister my enemy. not the 7-eleven again as i prepare for another rendezvous with my boy. all perfume and hope and heels and nerves. not again the bitch not again she goes with her born beautiful face looming above me.

i'm jerky with irritation shaky as i paint on my best seductive face. tart she taunts and her cheek is a masochist begging my slap. there's a laugh with edges then you know he's gay don't you donna and suddenly i'm swaying inside. you did realize with a slice and bits of me spill all over the bathroom floor. i know his brother all smirky she is. arthur's definitely gay and i'm fury. dumb lying slut he wants me. me. i'm screaming and she's gaping. fucking liar not my arthur sick inside not my boy. her vile rumours are maggotting through my faith and i need to know.

saturday night and it's time for the truth. cockroaches in my belly and i'm dressed to kill lurking in the shadows waiting for the end to this god-awful madness. then he's finished. it's midnight and he's out and someone's there to meet him. someone's there and they touch and oh christ the pain. that bastard brad. they touch in that way and i know. he'll never be mine now. i know. he's never going to be anyone's.

it's the last sighting. hateful in a black 7-eleven t-shirt garnished with a pretty boy whose presence makes my stomach clench more effectively than any cheap cask wine. and then that hand. that hand lasciviously sliding over the little companion's rippled chest with such disturbing familiarity. he hasn't even noticed i'm here. yet.

i hate him. i hate him so bad the heat from my hands wrings sweat from the air and i fog my way towards them with sticky fingers. sticky. on my boy. my boy with a gaze so slippery so smooth yet just masculine enough to lure me in. my boy with a voice like a fucking disguise with an arse so shopworn i could... if only i'd never set eyes on him.

his name. arthur. and i am. donna with menace in my heart. and you are finished my boy your treacherous fingers forcing rage into my head into my hand. see you later i snicker cos i know i won't. not ever. target practice is over. it's time for the real thing.
What's Left Out

Macbeth suffered from nightmares, his wife too. They'd committed heinous crimes and deserved some punishment in this life and the next.

Still, Shakespeare makes us pity their despair: their heads were full of witches, daggers, blood; in pursuit of dreams they'd murdered sleep.

Sleep comes unpredictably as the sea, yawns long and deep, stretches beneath the moon or freaks restlessly against disordered sand;

through loose weed and winter swell, fish flicker, light deceives us and, though seastone holds firm, waves break green and savage as thrown glass.

It's odious, and futile, to compare pain; to measure the torturer's precise or careless thrust, the slow death that chafes the perfect body or uneasy mind, the suffering of kings, the gibbering of the inarticulate, the bewildered innocent cries rehearsed with cups of tea — our solipsism, reluctantly centre stage, not the proper stuff of tragedy.

Waking at night it's emptiness I fear, not what's fantastical or added on, not witches, daggers, blood, but what's left out or lost or gone.
The headlands reach the sea in shadows this black night, the slick fluorescence skims waves and falls dully on the sand below the stone wall of the promenade.

Streetlights excavate the suburb’s pattern, the line of roads, the rise and fall of hills, a black square of park, the walled rectangle of a factory with its sharp chimney flame.

Headlamps make tracks that are soon erased and two-dimensional buildings display the bright circuitry of windows switching on and off in electric codes of light.

Above me the blackened sky is empty except for scraps of cloud, and the fractal geometry of stars has been eclipsed by the Euclidean grid imposed on night.
I will learn what the world is, 
not from the beginning, that’s 
the impossibility of meanings, 
but from that place where 
shiny thoughts are twilight 
and everything, like a child’s first ‘no’, 
furthers the sun.

Like when I spoke with her today, 
I will be naked, clear 
and mute. The rain falls 
through me. The flowers unfold 
as if they are afraid of my cold, sluggish 
face that says: Without that woman I am broken...

Hold on, the difficulty remembers. He is 
almost the same, the other woman, her sister.

For me they are the same, just 
as I must be this sameness in 
the leaves of my skin’s noise and 
all the books through whom 
I speak whenever I hear other storms, 
small animals and white languages.

Her name is another woman’s. Her face my Heaven. Her skin, God.

Write it down, inside.

The black woman here beside me 
doesn’t understand. Nor do I.

With me the woman sleeps as though the world 
were intimate and curious. Like a small animal,
her tongue walks around my face. And when
her tongue is over my eyes, I remember the visionary

and how he kissed his girlfriend. Her eyelids
were clear, stainless, and flickering a Name...

When, darkly, there were inside each other, what did she see?
a small cloud, cold and blue?

a name, that in meat, could speak of the All?
the exceptional silence that they felt across the darkness,
stones?

My mother, my sister, my grandma are there inside,
and my tongue halved.

In other languages, the song
of love, hope and death is
more serious, sinister, something

that in a bird's flight is only
a flash, a convincing
abstraction, that eventually, quietly as waves,

explodes.

*Translated from Afrikaans 1992-1997
Shipwrecks

You imagine them by submerging in the sea. The ocean mocks the geometric absolutes land aspires to, and surface becomes another dimension, as the breeze-pampered sailcloth of your skin adapts to the heavy press of atmospheres.

It is cold beneath the reach of the sun. Seagrass is a swath of medusa hair, combed endlessly with coral fingers.

You remember your father's stories of shipwrecks, at the dinner table, as he carved the roast with angler's hands; twenty years of mullet runs in the lines of his face and a thousand silver bellies unzipping in his eyes. You watched the two-knuckled abbreviation of his finger wrap around the handle of the knife — the stump giving blunt weight to the nightly parable.

Don't trust the ocean any further than you can piss in it
Then silence as he chewed and you thought of the tiger shark,
the slicing tautness of line, a rolling sea and flesh and bone irrevocably overboard like a worm end tossed from a hurley bucket.

The seabed holds mementoes to small distractions: seventeenth century sailors trusted Providence to forgive the quick glance off port side as something caught their eye; the moonlight on twin points of swell or a mermaid's breasts, glistening like shelled snails.

There were many storms — a loose hand on a wooden wheel; the rain, wind and clouds conspiring to create a chiaroscuro screen. What remains through
time is the silent moment before impact; the inner ear of a planet
strained to hear the unnatural coupling of wood with reef — the screech
of ice shaved with a chainsaw and beneath the rip and splash; through
corrugations of light — a spider web of rope; cannon and mast beginning
to fall — the last — like the crucifixion cross of some landfall God
coming to rest as a nibbling curiosity for small silver heretics of fish.

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY

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The Secretary
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The Order of Things

"... any classification, whatever it may be, is responsible for a meaning ..."
(Roland Barthes, Literature and Discontinuity)^1

That September, he took his car and drove away towards the east. He said he didn't know where he would stop. He took only the things he thought he would need and the things he knew he couldn't leave behind:
(1) The bicycle he hadn't ridden since 1988.
(2) The screwdriver set he thought I would never use.
(3) The new white car.

He said he took the car because it was a present from his mother and she would never forgive him if he gave it away to me. I believed him. There were already many things his mother would never forgive him for. I knew, though, that there was another reason. I knew that he couldn't bear to be without more than one means of escape in any situation. On its own, the bicycle was never enough.

There were things he thought he would need for the journey:
(4) A pillow, in case he had to sleep on the road.
(5) The tent that needed two people to put it up.

He took other things. Things that he would need when he got wherever he was going:
(6) A box of books, sealed.
(7) The ice-cream maker he had once used to make an ice-cream cake on my birthday. The cake was beautiful and delicious and had three layers; chocolate,

almond and strawberry. It was also very cold, but no-one minded because it was summer. I was impressed because some little thing had gone wrong with the ice-cream maker and he had been able to fix it in order to make the cake. At the time, I read its manufacture as a sign that he was attentive to detail, that he was willing to try to make things work properly and that he wouldn’t mind doing things around the house. I thought, if he wasn’t as attentive as a woman would be, at least he’d be more interested than most.

He took (8) extra books, a loose handful to read on the way. Some of them were books he’d owned since before we met. They made a scattered fan on the floor of his car. I saw them there when I carried (9) his dark suit to the car. It seemed strange to be helping him to pack, but at this point there didn’t seem to be anything else I could do. I knelt on the front seat above the books so I could read their titles; *Systems Therapy, Love’s Executioner, Goedel, Escher, Bach and The Lonely Planet Guide to South America, 1995.*

In his place, I would have taken novels or poetry. In his place, I would have wanted a story to immerse myself in for days at a time, or a line of words, an image for solace or thought. This time, however, I didn’t offer to give him a novel, nor a book of poetry as I had so often done. I didn’t comment on the way the books messed up the floor or how they would move around unsteadily with the jerking and halting movements of the car.

I placed the suit wrapped in opaque plastic over the back of the empty passenger seat and wondered if he would ever wear it again. He had worn this suit at his graduation, on the day of our wedding, and on his first day in the job that brought us to Perth. I imagined him, at some point along his journey, having dinner with his mother. He would wear the suit and they would be in the restaurant of a big hotel. She would give him the money to pay for the dinner and offer to buy him a new suit when he found a job. He might say nothing, or everything. He might say; “thanks, Mum”, or “I don’t want a job”, or “I’m never going to wear a suit again”. He might get up and walk away, then telephone her very late from some half-lit street. He might sit very still, except for swallowing. He might say nothing at all. Whatever happened, now I would never know. Now, it was nothing to do with me.

There were other things:

(10) The knife sharpener and a set of carving knives.

(11) Three pottery mugs.

(12) A packet of oatmeal to eat on the road.

(13) An empty bucket, just in case. I didn’t ask, in case of what.
(14) To be fair, I gave him half the blankets and towels and (15) the heavily framed print of a still life his mother gave us that I didn’t want.

(16) He took the dining table. That too had belonged to his mother.

(17) Six matching chairs, three of them unstable and liable to break under much strain. He left the refrigerator behind because he knew he wouldn’t need one for a while. Of course, the table and chairs didn’t fit inside the car, but in all the ways that count they went with him too.

(18) His wedding ring.

(19) The two pieces of gold we found together in the desert.

(20) The mosquito net I gave him on his birthday.

(21) The avocado plates we’d never used.

There were things he would have left that I made him take away:

(22) The six gold-rimmed crystal goblets that his uncle Stavros gave us the week before he went into gaol. I once asked him what Stavros had done. He replied that his uncle had mis diagnosed the situation. He said this scornfully, although I knew he was feeling sad. I didn’t say it at the time, but it seemed to me that it’s only afterwards that you ever know whether the diagnosis was correct in any situation. Even then, you don’t always know.

(23) His Swiss Army Knife.

(24) The twelve tapes he bought in order to learn French that he had never had time to play. I listened to the first four. He complained that I had gone too far ahead and that he would never catch me up. Anyway, I didn’t think I’d ever go back to Europe again.

As well:

(25) My short-handled axe. I thought he might need it to help kindle a fire somewhere along the road.

(26) His mother’s green-baize table cloth that covered so many things.

I know such a list can never be complete. It can never include; (29) the flowered umbrella we left on the metro in Montreal, (30) the hub cap that dropped off somewhere north of Yalgoo.

Some things he took without telling: (31) an old cushion I covered with material that I liked and (32) some photographs out of the album. I found out about
the photographs months afterwards. There are still empty, white squares between the pictures that remain. I can't remember where the negatives have gone.

The last day, I stood in the driveway of that house where we had lived, waiting until he drove away. It was then that I began to make the list, the list of the things he was taking away. Even as I began the list, I knew there were other lists. The kinds of ice-cream I would probably never eat. The things I would do when he wasn't there.

After a false start, having forgotten to return the keys of the office where he had worked, he finally climbed into his car. We kissed as if we were old friends, firmly, not quite on the mouth. He drove away with his lips pressed into a line, angry or sad, I didn't know. I stood on the street for a long time after he turned the corner, listening for the sound of the engine until I could no longer separate the trace of that sound from the others on the hot afternoon air.

Later, I gathered some things he left behind, things I didn't want anymore. I found an old shoe-box and put them inside it: (1) a photograph of his family, (2) his old T-shirt I used to wear, (3) the long rope of my hair. I thought of lighting a fire, but there was a summer ban on household fires. I thought of burying it, but it would take too long to decompose. So, wrapping the box in newspaper the way a butcher would have wrapped it, I went outside to the large green rubbish bin, the bin that was usually much too large but this time was just the right size. Holding my breath, as I always do when I lift the lid of a bin, I threw the cardboard box inside, knowing just how soon it would be until it was gone.
First and last, Len was a party man.  
After nights drafting resolutions, reading hate mail,  
he'd dream of Marx and a world treated fairly.  
Breakfasting on cheese and toast, Len would leaf through  
party bulletins, the news, shabby editions of Lenin.  

At party meetings, Len was always first there,  
arranging more chairs than were ever needed,  
coaxing the grumbling urn, rattling chipped cups.  
His finest role, standing guard at the pamphlet table,  
giving advice over age-stained, well-thumbed booklets.  

He nursed some private rage at capitalism,  
the two party system, unfair taxes, the whole shebang.  
Len wrote biting letters to any paper in the land,  
 sat on six committees, took minutes for the lot.  
He was rumoured to help an old adversary's widow.  

When I saw Len last, he lay in a hospital bed.  
Crushed by the Soviet Union's demise and grinning Yeltsin,  
he'd lost the will to be an active party man.  
Although he turned the ward into a makeshift soviet:  
the ruling caste of doctors and pulse takers was not amused.  

The godless funeral went off without a hitch,  
someone else was dragooned to do the food.  
We talked, drank and bungled the Internationale  
before stumbling into embarrassed sunlight.  
Len dead, our world had gone all wrong.
The Long-haired Kings of France

Childebert, Chlodomar, Theuderic, Dagobert:
The names reek blood, apoplexy and charisma.
They would sleep with man, woman or beast,
Ravish their sisters for good measure,
Then kill anyone who dared to break wind.
Dagobert once gelded a younger brother
He caught sleeping with their aunt.
Chlodomar was one of the worst:
After stabbing a maid for impudence,
His servants confined him to his chamber.
In a fury he set fire to the palace.
Before he could escape through four-inch doors,
He and half the household were burnt to death.
The women could be vicious too. Fredegund
Had enemies tortured, garroted, put to the sword.

They were not all despicable.
Sigibald took comfort in Holy Mother Church,
Dying peacefully in bed with the Bishop of Le Puy.
Lothar built fine castles and learnt simple Latin.
Sadly, he also had a dreadful temper,
Sending four saints to heaven in a single day.
Like many modern royals, the Merovingians
Fizzled out in bad marriages, incest and too much wine.
By 700 AD households once rich with ermine and gold
Were falcons' nests, deep in horse dung and sour pride.
At Auteuil outside Paris, you can still trace earthworks
Near tangled beds of hyacinth, daffodil and lupin.
Urban Arcadia: Depictions of Perth by Western Australian Impressionists

On 4 June 1890 the Wilgie Sketching Club held its “First Annual Exhibition of oil and water colour paintings” in the Railway Institute Reading Room, opposite the railway yards in Wellington Street Perth. Despite the implicit promise in the exhibition’s title, no other exhibition was to be held by the Wilgie Sketching Club.¹

The Wilgie Sketching Club had been formed a few months before the exhibition with the lofty ideal of “eventually founding a Western Australian school of painting”.² The first members included Bernard H. Woodward (who would later become director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia) as President, the artists Herbert W. Gibbs and Henry Prinsep and the architect George Temple-Poole. Margaret Forrest, wife of (Sir) George Forrest, the first Premier of Western Australia and a talented painter in her own right, was a member of the club from its early days.

The Wilgie Sketching Club exhibition is often cited as a significant milestone in Western Australia’s artistic development. In one sense it was, as the exhibition was the first group exhibition of art in the colony.³ However it was an exhibition which looked to the past rather than to the future. Less than twelve months earlier, in August 1889, Melbourne’s intellectual circles had been convulsed by the 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition, and the debate on the direction of contemporary Australian art

3. Roderick Anderson suggests that the first recorded art exhibition was of paintings of Western Australian wildflowers, by Mrs. Ellis Rowan, also at the Railways Institute Reading rooms in late 1889. Roderick Anderson. West Australian Art. Perth: Heytesbury Holdings Ltd, 1986, 6.
unleashed by that exhibition. In contrast, the Wilgie Sketching Club exhibition contained little that was uniquely Western Australian or stylistically novel. Of the approximately 300 works on display 197 were loaned by leading members of Perth society; parliamentarians, judges, prominent lawyers, engineers, senior public servants and clergymen all provided works from their collections.

The exhibition provided members of Perth’s establishment with an opportunity to demonstrate their wealth and taste; to show that they were a civilising influence in colonial society and through the public display of paintings owned by them, to assume a leading role in the development of community appreciation for the fine arts in Perth.

The vast majority of works in the exhibition were renditions of English life and landscape or scenes drawn from biblical or classical sources. Even paintings by members of the Wilgie Sketching Club often referred back to life in the British Isles. Bernard Woodward exhibited oils such as Woolmer Forest, Hants, and Epping Forest while M. Lancaster Lucas contributed an oil titled Battersea. However some members of the club did exhibit depictions of the local landscape. Herbert W. Gibbs put on show two oil paintings of Perth scenes, Perth from Mounts Bay Road and On the Swan. Henry Prinsep contributed several watercolours including Belmont (saplings), Canning Plains and Perth in 1876. Mrs Forrest, who like her friend Mrs Ellis Rowan was a painter of wildflowers, exhibited several examples of her work.

The response of the critic for the West Australian to the depictions of Perth was muted, suggesting that the exhibition was evidence that Western Australian artists, though “deprived of the advantages of properly equipped art schools”, were at last making an attempt to learn the language of the Australian landscape. But the West Australian was not convinced that the exhibition demonstrated that the visual arts would develop rapidly in Western Australia, suggesting that while in the eastern colonies there was a “marked desire to keep more closely in touch with the developments of modern art, and to .... found a school of distinctively Australian painters”, this would not happen in Perth until local artists found “wealthy

4. As Jane Clark has pointed out, the 9 by 5 Exhibition was “calculated to provoke the local critics and certainly did do so, to assert the artist’s independence and group identity, and to interest the buying public.” Jane Clark “The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition” in Jane Clark and Bridget Whitelaw, Golden Summers; Heidelberg and Beyond. Melbourne: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1985, 112.

5. Wilgie Sketching Club Catalogue op. cit. details names of the lenders and the works lent by them. Lenders included the premier, the Honourable John Forrest; Judge Leake; Alfred Hensman, a prominent lawyer and politician; Edward Keane, a railway engineer and politician; and the Reverend Charles Grenfell Nicolay, a prominent anglican clergyman (who lent two watercolour depictions of Chichester Cathedral).
munificent and appreciative patrons" who would support their work.⁶

While such patrons could be found in Sydney and Melbourne, Perth in 1890 provided few sources of patronage for artists and those who were in a position to provide support for local artists such as Bernard Woodward, looked principally to Britain for artistic inspiration. Woodward had arrived from Britain in 1889 to become curator of the museum but maintained the attitudes of an expatriate Briton throughout his life.⁷

As the leader writer for the *West Australian* had recognised, in the more populous colonies of Victoria and New South Wales, artists were responding to the impulse to depict the contemporary life of their society, painting directly from nature in high keyed tones employing a looser brushwork. This "impressionist impulse" as it has been described by Norma Broude, developed in France and spread by a form of artistic osmosis through the medium of art students returning from Paris to their far flung homes in Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia, and by the writings of avant-garde critics. But, as Broude has argued, the French school of impressionism should not be regarded as a yardstick against which local or regional examples of impressionism should be measured and found wanting. Rather each regional school of impressionism should be examined in the light of the history (or mythology) of that region and the traditions of that society.⁸

Therefore in any reading of Western Australian impressionism, and its place in the development of Australian impressionism, one should not look to French impressionism as the exemplar, with Australian impressionism as its peripheral and inferior subordinate. By that analysis, in Western Australia, that periphery of peripheries, the impressionist style of painting would suffer under the weight of multiple inferiority.

Unfortunately in the past, analysis of Western Australian painting, like so much cultural analysis, has been skewed by eastern states' perceptions. The seminal events which make up Australian history such as the convict era, the gold rushes of the 1850s, Eureka, the struggle to unlock the land from control by the squatters, the 1880s land boom and subsequent depression, the shearers' strikes in rural New South Wales and Queensland, were during the last years of the nineteenth century,

⁶ The West Australian, 7 June 1890. Editorial.
woven into the fabric of a new mythology by poets, writers and painters. This new mythology was ready made for the urban middle class inhabitants of Australia's eastern seaboard where, as Patrick O'Brien has suggested; “Because of their greater populations, financial, manufacturing and industrial dominance, New South Wales and Victoria became rival claimants as Australia's culture defining centres”.

These events had less relevance to those Australians who lived outside the Sydney-Melbourne axis. Their lack of population, capital, and an urban middle class meant that both the historically defined mythology, and its artistic counterpart, were all too often consigned to the scrap heap of mediocrity, or more frequently, dismissed as inferior by those who regarded themselves as being at the centre. This has been particularly true of Western Australian art, where as David Bromfield has noted:

> the very differences through which the unique nature of the Western Australian experience is expressed in its visual culture would cause individual Western Australian works to be read elsewhere, inevitably and unvaryingly, as aesthetically inferior if not incomprehensible.

Each of the Australian colonies grew from a separate settlement where the early colonists faced different problems and experienced different challenges, giving rise to what Martyn and Audrey Webb described as; “a collection of cosmopolitan cultural cells, similar in attitude and operation to the city states of ancient Greece, each with its own outlet to the sea and the world beyond”.

By the 1880s both Sydney and Melbourne were substantial cities. Melbourne in particular had developed rapidly after the discovery of gold in the 1850s, to become an expanding modern metropolis. By 1891 the rateable value of the city was surpassed in the British Empire only by London and (just) by Glasgow. The land boom of the 1880s turned Melbourne into a city of multi-storied buildings serviced by lifts and lit by electricity. With the growth in wealth and population in Melbourne and Sydney there was an equivalent growth in artistic endeavour. The 1891 census found 196 painters, 164 engravers and 259 photographers in

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Melbourne. From the 1880s Melbourne's National Gallery Schools were producing graduates who looked to art as a professional activity, and the constitution of artists' societies in both Sydney and Melbourne changed as professional painters wrested control from the amateurs who had once been the mainstay of these societies. Artists and writers gathered together in bohemian enclaves, centered around the Cannibal Club and the outer suburban artists' camps in Melbourne. In Sydney the "Dawn and Dusk Club", the Bulletin offices and nearby pubs, and the artists' camps at Little Sirius Cove and Balmoral Beach provided gathering places for writers and artists where they could seek to emulate the hedonistic lifestyle romanticised in Murgher's tales of "La Vie Boheme".

The bohemia which these artists inhabited was exclusively masculine. Although many of the students at the National Gallery Schools were female, they were excluded from clubs such as the Dawn to Dusk, and were permitted to the artists' camps only during the day at weekends. The inhabitants of antipodean bohemia tended to be young single men, firmly rejecting middle age and respectability; when they did get married it was often to the sisters of their fellow bohemians.

Consequently by the late 1880s there were in Melbourne and Sydney sufficient professional writers and artists, with a network of middle class supporters who by purchasing their works could enable them to survive however precariously, to enable them to gather in mutually supportive groups and gain intellectual and moral sustenance from their confreres. While they responded to nationalistic demands to depict scenes of rural life and labour, they also portrayed life in the modern metropolis painting renditions of the Melbourne docks and works showing trams and trains, the latter wreathed in steam and smoke as signifiers of modernity, against a backdrop of city towers and campanili.

However at the time of the Wilgie Sketching Club exhibition and for more than a decade afterwards these signifiers of modernity were largely absent from depictions of Perth. In 1905 Florence Fuller (1867-1946) painted a scene of the Narrows and Mount Eliza, looking across Perth Water from her studio in St. Georges Terrace. As the title of the work, Early Morning, suggests, it depicts the hour after dawn, as the river mist dissipates in the morning sunlight. Although

painted from the city, the only hint of urban life comes from the rooftops in the foreground and middle distance. There is no suggestion of the commerce and industry which give the city its economic power and status. Rather the emphasis is on rustic charm. The painting appealed both to the Trustees of the Western Australian Art Gallery, who acquired it for their collection, and to the art reviewer for the *West Australian* who was impressed by the painting's

> pure tone, its admirable perspective, and its strongly vivid reproduction of that mysterious and evanescent but always brilliant colouring that is momentarily lent by the sunrise to the Mount and the Perth Waters at its foot.  

The misty light and subdued tones of the painting were precisely what would appeal to the arcadian fantasies of Perth's cultural elite. At the time of its proclamation in June 1829 the Swan River Colony had been an experiment in creating a new society in the great south land. The first colonists had been drawn from the yeomanry and minor gentry of England but their attempt to recreate the life of the Shires under a southern sun soon failed. While those who through good fortune or good connections had secured prime land tended to survive, many others sank their fortunes into the impoverished soil of the settlement and then losing hope and heart, either returned to England or lapsed into rural poverty.

The West was also hampered by its isolation. Separated from the eastern colonies by the central Australian deserts, it took a month to travel the 3800 kilometres to Sydney by sea, and from four to six months to voyage more than 15,600 kilometres from the British isles. Although it was closer to Britain than the other colonies, Western Australia was off the main sailing routes and thus remained a backwater. But if Western Australia was a backwater, it was one which looked to "Home" for sustenance and support. In this sense at least, as Frank Crowley has pointed out, "The colony had fulfilled Stirling's early wish that it should be known as 'Hesperia' a country looking towards the setting sun, a land looking west".

At the time of the Wilgie Sketching Club exhibition Western Australian society remained stratified and insular. Yet over the next few years the colony experienced profound changes. While the early 1890s brought a period of economic depression and social unrest in the eastern colonies, the discovery of gold in Western Australia

in the mid 1890s brought about dramatic changes in the colony. Suddenly the west, for so long regarded as a worthless stretch of land, became the "Golden West". The population increased from 101,000 in 1895 to 239,000 in 1904 with most of the increase coming by immigration from the east, particularly from Victoria. With the increase in population and wealth, Perth underwent visible changes. Banks opened larger and more ornately decorated branches to garner the increasing wealth, new businesses commenced operation to meet the needs of the growing population, while companies from Sydney and Melbourne opened branches in the city with the consequence that Perth began to develop the characteristics of a metropolis.

The rapid increase in wealth in Western Australia during the 1890s saw an influx of artists into the colony. Some, like James Robert Walter Linton (1869-1947) arrived from the United Kingdom. Linton was not an impressionist. His use of watercolour in particular harked back to Constable, De Wint and Cotman, but he had a keen eye for the effects of light and shadow, and during his years as an art teacher in Perth his teaching on the effects of light and colour helped direct his students towards the use of impressionist techniques.

Other artists such as Frederick Mathews Williams (1855-1929), George Pitt Morison (1861-1946), and Arthur Wakefield Bassett (1869-1948) arrived in Perth from Melbourne during the 1890s. All had studied at the National Gallery Schools Melbourne, where fellow students had included Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and John Longstaff and had joined their fellows at the artists' camps at Heidelberg. Pitt Morison had studied in Paris at the Académie Julian under Bouguereau, Lefèvre, Constant and Doucet and had painted in the country around Paris with his compatriots John Longstaff, Rupert Bunny and Emanuel Phillips Fox. Further, Williams, Pitt Morison and Bassett had been active participants in Melbourne's literary and artistic Bohemia during the early 1890s. All these painters had developed their plein air techniques and had been influenced by the "impressionist impulse"; the desire to depict in high keyed tones, with loose brushwork, their vision of contemporary life and landscape long before they arrived

17. Crowley, 119.
in Perth. 18

Not all the artists who travelled to Western Australia during the last decade of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century were male. Marie Anne Tuck (1866-1947) arrived in Perth from South Australia in 1896. She had studied in Adelaide with James Ashton and was resolved to study in France. Perth was her first stop on the journey to Paris. Promptly after arriving in the city she opened a studio in Wellington Street and advertised for students, but it would be six years before she had saved enough to complete her journey to Paris. 19

Florence Fuller was born in South Africa and had moved to Melbourne with her family as a child, and studied at the National Gallery Schools before working for a decade in London and Paris. Like her male confreres from Melbourne, Fuller had exhibited with the Victorian Artists’ Society. Fuller arrived in Perth in 1904 and although she only remained for four years, she was to produce some of the mos, accomplished plein air or “impressionist” works to be painted in Western Australia. 20

The “impressionist impulse” found its way to Perth with those artists who had experienced it elsewhere, and who brought it to Western Australia as a part of their artistic baggage during the years following the mid 1890s. But Perth proved to be an inhospitable location, lacking the bohemian culture of Sydney and Melbourne. The artistic community was small, and none of the painters could support themselves from their art. All had permanent employment as teachers, museum curators or draughtsmen. 21 Further, Linton, Williams and Pitt Morison all were in early middle age by the time they arrived in Perth and married within a few years of


20. Details of Florence Fuller may be found in Anderson and Gooding.

21. J.W.R. Linton supported himself as a teacher and as art instructor at Perth Technical School from 1902 to 1931. Pitt Morison was employed by the Department of Lands and Survey until his appointment to the Western Australian Museum and Art Gallery in 1906. He remained there until 1942. Williams was the first instructor at Perth Technical School before becoming a draughtsman with The Mines Department.
their arrival. Consequently their art, while still important, became secondary to the need to support their families. Further, Perth lacked the meeting places and support networks which were necessary for the artists to gain recognition through exhibitions, make contact with art dealers and patrons and to meet fellow artists who were experimenting with new styles of work. As a result of these factors the circumstances which gave rise to bohemianism in Sydney and Melbourne did not exist in Perth.

The main forum for artists during the last years of the nineteenth century was the West Australian Society of Arts which was formed in 1896 by Bernard Woodward and other former members of the Wilgie Sketching Club. Linton, Williams and Pitt Morison were foundation members of the society, and with Marie Tuck, exhibited at the Society's first exhibition in December 1896. Over the next decade all these artists would be active as office bearers and committee members of the Society. But the West Australian Society of the Arts was not only a venue for the trained professional. It also attracted the amateur painter. The Society enjoyed Vice Regal patronage, and had the support of leaders of Perth society including Archbishop Riley, Chief Justice Sir Robert McMillan, Sir Winthrop Hackett (editor and part owner of the *West Australian*) and members of parliament.22

Despite some support from the socially prominent, the artists struggled to make an impact. At the opening of the May 1898 exhibition of the Society the Acting Governor of Western Australia Sir Alex Onslow felt bound to comment that “No one could have been long in Perth without seeing what a dearth there was of anything like fine art”.23 Perhaps stung by this comment, in 1898 the Western Australian government granted the society an annual subsidy of twenty five pounds, which was increased to one hundred pounds by 1903.24 Despite this official support, the society continued to struggle in the face of public indifference, holding its exhibitions in what the painter Daisy Rossi described as “ill lit out of the way rooms, and buildings connected to temporary galleries”.25

The Western Australian “impressionist” painters depicted life in and near Perth, painting (as a number of them had done at Heidelberg) the suburban bush, or picturesque views of the Swan River. In doing this, they painted the scenes which would appeal to the taste of the men who ruled Perth. For as Tom Stannage has

25. Daisy Rossi quoted in Chapman, 8.
suggested, Perth's establishment still believed in:

The great western traditions of the Pastoral idyll, a tradition which was central to the gentry's quest for internal peace and belief in a harmonious society where men were at one with each other and with nature.²⁶

In his painting Swan River Foreshore at Mount's Bay 1901,²⁷ Pitt Morison depicts Mount Eliza, part of Kings Park, on the edge of Perth. Although the city is nearby, there is no hint of this in the painting. The feeling of rustic peace is emphasised by the muted afternoon light and its attendant shadows. Similarly Frederick Williams' painting Mount's Bay Road 1897,²⁸ depicts the Swan River foreshore near King's Park in late afternoon, though there is still sufficient power in the sunlight to give the stones on the embankment surrounding the edge of the river a warm glow. This is balanced by the dark waters of the Swan. The atmosphere in this painting is serene and self contained, the effect being heightened by the small boy standing in the patch of glowing light. There is nothing in this painting to suggest that even by 1897, Mount's Bay Road was one of the main thoroughfares from the nearby city to the Western suburbs of Perth and site of the Swan Brewery, one of Perth's major industrial installations.

While the waters of the Swan River attracted the *plein air* painters of Perth, they also painted the suburban bush. Pitt Morison, Williams and Bassett in particular followed the pattern of their early years in the artist's camps around Melbourne, most of which had been located in popular beauty spots which were conveniently close to the suburban railway system. But there was a significant difference. For the reasons mentioned earlier Perth lacked a self sustaining male “bohemia” and while the impressionist artists of Perth painted scenes of the picturesque bushland and coast around the city and in the nearby Darling Ranges, they did not congregate in artists' camps. The scenes which they painted therefore tended to be suburban bushland within easy travelling from their homes or their holiday camps.

Bassett's vision of the verdant near city bushland can be seen in *Burning off, Lake*
In this painting a distant figure burns leaves and brushwood under a wintry sky. The feeling is one of enclosure, the effect enhanced by the wispy trees touched with blossoms in the foreground. The motif adopted by Bassett can be found in the paintings of Charles Conder, Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin who frequently employed the device in their works during the 1880s. They in turn had adopted the motif from Whistler, and through the influence of the aesthetic movement, from Japanese woodcuts. The verdant greens and flowering blossoms in Bassett’s painting reflect the opening lines of Elizabeth Brockman’s poem *Through the Woods*:

The Spring has lent a softer, brighter hue  
To the dark evergreens, and with a breath  
Of dewy warmth lured forth the early flowers.  

While many of the paintings by the Western Australian *plein air* painters avoid reproducing the strong sunlight of the Perth summer, one painting which shows the suburban bush lit by sunshine is Pitt Morison’s *Sunlight and Shadows* 1911. While the patch of bushland is uninhabited with a magpie in the foreground being the only sign of life, the two stumps in the middle distance show that the bush is not completely virgin. Sun dried grass glows golden in the sunlight, intersected by mauve shadows thrown by the trees. The overall feeling is of the bush in summer, yet even in this work it is not the harsh destructive summer of the outback which is depicted. In this painting, as in Laurance Spurhan’s 1907 ode to the Avon Valley near Perth:


32. Daisy Rossi reviewed this painting in an article “The Western Australian Society of Arts, Nineteenth Exhibition”. The *West Australian*, 23 July, 1912. She had recently returned to Perth from Paris and described Pitt Morison’s work as being “fresh and unlaboured and revels in the purple and mauves of the French school.”
I hear the green leaves kissing their sisters in the shade,
And see leaves softly creeping, where argent paths are made.\textsuperscript{33}

While the scots born painter John Campbell produced careful depictions of Subiaco Railway station and the Swan Brewery which have been described by Janda Gooding as “an expression of community pride in the economic progress and achievements of the state”,\textsuperscript{34} the works of Western Australian impressionists during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century concentrated on the picturesque. There were few scenes of urban life of the kind produced by impressionist painters in Sydney and Melbourne and there was nothing in the works to suggest the limitless space of the West Australian outback, or blazing summer sunlight. Many of the works were autumnal, or depicted the effects of light at the beginning or end of the day with little sign of the city of Perth itself.

Although Perth grew rapidly from the mid 1890s, it remained undeveloped compared with Sydney and Melbourne, and remote from the rest of the world, forming “an oasis of human habitation poised on the edge of a lonely ocean, and the almost limitless emptiness of the Great Western Desert”.\textsuperscript{35} The artistic community remained small, with no scope for painters to survive solely on their painting, yet in their depiction of the scenery around Perth, these early \textit{plein air} painters began to create a distinct vision of the settled areas around the Swan River and the Darling escarpment. In so doing, they created art with a distinct regional identity, while always being aware that they were far from the metropolitan centres where, they felt, important things were happening. Some, like Marie Tuck and Florence Fuller moved on, as did members of the next generation of impressionist painters like Kathleen O’Connor. Yet many of the first group of impressionists in Perth, such as Linton and Pitt Morison were constrained by ties of family and the need to make a living to remain in Perth. In the late 1930s Pitt Morison returned to visit the eastern states after an absence of some 40 years. There he renewed his acquaintance with Arthur Streeton and other surviving contemporaries from the 1890s. The experience left Pitt Morison with the sense that “because of his years in isolation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Laurance Spruhan ("Peter Doubt") “In Avon Valley”. Grono, 1, 135. Like many of the impressionist painters in Western Australia, Spruhan was born in Victoria (in 1877). He travelled to the goldfields in 1894, returned east c1916, died 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Gooding, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Peter Fuller, The Australian Scapegoat. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1984. Intro, xvii.
\end{itemize}
from the events in the east, he had missed a great deal at the expense of his own work”.36

While Pitt Morison’s conclusion may have been a harsh one, it is undoubtedly correct. While the works of Perth’s early “impressionist” painters were often attractive, they tended to be slight. In many respects the importance of the early *plein air* painters was felt in their influence as teachers on the next generation. The true flowering of Western Australian impressionism came with painters such as Kathleen O’Connor (1876-1968). But O’Connor had to leave Perth to study in Britain and France before her talent could reach its full potential, and by the time she reached Europe impressionism was already a part of art history.

Yet for the cultured classes in Western Australia during the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century, the signifiers of their society remained in the visions which they had imported from Britain of the rural idyll, riverine or littoral landscapes, or the portrayal, tinged with romanticism, of themselves at play. The impressionist painters in Perth were, in the main, content to depict these signifiers. In doing so they created a minor, but historically significant manifestation of the “impressionist impulse” in the isolated and insular community of turn of the century Perth.

Riding the Tiger

Old man dying. Jerry Dustin’s younger than me. He’s a smelly old friendless man, fat bald and grumpy. Lying flat out in a hospital bed, pretty nurses tending his every need, measuring his piss, checking the quantity and consistency of his shit, monitoring what goes in, what comes out with the dedication of Florence of the Crimea. It could’ve been a lot worse for Jerry. The likes of him should be in a back alley in a dingy city scrunched up in a cardboard box for the good he’d done anyone. Lucky old bugger, I thought, the thought crumpling in on itself. Jerry’d been a gunner in Darwin during the war. I didn’t know him then. I was in Borneo for a time, we’ve compared our experiences since. He’s full of bluster and crap, beat the Japs single-handed according to him.

That could be me dying in this antiseptic room, dreaming to the accompaniment of slapping rubber gloves, prodding fingers up my bum. Willy the Shake in the sixteenth century reaffirmed the Biblical three score and ten and I’ve long since used mine up.

I’m Bluey. G’day. I’m the old man watching the old man dying. We each have a job to do and we’re doing the best we can. No One is our friend.

Old age is the great equaliser. Walk through a nursing home and you immediately know what I mean. All the Phenol in the world can’t cover the stink of decrepitude. Wrinkled bony bodies fumble their way towards death. The primadonna, the garbage-collector, the poet laureate, Don Juan de Marco and Mata Hari are all hidden within these lumpy carcasses hunched in wheelchairs, strapped to benches, stretched out on scratchy hospital linen.

Take Jerry and me. No man ever asks us these days what we do for a living, no woman has given either of us the glad eye for many a year. I was once a... I remember when... My first love... Paris after the war... The beginnings of...
sentences hang in the air, tap each other gently and dissolve into the mist. Only No One cares what we might have done, what books we might have read, what we think Shakespeare would think of Baz Luhrman's Romeo and Juliet, whether we were once a doctor, a journalist or a baker, how many lovers we had. Youth scorns us and runs off to a party. Middle-age builds us nursing homes and dresses up in white uniforms to mark the difference, ward off the inevitable. No no no not yet, not me. We of the brittle bones can be at once a scholar and a bum because only No One sees the difference, No One's the only one who cares. Jerry and I have become used to No One. No One is our constant companion. We speak over and over to No One and No One takes the trouble to listen.

Jerry's lost his speech. Puts paid to the diatribe of self-pity he's accustomed to spewing, how his missus left him and after he'd fathered five of the best, gave her everything, the shirt off his back. She'd never used to complain of a little rough-handling before, liked her man to be a man. One day out of the blue, because of a measly black eye she chucked him out of his own house... and so on and so forth. These days he's a captive audience to me and my story. Jerry, me and No One. I sit here beside his bed and spill it, he can barely move let alone tell me to stop. No One interrupts. Long days, too. Liquidy. But I'm not smug about feeling the sun on my back, part of the deal is to bring a bit in with me. Fair exchange, sunshine for soundboard.

No words pass between us. Words are useless for the likes of us. Obstacles that get in the way with their sharp needly barbs. We've each done a stint of words and each suffered the consequences of their wobbly misinterpretations. Nowadays we go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred...

The nurse fidgets with the gadgets, ticks the report-sheet. She glances in my direction, a sideways glance. Too busy to take much notice. Confuses me with the others lying here dying. Too busy to take much notice. Confuses me with the others lying here dying. Pleased one of the lonely old men in this ward stinking of death has made a friend, someone to distract him, one less to tug at her heartstrings. Little does she know I'm no friend of Jerry's, I'm No One's friend. If she knew that she'd wonder why I remain here by his bedside. What am I but a whisper. I'm invisible. A mask. Wouldn't do to alert anyone to my real purpose. I'm invisible to all but Jerry and No One. They know why I'm here. There's an alternative to fight and flight. I intend to learn how to ride the tiger and Jerry has agreed to help.

Dribbling old man! He lies there with spit caked in the cracks around his lips. Glazed eyes. Mumbling grumbling — flaky skin reeking of rot and decay. I sit here on the plastic visitor's chair in a ward full of hard-bitten geriatrics gasping for breath
through their emphysema, their blocked arteries, I look at Jerry and I see No One. A rage begins inside. Fight or flight — I have a decision to make and fast. I see the elephant, the tiger. My own mortality rushes towards me spewing bullets. I'm frightened, a witness to the deterioration of No One, old man dying. He blinks, notices me sitting here. His ears prick. My crackling no-voice masks the trumpeting of the elephant, the roar of the tiger.

One of the kitchen staff has brought in Jerry's lunch. A dumpy little grandmother in a tight yellow uniform, not a nurse. Driven. Pussy-lipped, probably thinking of getting the rent in on time or paying the electricity bill. Not present, doesn't take any notice of the old man dribbling. Sees No One. Plonks the tray and scuttles off. The motto here - hurry, hurry, hurry.

Neither Jerry nor I are in a hurry. Where are we heading? Nowhere. What's beyond our wrinkled carcasses? Nothing. Who cares? No One. I look at the bowl of clear soup, the strained peaches... babyfood. There's no way the weak old bloke can feed himself. Martyr me sighs and lays myself out on the cross, picks up the heavy spoon and ladles a bit through the raggy lips. Jerry spits, the most movement I've noticed yet, looks at me in a way that makes me wonder if he isn't getting better. You don't want to eat? He glares at me. Look, mate, it's no skin off my nose. You don't want to eat. Fine. I shrug and replace the spoon.

I was settling back into myself on the point of taking up the tale when the pretty moon-faced nurse arrives. Nods and smiles and focusses her full attention on Jerry. "Well, well, well," she tutts, "my favourite boy hasn't eaten anything." I grumble silently that we've been through all this, he won't eat, leave him be, she should respect a man's right-of-way. His decision to starve himself out of here should be respected, as long as he's around long enough to straighten things out with No One. "We'll see about this," she suddenly gains two stone, becomes hard-faced and determined, the white nurse's shoes she was wearing turning into jack-boots, her pretty guava breasts now melons encased in brass breast-plates, a Nazi insignia on each, her accent thickens ve have vays of making you eat. She picks up the spoon and shovels it in. Jerry laps it up, fluttering his eyelids like a sheila.

A rage is growing inside me. Sharp blasting and violet it swells to bursting. Bluey, the human stick of dynamite. The last drop of muck in, she wipes his mouth gently, the pretty girl is back. She flashes me a smile, defusing the anger. I fill up with gratitude instead, like the babyfood was travelling down my pipes to fill my belly. Now I'm angry that it takes so little to placate me. She jots down the quantity of food he's eaten on his record-sheet clipped to the bedend, checks the gadgets he's
attached to, squeezes his foot affectionately and leaves us together with No One. I'm jealous. Wish it was my foot squeezed by that dainty little hand.

For the first time since we began this strange journey together Jerry looks at me directly. The resistance in his rheumy eyes has been replaced by enthusiasm. I resume my story.

Jerry pisses in the bed. He won't wait for a nurse. Won't oblige them in a bedpan. Childhood luggage, this refusal to follow the rules. Potty-training. There is a glint in his eye, a slight tickle around his lips. I call the nurse. Jerry screws his eyes at me. I've betrayed him and I'm glad.

Teach him to get a foot-squeeze and not share the pleasure.

The nurse is a bloke. A nice young man. Not sissy like you'd think. Brawny, even burly, but gentle. Dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. "Nice shot, Jerry," he grins as he lifts the old man onto the recliner to change the bed. Jerry squirts again and splashes the nurse's shoes. "Couldn't think of anyone I'd like better to christen these sparkling new rubbers," he winks. Jerry glares at him and would've peed in his eye if he'd had any more ammo. No One laughed.

This is a childhood resentment, forced on the pot as infants before we're ready. Now we can rebel, rightly say, I will not accept the consequences of my actions and piss in the bed, shit in our pyjamas and smugly wait for our grandchildren to clean us up. Our turn. The nurse's hands are strong. He deftly changes the bed, trollies Jerry to the shower, returns him squeaky-clean and spruced. It's only a matter of time, I think with a sneer. My sneer turns to a frown when the nurse returns so swiftly. He attaches a bag to Jerry's penis, humming a tune while he removes a man's dignity. Poor old man lying there useless - with a bagged dick. Lopsided face. Jerry is deteriorating. His manhood rots inch by inch. Everyone needs someone, not to interfere the way the nurse has, saving a mess, but someone to watch, to be here. We have No One.

ACAT is here. Aged Care Assessment Team. ACAT determines whether or not Jerry is able to care for himself. A little middle-aged woman wearing a mask of thick makeup, skinny dried-up creature reeking of Chanel Number Five and Fanny-pong, is the team. Dyed hair. Long red false fingernails (how does she wipe her bum?) flick through the report sheets. She peers at Jerry through a fringe of thickly mascara'd lashes. Poor old man tries to smile, ends up looking constipated. Disgusts her. She barely nods on leaving.

It's entirely up to her. A swipe of the pen could have Jerry back in his squalid caravan fending for himself, in a hostel with minimal care, meals provided but his
personal hygiene in his own hands, or into a nursing home with full care. I yearn for respite. I yearn because Jerry is not going to leave this hospital. I know that. He knows it. That masked bandit who has just now walked out with his dignity knows it. No One sighs, No One cares, No One weeps.

Jerry can't return to the caravan. His entire life is packed into two St Vinnie's cardboard suitcases. Hector who runs the caravan park let the site within three hours of Jerry's notice.

Bags. Seventy-plus years squashed into a couple of bags. A man's penis lies wrinkled up in another. Jerry's forgotten the few ratty things in the cases. Useless things. Stained snapshots of the children when they were little. Rat piss blotsches the wedding photograph. Pretty young girl. Tall muscly youth, full head of thick curly hair, grinning gimlet eyes, strong teeth all his own. Hard to imagine the toothless bald shrunken parody before me as once this manly, handsome youth in the picture. I place the photo before Jerry's eyes. Blank. He doesn't recognise the bridal couple.

Jerry's eyes aren't always blank. He recognises No One. And me.

I see Jerry as a hero. An unlikely hero, flaccid skin, atrophying muscles, a bone-bag. Jerry the hero reminds me of our shared bottom line. This wavy wiggly ephemeral pretending thing scares the shit out of us. We are confronting our bottom line and No One is watching. Face-to-face with the ferocious beast, one leg over, Jerry riding pillon. Risky business.

The little moon-faced nurse is back straightening his sheets, checking his pulse. I'd like to feel her delicate cool fingers around my wrist. Them's the perks, I shrug, winking at No One.

Jerry is giving me the evil eye. He's glaring at me from his plumped pillow, his eyes shrieking. We're running out of time, he says. I smile indulgently. Have you forgotten that Time waits for No One and No One is here with us? Relax.

Jerry takes up my story and turns it into his own. I'm not here by chance. Chance is a red-lipped, painted whore, a swashbuckling gigolo, a choirboy, a vestal virgin. Chance is a god, a goddess. Chance is bullshit. Together we end our story, dramatising it for our audience, No One.

We're excited. Excitement smells stronger than Phenol and decay. Sparks fly as he reaches for the pillon helmet. No One watches the set change, the hospital ward metamorphosing into a jungle, thick with coiling roots and whiffy of mulch and steaming undergrowth. No One hears the rumbling behind us and watches us standing together facing the tiger. We are no longer afraid. Sleek striped cat sidles towards us, lowers itself, bending its hindquarters, easier to sling a leg over. I pull
Jerry on behind.

We're settled on its back. The tiger straightens, on point to spring, its muscles ripple beneath us. Jerry grasps me around the waist, I grab the tiger's ears.

We speed through the jungle, slithering snakes and whining hyenas, a blur of colour. We hear music, the thumping of the tiger's thick pads as it sleeks from ground to branch. We're flying through the treetops, our hearts beating up the raw rhythm. The air tastes like fine red wine, tingling our tongues. Every cell in our bodies zings. Spiralling on the back of the beast we sip the heavens, meet Zeus and Persephone at a tea party, we toast the Dreaming, tip our hats to the Great Spirit.

No One joins in the fun. No One claps and stomps her feet. No One waves us off.
He thought it a vast expanse of clay,  
full of fissures big enough to swallow  
a Thai village. It was the birth mark  
on his father's arm; when punished,  
he saw Australia as the belt descended.  

Years later an aunt sent him there to study.  
In the centre of the city  
there were no cracks, only wide streets,  
searing light. He stayed with Lynne,  
who was pale yellow:  

her skin, her hair, the softness of her voice.  
In her house he found the cracks,  
snaking through the hallway,  
above doors, breathing out ancient air  
trapped since the house was built.  

The biggest in the dining room,  
shaped like a shark's muzzle;  
sharp teeth meeting in a jagged seam.  
He drew up a chair,  
at lumpy porridge watching it.  

In the sixth week he came to class, told us  
Lynne had cancer, he felt compelled to stay.  
He watched the cracks grow bigger,  
fed her fragrant broths, thought of the gingerbread  
coloured walls of his mother's house.
In the tenth week he dreamt he lost Lynne
to the biggest crack. Sleep was a blue ocean
haze, the gash of the shark's mouth
yawning wide. He cradled her bald head,
smooth now as a conch shell.

In week twenty, both our rooms
were lost under a tide of paper.
It was midsummer, but icy winds blew in
the chasms, sighed through the hallway.
She was bedridden, he couldn't leave the house.

She died at the end of summer,
We sat at a round table,
three clawed feet between us,
drinking warmish beer
into a sullen evening.

The divide in the centre filled with old dirt.
I imagined taking his hand:
the fineness of his bones,
the dry heat of his palm, wished
for the crack to open, for the table to fall in two.
Rob Findlayson

each moment enough: your bones

your bones and the electric light collaborate with love and the night sleeping under your face my finger agog with the skin's dust report's molecule to molecule the curves and mountains of bone and the nose's bone ravine eye sockets of water-washed rock and teeth sheep upon Afghani crags it's the skull peering careering through theatre's backstage props graves books biology classes the subplot holding our hand stroking the skin's waves like the breath the home of the roadsign to spirit i am certain we don't love each moment enough
Last of the line I'm elbow deep
in the old machinery shed, surrounded
by polystyrene boxes, spores and compost,
keeping an eye out for the Ag Department rep
waging war on unregistered production.
The secret's to be positive, set goals
according to that personal development
magazine I get monthly (part-funded
by rural industries training and research).
The family if they were here would back
me up, but our history wouldn't.
Warren walked into the open septic
at his twenty-first; it'd just been pumped
and Cec forgot to put the lid back on.
Cec baled himself slipping off the combine
taking the last of the winter wheat
and young Maurie went swimming in the silo;
Darryl's presence in every Asian feedlot.
The female side extinct, Esme about to marry
old grazier stock, blood poisoned by her applique.
Working blind, feeling for the cups that might
just be pushing through, I check for signs of life.
Site Inspection

With my fast food lunch and mobile
I climb the hill where I used to park
the car with Margaret, now the psychologist
working with the anxious and depressed.
I skirt the clusters of honeyeaters hanging
from red and yellow cotoneaster berries
among the tent pegs and survey tape
of the new townhouse development.

Shadowing the cyclone fence,
I follow the trail of renewal,
past crushed cigarette packets
and cans and faded soft porn
magazines caught in the net.
A wind song courses through the wire
along plumblines of trenches carved
among the heritage-protected gums.

I find the spot beside the rock, grass flattened
by the westerly which has blown all week
under a site board where a Minister smiles
over initials which cannot be forgotten.
Trail bikes wheel across the rise
bringing a squawl of cockatoos
and a hoarding of memory.
In the rear vision mirror reversing out
a weathered face covers the landscape.
REVIEWS


Appearing with the same publisher at approximately the same moment, these two volumes while not companion, are companionate. Their very titles ask us to question what 'Australian' might mean in these contexts, who are Australians, and how wide can the net be cast? Both anthologies include a few items from writers patently not Australian but present for some form of Australian connectedness, but then both exclude many Australians for what we can only assume is then some form of disconnectedness; but from what? Sadly, the answer appears to be because they are not white, anglo-saxon, or male. In both volumes, entries by men outnumber those by women roughly two to one. Both volumes represent Aboriginal Australia by a precise 2%. Multicultural Australia fares worse in Letters, a meagre 1%, and much better in Lives, 11%.

Anthologies are risky business for any editors. They must try to avoid establishing or confirming particular canons or hierarchies, and be inclusive; at the same time the inclusion of certain names is often driven by sales expectation on the part of the publisher. It is not easy. How can you have a book called Australian Letters or Australian Lives and not include say Patrick White or Henry Lawson? The last-minute Christmas shopper, stumbling into Angus and Robertson's or Dymocks on December 24 will buy one of these anthologies for mum or dad if the key names are there; even though they are the same old names that are always there.

Still, arguing in support of the Anthology as a form of publication it is perfectly true that through this medium the work of long-forgotten writers, too many of them women, may be restored to view. But surely this is also an argument for bringing the work of other Australians both from the past and the present ages more clearly into view as well. Many a fine research project can emerge from a chance encounter with an anthologised piece beneath which lies a whole collection of exciting work to be critiqued and brought forward into the public imagination, and perhaps

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even find a niche in the cultural memory eventually as solid as Henry Lawson’s or Clive James’s. And like all anthologies these two volumes are both very satisfying at one level; the quiet, casual random dipping in and out, guided by the introduction or by idiosyncratic taste produces gems of interest and pleasing discoveries. Yet having said all this I end with a ‘but’. I know the arguments for inclusion; I know the arguments for omission; I know you can’t please all the people all the time; but surely publishers can begin to institute some changes. Surely men and women can be represented fifty/fifty, that would be a small but equitable start. Then Aboriginal Australia and Multicultural Australia could be granted higher percentage representation. At this end of the twentieth century it would be exciting to try and change the meaning of the word ‘Australian’ to accommodate all our lives; all our letters. Collections like these two would be a fine place to start.

_Australian Letters_ has an excellent introduction explaining how the choice of selected letters, beginning in 1771 and ending in 1997, was dictated in part by the trope of separation; separation as part of the colonial experience; as part of the pain of war; as part of the quest for work; as part of government-engineered projects to ‘assimilate’ indigenous peoples into coloniser cultures. So along with the more familiar style of letter to and from ‘Home’, from the colonial fringe back to the centre, there is also Margaret Harrison’s letter of 1884 begging the Inspector of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines to be reunited with her two surviving daughters; a plea which was successful.

The guidelines for the _Letters_ project suggested a “personal, oblique history of Australia” (xvi) and so while the ancient inevitable patriarchal line runs through the Contents—John, John; Charles, Charles, Charles; Henry, William, Richard, Charles—some of the old familiar names are represented by less familiar lives: Eliza Marsden, not Samuel; Menie Parkes, not Henry. What is more, there are highly personal letters containing expressions of sexual passion in an age when it is commonly believed that people never articulated such desires in writing anyway: the convict Denis Frendergast to his lover Jack; George Meredith (the Tasmanian Pioneer not the British author) to his wife describing with relish their relationship within the “sacred precincts of our Chamber-of-love”.

The decision to present the letters chronologically was a sound one, and the Sources list is very reader-friendly,
clearly linking the numbered letter to its (mostly) manuscript original, and includes the location of that manuscript.

*Australian Lives* is a collection of excerpted autobiographical material beginning with Joseph Holt’s *A Rum Story* (1838) and ending with Thomas Keneally’s *Homebush Boy* (1995). The ‘Introduction’ usefully addresses the concept of autobiography or life-writing, and warns that mediation ‘makes the genre treacherous territory for the cultural commentator’ (xi). What the Introduction does not do is offer any particular premise for the basis of selection, apart from an attempt to locate diversity. Unfortunately the division of autobiographical extracts into categories, ‘Convicts and Outlaws’, ‘Childhood and Family Relations’, etc. flattens diversity and tends to stifle individuality as well. A straightforward chronological presentation would have proved more effectively diverse and allowed comparison of experiences in like periods. However the volume actually begins with a selection of relatively unknown voices, Joseph Holt and John Mortlock, and this was a sound decision. The *Letters*, by beginning with Captain Cook, erroneously signals a traditional, conservative structure at the outset which the work has difficulty throwing off.

The *Lives* volume in choosing division of selections into categories also highlights for the reader more obviously the omissions. Those two great stirrers, Dorothy Hewitt and Germaine Greer, should surely have been represented in the final category, ‘Thinkers, Questers, and Stirrers’. But then, as I said at the outset, what to exclude and what to omit is the curse of every anthology editor, and it is too easy for the reader and critic to proffer their own highly personal list of candidates for inclusion. That, after all, is another book.

**Judith Johnston**


This anthology is a tangible souvenir of the second of the four Olympic Arts Festivals being held annually in Sydney in the lead-up to the XXVII Olympiad. As Andrea Stretton, the Artistic Director of the 1998 Olympic Arts Festival, explains in her preface to the book, the festival’s name—*A Sea Change*—drew attention both to Australia’s literal existence as island continent and to the figurative
connotation of 'transformation'. In his engaging introduction to this volume, Adam Shoemaker considers the origin of the term 'a sea change' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play richly evocative of the issues pertaining to invasion/settlement, memory/history, and the responsibility that is concomitant with the freedom to reinvent oneself.

Shoemaker commissioned fourteen writers to contribute to the anthology, asking them to focus on the concept of 'metamorphosis' and sending each author some visual images to catalyse the writing process. Asked how he came to select the particular writers, he explained that he had encountered many of them during the 1996 and 1997 Brisbane Writers Festivals, and proceeded from the desire to include a range of different Australian voices. The black and white photographs which are interspersed throughout the text were mainly already published or exhibited in galleries.

The cover photograph is David Moore's 'Sydney From 16,000 Feet', taken in 1966. It is an apt image to encapsulate the themes of the anthology. An aerial view of Sydney Harbour bridge reflected in the water, it looks to this reader bizarrely like a small bite mark across two strings, on an extensive patch of snow. If Bondi beach seems to be disproportionately represented in the photographs, it is because Shoemaker—with an eye to an international readership as well as to the local one—determined to demonstrate the different perspectives which can be brought to bear upon even stereotypically Australian locations.

The longest of the written works, Louis Nowra's 'Ten Anecdotes about Lord Howe Island', functions as the centrepiece of the collection, and rightly so. It is an idiosyncratic mixture of fact and fantasy, Nowra's matter-of-fact tone concealing his shifts between historiography and tall story.

In 1939 John Young, a local apparently under the influence of Howie, assaulted a visiting Boy Scout in an unprovoked attack. In a Sydney court, Mr T Andrews, patriarch at that time, presented a petition to the magistrate who took the advice it proffered and sentenced Mr Young to three years' exile from Lord Howe, a punishment so severe that, on the five occasions it has been issued, all who have served it have died of grief before being able to return. (148)

Nowra's piece parodies the cliches
of Australia as paradise and Australians as anti-authoritarian larrikins (it's our convict ancestry) while exploring in dark comedy the trope of the return of the repressed. This trope is explored from another angle in Michael Cathcart's non-fiction piece, 'The Silent Continent'. Cathcart's is an interesting meditation on the representation in nineteenth-century writing of 'unexplored' territory (i.e. that inhabited only by indigenous peoples) as silent land. 'They were here but not here. They were here, but not heard.' (96)

Another of the impressive non-fiction contributions is Barbara Thiering's magisterially concise survey of religious practice in Australia, entitled 'The Land Where Myths Have Died'. The other pieces which particularly arrested my attention are Sue Woolfe's 'Forgiving the Sea', James Bradley's 'The Turtles' Graveyard', and Nick Earls' 'The Haircut of a More Successful Man'.

Woolfe's piece is apparently mostly autobiographical, the story of her transition from a childhood in the bush to a life by the ocean. Bradley's is an unsettling story, narrated by a diver who has been accidentally left in the ocean by the crew aboard the boat and is thus awaiting death. The story of course has resonances of the tragic recent abandonment of an American couple off North Queensland, but the author maintains a respectful distance between his fiction and their fact. Earls' story, on the other hand, is a light-hearted indulgence in wish-fulfillment, in which the ordinary, weak and self-misrepresenting narrator ends up happily ever after.

It would be churlish to ignore Matthew Martin's peculiar artwork entitled 'I Travelled West', to describe which as a four-part comic concerning a bird's journey to the four corners of the globe in search of its identity is woefully to fail at the reviewer's craft.

A Sea Change is a celebration of Australia's cultural variety and our potential to develop in directions as yet unimagined. In his introduction, Shoemaker dwells on another phrase from The Tempest — 'what's past is prologue'. The statement might be interpreted as an assertion that what is past is unimportant—that the 'main action' is yet to come. As a collective gloss on the statement, however, the anthology suggests that a contemplative awareness of the past remains essential for proactive creation of the future—one's own and that of the nation. A Sea Change has been distributed widely free of charge, and should be accessible in all public libraries. Anyone wishing to obtain a personal copy should contact SOCOG at 235 Jones Street, Ultimo, NSW,
2007—and should do so quickly, as supplies are limited.

Heather Neilson


In *Jamming the Machinery: Contemporary Australian Women’s Writing*, Alison Bartlett borrows Luce Irigaray’s subversive metaphor to undertake a particularly exciting reading of contemporary Australian writing by women. Bartlett’s decision to break with traditional academic paradigms, follows in the footsteps of a 1994 study by Sue Roe, Susan Sellers, Nicole Ward Jouve, and Michelle Roberts: *The Semi-Transparent Envelope—Women Writing – Feminism and Fiction*. Like Roe et al, Bartlett moves to explore the boundaries between fiction and criticism, the often fractious relationship between women’s writing and theory. In *Jamming the Machinery*, Bartlett allows the writers whose work she investigates to talk back to her, and about themselves, to discuss their writing practices, indeed to question her critical exercise. *Jamming the Machinery* combines serious scholarship with friendly chat, philosophical debate with light-hearted, although often revealing whingeing, the whole a meta-ficto-critical exercise that turn a reading of some else’s books into a shared experience, a kind of relaxed but lively afternoon book club discussion. One of the strengths of Bartlett’s approach, apart from her own ability to remain always the facilitator rather than the disector, resides precisely in this power to seduce the reader into believing that s/he too are part of the work, their voices just as valuable, their interjections equally welcome.

Alternating critical essays with personal musings, lengthy quotations taken from interviews with the various writers whose books she reads with theoretical pronouncements by such French luminaries as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Bartlett sets out in her work to explicate the thesis that contemporary writing by Australian women represents a unique blend of theory and practice, personal stories of women which seek also to stretch out to a wider community of beings who share in common a cultural and biological condition. As such the work travels the by now well-trodden path
of women's writing and difference, the nexus gender, desire, pleasure and aesthetics, but it does so in ways that are particularly original by focusing on selected texts by Australian women writers and artists. She writes in her opening paragraph: “In this book I am interested in the ways in which feminist theory and practice intersect, specifically in the relation between contemporary women’s writing and feminist theories about women’s writing”. To this end Bartlett adopts as the theoretical framework within which Jamming the Machinery operates the notion of écriture feminine, stressing the practice of writing as performance, and then in turn of self-(re)making.

If fault there is with the paradigm Bartlett adopts in Jamming the Machinery, it is essentially that in allowing the writers to express their own views on why and how they write, on whom they would like to have read their works, and on what they wish those readers to come across therein, Bartlett at times appears a little too reverential, perhaps much too willing to allow her interlocutors to sound like the idiots savantes she credits them with being. The point is not that she should be expected to adopt a clinical stance to all that the writers themselves say, either in conversation or in their correspondence with her. But why should we believe that when Ania Walwicz, Margaret Coombs or Davida Allen complain about ‘misreadings’ of their works, either by critics or ‘lay’ readers, they are expressing anything more than their own, always necessarily and inevitable biased views? Bartlett’s protectiveness of what at times seem to have become her writers is well demonstrated when she takes up the cudgel on behalf of Coombs. Noting that Rose Lucas, Helen Daniel and Carmel Bird, among others (by any measure quite a diverse array of viewpoints), Bartlett devotes a substantial amount of space to these critics’ ‘misreadings’ of Coombs (at least in the writer’s own view), giving us in return very little of her own reading of Coombs’ work. The jeu de mirroirs et de tableaux noirs Bartlett plays in this cleverly crafted work becomes at such moments a rather empty jeu de plaisanteries. Surely Coombs can speak for herself, as her non-fictional essays so ably demonstrate. Bartlett’s role shifts in this instance from that of a mediator to a quasi-maternal protector of her brood.

In contrast her reading of Fiona Place’s work, Cardboard, is at once informed and insightful. Bartlett offers of Cardboard a meticulously argued interpretation, and although Place herself is allowed into the discussion,
her views too are subjected to close scrutiny. Indeed, it is in the book's treatment of Place's work and of her interview with Bartlett, that the potential generated by Bartlett's unconventional critical model is best developed. By juxtaposing her own writing to Place's replies, Bartlett ably exposes what is one of the most crucial issues within contemporary feminist circles in Australia, the 'generational gap' that separates Place from Coombs, Mead from Garner, for instance. Place's response to some of her more radical feminist critics, who objected to her decision to have a man as her main character: "life is more complex than that", meaning that she did not see the point of romanticising a woman's world, eventually leads Bartlett to ponder her own decision to remain within a heterosexual relationship. To this extent she wonders, in her discussion of Davida Allen's Close to the Bone: the Autobiography of Vicky Myers, how so many feminists manage to combine an active engagement in women's issues with their equally active roles within patriarchal structures of marriage and motherhood. For Tom Shapcott's reading of Close to the Bone as 'a story of an enduring marriage ... a psalm to love' highlights the fact that love, here as in most senses, is still about the love between man and woman.

Interestingly, Bartlett then concludes, like so many before her, with the assertion that although uncomfortable about the duality of her position as a feminist and as a heterosexual woman, she is not sure how to theorise it. Hence her final note on the irony that critiques of heterosexuality to date have been largely the preserve of lesbian feminists.

As a reader, I was persuaded by the sheer inventiveness of her insights, the fluidity of her interpretative models to reconsider some of my own readings of works such as Walwicz's, Coombs' and Baranay's, and led to look up Davida Allen's writing. Jamming the Machinery: Contemporary Australian Women's Writing, will be indispensable to any student of Australian literature. But it will serve just as well the reader whom works such as The Falling Woman or The Best man for this sort of thing left intrigued, hankering for a bit more detail about the book and its author. One last point—given the almost total absence of Aboriginal content in works of Australian literature of a time gone by, to highlight such instances is a commendable though not particularly challenging task. It is perhaps a little more difficult to accept the exclusion of Aboriginal voices in work being produced today. Bartlett's justification for not dealing with "work by
Aboriginal women" rings a little hollow. But I am also only too conscious of the way in which to identify such flaws has in itself developed into a quasi-de rigueur stance through which one flags wildly one's own self-righteousness to pursue the issue here. May the readers pass their own judgement.

Tony Simoes da Silva


These twenty-one pieces of short fiction take the reader right into the minds and bodies of people at the violent ugly edges of sexual experience. They are strangely sad stories, and yet from time to time they made me laugh.

There are some stories that race along at a skilful and marvellous pace, lacking all punctuation and leaving the reader breathless. All but two stories are not divided into paragraphs, so that they too move in a particular and relentless way. The typeface of all the titles is very threatening, with every 'O' being a perfect circle divided by a central cross, the early Phoenician precursor of theta, the target-marker in the scope of a rifle. You are looking down the barrel of Eros's gun. This Eros has very little to do with the beauty of human love, seeming to be concentrated on something like love's opposite most of the time. These people hate a lot—they often hate themselves and hate each other, seeking ecstasy in depravity, pleasure in anger and destruction. They mostly are not lovers in an ordinary sense, but hunter and quarry, crossing many boundaries of gender and culture, entering a bleak world in which there is almost no relief from the light which is beaming in some of the darkest corners of human activity.

One of the narrators puts his own position in an interesting way:

'I pointed out that I wasn't approving of the situation, in fact it turned my stomach, but that I saw it as my duty to retell the story exactly in the spirit in which it had been told to me.' And there is a strange detachment in the telling of all the stories, even though many of them are first person narratives, and the teller owns the action. This is a perfect position from which the writer can deliver the material, can pose the questions of how far the writing can go, how much the readers can take.
At what point does a reader turn away in disgust? At what point does a reader laugh, if nervously? 'I carry a used condom in a zip-top money bag because I love to smell it.' And the pen at work is that of a poet who can find the music in the discord, can paint the scene with the flick of a word.

And characters—the range of these is broad and startling, from the nerdish schoolboy called Squirt to the meanest weirdo who cuts up dolls and possibly shoots boys in the head. (A note on cutting up the dolls: because of the way Barbie dolls are constructed, it is not possible to do what the boys say the bloke has done to a Barbie.) The voices, each so different from the other, cut through the reader's complacency and interrogate our culture and our understanding of what we can say and think and know about our own sexual lives and those of others. Snuff movie? Coprophilia? Fetish? Child abuse?

Very occasionally there is a scene of wistful tenderness, all the more arresting for being rare. 'I lose control and throw my arms around her and kiss her full on the lips my tongue losing itself in the soft damp warmth of her mouth and she says wow no one's ever done that to me before.' And some of the most brutal effects are the most subtle and exquisite, such as the use of the motif of the bracelet in 'Bracelet' and the motif of the foxes in 'The Throats of Foxes', the sea and the fish in 'The Red-Bellied Sea Snake'.

'...the red belly flops like war around on the scaled jetty and the fish knife rises against the sunset and slices the head clean off...' The imagery reverberates in the imagination, giving the narrative one more turn of the screw.

The publisher's note carries a warning that the book contains 'material which may offend'. It is meant to offend you, and to question why it offends, and to ask you why you are offended, and maybe if not why not. One of the most shocking moments is when a couple, who had been 'washed up for ages' 'solemnly reconsummated the marriage'. Horrible or what?

This collection is one that will stop readers in their tracks, and that will open a broad dialogue concerning the rights, wrongs, ins, outs of literary erotica, pornography, censorship and plain old storytelling.

Carmel Bird
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STORIES
including
Louis Armand
Jennifer Coleman
Kim Downs
Stephanie Green
and others

POETRY
including
Rob Findlayson
Stephen Gilfedder
John Mateer
Anne-Marie Newton
Philip Salom
Rita Tognini
and others

ARTICLES
John Kinsella on
A Patch of Ground

Richard Rossiter on
Seaforth MacKenzie &
Post Modern Facades

Christopher Wray on
Depictions of Perth by
Western Australian
Impressionists

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