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Sadly, June, 2005 saw the passing of Margot Luke, who for many years until the late 1980s was fiction editor of *Westerly*. Margot was born in Hamburg in 1925 and eventually became an academic in German Studies, but not before working as a typist, in publishing, and with Anna Freud. Her own fiction was published in magazines and anthologies, and she was a theatre critic for both the *West Australian* and *Australian* newspapers.

**PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2004: 

Graeme Kinross-Smith

for his story "Where Here Is"

that appeared in the No. 49, 2004 edition.
Half a century seems a fairly long time in the life of an individual, but in the life of a literary and cultural magazine it seems an aeon. The existence of such magazines is always fragile, dependent on a relatively small number of dedicated readers, the sponsorship of government arts bodies and philanthropists, and the energy of a few dedicated individuals mostly working on the magazine in their spare time. Fifty years of *Westerly* has meant many changes of individuals – the current editors were in primary school when the magazine was first published – quite a few changes of sponsors, some shifts in readership, many changes in external context and in technology, but overall a remarkable consistency of purpose and direction. *Westerly* has always been a cultural journal with a predominant emphasis on literature, particularly that from or about Western Australia, Australia generally, and the Indian Ocean region. These emphases, which have their logic in *Westerly*’s geographical location, differentiate it from other literary magazines anywhere in the world, but it does have in common with many of them the encouragement of linguistic creativity and critical intelligence without fear or favour, with underlying values to express but without any particular literary or political barrow to push. The editors encourage critical discussion, and they publish many views with which they do not agree. In an increasingly spin-driven political environment and a cultural environment of increasingly visual rather than verbal literacy, this is an activity of crucial importance. Valuable actions and valuable thoughts are not possible without imagination and verbal sensitivity. Literary magazines such as *Westerly* are made possible through enthusiasm, not through profit, and economic precariousness may even fuel their liveliness.

In this issue Bruce Bennett, for more than twenty years an editor of the magazine, reflects on its history, including the antecedents from which it grew. What began as a small, local publication has long since been
professionalised in outlook, content and method of production. It might have been expected that the original, resource-starved publication from the western edge of Australia would have been parochial but in fact that first issue of Westerly in 1956 included two articles about Asia. The internationalisation of Australian studies which Robert Dixon describes and encourages in his review of the year’s non-fiction in this issue, began for Westerly with its very first outing.

What was more lacking fifty years ago was a large amount of quality poetry and fiction. Nowadays obtaining good creative and critical writing is the easiest aspect of publishing the magazine. The creative and critical work has grown in sophistication, in line with the increasing complexity and sophistication of Australian culture more generally. In Western Australia at least, that improvement is partly due to the existence of Westerly; publication in a major magazine validates and encourages a writer’s work, and Westerly has been privileged to help the development of writers as diverse as, say, Elizabeth Jolley, Edwin Thumboo, Alf Taylor, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Philip Salom. Most writing in Westerly is unsolicited but for this special, fiftieth year issue, we invited a number of prominent West Australian authors who have been associated with the magazine to submit creative work. Many have provided excerpts from work in progress, so that the issue provides a snapshot of the current activity of a number of leading figures. Westerly has always sought to publish new writers, and the issue, as is always our policy, mixes together the work of new and experienced poets, fiction writers and critics.

For most of its history Westerly was published as a quarterly but with a reduction in funding to Australian universities and difficulties created by the Australia Council, in 2000 the editors decided to publish as an annual. This enabled the publication of a large issue more acceptable to bookshops because it had a labelled spine and resembled a book, and made each year’s publication an event. ArtsWA has provided unstinting support annually throughout this period, enabling Westerly to remain the flagship of West Australian literature and West Australian writing to be seen shoulder to shoulder with national and international work. Westerly now publishes work from all over the world, but it retains a special emphasis on Western Australia and its surrounding region; a recent visitor to Perth, the Filipino poet and academic Jose Wendell Capili, commented on how important Westerly is to the South-east Asian region. In many ways, it is easier to have the magazine noticed in Asia than in the eastern states of Australia; but it has been ever thus – a reminder that Perth is on the same time zone as Singapore, Hong Kong and Beijing but is two or three hours (depending on the season) off Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.
Apart from content, fifty years has seen enormous changes to the way the magazine is produced – but very few to the way it is distributed. It is now easier to print a magazine than ever – but distribution remains the bugbear for all serious and literary cultural publishing, magazine and book alike. This problem may be overcome in the future through the web and whatever succeeds it. Who knows? In fifty years time subscribers to *Westerly* may read it off their visually enhanced mobile phones or computer chips in their fingernails. It is a truism to say that electronic technology is changing faster than anyone could have imagined even ten years ago. Mercifully, the nature of imagination and creativity and the aspirations of human life seem to have a contrasting perennialness. Imagination is still a long-legged spider tip-toeing across a stream.

Readers may be interested to know of the roles different people play in preparation of the magazine. As Co-editors, Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell have overall responsibility for all aspects of *Westerly*. Monica Anderson, the Administrator of the Westerly Centre, prepares the manuscript for the Designer, Kevin Barnett at Media Fixation. Production is managed by Roger Bourke of Quarto Publishing Services. The Co-editors commission three review-articles for each issue, one on the fiction published in Australia during the previous twelve months (roughly the financial year), one on the year’s non-fiction, and one on the year’s poetry. Normally, other material is unsolicited. Non-fiction manuscripts, if thought worth considering by the Co-editors, are sent to one or two readers chosen from *Westerly*’s list of Editorial Consultants, who make a recommendation about publishing. Poetry and fiction are selected by the respective editors, who are appointed for three-year terms; the current editors are Mark Reid and Brenda Walker respectively. Writing by any editors is generally excluded from the magazine. *Westerly* has pursued strong design qualities more than any other Australian literary-cultural magazine, and Robyn Mundy has prepared our covers for many years. For cover images we have tried to use the work of West Australian artists, often young artists; but for this special issue we thought it appropriate to choose a painting by an artist who was working when *Westerly* was first published (and its covers were very spare): Guy Grey-Smith. One of the most pleasant jobs for the editors is to choose the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize, awarded for the best work published in *Westerly* in the previous year; the prize is normally given to a poet or fiction writer, and no regard is given to reputation: past winners include major names and lesser-known authors. *Westerly* receives submissions from all over the world, and is listed in the major international bibliographies, such as the Modern Language
Association of America Bibliography, the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, and AustLit.

Financially risky work generated by enthusiasm warrants a great many thanks. We would like to thank our many subscribers, readers and authors; our editors, design artist, production manager and typesetter. We wish to thank the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and Helen Grey-Smith for their generosity in allowing us to use Guy Grey-Smith's painting, and our tireless Administrator, Monica Anderson. We would also like to thank the staff of the Reid Library, University of Western Australia. Preparation of *Westerly* would not be possible without the support of ArtsWA and our colleagues at the Westerly Centre, University of Western Australia, which officially publishes the magazine.

Whether it is printed on a page or pixelled on a screen, *Westerly* is inherently a participative activity; words are inert until read and responded to. Fifty years of *Westerly* is a cause of celebration of that creative and intellectual enthusiasm which has been undertaken by an enormous number of readers and writers. We hope you find their spirit in the following pages and in at least fifty years of pages to come.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell
Co-editors
Westerly goes back. Its past, and pre-history, link it to other magazines and journals that have shared some of its aims and aspirations. *The West Australian Magazine*, which stopped in its tracks after one issue in 1851, was not an ideal model but colonial conditions were inauspicious. *The Leeuwin*, which survived through five numbers in 1910–11, was an interesting attempt at a literary magazine which featured stories, verse and essays including A. G. Stevens’s influential piece “The Manly Verse of Western Australia.” The long-running *The Western Mail* (1885–1955) and *The Golden West* (1905–49) were newspaper magazines with a rural emphasis whose Christmas numbers featured short fiction, verse and creative journalism. *The Western Mail* had ceased publication the year before *Westerly* arrived on the scene in 1956 as a junior partner to *Southerly* (1939–), *Meanjin* (1940–) and *Overland* (1954–) but in the same year as *Quadrant*.

*Westerly*’s real on-the-scene predecessors were *The Black Swan* (1917–39; 1945–49), the *Arts Quarterly* (1949–50) and the *Winthrop Review* (1953–55). All three were annual magazine publications. The *Winthrop Review*, edited by H. P. Heseltine and G. C. Bolton, *Westerly*’s immediate predecessor, echoed Matthew Arnold’s somewhat pompous phraseology in setting out its aim to publish “the best that is thought and said in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Western Australia.” When other universities appeared on the scene in the later twentieth century – Curtin, Murdoch, Edith Cowan, Notre Dame – such expressions of cultural guardianship would have seemed exclusive, or comical, or both.

In its first decade, from 1956, *Westerly* was edited and published three times a year by student members of the Arts Union of the University of Western Australia, assisted by academic staff. Early editors were R. W. Smith (1956–57), Warwick Wilson (1958), Bruce Lawson (1959), and Hal Nicholson and Peter Abotomey (1960). J. M. S. O’Brien was appointed “permanent” editor, with John Hay as student co-editor, in 1963, the year
in which *Westerly* gained a Commonwealth Literary Fund subsidy and commenced as a quarterly published by the University of Western Australia Press. Although the first issue of *Westerly* in 1956 had welcomed material from “other sources” beyond the university, 1963 marked the point at which the magazine went definitively “national”, with a Western Australian emphasis. O’Brien was replaced as editor in 1966 by an editorial committee consisting of John Barnes, Peter Cowan, Tom Gibbons and Patrick Hutchings, but *Westerly* continued to be published by the University of Western Australia Press until the ambitious and then expanding English Department of the university took on full responsibility for the editing and publication of the magazine in 1975.

My own close association with *Westerly* began when I was invited to join the editorial committee in 1968. A Young Writers Issue in the same year (no. 2, 1968) included stories by Michael Wilding and Murray Jennings and poems by Andrew Burke, Noeline Burtenshaw, Roger McDonald, Ian Templeman, Rhyll McMaster, Nicholas Hasluck, Hal Colebatch and John Romeril. This issue also recorded the death of Henrietta Drake-Brockman, at the age of 66, and an appreciation of her work by Alexandra Hasluck.

When Peter Cowan and I took on full editorship of *Westerly* in 1975, we attempted to further develop *Westerly’s* strengths as a publisher of quality short fiction and verse and to make a contribution to criticism and commentary in the still-new field of Australian literature. (Canberra University College, later the ANU, had introduced the first full-year course in Australian literature in 1955 and the University of Western Australia followed suit in 1973. By 1975, six of the eighteen Australian universities offered such courses.) But Australian literature was not the same menu across the country. In Western Australia, for example, we wanted to give some special attention to outstanding local writing. We also had a strong interest in developing literary links with the countries of Asia whose contemporary authors and literary traditions were little known in Australia. Perhaps such countries would take a reciprocal interest in Australia. These were some of the challenges ahead of us.

The greatest privilege in my time on *Westerly* was to work with Peter Cowan. He was a quiet, understated man with a keen sense of ironic humour. Peter was recognisable by his William Faulkner-style moustache which earned him the nickname “Mo” when he rode his International Norton motorbike to teach at Scotch College before he joined the English Department at the University of Western Australia in 1964. At university he was just “Peter”. He gradually developed a superb collection of Western Australian and Australian literature, with special strengths in the colonial
period, which I understand is now housed in the Reid Library at the university. But there was a breakaway, artistic side to Peter Cowan's personality, which had grown wings when he was in Melbourne with the RAAF during the later war years and was often AWOL with artists and writers such as Albert Tucker, Sid Nolan, Max Harris and John and Sunday Reed. Back in Perth, his wings were clipped but he used holidays and breaks from teaching to head off, sometimes with his son Julian ("Joe") and wife Edith, in his Toyota “tank” to remote beaches, ghost towns of the interior or the deserts of the north. These “unsociable” interests found their place in his short fiction and novels. The more harsh and forbidding the country, the more Peter seemed to relish it. He was an expert ornithologist too and an informed and critical environmentalist.

On the back verandah of the house he built in Mt Claremont, Peter Cowan and I spent many absorbing hours talking about books and writing. A lean and trim figure, often in overalls from working on his car, or on racing cars driven by Julian, Peter was frugal in his tastes. Occasionally, we shared a can of beer and a few crisps. He was a genuine scholar as well as a collector who was interested in reading Western Australian and Australian writing together with other literatures, especially American. Peter was a special mentor, and so too were Dorothy Hewett and Fay Zwicky who, together with Margot Luke, contributed greatly to the cooperative endeavour of a literary magazine ensconced in a university but espousing wider community responsibilities.

None of these writers, as I recall, favoured the direct teaching of creative writing, though all of them thought wide and close reading of a variety of literary texts important. As the Australian Academy of the Humanities gears up in 2006 to reclaim for universities the capacity to communicate with a wider public, I am reminded of that period in the 1970s and 80s when this seemed a natural thing to do, before “high theory” blocked some of our vision and before universities were driven to adopt corporate management styles and modes of communication. Learning afresh to speak to the Australian public is crucial to literary magazines and to universities and we might look to the past as well as a guide to our future endeavours.

The rear-view mirror brings *Westerly*'s contribution to Australian literary culture from the 1970s to the 90s into closer focus. In retrospect, it seems clear that *Westerly* helped to foster a remarkable renaissance in the short story over this period. Peter Cowan's example set a tone and his view of the many possibilities for short fiction was exemplary. In *Australian Short Fiction: A History* (2002), I had no hesitation in using one of Cowan's statements as an epigraph:
It is the form and pattern, the style, the degree of implication possible, the whole business of technique, which gives the short story its significance as a literary form.

With this kind of approach in mind – encouraging experiment but not for its own sake, focusing on the use made of material rather than the subject matter itself – we read thousands of stories submitted to *Westerly* by many hands from all states of Australia and overseas. In a special Short Fiction issue (no. 2, 1982), we observed that *Westerly* typically received 600 to 800 submissions a year of which we selected 20 to 30 stories. Names which recurred from the late 1960s and 70s included Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding, Vicki Viidikas and Murray Bail. The 1982 issue included Beverley Farmer, Tim Winton and Julie Lewis. In 1990, writers of short fiction included Robert Drewe, Terri-Anne White, Jean Kent, Nikki Gemmell and Marion Campbell. At this time, poetry selected by Dennis Haskell and Delys Bird was also making a considerable mark.

The editors of *Westerly* have consistently emphasised the local culture of Western Australia within a broader Australian context. We have done this not only by giving space to local writers but also by encouraging a more “regional” approach to the national literature. A defining event in this regard was a seminar organised by Ian Templeman at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1978 on “Regionalism in Contemporary Australia” at which Frank Moorhouse, Peter Ward, Tom Shapcott, Jim Davidson, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Cowan and Tom Hungerford all contributed (see *Westerly* 4, 1978). The implications of a more “regional” (and less “nationalistic”) approach still reverberate around the country and are evident in anthologies, bibliographies and regional literary studies from Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia to the Hunter Valley and Gippsland. As “place” is subsumed for many people in a variety of virtual realities, it is not only the Greens who wish to reassert the value and significance of place, region and community. With these kinds of emphases, we were able to persuade both the State and Federal Arts Councils that *Westerly* deserved support, in the never-ending struggle to fund quality literary magazines.

*Westerly*’s Asian orientation has often been noticed. Indonesia had been the focus of a special issue in 1966 and a Focus on Malaysia and Singapore issue appeared in 1971. Thereafter, we produced special issues on Southeast Asia (1976), the Indian Ocean region (1979), Contemporary China (1981), India (1983) and the Indian Ocean countries again (1984). In the introduction to the Contemporary China issue, I noted that
however informed we might have been in matters of trade, our knowledge of the cultures, especially the literary cultures of Asia was lamentably thin, and that this general ignorance about Australia compounded the problem. The two-way street that we wished to open up included both Asian cultural knowledge and the study of Australia in these countries. The anthology *Westerly Looks to Asia* (1993) displays an interesting selection of literary work from or about Asia published between 1956 and 1992. A number of books published by the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature (CSAL) – now the Westerly Centre – testify to this early awakening of interest in the literary cultures of the region.

Sometimes a crisis serves to focus one’s values and attitudes. This was the case when Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie following the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). These events provoked a *Westerly* editorial in March 1989 in which I tried to sum up where we stood on this matter, which stated in part:

*Westerly* places itself unambiguously as a supporter of the unfettered imagination. It encourages its contributors to take risks, artistic risks, knowing that these may be unpopular at the time they are written. *Westerly* requires of its contributors (and indeed of its readers) membership of no religious, political or ethnic group. It will not publish literary work solely because of its commitment to a cause, however attractive that cause may be to its editors, if the writing is not lively, and freshly imagined. Even under threats of tyranny or terrorism, we hope that communities of Australian readers and writers would resist the imposition of a single belief, insist upon the freedom to doubt.

My co-editors Peter Cowan and Dennis Haskell (who had joined the editorial team in December 1985) agreed fully with the sentiments in this editorial. Artistic risk-taking and the freedom to question and doubt have been important guiding principles for successive editors of *Westerly*. Long may they remain so.
Week One:

A lone face looks out from a high cell window as I approach the prison. The person yells something, presumably an obscenity. A pall of depression falls as I enter the grim Victorian facade. A grey South London day, although it’s supposed to be spring. Everything is old and cold and asphalty. Only the razor wire is new. I tell myself, as usual, that I have to balance this low mood with the possibilities of “experience”. The guards check my pass but not my bag. I could be carrying explosives, and there are IRA prisoners in here.

Through five checkpoints to the prison library, where the deputy-governor hosts a welcome-to-prison afternoon tea. The library’s wide selection is surprising: “quality” fiction and non-fiction as well as the expected thrillers and bestsellers, all in pristine condition. They don’t look read. There are even five books of mine, more than I’ve found in any English library or bookshop outside.

The deputy-governor gives a hearty speech about the penal life, his efforts to keep people out of gaol, etcetera, and finishes by noting that – ha ha – he hadn’t mentioned Australia’s convict heritage once, but wasn’t my being there terribly appropriate. This goes over well with the prison social workers, and especially with the middle-class “prison visitors” and library-duty prisoners, the old camp lags serving the tea and sandwiches.

I meet my co-writer-in-residence, the striking Sierra Leone poet Iyamide Hazely. Her gentle face looks out of place. She has a nervous habit of pulling the hem of her jacket over her hips.
Week Two:

We work in the education cell, just another small cell in A-wing, in the two-hour “free time.” Of the dozen or so students who meander in and out – or are randomly snatched out by warders – three stick in the mind. (1) The young black prisoner who, after two hours, says, yes, he has a question. To Lyamide: “Will you braid my hair like yours, Miss?” (2) Peter, an architectural historian serving eight years for armed robbery, and (3) Trent, an Australian sailor on remand for “tax matters.”

Everyone wants to talk about Neighbours and Home and Away. The murderers, rapists and thieves love them. Coming from the home of these TV soaps is kudos for me. The prisoners presume I’ve already seen the current episodes and want to know what happened. “I don’t want to spoil them for you,” I say. I don’t admit I’ve hardly ever seen them. It helps being Australian. In an English prison Australians are classless.

Finally I have a core of five or six regular students, as well as ten or twelve itinerants. When I eventually get them to sit still I talk about How To Get Started.

Week Three:

Peter, the architectural historian, has a journal a foot high – a thousand tiny spidery longhand words to a page. He loves to write but says he can’t do it outside. He’s too stunned by the beauty of the sky and trees and pubs. A classic recidivist, he’s been out for only seven months in the last 12 years (he’s 38). An intelligent, sensitive, ex-public schoolboy turned armed robber, he reads Oliver Twist to an illiterate gypsy boy every night and also corrects the spelling of a dyslexic young Cockney.

Peter tells about his last time outside. He was a special guest at a black-tie dinner-conference on prisoner rehabilitation at the Dorchester, invited to present the reformed-felon point of view. After following the Home Secretary and successfully delivering his speech (“for myself, brutally hard-won self-knowledge would never allow me to offend again”), he got drunk and stole a handbag and fur coat. Both events were captured by a security camera, a hotel innovation since his last time outside.

A drum class for beginners has started in the next cell in competition with us.

I talk about Writing What You Know and Keeping a Journal.
Week Four:

Trent, the sailor, says he’s only attending the writing class because I’m Australian. He’s very homesick – wants to talk about beaches and football, not writing. He was a communications officer in a submarine that submerged off Sydney Heads five years ago with two naval ratings still up in the conning tower. From there his life went wrong.

Peter complains about his possessions not being sent on from his last prison in Oxfordshire. He says he “absconded” from there disguised as a vicar, using a cut-up white plastic detergent bottle as a dog collar. “Sure!” I say, so he shows me his press cuttings. He’s indignant. “When you abscond they’re supposed to send all your stuff on to you in the next prison. My papers and some of my clothes haven’t turned up. But today my tuxedo arrived.” From the Dorchester episode.

Peter says he has a grant from the Arts Council of England to write a three-part musical dialogue on Henry Purcell, the 18th century composer. “Wren churches are the best places for Purcell performances,” he says. “Really?” I say. He shows me his grant letter from the Arts Council.

I talk about Plot.

Week Five:

The tension and chaos of the daily two-hour “free time.” The constant thwack of table-tennis balls outside the education cell. Not to mention the drum class. None of the drummers is improving. The VCR is also always on full volume outside – car chases, gunshots, women screaming and males swearing and threatening them. (Violent, misogynistic videos are popular in prison.) Black and white youths come and go into the class with no idea of what “writing” or even “English” is. Anything to break the monotony.

Peter enters brushing his teeth and complaining that he’s still waiting to get the other volumes of his journals back from Channel 4. He says he recently wrote and fronted a series on the Victorian architecture of British prisons for them. I don’t question him this time. He’s a sort of Sir Kenneth Clark of the slammer.

With all the noise and disruption it’s hard to keep a train of thought going, much less teach. Nevertheless I’m enjoying it, if enjoyment is the right word. Sometimes we have an amusing time.

This lesson I talk about Character.
Week Six:

There's a new student, Basil, a polite old man from Ghana, very dignified, with a sweet smile. He agrees with everything I say, nods and hums. Then he writes in the first person even though I carefully explain I want third person this time. His perfect copperplate stresses how respectable his family is, and what an important official he was (assistant treasurer) for the Lesotho Engineering Bank's women's netball team. He killed his son-in-law with an axe.

Also a new student, Peter's Cockney friend. He has two rows of pointy top teeth like a shark's. He's a thin, sly, pink boy who used to work in a bank, he alleges, and proudly carries his criminal record around with him in a manila folder, like a CV. He shows it around during class: he has one conviction for possessing half a kilo of marijuana, 25 for handling stolen goods. The other prisoners joke that he should get into another line of work. "You're obviously not very good at it," says Trent the Australian. He's still reluctant to discuss his own case. What was previously "just a taxation matter" is now "trouble with a passport."

I try, not too successfully, to teach them Point of View.

Week Seven:

A-wing looks like a bomb has hit it. Rubbish, odd socks and ripped girlie pinups lie everywhere, following a raid in which the officers turned over all the cells looking for a missing pair of spoons. Everyone's still edgy. There's another near-riot halfway through our session, with shouting, swearing and thudding feet, banging of clubs, and everyone locked back in their cells. The TV is turned off, the table-tennis noise silenced. (The ping-pong table has been smashed anyway in the earlier fracas.) Only the relentless drums keep beating. Why are they exempt from the lock-down?

Another new student. An arrogant, pale-skinned Black Muslim with a wispy blond beard enters with a copy of The Qur'an and Science and reads anti-Christian propaganda for fifteen minutes until he's stopped. He pretends he doesn't understand English. He mumbles about coming from Lebanon but looks German or Austrian. Swiss it turns out.

People come and go from the class even more than usual. Iyamide repeatedly explains to the young blacks what "creative writing" is. They've all put down their names for what looks like a lurk with a pretty woman. The Swiss Black Muslim starts reading aloud from the Qur'an again.
Peter’s in a state of high anxiety after being “spun” and strip-searched five times in one afternoon. He says heroin foil has been planted in his cell and he’s fighting the charge. He’s complained to his lady gaol visitor, a Dame, and informed the warders of his friendship with the architect of the new Royal Festival Hall, Sir Richard Rogers. He said to one warder: “Do you know who I am?” This didn’t go down well. He keeps asking to take a blood test to prove he doesn’t do heroin. “I’ll use cannabis if there’s any around, but that’s it.” They’re on to him for being a smart-arse. Meanwhile, I enter the gaol carrying a big computer bag every time and no one’s searched it once.

Peter’s also peeved about a Harvard graduate in A-wing who got six months for white-collar crime involving $6 million while he got eight years for stealing $30,000.

Trent’s “tax matters” turn out to be allegations of smuggling ecstasy into Britain. He says it was only one tablet, discovered by Customs officers when his yacht sailed into Dover. It wasn’t even his, he says, and even if it had been, the charge should be possession, not smuggling. The ecstasy was left over from a party on the Riviera.

I note the tension of the men on remand, like Trent, not knowing when their court appearances are coming up or if their witnesses will be there. Also the strange sight of cooks frisking each other for cutlery, all in white hats and clothes, floury-faced but menacing. No blacks on kitchen duty.

Today’s lesson is Description.

Week Eight:

A prisoner tries to hang himself. The “swinger” is cut down in time but it has made A-wing uneasy again. Wild shouts and thumps outside our cell, yelling and banging, to the frenzied accompaniment of the drums. The TV goes off again, the table-tennis stops and everyone’s locked in. Guards patrol the floor. One stands outside our room to protect us. Usually we’re just reliant on an emergency button on the wall. We’re supposed to press it if things get nasty.

More “possessions” of Peter’s turn up from the other prison he so rapidly left: a brown paper parcel of human bones and a packet of condoms. In the last gaol he was allowed to go on an archaeological dig outside and he had the bones in his cell for safekeeping. They were several centuries old. “It was all right, I used to put a Christian cross over them at night,” he says. His writing exercises are excellent. He always does the assignments.
Peter reads a story about his new cellmate, Dylan, a 22-year-old blond boy with (Peter says enthusiastically) aquamarine eyes. Sounds like Peter’s fallen for him. Dylan is the son of two British drug smugglers who operated out of Turkey. His earliest memory, aged four, is of watching his mother squat on the floor while his father pushed a sausage-skin of heroin up her vagina.

When they were arrested Dylan grew up on the streets of Turkey, shining shoes and being intermittently looked after by the Turkish drug connection. Eventually his mother died of an overdose. His father was still alive in prison somewhere. Dylan himself was in Brixton for crack dealing. From the excitable note of Peter’s tale, it sounds like he’s fallen pretty hard. Even though I’ve noticed the way he takes up young prisoners – skinny, street-rat types, I’d somehow thought he was hetero. He likes the image of himself as a sort of zany Pimpernel figure.

Encouraged by Peter’s revelations, another prisoner, a recently come-out gay, defiantly reads an in-your-face description of his recent sexual acts. All the other prisoners, except for Peter, leave the room.

Trent is in court today, confidently expecting to get off all charges. He’s already done six months awaiting trial.

I talk about Dialogue.

Week Nine:

The pale Swiss Black Muslim is crouching by the cell door as we arrive, and almost spits with venom at Iyamide. He’s asked her to intercede for him. He says he has a black friend facing execution for murder in Huntington Prison, California, and he wants her to get a message to him. She asks the head of the education unit, and she says no. Iyamide tells him this, says it’s against regulations. Anyway she has no power – she’s a poet. He calls her an Uncle Tom and is physically threatening. She tells him to back off. A warder has to intervene.

Iyamide is upset by the bad vibes and violence. She keeps belching, then apologising profusely and doubling over with stomach pains. She complains that the warders deliberately urinate in front of her at the prisoners’ open urinals. The female warders, stereotypical chunky weightlifter types, walk in on the men in the open toilet stalls. The showers and urinals are open to public view.

Trent appears in prison uniform for the first time, having been found guilty and sentenced to nine months for drug smuggling. He’s already
done six on remand. His eyes are red-rimmed and he can’t concentrate. He’s agitated and trying to ring his girlfriend in Holloway women’s prison. They’ve also been convicted of attempting to defraud the tax office.

My class all read out their completed stories – understandably variable in quality. Peter’s is publishable, even without editing. He reads it in a stage Yorkshire accent. It’s about his middle-class (adopted) childhood, of working in his father’s slaughterhouse in his school holidays. He had to shovel the lungs and innards “to show me a taste of the real world.” To avoid the blood and guts he used to arrange to cut himself with carving knives and have to spend the day in the infirmary. He started thieving early. An honour scout, he’d steal trinkets from his friends’ mothers’ mantelpieces and bedrooms. He’d get them out at night, spread them on his bed with his scout medals, and admire them.

I talk to them about *Not Listening to the Negative Voice in Your Head.*
Making sense of the fictional oeuvre of Robert Drewe has not proved easy for either reviewers or critics. His first novel dealt with the notorious genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines, his next with a well-meaning, bumbling Australian who worked for an international aid agency in the Philippines. Then came challenges to local myths when he celebrated the beach rather than the bush as Australians’ most crucial, shared experience in *The Bodysurfers*, and he breathed new life into the story of the country’s most notorious outlaw, Ned Kelly, in *Our Sunshine*. A similar unpredictability characterises his most recent works: *The Drowner*, a tale of an antiquated profession spanning three continents and his autobiographical memoir, *The Shark Net*, that reveals the factual basis of some of his early fiction. Confronted with such variety, with so many unexpected shifts of focus, nonplussed commentators, encouraged no doubt by Drewe’s edition of *The Penguin Book of the Beach* (1993), have linked his achievement with the Australian littoral, while, as he wryly notes, “every questioner has always been hung up on the beach.” The most impressive exception has been Bruce Bennett’s reading of Drewe’s early career as a novelist. Bennett notes how flawlessly Drewe’s experience of “newspapers, and their attempt to access the truth and then publish it,” has fed into his novelistic “quest after truths about contemporary Australia...his abiding interest in...[its] socio-political and human directions.” But whereas Bennett has drawn attention to the underlying cogency of Drewe’s early fiction and describes his subject’s conception of truth as an “elusive” and “bewildering[ly] hybrid,” the author himself has offered an alternative image, at once more idiosynratic and commensurate with both his heterogeneous material and his experimental narratives: the ricochet. As unfolded in *Fortune*, his third novel, the term embraces a theory of fiction and of life. There the narrator argues that
investigative reporting and writing the traditional novel are “largely a matter of attaining the continuous line, of making connections...like a child’s dot-to-dot puzzle and discovering a giraffe” (F 48). This, like an over-reliance on so-called fact, inevitably falsifies reality. Instead of a one, two, three sequence or logical, incontrovertible connections, he maintains that “people and events career off each other only to remain inextricably linked” (F 48). This ricochet principle operates arguably in Drewe’s most demanding novels that juxtapose distinctive narratives, switch abruptly between centuries or locations, and refuse to make connections or provide a conventional narrative flow. At times implicit, as in the staccato and entwined narratives of The Savage Crows, or recast in terms of his interest in cartoons and photography, this flexible conception has helped place him at the forefront of local writers concerned with investigating the diverse legacy of white settlement in Australia and the Pacific region.

Both Drewe’s fiction and his celebration of the ricochet principle grew out of his experience of journalism. From a cadetship on the West Australian, he moved to the east coast and to posts of increasing responsibility with the Age, the Australian and the Bulletin. He won the prestigious Walkley Award, Australia’s equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, twice for stories in the Bulletin that showed “a strong narrative line, together with a psychological dimension and hints of mystery”: characteristics shared with fiction that pointed to a growing impatience with the limitations imposed by his profession. For journalism, in the words of Fortune, “cannot begin to tell the story,” or “cope with...the links between the characters and their ramifications” (F 18). It “shies away from psychology,” and “for all its nosy reputation it mostly ignores the private life and rarely sees the larger truth” (F 18). Drewe was becoming preoccupied with complicating and scarcely visible factors or, as he put it, with what remained outside the frame:

The idea of photographs I find intriguing, too. I’ve always been more interested, even as a child, in what was going on outside the frame. Was some kid making a face? Was there someone watering their lawn? If you look at your own family photographs you can sometimes remember what was happening, and the missing bits to me are more interesting and important than the posed bits.

The significance of the missing, banished or forgotten in his work is adumbrated here, as is his abiding interrogation of what constitutes so-called reality, and how it is constructed. A sentence later he continued:
I was also trying to show that life has a definite if irregular narrative line based on a ricochet effect. I wanted to give the impression that there are unseen forces at work all the time, call them politics if you like. Unseen forces to some extent dictate what sort of a life we're going to lead. These are things over which the individual has no control whatsoever.

Seeking a form with a longer attention span that could embrace these possibilities, Drewe left the Australian to write his first novel which appeared in 1976 to critical acclaim. 

_The Savage Crows_, which was originally entitled “The Genocide Thesis,” is a complex investigation of guilt, repression and local racism, as they emerged from one of the darkest chapters in Australian history: the attempted extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines. His main protagonist, Stephen Crisp, is a disconcerting image of the modern, caring Australian. Reeling from a failed marriage, young and self-absorbed, his judgement is fallible, especially in dealings with his estranged spouse, but his motives are usually laudable. Having left his restricting job with “the Commission,” he is researching colonial attitudes towards the indigenous peoples, as well as seeking “to understand everything, starting with himself and working up to the nation” (SC 8). All around him are indications of dark, troubling origins ignored by self-centred white society. Crisp’s apartment, for instance, is invaded every night by slugs, metonyms for a primeval, intractable underworld that is capable of adapting to European change. His dreams are haunted by the bloody corpse of an Aboriginal, brutally dissected by pseudo-ethnographers in their rush to collect key skeletal parts before the race’s extinction. Most Australians, however, have conveniently forgotten that their white forebears carried out allegedly scientific acts comparable with concentration camp atrocities, exhuming corpses, decapitating them and making tobacco pouches out of human skin. Similarly, Sydney Harbour is dazzling from a distance. But viewed at close quarters it, like individual episodes of black-white contact, is marked by the detritus of laissez-faire and commercial imperatives. Crisp, on the other hand, cares intensely about the racist past and present, and shares with Drewe a belief that “the missing bits...are more interesting and important than the posed bits.”

Yet privileged vision and selective blindness can exist side by side, thanks in part to an Orientalist legacy, as Drewe shows by paralleling Crisp with George Augustus Robinson, the controversial nineteenth-century Conciliator of the natives in Van Dieman’s Land. To establish comparisons,
the narrative shifts between colonial and modern times, between journal or thesis entries and the protagonists’ thoughts and actions, in a foreshadowing of the ricochet principle. As variations on the prototype of the explorer-missionary, both men see themselves as potential benefactors of an endangered minority, but both are regarded by those apprised of their projects as mad and self-interested visionaries. Robinson has a wife and social position to consider, as well as potential Crown rewards for his labours in the wilds. Crisp is seeking a personal raison d’être. Their preaching falls on unwilling ears, and they are impeded in their attempts to understand the native other by unexamined motives and stereotypes – though in Crisp the Orientalist legacy is weaker and admits nagging doubts. Both learn, for instance, that “Things don’t seem as cut and dried” out in the field (SC 49). This further unsettles Crisp, whereas to Robinson, who is imbued with white supremacist notions, it is a catalyst to more strenuous self-projection: “Here, on 29th April, I decided to take up my grant of five hundred acres and establish my civilization,” he notes proudly (SC 53). His mission is fundamentally specular and proof against inconvenient divergences from his script: “I cannot easily describe the emotions of excitement and curiosity I felt as I approached the island. I regarded it as a mirror in which I hoped to find the reflections of my faith” (SC 50). Blinded by his preconceptions, Robinson combines attributes of Don Quixote and Candide with sinister outcomes. He interprets Caucasian lasciviousness as chivalry, or the ravages of white diseases as the workings of an inscrutable Providence – misreadings that spell the potential extinction of an indigenous people. Crisp and his society have moved beyond these reassuring myths, but they still prefer their Aborigines voiceless and submissive, reducible to decorative postcard format and other clichés of the day.

The concluding section of the novel carries the reader well beyond the usual “frame” of history or media coverage, when Crisp’s misgivings inspire a “colonial odyssey” (SC 239) that takes him to an island, midway between Tasmania and the Australian mainland, where the hybrid descendants of the Tasmanians are rumoured to subsist. Here ultimate answers elude him. Motifs of deception, confusion and self-interest predominate at this “arse-end of the Earth” (SC 242), with the group’s spokesperson, the Blue Plum, confessing in a moment of climactic candour that their true business is not the daily grind of mutton-birding but the flip-side of care, that is: “Guilt, of course. Fuckin’ guilt. There’s money in it boy, and a new tractor or abalone boat when you need it” (SC 262). Being of “certified Tasmanian blood” is now a lucrative proposition, but the
remnants are still as marginalised and invisible in the whiteman’s order as in colonial times – in spite of the Blue Plum’s bravado.

The narrative approach of *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*, Drewe’s second novel, was more conventional, as if to anchor its volatile subject matter: Australia’s vexed relationship with its immediate region. This is focused through international aid-workers, and so extends the previous investigation of the ambiguities of care, or disinterested action, in a postcolonial environment. Parallels are numerous between the modern nation and its main representative here, especially in their understanding of themselves as good, caring neighbours, whose well-intended advances are rebuffed unexpectedly – yet also predictably. For Australia, as a major outpost of British power and potential second Britannia in another world, had traditionally believed it was meant to rule and command respect (read subservience). After 1945, growing nationalist sentiment rendered this view untenable in the Asia-Pacific region, where economic development and mass consumerism were fast levelling the differences between East and West. But white nation states and their citizens were slow to grasp the momentous change, as Drewe demonstrates through Richard Cullen, who is a latterday version of the altruistic colonial official, burdened with supremacist prejudices. A former sportsman turned UN employee, Cullen still retains his competitive urges, but is battling unsuccessfully to keep his body in shape and to prevent his marriage from disintegrating. His sense of aging ungracefully is heightened by sylph-like local figures who leave him feeling “smelly, hairy; a ginger and white mountain” (*CJB* 37); while, despite being white and the biggest man in most gatherings, he repeatedly misses the erotic spoils. The clichés of the past are supplemented by those of the present, disseminated by media sensationalism, and Cullen, like elements of Australian society, has not moved on, emotionally or mentally. He is at home where “the food was English, the ambience nineteenth-century colonial, the views panoramic” (*CJB* 138). That is, he no more wants to be bothered by troubling detail or local peculiarities than by potentially disquieting depths: “Religion was a secret he did not particularly wish revealed” (*CJB* 72). Well-meaning but ill-informed, he is persistently identified with the local water buffalo, *bubalus bubalis*, dubbed the tractor of Asia. Both plod unseeingly in a circle, condemned to endless labour and silent suffering, in Cullen’s case in part by subscription to Orientalist clichés.¹⁴

Ultimately Cullen, despite working for an aid agency, fails as a caring figure. His alienation from his wife and from the objects of his professional attention is profound. He is only able to cope with time-honoured images
of the East, its reality disconcerts and defeats him. Attitudes, which in the past afforded “benevolent” white interlopers, like Robinson, with a reassuring way of processing the unfamiliar, are now a handicap: “They all seemed to read him [Cullen] like an open book, whereas the reverse was never true” (CJB 180). On occasions he likens himself to Gulliver among the Lilliputians (CJB 129), a comparison which captures both his internalised self-image as a lofty, superior being and the distance it places between him and local actualities, as well as an abiding sense of disjunction and physical discomfort. The only jungle bar he feels truly at ease in is an upmarket Manila variant which bears that name. When confronted with an unsanitised, seedy version near the favelas he still cannot abandon his search for an exotic princess, or at least a “salacious beauty” (CJB 234). He ends up, however, with a tired mother, and his fond dream of being in a realm where “normal restrictions no longer applied” (CJB 230) is punctured by a baby’s cry, then a pimp’s knife. Like Crisp, he is a dupe of his own fantasies and ingrained stereotypes. Asia is not what it seems, or at least not what the hapless white voyeur imagines. Far from being child-like and vulnerable it has an agenda of its own – a point highlighted in the final, open-ended scene when the muddy Australian, weak from loss of blood, stumbles upon a well-armed group of MNFL “rebels.” For the likes of Cullen the region is best viewed through the gun-slits of a military helicopter, from a safe height that leaves illusory surfaces and racist platitudes intact, as did the long-range vistas afforded by Crisp’s Potts Point apartment and the publicly sanctioned culture of forgetting.

Drewe’s apprenticeship to journalism had borne fruits. To it he attributed seminal lessons in writing short, declarative sentences, in producing lucid, highly readable prose. And it had alerted him to a fascinating variety of subjects available to contemporary writers. From among them he had focused prophetically at the outset of his fictional career on what, by the end of the century, had become the major divisive issue of racial reconciliation, and unerringly foreshadowed the difficulty, even the apparent impossibility, of finding among his contemporaries matter for a “bridge between the past and a longed-for tranquil future” (SC 248). Similarly, he had pinpointed Australia’s abiding problem of winning acceptance in its region. Although its allegiance had switched from Britain to the United States, it was still widely regarded among its neighbours as a “gauche intruder” and bastion of white hegemony. Subsequent books confirmed this journalistic instinct for the breaking story, for the issue that was bound to engross a nation’s attention.

With his next novel Fortune, which enunciated the ricochet principle,
Drewe returned critically to his roots in journalism and Western Australia. As he revealed later in *The Shark Net*, Perth had marked him indelibly. Spread out along endless coast-line and cradled by a magnificent river, the State capital is built not only on yellow sand but, as *Fortune* demonstrates, on local myths and intense patriotism abetted by the press, which "imposes its own form of order on the world's, the nation's, the town's events" (F 234). Reporters are arraigned for acting like "embryonic novelists. Ordering time. Playing, just slightly, at being God" (F 162), as are photographers for rearranging props to create an image true to their take on events, and the illusion of an explicable pattern. Instead, the disenchanted journalist-narrator proposes that incidents conform more often to the zigzagging, fragmenting course of a ricochet. Embracing such a conception of reality involves a willingness to eschew clear-cut closure, in favour of pursuing shards that may eventually become untrackable and must be left hanging in the air." Kundera's theory of fiction seemed a response to similar insights, and was copied down approvingly as Drewe worked on his manuscript: "This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual sketches of a journey leading towards a theme, a thought, a single situations, the sense of which fades into the distance." His own completed novel affirms these views with a multi-stranded, at times discontinuous narrative, that pushes beyond the known facts into realms accessible only to imaginative fiction.

*Fortune* also foregrounds Drewe's preoccupation, implicit in his earlier books, with the effects of the media's habit of reducing events to an easily comprehensible message. A simple instance of this are the war cartoons produced by Leon Levinson for *Life*. A drawing of the vulgar excesses of Allied soldiers is as unwelcome as one that shows a pool of urine, left by the stressed Japanese delegate who ratified his country's surrender on board the *Missouri*. The disconcerting puddle is reduced on the cover of *Life* to an inconsequential "shadow" (F 194). Markers of impropriety, degradation or psychological trauma are not allowed to darken the glorious narrative of victory. They are as unacceptable as Levison's experiments with a "chaotic skew-line which he thought better suited to detailing the anxieties of modern life and politics" (F 189). With time the synoptic image, disseminated by the press or other media, becomes the historical record, and even a vital shaper of actuality in two senses. First, it is the ultimate authenticator; as Levinson remarks: "Nothing was real until it was reproduced" (F 188). Secondly, as the main protagonists in this novel and Drewe's next book show, their life-story gradually comes to resemble the distortions of the press:
In their overheated way it was the papers that defined us, presented us as sure things, as blocks of type. And when they declare you to be so-and-so, then you become it. Strange the way they make you famous or notorious before you are – and then you are in spades. (OS 35)

In short, Drewe’s novels repeatedly offer an exposé of how “truth” is formed, as well as a recuperation of lost complexities. For the continuous line and finished sketch offer, at best, a semblance of truth, whereas existence is “like a coastline, of widely differing physical features...which while serving as the perimeter of possibilities also gave no hint as to what lay within” (F 200). To explore these invisible possibilities is Drewe’s self-appointed task and, fittingly, his third novel focuses on the misrepresented life of an actual diver.

At the centre of Fortune is Spargo, who shares many traits with the bushranger, Ned Kelly, the hero of Drewe’s Our Sunshine. Both are based on actual persons whose entanglements with the law brought them notoriety and savage death. Both books share a lively scepticism about the role of the media in reporting, or fabricating, reality. “Why did they always draw him as a maniac?” (OS 4), Kelly muses; Spargo is similarly simplified, and later traduced, by the press. Kelly, however, became a local hero, whereas the story of Alan Robinson (the real life Spargo) was lost among competing international incidents, much as the trial of Perth’s most notorious murderer, “the Nedlands monster,” was pushed off the front page of the West Australian by the unfolding drama surrounding President Kennedy’s assassination. In a synopsis to Picador, Drewe characterised Spargo as “an Australian folk-hero living in the wrong era.” A further factor in Spargo/Robinson’s eclipse was his awkward standing with both the law and the press. He flaunted convention, whether through a public affair with a millionaire’s wife or in fisticuffs with police, yet helped initiate legal reform. In addition, his unfolding story, although colourful and eminently newsworthy, overtaxed journalism because it “flew in the face of the Golden Rule. It changed tack, altered shaped, wilfully added and subtracted characters. The constants were very few” (F 29).

Spargo’s life, as Drewe depicts it, is driven by his psychological make-up and by the press. That he was alternately headstrong and downcast, malleable and unpredictable, is never questioned, but neither is the effect of his sudden elevation to celebrity status and the expectations of reporters:
But the next day he had blithely dropped all his work and domestic responsibilities to satisfy the requirements of the media. Their requirements were brutally simple: they wanted the treasure recovered, they wanted it recovered now and they wanted it recovered in front of their eyes exclusively.

But put yourself in Spargo's place, carried along by the tide of your own quoted remarks and photographed actions. There are your malleable words, rearranged and set down for posterity. There is your likeness, allegedly brave and imaginative, "preparing to recover the Fortuny treasure" and "studying a chart of the shipreck site."

It was impossible not to surge forward. (F 111-12)

Similarly, the press charts his downfall, with its carefully stage-managed or selected photos offered as incontrovertible evidence of the factual basis of its story. This process, Drewe stresses, is undermined by blind spots. Not only does the press become the author and ultimate arbiter of the accuracy of its own stories, but reporters, like the narrator, can easily be fooled by appearances. They overlook what is below the surface, in this case Spargo's instability, and that their subjects are equally adept at using "props," or constructing scenes to suit their own version of events:

I had badly underestimated how far Spargo was out of kilter by then. I was influenced by his props: the pregnant girlfriend left behind, the taped threats against him, the high bail money he had posted, not to mention the treasure I imagined he had stashed away somewhere. To me he had everything to lose by running away. (F 31)

These shortcomings justify reanimating this subject, and Drewe triumphs unequivocally over press constraints in depicting Spargo's death. It came just before his impending acquittal, when he was found suspiciously hanged in his cell. Able to move boldly outside the "frame" of history and into the realm of non-fact, the novelist draws together indices in their most likely outcome - the chilling murder of Spargo by frustrated law enforcers - in scenes emancipated from the normal strictures of admissible evidence. This imagined ending affords potential illumination of the historical record and fulfils Spargo's recurring nightmare of death in a diving bell, at the same time as it propels him towards the departed spirit of his lover who had already discharged a shotgun between her thighs.
Not all Drewe's fiction is as experimental as these early novels, and this is not the primary reason for his high standing in literary circles. Content dictates form in both his long and shorter creative pieces. What sets him apart from his Grub Street confreres, in spite of their shared "simple declarative sentences," is imagination. Constantly it tugs him beyond the bare historical facts in search of more complex truths, and his later autobiography is shot through with its bright effects. There scenes reverberate with his fantasies, such as a lion from the South Perth zoo roaming the corridors of his suburban parental home. Caged but undaunted, a lion resurfaces again at the outset of Our Sunshine as part of a purloined circus, introduced by Drewe as an analogue for the outlaw's situation on the eve of the fatal shoot-out at Glenrowan—out of sorts, occasionally roaring and finally shot down by a constable crazed with bloodshed. From the well-known but bare facts of Kelly's existence Drewe creates "a chronicle of the imagination" (OS 183), which brings to life the familiar arguments that race, class, injustice and, in addition, the press played a considerable part in Kelly's revolt, yet illustrates as well Drewe's belief that existence is shaped by coincidence, complexities and actions with unexpected and irreversible consequences: "Did I ever consider going straight? Madam, I must say it's not as cut and dried as that. Things flow over into other things" (OS 65). All is told from the outlaw's standpoint in a racy, endearing vernacular that can liken a gin-induced hangover to "looking at life through a black snake's bum" (OS 84), or memorably define "a hearty bushman's breakfast" as "a spit, a piss and a good look round" (OS 76). Through Our Sunshine and earlier novels Drewe has unequivocally demonstrated that Australia need not always be "the sort of country that gets the consolation prize," as its regions and local figures offer rich material for fictional exploration.

This rewriting of Australian myths and stereotypes has been continued in his two collections of short stories, The Bodysurfers and The Bay of Contented Men. Drewe's beaches are not simple places of sun, surf and fun, but the backdrop against which telling scenes in the lives of his characters unfold. The opening story of The Bodysurfers shows the narrator's recently widowed father turning towards another potential partner during a Christmas gathering in a Perth beachside hotel. In the final story the speaker, stung while surfing at Bondi Beach, makes the transition from vulnerable solitude to a new relationship. At one level, these and intervening stories "fill the art vacuum for heterosexual, surf-obsessed sensualists" (BS 140), perhaps most brilliantly in "Baby Oil," where the lovers' lubricant provides an unexpected measure of his partner's
infidelity. At another they show that, although Australia did not invent beach culture (the honour is California's), it nevertheless is central to local self-understanding. Here teenagers gather to assert their independence and to participate in crucial rites of passage; to beaches adults return in quest of their lost youth and happiness, typified by treasured images of surfing and the beach shack. In both collections Drewe's characters are anything but "contented men." Often they are on the brink of, or recovering from, a breakdown, or they may be unbalanced like a homophobic pervert ("The View from the Sandhills") or the applause-hungry Kevin Parnell, who commits incest with his daughter ("The Silver Medallist"). Whether set in Bondi or the world's first motel in California, his stories centre on emotional turmoil and are strikingly contemporary. The account of Paul Lang's personal chaos in "Eighty Per Cent Humidity" begins, for instance, with a list of his "bad discoveries" in "ascending order of disruption": "they are the flat battery in his old Toyota, the lump in his penis and the lesbian love poem in his girlfriend's handbag." Not surprisingly, The Bodysurfers struck a deep chord and was adapted for the theatre, radio and film.

In spite of their brevity, these stories at times reveal not only thematic but stylistic continuities with his longer works, as "Life of a Barbarian" illustrates. In less than twenty pages Drewe creates a complex fiction that shuttles in and out of the past, shifts between continents and cultures, and sets up revelatory, open-ended parallels in unlikely places. Its preoccupation with dislocation, and the new perspectives this affords, is dramatically established at the outset by a Tokyo earthquake which sends Michael Pond, a recognisable variant on Richard Cullen, sprawling on the floor of his shower. Pond and his life are taking a beating; "it is," as the narrator remarks laconically, "a long time since the certainties of his days as a mining engineer" (BCM 152). He and his wife cohabit but are emotionally severed; their son, as a convert to a religious cult, is lost to them. Has the boy's life been ruined or saved? Instead of an answer, the story juxtaposes his sacrifice with that of the kamikazes, who chose individual death that their country might live. Pond is successively rattled by tremors as well as painful insights into his own existence. Like a lost soul he seeks solace in brothels, only to experience humiliation; in alcohol, only to fall a prey to memory, regret and recognition of his intrinsic ugliness, as when he stands naked, like a boiled lobster, before an unwilling local concubine. As selected vignettes of his business trip show, Pond's life has indeed become that of a barbarian, by Western as well as Japanese standards. The story, however, closes enigmatically with him
addressing a kamikaze-like epistle to his family before lying on his bed. There his openness “to all the tremors and changes of the external and internal worlds” (BCM 167), as well as the gradual invasion of daylight, at least mark an advance on his befuddled and incapacitated state in the opening scene.

The possibility of transformation is at the heart, too, of Drewe’s most recent novel, The Drowner. Taking its title from an extinct profession that used water to spare fragile roots from deleterious conditions, the book interweaves a love-triangle with dramatisations of the importance of water and diverse Old World heritages in the antipodes. Will Dance, the son of a drowner, continues scientifically the family profession of water control, when he becomes the engineer in charge of piping water from Perth to distant goldfields hemmed in by desert. Romantically his heart belongs to Angelica Lloyd. She is the daughter of the renowned London actor Hammond Lloyd, who is determined to keep her charms and progeny to himself. Scenes involving the young lovers in Britain, Rhodesia and Perth are juxtaposed with ones that reveal the interests of three professionals on the goldfields: Axel Boehm, photographer, Felix Locke undertaker and aspiring poet, and Jean-Pierre Malebranche, a doctor of medicine determined to discover the cause of the typhoid epidemic that is ravaging their community. Their names evoke respectively a famed German alchemist, Jakob Boehme, “the founder of English empiricism, John Locke,” and Nicolas Malebranche, Locke’s renowned French contemporary who devoted his life to reconciling Cartesian philosophy and natural science with Christianity. Their antipodean reconfiguration affords a subtle commentary of these heritages, as when Locke is identified with both chilling death and a strong but covert creative impulse: unbeknown to his friends he is working on a poem about “the mysterious disguises of the private self” (D 300). Disguise, in the form of acting, is also a preoccupation in the main plot, together with humanity’s disinclination to face unmitigated actuality, as when Dance, backstage, “was romantic enough not to want to spoil the stage illusion of mystery and beauty with coarse reality” (D 86). This selective blindness hinders his attempt to gain Angelica, who embodies the mysterious female other, alternately life-giving and endangering like water itself. The object of Dance’s and her father’s desire, Angelica becomes the site of a territorial, sexual struggle that assumes imperial overtones. In the final scene which registers “a change in levels” (D 324), literally as water is pumped in, metaphorically as the narrative enters the realm of fable, Dance wins Angelica, who drowns her own father in the very water that brings the possibility of
sustained settlement to the wilderness. The promise aroused by their initial encounter in the steaming enclosures of Bath, in England. Outside the “frame” of the main plot, however, is Axel Boehm, a figure who challenges happy endings as well as simplistic notions of reality. As both his name and metier underscore, change and chemical transformation are his element. Since its invention photography has been increasingly privileged as an accurate, indeed unsurpassed, recorder of actuality, whose reliability was guaranteed by unalterable mechanical processes. Boehm, appropriating this authority, sets out to capture with his camera life on the goldfields, and ultimately to create a photographic archive. Nevertheless, as the narrator stresses, photographs are rarely unmediated “snaps” of reality:

Regarding photography: the ignorant don’t realise the extent to which the photographer is in command. Not for the first time Axel Boehm assumed control by withdrawing from the proffered subject. By calmly ignoring the potential photograph. Dusting himself off and focussing instead on pleasing static juxtapositions of machinery and skyline, camels and clouds. Whistling a bit of Mozart. Retreating under the hood. Placidly choosing his moment: “You don’t exist unless I say so.” (D 248)

These unavoidable decisions and selections render the process, in some respects, fluid and subject to manipulation, as it is again at the stage of chemical development (D 100–1). Hence, despite a commitment to documentation and “truth,” Boehm produces work in which the investigative and the aesthetic, “his sociological and experimental sides[,] converge” (D 100). He is, in short, a more artistic, self-conscious and imaginative version of the photographers exposed in Fortune: “A press photograph is a tiny frozen performance” (F 29), with favourite indoor and outdoor props. Boehm, however, has few illusions about what normally passes for truth. As a professional, “he” appreciates the considerable difference between “human vision and the camera’s monocular, unblinking eye” (D 119), and as a woman in disguise, who actively deceives in her daily dealings with others, she is fully aware of the extent to which human existence is a staged play or masquerade, and that props come in many forms. But whereas the press photographer is content with creating a semblance of reality, or an image that complements a clear-cut story, Boehm, like Drewe, seeks to use her art to bring forth “great universals,” and to raise routine, everyday scenes into “a cultural history, a
sociology of time and place” (D 101), or, in Bennett’s words, to bring forth abiding “truths about contemporary Australia.” Yet typhoid ultimately mows down this changeling and putative surrogate for a journalist-turned-author, with the implied verdict that no one can fully penetrate or escape the apparent contradictions and mysteries of existence.

Where the ricocheting “bullet” of Drewe’s creativity will next appear is uncertain. As The Drowner showed, he can tease complex fictions out of the most unlikely material, and Drewe is a many-sided author. He has written for a variety of media, edited two major thematic anthologies, opened potentially rich, new veins for exploration, and channelled his own experience into such diverse works as the light-hearted, whimsical Walking Ella, which purports to be the “true unsentimental ruminations of a dog-walker” who has done time with a shorthaired German pointer in Sydney’s Centennial Park, and, most recently, an autobiographical account of his early life in The Shark Net. Although humorously engaging and offering a loving recreation of post-war Perth and its small-town rituals, the book’s covert concern is with change, death and the growth of imagination – subjects that link it to, and challenge comparison with, other purportedly autobiographical works, such as Wordsworth’s Prelude. A related preoccupation with universal themes may also lie at the heart of the Australian’s forthcoming novel, entitled Grace: a quality that has been singularly lacking in the lives of most of his protagonists. Today Robert Drewe lives with his wife and their two children on the far north coast of New South Wales, and continues to pursue his craft painstakingly. He is at once a distant figure from, yet still in touch with, an earlier naive self who, at his twenty-first birthday party, felt he had “been an adult forever” (SH 357). When offered the prospect of a major shift in the form of a position on the Age he asked: “How could I ever leave the beach?” (SN 350). In a sense he never did. Hugging the coastline has been one constant among Drewe’s professional changes, just as diving below its well-known features to reveal what, before his efforts, had remained largely outside the main “frame” of Australian fiction has remained a significant feature of his art and a testimony to his achievement.

Notes

1 Letter to the author, 14 March 2005. The sentence continues: “or – in a rather patronising way – on the journalistic background (only ten years between the
ages of 18 and 28) rather than the 30 years of fiction-writing that followed it."


3 Bennett, 10. "They [the early novels] are based upon conflicts of value and behaviour which the author has discerned at a variety of sites, both geographic and psychic' and form parts of a "three-phase project," which Drewe had earlier outlined (Bennett 8-9).


5 Bennett, 8. For more detailed discussion of this growing dissatisfaction see Bennett, 6-8.


7 Baker, 94-5.

8 See his notes on the novel, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

9 Although this alleged genocide is the current subject of “history wars,” or debate about its authenticity, I follow Drewe in assuming that actions tantamount to a program of genocide occurred under colonial settlers in Tasmania.


11 In the text most of the first sentence is italicised.

12 Robinson’s delusions make him an unwitting tool of imperial policy. The white invaders, having failed to eradicate the Tasmanians by poisoning, shooting, disease and co-ordinated army-settler cordons, used the trust he inspired to round up the remaining Aborigines, perceived as vermin or “savage crows,” on designated reservations.

13 For further discussion of Drewe’s use of history see Randolph Stow, "Transfigured Histories: Recent Novels by Patrick White and Robert Drewe,"
While researching this animal Drewe noted: “The buffalo has three magical functions: to carry the weight of the world, to make rain, and to originate earthquakes” (Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia) – magical functions which, given the role he assigned to it, were out of place in his novel.

A remark made by Bennett about The Savage Crows holds good for much of Drewe’s fiction: it ends with “an ironic recognition...of the mixed economies of contemporary life, which must qualify any nostalgic hankering for pure solutions” (Bennett, 10).


This is a paraphrase of Drewe’s comments on “The Ricochet,” Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

This demonising is presented in greater detail later as a prelude to the fatal clash at Glenrowan:

From city desks and drawing boards come dramatic representations, in words and pictures, of the sombre ravines and precipices, the jagged crags and scars of the monster’s territory. This is Hell’s gaseous fire lifted holus-bolus from the depths and thrust into the tender and defenceless features of Victoria. And there in the centre of the holocaust stands Satan with his eyebrows meeting in the middle, eyeteeth glistening and shotgun smoking. (OS 105)

Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

Baker, 75.

Baker, 91. See his assertion that “there is experience everywhere, there is material everywhere” (Baker, 75).

A new novel, Grace, has just been published.
Estuary/Egret
Long before I left I dreamed of returning and when I did go back it was just as I had dreamed. Having flown in from the East, I stood beside my father, now elderly, and listened for more than words. He spoke of the Egret and the boat. He knows I’m interested in the Egret — that great white waterbird. He tells me he has watched them for years. They have a rookery down on the estuary. Every year, he says, they fly away and return, fly away and return. They travel to the other side of the world but they come back to their rookery. One year they didn’t come back, he says, regret in his voice. We look up, speaking of Egrets and one comes in to land in front of us, briefly, and is away. My mother noted the significance, later, of the flutter of snowy white wings like sheets of paper falling, so feather-light, so gently, to ground.

My great-aunt Erika has left me her boat though we’re not sure, my father says, laughing, if there’s an actual boat anymore.

Balsa wood
She wanted to make a boat from the moment she saw one in her father’s classroom. He taught grade Seven. He’d been teaching grade Seven for years. She was only five and not allowed into his classroom often. She watched one of the big boys trimming strips of balsa wood with a Stanley knife. She watched him pin the wood delicately either side of the prow, curving it around the frame, trimming, gluing. Transfixed, she held this moment in her mind — the covering of the frame, the shaping of the boat’s prow, the moment of becoming a boat.

Patient, she waited for years until she thought it might be possible for him to allow her to build a boat. He took a lot of convincing. She was the second of his five daughters. Was she ten or eleven?

Mostly the girls in his class didn’t want to make boats, he said. Though, he added, looking thoughtful, there might have been one once.
She was very quiet and still when they went to buy the balsa wood. Balsawood, balsawood, she’d repeated a hundred times to herself, hoarding the words.

She’d reminded him carefully several weeks in a row and now he was in the Newsagents buying a few sheets of balsa and a tin of sharp silver pins, half-laughing to his friend the newsagent, half-proud, about what his crazy daughter wanted to do.

So he bought her the balsawood and before school she would come into his classroom and in between his marking and thesis writing she would go on with her boat. He helped her lay out the pieces of the paper pattern onto the light wood. He’d have to trust her with the Stanley trimmer, he told her. He showed her how sharp it was, gently pressing the blade against her finger – the same finger with the freckle, her right index finger with the freckle he’d pointed out when she’d had trouble knowing the difference between left and right. There’d only be one warning, he said gravely, but she felt that he knew he could trust her.

Before the boat she had asked for paper to draw or write on when she was in his classroom. Sometimes she and her sister Dee were supposed to be practising on the school piano. Now she worked on the boat.

Sometimes the big boys came in early to work on their boats before school. They saw her there and knew which boat was hers if someone accidentally tried to take it down and work on it during the day. No one in her class – grade Five – said it wasn’t fair or asked to make a boat. Perhaps she didn’t tell anyone. Perhaps it was her secret.

Sometimes she was frustrated. Her father was busy and she wasn’t allowed to go on without his guidance. She would barely have begun, it seemed, when he would be lifting the skeleton of her boat out of her hands for the day and up onto the ledge in front of the high louvre windows where all the boats in progress were kept. Once, he didn’t have time to guide her and she went on anyway, pinning and curling the wood around the prow as she had seen others do.

**Boats/Books**

I imagine stepping into the boat before dawn, pushing off the edge with an oar, feeling the first gliding movement over the water. I’d take the rowlocks from the pockets of my old green canvas jacket and push them into place, then lift the oars into position and row to the middle of the estuary. Up ahead, the startlingly white hills of the sandbar rise out of the middle of the channel like a mirage, blocking any sight of the far shore. Behind, beyond the lights of the roadhouse, the twin grey telephone boxes and the double-lane
highway, there’s a stand of peppermint trees. In its midst there’s a Geraldton wax, spindly and overgrown, and the remains of a brick chimney rising out of the ashes of the blackened ground. These are all that is left of Edward and Erika’s house.

It was summer. We’d have driven in the shiny black Chevrolet for many miles through the trees that lined the roads in those days. The leaf shadows and sunlight would flicker at the windows as our father drove, making patterns that shifted over the interior of the car’s upholstery and fluttered sometimes across one or other of our faces.

At last we’d arrive and come inside out of the strip of hot sun between the mad avenue of Geraldton Wax and the broad, dark back veranda. We’d go over the threshold into a further gradation of dark and cool and whilst adjusting our irises the music, it seemed to me, would begin – of voices coming out of the darkness. Erika, viola, and Edward, cello. My parents weren’t really the violins – they didn’t have angels’ voices at all but violins will do, retrospectively, for the quartet of strings.

One day when I was old enough, I noticed as soon as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, that the room was full of books. I don’t remember bookshelves. Piles of books and magazines were randomly placed on the hardwood floor around the edges of the room. It was a dark and dusty room in a cold climate – much like the climate I live in now – except for the occasional blazing summer. There were black French doors opening onto the front veranda to let in a cool breeze from the estuary.

University

I’m seventeen and starting university. I wear a white cheesecloth dress. It’s the seventies at the University of Western Australia. A number of Dalkeith ladies have come back to do degrees now that their children are grown. One in a white dress and gold sandals is the recipient of my spilt black coffee outside a marquee on the first day.

I learn logic in Philosophy and try to argue with my father when I visit but he never plays by the rules. I try to explain logical trains of thought. In class, I feel angry when people stray off the topic. My mind is quick and focused. I want some order and rules, finally, after all the arguments at home fuelled by alcohol. Outside the tutorial room windows the surface of the Swan River wrinkles like an old skin. I imagine a slipstream; a fast silver pathway.

“Reminiscent. Reverberate. I think you are having a love affair with these words.” The visiting Literature tutor unkindly discusses my vocabulary in front of the whole class. He is right. I am having a love affair with these words.
I Must Go Down To the Sea.

The wind sings in the stays, those thin wires holding up the masts, the scaffolding to hold the sails; magic canvas, gossamer fabric to catch winds. My eighteen-year old cousin and I fell off a yacht in the middle of the Swan River in 1975. I always hear my father's voice when I think of this, teaching Masefield's poem to the grade sevens.

I must go down to the sea again,*

To the lonely sea and the sky,
And her much older lover showed us how to make prawn cocktails and gave me a taste for filtered coffee...

And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
She said his house was full of the woman before, a woman his own age, but actually it was empty except for the silver coffee percolator and some old paperbacks. A bachelor's house, a beach house. Only full of his dreams of my cousin. I had hopes, he told me, years later.

And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking.
But I won't forget that moment of hitting the water, the slide as the yacht tipped, the shock of the freezing water. When we surfaced we looked up to see my cousin's lover laughing down at us. He threw us tubes and ropes, hauling us back up on deck.

Now becalmed. The jib sail suddenly up, a swelter of cream. My father saying, I don't want to leave your mother with a debt. Perhaps he should pay off the new car in full. And I don't talk about the debt he leaves, the debt that parents leave their children and this ageing man, all gentle concern, is not the father in my memory, surely? Not the man who hammered impatiently and swore when he hit his fingers, not the sailor many years home from sea.

I remember the days spent worrying about that cousin who fitted the description of a girl who drowned one weekend on the Swan. My cousin told her mother she was spending the night with Dee and I. We were her alibi. Schooled in disaster, we feared the worst.

You look, she said as she rushed into the room on Sunday evening, as if you'd seen a ghost.

*Some lines are taken from "Sea Fever" by John Masefield.
Summer late ten or eleven every night
I walk to the crest of the hill
smell the air for wood-smoke
looking out over the olive trees
that seem light in their youth
against the dark of the hillsides.
It's usually still — he seldom picks windy nights
seems to be trying to avoid
too much damage —
it's the excitement the power he's after
we tell each other.
Eight times this season I've caught the orange glow —
sometimes heard it first —
the crack and surge —
the high whine of green gum leaves
engulfed by flames.
Eight times the heart-pounding rush
back to the house to alert the volunteers —
bring the lights and sirens along the highway
flickering through the trees
for him to watch as I watch
knowing he's out there with a view
much like mine.
For two years he's been at it
with his candles and his milk cartons
that give him distance.
Two years our summers edgy with each other —
roused from dreams of fire to fire —
our bodies out there like spectres we can't control
growing accustomed
to his presence
like another tradesman in the district
so that the buzz of fear
the anger by day
turns at night
to the sleep of anticipation before a pre-dawn journey.
Last night they caught him
- not local but local enough -
we relax with each other.

But with ourselves it takes longer
to admit relief -
so used to standing in the olive grove
with purpose

22

and with something else
like a light recurring fever
not too high not too much discomfort -
so regular so familiar
you almost turn to greet it in the dark
as it puts you
for a few hours a night a day
at the distance that absolves -
stops you minding
whether you should or shouldn’t
be there.

**FIREBREAK**

Somehow she thinks it’s her fault and keeps apologizing
as we walk up and down the fence-line
with back-pack and garden spray.
Luckily it’s early in the season and the light breeze
is at our backs.
Leaf litter twists and crackles brilliant orange under the trees -
rages up a dry bush then for no apparent reason
goes around another just as vulnerable -
continues its sultry progress.
But the firebreak is wide there’s daylight left
and already tongues and peninsulas of flame
have reached the edge
where we wait and the lightest spray of water puts it out	hough further back the flaring and smoldering goes on
and we know those lazy plumes
will prickle with sparks come night.
Another day this could have been a conflagration –
it’s the wind that does it
and the firebugs
and the well meant burns that gauged as carefully as possible –
litter burden humidity temperature –
get out of hand go wrong.
It’s late and the breeze is gone.
We talk but watch... as we would the flicker of car lights
turning off the highway
or an animal repeatedly testing a fence
and listen as we would for a child
in another room.
LUCY DOUGAN

YOUNG BOY WITH DAFFODILS

You are perfectly a boy
standing amidst daffodils.
Lines of energy sport
and engage you – young vorticist –
they belong to the burnish of pollen
on your cheek-bones,
and the vegetable world alone.
Your hand trails a stem
that registers the clock in you
set to bloom.
Small gusts fill the darker
green and broken swathe
you have cut away from me.
Beyond, a flowering arch
frames your father and brother.
Soon your track will turn to them.
But for this instant
I’ve called you back,
wedded you to the brief host
of yellow heads, the living and the dead,
that jump at your hands and thighs.
They are shaped as a child would draw a flower, 
heady stars that were stepping stones 
on trails I walked. They lit up 
the way to piano lessons at the convent; 
later to the door of a boy 
who led me to feel, bare, edenic, 
and coaxed my soul 
to fling itself with shuddering force 
down to my toes. 
We spoke of nothing after, 
only our bodies cried out 
for what we had done 
and did not understand –
all of it in flowers. 
When I stood they fell 
and I left 
the rough outline 
of where we had lain. 

Now, the bruised gift 
you carry to my lips, my hair, brings back 
the scent of love before care, 
any girl and boy –
you and I going bare.
Inheritance: Fetish Sestina

I couldn't but notice, driving the tractor in summer, that my wife's nightie – soft cloth folded over – is much more interesting than oily hessian on the pneumatic seat – no more cushioning but pleasanter on the skin wearing shorts, like ball-bearings so glossy to touch, so cool in hot weather, rolling out the wrinkles of travel, smooth on the cheek, the lips; it being rickety in here and the dust rough in the throat, it distracts from the harshest work, plush as eyes looking up at my sensitive bits, chewing the crop, eyes kept sharp for errant rock or nest of quail, the odd locust fluttering up, the cloth warding off plagues; I stop for smoko, but instead of jumping down onto rough earth, stay seated in my cab-over, rolling my hips and soothing from the seat up, a blood-red sunset saying enough is enough, and calling it quits I smooth out my line of cut, rest up with evening cool, soft-harsh bite of fabric, getting my bearings from home-thoughts and satisfaction of work well-done; it's time I changed the bearings in this old but reliable work-horse, time I stopped my thoughts wandering, kept my eyes
on the goals ahead — taking the place back to profit, serving the church, 
looking to smooth 
out the bumps in this ride, the vibrations that are the devil’s work, 
the cloth 
that turns me from my wife, turns me into myself; time I renounced and 
took my seat 
in a town desperate for remedies and confidence, ironed my own laundry 
with rough 
hands, hands whose lines can’t be read by the fortune tellers I dream of, 
hands rough 
on my wife’s skin kept out of the sun — blemishes as frightening as sin 
— her bearings 
lost to me in years of you do your thing and I’ll do mine, no children 
to take the seat 
of power we both believe we’ve a right to — the farm come down from 
her father, his eyes 
on every change I make, every repair I carry out, hero of the Church, 
crisp white cloth 
still covering possessions left in his room exactly as it was when death 
came smooth 
and merciless out of the full moon, swallowed him whole through the 
window, the smooth 
glass reflecting only an image death wears on lonely outings, its essence 
rough 
and ready and deadly behind mirrors, the moon on your face I’d warned, 
no cloth 
of curtains to protect him from the madness that’s ruled this house since 
mother, death’s bearings 
set before the vows were even made; let go of him, I say, let go of him who 
only had eyes 
for you, stroked the satin of your garments by the Metters Stove, fixed to 
his seat 
in grim determination against me, a scowl as he spoke of its softness, 
screwing the seat 
to the floor with his belligerence: like duck down or the upside of a red 
gum leaf, so smooth 
to touch, like your mother — he said it to get at me, my wife kept busy; my
wife's eyes
are his eyes and they are tired with pretending not to see... for all her
genteel ways, she's rough
around the edges – some days she wears nothing underneath... tomorrow,
I'll take my bearings
from the house antennae, from the stand of wandoos, the dam... focus... the
cloth...
cloth so smooth
seat so rough
bearings for eyes.
THE ARTIST PRETENDS TO FEEL

pushing against the bark, the tip of the penknife
already sticky, resisted by the viscous sap,
she’s not carving her name;

she’s tapping what the thick, dead skin
hides in its covered veins,
and it’s not the amber, clotting as she digs,

but the empty channel, from root to branch,
and the drop, then, of her own blood
to fill the aridity.
THE SILVER PARCHMENT

It is as if gravity has been plucked
Like a hair from the centre of me and I
Can not flush these bells; I hear them. Their message is silence,
Silence for the earth that lends itself to the moon,
To the tailed Ophelia! She has opened up for the fourth time
Like a mouth. I believe she is noble, she is pure!
I wanted to be valuable and nursed on her breast bud
I wanted to be her child.

I can see it behind my veil
The tide pinned at my ankles as the new sand
Wove the fishes net and I shed its dead spiel.
Small blue bodies trapped
Like an infidel skin, starched scaled legs flinched.
All is prey, these rare insects
In the effigy of a window, lovers pleated into soundless knots
Dulled to the moons glare, her one eye.

How promising she hangs, if anything else
As that orb of Chinese paper untying herself from the stiff stars,
The smell of ripe children
Rising from my womb as soft dough. Seven young seedlings kneaded
Like brave corpses. They are my fence, my house door.
My patch of earth pulled back from the great sleep.
There is a box there, a bee keeper, a man, an empty seat.
Stripping me down to bone, planting the fat daddy bee and
His dark stinger into my separate room, annihilating every child.
These cells will not be kind to us! Have you had your death of me?
Planted that tree and watched every deaf leaf uncurl like a
Child’s finger from my body.
In her review of fiction for *Westerly* last year, Susan Lever began with the shortlisted finalists for the 2004 Miles Franklin Literary Award, who were, she said, “a rather international lot of novelists.” So they were: the winner Shirley Hazzard was born in Australia but has lived elsewhere for most of her life, while Peter Carey has also been an expatriate for decades. Two of the other finalists are relatively recent imports – “international” in the other direction, as it were: Annamarie Jagose from New Zealand, and South Africa’s J. M. Coetzee.

Lever went on to say that “the dominance of the ‘internationals’ ... invites reflection on the performance of more ‘local’ writers over the past few years.” But it also invites reflection on the changing perceptions and literary constructions of Australian nationalism in the twenty-first century, and on the differences to be teased out between a writer’s chosen place of residence and his or her fictional subjects, settings and themes. Peter Carey, for example, has lived in New York for many years and not much of the shortlisted novel, *My Life as a Fake*, is actually physically set in Australia; but his subject was the Ern Malley hoax, a story about Australian literature itself.

So when is an Australian writer not an Australian writer? Or an Australian book not an Australian book? In the global twenty-first century, these questions get harder to answer every year. There was a scandal in Australian literary life when Christina Stead was awarded the lucrative Britannica Australia prize for 1966 only to see the decision immediately overruled by the award’s administrators on the grounds that neither she nor her work was sufficiently “Australian.” By these standards there is no way that *The Great Fire* by Shirley Hazzard, an expatriate for almost sixty years and most unlikely ever to return to Australia to live, would have won last year’s Miles Franklin Award.

This year’s shortlist was altogether less problematic; all five of the shortlisted writers are Australians born, bred and resident, with all of their books set largely if not wholly in this country. Two of the five, Andrew
McGahan's *The White Earth* and Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights*, were discussed in detail by Lever in her 2004 essay, and both subsequently won a swag of major prizes in the 2004–2005 round of awards; *The White Earth* was the favourite for the Miles Franklin, which, to no-one's surprise, it won.

The three other novels on the shortlist, all very much engaged with aspects of Australian life, were *Salt Rain* by Sarah Armstrong, *The Gift of Speed* by Steven Carroll, and *The Submerged Cathedral* by Charlotte Wood. Not only was it an uncompromisingly "local" list but it was also an unusually and in some ways a reassuringly youthful one, with three of the five writers still under 40, Carroll at 56 the oldest by several years, and the average age of the shortlisted finalists a full ten years lower than the previous year – all of which, or so one would hope, bodes well for the future of Australian fiction.

The conditions of the award as laid out in Franklin's will do not state that the prize must be won by an Australian writer, so no haggling need be done over what this, at least, could mean; but they do specify that the winning book must be "of the highest literary merit and present Australian life in any of its phases." The highest literary merit is something upon which most panels of judges can usually manage to reach a compromise, if not actual consensus. But "Australian life in any of its phases"? What does this phrase actually mean? It can be argued that one of Australian life's "phases" is travelling and living abroad, as Franklin herself did for many years. The conditions of the award have been closely scrutinised and much-discussed over the last decade, particularly after Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days* was ruled ineligible according to the "Australian life" criterion.

In post-9/11 times, when the expression "post-ironic" is used without irony to describe this new era, when the word "Australian" becomes more overtly and vexedly politicised by the day, and when journalists and politicians are using the expression "un-Australian" in deadpan earnest (perhaps the times really are post-ironic) – in this era the question of what is or is not "Australian life in any of its phases" will become more of an issue for the Miles Franklin judges than it has ever been before. And in the wake of the changes to the administration of the prize that were made in late 2004 when the judges' role and responsibilities were diminished and curtailed, it's not at all clear who will now decide, and on what grounds, whether any given novel is eligible or not.

But two of the best Australian novels published so far this year won't qualify for the Miles Franklin Award no matter how creatively that criterion is interpreted. *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, by Australian born, bred and resident Delia Falconer, is about the American soldiers who fought under General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn. And Geraldine Brooks, an Australian journalist working internationally who first became known on the
Australian Literature scene ten years ago for *Nine Parts of Desire*, her non-fiction book on the lives of Moslem women, has this year published her second novel, *March*; it, too, concerns itself with nineteenth-century North American race wars, this time the Civil War and the part played therein by the absent father in *Little Women*.

Like Catherine Cole’s *The Grave at Thu Le* – or as with Michelle de Kretser’s *The Hamilton Case* (2003), a brilliant, elegant and very funny book on very serious subjects which would almost certainly have displaced one or another of the books on the 2004 Miles Franklin shortlist if it had been in any way about “Australian life” – both Falconer’s and Brooks’ novels would otherwise have been well in contention for next year’s award. Miles Franklin could not have foreseen this kind of development when she made her will all those decades ago, any more than she could have foreseen that the award would last so long and become so central to Australian literary life. But we are already in an era where some of the best novels the country can produce each year are routinely ruled ineligible for its most coveted and prestigious literary prize.

*The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers* was one of this year’s most eagerly anticipated novels, after the success eight years ago of Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds*. This very different book seeks to explore the gaps and silences in written history, looking at Custer’s Last Stand from the point of view of the man who was widely blamed for his defeat: Captain Frederick Benteen of the Seventh Cavalry. Twenty years on, now a medically discharged Brigadier-General and very near the end of his life, Benteen recalls over the space of a single morning the events leading up to the battle and the company of soldiers with whom he rode and fought: Star-Gazer, Handsome Jack, Grasshopper Joe and the rest.

Benteen decides against his better judgement to answer a letter from a teenage clerk in Chicago who has written to ask him for his personal account of the Battle of Little Bighorn. “It is my fervent wish,” writes the boy, “that I may argue your case against the malicious ghost of Custer and those who would claim him as a hero.” Benteen, after reading this letter, spends the morning looking through his papers and mementoes, thinking about what to tell the boy:

He wants to write the lost thoughts of soldiers.

No, not the grand story, he has never known his life that way, but the seams and spaces in between. This is history too, he thinks, the weight of gathered thoughts, the cumulus of idle moments...If you truly wish to understand the battle and my place in it, he writes now
to the boy, you must understand the dreams and jokes and stories that we bore within us. You must see how, as we shared them, they formed a kind of landscape.

This novel is a eulogy for the lost, for lives that have disappeared amid the heroics of history. Though far shorter and less stylistically lush than Falconer’s previous novel, it is written with her characteristic and unique style and vision, for Falconer’s take on the world is so word-oriented that her style is her vision: a profoundly metaphorical habit of thought, poetic in its rhythms as well in its diction, in which ideas and things collide and blend and become part of each other, and sometimes come to a life of their own. “There is a particular blue, he says, from way down in the deepest lakes, that does not wish you good, that troubles with your mind.”

Geraldine Brooks’ *March* is likewise anchored by a real historical figure, depending for much of its material on the transcendentalist philosopher, educator and abolitionist A. Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May, friend to Emerson and Thoreau. *March* is an extraordinary feat of imagination and synthesis, using biographical and autobiographical material about the real Bronson Alcott as the basis of Brooks’ own imaginative engagement with a literary character who was closely modelled on him but who exists mainly as a potent absence: the father of the four March sisters in *Little Women*, “far away, where the fighting was.”

The action of *Little Women* takes place over a year, and it is this year of her character Captain March’s life as a chaplain in the Union army that Brooks takes as her chronological framework, though there is some important backstory. The book works on several levels: as historical fiction, as a loving engagement with a literary classic, as a kind of imagined biography, and as, perhaps inevitably, an implicit anti-war argument from a woman who in her work as an international journalist has probably seen more fallout from more wars than any other fiction writer in the history of Australian literature except perhaps George Johnston.

Even so, Brooks herself has said of *March* that it “isn’t a book about war, but about the strength of ideas that drive people to extreme action.” What is explored in this novel is a series of disjunctions: between ideals and behaviour, between motivation and action, between pure belief and unavoidable circumstance, and not least between the complex physical realities of a war zone and the idealised life of the all-female family left back at home in the unsullied domestic nest. By the time that March returns home for Christmas, shattered in mind, body and soul, his year’s experience has taken him far beyond the possibility of fully truthful communication with his wife and daughters.
There are two more novels of note that will be disqualified from Franklin Award contention by the “Australian life” criterion. Catherine Cole’s *The Grave at Thu Le*, set in the present, is about a French family’s nostalgia for its exotic colonial past in Vietnam; the young Catherine D’anyers visits Vietnam in quest of a family grave that may or may not exist, and about which she has only the word of her secretive great-aunt Lily, back home in Paris, to guide her. While the characters are French and the setting Vietnamese, the novel is more widely “about” postcolonialism as such, and in her review essay on this novel Drusilla Modjeska develops a complex argument about its status as a “very Australian novel.” Cole, says Modjeska, writes from an understanding of postcolonialism that has been developed through her own lived Australian experience, and in writing this novel has taken an important step in our thinking about this country’s own postcoloniality by moving outside the “guilt/blame/black-armband” debate loop to a less fraught and limiting position:

...she writes without the guilt that has been so debilitating to our political and intellectual culture. She doesn’t engage with debates about guilt or blame, neither fending them off nor joining the chorus of mea culpa. She brings an awareness to attitudes of mind that Australian readers will recognise. (*The Monthly*, July 2005)

From Vietnam to Tahiti, a fourth exclusively “offshore” novel to be making a bit of a splash this year – it was shortlisted in the NSW Premier’s literary awards – is *Frangipani* by the Tahitian-born Célestine Hiriuta Vaite, who lives with her Australian surfer husband on the south coast of NSW. *Frangipani* is a charming, vibrant, upbeat novel about Materena, champion cleaner and the best listener in all of Tahiti, and her wayward daughter Leilani; local customs and lore form a backdrop to the family tussles, gossip and romance in a book that more than one critic has compared to the novels of Alexander McCall Smith in its warm, good-natured humour and charm.

Between *Frangipani* and Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe* there’s a contrast so vast as to be almost grotesque: *Dead Europe* is a surreal nightmare rave, a black vision of corrupt humanity infesting a continent rotten to the core. Will this qualify as a phase of Australian life? The novel is set offshore except in memory, but it features a Greek-Australian hero (or anti-hero), which alone should be enough to get it across the eligibility line; perhaps even more importantly, the hero Isaac’s world view, like Tsiolkas’ own, is even more clearly the product of an Australian background than Catherine Cole’s. *Dead Europe* seems so far to have acted as a kind of watershed for critics: some have high praise for its energies and angers and for its highly politicised vision,
while others are perturbed by its ambiguous if not incoherent representations of anti-Semitism and “the Jews”, and/or repelled if not infuriated by its graphic depictions of degradation and abjection, in sex, violence, drug-taking and taboo-breaking of the most extreme kinds. “For me,” said Tsiolkas in a recent interview, “it is crucial that there is a space for artists to make works of nightmare.”

Critic Robert Manne, in a detailed and influential review (The Monthly, June 2005), argues that the idea of transgressive art no longer has any real meaning, with which Tsiolkas disagrees. But Manne goes to the real heart of Dead Europe in asking of it a question that in the current world order is daily more and more of a concern to, and potentially more divisive among, ordinary thoughtful people all over the world: “Are we to meant to assume that there is some direct cultural continuity between traditional Christian anti-Semitism...and the contemporary left-wing political anti-Semitism concerning the dispossession of the Palestinians and the fusion of Jewish and American power...?” The answer would appear to be Yes, we are; even readers able to tolerate the book’s violence and its torrents of blood, shit, semen and vomit might still baulk at its apparently equivocal and unstable race politics. Tsiolkas has said that he wants people to be disgusted by the racism in the book (as distinct from “of the book”) but this raises the difficult question of how to interpret any work of fiction when there’s such a dramatic disconnect between authorial intention and reader response.

On the basis of this ambivalence and lack of clarity on the question of anti-Semitism, Manne compares this novel to Helen Demidenko’s “far less accomplished” The Hand That Signed the Paper – itself a highly controversial Miles Franklin winner, in a judging decision that was far more interesting and complicated than it was subsequently made to appear in the press. Given that literature is a transmitter of ideology either deliberately and consciously or, as it were, negatively and by default, by what critical means are we to determine and locate the ideological centre of such a novel, or its moral heart? In the case of Demidenko this was ultimately a failure of technique, with the author not in sufficient control of her narrative strategies to convey a coherent authorial stance on such complex and volatile material. But in the far more mature and consciously crafted, double-stranded narrative of Dead Europe there are even more complex factors at work, and analysis of them is well beyond the scope of a survey like this.

“Foreignness” of a different kind will have more awards judges than just the Miles Franklin panel scratching their heads and reaching for the rule book: French-Australian author Catherine Rey’s The Spruiker’s Tale, set in Australia’s remote northwest, is translated from the French by the critic Andrew Reimer, and the status of a translation might be too difficult a question for some of the awards administrators to address. Rey’s novel is an
exotic hybrid, a European vision in an extreme Australian landscape: hectic and brilliant but with a heart of ice, it follows the rise and fall of a dynastic circus family in a mode whose expressionism sometimes mutates into full-blown surrealism.

Despite the fact that most of Eva Sallis’ *The Marsh Birds* is set in the Middle East, Indonesia and/or New Zealand, there will be no doubt at all in anyone’s mind that this novel addresses Australian life – however much this particular “phase” of it might be one that many of us wish we had never entered. Sallis is a refugee-support activist and *The Marsh Birds* directly addresses the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia; it follows the journey in time and awareness of the Baghdad boy Dhurgham, separated from the rest of his family after his uncle and brother fall out of political favour and the family is forced to flee across the border into Syria. Dhurgham doesn’t understand this at the time and neither do we: all he knows is that his father has instructed him to meet up again in Damascus “at the Great Mosque” if they get separated, and he waits there for weeks before he realises that the family is never going to arrive. After an interval under the protection of his “friend” Mr Hosni (for Dhurgham is a very pretty boy), the “friend” palms him off onto people smugglers after a warning from a British fellow-pedophile who says “that boy will turn on you” – Dhurgham, still only fourteen, can’t follow this transaction too well either – and he inevitably ends up, via Indonesia and a nightmare journey by sea on a leaky, overcrowded fishing boat, in an Australian detention centre.

*The Marsh Birds* shows extraordinary restraint given the passion of its commitment; Sallis firmly refrains from writing a tract and opts for narrative instead, using the skills of a novelist rather than those of a speechwriter. She tells the story through Dhurgham’s only partly comprehending eyes, and responds to a political situation in the most effective way a politically motivated artist can: by using the story of individual people caught up in a system or systems in order to demonstrate how power operates and how institutions work. There is some very powerful writing involved in this, including a virtuoso passage of beautiful, hallucinatory prose indicating that Dhurgham, dehydrated and starving on his journey to Australia by sea, has come very close to the limits of his physical endurance: “He stared at the waves. Each was different. Each was identical. He watched the light play through and over them. It was as though an altogether different light played from within the waves, and sunlight itself was the lesser, more fickle light. The deep blue far under each wave had something to say.”

Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* is set two hundred years earlier than *The Marsh Birds* and addresses the question of alien arrival in Australia by sea from quite a different angle. Grenville combines the two most bloody, dramatic and emotive strains of early Australian history – contact history and convict
history – to tell a story of settlement in which the triumph of transported convicts in recovering personal freedom, dignity and prosperity is gained at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants whose land has been invaded. Will Thornhill’s story becomes by degrees an allegorical representation of Australian post-contact history.

One of Grenville’s most significant achievements in this novel is the sane and generous even-handedness of her attention to all of the various characters’ dilemmas and injustices, and there is a powerful turning point in the story where Will is forced to choose between joining in a murderous raid on the Aborigines, or losing his wife and children and the home they have made along the Hawkesbury River. Grenville, resisting calls in recent years for Australian novelists to stop being seduced by historical fiction and address themselves to the current state of the country, demonstrates in *The Secret River* how well she understands that one way of understanding the present is to interrogate the past.

Like Eva Sallis, however, Robert Drewe directly addresses the present; one of the central figures in his ambitious, multi-themed novel *Grace* is, like Sallis’ Dhurgham, a teenage escapee from a detention centre. *Grace* is rather like a twenty-first-century *Capricornia*, full of ideas and energy and the colourful, larger-than-life characters and situations of the country’s northern coast, including an overpriced restaurant called the Hard Croc Café and a brothel called the Golden Peach. Drewe’s heroine Grace Molloy has fled from Sydney to escape the chilling attentions of a stalker and has ended up in Broome, working in a wildlife park; knowing from personal experience what it is to need to run away, she finds help and refuge for the detainee. Drewe’s material ranges over a wide and varied terrain: evolution, ecology, immigration policy, father-daughter relations, corrupt ex-cops, warring anthropologists, flight, harassment and mercy.

Both Gerard Windsor in *I Have Kissed Your Lips* and Sonya Hartnett in *Surrender* choose for their dark stories the setting of a small and isolated Australian country town. Windsor’s novel crosses and re-crosses territory he has covered before in different genres over the years: life as shaped by the institution of the Catholic Church; familial relations and their consequences; the non-negotiable disjunction between traditional Catholic teachings and the realities of desire and sexual experience. While the behaviour of the young priest Michael is by no means admirable, the punishment in store for him is disproportionate to his crimes; just when you think nothing worse could happen, something unthinkably worse is revealed.

Windsor’s appallingly sad and sometimes horrifying story has the downward-spiralling narrative shape characteristic of the classic tragic plot, as does Hartnett’s *Surrender*. The main difference is that Hartnett’s novel is about psychic disintegration rather than societal and familial dysfunction; the
young, fragile, dying Gabriel, bedridden and helpless at the novel's beginning, is gradually revealed to be not at all what he seems - beginning with his puzzling lack of surprise at the news that human bones have been found in the forest. Both novels take a disturbing view of the mother-child relationship, both are intense visions of life at the extremes of experience, and both have moments of nightmare to rival anything in the much more florid and noisy *Dead Europe*.

There's more nightmare in Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore*, for me one of the real finds of the year. Temple has for some years been a highly respected writer of crime fiction, but *The Broken Shore* qualifies by anyone's standards as a "literary" novel of note, still complying with crime fiction's generic conventions but not at all limited by them. This book is a stand-alone story rather than part of Temple's Jack Irish series, though the police detective Joe Cashin is sketched along traditional crime-fiction hero lines: a troubled loner with a lot of inner demons. But Temple fleshes out his characters and the landscapes and cityscapes through which they move in a way that puts many established "literary" novelists (and not just in Australia, either) to shame; his crime plot is likewise appropriate to the genre but at the same time a complex, three-dimensional exploration of human behaviour and motivation. Incredibly, and in a laconic-Australian-male, dry-as-a-chip sort of way, this book is also very funny.

As might be inferred from their titles, a welcomingly contrasting cheerful innocence pervades two very "Melbourne" novels, Arnold Zable's *Scraps of Heaven* and Steven Carroll's *The Gift of Speed*. Both novels are set circa 1960 and both deal with the arrival of unthinkably exotic strangers in the Melbourne of Edna Everage and Robert Menzies. In Zable's book the new arrivals are postwar immigrants, seeking refuge from the wreckage of Europe, who in spite of traumatic memories and miseries can still find "scraps of heaven" in the new place. In *The Gift of Speed*, a suburban Melbourne boy is bewitched by the magical presence and genius of the touring West Indian test cricket team - but after they have been beaten and then given a heroes' farewell, Michael and boys like him all over the country are left with "this vague, nagging feeling that we all just might be a bit better than we thought we were."

Tim Winton's *The Turning* is one of the surprisingly few collections of short stories to be published in the last year; even here, the stories are linked after the manner of what Frank Moorhouse once dubbed "discontinuous narrative," giving the book a half-novelish feel. There's less joy and more grimness in this book than can usually be found in Winton's work; the characters are his usual coastal battlers from the fishing towns of the West, and some of them are doing it very hard. While the publication of any book of Winton's is always an event, the problems that many feminist - or even just
female — readers have often had with his work are more in evidence here than ever before; in the title story, the long-suffering Rae undergoes a religious conversion while she is being raped and bashed by her porn-loving partner Max. This kind of thing makes Winton’s work tough going for a certain kind of reader, but there’s no denying the force and conviction of his writing.

Like Geraldine Brooks’s March, Susan Johnson’s The Broken Book is an imaginative engagement with the work of another writer, and like Peter Carey’s My Life as a Fake it concerns one of the most intriguing, talked-about, mythologised episodes in the history of Australian writing. Johnson’s heroine Katherine Elgar is consciously and avowedly modelled closely on the essayist and fiction writer Charmian Clift, famous beauty, gifted stylist, much-loved and highly influential weekly columnist in Sydney in the 1960s, wife of fellow-writer George Johnston and dead by her own hand at the age of 45. This novel is at its most successful not its re-imagining of Clift, but rather in the places where it comes closest to breaking free of her ghost and turning into a story of its own.

Some time during the latter half of the twentieth century, Australian novelists stopped feeling required to write the Great Australian Novel and began, one by one, to focus instead on whichever particular part of the nation they happened to know best. Some of the most readable and engaging books of the past year are those that convey with great clarity and loving detail the specificity of the region or city in which their stories are set: Winton’s Western Australian fishing towns, Zable’s Carlton, Grenville’s unspoiled Hawkesbury River, Temple’s windy, rugged “broken shore” along the coastal strip of south-western Victoria. In most of the current crop of fiction, the specificities of regionalism give anchor and focus to the more general, abstract disquiets and anxieties about the state of the nation and the political directions in which it appears to be heading.

This survey covers Australian fiction published between winter 2004 and winter 2005, so anything that seems obviously missing will probably have been published after that point, and is likely to be covered in next year’s fiction essay. But to close with a preview and to end where I began, with the relationship between literary prizes and representations of place, it’s J. M. Coetzee’s just-published Slow Man that’s most likely to dominate the 2005–2006 round of prizes and awards. Set in Adelaide where Coetzee has now lived for several years, which means that he is steadily acquiring the status of a “local” rather than an “international,” the novel is unquestionably about “Australian life” and will therefore be eligible for the Miles Franklin Award next year; so far this year, Grenville’s The Secret River is the novel most likely to give it a serious run for its money, though other promising contenders include The Marsh Birds, Surrender and Grace.
Slow Man tells the story of Paul Rayment, a cautious, prudent loner whose life is smashed along with his right knee in a cycling accident on Adelaide’s busy Magill Road, an accident that results in the amputation of his leg. As with all of Coetzee’s novels, one of its central themes is suffering and the alleviation of suffering; it is full of such luminous, painterly moments as the description of Rayment’s abandoned shopping, picked up from the road by the police hours after the accident: a tin of chickpeas with a dent in it, and a quarter of a kilo of Brie that has melted and congealed in the hot Adelaide sun.

Apropos the whole issue of fiction and place, the interpretation of the Miles Franklin “Australian life” rule at the most literal level has tended in the past to rest on how much of a novel is actually set in Australia, which is mainly how Moorhouse’s Grand Days came to grief. And it’s on this most literal level that even so good a novel as Slow Man can still feature a moment of poetic licence likely to disquiet the locals. When you are writing or reading fiction about a real place, no one would question the importance of authenticity in representation; even just one small false note can undermine readerly confidence, as with the reader who once wrote to Elizabeth Jolley to take issue with a detail in one of her novels: doves, said the reader reproachfully, never roost in a Moreton Bay fig tree. In admiring emulation of this reader and with all due respect to a man who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature and will undoubtedly win more prizes both national and international for this new novel, I would like to point out that, as any native of Adelaide knows, a cautious-minded, French-born dweller in a North Adelaide flat is profoundly unlikely to go shopping for Brie anywhere in the vicinity of Magill Road. It’s the sort of thing that just doesn’t happen.

But only we Adelaidians, in the spirit of Alexander McCall Smith’s characters as they fret their way earnestly through problems, are likely to be even remotely worried about this. The rest of the world won’t care.

Fiction received 2004–2005

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review


I wake thinking of my uncle, Zio Vincenzo, and some of the things he sometimes says to me. Shake my head, push the thoughts away. When I get out of bed my two cats begin their usual, making passes at my legs. They’ve been waiting for this moment for some time, crouched like gargoyles either side of my head, purring loudly and occasionally licking my ears. No mistaking what they want. The younger one mistimes one of her passes and collides with the older cat. He raises his paw and she backs off. After a pause, she resumes seducing my left leg. She’s so enthusiastic she’s also rubbing up against everything else in the room. When I try to walk she headbutts my knee and I nearly fall over. Zio’s had a couple of falls lately. I wonder how long he has left.

I put coffee in the percolator and put it on the hotplate, boot up my computer. Begin feeding the cats. As soon as they can see I’m getting their food they go and sit by the door. It seems they like to be assured that breakfast will be there, ready for when they get back from the day’s first patrol.

Let them out and check email. The junkmail screening program doesn’t seem to be working but when I check the mail it’s busy receiving. Percolator burbles so I pour a coffee and take it outside with a cigarette. When I come back in I’m still, apparently, receiving mail. Pull up the anti-virus program but it won’t run. Reboot, but now nothing runs. And I’d been planning to spend the day writing. I phone Anthony, the guy who usually fixes things like this for me, and leave a message on his message-bank.

I know from experience there’s little chance he’ll be able to come today so reassess my plans. Looks like being a piecemeal sort of day. First up, visit Zio Vincenzo and Zia Carmina. It’s been a while and I need to collect some legal documents from them anyway, run some errands for them. I prefer the sound of Zio and Zia to that of Uncle and Aunty, though I do sometimes call Vincenzo Uncle Vince. Shame I’ve forgotten most of the Sicilian I knew as a
child; I like the fact that in Italian there are many more words starting with Z than there are in English. *Zagara*, orange-blossom; *zigomo*, cheek-bone. My sisters still pronounce Zia Carmina as *Ziggamina*.

As I park next to the shabby old house, I’m blocking childhood memories that are trying to surface. We used to live here too, right next door to Vince and Carmina. The place is an emotional minefield, but I kind of like the challenge of trying to control what I let in and under what circumstances.

To my right there used to be large heaps of firewood. Right here on the track is where my sister badly burnt the soles of her feet on a sheet of iron one searing summer day. We never wore shoes at home, had no fear of snakes. My cousin Carlo was my hero – he told us how to handle a snake: stare at it, holding its gaze while slowly moving closer. Then, lightning quick, grab it by the neck and bite its head off. Thank Christ we never saw one. As I remember it, my parents were always arguing. Their preferred reply to criticism was, *I might as well slit me throat then*.

Zio Vincenzo appears round the side of the house. He’s holding a rake and when he sees me he raises it, threatening. “Zio, it’s me. Michael.” The rake equivocates and I duck under it to give him a hug and a kiss, left then right. I’m struck by the resemblance to boxing. As I step back Vince looks at me wonderingly. I ask, “How are you Uncle Vince? You doing some gardening?”

“Oh, I’m just... The weeds are...” Shakes his head and laughs and I join in. I’ve no idea what we’re laughing at, nor if he really knows who I am, but it feels good.

“Zia Carmina inside?”

“Yeah, yeah she’s doing...and...” Again we laugh together. With my hand on his shoulder I guide him towards the back door.

Carmina soon has coffee percolating. She offers me campari while putting homemade biscotti on a saucer. It’s only about nine am. I don’t like to refuse, although I insist on pouring it myself so I can control the amount. She tells me a long, complicated story – of which I only understand about half. It’s something to do with social workers, personal carers, and getting Zio into the shower. Her English vocab is good but her Calabrian accent is very strong – even after more than fifty years in Australia. They have to alternately badger and reward him. I’m missing the point. Something subtle about the reward system. Vince looks at me sheepishly. Zia laughs a lot and Vincenzo and I laugh with her. Every now and then he whispers something at me. This used to be my second home.

About an hour later I’m home again – with a week’s supply of figs, grapes, and biscotti. Feel disconnected from the world without email and internet access.
I have to take the legal documents to the lawyer. Her office is in the city and so is the Aboriginal Corporation where I do some volunteer work, so I decide to combine the two. At least I can check my email there.

I usually take the train into town, as parking is expensive. At the station I can't get the ticket dispensers to work. Train arrives so I board, intending to get a ticket when I change trains for East Perth. At the next stop a transit guard gets on, checking tickets. Listens to my story and I can see him wavering. Not allowed to let people off, use discretion. His jaw clenches and I resist the temptation to beg. Keep my face devoid of expression: he's just doing his job. Training overrides empathy and I now possess a fifty-dollar fine and that childlike feeling of having been unfairly punished.

At work I'm typing up minutes of a community meeting from someone's handwritten notes. They're full of abbreviations, acronyms, and references to arcane knowledge and places I've never heard of. Those parts of the meeting conducted in the local language are simply rendered as “language discussion.” It seems a bit of a cop-out. When I check my mail there's nothing that couldn't have waited.

Mid afternoon email the work I've done to the anthropologist in the next room, leave the office, and head home. I have a carpenter coming to install some shelving. When I go to buy a ticket for the return journey, I realise that earlier I'd been hitting the dispenser buttons in the wrong order. It's all fairly straightforward, but somehow I'd mentally reversed the process.

As I try to avoid staring at the other passengers I remember how Zio Vincenzo, during breaks in the conversation, would lean toward me and whisper things like, Medicare Gold or, We decide who comes into this country and under what circumstances. These were the only times he could complete a sentence. Mostly he was quoting from politicians’ election speeches and slogans. I had an idea he might've been saying some of these things before the elections in which they were used. I couldn't be sure. But other things he whispered sent inexplicable shivers down my spine.

Dave, the carpenter, arrives soon after I get home. Computer guy still hasn't called back. I'm showing him where I want the shelves when he notices a copy of the Qur'an amongst my books. "What's that doing here, mate?"

I'm thinking about shelving, this is a distraction. I assume it's a joke. "Everything's gotta be somewhere. Mate." I don't feel comfortable with being called mate. It's inclusive yet defining, delimiting. And no amount of ironic usage changes that for me.

"You wanna replace that with God's book. The real word of God."
I feel suddenly weary. “Yeah, yeah. Look, let’s leave the shelves for another time. Need to give it more thought.” Shepherd him out the door and close it firmly before he’s even reached the car. We used to be friends but that’s becoming more and more difficult. He didn’t notice my bible and Torah on another shelf. I don’t even believe in Islam. Dave knows I don’t believe in anything. Told him before: if there is a god he must be a pretty dysfunctional bastard. Dave even believes that yoga is the devil’s work. Maybe I should leave another message for Anthony the computer geek.

I’m just about to begin a series of yoga poses when there’s a knock at the door. I groan, thinking Dave’s come back to have a serious go at converting me. Maybe with reinforcements. But when I open there’s a woman standing there frowning. About my age, dark hair, big eyes. She’s a former lover, now we’re sort of friends. Her eyes are very red and I hope she’s not stoned. When she is, she likes to talk philosophy and make love at the same time. Irritatingly pointless conversations full of portentous solipsism and faulty analogy.

She asks, “Are you okay?” Can’t think what she’s talking about so I just stare at her, raise my eyebrows. “I heard some moaning.”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m fine. I thought you were someone else.” She looks tired, has a backpack slung over one shoulder. I can’t see her car anywhere. There’s a pause like we’re on either side of an abyss, deciding whether or not to jump across. I’m remembering that when we were lovers I never quite trusted her. I’d be just about to fall asleep when images of her attacking my sleeping body with a knife would send me into an anxiety attack.

“Can I use your phone?” Suddenly she seems nervous. Maybe it shouldn’t but it puts me at ease.

“Yes, sure.” I hold the door open and back awkwardly out of the way to let her in. “So what are you - ?”

“I’ve been walking for hours,” she says flatly. “My boyfriend dumped me. My car broke down. I don’t know - . I didn’t - .” She clamps her mouth shut but her eyes just fill with tears anyway. I put my arms around her, pat her back, massage her head a little. It’s difficult because of the backpack. But maybe that’s a good thing because soon we stop so she can put it down. I offer her a drink.

While I’m making the drinks she sings a few lines of, When I Fall in Love. I begin to feel guilty for having dumped her myself, but then I remember that we’d just drifted apart without ever really connecting. At least, that’s how it seems to me now. I remember that Echo and the Bunnymen’s version of this song segues into something about a sex machine. I don’t want to think about that. She has a terrible singing voice.
I’m about to hand her a gin and tonic when she asks for a cigarette, bursts into tears again. After a moment’s indecision I put the glasses down and comfort her again. Both cats appear and begin tangling themselves around our legs. They seem to like human displays of affection. I suppose their movements could be rendered as algorithms. Perhaps they’d follow the same rules as objects circling a strange attractor – similar paths, but never exactly the same. I realise I shouldn’t really be thinking about chaos theory at a time like this. Or should I? Maybe it’s quite relevant. Maybe there’s a connection with relationships and reproduction, DNA copying errors and bifurcation. Random mutation. I savour the phrase. I say it out loud and it’s the cue for us to move apart. We sit at the table and drink and smoke. She asks me what I’m talking about, so I tell her. I actually see her eyes glaze over but I talk on past the limits of my knowledge. Inventing freely, improvising. This morning I’d had thoughts I wanted to write, but with my computer down I feel blocked from anything but this sort of spam thinking. I tried writing longhand but it’s too slow, ideas shrivel before they reach the page. Should be called slowhand. But, of course, that has other connotations.

She says, “I wanna go out. I want to go out and drink and dance,” emphasising the verbs. Whenever we went out together she got drunk and made trouble. The people she upset always seemed to think I should be responsible for her. They weren’t usually amenable to reason and diplomacy.

“Nah, I don’t want. Not tonight.” I remember all the times I held her hair out of the way in alleyways and carparks. I became adept at gathering it with both hands, transferring it to one, then patting her back. A friend of mine claims that every time she goes out she ends up holding a drunken woman’s hair out of the way while she vomits. I’ve noticed, though, that she only goes out with women with long hair. “I can drop you home if you like.” She ends up staying for dinner. Watching crap TV while I cook. I wanted to think about Uncle Vince: about his simulacra of communication and how it seems to be enough for him. As long as we go through the motions, nod and laugh in the right places. But I can’t think while she’s here. Can’t write, can’t think. And still no word from computer boy.

I’m lying in bed now. Still awake, though it’s late. I let her stay the night. She didn’t want to be alone, but understood she was to sleep on the couch. The cats are bodyguards, either side of me. Mind busy with all the thinking I couldn’t do during the day, while pencil and notebook lie useless on the bedside table.

Zio Vincenzo’s partial sentences manage the form but lack content. Leaving us to fill in the blanks, ascribe meaning. Whatever meaning we like.
Perhaps his is a particularly postmodern affliction. Some of the other things he whispered to me this morning come to mind. The snipers have gone blind, was one of them. I can't think now what it was I found so creepy about these, but another was, I wore my best suit, only to have it ruined by the carabinieri. My guards are asleep on the job. I envy them, lucky bastards.

I get up about sunrise. Cold grey-green, sky looks like sputum. Follow the usual algorithm - more or less - with cats, percolator, and computer. The thing about chaos theory and strange attractors is that small differences in starting conditions can develop into large effects later. It's become such a cliche it's impossible not to think of it whenever chaos theory is mentioned, but still I try not to think about the butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil. The notion of small differences reminds me about the computer. Check it, hopeful, but still nothing runs. Leave another message for Anthony.

I can smell that the coffee is ready so I pour two cups and take them into the lounge. She's sitting up in the middle of the foldout bed with quilt spiralled up around her like an inverted whirlpool, crying silently. I feel somewhat relieved when I realise I can't give her a hug because of what she's done with the bedding. I'd like to snap a photo of her. She looks like Yvette Watt's painting, Woman in a Whirl (Hello and Goodbye). Except for her streaming eyes. Inertia, plus the craving for coffee and nicotine, wins over my desire to imitate art. Sip my coffee. Carefully lower the other one to the small table.

About to slink out when she says, “I didn't tell you everything last night.”

“Uh huh,” wondering if “everything” is something I really want to know. While hoping she doesn't let this pause go on too long.

“I'm pregnant.”

I know that I shouldn't pause here. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“I want a child, but not by myself and not with the wrong man.” I grimace sympathetically. What can I say that won't be patronising or lame?

She tenses and straightens her back. I wonder whether she's about to fart, she often uses physical humour to distance herself from serious discussions, but instead she says, “Termination. Today. Nine o'clock.”

“I'll drive the getaway car,” I say, heading for the back door. Feel I've earned this cigarette. I turn back and retrieve her coffee. She won't be needing it. Breakfast for one after all.

The sky looks a little less abject at eight forty-five. An ordinary grey now. We're outside the waiting room sharing a cigarette. Ignoring the nurse's prohibition. Both of us dressed in black. We laugh when we notice this, attract glass-filtered frowns from nurse. Small raindrops curve in under the
veranda and spit on our faces. We continue giggling intermittently. As well as black boots, jeans, and T-shirt, she’s wearing a black leather jacket and dark glasses.

I nearly say, “Jesus, you look like the Terminator,” but manage to turn it into, “Jesus, you look like a rock star.” I even say it admiringly. I consider mentioning a black cap and Linda Hamilton in Terminator II, but even that’s probably too close a reference. We’re making some fine distinctions here. I wonder how much she’s editing her speech.

In the recovery room she’s groggy, slightly delirious. We drink the tea and share the fruit. I peel and segment a mandarin. Hand her a piece and say, “Solidarity sister.” She parts her lips, pushes out her tongue to display a mouthful of semi-masticated fruit. I laugh dutifully.

She spends three days on my couch. TV, reading, and dozing. Says she’s fine. Physically. Now we’re both in my bed. I usually sleep naked but this time I keep my boxers on. She’s borrowed one of my larger T-shirts. We cuddle. I find I’m fairly good at ignoring my body’s response. I’m falling asleep when I feel her hand move from my shoulder. It glides across my chest. She removes my hand from her hip and places it where she wants it. Fingers slide down my belly. I don’t stop her. I don’t stop. I remember to breathe out.

Afterwards, she gets up and goes to the couch where the folder bed is still made up. I’m lying here with a memory, from when I was about ten years old, of Zio Vincenzo killing a goat. He and my father occasionally used to butcher a sheep and I was allowed to help skin it. I didn’t like killing things just for the sake of it, but I did like providing mangiare vero, real food. I was such a boy-scout manqué.

I hadn’t realised it was always my father who did the actual killing. But this time we were going to have goat and, for some reason, Uncle Vince was intending to do the killing. When it was time, though, he couldn’t bring himself to cut its throat. Neither could he back down, lose face. I remember his two hands holding its mouth shut, blocking its nostrils. Took a long time to stop struggling and twitching. I’m trying to remember the expression on Vince’s face. Even as a ten-year-old I knew this was wrong. Just watching made me want to go and wash. I’d like to think he was crying.

My immediate family have never told stories much, nor very well, but Zio Vincenzo was a great raconteur. He had a knack for turning seemingly banal events into comic narrative. I’ll always remember him as a gentle, kind man with a subtle sense of humour. He never told the story of the goat, though. I wonder if anyone else remembers it. Oh, yeah; now I remember the thing he
whispered that really shivered my spine. *We slit our throats and smile.* I’m glad the cats are here. I bring both hands out from under the quilt and cup their heads. Maybe computer boy will come tomorrow and things’ll be back to normal. Maybe I should go out to the lounge and see if she’s all right.
Since the death of his father six years ago, when he and his body guards were blown up inside their car as they left the Catania airport, Mimmo Urzi' had found himself at the head of the family's “business” empire. The many people, whose livelihood depended on the goodwill and protection of old Leone Urzi', were shocked. Prior to this disaster the Old Man had seemed invincible. He was ruthless, shrewd, highly respected and widely connected to people who could make things happen: politicians, businessmen and the enforcers, both inside and outside the law. Unfortunately, as everyone in that highly precarious business knows, you’re only as good as your luck, when that runs out, all the other power props are of little use and tend to collapse with it. After the shock people were considering how to best cut their losses and change allegiance to the new guard from Cefalu'.

Initially nobody gave the new boy on the block much of a chance. He was young, just twenty-five when his father was killed. He was considered somewhat of a scapestrato by all who knew him. There was talk of him being a junkie, a gambler, a womaniser...you name it. Worse still, everyone agreed that the boy was none too bright. His own father, who had all but disowned him, was quoted as saying that his son’s brain matter had all drained down to his penis, in reference to the size of that part of his anatomy.

Be that as it may, once his father was out of the way, Mimmo astounded everyone by the swiftness with which he took over the reins, pounced on his enemies and established order. Now at age 31, and after a string of successful operations that left a few corpses riddled with bullets, incinerated in cars and, in one case, drowned in a vat of olive oil, he had rightly gained respect. It seems that where Mimmo lacked in brain cells he was endowed with cunning, swiftness of action and good old survival instinct.

When Don Alfio arrived, the driver had given up on the door bell and was heading back. He stood outside the car, on the passenger’s side, where he
knew Mimmo was seated, though all he could see was his own reflection in the bullet-proof glass. That face in the tinted glass made him feel faint.

"Signor Mimmo." He called feebly into the glass.

A few seconds' silence. Finally the glass lowered to reveal the chubby, inscrutable face of Mimmo Urzi'.

"Don Alfio, i miei ossegui." Said Mimmo, and despite the obsequious words his face had a smirk and his voice a tone of contempt. Don Alfio swallowed hard and touched his hat.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Nothing," said Mimmo, in his slow drawl, that made him seem even more dense than his repute, "I was going for a passeggiata to the mountains, to get some fresh air. I've heard that you make the best coffee."

"Oh, signor Mimmo. It's an honour... My family are all out," he said with a quick glance at his watch, "Would you honour me... over at Ciro's..." He waved towards the Bar.

Mimmo dismissed it with a wave of his bejewelled hand.

"You know me, I'm private man, Don Alfio..." and he looked up to the balcony.

Don Alfio had no choice but to invite him up.

Don Alfio was glad that there was the coffee to be made, it gave him an activity through which to channel his tension. He poured a cup for each, lacing his with a generous drop of grappa. Normally he wouldn't, not on a Sunday morning. It seemed sacrilegious. But he needed to steady himself. He knew that Mimmo would not be venturing out all this way unless there was something heavy on his mind.

Mimmo put three generous teaspoons of sugar in his coffee then proceeded to stir, as he did his bracelets clanged on his wrist. The sound further destabilised Don Alfio's unsteady nerves. Mimmo loved jewellery. His Gold Cartier watch on his left wrist was augmented by a matching bracelet of thick spun gold. His right wrist sported a bracelet which strung together little silver bells, whose ringers had shapes of hearts and horns: love and luck, the two essentials in his life. When Mimmo raised his arm and shook his wrist, something he did regularly to emphasise a point or simply to fill in a silence, all those shiny trinkets glittered and jingled like decorations on a Christmas tree.

The luck theme was pursued beyond his wrist to other pieces of visible jewellery.

From his left ear hung yet another golden horn, as further bastion in his barricade against ill fortune. Mimmo felt, with some justification, it must be said, that in his profession he needed to have plenty of luck on his side. And
so far it seemed that his lucky trinkets had served him well, given that he had already escaped a couple of serious assassination attempts, by rivals keen to get their hands on his fast growing empire. But the piece of resistance of his cachet of jewellery was without doubt his chain. Chunky and solid, its reputation preceded its impressive appearance. Legend had it that it was instrumental, at least once, in the elimination of a rival, by strangulation. So many uses for jewellery.

Having drunk down his coffee, Mimmo got down to business, “Have you considered the offer on that piece of land, Don Alfio.”

Don Alfio cleared his throat, he knew Mimmo had come for that and yet, true to his old habits, instead of preparing for this visit, he had chosen instead to avoid thinking about it. Now he was lost for a reply.

“Yes, of course, it’s a very generous offer...for myself I would sell right now... I could certainly do with the money...”

“You are ready to sell then?”

“Well, no. I mean not yet. You see, the grove has sentimental value for us, it’s been in my wife’s family for... well... for ever. So, it’s not really in my hands. I mean, if it were up to me, I would sell. Times change, and one must adapt. We must be realistic, but...”

Mimmo didn’t like talk, he liked even less words that he couldn’t understand. He felt threatened by them. He was sure they had been invented by clever dicks to confound people like him and to let themselves off the hook. So he shook his wrist in a show of impatience. At the sound of all those bells Don Alfio stopped talking, but the ensuing silence felt even more terrible.

“Maybe we can wait until my mother-in-law passes away,” he ventured, in a plaintive voice, hoping to appeal to Mimmo’s sense of family, “She loves it there. She would die if she were forced to move.”

Don Alfio realised the futility of his plea. Clearly death did not have the same import for Mimmo as it did for ordinary mortals.

“Don Alfio, this is an important project, that will bring work and prosp... money into our region. With all respects to you and your family, my clients are not prepared to wait for the good soul of your mother-in-law to leave us; long may she live. The property is required now, or else my clients might take their business to Cefalu’.”

Cefalu’ was under the control of his rivals and that did not suit Mimmo at all.

Silence.

“Don Alfio, al buon intenditore, poche parole.” (To a good listener a few words suffice.)
Mimmo looked away. Mimmo never looked you in the eye, not out of shyness, rather, so as not to deign you with the privilege of his whole attention. The effect was most disconcerting, because when the light fell obliquely on Mimmo's eyes it highlighted the yellow specks in his irises, giving him a menacing appearance. Don Alfio sighed.

"I'll speak to my wife. I'll need time to try to persuade her."

"How long do you need."

Don Alfio did not want to be held down to a date.

"Well, if I know her, she'll take some persuading."

Mimmo's hand went to his ear, he winced and pulled at the golden horn with some force. Don Alfio saw the ear rip open and the ring come clear of the bleeding ear. Fortunately it was his own imagination playing a cruel trick, but the message was all too real. There was nothing doing but for Don Alfio to cave in, which he would have done, had he not feared his wife's reaction almost as much as Mimmo's threat.

Don Alfio, modern man that he was, did not believe in supernatural intervention, but what happened next was so timely that, in the days following the incident, it induced to think that maybe he should reconsider his philosophical position on this point. Just as he was about to sweat out a final shirt, and Mimmo's impatience was reaching the point of dire consequences, he was rescued by excited voices coming from the corridor, just outside the study where the private interview was taking place. Like a prisoner in a dark tunnel who has just seen a spiral of light, Don Alfio excused himself and went out to investigate. His son's arrival was always a pleasure for Don Alfio, but now it was accompanied by a huge relief.

"Is Mamma with you.?” asked Sante.

As Don Alfio replied his eyes fell on the girl next to Sante.

Seeing a beautiful woman would have gladdened Don Alfio's heart at any time, but at this moment of intolerable distress, her appearance attained the power of a miracle. In his eyes she became a veritable Angel of Rescue.

She was, he guessed, the Australian girl, as Sante was about to confirm.

"Papa, questa è Ira-Jane."

Gladness and admiration gelled in Don Alfio, producing an impetuous outpouring of affection.

"Ah carissima Signorina, we've been expecting you."

It quite overwhelmed Ira-Jane, but there was no time to react, because Don Alfio had already his arm under hers and led her into the study, where Mimmo sat, miffed at the interruption.

"Vieni, vieni. Ti presento il dottor Mimmo Urzi.‘.” (Please come, let me introduce you to Dr Urzi.)

"Oh hello,” said she, choosing to speak in English, even though she didn’t
have the foggiest whether the two men understood her, but in the midst of what she perceived to be a tense situation she thought she would retain the shield that speaking her own language gave her.

Upon setting his eyes on the girl a strange transformation took place in Mimmo Urzi'. His face twisted and re-set itself in a painful grimace, as if he were being tortured. His brow broke into a sweat and for a moment he froze on his chair, unable to return the girl's greeting.

To fill the silence Don Alfio said, “Mammà has gone to see Nonna.”

“Ah, perfetto. Come Ira-Jane, we shall go and visit Nonna.”

Ira-Jane thought she misheard.

“Nonna? You mean my Nonna?”

“Yes, of course, our Nonna, but I cannot say that she will know you.”

Ira-Jane was dumbfounded. Just yesterday she had been told that the Nonni were dead. Meanwhile Sante was taking her hand and he started to retreat back towards the door. The prospect of the girl's departure shook Mimmo out of his paralysis. He now sprang to his feet as if a spider had stung him in his backside. He bowed very low and proffered his chubby hand. Ira took it in passing, for her mind still grappling with the contradiction of what she had just heard, (a contradiction perfectly mimicked in the fact that at one point her hands were being held by two different men pulling in opposite directions). And perhaps to compensate for her curtness, given the funny man's gallantry, she allowed him a wan smile. Never in her wildest dreams did she realise the impact that this perfunctory little gesture would have on Mimmo’s heart and on subsequent events.

Such things only happen in books, thought Mimmo, or rather, he imagined they did, for Mimmo had never read a book in his life. Mimmo's eyes remained fixed on the door, beyond which that luminous creature had vanished just as quickly as she had appeared, after wreaking havoc in his heart. He wondered whether the apparition was real or whether it was one of those air-brushed things you see on magazine covers. He stared at the door, waiting for it to open again and confirm the reality of the vision.

Don Alfio noticed the change in Mimmo, how could he not? The man had been transformed by a passing spirit, though not quite spirited away, as Don Alfio would have wished. Mimmo seemed immobilised in a space of his own. This was a new situation for him, outside the realm of his experience. He turned his attention to his jewellery, hoping to find inspiration out of his state of bewilderment. But none came. Not the rings or bracelets; earring or chains provided him with a clue. So he just sat there looking at the door.
Then as his eyes scanned the room aimlessly they came to rest on Don Alfio. They were little eyes, hazel, with specks of yellow in them, lost in the ample space of his cheeks and the immensity of what he felt. They looked at the Mayor pleadingly, as if to ask, what is happening to me Don Alfio?

Of course, Don Alfio, who all his life had loved women above all else, understood perfectly well what was happening to Mimmo. He sympathised and commiserated with him, especially as his experience in these matters indicated to him that Don Mimmo was in for a long haul of suffering, as the object of his nascent passion was unlikely to requite his feelings. Nevertheless Don Alfio was also a survivor and it was this very instinct which prevailed upon him. It occurred to him that this new state in which Mimmo had fallen relieved him of the pressure of having to make a decision now. It was a god-sent turn of events to be exploited to his advantage. For a start he saw a chance to get rid of his uninvited guest and to give himself some respite. Mimmo himself gave him the opener.

"Is that Sante’s girl?"

"Oh no, Sante is merely a boy; she’s a relation of my wife’s, from Australia. The girl’s mother and my wife were very close. She carries the same name as her. Unfortunately, she’s an orphan, the poor girl, and looks to my wife as her mother."

"She’s a Signorina then?" asked Mimmo and you could feel his heart suspended on the filament of Don Alfio’s reply. Don Alfio, paused, intoxicated by the feeling of power over such a tyrant.

"Certainly, my niece..." imperceptibly he upgraded the level of his relationship to the girl, “will not give up her independence just for any man. When the time comes, she will choose a strong man of character. I feel that a Sicilian man would be just the person for her."

Don Alfio tried to discern the effect of his words on Mimmo without looking directly at him. Having satisfied himself that he had sown the seeds of hope in Mimmo’s heart, he got up and added,

"Signor Mimmo, I would ask you to stay for lunch, but ..."

Mimmo sprung to his feet with such force that his bulk wavered unsteadily and his jewellery jingled, but this time it played sweet music to Don Alfio’s ears, for it announced Mimmo’s departure.

"No, Don Alfio, I...I am expected somewhere else. Thank you for receiving me." Suddenly the terrifying bully was bowing respectfully. And Don Alfio thanked unpredictable old Cupid – and Ira-Jane – that Mimmo, who had marched into his living room with the arrogance of a mafioso, was now limping his way back to the door. Clearly Mimmo was a man wounded by the arrow of love.
Aloysius de Sequeira couldn’t recall the first thickening of Mathilde’s long slender neck in the early years of their marriage, but he remembered pouring his urgent breath and coconut flower toddy down her throat in the evenings when the constellations fizzed in the sky and his own white stars sparkled in Mathilde’s dark bay; he remembered her calling him her Wish; and he remembered that tide of their merging waters that rocked them, sometimes to sleep, sometimes towards the world beyond.

Within a year, Mathilde’s long slender neck was discernibly thicker. Hortense Oratio the Devout snidely suggested it was becoming thickset and muscular from too much kissing.

“Dowager hump awreddy, but back to front,” she sniggered.

A few months after Mathilde became pregnant with Aloysius’s brightest star, a saucer-sized lump shaped and marked like a turtle shell appeared on her neck. Doctor Arbuckle pronounced a goiter and prescribed iodine. Hortense Oratio suggested the turtle was God’s way of punishing Aloysius for taking a divorced woman for his wife. She was also sure Aloysius’ falling for Mathilde had something to do with the influence of Hollywood movies on Malacca. Malacca’s church congregations dwindled whenever one of the new movies came to town.

“Ah yah! Off again to take smut lessons from all those itchified actresses,” Hortense said when she arrived in time one Sunday to see Mathilde departing for the movies. She ran a critical eye over Mathilde’s powdered face.

“But the censors always cut the naughty bits out,” protested Mathilde. “All those white flares on the screen.”

“Think you so clever. Still smutty, naughty bits or no. You think those actresses put all that make-up on for nothing? Like putting light bulbs on their skin! Glowing so promiscuously, ah-yah! Trap so many men like moths.
Serve the women right they get moth eaten. One man more than enough for a good woman. Some good women never get a man.” Hortense Oratio referred to herself often in this way, but she had a point about the influence of the movies on the young Christao women of Malacca. It was true that in that year, 1941, the sales of cosmetics in Malacca tripled and the centuries old churches of Malacca rang out with the indignant cries of Eurasian babies being christened with the names of Hollywood film stars.

Mathilde’s baby would be named after a minor French actress whose luscious mouth, imbued with the grainy black and white pearlescence of Paramount films, had come to Mathilde’s attention in Malacca’s Cathay Picture Theatre. The Cathay had almost enough holes in its tin roof to be considered an open air theatre. Mathilde’s nine months pregnant belly protruded from her like a globe of the world, abbreviated yet all-encompassing, as she sat sharing salted plums and sour-sop juice in the theatre with Kat Non, the Malay confinement lady and servant Wish had found her. Mathilde was transfixed by the variety of ways in which the actress’s mouth gave meaning to her silences, for Mathilde was a woman who had considered the meanings and uses of silence in the five years of her previous marriage to the precisely spoken Chinese lawyer. She counted and named the expressions on the actress’s lips in each scene.

“Amused. He is amusing her. How you say in Malay?” she asked Kat Non.
“Menggembrakan.”
“Desire. She desires him.”
“Hasrat,” concurred Kat Non with a noisy slurp on her starfruit juice.
“Shame. She is ashamed of herself.”
“Malu. Look at that man touching her! Ai-ye!”
This time Mathilde could only find the word for what was happening on the screen in the language of her parents, which she had rarely spoken during her marriage to her first husband.
“Tokah,” she whispered, pressing her fingertips against her eyelids and the pricking of tears.
“What tokah?” asked Kat Non.
“It means to touch, but it also means to cost. Christao word.” Until her first marriage was nearly over, Mathilde had not believed her parents’ dying language had any meaning that couldn’t be more adequately expressed in English. She had spoken to no-one, not even Aloysius, about what the Chinese lawyer’s touch had cost her.

The leading lady loomed larger on the screen, hands on hips, utterly silent but in full possession of herself.
“She wants revenge,” said Mathilde. “How you say like that in Malay?”
“Dendam. Revenge, grudge. He wanted to go too deep too soon ah. Like he got no shame. English man of course.” There was a sudden flare of white on the screen and a jump in the soundtrack. A murmur went through the audience.

“Ah yah! Government censor.”
“Kiss or murder lah?”
“How you say deep inside in Malay?” murmured Mathilde.
“Dalam. More than one meaning. Deep, inside, interior. You can use it for the private places in a house. Or in a woman ah.”

“Ah.” The unnamed baby turned suddenly in Mathilde, sending a jab like a needle through her birth canal. She retrieved the salt-plum stone from her mouth. “How deep? So deep that a baby doesn’t touch it? So deep that a man can’t go there? Sspphh!” She drew her breath in suddenly through her teeth. White-hot pain obliterated further speech as the brightest star of the love she’d shared with Wish surged suddenly in the darkness of her body.

*  

Ghislaine Evangelia de Sequeira. What a brilliant constellation of contradictory features Kat Non revealed when she wiped the vernix from her. Although the baby had her mother’s soulful eyes and full mouth and her father’s slightly perplexed expression, her cry rang with the same belligerence as Mathilde’s laughter. But no-one could agree where her pale golden skin faintly tinged with green came from, and not everyone could get their tongue around her name. Ghislaine, pronounced with a “J”. Although her name was never abbreviated, she would become used to being abbreviated by people in other ways after her mother’s death. But she would always remember her mother called her Ghislaine after the minor but brilliantly expressive actress who had imparted so many meanings to silence.

*  

Even Hortense Oratio congratulated Mathilde for producing such a fair-skinned baby. After over a century of British government, Hortense wasn’t the only Malaccan who saw good fortune in a pale complexion. But the value of pale skin had changed in Malacca many times since its history was first recorded, and was about to change again.

On the morning that Ghislaine de Sequeira turned three months old, her father went downstairs and tuned the wireless to the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation. The British newsreader reported firm stands and strategic
retreats were being made by troops against the Japanese in the northern peninsula. Aloysius de Sequeira filled his government-issue portmanteau with strips of clean old sheeting, suture thread and antiseptic. He had worked with British doctors full of cool reserve and implacable nerve in the Malacca Hospital for twenty years. He knew a British euphemism for impending disaster when he heard one.

* *

Two British soldiers came knocking with Doctor Arbuckle on the door of the de Sequeira house early the next morning.

"We're all getting out of here," Doctor Arbuckle said, "we don't stand a chance against the Japanese. But you do. Good luck old chap." Doctor Arbuckle's spectacles were smeared with blood and his shirtsleeves flapped open at the cuffs. His greying hair clung to his forehead with sweat and the lines of his face had deepened with fatigue. He gave Aloysius his leather medical bag full of supplies and a key. "Help yourself to the dispensary. You'll need it."

"And take the stores in the hospital pantry before the Japs do," said one of the soldiers. "We're leaving everything behind."

"I'll never forget you, Doctor Arbuckle sir."

The doctor shook his hand. "Likewise, Aloysius. But now the Japanese are here. Pretend you never knew us."

By the time Aloysius got to the hospital pantry, it had been ransacked by looters. But on the backmost shelf, he found a box of unopened treacle tins from Australia and a small pile of Bing Crosby records. He carried them home to Mathilde.

"Ah yah Wish! How will all this syrupy stuff help us survive a war lah?" she cried, pushing the box under the stairs.

The next day, the decapitated heads of looters were displayed on lamp-posts throughout the town. The invaders had brought a new kind of justice with them. Aloysius hid the records and the treacle under the stairs, but he slept with Doctor Arbuckle's bag next to the bed.

* *

Within days of the Japanese invasion of Malacca, some Japanese soldiers noticed the dark-skinned mother holding her pink baby as she alighted from a trishaw outside the de Sequeira bungalow in the Land of the Priest.

"Your baby very pale. Who is the father?"
"Aloysius de Sequeira, the medical dresser."
"What nationality?"
"Eurasian. We come out all different shades in the wash."
"Liar! How can the baby’s skin be so pale if your husband is half-caste? Englishman’s whore! You are hiding an Englishman somewhere in here. Search!" shouted the officer. Six bayonets sliced the air above the threshold of the house.

The soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army tore the ceilings down and ripped the doors off cupboards with their bayonets in their search for the English man. Thick clouds of plaster drifted into the well and onto the furniture, as if a mist had entered the house. The baby screamed as the plaster dusted her eyes. Mathilde and Kat Non were unable to read the soldiers’ faces clearly, even as they loomed closer and closer.

Aloysius arrived home that evening to find Mathilde and Kat Non white with plaster from the torn ceilings.

“They rubbed it into our faces. They said it would make us paler for our English men.”

The fish in the courtyard well lay immobilised in white sludge. A boat-shaped bloodstain grew larger across the back of Mathilde’s sea-green skirt, as if the arrival of some unknown cargo drew closer by the second. Kat Non sponged Mathilde between her legs.

“The shock has opened her birth wound again, ah. Light some brand and incense in the burner.”

Mathilde shook her head. “What if the soldiers come back lab.? Shouldn’t we leave just in case?"

“The Japanese Imperial Army will need medical officers like me too much to imprison us. First things first.” Wish lit the incense burner and the stove and brewed five spoonfuls of Teacher brand tea until the water was purple. He poured a whole can of Dutch Maid condensed milk and a tablespoon of Australian treacle into it.

“For the shock. Drink,” he told Mathilde. He took Ghislaine from her arms. Kat Non guided Mathilde to the burner.

“Stand astride. Like that. Ah. Dry the wound.”

“Too late. Too late lab.”

“It is never too late to heal. Even deep inside. Dalam, ah.”
BUMBOAT CRUISE ON THE SINGAPORE RIVER

Rhetoric is what keeps this island afloat.
Singaporean voice with a strong American accent,
barely audible above the drone of the bumboat engine:
“Singaporeans are crazy about their food.
They are especially fond of all-you-can-eat buffets.
Why not do as the locals do and try out one of the buffets
at these hotels along the waterfront.” The Swissotel looms.
The Grand Copthorne. The Miramar. All glass
and upward-sweeping architecture. Why not do
as the locals do. Here in this city where conspicuous consumption
is an artform. Where white tourists wearing slippers and singlets
are tolerated in black-tie establishments. Dollars. Sense.

How did I ever live in this place? Sixteen years of my life
afloat in this sea of contradictions, of which I was, equally, one:
half-white, half-Chinese; the taxi-driver cannot decide
if I am a tourist or a local, so he pitches at my husband:
“Everything in Singapore is changing all the time.”
Strong gestures. Manic conviction. “This is good.
We are never bored. Sometimes my customers
ask me to take them to a destination, but it is no longer there.”
We tighten our grip on two squirming children and pray
that the bumboat tour will exist. Nothing short of a miracle
this small wooden boat which is taking us now past Boat Quay,
in its current incarnation, past the Fullerton Hotel

To the mouth of the Singapore river, where the Merlion
still astonishes: grotesque and beautiful as a gargoyle.
The children begin to chafe at confinement. My daughter wails
above the drone of the engine. There’s talk of closing the mouth of the river. New water supply. There’s talk of a casino. Heated debate in the Cabinet. Old Lee and Young Lee locked in some Oedipal battle. The swell is bigger out here in the harbour, slapping up spray against the sides of the boat, as if it were waves that kept it afloat, this boat, this island, caught between sinking and swimming, as I am caught now. As if rhetoric mattered.

As if this place gives me a name for myself.
SINGAPORE AND THE REAL

That something exists doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s real. That person gliding down the narrow monochrome passage of a hotel in China Town you are watching on the CCTV monitor needn’t be me, nor does the gaze of a young woman that lingers too long on my face in the Lunar New Year’s Eve crowd necessarily imply a future kiss. That dusk invokes in Little India a neon yellow trident on a dim temple, the scarlet moons of those lanterns over Desker Streets conspicuously unattended doors as well as those Golden Arches at the corner, and on other streets the litter in the gutters, the mangos in boxes, the baroque sweep of labourers’ hands sopping up curry with naan, and the poet who admires the tango-closeness of two cars edging around one another in a lane, needn’t mean that previous empires existed nor that we will see ourselves in tomorrow morning’s bathroom mirror. Well, you might muse, while watching me on the monitor in your hidden office, I am God and he my clay—Should I send him past the spruikers outside the restaurants and bars at Boat Quay? Or should I force his mouth open with a karaoke microphone in a Katong dive? Or bang the sky with fireworks that he won’t see except as trailing tinsel on the vast glass skyscrapers?

And as those thoughts gather, this shrinking island, this tropical city-state—as much as your poet—is something that is sung into being and exists, though that doesn’t mean that it’s real, necessarily.
THE HUMBLE ADMINISTRATOR’S GARDEN, SUZhou

An ideal, distilled and contained with ink in shrinking wilderness flavour: it’s authenticity, a late Ming background for your autobiography. On lotus leaves, puddles of allusions form. Where is the tune of “Falling Plum Blossom” played? Hair unbound, gaze thoughtfully at a jagged mountain and listen. Armies of wooden slaves retreated into the countryside long ago: the Humble Administrator was certainly not a vegetable peddler.

Hear that lofty drop as the vulgar masses flood in (Beijingers say but it’s so small), see the Humble Administrator’s inky property filled with organic footnotes (déjà vu a knot of bamboo). Is it shedding references like they’re going out of fashion or metaphorically pickled in perpetual spring? In fact, the garden has never looked better except, of course, when it played a starring role in the miniseries A Dream of Red Mansions. Made stable behind a shutter which is yet another screen, the four seasons stop here:

things don’t move, you do.
THE KINGSBURY TALES: LI HONGZHANG’S TALE, A FRAGMENT

Perhaps you do not know this name?
Or you think it is just another cheap migrant?
You are not right for this is the guy
Assigned the task of dealing with the Allied Forces
During their occupation of Peking in 1901
As the principal negotiator
To end the Boxer Rebellion
Li toured Europe in 1896
Among his entourage of 45 people
There was a huge decorated golden lacquer Coffin
A bei shui yi zhan tradition
In which soldiers were forced to fight the enemy with waters behind them
And the general, with a coffin beside him
Li was to go to fan bang, foreign nations
Like going into a den of tigers and wolves
Who were to devour Peking in five years
He was to be exhausted and die after the negotiation
His coffin went on show, beside him
In Great Britain where he observed the parliament in session
And commented on the senseless quarrelling as “nothing much worth seeing”
He spat on the exquisite English carpets wherever he went
And treated the dog-gift given him
By General Gordon’s wife
The way a cook did: stewed it and ate it
In America, Li mixed the Chinese food and the Western
Thus creating a new culinary genre called zasui
In Hengbin or Yokohama, he vowed never to touch the Japanese soil
Not even the cement of the port
Risking a fall into the ocean
He walked the gangplank from his American ship
To get on board his Chinese

... When the Xinchou Treaty or the Boxer Protocol was signed in 1901
With 450 million taels of silver to be paid as indemnity
Based on the total Chinese population of 450 million
One tael per head
Li coughed blood
And died
Ever afterwards he is known as a Traitor
Ah well, just put yourself in his shoes
And imagine how you'd deal with those wolfish foreign powers
Inside your house
If you are a loser¹

NOT A SINGLE PRESUPPOSITION, EXCEPT MY IGNORANCE

"The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way"
- Lao Tzu

Here you are in your chimerical disposition
creeks shallow and simple to follow.

Here one cannot create, or find conclusion;
there is no system.

Though you have bequeathed all arrivistic tendencies
for omnipotent bliss and ubiquitous rest

and can dance upon snake-scale
sage-like through a honky nut,

attempts to broach your most genuine
masquerade fall in a heap.

In this human language
I struggle to see your limbs

Non omnes omnia pussumus
we cannot do everything.

Supremely patient beside rapids
I observe the clouds in me change

easy metamorphosis, easy
our only gauge of time is
itself.
You died tomorrow afternoon, fifteen time zones
And a whole day away. Like the future I saw
With you almost a life ago. I was ungrown,
Unfattened, green in my joints, raw,
And you, years older, a seductive senior.

What was it we wanted from each other
Then? Merely a moment aligned
Of sight when we mirrored
Ourselves in perfect mind,
Imperfect love scored.

I had stopped wondering, stopped asking
Why and what and whether
If, although, perhaps we could, this thing
We shared for a brief year
Would be worth the resurrecting.

And you? You went your merry way,
Madly skidding among admirers,
Throng applauding; the play’s
The thing. Actors, authors, lovers
Hovering, you staged their day

For them, every one equal, cast
From the apron after the last call;
Each one receding behind the last
To appear, each irresistible mirror fallen, shattered when play is past.
Cremation at Sea

He would have preferred fire to cold,
Heat to dampness, and to mingle
With the open waves rather than molder
Under inert dirt. My brother
Sent me news as soon as it was flashed,
Then all sorts of friends sorry for
What never was. I cope as always
In solitary poetry. Distance
Was my choice, and I choose it, hold
It close again. Some loves live strongest
Failed, some images cast brightest
In the body's mind.

So now I look
Out at the Pacific waiting for him
To wash ashore here where I walk
Each week, speckled in the grains
That catch at my toes and turned-up jeans
And that I will sprinkle in my garden
In California, where he had never been.
PLACE AND IDENTITY IN NEW AUSTRALIAN POETRY,
2004–2005

The “Map of Australian Verse” as drawn by James McAuley in 1975 has been subject, in the thirty years since then, to progressive re-configuration. The new collections of poetry published during the last year indicate that the contemporary pattern of growth continues to be culturally lucrative, and that the map of Australian poetics today is enriched by imaginative diversity. Thirty years ago McAuley contended that “within a limited situation...we are neither metropolitan nor strictly speaking provincial.” In relation to his reading of that binary then, our map today – our poetry’s cultural landscapes, our habitations for both local and trans-cultural identities – has extended the binary in both (opposite) directions, being more accommodating to (non-pejorative) “metropolitan” and “provincial” cultural developments and sensibilities.

To test these hypothetical assumptions let’s begin with a brief overview of The Best Australian Poems 2004 edited by Les Murray. One hundred and twenty-seven poets are each represented by one poem. In his “Preface” Murray does not address issues of place and identity nor the cultural manifestations of metropolitanism and provincialism, although he does in an aside confront globalisation by robustly denigrating the “internet” as “that wicked CIA technology.” The anthology does not have a “Notes on contributors” section, but there are plenty of familiar names to testify to cultural, regional and urban diversifications within Australian poetry which is also represented here by expatriate poets such as Katherine Gallagher, Graeme Hetherington, Clive James, and Peter Porter as well as important Aussie poets who don’t have Australian birth-certificates.

Brief mention of a few poems gives some idea of the variety and comprehensiveness of the national poetic imagination. Australia, in the broadest sense, is the subject of Peter Goldsworthy’s “Australia” in which our country’s geological place on the planet is envisaged surrealistically, with “many maps of Tasmania, most of them in other places,” and South Australia:
baked and gritty  
crust, lightly watered, sifted dusted  
and sarcastic with its hints of eucalypt.  
Its thousand mile creek tastes too salty,  
its muddy waters barely moving, but  
moving enough to stir a homesick heart. (66)

Ouyang Yu offers a multi-cultural perspective in “Far and Near” which is another example of how the map of our verse is being re-adjusted:

in australia  
I am as far from any australians  
as china is from australia  

and I am as near them  
as a cloud  
near the sky (201)

The anthology also contains, predictably, historical perspectives, two deft examples being Anna Buck’s “Two Out of Ten” which laments the demolition of a schoolhouse erected in 1851, leaving only “stone steps leading up/ to nothing” and a “whiskered lemon tree” like a child serving detention who stands “outside/ for the rest of the century” (13-14); and Jane Downing’s “A True History” which presents an adverse perspective apropos the mythologisation of Ned Kelly, that of the widow of Sergeant Kennedy:

...I, Bridget Tobin that was  
Bridget Kennedy but briefly married  
must keen in the small corners you'll allow  
Such is the life he left me (41)

Two subtle poems – Philip Salom’s “The Family Fig Trees” and Thomas Shapcott’s “Looking for Ancestors in Limerick” – are meditations on ancestral origins. Adroitly manipulating family tree metaphors, Salom calls up the “music” of his ancestors:

...and if I cannot hear it quite  
there’s a sweetness I can taste above the branches  
in my chest, in this tree, this wooden cloud of names:  
Mordecai and Sarah. Noah and Ruth. Shalom. (162)
Shapcott celebrates his grandmother “Who hoarded an ominous Celtic legacy” and who is the “myth” he took back to Ireland where he discovered the bardic origins of his grandmother’s “vehemence,” “exile” and “anger”: “I took a myth back with me. My senses/ Have already been infected” (165). Expatriate poets, on the other hand, tend to undertake reverse journeys, as in Graeme Hetherington’s “Athenial Wolves”; his Grecian “self-exile” is in juxtaposition to his Tasmanian/Van Diemen’s Land origins which urge him to “hunt/ My family down in packs of poems” (83).

Turning to poems of a lighter note, examples are Max Richards’ “My Wife’s Dream” which concludes with an amusing apposite pun; Andy Kissane’s portrait of a baker in “Loaves and Days” which is achieved through the elaboration of a splendid conceit; and Carolyn Fisher’s “Potato Country” in which the poet offers pastoral homage to “potato growers” and what they grow. Murray’s anthology is bursting at the seams with a heterogeneity of Australian icons and flavours, ranging from Diane Fahey’s parrots (“exotic, without condescension;/ wisely adapted, fantastically sane” 50); to two Bondi poems – Joanne Burns’ “Salt” and “Notice” by William Carney; to Alan Gould’s evocation of a National Folk Festival (“The Quick of It”) that is achieved through a clever use of registers, “curlicues of sound,” and “musical unzipping” (68); to Michael Sharkey’s wonderful love-affair with the noble beverage in “Wine.” Les Murray’s own contribution, “The Cool Green,” is a polemical piece about the soullessness of materialism with the result that “we are money’s genitals” (139).

Perhaps the one poem, powerfully and morally polemical, which more than any other will haunt the reader’s memory is Bruce Dawe’s “Hang in There, Boy.” Writing back to Walt Whitman, Dawe produces a devastating satire which will probably be accorded a status akin to that of his classic “Homecoming”:

O you America,
to whom can we look but you
- voted year after year the World’s
Most Popular Enemy, brave in the field, pusillanimous often
in foreign policy, too big by far
to always get it right, although invariably sure
this time you’ll thread your bullish way
through the china-shop without the smashed porcelain? (37)

Among several books that showcase career achievements by poets, as in the case of Selected collections, two merit special recognition, being last
collections published posthumously. These are *The Sky's Beach* by R. A. Simpson (1929-2002) and *The Long Game and Other Poems* by Bruce Beaver (1928-2004). Long-time shaping forces in post-World War II Australian poetry, and mentor influences on younger poets in many ways, Simpson and Beaver contributed significantly to the poetry scenes in their home cities, Melbourne and Sydney, respectively. In his Foreword to *The Sky's Beach*, Peter Porter pays tribute to Simpson’s creative accomplishments as a poet, painter and graphic artist, and says “If I sometimes fancy myself as an honourary Melburnian, this is, in part, because Ron Simpson was such a decoration to the city” (xiii).

The title of Simpson’s book, taken from Kenneth Slessor’s “South Country,” is a tacit acknowledgement of the indebtedness of Simpson and his generation to Slessor’s pioneering influence on the shape of things to come in modern Australian poetry. The cover of *The Sky's Beach* is graced by a beautiful still-life painting by Simpson, and interspersed among the poems are seven pencil drawings which confirm the accuracy and relevance of Tim Bass’s statement (on the back cover): “the economy and emotional density of his poems parallel the compressed space of the Cubist art he loved so much.”

The Contents of *The Sky's Beach* are divided into four sections. “1 So Much Stillness” consists of poems through which the poet steadily stares life and death in some of their many negating faces. A “mound” of a “man...sleeping” is “just breathing” (3). “The First Pain,” corollary to Original Sin presumably, is the theme of the second poem; “Window Ghost” portrays a forlorn Miss Haversham figure. In “The Chimes at Midnight,” ice images are symptomatic of the human condition. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism can appease an instinctive agnosticism. The first section offers little allegories, meticulously phrased, which inscribe a sceptical tone that infiltrates the volume. However, the scope for affectionate experiences is also affirmed in the fine elegiac tribute to Vincent Buckley, the “Music and depth” that “went into his words/ with laughter” (8); and in the whimsical “Gorilla at the Zoo”:

> Instead of King Kong they have found  
> a wise performer tasting termites  
> picked up gently close at hand

> To squat like this is rather regal (19)

The above shift to affectionate mood foreshadows some of the poems in “2 Comprehending Years” which begins with a splendid love poem that (like so
many of its companions) is so well crafted that punctuation is superfluous. “Flashbacks” and “Private Masterpiece” exemplify Simpson’s mastery of the vignette-genre poem in which he often viscerally and visually marries the twin arts of poetry and painting. On the other hand “Night Flight” is a cosmological fantasy that culminates with the irresistible logic of “the universe has no end” (45).

Section “3 Life-Cycle,” like certain poems in the previous sections, confronts death juxtaposed with botanical cycles of regeneration. “The Accused” is an amusing poem in which the court of law fails to put away Mr Death who raises his arm and, thus, “all are dead...heaped on the floor”; it is in a way the comic poem that Emily Dickinson never wrote. A totally different and disturbing mood is chillingly evoked in “Married Anger”:

Lugging a large and clumsy gun
he climbs across volcanic rocks
shooting wild at gaga rabbits

He goes on thinking about his wife
fires again at the dying sun

Blood runs down onto the clouds

Waiting for hours in their farmhouse
sick of cutting raw lumps of meat
she stops and wipes her crimsoned knife

Mice are playing rounders in the bedroom (64)

The Long Game and Other Poems, Bruce Beaver’s thirteenth but last volume of poems, is a stunning accomplishment as well as an awe-inspiring memorial to his achievement as a poet who has an eminent place in the history of poetry written in English over the last fifty years. A first reading of the book reveals immediately Beaver’s technical virtuosity, the freedom and ease with which he orchestrates a myriad of forms, and a corresponding diversity of subjects and themes, all of which are examined and presented with intense commitment.

Identity and place are concepts which resonate throughout The Long Game, particularly with respect to Beaver’s scrutiny of poetic and spiritual identities and his attachment – not entirely uncritical as we see for instance in “Queenscliff, Manly” – to what has been the setting in which he has lived
most of his poetic life. The strong sense he has of his muse as “daimon” is intimately associated with his and his wife’s attachment to their Manly environment, a belongingness which is consonant with their devout attachment to each other. This indeed is the subject-essence of Beaver’s fine, unaffected poem “September 1st 2000.” The poet ponders the need to “affectedly/ summon up that magical/ entity I call my daimon” and force his “arthritic hand” to shape a poem, but he counters this with the sufficiency of celebrating “this first day/ of millenial spring” (7) by walking with his love along the waterfront:

So on
this fairest of first spring days
we walked the larger beach’s
length beside the worn, pocked
sandstone sea-wall that all helped
first kick-start my daimon rubbing
my nose and mind and heart in
pen, ink and paper over
fifty springs ago until
this most bounteous of love-shared days. (8)

In this poem Beaver’s dilemma is neatly resolved (having his cake and eating it) by writing a poem about not writing a poem and his personal identity is tangibly expressed through, or in conjunction with, the creation of poetry and the bounty of love. In the two-part poem “Identity,” however, self-recognition is conceived as a problematic mystery: an existential combination of “awkward entrances” and “clumsy/ rehearsals of exists,” “somehow to do with...all the paraphernalia/ of the cosmos” (62). Part Two is synthesis and synopsis of a perennial theme, one explored prolifically in the so-called “psychological novel”:

The utter incompetency of mirrors
to show us ourselves as we actually are
to ourselves and imagine we are to others.
Perhaps we come close to identities
in the eyes of others reflecting
attraction or repulsion, sometimes
frighteningly both. And even then
they may be seeing what they want to see
or one may be taking it in on sight.
Identity seems to be the sixty million dollar question with not one satisfactory answer in the erstwhile offing. (63)

The range of styles, rhythms, forms; of cryptic, conversational, simple, complex metaphors and symbols; of metrical subtleties, whether in rhymed or free verse; of lyricism, realism, humour, life-studies à la Lowell who (judging by the excellent “Sonnet I. M. for Robert Lowell”) Beaver respected and admired; of his kaleidoscopic philosophical aesthetic which is strenuously devotional in both the secular and mystical contours of Beaver’s work: this range, this catholicity of versification and humanism, is breathtaking. Beaver’s eclecticism can be staunch with vibrant wit and backbone principle as in his assaults on “all that/ understated stuff of old world-/ weary music Empson avoided/ but his followers didn’t” and “the chill of/ the post-Modern malaise” (50), as well as on “envenomed/ verses and plaster of paris prose/ about the awful necessity of/ the ordinary” in “On Re-reading Amis, Wain and Larkin” which begins with:

No more Movementese, please.
Take back all that very old
mouldy hat about tasteless
Common Sense in place of
passion fruit flowered Romanticism
Your Everyman’s Castle isn’t even
a home, it’s a house where you
sit and sulk and play Bach
without really listening to
anything but the surface hiss
of the wear and tear of mundane
“reality,” that unleavened dough
of things. (91)

It’s as if Beaver is reminding us, as Australians, of how ingrown toe-nail and navel-gazing British cultural provincialism appears in the cross-cultural, international scheme of things.

Beaver’s daimon, however, is both broader and more eccentrically narrow than that. Broader because of his devotional and mystical belief systems within which he holistically and symbolistically incorporates life, poetry and the universe, in the poems that elevate conviction as well as risk-taking (as
did Donne's) to new and fraught apocalyptic depths and heights (e.g. in “To
the Divine Mystery” and “The Night of the Soul”). Yet it’s also scrupulously
narrow to the extent that he lovingly acknowledges the mundane
munificence of, for example in punningly titled “Darn”, “Holes in my sox!/The
first (& last) potatoes of the season”; a poem which confirms the simple
truth that “Everything has its life-span” (93).

Beaver is a poet with a redolent intense sense of vocation, within which
the marriage of art and craft is sacrosanct (as in Dylan Thomas’s “craft and
sullen art” paradigm). His creative sensibility is polymorphous: he respects
the emotional intelligence of Romanticism, affirms the necessity of sober
realism, endorses the œuvres of modernism, and in interludes of mysticism
(when he sees “eternity in a grain of sand”) embraces a devotional and
metaphysical aesthetic. His poetic theory or faith, as outlined in “To the
Divine Mystery,” is in search of “a tentative dispensation” (133) and
incorporates a humble credo:

To leave children or
poems behind us
are two ways of trying
to serve the ineffable. (138)

That artistic and religious ideal of service – for he does assert that “the only/
ture wisdom is the knowledge/ of the truth of God” (141) – becomes by the
end of Beaver’s last book his culminating aesthetic of poetic truth and beauty.
And in “The Long Game” – the last poem in the book – that truth and beauty
is enshrined in a Blakean vision of innocence (in keeping with the subtitle:
“a poem about children”) in which the rhyming dexterity along with the
circular magical game trope is sensuously and Edenically appropriate in a
then-unfallen world:

He’d run and rest and be in her sweet company
and that of all their friends under the magic tree,

the tree of all the earth, of heaven’s height and girth,
of forests made of stars, of wonderment and mirth.

Their laughter in the game rose high as any flame
consuming every woe, beyond all praise and blame.

With or without the sun it rose in joy upon
the long ecstatic dance, the circling marathon. (172-3)
Beaver’s last book, of course, is sumptuously and honestly concerned with Last Things (as is Simpson’s farewell Volume in which he identifies with Yeats’s stance regarding old men), and in writing poems in old age that focus on aging he invokes poets such as Brecht, Wallace Stevens, New Zealander Louis Johnson, Peter Porter, Robert Lowell, Christopher Brennan, and W. H. Auden.

As Australia is a physically huge country there is a corresponding amplitude in its literary and artistic endeavours, and so even when the map of Australian verse is demographically represented, it becomes evident that there is a meaningful correlation between geographical and creative amplitudes which is a feature of our collective culture. The present brief review of the year’s poetry amplifies the above generalisation, especially when you attempt an overview of regional dispositions in our all-encompassing cultural and cross cultural nationalism, subject as it is to neocolonial ideologies.

It seems logical therefore to encompass as many as possible of the poetic voices in the new publications within the paradigm of regionality in which patterns of identity commensurate with place are identifiable. Les Murray’s anthology has offered an overview, while Melbourne vis-à-vis Sydney artistic autonomies have been acknowledged in the dual homage above to the posthumous collections by Simpson and Beaver. Poetic loyalties to place and identity, notwithstanding those notable achievements, are not confined just to patrician Melbourne and trans-cultural Sydney.

Secondly, the poetic coteries of cultural urbanity are well represented in Les Murray’s anthology, so that we can proceed to acknowledge a fraternity of established poets who in the same period have produced “Selected” editions which represent a notable seniority of poetic accomplishment. Melbourne’s Peter Rose’s *Rattus Rattus* (“New and Selected Poems”), WA’s Rod Moran’s *The Paradoxes of Water* (“Selected and New Poems 1970-2005”), Canberra’s Alan Gould’s *The Past Completes Me* (“Selected Poems 1973-2003”), and adoptive Tasmanian Andrew Sant’s *Tremors* (“New and Selected Poems”) admirably confirm this potent trend. These poets, two of whom (Gould and Sant) are British-born, comfortably embrace both metropolitan and provincial stances and styles of perception.

The title of Rose’s collection *Donatello in Wangaratta* (1998) symbolically exemplifies the subtle ease and complex grace with which his sensibility unifies metropolitan and provincial dimensions of identity. Encompassing childhood in country Victoria and adulthood in Melbourne (latterly in Adelaide also), Rose’s poems are complemented by others that call Australia home but are also imbued with a cosmopolitanism acquired through reading
and travel across cultures. Such comprehensiveness is reflected in the fact that *Rattus Rattus* is published from Cambridge in the Salt Modern Poets series.

Among the New poems that confirm the validity of these judgements are three marvellous Italian poems (“Rattus Rattus,” “The Calling of St. Matthew,” “Hospital of the Innocents”) and “Homage” with its twice-fold reference to Cavafy who many of us first encountered, translated, in Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*. “Homage” recalls a meeting with a Spanish sculptor in an “obscure inn we liked”:

you began extolling the poetry of Cavafy, 
which we’d just been reading....
At first she said nothing, moved, 
then she placed one hand on her breast, 
impressing you with her dignity 
and understatement.....
Some time later, the poet’s name 
again being mentioned, 
I repeated her gesture, thinking 
you would have forgotten its provenance... 
Immediately the gesture felt false, wooden, 
not even Spanish. Either you were 
too tactful to remark on my faux pas 
or failed to notice, but I knew, 
lowering a foreign abject unavailing hand. (12)

The poem thus becomes a parable about how we may learn humility as well as enlightenment from encounters with “foreign” cultures.

The New poems also include celebratory salutations to our rural- river- and seascapes in, respectively, “Sheep at Dookie,” “Murray Drift” and “Balnarring Beach.” Also appealingly resonant with social reality is “Morning Bias” in homage to the Saturday fraternity of the elderly who play lawn bowls at clubs where, frequently, “A new hip is welcomed/ to the brotherhood of joints” (4).

One of the powerful poems in Peter Rose’s first volume, *The House of Vitriol* (1990), is “I recognise My Brother in a Dream” which leads us forward and back to an outstanding family poem in the “New Poems” section in *Rattus Rattus*. This is “Ladybird, For my brother,” an elegy-within-an-elegy poem which has an esteemed place in a great tradition of modern poetry in English beginning with Yeats’s eloquent “In Memory of Major Robert
Gregory” which ends with the paradoxical recognition that “thought/ Of that late death took all my heart for speech.” Rose’s commemoration of his father, in relation to the latter’s illustrious career as a Collingwood footballer and coach, is complemented by the specific memories of the Wangaratta childhood shared with his brother – in particular when, playing under a bridge, they collected ladybirds. This memory in a poem of doubled sorrow succeeds in accommodating that grief, adjusting to it, with an image of shared ecstasy:

Teasing each other, we’d compete
to find the most ladybirds,
rapt, jostling each other, ecstatic. (9)

Rod Moran’s *The Paradoxes of Water* presents visions of myth, history and spirituality rising out of Australian landscapes. In “Silos” a northern hemisphere iconography is invoked for his evocation of that ubiquitous rural symbol of the wheat harvest, the silo:

Druid priest to ghosts of wind,
the moon performs its ritual rise,
a forest of fossiled trees in array,
like monks strung in procession.
There, above the green-black gums,
this moment forever in silhouette,
silos rise like Stonehenge. (20)

An example of sensitivity to the sacred and sombre beauty of wild coastlines juxtaposed with European intrusions and impositions in the “Bass Strait Poems,” “Wybalena Chapel, Flinders Island” recalls a notorious episode in Van Dieman’s Land history:

The tribes trekked centuries
of ice and rock to arrive, far south,
make fire, camp, and together
dance between gums scaling
cliffs of sheer light.

Instrument of God’s love,
Robinson, entrepreneur,
harsh hand of History
and invented fate,
hurried them deathward:
graves mapped, named,
a bucolic Belsen... (10)

The final section in the book of *New and Uncollected Poems 1990-2005* is, in various ways, a sequence of meditations about life at home (the “pure ecology of our love”; family; “South Perth Dreaming”) and away (“Kosovo,” “The Moon Over Baghdad,” “Yugoslavia 1992”). One endearing poem that arrests the reader’s attention is “My Daughter Reading,” written from the point of view of a father anxiously observing his child acquiring knowledge.

Other volumes by Victorian poets, mainly from Melbourne, are: Justin Clemens’ *The Mundiad*, Jack Hibberd’s *Madrigal for a Misanthrope*, Sandy Jeffs’ *The Wings of Angels*, Alan Loney’s *Fragmenta nova*, Shelton Lea’s *Nebuchadnezzar* and Patricia Sykes’ *Modewarre: Home Ground*. Clemens’ mock-epic in heroic couplets, written back to the *Dunciad*, is conceived as an antidote to the manifold poisonous influences of modern life and their impact on Australian identity. Hibberd’s book is a cornucopia of homiletic verses, of which “Terra Cognita” is a good accessible example, while his penchant for satiric wit pervades many of the pages of this happily eccentric collection. Rarely does autobiographical poetry explore the condition of madness with such clinical precision and emotional integrity as does Jeffs’ book, subtitled *A Memoir of Madness*. Reconfiguring, as it were, D. H. Lawrence’s vision of love’s duality as “the heights of heaven and the depths of hell” Jeffs’ psychic ordeal occurs “Where God is Only a Word” (83-4) “…and the Angels are Mad” (85-6); ‘Here heaven is hell/ and all the angels/ trudge naked to their cells.” An epitomising example of Jeffs’ uncompromisingly courageous and lucidly detached revelations of the psycho-pathological conditions she knows all too painfully well is “Where Everyone is an Informer,” which deploys a powerful image of the shredder machine to expose the submerged treacherous depths of paranoia, where “everything has been erased in haste/ collective memory lost to a systematic amnesia” (59). Loney focuses on his pages’ diverse technical representations of form and content, physically construed, to embody what he refers to in “Acknowledgements” as “the intricacies of the poetic craft, right down to our respective and changeable commas.” In his ninth book, Shelton Lea is a poet of the street who asserts and celebrates his poetic and social identity as “nebuchadnezzar...the king of Fitzroy” (7). Sykes’ collection deserves much more reviewing attention than there is space for here. The poems reverberate with socio-political commitment as they address “acts of identity” (4), “the identity tag” (24), indigenous ancestral
histories of “Location and dislocation” which, as Jennifer Strauss says, are “personal/historical and political/historical” central concerns in the poems. In our present-day map of Australian verse Tasmania is well represented by Andrew Sant’s *Tremors*, Tim Thorne’s *Head and Shin*, and Adrienne Eberhard’s *Jane, Lady Franklin*. Sant’s book reveals to us a writer who finds poems in many, often unexpected, places, situations and experiences; who systematically and chronologically interrogates his double heritage (English/Tasmanian); and who deploys a rich variety of tones and registers to portray the insularity, beauty and provincial mores of Australia’s island state. His respect for the traditional tools of the poetic trade — “full ink bottles,” “libidinous pens,” “promiscuous Quink,” “calligraphy,” “wet cursive script” — in “Blotter” pays genial homage to the compositional foundations of his art (88). The volume’s title poem “Tremors” takes a wary look at the mining industry which has been a prominent aspect of the history of Tasmania and, in Western Australia, produced the disaster of Wittenoom, the tragic repercussions of which are felt to this day. This relatively early poem (1985) envisages that the “energy” of industry (presumably hydro-electricity schemes as well) “will unleash tremors, potentials; the future, harnessed, but a wrong move and the outcome could be lethal” (54). The geological and colonising history of the island is also featured in relation to tectonic and metaphorical “tremors” (225-6).

By the time Sant’s *The Islanders* was published in 2002 he had indeed contributed greatly, as had Tim Thorne equally, in putting Tasmania on the map of Australian poetry. Being left off the map (for example in a logo for a Commonwealth Games in Australia) had become a legitimate island obsession, one which Sant turned into a witty poem (“Off the Map”):

Identity deleted,
close to the Continent,
who wouldn’t make a fuss?

There have been wars for less...

Something had to be done
on the cartographic front...

So it happened, the absence
was flagged.

News of this island:

bolshy inhabitants, often mad. (191-2)
Head and Shin is Tim Thorne’s ninth collection of poetry and confirms his reputation as “a poet of cynical verve, daring introspection and erudite verbal audacity” (Giles Hugo), and a “wry and perceptive observer of human folly, greed and self-deception” who “assumes the role of smiling surgeon” (Heather Cam). A poet of prolific consistency and in a bardic sense Tasmania’s Walt Whitman, Thorne is notable for his spontaneous cultivation of distinctive voices, including the argot of the people, and a tenacious appetite for creating poems bulging with narrative and thematic detail. This can be achieved with an intelligible compression, “Writing the World” being an accomplished example, a credo poem stipulating that “The problem always/to live the meaning, when to write/only is at best to catalogue/or preach, cop out at worst.” Thorne’s self-advice concludes instructively with “Avoid the easy paradox.../Respect what you re-use/and sing innocently,” ending this vision of his craft with:

    take the estuary’s voice
    and the sour cloud’s script;
    be a consultant to the air,
    amanuensis to the earth. (50)

One of the consequences of this commitment to his vocation is the amusing “Road” which catalogues the vicissitudes of being a “wandering minstrel” whose travel itinerary consists of poetry-reading gigs up, down and across the country which always end “when the show’s over/leaving me with just the barman and a pile of unsold books” (103).

Adrienne Eberhard’s Jane, Lady Franklin contains an amazingly tactile, detailed and comprehensive evocation of Tasmania as astonishing natural world and site of a history of colonisation and its consequences, a penal colony established in an environment in which catastrophe was commonplace. This book offers us an authoritative introduction to the island’s geographical, historical and cultural landscapes through the sensuous imaginative medium of vivid paintings and sketches rendered with rare poetic skill. Eberhard surely, adroitly and passionately, fulfils Thorne’s ideal of the poet as an “amanuensis to the earth.”

Unfortunately there is virtually no space left in the present essay to complete the map of current poetry by paying comparable attention to those other regions of creativity so far unaddressed—specifically Western Australia, South Australia, A.C.T. and other New South Wales localities. But we can at least note in passing that Andrew Lansdown from W.A. continues to enhance his reputation with the beautifully crafted, subtly imagistic poems in
Fontanelle, including haikus which indeed justify in “Journey” Lansdown’s homage to Matsuo Basho, “my mind his staff, my heart his companion” (92). Michael Heald’s *Focusing Saturn* redresses various forms of “theft” – of meanings, identities, land, prosperity, etc. – through asserting the mystery of the landscape and its identity that is ulterior to human ambition and industry. South Australian Martin R. Johnson’s new collection, *the earth tree*, is a celebration of work that is wholesome in poems that alert us to the rhythms of country town life, low-income standards of living, and a simple-life-style with its positive attunement to nature.

Lizz Murphy’s *Stop Your Cryin*, Jill Jones’s *Broken/Open* and David Brooks’s *Walking to Point Clear* delineate landscapes in relation to which they sensitively explore the potentiality and meaning of various forms of identity, notably in Murphy’s book through the visual imagery of pastoral landscapes and social activism; in Jones’s book through the “still wild/ rough glitter in a country of words” in the last section “Ecstasy on a Verandah”; and through the deeply “earthy” sense of the places Brooks writes about as well as the rhythms of nature and the hope we find in everyday work. The atmosphere of Brooks’ collection is almost medieval in its focus on time, ritual and a talismanic vision of nature. Four other books that warrant positive appreciation (unfortunately not included in the present overview) are Alan Gould’s *The Past Completes Me*, Ian McBryde’s *Domain*, David McCooey’s *Blister Pack*, and Morgan Yasbinck’s *firelick*.

The new poetry we have been perusing is undoubtedly a demonstration of the relevance and wisdom of sustaining identity and a meaningful sense of place in conjunction with reverence for the natural world. This being the case we should ask a provocative and leading question: *Where then are the indigenous voices?*

**Poetry Received 2004–2005**

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


Owen washed Pa’s feet in a bowl of water. The old man got to his feet, dropped his trousers, and made Owen understand he wanted further help.

Owen adjusted the shower taps. “Hotter, hotter,” the old man insisted as the steam rose around them.

Towelling the shivering body dry, Owen marvelled again at the swirling colours of scarred flesh. How skinny the old man was; like a skeleton draped in such strangely beautiful skin.

On the back step, in the warm sun, Owen sheared away at the old man’s toenails with a great big pair of scissors. Small half-pipes of what looked more like ivory or bone fell to the cement slab at their feet.

It was habit, a routine wordlessly completed by Owen replacing the old man’s socks and shoes on his feet. Pa creakily stood up, leaned on his walking stick, ran the palm of his other hand over his hair.

“C’mon,” he said, setting off with those brisk, short steps of his, and Owen padded behind him.

A TV blared sickly and bright in the curtain-drawn gloom. Someone was asleep on the lounge; a mattress on the floor held another sleeping adult, and the small child leaning into the curves of his elder momentarily shifted its eyes from the screen and smiled at them.

Aunty Heather was at the kitchen table, just the other side of a door.

“Mmm, lookin’ deadly Dad.”

Another woman in the kitchen laughed, and the child on her lap studied Owen, before pushing its face into the woman’s shoulder.

“You get paid tomorrow, for the gardening, unna?”

“I think so,” Owen guessed.

“Yes, you do,” she said, “they wrote it down.”

She went to a drawer, brought back a slip of paper. Owen saw the names, Peter and Corry Wright, an address and series of dates.
“Yell out when you’re going,” she called as Owen followed the old man from the room. “I’ll walk with you.”

Pa was lowering himself onto a single bed, his shoes neatly placed beneath it. The walls of the tiny room were dull with the grime of years, and stacked along one wall were layer upon layer of paintings and drawings on paper, bark, plywood, glass, and even a few on canvas. Owen thought of his own dishevelled room, the litter of paper there.

He began browsing through the top layers of paintings, and was suddenly within a landscape; not looking down at an image, but within it, part of it. Bewildered, he looked up to the sky, and became merely a viewer again, outside, looking down upon.

Quickly, he turned to the next painting.

“You been there,” the old man said. “Remember?” The bush was full of energy, colour, scents. Owen heard the humming drone of bees, felt the warm sun, the cool shade. The freshly rained-upon earth. “You been there,” the old man said again, “but never like that. See, all the flowers coming up together, all the seasons at once.”

Many of the paintings — a paddock of sheep, a large rock among trees, a bitumen road cutting through mallee — had a trail of footprints in them, sometimes wandering across, sometimes away from the foreground, out of the frame altogether, or appearing in the distance. There were other drawings of odd, hybrid creatures: various combinations of machines, plants, animals, humans. There were animated skeletons, skyscrapers crumbling in weak sunlight, a telephone booth leaning at a crossroad...

“C’mon,” the old man said. “One of our stories. Give it to me in lingo.”

Owen took the empty chair from beside the bed and, reversing it between his legs, leaned his arms across its back and dropped his eyes from the old man’s. Pa closed his eyes.

No words came to Owen.

After a few minutes he exhaled his relief. The old man was asleep.

Naatj Nitja

Corry paused at the nursery doorway, savouring the backyard before entering it. Our home, our office, our lab and garden, she thought. Our skills. It was as if they — Peter and Corry — were fated to care for the amazing creature they’d found. Who better?

She and Peter had left the creature in a hutch by the balga trees and a clump of granite rocks, hoping to provide shelter, familiarity, even a degree of emotional and psychological comfort, voicing such words and concepts without hesitation.
Now Corry saw that the stem of one of the balgas lay on the ground some distance from where Peter crouched with his back to her, studying what appeared to be the remains of a small fire. There was no sign of the creature. 

Peter turned, startled at the sound of her footsteps, and grinned weakly. 

“What’s wrong?” she mewed.

Peter’s hand waved across the broken balga stem, the fire and the set of tracks leading to a hole in the soft soil between granite rocks.

“I think it must’ve burrowed in there.”

“We’ll have to get it out. If it can dig that far...”

“It can’t escape. The mesh of the fence goes right down.”

“We don’t even know what this is, Peter. We can’t lose it, not now.”

“But you’ve seen it. I’ve got as much chance of digging out of here with my bare hands.”

“But look, that hole. It’s like a burrow. How far...?”

“We’ll dig it out. Shovels.”

Suddenly they were wrapped in smoke, each isolated and utterly alone. Coughing, blind and befuddled, they dropped to their hands and knees. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the smoke cleared. Eyes streaming with tears, grateful for those first few breathes, they helped one another to their feet. What had happened? Where did that smoke come from?

Peter thought it was the grass tree.

“Must’ve been smouldering, sparks from the campfire,” Peter suggested. They looked at a tiny pile of ash.

“And the wind.” Corry was workshopping this latest phenomenon, trying to help. “The wind must’ve fed it. Thick though, wasn’t it, that smoke?”

They dragged their fingers along gummy, charred flakes of wood. “You know how this stuff burns.”

How fragrant it is.

“When it’s dry, anyway.”

“But it went out so quickly.”

“Lucky for us.”

“Yeah, just as well.”

“We’ll still have to dig it out, check anyway,” said Corry, and went to get a shovel.

She called out to Peter only a few minutes later. And then a second time, louder. Did she sound distressed?

“What now?” Peter went to her. How strange, he thought, slowing as he saw her at the entrance to the shed. How strange that she should stand so motionless, slumped and with her head down like that. Then he saw the red eyes, the creature staring from beneath Corry’s armpit.
Corry had still not lifted her head. “It’s hurting me.”

The creature’s face – smeared with yellow pus, eyes foggy and dim – was almost unrecognisable from the day before. Breathing heavily, phlegm clicking, it muttered something which was, initially at least, incomprehensible. But then Peter and Corry heard, so clear it might have been their own voices, “Let us be,” followed by what seemed echoes, other voices whispering, “Allow us,” and “Listen.”

It grabbed Corry and yanked her to her knees, but as she dropped Peter lunged and caught the creature by the neck. Immediately it slumped, passive in his grasp, and Peter easily hauled it across Corry’s back.

Yet when Corry turned the creature was sitting on Peter’s chest with its hands at his throat, and Peter was gurgling, his legs kicking fitfully.

Corry swung the shovel.

She helped her husband to his feet, and they stood holding one another, looking at the creature she had knocked unconscious. Neither of them mentioned what they’d heard. Each, as they brushed themselves down, adjusted and pulled themselves tighter, dismissed what they may have heard as a fantasy, something heard only inside his or her head, some product of individual imagination and stress.

There were some things you had to do. Just got up and did.

The creature stirred and, silently operating as a single unit, Peter and Corry roped, buckled, shackled the creature so that when it regained consciousness it would endanger neither them or itself.

“Umm...”

They turned around.

Who?

Ah yes, the gardener: a doughy, soft young man, and his grandfather: dark, all angles and sinew and shabby, formal cloth. The younger held up a hand; in it the key they’d given him to enter the yard, but both he and the old man were staring, their eyes large in their heads and their mouths agape. The old man took a step back.

“Naatj,” he said.

The creature turned its head to him, struggled. Peter and Corry tightened their grip on it. They’d have to give it another sedative. Get the dose right.

“Back in a minute,” muttered Peter and, bundling the creature in his arms, he left the garden.

“What did you say? What did you call it?” Corry asked, like when someone has hidden the answer you seek.

Pa looked at Owen, Owen at him.

The old man grinned. “Oh, ‘Naatj,’ I said, ‘Naatj nitjak’.”
“Naatj?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you ask him what he meant?”

Corry’s mouth tightened, her face twitched.

“Sorry,” Peter said, hands up to fend off her anger. “But…”

“Of course I did, but he wouldn’t say.”

“What were they doing here anyway?”

“It was his day. I forgot, didn’t ring him to cancel. The old man often comes along with him, sits in the garden. He knows the language names of all the plants, what you might use some of them for, what lives in them. He’s his grandfather.”

“Grandfather? You wouldn’t think it, not by the look at them.”

Owen and Pa were long gone. They’d turned tail; not a dignified exit, what with the old man being so creaky and stiff, so clumsy in layers and layers of clothing and Owen bobbing around him like a balloon on a string. They kept putting their hands on one another, pushing and grabbing, turning in circles. Corry swept past and opened the gate for them. Their motor wouldn’t start, but they’d parked on a hill so they let it roll, and with a yelp of its tyres the car jumped to life, snarled and coughed.

The old man’s head nodded as the car jerked, the motor stammering and coughing, gathering its rhythm. He’d turned away from Corry, hunched his shoulders and withdrawn into his clothing yet as he was swept away Corry, waving goodbye, saw his dark, almost skeletal hand emerge from the window, flapping, rotating at the wrist as if caught by the wind, by the car’s momentum.

Owen’s eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

Tjanak. Balyet. Mambera, or mammari. Djimbar. Woodartji. The old man intoned the words, his voice almost disembodied, emanating from a bundle of cloth, listing the names of supposedly mythical and spiritual creatures. Owen leaned into the steering wheel, worked the gear shift.

The structure of his own life was returning: him and the old man, the business of driving a car, the gardening job, navigating here and there, the pleasure of being in that garden... There was a pattern to it, and he found comfort in settling into what must be habitual activities. But it was small, there was not much substance to it, and this talk of tjanak, of djimbar and balyet and woodatji and the old man’s consternation threatened to unravel it, to pull it apart.

“None of them but,” the old man said. “Course some people get ‘em all
mixed up; tjanak can be any kind, balyet is sort of like a man but not. Mambera – mammari them others say – is the little one. Woodartji too.”

“But it’s not none of them, is it?”

Nope, it wasn’t.

“We talked about this on those tapes, unna?”

Owen would have to search the tapes to discover that memory.

“Tjanak, some people called wadjelas that early days, cause how they didn’t know nothing, or how to behave properly. Some tjanak, they got spears sticking ours from their knees, or funny feet, all kinds of tjanak... Might be like a big dog. Cannibals some of ‘m.

“My old girl, my wife (rest in peace), she woke up and a mambera sitting on her. On her hip, she said, she was lying on her side, see. She didn’t open her eyes, but put her hand out and it was like, like a hairy thing but been shaved. Prickly, stubble you know. She couldn’t walk properly for months after that...”

Of course Pa was wondering what they’d seen, that strange creature, tied up and unconscious; if it hadn’t struggled he wouldn’t even have seen it. He was sure it had responded to the sound of his voice.

“Lots of Noongars,” the old Man’s thin wrists and neck, twigs and stems held in layers of cotton and wool, in shirts and jumpers and coat, “they’re frightened. You know, get back home before dark or mambera’ll get you.

“But not me. Lots of times you could say things to ‘m if you know the right way to speak, know the language. When I was a little boy, mambera tried to get me to follow him, but I wouldn’t go. So you know what? He followed me home. Woke up, and he was sitting just outside our tent. I didn’t tell no one. No one else saw him. He was sitting on the bedroom windowsill when I woke up ‘nother morning at my wadjela friend’s house. Little fella, hairy – not the wadjela, the mambera I mean. I just ignored him. He went away after a couple of days. Never seen him again.

“Not like this one, but. Different from this one here...”

They’d stopped in traffic, a line of cars before them waiting to move across the intersection. Pa lowered his window a fraction, and breathed deeply.

“I never seen nothin’ like it, ‘cept maybe one time – I told you, unna – when I was getting gilgie and I saw its reflection, looking at itself same as I was in the water. Standing behind me.” He laughed. “I took off that time, same as anyone would. Didn’t look back. Wish I’d stayed now.”

“Go there tomorrow, do their garden, unna?”

“Mmm.” They moved slowly now, only metres at a time, stop and start, caught in traffic. They halted again. Nice car, thought Owen, glancing to one side, changing radio stations, studying people though a series of windscreens.
Owen made two large papier-maché figures, and left them in the sun to dry. Apparently, he'd planned this; Aunty had said as much, and he'd seen his sketches and notes. The lifeless figures slumped now just outside the circle of firelight enclosing he, Pa and Aunty Heather.

"When I was a kid," she was saying, stroking the hair of the sleepy child on her lap, "there was a TV show. 'The Magic Boomerang.'" She mimed throwing a boomerang, and indicated its spinning flight with her hand. "They musta got the idea from Aboriginal people, 'cause someone would throw a boomerang in the air, and time would stop. No blackfellas on the TV, though, not then anyway. Not our kind."

Owen remembered, in a story the old man once told him; a boomerang, spinning in the air, otherwise motionless in the air and just out of reach, looking like a pool of water in the sky.

Memories, thought Owen. I feel so far from home.

He tilted his head back. The moon commanding the sky, clusters of stars at a distance, and all around him the dark pyramids of roofs.

"She rung, said yeah come tomorrow."

Pa poked at the fire with his walking stick.

"Naatj," I said, "Naatj nitjak, nitjak naatj" like saying "What," you know, "What's this," 'cause I didn't know, and I don't know, and you may as well say "Little shit-stirrer," for all I know, "'cause as for me..."

"Well, but mammari and that, you think they're real..."

"Mambera - mammari - and yes, well, true. They're real."

Peter hoped Pa would continue, but muffled in clothes and with gloves covering his scarred hands Pa just repeated "True," and looked at them all, one at a time. Owen dropped his gaze. Aunty Heather and Corry smiled, to show all was well.

"Well, there's no doubt about this, this one is real," and Peter gestured through the observation window recently installed in the wall shared by laboratory and office.

"Naatj."

Barely conscious, wedged in cushions and blankets in a corner, the creature suddenly looked up, and Owen felt himself recoil a little from the intensity – even from within a veil of drugs – of the creature's brief glance.

"It's real," Peter repeated. "We can care for it, help it. It's not just research for us!"

"Fair enough anyway," said Pa. "It's a free country, they reckon, since whiteman found it."

"It's real, but we can't make out quite what. First, we have to heal it."
“It’s my country,” Pa was adamant, “where you got this, and you don’t need to talk to anyone else; no government, no other Noongars, nothing. They know jack shit. I’m the Native Title Claimant down there. I’m the Traditional Custodian.”

Peter and Corry appreciated the convenience of dealing with one man. They’d tried before to establish Indigenous reference groups for their projects, and had consulted various Indigenous bureaucracies, only to be met half-heartedly. However, just as soon as something tangible came up they’d suddenly find themselves swamped with countless and competing claimants and custodians. So yeah, there’d be other stakeholders. Eventually. Sometime.

Peter insisted, “We want to do this right. You’ve got your rights, and we want you involved.”

“But just now,” said Corry, “we need to give ourselves time, keep it sedated, find what it needs to be comfortable. Find out, really, everything we can.”

“And we need to keep it quiet, that it’s here, I mean” Peter added. “That’s part of the fee, the consultancy fee. Confidentiality.”

Pa nodded. Aunty Heather said, “Yeah, well... That’s right, we can do that. And the boy keeps up the gardening, and maybe you can let him help you out with...”

“Naatj,” said Corry, quickly.

“Good a name as any right now,” Peter laughed.

“Naatj,” said Owen, to himself really, as he left the room. Unobserved, the creature lifted its head.
I glanced up and noticed a lone shadowy figure emerging through the misty clouds. Then I realised it was none other than the Master Cock Crower, Peter, the Keeper of the Black Pearly Gates. I froze instinctively and also thought quickly “the Jude, the Jude, where is he?” looking for him frantically. He stood only a few metres away in brazen courage, to confront the shadowy figure before him and when I looked again, they were metres apart. No words were spoken as they eye-balled each other. I could feel the heat radiating from their glare at each other. The electrifying impulse between the heads began to get quite warm and I began to shiver and perspire involuntary as the electricity began to dance between the two heads, and I thought “what will happen next?” Immediately there was a gigantic crack of thunder and the lightning flashed around their heads. Neither took a step forward or backward, each still glaring at the other and still no words were spoken as the lightning and thunder cracked around their heads, with me trying to burrow myself in as deep down as I could, into the soft heavenly floor. Trembling violently I took a peek at the two fearsome heavenly warriors and prayed silently to God, asking that they do no harm to each other physically. My prayers, I noticed, were answered immediately. I began to slowly stand upright awed and mesmerised for I could not believe my eyes as I watched the lightning fizzle out to a mere spark popping away harmlessly. I had to burst out laughing at the sight of these two holy disciples...all their hair was sticking straight up and their beards were sticking up and covering their faces. I grimaced at the sight of the rope burns around the Jude’s neck. What made me laugh more hysterically was that they were both trying to pull their beards down. Their beards only sprung back up to smack them on the face! What made it more hilariously funny is that they had these great burns around their heads caused by the lightning bolts and I could see smoke smouldering from where they had struck.
Managing to control my laughter, I thought “Wow, they’ve got to be bigger than the Lord Jesus himself.” I could see they were just itching to tear each other’s throat open and this caused me to gulp nervously as I stammered at the two fearsome heavenly warriors. “Let’s...sit...down and...talk” I almost choked. I could see the holiness come flowing back through their veins, as they both looked at me embarrassed, holding their beards down. They both dashed off...

I was startled when I saw the two figures emerge through the misty clouds that softly swirled around their ears and I was in for a shock for they had got together and really cleaned themselves up. They really looked like two dignified gentlemen and I applauded their approaching faces which had great big smiles. Being a soon-to-be thirteen-year-old boy I was quite impressed by the two men I had admired most in the fairy tale book called the Holy Bible: the ruffian Alcoholic Peter, and the supposed betrayer, Judas Iscariot, or Chariot or whatever name he goes by. I had a laugh to myself. I was indeed in awe of these two great men, who indicated for me to sit down. I also noticed there was now no animosity between them.

I began to scratch my head as I sat down and hoped that my little native brain wasn’t going to explode. I looked at their smiling faces across from me and wondered what to expect. I had for one who was so young, so bewildered, imaginative thoughts that flashed imagery through my mind at an incredible speed. One tends to forget the most basic things in life.

My mother and I spoke in hope:

This dream that has
Captured my imagination
I wish it would last forever
But in real life
I long for the hug
Of my mother.

I felt shockwaves shoot through my body as I saw the two maestros across from me stand up and clap me most fervidly and, boy, was I in for a surprise, when they both shouted “bravo, bravo” enthusiastically.

We sat and I felt guilt and shame sweep over me because the other boys were not there to see my performance on the greatest magical stage on the highest. Peter, sensing that I went quiet, was bemused and asked:

Peter: (with concern) “Why are you letting the candles go out in your head? If not for the candles which are burning very brightly, you would have never made it into heaven.”
Alfred: (grabbing my head) “Wouldn’t the candle flames burn my brains out (with a smile). Not that I have got any in there.”

Peter and Jude looked at each other and laughed uproariously and continued to laugh and point at me until The Jude said.

Jude: “That’s what they want you to think and what I mean by they, is your Government and all these followers of Jesus Christ.”

Peter: (controlling his laughter, shaking his head) “I must agree with the Jude here.”

Alfred: (in surprise) “Hey, how did you know his name was The Jude? Everyone knows that the Bible called him Judas Iscariot.”

Jude: (looks at Peter questioningly) “Yeah, Peter, how did you know about that? (pointing to me) I know young Alfred here referred to me as The Jude or Judo Judas.”

Peter: (bowing his head in remembrance of denial, speaking softly at first to the Jude, then to me) “When we all first got together, I don’t know where it was but I think it was around Galilee somewhere, and the peasants were giving us a hard time and Jesus, he was no help at all to us, for he was nothing but a blithering idiot.”

Jude: (sensing that Peter is trying to deviate from the question) “What Alfred wanted to know, and of course I do, is when did you or the rest of the Funny Farm Members refer to me as The Jude?”

Alfred: (defending Peter and looking at Jude) “You can’t talk to Saint Peter like that, as we all know, or mainly us native boys, know that he is the Boss of the Pearly White gates. (Laughing) But I know different, why the gates are black and of the most beautiful pearls that I’ve ever seen.”

The Jude: “How many pearls have you native boys seen, be they black, white, pink or purple?”

Alfred: (this made me snigger at him) “Okay, Okay, we, or should I say me, wouldn’t know a pearl from a kangaroo’s tail but I know they are beautiful.”

This got The Jude and Peter again laughing hysterically, when Peter asked:
Peter: “What, the kangaroo tail or the pearl?”

I was incensed with his remark and responded back in a normal soon-to-be thirteen year-old native boy from New Norcia Mission, very subdued.

Alfred: “Of course I know nothing of pearis and of course I can’t remember the taste of a kangaroo tail stew. I may have had a feed of it a long time ago, but the teachings of the monks and nuns, tell us not only that our native tongues are a mortal sin but also our culture...so I guess kangaroo tail stew is also a mortal sin in their eyes.”

With this The Jude applauded vigorously and shouted “bravo, bravo”, causing Peter some embarrassment. He knew he wasn’t up against that servant girl of the High Priest who asked him if he knew Jesus, which he openly denied, and so said sombrely.

Peter: “Look Alfred, I am sorry. I didn’t mean to ridicule you. I guess I am no different from your Government or the missionaries who control your lives.”

The Jude: (sneeringly) “So the Master Cock Grower admits that he is no better than Alfred’s Government who steal children away from their mothers and let them rot in some hell hole.”

I could see this was going to be one hot argument as Peter scowled at The Jude, which was very intimidating... I stood up trembling violently and speaking above the thunder which was about to explode, I said a prayer hoping this would get rid of the thunder.

Alfred: (hand clasped in prayer, eyes closed tightly) Dear sweet Jesus, don’t let these two holy men fight. For they are the doves that nestle in your heavenly rafters. For they are your king doves, who spread peace and holiness with each flap of their wings, not only to Heaven, but to Earth as well. And we mission boys, mainly, feel peace and holiness with each flap of their wings. Amen.”

Opening my eyes slowly, I heard both say Amen. And looked to see they were both seated and had very embarrassed looks upon their faces. And there was no lightning or thunder to be heard. Sitting down I smiled at both and got a feeble smile in return.

Alfred (saying fervidly): “You (pointing to Judas) fascinated me. You had everything. Women, I mean beautiful women, and heaven, but at the
moment I don’t know where you are. It’s just that my imaginativeness has got you here and I guess it got me here (pointing to Peter) and you. You do remind me of an alcoholic. Maybe I saw a holy picture of you somewhere. Your eyes intrigued me. They look to me like you needed a drink of altar wine, like me. I love altar wine. All I asked when we all sat at the table was ‘how did you know he was The Jude?’”

Peter (smiling): “Like I said I think it was Galilee and you were wandering off, or as Alfred’s Government would say, you know, ‘gone walkabout’. It was Paul, John and George used to go looking for you and you know how silly they were. I’d send them looking for you and they’d always wander off shouting ‘Hey Jude’. No big deal.”

Jude (laughing) “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place, instead of nearly ending in a fracas and here I thought that young Alfred was the first to call me that.”

We all had a good laugh together and I’m sure I caught a glimpse of the sun’s rays beaming through heaven’s ceiling and the gorgeous angels playing a soft melody on their harps. If this was heaven I wanted to stay feeling contented.

Alfred: “Why did Jesus always have men around him and why in the Bible, when Jesus was arrested a young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following him and when they (the soldiers) seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”

Peter (with a knowing laugh): “Well, I mean the pictures on your chapel shows him (Jesus) to be a dashing tall, blue-eyed, white skin blonde but in real life he was very effeminate and small.”

Alfred (questioningly): “What’s that mean…”

Jude (interjecting): “Well, Alfred, later on in life as you journey you will pick up on different words and some will go deep into the cellars of your mind and others will skim across the top of your mind.”

Peter: “It’s better you learn now and understand the words that are spoken to you. But remember it’s up to you to learn. No one else, but you.”

Alfred: “I want to learn a lot of things in life but the most important part of my life is that I want to see my Mother again.”
Peter: “You will see your Mother again. It will take patience but the love of your Mother will reunite you. But first you’ll have to obey all the teachings of the Monks and Nuns at New Norcia. Although locked away in pain, you will have sunlight and laughter. That will be your saviour in your advancing years.”

Jude: “Amen to that Brother Peter for you talk in honesty and wisdom. I could see great sunlight and roses, for you are the Chosen One Alfred. It is but for you to suffer in the name of your ancestors.”

Jude: “Not the barbaric treatment your ancestors suffered on the landing of the first Englishmen who stole your land away from you, all in God’s name I might add. But the trials and tribulations of the 1905 Act of the Assimilation did bring chaos to a tribe that has roamed and guarded your boundaries for thousands of years and all in the name of peace.”

Peter: (carrying on where Judas left off) “So, true Brother Judas, as you said before, honesty and wisdom was with your tribe long before the birth of Jesus Christ but when the Englishmen arrived on your shores they brought Christianity and different church people of the highest order to confuse and disrupt your peaceful existence and each church of different denominations did carry one message from the King and the message was but to us, who are being saved. It is the power of God for it is written:

We will destroy the wisdom of the wise
The intelligence of the intelligent
We will frustrate them, like dry reeds
That break on the onslaught of the wind.”

Jude: (clapping enthusiastically) and of course Myself “Bravo, my Brother Peter, Bravo. To the Cock-Crowing Champion, Bravo.”

After they had settled and taken their seats and the angels played their soft music, I was quite overwhelmed by the joy that these two great men had given me and I knew, once back in the Mission of the Damned or Depressed, I would miss all of this...presenting questions and receiving honest answers, not the strap we received when given half-hearted answers. But the sole purpose of my young life was to see my Mother again and the only way out was to get back to Father Basil and the bus, where I belonged – an ugly little black devil, who was never going to make it in life and drink himself to death at a young age.
“Glory be to God in the highest” I shouted with all of my might. I could see I startled not only the Jude but also Peter and, again, shouting with a full voice “Bring on the altar wine, for it has been written in the scriptures – the blood of Christ is for you to consume heartily and let the altar wine flow freely down our gullets.”
In several recent papers I've recommended that Australian literary studies - and Australian studies in general - should now move beyond the national paradigm that was a necessary part of their original disciplinary formation. Since the watershed of the Bicentenary and increasingly since the new millennium, I think we've begun to see Australian studies as a discipline whose origins lie in a period of cultural nationalism that in certain respects we no longer feel to be contemporary. This has to do, among other things, with our changing attitudes to issues of nation, race and gender, and with the effects of globalisation. These nation-based studies began - let's say very roughly - in the 1960s; the peak of their growth was probably the decade from 1977 to 1987, which saw the establishment of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) in 1977, the Australian Studies Association (ASA) in 1983-4, and the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (CRASTE) in 1984-7; and we can sense their active transformation into new forms during the years between the Bicentenary in 1988 and the end of the twentieth century: in 1993-4, for example, the ASA became the International Australian Studies Association (InASA). In particular, we are coming to see that the concept of the nation, which was needed to establish Australian studies both intellectually and institutionally, can also prevent us from exploring the connections that exist outside of - or in a complex set of relations to - that space.

Since the early 1990s, and in a number of disciplines, there have been signs of a growing unease with the idea of the nation as an organising category in area studies. I'm thinking, in particular, of American and German studies, where important journals have published special issues on this topic. Here, for example, is the historian David Thelen on the challenge to American studies:

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ROBERT DIXON

INTERNATIONALISING AUSTRALIAN STUDIES:
NON-FICTION 2004–2005

In several recent papers I've recommended that Australian literary studies - and Australian studies in general - should now move beyond the national paradigm that was a necessary part of their original disciplinary formation. Since the watershed of the Bicentenary and increasingly since the new millennium, I think we've begun to see Australian studies as a discipline whose origins lie in a period of cultural nationalism that in certain respects we no longer feel to be contemporary. This has to do, among other things, with our changing attitudes to issues of nation, race and gender, and with the effects of globalisation. These nation-based studies began - let's say very roughly - in the 1960s; the peak of their growth was probably the decade from 1977 to 1987, which saw the establishment of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) in 1977, the Australian Studies Association (ASA) in 1983-4, and the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (CRASTE) in 1984-7; and we can sense their active transformation into new forms during the years between the Bicentenary in 1988 and the end of the twentieth century: in 1993-4, for example, the ASA became the International Australian Studies Association (InASA). In particular, we are coming to see that the concept of the nation, which was needed to establish Australian studies both intellectually and institutionally, can also prevent us from exploring the connections that exist outside of - or in a complex set of relations to - that space.

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people, ideas, and institutions do not have clear national identities. Rather, people may translate and assemble pieces from different cultures. Instead of assuming that something was distinctively American, we might assume that elements of it began or ended somewhere else. We may discover that what people create between national centers provides a promising way to rethink many topics in American history.

What we are seeing is an impulse – and here I allude to the titles of some recent books – to feel once more “at home in the world”; to “think and feel beyond the nation.” One way we might begin to achieve this is by what Amanda Anderson calls a “situated cosmopolitanism.” This is not to abandon the category of the nation, for it remains a fundamental unit of domestic policy and affect, and of inter-national relations. But it does mean imagining new types of cultural history that are concerned with the traffic of people, capital, practices, ideas and institutions within but also beyond the conceptual space of the nation. It would involve types of cultural history that accepted rather than left out divided affiliations and multiple identities. It would mean inquiring into the way different forms of internationalism – vernacular and elite – affect Australian lives both positively and negatively, and within and beyond Australia. And it would involve different ways of thinking about the comportment of the Australian studies intellectual as someone with multiple interests and affiliations, centered in but also reaching beyond the nation.

A number of the books published in 2004–2005 provide some idea of what this new, international Australian studies might look like. Many, of course, continue to examine the national culture, albeit from new theoretical perspectives and with a heightened awareness that it exists in a wider field of relations against which it has always struggled to maintain its own logic and density. They include Christopher Lee’s City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination, Paul Genoni’s Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction and Tania Dalziell’s Settler Romances and the Australian Girl. Others, though, have been concerned to fold Australia and Australian studies into broader international contexts; many have editors, authors or contributors working outside Australia; and some even carry the imprints of overseas publishers. Broadly, this internationalisation takes several forms: there is work by Australian scholars of Australian literature published locally that rediscover the cosmopolitanism of Australian culture; there is work that projects Australian studies offshore by its association with non-Australian institutions, scholars and publishers; and there is work that
"mainstreams" Australian material by putting it into dialogue with non-
Australian material or with explanatory models that circulate internationally.

Thinking Australian Studies: teaching across cultures, edited by David Carter,
Kate Darian-Smith and Gus Worby, is a collection of essays that both
exemplify and reflect upon these trends. It had its origins in two conferences
organized by InASA: the first, in 2002, on the development of Australian
studies both “at home” and internationally since the publication of the 1987
GRASTE report, Windows on to Worlds; the second, in 2003, on “Teaching
Across Cultures: Australian Studies in an International Context.”

Contributors include InASA members who have taught in Australia, the Asia
Pacific, North America, Britain and Europe; diplomats and former policy
makers with experience in Canberra, London, Tokyo and Washington DC;
and former overseas students who now pursue careers in Australian studies in
locations as diverse as Japan, Taiwan and Denmark. Collectively, they reflect
on a series of key questions. How might Australian studies contribute to new
international perspectives and alliances? How can new conceptual and
pedagogical approaches help scholars and students to think beyond national
boundaries and across cultures? What is the future of Australian studies in an
increasingly global educational environment?

Whatever the legacy of Windows on to Worlds has been, it was, as Anne
Curthoys remarks, “a document of its times” (71). In retrospect, she suggests
that its cultural nationalist emphasis may have gone too far and now requires
“something of a correction” (69). In their essays, Susan Ryan, the former
Labor Education Minister who commissioned the report, and Bruce Bennett,
one of its three co-authors, also wonder if Australian studies have since
become too self-referential. Curthoys now believes that “Australian studies
needs to reconnect to other stories, to diasporic histories, post-secular
histories...histories of transnational organizations and political movements,
histories of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and cultural context and exchange”
(108). David Carter also speaks of a new “creative Australian
(inter)nationalism.” His own essay is a SWOT analysis of Australian studies
abroad, drawing on his considerable administrative experience over many
years. He believes that its future beyond Australia is bound up with its
relations with government, both “working with and working on government”
(92). Among the possible opportunities, Carter looks to Australian studies’
role in what he calls “cultural diplomacy”: that is, “the process whereby
government deliberately...as a matter of policy and with specific objectives,
supported by funding and infrastructure, ‘re-purposes’ Australian cultural
products and practitioners as a means of telling the rest of the world
something positive about Australia” (93). For those of us who are
“institutionalized intellectuals,” this means learning the language of government and adjusting our product to suit the market’s diverse and changing requirements. As several of the book’s case studies indicate— including those about Australian studies in Japan, Indonesia and Europe—the character Australian studies takes abroad will depend on the particular country and institution where it is being located, each of which will have its own established interests and agenda. Carter concludes, “We need to project Australia as belonging in a network of potential points of comparison, of bodies of knowledge and theory, and of cultural, economic and political exchanges which transcend the nation” (98–9).

One area where the international approach Carter foreshadows first emerged in Australian studies was in work on popular entertainment by scholars such as Richard Waterhouse, Veronica Kelly and Katharine Brisbane. Jill Julius Matthews’s Dance Hall & Picture Palace: Sydney’s Romance with Modernity is an important contribution to this field. Taking as its time-span the thirty years between the depressions of the 1890s and the late 1920s, it studies Sydney’s embrace of modernity and the impact of new entertainment technologies on everyday life. Sydney, Matthews argues, “was always cosmopolitan” (12). From the beginning, its economy and its culture were “outward-looking, constantly adapting to international movements” (10). Its people embraced the pleasures of moving pictures, as well as radio, the gramophone and cheap magazines, “confidently and joyously forging their identities” as modern citizens of the world. For this reason, Matthews breaks with cultural-nationalist histories which treat the international context as antagonistic rather than enabling. The stories she tells “do not fit neatly within the boundaries of the nation continent but flow into and merge with the great international movement of things, people and ideas that was at the heart of the newly modern world” (2).

In her account of cinema as the exemplary site of vernacular modernity, Matthews moves from textual analysis to the study of corporate structures, architectural styles, and marketing and management practices, then on to case studies of individuals involved in producing, marketing, consuming and even objecting to the new film industry and its products. Through archival research, she rediscovers the pleasures Sydney shop girls, factory workers and union organizers found in the new American-style dance-halls and picture palaces that sprang up around the city and its suburbs in the 1920s. But Matthews declines to see Australia’s as merely an import culture, characterising it instead as an active, if not always equal, participant in the international circulation of products and personnel. “International modernity,” she argues, “was gradually adapted and Australianised in Sydney
then proudly performed to the rest of the country and returned to the world” (1-2). This “return to the world” is especially clear in her case studies of show-business entrepreneur Hugh D “Huge Deal” Mackintosh, cinema production and distribution companies Union Theatres, Australasian Films and Cinesound Productions, and cinema magnates JD Williams, Stuart Doyle and Stanley Crick, all of whom pursued successful international careers.

There is a good deal of overlap between Dance Hall & Picture Palace and Liz Conor’s The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s, which draws upon Matthews’ earlier work. Conor focuses on modernity’s production and privileging of the visual, on the way its spectacularisation of women allowed them access to public space and, at the same time, to new modes of subjectivity. There are three aspects to her argument. First, the changing historical conditions of women’s visibility and the perceptual fields in which they appeared: the metropolis, the “cinematic scene,” commodity culture, beauty culture, “the late colonial scene,” and heterosexual leisure culture. Second, within these spaces there circulated an expanded repertoire of representations of the Modern Woman, “types” upon which individual women might model their subjectivity. These include the Screen Star, the Beauty Contestant and the Flapper. Third, Conor is concerned with the possibilities of female agency within these visual fields. These are similar to the issues that organise Matthews’ book, but Conor’s is at once theoretically denser and empirically more wide ranging. The spaces of modernity she examines include the dance hall and picture palace, but also the department store, advertising and print culture, especially the newspapers and illustrated magazines from which many of her examples are drawn. She also demonstrates more profoundly the product tie-ins that linked these spaces, and her case studies are drawn comprehensively from all of Australia’s metropolitan centres.

Like Matthews, Conor points out that the spaces of modernity were international – that Australian cities shared these “scenes” with other industrialised Western Nations, particularly Great Britain and the United States. It is therefore appropriate that she puts the Australian case in its international contexts while also deploying a wide range of theory and scholarship. This has the effect of placing Australian, British, American and European scholarship on something like a level playing field. One example comes during her critique of modern theorists of visuality and commodity culture, from Siegfried Kracauer through Walter Benjamin to Guy Debord. In his essays “The Mass Ornament” (1927) and “Girls and Crisis” (1931), Kracauer uses the Tiller Girls, an American dance troupe that toured Europe in the 1920s, to demonstrate the supposedly objectifying effects of mass
spectacle. Conor's photograph of the troupe is drawn not from a European or North American source, but from the Melbourne *Sun-News Pictorial*. The moment perfectly captures the internationalisation of the Australian city in the 1920s and of Australian scholarship in the present. Conor's critique of Kracauer and Benjamin relates to her main argument: that their suspicion of commodity capitalism and its visual economy arose from an unquestioned opposition between the roles of subject and object, as if women could not be both at once. She replaces the opposition with a coupling, albeit a conflictual one, which she calls “appearing”: that is, “the syncretic moment of the subject experiencing itself as object, or the object experiencing itself as subject” (178). Modernity’s spectacularisation of women did not make them into passive sex objects – or at least not only. It simultaneously offered a range of possible modes of “consumerist subjectivity.” Like Judith Walkowitz, on whose work she draws, Conor argues that women's spectacularisation allowed them to become actors in the metropolitan scene, to become “self-possessed” as well as possessed by others (255). And like Matthews, she illustrates these arguments through the careers of Australians who were mobile along the routes of international modernity, including the Australian-born Hollywood star Lotus Thomson and the swimmer and physical culturist Annette Kellerman, “the Australian Venus,” who became America's first pin-up girl.

Although Frank Van Straten is not concerned with the theoretical issues that exercise Matthews and Conor, his *Huge Deal: The Fortunes and Follies of Hugh D. McIntosh* is a richly researched show-business biography whose wealth of detail both speaks to and allows us to challenge some of their general arguments. In focusing on the modernity of the 1920s, for example, Matthews and Conor exaggerate the case for an historic break, underestimating the extent to which modernity's own claims to radical innovation conceal the way it folded within itself many technologies, performance genres, stage practices and modes of affect that were pre-modern. McIntosh's career is a reminder of how closely the cinema was linked with earlier forms of popular entertainment. Having worked as a chorus boy at the Tivoli, and then as a caterer and tour operator, he promoted his first boxing match in Sydney in 1901 between two visiting Afro-Americans. In 1908, coinciding with the visit of America's Great White Fleet, he opened the Stadium at Rushcutters Bay, boasting that it was “the Largest Open-Air Hippodrome in the World.” On Boxing Day 1908 he achieved international fame by staging the World Heavyweight Championship fight between Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson. Billed as “the Greatest Fistic Event in History,” it was promoted as a contest for “Racial Supremacy.” Covered by more than two hundred American
journalists, Johnson’s victory provoked an extraordinary response in the United States, including lynchings and race riots in southern states. As tie-ins McIntosh sold postcards of incidents from the fight and staged post-match exhibitions at the Tivoli theatres. He also had the fight filmed and negotiated exhibition rights in Europe, Great Britain and the United States, where he lectured to the silent film. He used the wealth and celebrity generated by the tour to establish himself as a promoter in the US, Paris and London.

McIntosh had also used the Stadium for vaudeville and “outback” or wild-west shows but in 1912 he sold it to buy Harry Rickards’ circuit of Tivoli Theatres in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Kalgoorlie and Brisbane. The Tivoli circuit specialized in traditional vaudeville repertoire and had brought to Australia some of the world’s finest performers, including Carl Hertz and his cinematograph, cockney comedian Marie Lloyd, escapologist Harry Houdini, strong man Sandow, and silent comedian WC Fields. McIntosh boasted that “nothing in the shape of money will stand in the way of our importation of artistes” (74), and he travelled the world using the networks – and the fortune – that he had built up as a boxing promoter to sign the leading international artistes. After the Great War, he diversified his theatrical interests to include revue, musical comedy and cinema exhibition, and even dabbled in film production. The Sydney Tivoli became famous for its special effects, which were claimed to be “the acme of modernity” (125).

If Australian studies are to become truly international, however, we need to find ways to publish case studies of, say, print culture, cinema or theatre not just in Australian journals and with publishers located in Australia, but with the best international journals and presses in these fields, otherwise our new “internationalism” remains a conversation amongst ourselves. By virtue of their local publication, it is ironic that books like Dance Hall & Picture Palace and Huge Deal may not enjoy the same international distribution as the mobile careers and commodities they describe. By contrast, its publication by Indiana University Press makes The Spectacular Modern Woman a leading example of today’s internationalised Australian studies. Also carrying the imprint of a prestigious North American publisher is Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World, edited by Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Originating in a conference sponsored by the Harvard Committee on Australian studies in 2002 and published by Harvard University Press, it includes essays by leading scholars based in Australia, such as Susan Martin, Stephen Muecke, Tony Birch and David Carter; Australian scholars currently working overseas, such as Meaghan Morris, Simon During, Judith Ryan and Kevin Hart; and British and American
scholars with long-standing interests in Australia and its literature, such as Paul Kane, Brian Henry and Graham Huggan.

Another instance of the kind of international scholarly conversation I have in mind as a goal here is Playing Australia: Australian Theatre and the International Stage, edited by London-based scholars Elizabeth Schafer and Susan Bradley Smith. This collection of essays characterises “Australian” theatre history as a multi-directional traffic in people, practices, texts and intellectual property that is reflected, in turn, in the conditions of the book’s own production. Most of the essays were presented at a conference in London sponsored by the Drama Department at Royal Holloway, the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, the Theatre Museum and the Australian High Commission. Published by Rodopi in Amsterdam, the book is part of the Australian Playwrights series edited by Veronica Kelly, director of the Australian Drama Studies Centre at the University of Queensland. As the editors point out, their contributors can be situated at different points along “a continuum of experiences of Australianness”: “Some have lived in Australia most of their lives, some in Britain. Most have alternated between the two countries [and] have experienced expatriation for long periods” (4).

In charting the currents of “theatrical exchange” around the Anglophone world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, life narrative and the concept of the career are again useful analytical techniques. Peta Tait examines the international career of Ella Zuila, “the Australian Funambulist” and “premiere gymnast of the world” (82), whose high-wire career flourished in Australia, South Africa, Britain and the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Katherine Newey uses the British career of Australian May Holt to question cultural-nationalist histories that value “radical nationalism” and “anti-Britishness.” Susan Bradley Smith’s essay on Inez Bensusan, an expatriate playwright, producer, actress and suffragette, and Elizabeth Schafer’s essay on the British careers of Australian playwrights Haddon Chambers and Gilbert Murray, lend further support to one of the larger claims that the editors make for the collection as a whole. It is that to be properly understood Australian theatre history must be ‘mainstreamed’ into broader considerations of the development of western theatre over the last two centuries. This was and remains a two-way traffic, and “Anglo-centered theatre histories that claim to be universal...will have less credibility...the more they ignore global experiences” (8).

These case studies also reveal the limits of expatriatism as an explanatory model. They suggest that it is not a neutral tool of historical analysis but an implicitly derogatory label of the mid twentieth century that potentially distorts our understanding of la longue durée of cultural exchange. Perhaps this
is why Peter Conrad’s version of Australian history in his 2004 Boyer Lectures, Tales of Two Hemispheres, seems so tired and familiar. Conrad writes from the perspective of the expatriate generation of the 1950s and 1960s, projecting what Patrick White famously called “the Great Australian Emptiness” back on to the early decades of the twentieth century, and then further back into the nineteenth. The “proof” of this generation’s vision is that Australians have only recently been invited to join “the great world” and now turn up everywhere: a Tasmanian has become Princess of Denmark, Jacobs Creek wines are sponsoring Friends, and “Hollywood” films are shot at Fox Studios in Sydney where, in Conrad’s day, Australia paraded its agricultural produce at the Royal Easter Show. Confirming the new internationalism from personal experience, Conrad recalls, “The first thing I saw in Las Vegas, after getting off a plane earlier this year, was an assortment of my muscular compatriots preening in Y-fronts...a troupe of male strippers resident at one of the casinos” (88). The point is, of course, that “The Thunder from Down Under” were following the route across the Pacific pioneered by earlier generations of Australian entertainers like Ella Zuila and Annette Kellerman, while the Sydney Showgrounds were not far from the Stadium, where in 1908 “Huge Deal” McIntosh staged “The Greatest Fistic Event in History.”

Although Australian entertainers were always internationally mobile and made important contributions to the globalising entertainment industry, this was also a space subject to the forces of colonialism. The circuits of people and intellectual property around the British and European worlds were not an even playing field, especially for their subaltern peoples, a point brought home by Roslyn Poignant’s Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle. In 1882, the impresario Phineas T Barnum instructed his agents to assemble “a collection...of all the uncivilized races in existence...to astonish, interest and instruct” the American public. It was to include “a number of the finest specimens of Australian Aborigines.” Within months, the Irish-American showman and “man-hunter” RA Cunningham, who was then working in Australia, had “recruited” nine North Queensland Aborigines – six men, two women and a boy – and shipped them to San Francisco. They were subsequently displayed on the international exhibition circuit as “RA Cunningham’s Australian Aborigines, Tattoed Cannibals, Black Trackers and Boomerang Throwers,” appearing at the Midway Plaisance of the Columbian World’s Fair in Chicago, Coney Island in New York, London’s Crystal Palace, the Folies-Bergere in Paris, Berlin’s Panoptikum, St Petersburg’s Arcadia, and the court of the Turkish Empire in Constantinople.

Cunningham himself was a typical late nineteenth-century showman,
belonging to “a cosmopolitan, even international, culture of show people who were versatile, worldly and attached to the traveling way of life” (63). Yet however much the lives of his Aboriginal performers appear to have been expanded by their travels overseas, they were restricted by their containment within “the show-space.” The term refers not just to the houses at which they performed but to a collective cultural space in which “historically specific relations of power between colonizers and colonized were made visible.” While cosmopolitan modernity was liberating for some, it also deterriorialised cultures and peoples. As Liz Conor argues in her analysis of modernity’s exclusion of women of colour, “appearing” – the experience of being both subject and object – was not uniformly enabling. Within their performance roles, Cunningham’s indigenous entertainers were “simultaneously themselves and reflections of the ‘savages’ of Western imagination” (8).

Although all of these books about the popular stage and screen deal to some extent with print culture, this is one aspect of colonial modernity that falls largely outside the scope of their analysis. In Marcus Clarke’s Bohemia: Literature and Modernity in Colonial Melbourne, Andrew McCann seeks to clarify the relationship between literature, commodification and settler-colonialism by locating nineteenth-century Melbourne bohemia within a bourgeoning cosmopolitan print culture that extends beyond national borders. This ambitiously conceived and densely argued book is perhaps the most theoretically sophisticated and critically insightful study to date of Australia’s colonial modernity in the period before 1890. Yet it takes a particular line. At first sight, McCann’s work has much in common with previous studies of urban entertainments by scholars such as Richard Waterhouse and Veronica Kelly, whom he cites in his introduction, and with the concurrent work of Jill Matthews and Liz Connor. But it is ultimately driven by a very different view of popular culture.

For McCann, colonial modernity is hollowed out from within by its own belatedness, by “colonial lack” (25). The cultures of settler colonies, he argues, are formed by the affective consequences of colonialism and global capitalism – migrancy, relocation, dislocation, itinerancy and vagabondage (7) – while lacking the “lingering” or “residual” consolations of the old world, such as the Romantics’ nostalgia for an organic culture grounded in the essence of the nation and the folk. In colonial Australia, “the nation functioned as a foundational absence in critical debate” about the possibility of a vigorous local literary culture (6). The Victorian colonists may have listened to the latest music, read the latest novels and news from Europe, and worn the latest European fashions, but this only reinforced their state of “chronic
homelessness and displacement.” “The colony reproduces the metropolis,” McCann believes, “but in the urgency of its desire to do so, it also reveals its own distance from it” (8). Belatedness returns in the empty and deceptive form of the commodities settler colonies consume, including literature, which is “beholden to” and undermined by its dependence on the marketplace (11).

There are perhaps three reasons why McCann’s account of colonial popular culture and its place in transnational flows is so different to those by Matthews and Conor. First, he is concerned mainly with production rather than consumption, with writers rather than consumers. While local readers’ demands for metropolitan publications were met by importation, there was little or no market for Australian writing and too little institutional support for its local growth – as Christopher Lee’s discussion of Henry Lawson attests. Second, McCann is concerned with literature’s ambivalent relation to the marketplace; his subject is the relation of elite to vernacular forms of cosmopolitanism. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it derives from a different theoretical tradition. What we are seeing here is the difference between the Frankfurt School’s understanding of consumption as a mode of subjection, and the more optimistic view to be found in certain forms of cultural history and cultural studies – especially the work of Michel de Certeau and his followers – that commodities can be actively appropriated by their consumers; that local meanings can be pulled from international commodity forms; that they can be used, as Matthews puts it, to “joyously forge an identity.” This is what Conor means by “consumerist subjectivity.” McCann’s understanding of the commodity derives explicitly from the theoretical tradition Conor critiques. He cites Adorno and Horkheimer on “the delusional solace of bourgeois culture” and “the false promises of the culture industry” (17). His account of colonial Melbourne as “an avatar of global capitalism” is modelled on Benjamin’s excavation, in the Arcades project, of “the delusional, fetishistic quality of cultural forms under the sign of the commodity” (19). These influences produce a theoretically motivated account of the nineteenth-century’s “fall” into global commodity culture.

Marcus Clarke’s Melbourne is also the opening setting for Michael Ackland’s Henry Handel Richardson: A Life, which begins with the career of Richardson’s father, Walter, in the 1860s and 1870s. Ackland depicts the new colonial city as prosperous, precociously self-confident and culturally up-to-date, the equal of any British city of the same size. Yet his analysis of Richardson’s years at the Leipzig Conservatorium complicates our understanding of Australian internationalism at this time. By examining reviews of the public concert that was part of her Hauptprüfung, he establishes
that she failed to live up to the high standards of the European music world. If we are to understand colonial internationalism fully, we need to know what effects it had - both positive and negative - on Australians who aspired to be citizens of the world. While Richardson's education at Melbourne's PLC led her to seek a European career, it had failed adequately to assess or to nurture her talent in relation to the highest international standards. Years later, in recalling the Prufungs Konsert, she would write, "Had I been born a Hun...I would have...learned the things one has to know in early youth. But Australia - what can be hoped from that! When I was eventually sent to Leipzig, I found the fight too hard...It was a bitter disappointment" (106).

After Leipzig, and following her husband's appointment to the Kaiser Wilhelm University in Strasbourg in 1896, Richardson began in earnest the cosmopolitan's difficult self-fashioning, transforming herself from "a provincial colonial to a European intellectual" (138). In allowing us to understand this process, Ackland perfectly demonstrates the skills of cross-cultural analysis required of an internationalised Australian studies. His research, conducted in both English and German, reveals how narrowly Anglophone so much Australian scholarship has been. To understand this most cosmopolitan of Australian writers, we need to move beyond both the national and linguistic boundaries that have circumscribed Australian studies in the past. Paradoxically, the decade of the 1890s, the originary period of Australia's nationalist mythology, was also the period of Richardson's immersion in European culture. Guided by her husband's immense erudition and with access to the finest libraries, she worked her way systematically through modern European literature, averaging more than a hundred books a year. By the end of 1902, Ackland observes, "Ettie was thoroughly at home on the Continent" (153).

Ackland speculates at some length on Richardson's final sense of her national identity, which he describes as "contradictory" (264). On the one hand, she remained homesick for the sights and smells of the bush and the sea; on the other hand, the experience of two world wars had deepened her bond with England. She complained to William Norton of her weariness at being "always branded as the Australian authoress," and it is likely that her choice of the Wagner circle as the subject of her last published novel, The Young Cosima, was a deliberate attempt to disassociate herself from Australia after the Mahony trilogy. Yet it is possible to see her relation to nationalism as more than "contradictory." It is likely, too, that her hatred of German militarism and fascism had made her suspicious of nationalism per se, and that she had come to see herself as an artist and a cosmopolitan intellectual, and therefore above national affiliations of any kind. This is implicit, I think, in
her distinction between the timeless spirit of German culture and the contemporary barbarism of the German military machine. She reiterated to Norton, “I have no desire to be marked for life as an ‘Australian writer’” (265). What she was, this seems to imply, is simply a writer.

While the books I have discussed here all reflect the internationalisation of Australian studies – or at least Australian studies’ aspiration to become more international – they do so in different ways and to different degrees. At their best they rediscover both the complexity of Australian culture and the mobility of its people, while also allowing contemporary Australian scholarship to take its place in international conversations. But they also reveal contrasting and even conflicting interpretations of Australian internationalism. This is perhaps a consequence of the four different parameters that organize them: the specific time period under consideration – the 1860s, say, versus the 1920s or the 2000s; the particular art form being studied and its social status (“literary” writers, for example, do not see the world in the same way as actors, producers, entrepreneurs or audiences); the particular theoretical approach taken toward commodity culture; and finally, the difference between cultural production and consumption. The work of Andrew McCann, Michael Ackland, Jill Matthews and David Carter, for example, suggests that it felt very different being a “cosmopolitan” man of letters in Melbourne in the 1870s than it did being a “cosmopolitan” intellectual in London in 1910, a “cosmopolitan” cinema-goer or magazine reader in Sydney in the 1920s, or an Australian consumer of international “good books” in the twenty-first century. What these differences suggest is that we need more highly nuanced, multi-disciplinary accounts of Australian internationalism that are sensitive to its various forms and registers across time and social space. They also suggest that we should be wary of any theoretically-driven interpretations of Australian cultural production in its international contexts that are not supported by detailed empirical research into specific historical periods and cultural practices, and on the individual cities, careers and national cultures through which inter-nationalism is expressed.

**NON-FICTION RECEIVED 2004–2005**

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


Notes


Halfway up, we're within sight of the summit, and I watch your determined back forge on, pushing its way stubbornly through rock and through sky.

That stick you bought at the gift shop, counting out notes too rapidly to believe in it yourself ploughs reckless into stone. It's not that steep, but by god you'll use it rather than have your tourist self brought home to you here, exposed on the edge of our world.

And here is where I'll stop, I think, this too-imminent cresting catching in my throat: once you've stepped up into clear blue sky, there's nothing left but descent, the sure, sharp plunge toward earth.

All I ever wanted was the promise of a long, slow climb, to share somehow the pleasures of an endlessly deferred summit - nothing ever coming home to roost. So this is where I'll stop and watch your dogged upward push towards our end.
MEG MCNENA

TAKEOVER

His lanky hair and limbs, acned frown and bristled smile have outgrown me. Just when I'd done sufficient work experience to apply myself more easily to the job of mothering, he stopped advertising for my services. The Help Wanted sign disappeared from his door. Do not enquire within. He finds his own clothes and bandaids, relegates toothpaste to weekends and upgrades deodorant. The right to remain silent is invoked when I wonder why a nice girl no longer calls. That's as far as it goes, classified for restricted audience. I'm off the A list for All and Always but still on the B list as Bedtime hugger and Backstop. After all the nappies and grazes rescued, tantrums diffused with solitude and patience, relays from work to crèche, from school to training, I'm the one consigned to 'Time out!' When stories once rolled on a launch-pad pillow his eyes reneged on suspense halfway through. No surprise for me tomorrow. Happily-ever-after was sought before once-upon-a-time began. Now he owns endings. No sneak previews to ensure the all clear. In the dash to provide returns there has been a quiet coup, a manifesto written. A young man, set to run the business, is certain to make changes and expand from the parent company. Retrenchments are likely so I'll start buying the paper and update my résumé.
TRAVELLING WITH THE WRONG PHRASE BOOKS
(For Martin)

Last Days on Our Usual Littoral

Sunset into the shipwrecked house tracks spiders' glittering seams.
The quilted air pads lightly round us this winter

as we pack and prepare for farewells. I almost forget this peninsula
we have beached on, this tongue of land with its lazy phrases
of house and garden, its exclamations of jetties over a lake.

But now, when all our surfaces have been tableclothed
with maps and passports, bills and wills, as I go out into the neighbourhood

I hear the Esperanto of end-of-winter walkers ahead of me.
Three men by the bottle shop clutch their beer. In seeding grass nearby,
seven magpies just as eagerly sipping. A woman hurtles over the hill,

about to take off in pink lycra – and cockatoos & rainbow lorikeets flap up,
screeching news of foreign invasion: “A flamingo at Lake Macquarie!”

Below our house, the water is calm with cloud. Over this mute surface,
swallows flash – then swoop around me as if I could be stitched here,
appliquéd forever into this space. I skip place names

over my mind and watch them sink: England – Scotland;
Germany – Lithuania; Queensland Canberra New South Wales...

We have imagined ourselves all around the planet so much
how can we believe this is where we belong? As the scars of the day
are smoothed over, as the water waits for mullet underneath
to leap up neat as needles, restitching a doona big enough
for all the landscapes of our lives to sleep under,

the edge of this world is littered with memories of its history:
sponges of thongs and mussels; chips of coal and amber-shimmering
beer-bottle glass . . . Through a rip in the sky, sun slips to claim them

and immediately out from under jetties
swallows are swooping, threading themselves with light and looping it,

from land to water and back — so many webs which should hold us
to this littoral — so many lines of connection
and abandonment . . . streamering me now like an ocean liner

as I turn to leave, the hulls of my shoes collecting
a last home-crunch.

On the Plane to Paris

On the plane to Paris, is it too late to learn French?
The child of migrants — and now a global adult —
you don’t think so. Un deux trois . . .
merci, merci . . . s’il vous plaît . . .

Confident as a cockatoo, you sprout these comical crests
while I wonder: speechless for six months,
what mercy could you beg for?

War spun your parents’ globe and slid them
down to the end of the ocean. You grew up on their island,
lapped by three tongues. Feel quite at home now
with none of them.

So, as yet another culture threatens to swamp you,
only at the last moment do you peg your nose,
try for three minutes
to take the senseless plunge . . .
Too late, our seatbelts clicked, Australia beneath us – all around you suddenly you sense
an embryonic lap, a language before thought, easy as baby talk and bubbling toward the sky

because yes, this jumbo belly is full of Germans, hungering home.
The Lufthansa hostess after a quick identi-kit scan guesses you’ll speak her language – und “Ja, danke schön”, you do.

Those other sounds which snorted out of you are gone like blue-bottle pops. Saliva runs over their stings as you burst the foil round your pretzel, close the lesson with a sniff. Well, isn’t the whole world multi-cultural now?

The plane, at any rate, speaks universally.
Screeching louder than the cockatoos unfed in our garden tonight, it launches us into limbo . . .

while I rehearse new ripples introducing us at our far-off touchdown – the hostess pearls pure nonsense three different ways into the displaced oyster shells of my ears – and you go up into clouds as calm as the bubbles in your beer trancing into Tract 1 in the Guide Book for Word 6 safely settled in our laptop.

At Photo Station, Boulevard St-Michel

What language does it need, the cheeky bird which is this Photo Station’s logo? At home in Ad-Land, flying under a rainbow and sticking its beak through a camera lens, it welcomes us.
Snapped for the album now, we’d be forever on this footpath, glad-mouthed as Christmas bells. But while I’m ringing with mind-music of pellicules and négatifs, the ropes which keep this commerce chiming turn your tongue to felt. This language love pre-dates us: a cobble throw from the Sorbonne, it takes me back to sandstone and gargoyles at St Lucia – to grit in my mouth and the scowl of cigar smoke in a tutorial where, to be seventeen and shy and female, stranded me strange as a bellbird in Quasimodo’s ear.

“Today we will discuss L’Étranger – the alienation of Camus – ” Aah oui, agrees the tutor’s djellabah of young men, pleating their voices earnestly around him, we will, we will.

In my Pierre Cardin/Vogue Pattern dress, I am bare-shouldered, shivering in the heat and silence of Algeria – as I hear the French, the French I thought I slept in like a stream,

slither over sand, a sinister ripple no longer to be trusted.

That was 1969. The Paris pavements had already been overturned. At lunchtime forums under poincianas in the Brisbane swelter, while pamphlets printed Apathy and People’s Power in roneo ink on our not-yet met fingers across the Great Court in his laboratory your Lithuanian father was safely translating symbols for catalysts, warning of the dangers of Communists, forgetting his student nickname ‘Bon ami’. Your mother, under lorikeets at Mt Cootha was at home, cooking in German.

Their shadows were not there in that stifled room. But today on the Boulevard St-Michel, spelling in French our shared Anglicised name,
mouthing beside you sounds as odd
as formulae for a bomb –

as a narcissus-pale girl in this Photo Station
reels before my Antipodean breath,

over all of us

the pall of difference falls. I hear how any tongue
flung into foreign air can strike, reptilian –

while our thoughts are still
kind chimes in our clanging heads.
My mother collects antiques but doesn’t believe in history, so I keep her madness in much the same way she hoards crazy china. They are both family heirlooms in that they were here before me, they have a precious if somewhat mysterious value and they will inevitably be passed on. What they also have in common is they are not complete. Pretty china and my mother’s madness are fragments by which to try and read the past and present. She was born in a Yorkshire slum on the same day as Elvis Presley. That much is certain. She was the daughter of Millicent Stone and the Irish drunk, Charlie O’Brien. That much is also certain. Other tales that could be true or could be misunderstood by me are these. My great grandmother had an exceptional ability to curse people. Nobody ever loves a tall person. A bicycle is an evil invention that can ruin both a face and a life, and girl children need to be careful of grave dirt.

Betty Boo was my aunt, my mother’s older sister. She dropped in on a skinny ray of hope five years after the end of the First World War. Millie and Charlie brought her home to Feldspar Street in a pram and left her outside to catch uncertain sunshine and certain admiration. Baby Betty was utterly beautiful and smelled of the very best things in life – survival and young, hot love. She was an exquisite talisman against the stinking obscenities of mustard gas, blood and French mud. She inspired a generation. When young women danced, their dimpled knees flashed below petal skirts and they had little Betty Boo pictures in their eyes. Young men, on the other hand, leaned in doorways wearing baggy trousers that covered the tilting hungers they felt for the girls with Betty Boo longings.

Six days a week Charlie O’Brien caught a tram from Feldspar Street to the copper works. He stayed there for ten hours at a time so he could keep bread and meat on the table, milk powder in the cupboard and buy silk stockings for Millie’s birthday. Millie and her mother took in washing and ironing, spending their days grating lye, scrubbing shirt collars on rippled wash boards.
and heating irons on the stove. At night Charlie relaxed with a pint while Millie fell into exhausted, milky dreams of her husband and daughter. Charlie and Millie were good people in a brief moment of happiness doing their best to care for infant dreams of peace, but national trouble and family history had a firm hold of them and their innocence couldn't last.

Gnawing on their future like rats in wainscotting were new envies, old spite and a gathering war. The war was, in some ways, the least of their problems and it came on slowly and at a distance. It is probably enough to say that during the decade after Betty Boo was born there was trouble in the Rhineland, and a young man with infernal fire in his belly set out to become the Chancellor of a Republic he was hell bent on destroying. So, in some ways it was business as usual across the world, in other ways it was the worst of times. Consumerism, on the other hand, was more immediate. The New World fed inadequacies and jealousies in the unlikely shapes of toasters, shoes and Millie's mother, Grandmother Stone.

The electric lights of America could almost be seen in the night sky from the east coast of the British Isles and Millie and Charlie desperately hoped jazz would come to Feldspar Street. In anticipation, Millie bought one of the new pretty low waisted dresses off the rack and a long wool coat to wear with the silk stockings Charlie had given her. Despite spending twenty-five days a month in flat brown lace up shoes, with baggy floral pinnies tied round her slim waist, she lived in the sort of hope that could just possibly have withstood a world-wide depression. Unfortunately it could not survive Grandmother Stone's glittering mica eyes and bitter tongue.

Grandmother Stone was a needed pair of hands at Feldspar Street, but she was impervious to the charms of Baby Betty and downright hostile to Millie and Charlie. As her only child, Millie knew much of what life had dealt the old woman but she never got round to seeing it through her own eyes. Grandfather Stone had been an industrious worker in a textile mill. His little daughter was an unexpected gift for his autumn years but before Millie's birth his left hand was crushed in an accident with a power loom. A sense of indebtedness to his wife who dealt with the festering poverty and pain of the subsequent decade hollowed him out absolutely. By the time he died, a sack of pale skin on white hospital sheets, he'd been invisible to eight year old Millie for most of her life. He never even saw the start of hostilities in Europe. Compared to other husbands in her acquaintance, his was an ignominious death, one that left Grandmother Stone with no medals and no pension. It was hard for her to forgive her husband the extra suffering she had to endure because of his injuries, so she didn't.

Millie took over where her father had left off. An only child, her mother's
welfare and happiness were her mission in life. So, as they worked together on the bag washes, she shared what was joyful to her with her mother – Baby Betty’s softness and Charlie’s crooked Irish charm. Millie was not a strong woman, her biggest ambition was to be the first in the street with a shiny, silver toaster. However, like a watercolour sun, she brought a little brightness into the industrial grey and brick sepia of Feldspar Street. She trod the bumpy cobblestones lightly as a young wife, and for her the smoke curling above the popping, hissing gaslights even held a certain poetry. Grandmother Stone’s heart was devoid of such flummery and she found her daughter’s generous vision of council housing suspect. Protestant by birth, the old woman had a natural, grim Catholicism about her. To her, pleasure and sin were easily confused and she resented Millie’s soul being endangered by love. Millie’s salvation required an eye sharpened to the injustices of daily life. So Grandmother Stone did her best to educate her daughter. Her bitterness was a pianola scroll of discord that ran like ghost music through their days. Beer and butter became measures of love and distress in Feldspar Street, as did Mary McCardle’s shoes.

Mary McCardle had been at school with Millie, and Grandmother Stone had cordially despised both the girl and her parents. Mary, however, had since married a foreman by the name of Evans who worked at Fairbairns Mill. He was an Englishman who provided his young wife with good shoes to wear every day of her life, a fact that both appalled and titillated the old woman. They were not the sturdy brown lace-ups most women did their shopping in. No, Mary McCardle had more than one pair of soft black leather pumps with thick crossover straps and a button on the side. While Grandmother Stone believed the girl to be as spoiled as a Sunday dinner on Monday morning, she found her strategically useful when dealing with the inhabitants of Feldspar Street. Sometimes Mary’s shoes were the reward for a beauty Millie did not possess, an observation truly crushing to Millie’s spirits if she became too contented. Sometimes the foreman’s pride would never see his family going without. Charlie’s eyes would darken at the insinuations, but it was not her fault, the old woman would say, that he took her nattering so seriously or that he was so sensitive about the Irish having no pride. When it came to Betty Boo, the old woman appointed her Mary McCardle’s successor – one bound to do well for herself. After all, she would say, one look showed how Betty Boo never went without while her mother’s brogues were quite worn through. Yes, Grandmother Stone got great mileage from Mary McCardle’s shoes.

Like frogs sitting in a slowly heating pot, the extended O’Brien family endured the next few years. It wasn’t all bad. Little Betty grew with the speed of a sapling in compost. By the age of six, she was tossing thick, black
hair as she hopscotched down Feldspar Street and rehearsed a blue-eyed Irish charm on the local priest who was preparing her for her first communion. She delighted her father by being saucy behind her Grandmother’s back, and she was her mother’s pet, able to coax odd ha’pennies from the budget even when Millie was having to choose between lard and soap at the corner shop. Grandmother Stone disliked Betty Boo intensely. However, as she said, good discipline was wasted on pert children, so she settled for despising Charlie.

The old woman forbade Millie from serving Charlie his dinner. Not directly, of course, and not all at once. Only if he wasn’t on the first homebound tram. If Charlie went down the pub for a pint, he more often than not came in to an empty table. Food packed away and dishes done. The fights followed like clockwork. As the brass door knob turned, Millie would suddenly pay great attention to her knitting. There would be reproach, coldness, harsh words, heat, tears and regrets. In the night there would often then be confusion and more hardening of feeling. Charlie would mutter in their bed that the old witch should watch herself, and Millie would never see how her mother had anything to do with Charlie’s practice of spending drinking hours with Seth McCormack. In the morning the unacceptable bread and cheese that had been raged over the night before reappeared, softened with a small jar of homemade marmalade and a large pot of stewed tea. At first it only happened on a Saturday. And then, chances were, things could be tolerable for a while.

Though she despised Charlie, Grandmother Stone had no sympathy with Millie. She’d wanted a daughter with pride, not a girl with silly romantic notions in her head. A late baby, the old woman often suspected Millie was weak in the intellect as well as weak in her dealings with her husband. Saying that, she’d look sideways to assess the effect of her words on Betty Boo, but Betty Boo saw beyond her grandmother. On every count she refused invitations to despise her parents. While the child recognised that Millie and Charlie were imperfect, she knew full well there were worse parents on Feldspar Street. More than that, still generating a post-war glow, she lived with the compassionate knowledge that her life would be better than theirs. That led her into a natural kindness.

From the age of ten, Betty Boo bleached her own socks and underwear spotless, she cooked while her mother did bag washes, and she went to the fish markets at sunrise on Friday mornings with her father to buy the evening dinner. She even fetched her grandmother to the doctor. The Doctor said Grandmother Stone’s heart was her problem. Betty Boo was impressed with the accuracy of the diagnosis, but she wondered why it wasn’t obvious to everyone that Grandmother Stone’s heart was Charlie and Millie’s problem
too. By the middle of 1934, things were bleak. Coal was expensive, bread and dripping served as a main meal at least two days a week and people were washing and drying their own clothes on the settle. The O'Brien marriage was just over a decade old and fights had settled in like a daily drizzle that had the Roman Catholic priest visiting once a fortnight to talk of Irish duty and Irish family.

Charlie turned to fortifying ales at lunch as well as tea and no longer looked Millie, Betty Boo, Grandmother Stone or the priest in the eye. Millie relentlessly scrubbed the front step, until it had a dip like a saucer in it, and her knuckles wrinkled and split like old fruit. Charlie’s black hair quickly became as white as his daughter’s smalls. Millie steamed tripe while the love of her life staggered home singing songs of betrayed love, and at night they fell into a cold bed. Indeed, the O’Brien bed was so chilly it surprised everyone, even Millie and Charlie, that a second babe could be conceived in it.

Betty Boo’s sister, Nellie, could not have been more different from the blessed child herself. Betty’s first decade had been one of plenty. There’d been no shortage of meat, potatoes and adoration, and in that time she had grown rosy as a milkmaid. Her blue eyes flashed, her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders when she wore it down, and her limbs were rounded and dimpled. She was the queen of Feldspar Street, with a mouth on her that was both beautiful and foul. Coming up twelve, lips like crushed strawberries she dropped casual obscenities in front of the gangling boys and turned them resentful and warm in one sentence. However, perhaps because Millie was on the depression diet, Nellie was thin and angular, and her colouring was disappointingly English. Her hair never achieved the rich black of Betty Boo’s and her eyes were a mongrel hazel. She was a needy baby who was left to cry herself to sleep and got in the way of her entire family just by breathing.

It wasn’t right, but it was an accident of history. Not that Millie did not care for her new daughter, she did. But Millie was tired with beating endless coppers, pandering to her dying mother and propping up an alcoholic husband. Europe was deeply unsettled and every day brought bad news to the city. Wages only went so far. Eating well became a luxury and many things were hard to get. Betty Boo walked three miles a week for just a few fresh eggs. Then she wore her young legs out running up and down for her grandmother’s drops, shawl, slippers, and chamber pot. Eventually, Charlie was let go from the copper works and the O’Brien’s and Grandmother Stone faced a second big war.

A paper twist of condensed milk in a mug of stewed tea kept a man looking for work for an entire day in these times, while in tiny grey kitchens women performed economical magic with offal and scrubbed themselves and
their children in the sinks where they washed vegetables. It was sad, but there was just no place in Feldspar Street for a maungy toddler in this time. What was cute and hopeful the decade before was now an exercise in futility and a burden. Nellie could have been just as charming and glossy as Baby Betty, it would have made little difference. She was born at the wrong time. Charlie was too full of self-pity and booze to be any good to his new daughter, an exciting mix of fear and independence was waking in both Millie and Betty as they turned their eyes to the new industries in the city, and Grandmother Stone directly competed with Nellie for care in the family. It was a competition Nellie could never win.

Little Nellie became a bit of a favourite with one of Millie’s old school friends. Ada Robert’s household was louder, dirtier and in many ways happier than Feldspar Street. Ada and Arthur had married later than Millie and Charlie, as Ada had nursed elderly parents. Ada was destined to care. There were two children already there. Derek was four years older than Nellie, destructive and difficult, and the baby was not yet walking. Ada had her hands full because Arthur spent a lot of time in the sanatorium and, when he was home, was either down the pub or laying on the couch hawking bloodied sputum into a handkerchief. Little Nellie was useful in the same way a puppy would have been. She kept Derek amused as his mother doted on the demanding husband and a grizzling infant. At Grandmother Stone’s suggestion, Millie and Charlie, who had another job now making uniforms, paid Ada seven shillings and sixpence a week to rear their daughter. This worked out well for everyone except Nellie, who had to straddle the rather peculiar gap of years and streets between her family of origin and the family who shaped her in key ways.

By the time the conflict came to that part of Britain, Little Nell was seven years old and she’d grown as rapidly as Betty Boo had at that age. However, she had none of the roundness or sass that had endeared Baby Betty to the world. She was long and thin and resentful with a sharp tongue to boot. She didn’t exactly go hungry, but her joints poked through her clothes as a testament to the pared meals of the depression. Her earliest memories were of crouching under kitchen tables as planes flew over the blacked out city. The bombs never came to either of the houses she lived in, but she could sometimes hear them whistling. Having read the story of Chicken Little, Nellie tried to imagine the bombs as large acorns, but the craters that appeared in the earth let her know the sky really was falling. Nellie had been robbed by history of something that had been Betty Boo’s birthright - hope. While Betty Boo’s spirit was imbued with the cheerfulness of a bright morning, Nellie’s was infected with fear and loss.
Nellie’s realisation that, though she might be loved, she was not thought fondly of by anyone came just before the war. The Shirley Temple rage meant her hair was tied in thick fingers of rags as she shared the fireside with Ada and the other two children. Derek leaned indolently against Ada’s legs while the baby, now three years old curled into her mother’s bony chest. Nellie stood by and watched them. The fire lit their faces from underneath, softening features. It gave the three of them an almost holy, golden glow. Ada breathed a deep sigh of contentment, then realised that Nellie was looking longingly at the child in her lap. As much to wall off her own guilt as Nellie’s need she brusquely told Nellie she was too tall to be cuddled.

How words pierce spirit is certainly one of the mysteries of modern life, but there is no doubt that they do. Nellie continued to stand by the chair and then she later went to bed as normal, but she was mortally wounded. Like the child in the story of the Ice Queen, something cold had lodged in her heart and her very well being and future were endangered from that moment. She was too tall to be loved. Tall girls could not be loved. It was a simple and rather strange truth, but one a child had no difficulty believing, and it explained a lot. It explained her absence from Feldspar Street, her difference from Betty Boo, and her failure to graft properly to Ada’s family. So much that was puzzling and painful to the little girl made sense when seen as the result of a physical flaw. In the firelight, Nellie had wished quite violently she was a boy like Derek, so it didn’t matter how tall she was. That night she went to sleep curled up into a ball, crying almost the last tears she would ever cry.

If the matter of her height stirred deep feelings of rejection, the matter of the bicycle sealed them. Every Friday, she returned to Feldspar Street after school to have fish dinner with her parents and grandmother and to silently envy Betty who was now working in a munitions factory and stepping out with a young man from the university. To say Betty was beautiful was an understatement. She was ravishing. Her dark hair was a silky undulation of richness and her Irish skin was unflawed. With colour on her eyes and lips, she looked like Dorothy Lamour. Nellie adored and hated her sister and was desperately self-conscious about her own angles when confronted with the rich curves of Betty Boo’s eighteen year old breasts and hips. If Betty’s boyfriend spoke to her, she squirmed and blushed and stumbled over her words. It was all reasonably normal, and Nellie might have moved through this stage without permanent damage, but her parents were ignorant of their own darkness and the peculiar fragility of a child’s mind.

Charlie O’Brien had been unhappy for a very long time. Too young to fight for his country in the first big war, he’d decided to still make it a safe place for women and children. Using the rhetoric of battle, Charlie had set up a
family. Too late, he discovered while he might want to save women and children, he didn’t really like living with them. His needs were simple and their needs seemed deeply complicated. When he was first married, Charlie had found contentment in a pay packet, a full stomach and a pint with the lads. Satisfaction, however, was a shifting goal post for Grandmother Stone and, in a world of art silk underwear, perfume, newspapers and suffrage, it became elusive for Millie and even Betty Boo. Charlie grew bitter and angry with the women of his family because they never seemed to be satisfied. His personal nation building strategy had failed. He really didn’t believe it was his fault and he resented his shortcomings being reflected back at him in the eyes of his wife and older daughter. If it had been possible, he would have hit them but that would have destroyed his own hero myth. Besides, fifteen years of drinking had made him almost impotent. There was only one person left Charlie could even the scores with – little Nellie.

Charlie was cruel, and didn’t bother to think about why. His story was that the drink made him a bit nasty, but he actually spoke out of vicious weakness when he told Nellie she was an “ugly bairn.” An ugly baby. Betty Boo was beautiful and Nellie was ugly. Once Charlie had said it, Friday night fish dinners became a trial for Nellie. She loved being at Feldspar Street getting small doses of true family, but she hated the humiliation that was her lot with her father. Like wine fermenting into vinegar she slowly brewed her sense of injustice as she sat at the table with the preoccupied women of her family and her bitter, unpleasant father.

The day she fell off the bicycle, the authority of Charlie’s story crystallised and she understood it much better. She’d been to the shop to get flour, butter and sugar, and coming back she misjudged a kerb. As she went over the handlebars she protected the precious groceries and failed to protect her face. Her chin hit the raised cobblestone and her slightly crooked upper teeth pierced her lip. The initial blood flow was impressive and she limped through the doorway at Feldspar Street with a large patch of crimson on the front of her white school blouse.

Betty Boo was out with a friend, Charlie was down the local. Grandmother Stone greeted her with vexation – the stain, the lack of consideration for others, the (last) despised tears. It was classic Grandmother Stone. Millie was more gentle, but a little distracted. She put the blouse into soak in cold water then helped Nellie clean her face. She was worried when she saw the hole in Nellie’s lip went through to the outside. It needed repair. By the time they reached the doctor there was no more blood. More to keep Millie happy than anything the young man decided two stitches were in order. This did not make Millie as happy as he expected. There would be a scar. Any marks
were bad for girls. They could ruin appearances, ruin any chance of a good marriage, and ruin a life. The doctor understood this to be mid-life fretting from a woman on the brink of losing her own beauty. Nellie understood this to mean that now everyone would see what her father had seen in her. The tumble off the bicycle made her officially ugly to the whole world.

In the months following this incident, while her young understanding struggled with Derek’s desire to pull her knickers down all the time and her mother’s anxiety about her being disfigured, Grandmother Stone died. Cantankerous to the point of vile, the old woman finally began cursing the family that looked after her. She turned Charlie yellow with bile and he vomited out his rage for weeks. Finally he gave up drinking, but not before being fired again. The old woman told him he would beat her to the gate of Hell and she knew all along he couldn’t do an Englishman’s job. Millie became spiritless with Charlie out of work and sick, her own long hours at the factory where she now worked wore her down almost as much as her mother’s gloating. Grandmother Stone had been determined that Millie would not have a better life than her, and except for the small aberration that was Betty Boo, here was a twin destiny. Millie was simply taking her turn looking after a useless man and being the mother of a girl child that simply could not be cherished. Poor little Nellie. Grandmother Stone did not need to curse her particularly as the child’s life was clearly presided over by a certain malice. And she didn’t bother to curse Betty Boo either. What was the point when Betty simply sidestepped the old woman’s rancid heart with her adorable feelings of entitlement.

The rancid heart finally collapsed in on itself like a piece of moulding fruit. And in the end there were only a few abrupt hours in which to say goodbye. Millie and Nellie witnessed the whole thing and were spat upon for their pains just before the death rattle. Charlie fell off the wagon and got plastered. He never saw the inside of the hospital, never smelled the disinfectant and never spoke to the sallow faced man in the pin striped suit who obligingly took his mother-in-law’s body away. Betty Boo would probably have said her farewells to her grandmother, but things weren’t critical when she went off with her friends on that Thursday to learn the jitterbug, and by the time she’d mastered the new steps it was all too late to ever speak to the old woman again.

Betty did, however, go to the funeral. She had to support her mother who was collapsing under dreadful grief. Millie’s fitted cap had a veil that hid her swollen eyes, and her navy blue suit bespoke her bereaved status but words can never describe the despair that sat on her like lead ballast. The weight
came from a life time of never having being good enough and facing a future without the one person who could relieve her of that feeling. Millie went to great lengths to settle the old woman's spirit unable to realise it was her own that needed appeasing. Once a week she took caught two trams and walked a mile and a half to the cemetery to lay flowers, weed and weep. And she took young Nellie with her.

It was there that everything fell into place for the girl. At the end of the visit Little Nellie had to step on her grandmother's grave to pull up her prostrate mother. As she did, she unexpectedly realised the advantage of being tall. She had become the big person, while her mother had shrunk to the size of something almost contemptible. Seeing her mother in this way established a deep kinship between the living and the dead. Nellie drank in her grandmother's spirit as if it was ambrosia. To be small was to be needy, to require the touch and kindness of others. To be tall was to be beyond those needs and even able to deny them to someone else. Given those options, Nellie couldn't see the advantage in being small. The end of the war was close to the British people, but Nellie was just getting ready to fight her way through life. She had to find ways to deal with the drunk and cruel Charlie O'Brien, the sad and lovely Millie, the beautiful and untouchable Betty Boo and the demanding and lecherous Derek. She assisted her mother to her feet, but she did not offer her even a second of compassion.

As well as immunising Nellie against unwarranted tendernesses, Grandmother Stone's magic included practical attack skills. Nellie had an exceptional talent with language. Years of witnessing unkindness meant words fired from the little girl's cooling heart with the accuracy of sniper bullets. At first she practiced on school friends. Girls with bright eyes and shining hair flinched when she noticed their foolishness, fingered their self-conscious anxieties with truth. Nellie took that glad knowledge home to Betty Boo. Pretty but stupid, she said to her sister and held her ground. Betty lost control first, then Betty's tears had another name. Weak. Now that Nellie could see what Grandmother Stone saw when she was alive, she knew that her whole family was riddled with weakness. That made her the strong one. Betty was bonny, but vain. Millie was loving but couldn't see why any one would ever really care for her. And Charlie was unable to say no to liquor. The scar from the bicycle witnessed her own initiation into cruelty, but in her view it also marked her as a survivor. The worst had already been done to her. She had been expelled from her own family, but found somewhere else to be. She had been mocked as a pale, thin child of the depression but Derek's fumblings showed her she could still be desired. Bombs had been literally dropped around her but she was alive.
Just after entering secondary school, my mother turned away from the family that didn’t deserve her. Much was happening beyond Feldspar Street and the two up, two down house was just too small for a girl who read a book a day. Bright and prepared to move on in whatever way she could, she turned her young and blistering gaze on the world and wondered what it would offer her. Her rather strange psychology was deeply synchronised with history. She was a child of empire, and she and her kind had just won the biggest war ever. She’d also seen the women streaming from the factories tucking their pay packets into their bags. Fluent in human weakness, she firmly believed she would never have to rely on anyone else to make her way in the world. So, at the age of fourteen she got a job in the local greengrocers and bought herself a pair of patent leather pumps, black with a fashionably high heel and a featured button on one side.
"True! – Nervous – Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?"


A flicker. "Why do you use other people’s words when you talk about yourself?"

"If I made up my own words, you’d think I was crazy."

She doesn’t laugh.

"There are no books in here, so all I can do is remember stories I’ve read, repeat them to myself, like someone out of Fahrenheit 451. I’m starting to feel like... what’s that Borges story about the guy who decides he’s going to write Don Quixote from scratch, without having read the original?"

She writes something in her notebook, but doesn’t answer.

"Of course, in the story, he manages to make it word-perfect: in fact, the critics rave about it, say it has levels of meaning that Cervantes didn’t manage. But that’s just a story. The only version of Don Quixote I know that was written like that is pretty fucking spectacular, because it was illustrated by hand... no, that’s not the right word... it’s illuminated, like one of those medieval manuscripts. You can see it in the Collection de l’Art Brut."

She raises an eyebrow at that. Maybe it was my accent. "What’s that? Or where?"

"Lausanne. Switzerland. It’s a gallery for art created by psychiatric patients. It translates literally as ‘Raw Art’, but in English it’s usually called Outsider art, which I always thought was a bit perverse, because the people who did it were Inside. Schizophrenics, bipolars, psychotics. Maybe I should send them something when I get back Outside."

"Have you been there?"

"When I was a kid. It’s near the headquarters of the Olympics committee."
Now that’s a fucking scary building. Looks like it was designed by Albert Speer – you know, Hitler’s architect. I went to the Collection to get away from it. There’s some scary stuff in there, too, but on the whole, it’s actually quite wonderful.

“Do you feel at home there?”

“More than I do here, that’s for fucking sure,” I say, looking around her office. It can’t be her real office; unless she’s bureaucrat Barbie, born in a box, she must have a place somewhere with her certificates on the wall, photos on the desk, books on the shelves, Far Side cartoons on the calendar. This box is as bare of personal touches as the inside of a pill bottle with the label removed. The whole fucking place is like that.

“What about your real home?”

“It’s my parents’ home, not mine. I’m not saying that they’re not my parents. I don’t have, what to they call it, Kapsbrak, no, that’s that kid out of the Stephen King novel, the one who, uh... Capgras syndrome. That’s it.”

“Capgras syndrome?”

“Thinking that people around you have been replaced by doubles. Like Invasion of the Body Snatchers. I read about it in Scientific American. Or Tourette’s Syndrome. I just swear sometimes when I’m upset. Fuck, all teenagers swear. Sometimes I lose control of it, but Jesus, they’re just fucking words!”

“But you do get depressed.”

“Fuck, yes! Doesn’t everyone?”

“You get depressed a lot.”

“Maybe.”

“And you write when you’re supposed to be studying. They caught you writing a poem during your biology exam. But you won’t take medication.”

“The fucking pills stop me writing.” She doesn’t say that that’s the point, but I can tell she’s thinking it. “You didn’t answer my question,” I remind her. “Why can’t I have some fucking books?”

“We can’t provide books for everybody, and the ones you’ve chosen aren’t going to help cure your depression. Other patients might find them even more disturbing. Anyway, there are magazines – ”

“Doctor’s waiting room magazines. Sometimes I think they’re a major cause of illness.”

“– and the TV...”

I snort. “Reality TV. If people want to see reality, why don’t they look out a fucking window? Why don’t you feed your closed circuit cameras here into everybody’s TV instead, and let them vote us the fuck out of here?”
“It could be worse,” J whispers, as we sit at the furthest corner of the room from the TV, bent over a chess board. Big Brother may be watching us, but he’s not a good listener. J has her eyes half-closed and is touching her eyelids lightly to make a kaleidoscope. She says she read that Dali said he’d do that if they tried to stop him painting.

“How?”

“We might not be white. Crazy people who don’t look white get shipped overseas. Don’t you watch the news?”

“Not any more. They say it makes me depressed.” It’s just like reality TV, except that we don’t get as many chances to vote people out. “Did you try asking for some books?”

“Yes, but I thought I’d better make up my own list. They’d get suspicious if I gave them yours.”

“Why?”


“They’re all on the school’s recommended reading list,” I say, and cringe at how defensive I sound. “Okay, can you ask them for La Passe-Muraille?”

“They know I don’t speak French. What is it?”

“It’s about someone who can walk through walls. I suppose they might think that was escapist.”

J looks around at the walls and up at the ceiling. They could also pass for white, at least in bright sunlight, but in this weather they’re the same dull grey as the boiled potatoes we had for dinner. J, I know, sees them as a blank canvas, as she does most walls. That’s sort of why she’s in there, for painting graffiti. When they took her paints away, she went back to drawing on paper, but that seemed too flimsy, too temporary, so she started turning herself into a work of art instead, using her skin as a canvas. They tried taking her inks away from her, but she managed to find needles and razor blades, and when they tried taking those, she used fire. It sounds as though her parents weren’t so distressed by the methods she was using for decorating her body as they were by the way she was exhibiting her work, but maybe that’s just the way she tells the story.

She took her medication for a while, and was briefly fascinated that it turned her urine purple. The staff thought she was hallucinating, but the doctor said it was a common side-effect. After that, she grew bored with it. She asks me to tell her again about the art galleries I visited when I was in Europe. I do my best to describe what I saw in Paris and Milan and London, the d’Orsay and Brera and V&A, but as always we ended up back at the Collection de l’Art Brut. This time I tell her about Henry Darger, whose work
I first saw in a room there. Darger was sent to an orphanage at eight, diagnosed as an habitual trouble-maker, and kept in various mental institutions until he escaped when he was sixteen. He spent most of the next sixty-four years cleaning hospitals, attending mass daily, conversing with the voices in his head, and writing. He started writing his autobiography until it turned into a story of a tornado named Sweetie Pie on page 207 and continued in that vein for the next four thousand or so pages, but he’s best known for his 15,000 page epic titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. The Vivian Girls were traced from pictures scavenged from Chicago’s rubbish bins, and the manuscript is illustrated – no, illuminated – with hundreds of paintings and sketches and collages, some of them three metres wide. Darger was better at drawing incredibly realistic clouds and brilliantly coloured landscapes than he was at the female form, but he did draw the girls’ penises himself. The work remained his secret until it was discovered by his landlord after his death. Darger’s death, that is, not the landlord’s.

“Hundreds…” I breathe.

I nod. “And 15,000 single-spaced pages. But over sixty-four years, that’s not even a page a day. I’m doing better than that now. Most days, anyway.”

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“Why do you feel the need to write so much?” the interrogator asks.

It’s a wet day, as grey outside as it is inside, one of those times when I think we might be better off if no one had ever invented windows; I feel cold even though I know that it really isn’t. The room’s empty bookshelves remind me of a skeleton, a rib-cage. When I was dissecting a rat in biology class, they accidentally gave me one that had been pithed, its brain burnt out by an electric current. I opened the skull only to find it empty. I shrug. “Why do people write?” I ask. “Something to do? A way of being somewhere else? A way of making sense of the world?”

“Do you feel happier when you’re writing?”

“Happier’s not the right word.”

“Your work seems rather bleak. Do you think that’s healthy?”

“I don’t know. Is lying healthier than telling the truth?”

“You think this is the truth?”

“It’s my truth.”

She nods at that. “Do you want to be somewhere else?”

“Fuck yes!”
“Where?”

I look at her suspiciously. “If you’re thinking of sending me overseas, my ancestors came from Europe. Bin gar keine Russin, staumm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.”

“I know about your background,” she says with a good imitation of patience. “I’m just reminding you that if you take your medication, and we observe a positive change, you’ll be free to leave.”

“You’ll see a positive change if I can get out of here, but I can’t imagine it happening before then.”

“You were depressed before you came here.”

I shrug.

“Why won’t you take the medication?”

“It makes me feel slow and stupid, and that’s about all I can fucking feel when I take it! It stops me writing! There has to be something better than the fucking pills!”

“Not yet,” she says, and for a moment I look at her face and it’s like an epiphany, like looking at one of those trick pictures where you suddenly see a beautiful woman’s profile so clearly that you can never look at this again and not see it, never see only what you saw before... I realize that she does understand. Worse still, she believes what she’s saying. She might even be right.

Maybe the writing isn’t about being somewhere else. Maybe it’s about being someone else. No, that can’t be right. I don’t want to be someone else. I don’t.

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J and I sit on her bed and stare through the window at the clouds, then turn to face the wall. We’ve decided that if we work together, we can do something worthy of being hung in the Collection de l’Art Brut. “Are you ready?” I ask.

She nods, and holding hands, we walk through the wall.
The first phone call came shortly before midnight. Old Kim’s voice was feeble and distressed, and in retrospect I think he was already dying.

“Somebody’s creeping about in the backyard,” he said. “I’ll observe the protocols, don’t worry about that, but you’d better know.”

We had always been concerned about the size of the garden areas at the safe-house, but it had to be located in a semi-rural area so that the neighbouring houses were out of sight and earshot. Besides, the house itself was supposed to be as secure as the Perth Mint.

I opened my wall-safe and selected identity papers, double-checking that I’d taken the right ones. I was now old Kim’s son-in-law, still keeping in contact long after the death of his daughter ... and just hoping that Kim could still remember the agreed name for the daughter.

There’d be no traffic this late at night so I knew I’d reach the far fringe of Wanneroo within fifteen minutes.

The second call was diverted to my mobile as I drove.

“Two of the bastards...” He was breathless, agitated. “Young louts. Tried to jemmy the back door ... ran off when they saw me. But I’m not feeling so good. No doctor, though; I know the protocols.”

I winced at his loyalty to us, obeying safe-house protocol to the end. No calls to doctors, police, or public utilities; ASIO handled all of that, through me, so that nothing could ever get out of control. Project Kipling must not be compromised, especially after so many decades of operating successfully. It was strange for a man once accustomed to being in charge to be so obsequious, but I had come to understand that it was Kim’s form of loyalty to play strictly by our rules; it was his way of expressing his gratitude to us.

That’s why I had come to like the old bloke. He was straight and direct. I still couldn’t stomach or justify the way he’d abandoned his family and his responsibilities, but over the years I’d seen that this made good sense to him, given the choices he’d faced. Now ASIO was guardian of his dark secret and
he candidly accepted that his fate lay in our hands.

The safe-house was situated at the far end of a No Through Road. In the 1990s, as Kim grew more frail, we had instigated intruder scares in the street in order to encourage people to buy guard dogs. That had worked well, and barking dogs had become Kim’s early warning system when strangers entered the street. They barked at my car now, and I wondered why they hadn’t warned off Kim’s intruders. Local lads, perhaps?

The gate to Kim’s driveway was padlocked as always; that deterred visitors and was entirely credible for a codger in his nineties. The worried son-in-law parked at a reckless angle out front, then seemingly cursed and fumbled with the padlock on the front gate. A watching neighbour wouldn’t have noticed that he also sent off a coded signal to his headquarters in Canberra, warning that Project Kipling had opened a new page.

We all knew that any new page was likely to be the last page, and that wasn’t wrong. Old Kim was dead by the time I entered the house.

I felt a deep, deep pang – far stronger than I had ever expected the moment would bring. As if to shield myself from that surge of emotion, I turned away from the form on the sofa and ran a quick check on the house. There were no signs of entry, but the main back door was open and someone had bashed at the flyscreen on the locked security door. They’d have been surprised to discover the old pensioner was protected by state-of-the-art security mesh, but I doubt if the scum who’d done this had the brains to spot anomalies.

I went back to the living area, closed the eyes of the old man slumped on the sofa, and sent off a coded alert. Project Kipling was winding down.

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The ASIO Regional Co-ordinator arrived twenty minutes later, and by that time the devastated son-in-law had phoned for police and ambulance and had opened the driveway gates for their arrival. In his distress, he had not thought to turn on any porch lights; that minimised the likelihood of alerting the neighbours.

“So he was dead when you arrived? But no intruders got inside?”

I nodded.

“And he made no calls – no cops or ambo – he just rang you? And you’ve made the triple-0 calls from his phone?”

I nodded again, and now he relaxed.

“Ron,” he introduced himself, shaking hands. “So why was it called Project Kipling?”
That rocked me. Was he testing me, trying to see if I would be careless now that it was all over? No; he was a younger man, probably late thirties, so it was more likely that he simply didn’t know the early background. But I decided to step carefully.

“Well, you’re aware that Kim was only his nickname?”

“Yes, I know all that. Real name Harold, and when he was asked to choose a new identity he settled on ‘Kim’ after Kim Philby, whose real first name was also Harold.”

“It was just a joke,” I explained. “He was being ironic, because Kim Philby was the last person he’d be linked with – but he loved the idea of two Harold from different political sides both sheltering under the name Kim. And it stuck. Then they had to dream up a code-name for the operation, and you know how these things work: some deskbound wit sees that the name Kim is a ninety-degree tangent from reality, and he decides that the name for the operation has to lie at a further tangent. So they connected ‘Kim’ with the Jungle Book rather than Philby – hence Project Kipling.”

That answered his question but gave little away.

“Clever if you go in for that sort of thing,” he murmured, also giving nothing away.

Stalemate.

He began to look at the pictures on the walls, the books, the few meagre decorations on shelves.

“You can see clues here if you know what to look for,” he said. “The well-thumbed books are on politics, see: biographies of Menzies, Fraser, even Gough. And the paintings – so many beaches and seascapes. There’d have been a protocol that he couldn’t go to beaches or swim; he must have missed that part of his life…”

No more than he should have missed his own wife and family, I thought. No more than he would miss the endless round of dinners and decisions that he had sacrificed everything to escape. But I didn’t like where this was headed, not at all.

“Look, I like the old bloke,” I said, peeved. “He became a friend – I’m not going to betray him. The bloody secret is safe!”

“I wasn’t testing you,” he said, “sorry if I gave that impression. It’s tough for you because you’re burying a friend as much as ending an assignment. It’s tough for me because this is the biggest thing I’ve ever handled for ASIO. What do I do if one of the cops says, Hey this guy looks like Harold Holt?”

That was what I feared. It could all fall apart so easily, right at the point where it would otherwise be finished.

“They made him grow a beard, you know – from the ’70s right through to
the '90s.' The thought made me grin, despite the tension of waiting. "He upped and shaved it off a few days after Howard was elected in '96. No one would've recognised him by then - too aged."

We both resisted the urge to glance at the shape on the sofa. Where were the damn cops?

"I've never known the full story," said Ron, "only what I needed to know, and I've only been the Regional since '99. Apparently they found him in Darwin two years after Portsea?"

I suspected that he knew, but we both needed talk to mask the tension.

"Two years and two days! There was TV publicity on the night of the second anniversary of his disappearance - 1969 - and the next day a Darwin schoolteacher told the local police she thought she'd seen him at a bus stop. The cops passed it on, and ASIO found him living in a beachside caravan park."

"And banged him into a safe-house, poor bugger."

Old Kim had never talked about that time. In his later years, after his wife had died, he reminisced guardedly about the way he had planned his fake drowning and plotted his escape-route to a simple, uncluttered life. But he never mentioned that moment when the system reclaimed him. What must it have felt like? - freedom, but on our terms. Protocols until death.

Headlights brightened the front of the house - first police, then the ambulance.

We eyed them off as they stepped into the light of the hallway. A tanned young female and a fresh-faced rookie from the squad car, two hunky workout fanatics from the ambulance. All four of them born long after Harold Holt disappeared at Cheviot Bay on December 17, 1967.

For them he had never existed, and we answered their perfunctory questions with our well-planned lies and muttered gravely as they offered condolences.

But I felt only loss as they trolleyed the frail body down the front path, headed for cremation under a name chosen in jest.
CURRICULUM VITAE

What are her weaknesses? Well, she's a writer, and writers will always place their art above any other career, so don't expect her to put the job first.

- A referee (who needs enemies?)

Go back to school and get some nous.

- Angry first boss, who was also a poet, and pronounced it to rhyme with "louse"

Sessional, part-time, casual, fixed-term, adjunct, freelance, substitute,
Temping, cobbling, stretching, relieving, resting
Only ever euphemistically. In residence, meaning
Soon leaving. It never seemed real to me
But kept biting till I learned to stand back.
Narcissism, egotism, think the world owes you a living,
God’s gift. Can’t stick at anything. It rolled by
Like an in-flight movie, in snatches
Repeating and edited for a general audience,
With the sound dropped out, the invisible captain
Always interrupting: the race, the course of a life. Le train-train
Quotidien that made her stop eating. Métro boulot no go –
If she'd been a poet, she could have justified it.
A series of workshops each winter, don’t list the dates
It looks better when there are no gaps, though the one
Advantage of sexist assumptions
Is the woman can say, I was raising children.
Home duties. Self-employed. I was working, I just didn’t have a job.
HOUSEKEEPER

Of diminishing economies:
Each week she returned
To the place, there was less
Of everything: the boys’ clothes
Gone to that place only boys’ clothes go
Like dogs’ heaven, hopeful but never provable,
The iron burned out, the fridge
Reduced to one thawing lamb-corpse-lump
And she supposed to spin gold from straw.
Started bringing the veggies with her,
Spending her pay to earn her pay, feeling sorry
For the place she couldn’t supply, the runaway
Mother who sent presents from exotic locations
But never a note. When the glass broke
On the panel by the front door, the dad said,
“Just reach through the hole to let yourself in.”
ADRIAN CAESAR

PARIS SPONGE
(For Bruce and Trish)

In the café La Madeleine du Proust
everything is precious as it should be.
We, the only customers on a moody afternoon,
decide on tea, share cakes, two between four
(the unnecessary sweet confection)
earning the disdain of les homosexuels
who perform an expensive ballet;
every task is mime or gesture
for maximum proprietorial effect,
washing dishes, laying plates, preparation
of coffee we are led to understand
is work of the highest order, an art form
waiting to be discovered, while we
the philistines scoured the walls
their black and whites of Sartre, Gide
and Hemingway, les immortels,
until the Madeleines arrived.

A mere taste, should make the world
death disappear, Proust says or snap
open the synaptic paths of memory,
but nothing happened, not even a wistful
image of Maddy, my first beloved,
sugar and butter not powerful enough
to conjure that dark girl delighting
to shock with her dangerous expletive.

No, we were left, polite ironical,
four friends savouring time together,
practising the demotic craft of conversation,
cultivating a casual *sang froid*,
knowing the moment won't come back
however hard we try, and is the more
precious for that, as the dark angel beckons
instinct in each sip and bite.
MY FATHER'S PIGS

My father tells me
that he has just come back
from killing pigs at old Vern Brewster's place,
bleed like bejesus,
and he looks at his hands
suprised they are so clean.

My sister had encouraged us
to tell him, No Dad, you're in a nursing home,
but that's long ago
and we know he would have preferred
to have died in a bar-room brawl,
been abandoned in the forest
than this soft finish.

So I ask how many pigs Vern has?
their weight, ask if it's true
that they will kill you if you finish up
arse-over-tit in the dirt?
and he brightens up,
as happy as a pig in shit,
as if no one has asked a sensible question
in the last month.
WHITE-FACED HERON

By the river the white-faced heron –
geisha refinement and deportment,

Buddhist reflection and detachment,
ninja readiness and commitment,

haijin restiveness and engagement
– carries on like a white-faced heron.

RISING UPRIVER

During the night the sea
closed up the sandbar we
dug open in the day.
Now upriver a way

water’s slowly welling –
covering and filling

the prints a heron left
impressed on the mudflat.
from The Witness.

It's the love of the manifest world
that makes you an unreliable witness
- Rumi

The Poets

Let me speak plainly:
let these lines be the Prakrit
to your poets' Sanskrit:
no more making the foolish beautiful.

The Metaphor-spark

Perhaps you think
that the metaphor-spark
gives a glimpse of depths
cavernous, intricate, profound.
But could it equally plunge us
into our own gaudy darkness,
lurid ignorance: down in distorting waters,
that exhilarating breathlessness
starvation, not plenitude?
The Burmese poet Minthuwun (actual name U Wun) was one of the foremost poets of Burma of the twentieth century. Indeed I feel privileged to have read a photocopy of a poem, in his own handwriting, which he composed when he was nearly ninety-one years old. The poem was written in January 2000. A poem of his first appeared in print in the year 1926. His literary products spanned about seventy-five years, from the second decade of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century: an achievement virtually without parallel in the Burmese context and perhaps also internationally.

Minthuwun was born on 10 February 1909 in the town of Kunchangoan in Irrawaddy Division in Burma. He graduated from Rangoon University with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) with a distinction in Burmese literature in March 1933, then obtained a Master of Arts in Burmese language and literature in March 1935. In September 1936 Minthuwun obtained a scholarship to study at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. He studied Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan languages as well as general linguistics at both Oxford University and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He was awarded a B.Litt by Oxford University in July 1939. Back in Burma before the Second World War broke out, he started work on a Burmese dictionary: a task that he intermittently – together with other scholars – was involved in for the next thirty years or so. In the year 1952 Minthuwun was, for about six months, a visiting scholar of linguistics at Yale University in the United States.

Starting from the early 1930s Minthuwun, together with two other writers, the late Zaw Gyi (real name U Thein Han) (1907–1990) and the late Theikpan Maung Wa (real name U Sein Tin) (1900–1942) spearheaded the khitsan Burmese literary movement: “khitsan” means (literally) “testing the Age.” The khitsan movement was initiated under the tutelage of the then Principal of Rangoon College the late Professor U Pe Maung Tin.
(1889–1973) who had been the teacher ("saya" in Burmese) of all three writers. This khitsan literary movement makes a shift (perhaps in the context of the times it can even be called a radical shift) from the florid style of writing which previously was the trend in Burmese literature. There was a shift not only of the style of writing but also of the substance. Instead of dwelling mainly on the sentimental, the romantic and, on the other end of the spectrum, religious themes, the poems, belles lettres, essays and short stories written, mainly by these three khitsan writers, from the early 1930s onwards began to cover wider human themes and concerns.

In one of his poems, first published in February 1982 (when he was already 73 years old), Minthuwun acknowledged that he had been named or perceived by the general public as a "romantic writer/poet." In that poem, which can be translated as "So I am called a romantic poet", Minthuwun draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the time when he was growing up during the colonial era under British rule, many people – especially the Burmese rural poor – were in debt. During the winter season, wrote the gentle poet, the plague was rampant, affecting segments of the population, and in the dry season cholera regularly ran its course. In the rainy season too, wrote Minthuwun, malaria played havoc in his native village and other villages of Burma. "Besieged by these multiple troubles" wrote Minthuwun "I might have become eccentric" and "to allay my mental despair and tiredness I might have grasped whatever came my way" and "wrote romantic literary pieces." The gentle, self-effacing poet wrote that readers could well consider his excuse a lame one, given by "a less-than-mediocre person." As a human being with foibles, wrote Minthuwun, his "explanation" for being a romantic poet might amount to a "deception" for which he "craved the readers’ forgiveness." Minthuwun also exhorts his readers "to search for the truth for themselves."

The truth is that Minthuwun was not only a romantic poet (in a complimentary sense) but a great one. He was also a marvellous human being whose life and rich contribution to Burmese literature and humanity we can only be grateful. One of his earlier romantic poems reads in translation:

Roses

(Translated by U Khin Zaw, adapted by Dennis Haskell)

Her ladyship fancied star-flowers
We saw on the wild-wood way;
I cut them for her, those forest flowers;
Alas, today
In her hair are rose petals, roses!
Very beautiful she looks with roses!

Saya-gyi ("Revered teacher") Minthuwun wrote this poem on 30 or 31 December 1932. I had the privilege of meeting the poet once on 11 December 2003 at his house in 16 Tun Lin Yeik Thar, Kamayut Township, Rangoon, Burma. In January 1999, I had published an article "Burmese Poetry: Three Poems by Minthuwun" in the *Unit News* of the Deakin Law School in Melbourne. I tried to send this article to Minthuwun in Burma, but was not sure whether it had reached him. On that December day, nearly five years after my translation and commentary on three of his poems were published, I sat beside his bed and read them to him.

One of these poems was composed by him on 1 November 1961. When I mentioned the date of the composition of the poem he humorously commented that it was not "that long ago." Then "mischievously" I said I could recite to him a poem that was even "less distant" in time of composition. As soon as I began to recite the first few words of the above poem (in Burmese) he raised his hand gently and recited it himself twice. And then in yet another illustration of the poet’s humanity, charm and indeed lovability the then ninety-four year old poet said he wrote that poem (nearly seventy years earlier in December 1932) not "because he was angry but because he was glad" (that his "love with the roses in her hair looked beautiful").

Yet, it would be inappropriate to "box in" Minthuwun's contributions to Burmese literature as mainly that of a romantic poet. On 4 January 1938 while studying in England Minthuwun wrote a poem which was political and also eerily prophetic. The last lines of the poem include the phrase (which in translation reads) "while the rooster crows in the early morning, and the dawn’s red rays appears over the horizon, and the drums are played in triumph let us rejoice in the wide fields" (for the forthcoming independence of Burma). Exactly ten years to the day after Minthuwun composed the poem on 4 January 1948, Burma regained her independence. The independence ceremony was – in accordance with astrological advice – held at 4:20 am just before dawn. During the ceremonies there was also the ringing of drums as the "red rays of dawn" appeared over the horizon.

Among the numerous literary accomplishments of Minthuwun, one more deserves mention. In 1973 he embarked on a Burmese translation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Minthuwun worked on the translation
intermittently for over ten years before it was finally published in 1984. This Burmese translation of *King Lear* won Burma’s national literary prize (translated literature category) for the year 1984. In the preface to this translation Minthuwun recounted how he struggled, indeed agonised over the translation of the phrase “Nothing, my Lord” said by Cordelia in Act I, Scene I of the play into an appropriate Burmese phrase.

Some of the academic posts the late poet held during his life time include his short stint as Professor of Burmese language and literature at Rangoon University from March 1961 to May 1962. From 1975 to 1979, Minthuwun was also a visiting Professor of Burmese at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Osaka, Japan.

Even a “romantic poet” – indeed in the most complimentary and all-inclusive sense of the words a humanist poet – like Minthuwun could become “entangled” in the political affairs of Burma of the past few decades. As stated earlier, in the early 1970s Minthuwun played an important role in the work of the Burmese Dictionary Commission. In a rambling speech given at the closing day of the First Congress of the then sole ruling political party, Burma Socialist Programme Party on 11 July 1971, Party Chairman and then “strong man” of Burma the late General Ne Win (1910/1911-2002) stated that he was not satisfied with the work of the Burmese Dictionary Commission including that of some “Lecturers in Burmese.” These persons, General Ne Win averred, are like “half-baked loaves of bread” who thought much of themselves just because they have had “BA, MA and ‘big’ Ph.D degrees.” (In a speech given more than ten years later in November 1981, Ne Win also proudly boasted that he did not have “any degrees from universities” and did not have “any tail behind his back”).

Though Minthuwun was not named in the speech, broadcast nation-wide over radio and reproduced in the front pages in the original, and in English translation in all of Burma’s State-controlled newspapers, it was clear – at least to the sophisticated Burmese – that Minthuwun was probably the main target of Ne Win’s outburst. Later, in another speech given in August 1971, Ne Win did apologise to those who were more “learned than him,” “greater in age and prestige” whom he had attacked in his speech. Ne Win stated that he should have used the word “some” when he categorised the Burmese language experts and compilers of the Burmese dictionary as “half-baked.”

Minthuwun was nominated (and elected) as a member of Parliament in the May 1990 general elections, as a representative of the main opposition Party National League for Democracy (NLD). The “Parliament” or the “National Assembly” was never allowed to be convened by the ruling State
Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). As a result of Minthuwun being elected as member of the NLD some references to Minthuwun in Burmese magazines came under strict scrutiny. Indeed in July 1995 the now-defunct *Sarpay Journal* ("Literature Journal") was about to publish a commemorative issue devoted to Minthuwun’s literary works with a photograph of him on the cover. Every book, magazine, and pamphlet that is published privately in Burma can be published and distributed only after the approval from the censors is given – and after initial approval was given, the literary censors withdrew permission to publish the entire magazine. And sometimes references to and about his poems and literary works are “censored”, although at times his name and reproductions of his previous work do “seep” through the censorship process.

In a poem Minthuwun composed on 1 November 1961 entitled “The Cyclical Continuity of Regrets” sanya gi (revered teacher) Minthuwun wrote that “while pining whether and when I will reach the peaceful bliss in which there will be no regrets, the majestic sun has gone down and I grope and falter in the dark.” Indeed one of the great “suns” of Burmese literature is no more with us but Minthuwun’s rich majestic, and continuing legacy will thrive.

When the late saya (teacher) Zaw Gyi died in September 1990 Minthuwun (who was only two years younger than Zaw Gyi, but who happened to be Zaw Gyi’s student when Zaw Gyi was a tutor in Burmese at Rangoon University in the late 1920s and early 1930s), wrote an affectionate poem about his saya whom he missed and who had a “good heart.”

When both Minthuwun’s and Zaw Gyi’s teacher U Pe Maung Tin, who had translated works of Buddhist literature from a (non-native) language (Pali, the lingua franca of Southeast Asia Buddhism) into a (non-native) language (English) died in March 1973, Minthuwun wrote in admiration, reverence and in awe of his late saya gi’s “perseverance, determination, skills and wisdom.”

But perhaps the best epitaph or fitting message regarding Minthuwun’s legacy can be extrapolated from a poem he wrote in tribute to Shakespeare around 1937 after visiting Stratford-upon-Avon. As a result of giving obeisance, to the “The Renowned Sage” (the title – in translation – of his short poem) Minthuwun wished or prayed that his “mind be as wide as the sky.” All Burmese literati recognised not only his wide vision and great literary gifts but also his gentleness, his humility, his humanity. Though all of us are indeed impoverished by his passing, we can take solace in the fact that his life and vision have also enriched us in a way “as wide as the sky.”
Minthuwun was a very special person who was disgracefully treated by the official Burmese establishment because, as Myint Zan writes, he happened to incur the displeasure of General Ne Win in the 1970s. He was a scholar, a linguist, a lexicographer, a literary critic and historian and first of all a greatly loved poet. Some of his rhymes for children are known and recited by all Burmese kids.

It was courageous of him to stand for election in 1990; he suffered having his house watched for this. He was never restored by the government to his rightful position of respect in the Burmese academic world. Writers in Burma never ceased to love and respect him and there were large gatherings at his house for his every birthday. His translation of *King Lear* is a magnificent labour of love. Undertaken I think because the government had treated him like Lear treated Cordelia. He truly loved Burma and his language and his culture but was officially shunned and ignored. He may not have been aware that that was why the story of Lear and Cordelia appealed to him.

This is my translation, from 1993, of an anonymous poem from 1988–89 (actually by Minthuwun):

**Wake up, rise up, people of Burma!**

Our wealth destroyed, morality destroyed
Our spirits in despair – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Those on top – rotten, those beneath – rotten
All rotten to the core – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?
Stealing and dealing to get our money,
Always trying for profit – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Only lying gets you on, deceit is smart,
Competing to be cunning – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Always flattering, with good cause or not,
Resorting to false words of praise – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?
Harbouring resentment, bearing grudges,
So much hatred for each other – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

“I know all the answers, he’s no use”,
Smug, self-satisfied – people of Burma,
How long, how long till we are saved?

Boasting, bragging as we sink in the mire,
Go on and drown – people of Burma,
How long, how long till we are saved?

Thinking good to be evil, all evil to be good,
Turn virtue on its head – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

“The squandered wealth we shall restore,” they say
But too much corruption, too many vices
Will hold them back and block the way.

Too much corruption, too many vices,
For all of these there is no easy cure,
The harm may live on for too many years.

Ceaseless whining, endless whingeing,
Once and for ever, we must finish with all this,
To reach the right road again, for the future.
Wake up, rise up, all you people of Burma,
Let us try our best for our sons and daughters!
The manager of the Hotel Jakob in Brussels watched through round brown eyes from under his black toupee as Rose unfolded the wire. He raised his plucked eyebrow as if to ask what it said. Rose looked directly into his face. Merci Monsieur, she said. She sat down on the oak and burgundy satin chaise longue next to Alison.

GOT A HOUSEKEEPER IN FOR THE WEEKEND STOP THOUGHT WE'LL PUT THE VAN ON THE FERRY AND DRIVE ACROSS FROM OSTENDE TO MEET YOU STOP LOVE GREGORY

Her hands were shaking. "Oh pet. Don't just sit there. You can go and play Scrabble or cards with Dave. I'm slipping out for cigarettes."

Alison watched through the interlocking garlands of the lace curtain. Under light, almost horizontal drizzle, Rose's frizzy cropped hair and olive green jumper wove between the cars. Then there it was, framed by a tilted navy umbrella: the shiny dome — Gregory with his gap-toothed smile. And there was Mink, leaning into him, saying something behind her blue gloved hand. Were they glad to see Rose? There was Rose again, from under the red Bar Tabac awning, sucking on the cigarette, already lit and glowing. He would be cross at that cigarette, now cocked and smoking between her fingers. Mink was carrying a slim-lined clutch in patent leather. Rose looked sort of frowsy now with her great big shoulder bag, into whose yawning belly she dropped the cigarettes and telegram.

Alison and Dave came straight down in the tiny cage of the lift to throw themselves at Mink and Gregory. They were fresh faced and chic. Gregory was all muskiness and after shave; he didn't seem out of place in Brussels; it was like he could be part of anywhere.

At the bistro he ordered a Campari for Mink and Rose and a Dry Cinzano Vermouth for himself, lemonades for the kids. He shaped Alison's outline with his hovering hands. "You've done some growing behind my back, Not So Little Miss Alison, and so has the young fella. But I can see that our dear
Rose, has been burying herself. Rose, I think we’ll have to get Mink to take you shopping when we get back to London and fit you out. You’ve no need to hide like a mouse! What you need is colour, my dear, colour to embrace life so that life will embrace you in return! You don’t want to disappear in your biscuits and olives and your taupes and beiges.”

He made them sound like diseases. “With your skin you can carry all the colours of the rainbow, and more, and more! A strong slash of lipstick, for a start. What happened to the colour? Did you stop over in Perth long enough for your Tyrant of a Mother to knock it for six?”

Rose’s voice caught. “Seems Mum is a victim of the colour fiend. In her kitchen every cupboard panel a different one from the Walpamur range.”

“My God, don’t tell me! Are the Australians all discovering they’re Mondrian, now! No, but seriously, I remember, in Sydney you were starting to step out in colour – that jacket, geranium red, I think you called it. Even that hat, the perky one, flower pot style, that’d do the trick.”

The fire climbed up Rose’s neck, setting her chin and cheeks aglow. “Speaking of red, Gregory, let me say one more thing about my Tyrant of a Mother. I found her – must have been three a.m. – in her big red armchair, rocking like a distressed child, those blue eyes wide in horror. Not a moan, not a whisper. Her tears standing. And then I saw it, the ulcer she was attempting to dress without my seeing. It had carved her ankle to the bone, Gregory! And the gangrene had begun to blacken her toes. She had made not one sound because she wanted us to enjoy this trip. And here I’ve been, heartlessly listening to these heartless jokes about my Tyrant of a Mother.”

Rose’s whisper was savage. Gregory’s eyebrows puckered and he gave an appreciative gasp. “Well, this may be so, my dear Rose but I only came to my admittedly rather cheap caricature from what you yourself had told us. Now you’re rewriting things in your distress. What awakened you one morning late in your stay at three a.m? The little scene you stumbled upon might well have been staged for the very effect it had.”

“Come off it, Greg,” Mink said, over the menu. “Do you think Rose’s mum contrived her ulcers and gangrene with stage make up?”

When Rose stood up to go to the Toilettes, Gregory used his ventriloquist’s voice to Mink, “And yet here she is! And yet here she is!”

Alison might have told him that Rose had organised for Grannie Stasia’s skin grafts to be done at St Joseph’s Hospital and they’d delayed their departure for long weeks to make sure those grafts had taken but she felt it wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted to know.

“Go easy on her, Greg. You elevated her to Goddess in your anticipation and now you’re taking it out on her for letting you down.”
“She owes it to herself not to be drab. I mean, what kind of friend would I be not to try... You’re not going to pretend you’re not disappointed?”

At eleven p.m., after the veal, sauté’d potatoes, and spinach, which Alison and Dave slipped into their serviettes and after Gregory had gone through another bottle of rosé, Alison was drifting off when there was a rustling at the door. She looked across to see a white sheet of paper sliding across the parquetry.

“This is a Continental Breakfast because you are on the Continent, Alison, so there are no Weeties here.” They were sitting in the tiny dining area tucked away behind Reception. Rose had quickly folded back the typed sheet into her wallet, but it still stuck out.

“So you got your midnight delivery?” Mink’s profile was pearly against the lace curtains. “It’s his Poetry Phase. Since he’s had that portable Olivetti, it’s come everywhere with us. Must have driven the people in the next room mad. Even on the Channel crossing, rough as it was, he had to perch it on his knee, narrating the crossing, snatching bits of conversation from around us, putting it all in. He’s tapping away right now up there on the unmade bed! Don’t let it worry you; it’ll pass like all the rest. You’re looking radiant,” she added softly, as if she was trying to make up for Gregory.

“Incipient belly,” Rose said with a little laugh.

“Oh we’re all incipient something. Incipient corpses too! Anyhow, he thinks we should all be as flat as boys. That’s his problem. But I agree with him on one thing, Rose. You should flaunt your good looks more. You’re rubbing yourself out. What a difference a little colour would make! It would celebrate you. Gregory can be maddening, I know. But I agree we should sack the Mouse!” She looked closely into Rose’s face, “I must say you manage better than most of us without make up. Scrubbed clean!” Alison felt the inspecting gaze crawl across Rose’s skin. There were tiny beads of perspiration forming on her mother’s top lip. Perhaps it was the central heating. “But I wear my foundation,” Rose said, “a touch of powder from the compact. Lipstick.” “Oh, it’s a thin line between subtle and invisible then!” Alison saw in the pearly light as Mink’s laugh gurgled musically, that Rose was a bit...of a mouse. She saw that Rose’s suitcase had been from the start packed with mouse clothes and now she saw that the Mouse had lost her voice. Rose always used to say she couldn’t understand the hysterics some women had over mice. Mice were sweet, delicate little things with their quivering noses and beady, vulnerable eyes, she said. She rather liked them.

“Well, let’s hear it,” Mink said. Rose’s voice came out reedy, and like the page she unfolded, it shook.
Through that drizzle, above the fat-rumped Citroens, between the Belgian citizens in gabardine & a canopy of post-impressionist umbrellas, your face snapshot my nerves. Your gaze was floating objectless and luminous before it stopped on me. I dropped my hand, let traffic pass and saw you, not quite forty, test the moment like a peasant woman at the market turning the fruit, looking for rot, while for my part I saw your box-pleat plaid, your neutral tones, your incipient belly your Hush Puppies but especially your patent leather bag, slung huge like expectation gave you to me, undeveloped. So Australian! Mink said You could pick her out a mile...

Alison remembered Rose eyeing that Sportscraft skirt in Homsby, saying it allowed endless mix and match. The olive top caught and deepened the green of her mother’s eyes.

“Gave you to me could mean anything. Couldn’t it, Mink? A sacrifice, an offering – slit and splayed open, like a bird for augury? Gave me away, more likely? Skewered for his satirical reading? Typical tourist? Oh surely he doesn’t mean...”

“You’re reading far too much into it. He likes creating that sort of anxiety... But really he’s just pushing words about! You could just as easily read it as a love poem, Rose. But I hope you don’t believe I ever said such a thing about you?”

But Alison heard a put down in it, whether or not Mink had said it. “Slung huge like expectation... So Australian!” There was an image of Rose packing their bags there and then, whispering to her and Dave, her voice burred and urgent, that they must leave, right now. Bag stuffed huge like expectation... Passport and travellers’ cheques, stuffed wallet. Rose hadn’t got the right colours. Undeveloped. What did that mean? Her mother had breasts. Did he mean like a photo negative? Did he want to develop her?

Mink was warm, beaming at Alison now. “Gorgeous croissants, aren’t they, Sweetie?” Talk about changing the subject. Mink was in the right colours. It was a pencil slim skirt, in an electric blue and black pattern, “You like it? That’s called houndstooth, Alison.” Its hem was just below the knee, and she wore a topcoat, short with three huge round black buttons and a stand up collar. She could have been in Vogue. Electric blue, the coat brought out her vividness. If you had money, like Mink, you wouldn’t have to worry about mix
and match like Rose. You had all the colours; you need not be a mouse; you could be bold all the time.

“What’s veal?” Alison asked Gregory, pushing down into the breadcrumb crust with the blade.

“Veal is suckling calf, Alison. And it has its throat slit so that the heart keeps beating all the blood out. Thus it is a very pale meat that you’ll find inside your scaloppini.” Gregory watched her, his knife poised, his serviette dabbing his bright lips, his eyes a twinkle. Maybe they both mock us; maybe it’s all a game for them, Alison thought and now she was trapped into this suckling calf eating and felt herself moving with dreadful inevitability - teeth... tongue, throat muscle - to send the bloodless pulp of the suckling calf to splashdown, while he talked and roared at his own funniness and Mink quietly tinkled and twinkled. Alison saw the suckling calf hanging, stunned and live, its round eye turning to white, to pump out its life blood for her bloodless meal, to become the tender load on the rolling conveyor of her tongue. She caught Rose’s eyes on her then, soft, soft. Not glare now. Rose felt the same, Alison could see, as she swilled and swallowed her wine, nodding to Alison’s water glass, that she do like her, that she swill and swallow.

Gregory had poured Rose another, and Alison tracked his endless attentiveness to Rose. He watched each and every plate-to-fork-to mouth as if that gave her to him... undeveloped! What did he want of her mother? He might be a grown up, but sensing he might have a tantrum any minute made them all very careful. Mink’s forehead would knit and crawl, and then there was a quick twitch around the eyes to unknot that tension. Alison prayed that Rose would not reach for a cigarette. Gregory had them all playing up to him, being his audience, laughing at his jokes, cringing like Kaos when the laughter died and the look of the bully came into the shining eyes and you’d almost be relieved when the flare came, with wide, extravagant cruelty, like a Sydney electric storm, twisting Madison’s ear, bellowing its rage, then flinging her aside like some flimsy, trivial thing that should never have been in the way. Then Alison knew she must look sheepish, and she forced herself not to seek out shelter in David’s eyes.

“No, Rose,” he was saying. “Three years now, Rose, since Rory? Hmmm but you’re still, sort of... clutched in somehow! And what is that mass of memory or resentment called Rory but a... corpse blocking new ways into your life? My dear we’ll just have to help you expel that dead beast once and for all. It’s still parasiting you!”

“Gregory, you’re mixing your metaphors again!” Mink said flatly, her eyes a smarting blue.
“Ha, better than mixing my drinks. Shall we go another bottle of rosé, dear, dear Rose?”

Alison saw that Gregory’s torrents of talk left no place for Rose to answer back, no place for her to gasp out that she couldn’t see herself in his picture of her, of this Mass of Memory she called Rory, that it left Rose no room, no room to breathe at all.
TERRI-ANN WHITE

FROM ARRIVING (A WORK-IN-PROGRESS)

The man is a recent arrival in Australia: he has been welcomed at its borders, has paid a sum of money as an economic migrant and has passed the test of exceptional talent which may allow non-Australians to make this country their home. He has traveled extensively throughout his adult life and has already visited the major Australian cities; as well, he has been on a short walking tour in the deep forest of Tasmania and spent four nights in Broome with daytrips out to Cape Leveque and Beagle Bay. He intends to do more travel but in the meantime his understanding of the continent is limited to works he has read, mainly literary works – he is himself a writer of fiction and literary critical works – as well as a smattering of history, environmental studies, and political analysis. Patrick White's vision of the flat hard earth, a relentless splendour of vast distances of sameness, subtle only if you look or know how to look, and the extremity of heat, is what has informed him, not to take up residence here but to begin to understand what sort of country it is and how it might be possible to call it a home.

He thinks often, and usually it is in a ponderous fashion, about the paucity of tools for recording the profound experiences of life. Making a way of holding these treasures for future reference, for times of need or satisfaction. It is always much easier to turn to the words of others, abstracted in various forms, than to attempt to describe directly any phenomena, with a startlement of the value of what had happened. In times of joy and despair, sometimes the same work can do the trick for him.

This major geographical re-alliance is one of those times for deep consideration, thinking through everything that comes before him with new eyes, and re-assessing key decisions of his life so far. To all intents and purposes, it appears that his will be a relatively long life; he is likely to be through just three of its quarters at his current age, the age that his father's life ended.
He has already been *blessed*, his word, in this life. A life constructed out of selective ruin and now entirely re-made according to his design, his aesthetic; his benevolent forgiveness. Without malice or in memory of anything other than goodness, he has settled in a new country, Australia, on the bottom of the world-of-his-choice over the decades of his adult life.

In this reflective state, it is the arbitrariness of so many major life choices that puzzles him. He remembers an important one of his, imagining he understands it for the first time from this vantage, many decades later. In an impressive art museum on a major American university campus, with its marble and glass and domed silence, he identified the perils of fatherhood early – at age twenty-four and during his graduate studies – when he listened to an elongation beyond tolerance of the word *daddy* by a toddler all through the complex architectural spaces. Not expressed as a whine or any other sort of protest, but as a declaration of love and dependence. That monstrosity ensured no issue ever came from any of his marriages – legal or equivalent – in the face of the desire of some of his women to procreate. Perhaps that doomed them to shorter than *till death us do part* terms.

Even now, largely alone in another new country at what he considers a vulnerable age, he regrets none of this. Having always preferred the company of adults – even as a child – he is relaxed with his current degree of solitariness. It is in the light of such resoluteness that he wonders where these tears, moving into sobbing, and the general nightly dread he feels when compulsively watching the television news to be faced with the particular, individual stories of the suffering of children, alone or with their families, in desert detention camps; he wonders where this all comes from. The compassion for adults in this dreadful mess is ordinary; the impact of seeing the children and being undone by their despair surprises him, not because of any inherent callousness but because he has always found it easier to identify with like.

In his position of newcomer, or person-without-a-past in the psychic world of Australia, he is reluctant to take any type of stand, even as he recognizes these mistakes being rendered into the historical surface of this nation. It would be impolite; unacceptable. He understands this already from prior experience: in the contentious political field of his home nation he knew how counter-productive the moral statements of “outsiders” had been until the gravitas of a worldwide response has become a commonplace. Hard to imagine in this turbulent world when that moment might be arrived at, though, with the swirling of scandals and flouting of international codes and conventions. But he has noticed the disquiet. Families splitting into parts; this political fallout would require future repair work.
He knows how prone his migration is to failure: that all of the preparatory work could collapse in the whim of an ill-advised, spontaneous public statement. Any perceived heavy judgements could ruin the longer-term intention he has to reside in Australia. An early, but not particularly original observation he made to himself about Australians was the low esteem they held themselves in. Remembering the reception of the Australian-born like Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes when they stepped over a particular line. He has already established a pattern of holding back from discussions with colleagues at his places of intellectual work, people traditionally cast as liberals, as progressive thinkers, after some early attempts that were more like a cat-and-mouse game of disclosure, double-speak, obfuscation. Current politics makes for strange positions and speaking voices. Being more used to frank and fearless discussion with trusted friends and colleagues, this is a strange prelude to learning how to live here, a time of sorting out how trust works.

I know so much of how this is going to play itself out, he tells himself as a refrain; culpability less important than the immediate political considerations. This interior monologue always making him sound so priggish to himself, a strange indulgence. He desires a settling into Australia to take his own space, without the mantle of the expert from outside, with no rights to make claims or judgements. People in Australia were amazed, and honoured, that he had chosen to live here.

There is something of the quality of improvisation in the moments of high influence he finds himself enmeshed in. Introductions at Business Class airport lounges to the Nation’s Leaders (he has a tendency to use capitals whenever he contemplates such people) are attempted. They never appear to be encounters with professional people; much more the gawky discomfort of adolescents he recalls from the end of schooling than what this is supposed to be: the social intercourse of middle-aged people with power, influence, and enough money to allow them to do whatever they care to do, no matter where they had come from in the egalitarian world of their birth.

The one thing instantly proven in the Qantas lounges as he sits quietly, minding his own business, is that in this country as with most of the others he has lived in (apart from England) the general fear of writers by whole sections of the community is palpable. They need to be included in any make-up of a cultural and social world, but they could not really be trusted: observers, double-agents, betrayers. A dinner invitation is extended after of one of these exchanges of bland generalities en route to some other place. A dinner in the bosom of the Establishment, the ruling class of the postcolonial society. Not to his liking; not at all, and a genre he has avoided since
the regular invitations to this *sideshow* had started with early literary accolades.

One of the guests at this first dinner party is a senior Minister in the Federal Government. It may have been an opportunity, to voice his concerns, to protest, to offer his worldly advice, but this isn’t the way he has ever behaved. That he does not know how to act is disturbing, but without understanding the required codes he finds himself cautious and often silent.

The problem lies with sameness: he recognizes how easily he is folded into this community and how little it takes to deplete the contrary voice, the nascent challenge.

To be fair to the hosts, he isn’t a good dinner guest either; chances of repeat invitations are always unlikely. It’s not that he is rude, but he is one of those people – like the alcoholics, the ideologues, the randy man excited by an audience for his exploits – usually not offered a second chance. Talk just for the sake of filling the spaces around the table, using clever items of weaponry is not for him and turns him close enough to mute. Sometimes he has gone the whole way, though, into silence and discomfort, leaving the aftertaste of a bad reputation for being a snob. *Smart arse wanker intellectual*, he would imagine would be the first feedback after the event; he’d never had the slightest interest in his scores for performance.

So here he is in this funny new country. The mantra offered to him in virtually every exchange he has with humans – in company or mercantile contact of every sort – is the continuing claim that this is *a new country*. He knows that much needs to be done to settle his life again. Adopted late, in late middle-age, as his own good idea, he aspires to a clean slate. In response these people have collectively embraced him, even if there is suspicion about what he is doing here. With the prestige earned he covers them, nationally, in a glory-of-a-sort, it is the glory they seem to be enamoured with, rather than what it is that distinguishes him.

How can he do this? Tell them that this is madness, a betrayal of all that matters in a life. That they won’t be able to explain these policies of torture and deprivation to their future children and grandchildren when governments who imposed them have been replaced and motivations forgotten. By then, it’ll be the responsibility of the people; it’ll be their own burden of memory.

The flat hard earth, camps purpose-built or recycled from military barracks. Built to hold men, not designed for detaining vulnerable families. Writing of such places isn’t easy when other camps have the attention of the world, with names like Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay – where the rule of law dissolves. The effect for him of imagining his new countrymen exiled from their own humanity offers nothing good in return. Barbed wire;
surveilled; the despair cooped up under the heat of the relentless sun. It turns on itself. Malicious acts of self-torture are observed by a camp psychiatrist who resigns in disgust and his own despair when the effective banning of media in the island processing camp of Nauru helps Australians to say, when all is over: we have not known of it! Where else in recent history did people say so? The processing centres with their subjugated and desperate population under the tropical sun is like the Heart of Darkness.  

The camps in the desert are no better than the camps friends of his – or their parents – survived during the Nazi regime (and, it goes without saying, millions didn’t). As efficient as a way of silencing people and the needs they express, turning them into numbers and stripping them of their human rights.

This is the line proposed by one of his close friends. This is the man who assisted in his entry to Australia, who generously supported his application, a Jew from old Europe whose family went through the Final Solution and, in part, survived. Enough of them, anyway, to allow his birth in Sydney in 1946.

He cannot fully agree, but it is clear to him that the lines of efficiency, that clear-headed set of rules of operation – a contract to a lean commercial prison company from the USA – and the establishment of a code of conduct about media coverage, are a calculated risk by the government to ensure that Australia remains in control of its own destiny.

The Minister, a dour character, makes a bold statement upon introduction at the dinner party, foreclosing on opposition that is never expressed at all on the night, certainly not from our brave, weeping writer, folded into the homogeneity of his new country. I’m off duty tonight, and happy to not mix business with pleasure.

Sometimes, I forget. When I do, and feel my heart hardening against compassion, my own flesh calcifying around my true bones and my veins turning to rivers of iron through my new bones, I know it is time to go back to the edge of the desert. I shall be in good company there.

There are three petrified men standing in the country outside Tibooburra, whose hearts and limbs have been turned to the stone that my own become, sometimes. They are three rocks, although only one remains intact. The other two have bowed to forces beyond their strength over time and under the rain and wind and have broken apart. The story the Wangkumara Aboriginal people tell about the three stones is like this: three men fell in love with women from outside their tribe and were brave enough to make them their wives, in spite of the anger it caused among their people. For their courage or disrespect, they were turned to boulders by magic and now stand as a lesson to all other young men: do not go against the expected order of things. The word Tibooburra means “place of stones.” We four bodies, the rock men and I, are at home here.

Our spiritual home extends three hundred kilometres to the south too, where a “broken hill” was Charles Sturt’s only route through the Barrier Ranges in 1844. Thirty-nine years after Sturt’s journey, a stockman named Charles Rasp rode through this same region and observed the broken-down hill was rich in minerals. He laid a mining claim to the land and was vindicated by his speculation. The Broken Hill mine had some of the finest veins of silver, tin, lead and zinc ever discovered in Australia, and gave rise to one of the country’s most pervasive companies, the Broken Hill Proprietary Company, BHP.

When my heart is more a magnet than a living muscle and I feel drawn to this earth which is brimful with metal, I know that to be put right, I should give in to the attraction. It is the place that reminds me of my origins. It is not an easy journey to make though: eight hundred kilometres from
Melbourne to Broken Hill and two days driving. The road there winds through the grassy, basalt plains of the western districts of Victoria, across the Murray River and into the lake country of New South Wales. By the time I have arrived in the Silver City, several days away from Melbourne, I am restored. It is a journey that I have made only twice and dare go no further north than Broken Hill. I am afraid my car would never make it along the dirt road to Tibooburra, and I am afraid of being disappointed by the dreaming-country I have been thinking of all these years.

But I go to Broken Hill and stand on a cliff outside of town to look northward over the plains. Where the wind blows through the empty desert, it is like the first day of Earth, when only the light and darkness existed. In the Biblical account of Creation, the first man was made on the sixth day of the world, after the land and sky, night and day, the oceans, stars, plants and animals were created. He was formed from the dust of the Earth and was named Adam, from the Hebrew adamah, meaning ground. The Bible refers repeatedly to humankind being made from the soil and in Christian funeral ceremonies, it is said for the deceased, “ashes to ashes” and “dust to dust.” We came from the earth and will return to it. We arose from the ashes and will become them again. But in the years between birth and death, we shall be set afire to blaze with all the life that is ours to claim. In the deep, desert nights, I remember: it is easier to burn in the darkness than do battle with lights of a city that does not sleep.

The Psalmist also reminds us of our metaphorical origins in the earth. He says to the Creator, “You formed my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb...My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place...when I was woven together in the depths of the earth....” The cicadas and microbes and hidden streams and elm trees and humankind all struggle together in a common womb of soil then. In utero and afterward we are kindred. Sometimes, I forget.

On the desert cliffs though, I realise again the common heritage of my body and every other created being, that we come from the minerals of the soil, humus of plants a thousand years dead, from the star wreckage fallen on earth, from the air, the sky and the sea. In the wild places, I remember our dependence. In the wild places, I can feel my spirit and it is joyful. Because in the wild places, I know we are more than simple bodies: we are of ova and the ether both, of heaven and of earth.
THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER’S WIFE

Not an ordinary lighthouse,
her home on the hillside above the channel.
Not an ordinary lighthouse:
a cottage with a double-ridged roof,
south wall bisected by a weather-boarded tower
squared and copper-capped, three keeper-lengths high.

Not an ordinary cottage,
walls as wide as her husband’s chest,
the tower-light a maypole the keeper’s wife
and daughters skip around west-east, east-west.

Once, she saw a ghost, grey as possibility,
drip salt water along the passageway
some long-drowned former tenant drawn back to trim
the twin wicks, combined bright light visible for miles.

Not an ordinary garden,
she’s cultivating granite where the lighthouse stands.
Not an ordinary garden, she’s cultivating wind
to harass the keeper’s tough-stuff,
growing stunted in kero drums,
through soils he’s backpacked in flourbags.
The woman nurtures native rush-grasses in fault-lines,
a reclining melaleuca in the fertile gap between two boulders,
bright lichens as a border between the land and sea.
Not a connoisseur of silence, she’s cultivating noise
the sea is never silent here, the nights are never dark.
Working against the keeper is not unlike embroidery and every time her sense of duty hems her in, the keeper's wife dwells on the night the light went out, her second daughter's fall into her father's sea; and her own night-blindness: blundering around on the rock in her nightdress in the dark and knowing the storm was tearing the whitecaps from the waves, and she was two-times bereaved.

Working against the keeper is not unlike embroidery. With every pass of his magician's needle through the fabric of the sea, she has a counter-pass with thread: stem stitch becomes herringbone, blanket stitch chain, a temporary tack an oversew, and she resets the hoop daily, straining the weave until the grain is warped. And she rehearses tangles, French knots, lattice stitch, keeps her needles shining, her scissor blades sharp.

And just when she thinks she has her husband where she wants him, she stands at the table in the kitchen comparing cottons, sizing thimbles, tape's capacity to gauge her blackness. When from this vantage point she detects the keeper shepherding the channel current east, she turns it west, when he reroutes the cove rips north, she turns them south, when he guides a freighter cautiously toward the harbour she gouges its hull out on a hitherto unknown shoal.

From the light tower the kero drums, performing their daily cycle of expansion and shrinkage, toll dully. She knows the smell of kerosene as well as she knows her own distilled essence, the scent of her children's hair, the keeper's salty presence. Kerosene smudges everything with its hazy-blue skin: is the lighthouse's other tenant, always present, never seen, a bitter layer on the lips after she's kissed her husband's hand. And remembering her daughter's dog barking until its voice was gone, she wonders how long she could scream before she would not make another sound.
PHILIP SALOM

SECTIONS FROM THE MAN WITH A SHATTERED WORLD

A palimpsest on the story of Zasetsky, brain-damaged in WWII, and his attempts to recover from chronic aphasia, observed by his physician A. R. Luria, the Russian neurologist.

Face-down in Id
shellshock
mudwound
generalanaesthesia
patronymic dreamsof
sexanddeath

as they lift you from your ditch of star-shells
your eyes a crocodile’s opening from the mud

the light is migraine the world is flat where
your name was clouds of smudge

when you lift your head from the pillow
the hospital glare overwhelming overlit

as heaven the wards crowded with the risen
from where dead as deep water the

poem of evermore begins and eats you
stanza by stanza from mud into mudlight

***
Being shot in his left temporal parietal lobes
ruined his right side of everything – a cat-like pupil
pounds like a splinter in his brain:

the images a needle in a groove
should play back crooning
its love of the world...but his universe
recedes by half of everything
and half of every half is infinity
like a metaphysical conundrum

as the tilting halves
of the township are watching
as the women at home are watching
he sees half of a full head of cabbage
on the table in front of him
then half of that leaf then
half a crease...

watching the physicians leaning forwards in their seats
as he stands nakedly before them:
like Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson, the scalpel
and the colours of seriousness
above dissection of the corpse...
he is some kind of criminal?

Pedagogues, scientists, reductionists,
he is halved: his own sight
sections everything
   (the physicians are)
   (scien s a)
   (cia)
   (i)

   * * *

He grips the pencil
like an etching tool
to make each sentence
score the surface so
deeply each letter
go down up into
the blink-sheets of his
left brain, the dark.
Every day he forgets
and starts again.

Who could blame him
falling down drunk in the street
the words burning his stomach
in farmyard fury, trapped, each
hobble and joint pain
a wrecked syntax.

For twenty-five years
trying to wake up free of it
the world in one place
the words filling into him
like champagne and listen
to them moved to tears
words which give him back and strip him
as he stares at the pixelating
blackboard.

***

Seeing is a fern in the brain
where the world still drips and whistles.
The eye shapes us, our three
dimensions the urge to copulate.

If he has a lover, if,
then just to see her he must scan
back and forth as if shaking his head.

He stares through the window at cars.
He is a cat, the pupil's black line.
There's truth to conjugate: If an elephant is
bigger than a tank, is a 20 year old soldier...?
"Perhaps they took my brain out altogether. Or cut the left side off and put it back in again. I dream. I can imagine with my right. I am a little brain left out in the snow."

At night the air is cold across the valley, a diesel beats like a slow repeating gun under the stars.
Looking up he almost tastes the tang of constants the black roof of his brain scattered with salt.
The sky is heavy as the Russian language.
He its smallest black hole its beating syllable
ROSS BOLLETER

LATE SONATA

(to the memory of Mme Alice Garrard)

I arrive for my lesson
to find her muttering to herself
as she rehearses that late Beethoven sonata
dizzying the summer morning with it angling
its trills at heaven making the fugue an iron cliff that rings
each time she strikes nearly one hundred she lives
on a sliver of chicken and a spoonful of broccoli a day
arthritic eagle hunched over the blue gorge she quivers
an unfiltered Gauloise stuck to her lower lip smoke
pours up into her itching eyes over her wet cheeks
She forgets her way circles back and there again are the crags
and eagle feathers making a mess around the cave’s mouth

At nineteen she played this sonata for her Budapest debut
Weiner her teacher waddled towards her through battering applause
to kiss her and to give his blessing on her wrist his fingers’ fat warm arch
that Liszt had moulded as Czerny (Beethoven’s star pupil) did for him...
maybe lineage counts but she never warmed herself by that fire
just urges herself on scolds herself as her hands struggle with themselves
against their own tightening

No bigger than a child you groan at the dirty labour of uplift and uproar
as a starry sky twists and sings blind sighted a moment
you just miss old Ludwig drunk and beaming as he ambles
in the dazzled gap the intact swiftness of your mottled hands
swallow diving into ivory.
The first floor of the library
is a warm juggernaut of books
pushing north
in the worst April storm for decades.

The last window is a blear of leaves and rain
and there is no such thing as distance,
where I am bound in the journal collection
reading old editions of the TLS. And

here’s a poem entitled *Reading in the Library*
I might have written had I been someone else
somewhere else. Like mine it deals with time
and place but not the ephemeral

curling of a page
nor the blanch of pen and ink.
I scan it a second time
as if it were a draft of mine:

a midwinter weekend at Margate Sands
each hour constructing an unthinkable fence
of wind and rain it would be impossible
to climb back from –

and what was broken irreparably
anyway, afterwards. As with a tendency of mine
I notice too many adjectives upon the noun
as if one could never be sufficient
for the construct of metaphor and meaning.
Outside the windows the hour is sinking
in cold dark waves of afternoon.
The newspaper pages are reflected in a damp blur

of light and the poem again settles as in a skittish
shower of strange droplets
giving a precipitate shape to words
before the first signs of wreckage.
JÉROME'S HAPPY HOUR

Time is suspended so sweetly,
Jérome might think, but he's not,
not like that.

On a Friday afternoon at Black River,
he has come back from the reef,
pulled up his blue catamaran on the beach,
and is hailing his friends, as Ayeesha looks after the catch.

They gather under the palms
with a bucket of sweet rum coco.
Before time starts again.

They spot the green Landrover
coming from Flic-en-flac
with the white-shirted driver.
And have time for one "Missié James" joke,
before he stops and walks over (Bonzour, bonzour!).

Mr James Merryweather, an agent of the modern,
sent from the UK:
to inject new life and vitality into the fishing industry

"Come on Jérome. This is a glorious day for fishing.
Why aren't you working?"

"I don't have to, Missié James. I came back yesterday with 75 pounds of capitaine and vacoas. I've got enough money to last the weekend!"
“Look, Jérôme……”
He is ignoring the others who are smirking or sleeping.
“If you get more fish,
you can buy a big boat with an outboard.
And then take tourists out,
and make more money!”

Jérôme’s eyes open a little wider
in mock-negro surprise:
“A big white house, more children
a gold necklace……for Ayeesha”.
(kissing the illusory jewel away,
with a theatrical gesture, for the drinkers).
Takes a puff of one of Merryweather’s du Mauriers.

“And when I am rich, Missié James, what then?”

“You’d be an old man by that time, Jérôme.
You could then stop working
and lie on the beach and enjoy the sun!”

“So what am I doing now? Enough fish, no work, plenty of sun!”
and he cackles until he coughs and spits.
And takes a good slug of rum coco.

And the Englishman goes off to his own clubby happy hour
at Flic-en-Flac,
watching the sun set in the ocean as
five women in red saris make puja to Lakshmi on the beach.
And he complains to the teacher Ramesh Ramdoyal
who writes it all up in
Tales from Mauritius: A Supplementary English Reader.

There are questions at the end for the pupils,
Who were also becoming modern, in 1979,
as the reef fishing is running out and
ocean trawlers are coming in.

“In the story ‘Live Now, Pay Later’ who do you think is more sensible – Jérôme or Mr Merryweather? Give reasons for your choice.”
As soon as you have choice, you are a modern subject. You can hone a moral technology, becoming professional, going about giving people advice.

But they might think. Did Jérome really have a sensible choice? Or Mr Merryweather? The only thing that can really compete with a fleet of trawlers, is the happiness of rum coco in the filaments of a long hour.
He places his suitcase on the slatted stand, his jacket on the bed. Unpacks only what is necessary. Journal, photo pouches, mobile, laptop, camera. He plugs the last three in. Underpants, toothbrush, belt, electric shaver, there’s none provided, so now he’ll need to buy another converter. He likes to shave without looking, while reading the English papers on the Web.

Next he hangs up his leather jacket, his one blue suit. The three new white shirts he always buys in airports, always the same brand if he can manage it, he puts on the shelf with the extra pillows and the duvet which will be too hot in this air conditioning and which features blue flowers, not pink. He arranges the toiletries on the white tiles of the bathroom, removes the small wrappers of the rectangular soaps that will never lather. He opens the shower cap, hoping it might be different, but it’s the same crinkly type with elastic which breaks. Its cling film look reminds him of a BBC crime thriller he saw in the middle of his night, on the plane. A sucked in mouth, a look of genteel surprise. Red suffocation. There’s always too much clutter in these rooms.

Next, without fail and no matter what time it is, because he has drunk already on the plane, he investigates the mini bar. Takes one Heineken, one baby bottle of vodka, nothing more. He leaves the crisps this time, as insurance. He has been to Munich before, he doesn’t eat meat, knows very little German, even though he speaks French and Italian and Spanish, and he has nearly starved. He refuses to learn German, because of his father, because of the things they did. Words give power, so do pictures, well that’s what people say.

He takes off his clothes, turns on the TV, flicks through porn and soccer. Finds a channel in English, turns down the sound.

The last thing he does is check the view. It is of concrete car parks, empty because its Sunday, stuttering in a cantilever pattern which an architect thought would add interest to the grey. Traffic lights glare red then orange.
through the fogged window, the slanting rain. The pavement is dotted with black umbrellas. The people under them in heavy overcoats, in black and brown and navy. Plump little rain clouds blossom mutely on the TV map.

It is to be expected. It is March in Europe. He shouldn’t take it personally. And much of Germany seems grey. The sky, the fields, the office buildings, the old men in tweed jackets at the airport, drinking steins of beer at seven in the morning. The road signs on the autobahn the only jolt of adrenalin, glaring yellow in the drizzle. Ausfahrt. The language growls and barks. The Australian he shared the taxi with, a computer software salesman who’d never been out of Adelaide, found this funny. His accent so flat and strangled after so much time away. He leant over, the smell of wet jumpers and Juicy Fruit rife on him. He poked Philip in the ribs. Gestured to something out the window, as if the whole of Europe was some sort of playground joke. Philip kept his eyes unfocussed. Watched the fields roll by, ploughed grey and grey and grey.

The beer is gone, the vodka is warming him. The ceiling is featureless, not a crack, not a stain. He opens the letter, turns on the bedside light. The same words unroll as they did in Paris, in Saigon, in Manila, as they did on the plane. For four weeks they’ve just bounced around different cities. Different rooms.

Your dog is well, although I had to take him to the vet the other day, he had flea allergy and dermatitis, from the hot weather, he was itching like crazy and he’d pulled out big hunks of his fur. I’ve tried a few but he won’t answer to them. He keeps sitting in the hallway and staring at your room. Do you know it’s been three years?

Philip any idea when you are coming back?”

It may as well be in German. He just doesn’t understand.

He folds the letter and puts it under the table lamp, which is pink and frilly and reminds him of busty ersatz German beer hall wenches, the little satin ribbons which tie up their overflowing tops. All of these things – the Neopolitan ice cream decor, the big busted frauleins, the cling-wrapped airiness, the black words curling in Alice’s frail-wristed longhand – float through his brain with the same precise weightlessness.

It’s a different country, a different room, a different moment. But nothing has changed.

* * *

“March 21. Munich, Flight long and uneventful, too many changeovers, had to wait for four hours in Charles De Gaulle airport, on a bench. Food was crap.
It was hot where I left, cold here. I have diarrhoea from the bad hotel with the off-smelling milk. I have the wrong clothes. The wrong money. Or I'm in the wrong place. Need to go shopping. Need some more euros. Conference starts tomorrow, 1pm. Have nothing prepared. No extrapolations or interpolations, no theories and scaffolds of reverberating meanings to impart. The photos will have to speak for themselves. Need to check out how to get there, the rail or the tram.”

The pen runs out. He decides to go walking. The four walls of the room pressing in. A familiar feeling, as if there are just the walls and a vacuum between them, a vacuum outside. Arbitrary, the idea of home in a strange city, as if placing his toothbrush next to the sink gives some locus. This is the prescribed escape route, part of the system. Learn the metro stops, buy a bus ticket, see the locations and the architecture, trace the web of horizontals and verticals, let them define him, however sparsely. Find a space in which to stand.

* * *

The English Garden. In the German way of writing it, [you can almost hear the sneer – Q: do you really want this??]. A soft green stomach in the middle of this grey stone city, ribbed with curving paths. Where water breaks the landscape, perspectives beckon. An arch of bridges, receding like a raised eyebrows. No crematoria here.

Instinctively he frames the photo, considers it, holds it a moment, then drops it through the hierarchy. It wouldn't translate, wouldn't work. He can tell by now what will parlay its evanescence. What he can deliver, exposed and bloody, to the waiting eye.

The paths are clogged with nannies, puffing joggers, obnoxious children on wheels. German people don't seem to know how to run. Beside the lake, a child, its tiny trench coat pulled tight over a sausage-filled stomach, almost throws itself in the lake after its piece of bread. Philip's finger hovers on the camera button again but then its parents' shouts bark out, full of crunching muesli sounds, that no nonsense brusqueness of people with well regulated bowels.

He walks away fast. He's getting hot, bothered, irritable. Alice's letter rustling in his pocket. An insect flurry, a faint intercontinental whine. Alice following him like a crackly raincoat on a bolting horse. Turning a corner, the path splits, into the shape of a hand splayed rigid against glass.

He's lost in a whorl of green arteries. Deep in the severe grace of linden trees.
Beside an old iron drinking fountain in a children's playground – plastic, deserted, icy with shadows – there is, ironically, a smell of frankfurts in the air. It soaks his nostril hairs, he almost feels a boiled yellow scum forming on his tongue. But even with this gaudy stinking signpost, there is nothing in his head. No images spring to mind. Only photos. Alice’s photos. Alice remembering, with her camera-shaped eyes. Frankfurts spitting in a pot of pink water, splitting their skins. The larger ones his father favoured with mashed potato and Branston pickle, those were called saveloys. They were rudely huge and lobster red, something embarrassing about them. A faint memory, long ago, of the next door neighbour doing something furtive with one left uneaten on the barbeque. A florid man, in King Gee work shorts, laughing, winking, belly rolling, only just this side of humour, that laugh. On the other side of the fence, his skinned lasciviousness wobbled through a knothole. Philip only remembers this because – puzzled, curious, wanting to know the logistics – he went straight in and scientifically, like his father, wrote it all down.

There should be a tribal connection, something he owns, with this smell rising up. Somewhere way back his father’s family was German, and Philip’s father remembered this fact and passed it on, blunt and unadorned, in a letter. A fact cut from its underpinnings, dissected from his own grandmother’s memory, passed down by generations like the family Bible with its spiky sepia signatures. We were German, his father said, apropos of something or other. Later from books Philip attached postcards and notes and cliched detail – thick coils of thick sausage and head scarves and work ethics, their saving up for cold winters, wet firewood and pearl backed accordions and grey sauerkraut. Nothing rang a bell.

Philip’s birthday, nothing German about it. It was a hot Australian summer, with flies and chlorine pools and cricket played on the oval near the creek. Frogs, later, in the bowl of water softhearted Alice left near the back tap. Of course he doesn’t remember this. Alice wrote it in his journal. She took pictures. Rabidly, greedily, with an edge of desperation. Alice’s pictures record things as she would like them to be. She edits life like it is a magazine. Everyone in Alice’s photos wears a slightly weary smile. Usually blurry and out of focus and badly framed, but full of rose coloured hope.

The party was the only one and also the last before his mother ran away. There was fairy bread and party pies and cocktail frankfurts and chocolate ice cream, according to Alice and her never-ending photos. There were children of course, invited by Alice with her little homemade paper cards, entwined
with pink flowers and silver stars and dimpled hearts. She passed them around the playground to a lot of boys Philip barely knew.

Alice saved all the photos in a shoebox, under her bed. Insists now on sending them, at parsimonious intervals. Piece by piece, like a kidnapper. These arrived this morning. An ear lopped off. A boy beheaded. A child's chocolate covered thumb. Philip himself, stone faced under a pointed party hat. Some child crowing over winning the parcel, which contained only a minutely wrapped packet of jellybeans. You can see in the photo, the waiting disappointment curled like a snake inside flushed pink cheeks. Their mother, presiding over the birthday cake, in a starched white party dress, a cigarette between her fingers. Long grey ash hovering dangerously over Alice’s purple icing. She made the cake look like a telescope, joining log rolls together, for Philip, his favourite thing. Or so Alice had decided. A photo of the cake on a card table, looking like an engorged donkey’s dick. His mother regarding it slightly scornfully, the glint of a few gin and tonics in her eyes.

A picture too of their father, interrupted in his work, dragged there by Alice, helping Philip blow out candles. Someone has stuck a too small gaily-coloured hat on Philip’s father’s head. What should be funny is chilling. No amusement in his eyes. He looks coldly affronted, stiffly polite. And one hand and a leg and an eyebrow and those eyes of his like Philip’s, grey-green, frigid as the North Sea, already travelling, already leaving, on their trajectory, out of frame. From no matter what angle you caught him, his eyes were a hall of mirrors, already somewhere else. His father only ever willing to donate an archaeology of himself the faintest trace. To find him was like trying to find a word for an unnameable but furiously perfect thing.

* * *

At dusk, the orange sits on the bedside table. He bought it from the hotel restaurant, the Wintergarden’s it called, they were using it for decoration, the only real piece of food in a platter of wax. He asked if it was plastic, mimed chewing, the waiter gave him a puzzled look. He got out his wallet, they understood that well enough.

He’d like to eat it, but the acid would be bad for his stomach. Also he likes the glow it gives in this grey-brown room. To unwrap it, peel it, cut it into quarters, would be to ruin it, reduce it to garbage. So he lies there, basking in its sun.

He’s taped his photos up across the mirror as usual, blocking out his face. There’s the one of the stick house in the river, angled with the current, like a tree blown into a leaning shape by wind. But this was no long erosion,
you can almost hear the creak of frail foundations, the suck of river mud. Two hundred killed by water the colour of cholera, a malicious yellow brown.

Grey driftwood, one old thin woman crouched over a cooking pot. Bangladesh. Five years ago, according to the journal. Her white hair fronds in an inappropriately girlish way to the corner of her mouth. His framing is perfect. The black cooking pot, her spindly house of sticks. Skin puckered with moles. No teeth. Her jaw lumpy with the lack of them, her eyes somehow dead in the water, lost the moment before.

A child, knee deep in dust. The Congo, last year. The pot belly of starvation on him. His small white penis, curly pale as a pig tail against brown skin. He holds a bowl out, a third world Oliver Twist. There will be a collective sigh of nostalgia at that one, he’ll be able to set his watch by it. Here is something they can recognise. They like the neatness of the allusion, like to hear the suave easy echo of their internal hollowness, spinning round and round.

A man with one leg. Vietnam. The remaining leg thin and ulcerated. The lost leg, a bloody stump from the knee down. It blooms there arterially, in black and white. His face sullen. And why not. To what use will he be put. To what appreciative audience will he be served, like a dumb animal on a plate.

Phillip will of course offer a short potted history for the uninitiated. The needling little faux memory voice, it will be his father’s. Precise, bloodless, taxonomic. Demanding he record these things, to what purpose, he’s never sure. The war, the logistics and geographies, the official propaganda. Some local colour in case in the facts are too boring. The American aeroplanes still lying weed infested at the airport. The airport itself, a shed with computers that are really just disconnected grey boxes. The colonial architecture, old wedding cakes dripping grey in humid heat. The tales of the tunnels having to be widened to fit in fat broad shouldered GIs. The propaganda films shown in a small hot yellow museum amid the buzz of insects, the determined, sullen silence of slogan filled minds. Things in bottles. A hand, a foot, a thumb.

Skulls, finally. Cambodia. Rwanda. A famine or civil war somewhere anyway, the link is gone. A child’s saucer eyed head next to a stack of them, he won an award for that. For the white teeth and visible joints and the tremulous smiles. Their big heads on tiny bodies, sickeningly similar to the celebrities in trashy airport magazines.

The close up of an old woman in a headdress. The vibrancy of her bandanna lost in Philip’s taut strictures of black and white. She wore orange and purple and magenta, he knows this because he has a colour version, and he knows he took the picture but he can’t remember pushing the shutter or how the street smelt or what the roasted guinea pig tasted like, although he
knows he was there, he wrote it in his journal, there are times and places and dates. And the pictures. But they are peculiarly lifeless here, as if the brown and beige and greyness is leaching out all movement, all personality. There is no topography any more, his photos offer no relief.

The orange though, it’s here. It burns with unreal intensity under the pink frilled lamp. The skin bumpy, human like, with pores. It repeats itself gaily inside the empty bottle of beer. He thinks of lampshades and Nazis and a stretch of tattooed skin, a Poe story he read. He annotates the oranges with these fragments of knowledge he has gleaned. If he thinks hard about it, if he makes a mental list, he can even remember what it tastes like. No, remember is not the right word. He can construct, by a process of deduction and logic and elimination, the taste of the orange. There are words which spring to mind. Sharp, sweet, string, sting. He keeps a mental filing system for things like this.

He knows if he peels it, there will be thick white pith, the flesh of it also humanoid in its wrinkles and segments, its sinews and strands. It will be sweet or sour, watery or so juice filled it will spurt across the sheets. He knows that it is round, or in this case, sort of oval, with lifelike bumps. It’s not plastic, it’s irregular and cosily imperfect, or it is, before he takes a picture of it, freezes it forever in its imperfection, which does something to it, which makes it tasteless as the plastic grapes on the Wintergarden’s buffet spread.

He remembers Alice talking about oranges, her favourite fruit. Well, he doesn’t remember exactly, she wrote it down, at his request. Years ago. In his journal. On the very first page.

I remember, remember. They are always her words. He remembers her remembering. The sharp sting of orange juice in a split on her lip, after she fell off her bike and their father peeled her an orange, to cheer her up, distract her. The way her first boyfriend smelt of oranges, he was always eating them for breakfast and lunch, cutting them into small segments with his Swiss army knife. He smelt of oranges and of poppyseed rolls. How his skin, scarred by acne, looked like orange rind. But blueish, she said it looked blue. He was lying under a mozzie zapper, they were having sex in a park. He had a lot of springy blue-black hair. There was orange juice on his chin.

She remembers too her grandmother remembering about the gem-like importance of oranges, how they had a different memory then, in the Depression or before, than they do now. How there was always an orange in the toe of her Christmas stocking, and a few walnuts, little simple treasures, and Alice would sigh and smile. The maudlin, the sentimental, the touching, these are Alice’s territory. A wide and formless country, full or spiralling borders, dense jungles, female swamps. These are her memories, not his.

In their different ways, they are the same, Alice and Philip. Blank, white, bloodless. Like photos exposed too early to the light.
SISTERS

Stand waiting to sing at the silvery microphone. The song text is taped to the stand, the backing music will come through the headphones. Check your distance. Not the yards to the gates and the road, lined by the dark cypresses, where at some time Michael will arrive. I don't mean, either, that two miles to the nearest town, pale Llucmajor, where Michael might pass through. Check simply those careful centimetres to the microphone. Look down to your feet: your spot has been marked by yellow tape on the floor. Willy himself jerked the tape from a roll, cut strips with scissors and stuck them there. (He held me by the arms showing me where to stand, held me in his blue-eyed gaze. I smelled his hair gel. He deliberately brushed my nipples; that's Willy. But I ignored this because I know I am too strong for him, he will not have me, nor my sister.)

I'm alone with Willy and Terry the dog at his studio outside pale Llucmajor, in the middle of nowhere.

The town at least is on maps. Far from tourist trails, it's a dusty pueblo of closed shutters in the statutory Mallorcan green. Where are we geographically? Splice Mallorca down the middle and you would go cleanly through Llucmajor's Plaça d'Espanya, on Sundays turning it to a rubble of apricots and almond shells and fine shoes; on days like today turning it to plain dust; leaving an Iberian Mediterranean to the left and Italian Med to the right. (Think Mediterranean without the water: olives, citruses, fireflies, but no blue seas thick with life; this is dry land on the Mallorcan plain.)

It is the final day for recording, set aside for putting down the last singing track and a piano solo.

My sister Chrissie will pass through that dusty square with Michael, whom we are extremely lucky to have, excited to have. I'm willing them to arrive, don't let them stop in Llucmajor.

"Wait for it, Denise." My eyes meet Willy's blue-eyed gaze, black and silver bristle, his glistening tan. "Before you give me soul - " I give him a
quizzical look: Soul? “You know what I mean, Denise – your soul. Before you do, first I have to cut back that echo. Give me one minute. Two.”

Two minutes to imagine Michael and Chrissie on the Harley-Davidson. I picture them already leaving the square, passing the statue in homage to the shoemakers of Llucmajor before building up speed. I imagine them glimpsing, laid out on trays, apricots which have been halved to look like ears; revving past the empty outskirts of the town at siesta. Soon to draw up at the studio, to buzz the intercom. It takes a minute for Willy to go to the gates with Terry, a golden Labrador, an unlikely breed to protect recording equipment in the middle of nowhere.

Terry is the same colour as the town. Terry and Willy, two lone dogs.

Our souls are very small and difficult to see and find. This is because they are not in our hearts but in a drop of blood. This drop of blood may be used once in a lifetime.

Listen: the technology is perfect. Listening through the headphones is like hearing outer space, hearing nothing. When I push the headphones half-off both ears: not even the air-conditioning, nothing. If Llucmajor is on maps, the studio is on nothing, amid nothing. Beyond the silvery microphone, past the sliding glass doors of the studio: nada. The half-dozen cypresses, rippling and waving. Indigo-grey clouds, set fast in the sky. To the right, a patio with a white table and chairs. No life the other side of the glass doors except sporadic forays by Terry, sniffing and searching the haphazard searches of a dog. Beyond him, in the driveway of cracked concrete, between kerbs of cheap brown tiles: still nothing. Panning left, there is that old Citroen stopped in the grass, between bamboo clumps; a delivery van with rusted blue and silver panels, halted for ever just short of the swimming pool, an indecipherable name above its twin windscreens. An N, a G, possibly IR at the end.

Still Willy is sliding the switches at the console. Captain on the bridge, he adjusts dials, swivels aside on his black leather chair. What are we waiting for? Where are Michael and Chrissie at this very moment? “Nearly there, Denise.” He and Michael are so different. Yesterday Willy said: I would like a young air hostess – as if he was hungry for some juicy chicken.

“Ready. Watch the third line again,” he says pushing his sunglasses firmly up in his hair. “My brother knows where the best bars are. Aim for best bars the whole time. So it’s best bars.”

But a phone rings: Willy disappears from his place at the console. A bridge with no captain. I re-tape the text (Crescent City by Lucinda Williams) to
the music stand, hang the headphones on the headphone stand.

I leave the room to stroll to the Citroen. It’s warm out. Years before, the van must have been driven across the neighbouring plot to stop at the pool. At its tail the rusted roof of a rusted counter is propped open still, like a roadside stall selling fish, eggs. I hear the cypresses. I walk over and touch one as cars zip by, headed west towards Palma, causing the branches to spring back and forth. Terry barks and I head back past the pool, a pit of leaves and brown stains. There goes a red dragonfly, quivering. I stroke Terry behind the ears and he beats his tail against some bamboo. Other than the Citroen, he’s the only attraction. The count of activities between takes is: three strolls to the Citroen to two playing with Terry, to one encounter listening to takes and watching the seismographs of sound on the screen, fielding Willy’s flirtations. I see there’s a tree with blue plums beside the studio wall.

Slipping through the sliding doors I reinstall myself at the stands and the headphones and the tape on the floor and the silvery microphone.

Willy comes back brashly, ripping the wrapper off a Mars bar, a panther with a lump of meat. Energised, as if he’s been vigorously showering. As if he and his wife have been fucking. Something I don’t want to think about. “OK Denise. How come you don’t look really like your sister, by the way?” I don’t answer; I dangle my arms. “I mean, you are twins, mm?” “What’s that to do with you?” “Just wondering, Denise. No sweat.” “Chriisie was in a bad way for a long time; ill. That’s what made her so thin.” “You two are so different,” says Willy ignoring this information, “yesterday it crossed my mind you might have been after Michael; interested. Today I thought: So how come Chrissie’s the one on the motorbike?” He stops chewing and scrunches the wrapper, dropping it carefully in a bin. “Denise?” “She likes motorbikes. Can’t you spare me your inanities?” “Sure, I’m very short on inanities.” “Well then.” “We’re all set. Sing into the mike from any side, any way you want. Could be the last take. Best bars.”

Big Michael is astride his Harley-Davidson with Chrissie behind clutching what she can of his great girth. Barely able to see in front of him, she drops her head to look back one last time at the valley of Sóller, the sprawl of town and sprinkling of orange plantations. She looks up and the silvery forks of the handlebars dip and twist through a narrow gorge. She leans with Michael. Under the mountains the road is clear; they roar through the cool tunnel connecting Sóller with the Mallorcan plain. Michael accelerates. Chrissie shuts her eyes, trying not to suck in tarry air. Underground video cameras would catch big Michael in sunglasses, turning to grey his French-blue aertex shirt; would see Chrissie in a sweatshirt, without the pink hoops on grey. It
seems they are below the mountains only a matter of instants, before Chrissie, eyes still shut, feels her eyelids turn orange, filtering light. Out of the tunnel, back in the sun – still ten miles from pale Llucmajor – and groves of olive and almond trees fly by, attached to pale fincas set back from the road. Chrissie feels magnetised by a sense of adventure.

For a few hundred yards they draw alongside the rattling carriages of the old Sóller train. Michael glances at it; a boy waves; the boy would see Michael’s greying hair beneath his helmet, Chrissie’s blondness fluttering. The Harley veers back to the centre line. They bear down on a station; the road arcs away from the tracks. Chrissie inhales lungfuls of happiness. She looks at her watch: they are making excellent time. They speed on, over the plain of La Pla towards the mountains of Randa and Llucmajor, where Michael is to lay down his piano solo.

People say Michael is a musical genius.
I said to Chrissie: Chrissie, I hope for poetry. I pray.
After that: I pray he will want me.

Willy’s studio may be in the middle of nowhere but access to it is dangerous. The blue gates with their spikes and alarms (for show, admits Willy) shut directly onto the road. As a car waits at the intercom, its rear blocks the road and a sudden chicane forms on the C171, the fast straight crossing the dry fields between Palma and pale Llucmajor. Those Spanish cars fly past at eighty, ninety miles an hour. A crazy car could crash into you as you wait. Does Willy care? Willy? Willy cares about Willy. He has Terry and he has glacier-blue eyes and an expensive studio and no other cares; he has no wife or air hostess in the back or anywhere.

Nonetheless he is worth having for his work, his energy. Willy is energy, Chrissie reckons. Sometimes misdirected. But energy is good, good for making music. Energy is good for love-making, but not always enough. Chrissie says he would not be tender with a woman.

Would Michael be tender?

I can see my sister leaning, catching sight of him, unable to make out his words, and him leaning back, guessing at hers. The Harley decelerates majestically to turn off the main highway, for Bunyola.

She presses a hand on Michael’s great shoulder. I want to stop, she shouts in his ear.

Here?

I’ve been loving it so much, she says as the revs die. I want to feel there’s a second ride to come.
The Harley pop-pops to a halt by a field. They lift off their helmets. Michael’s shoulders are brown against the blue of his shirt. Chrissie walks about, stretching and shaking her legs. Michael sits against a grey stone wall, his hands behind his head.

Chrissie, he says, you and I can go for a ride any time.

My sister – Denise is wondering if you’re going straight back home. After the recordings are done.

No, I don’t think so.

She’ll be pleased. We’ll all be pleased.

Ah, don’t tell me, Chrissie, you are trying to precipitate events –

We are sisters.

I like Denise, of course.

God what are those?

Those are watermelons.

On the ground? Like that? I thought they always had stripes.

We can take one with us. Or look for a striped one in Llucmajor. They’ll have all kinds.

Let’s not stop there.

We should. It’s a historical town.

Chrissie reaches over and strokes him on the chin, her hand barely touching. Or does she? Would she do this?

Historical? she says. As in what?

This would be a familiar talk, I heard it from him last night as we ate fish from the grill and drank wine. Chrissie had turned in, leaving us alone at the big hotel table under the vines and the fairy lights. It was warm out still.

Does history matter? Michael can make you think it does.

It was just our second encounter.

He sat across from me. There were dishes and bottles and paper and pieces of bread strewn about the table.

I recognised you by the beach this afternoon, I said. You were deep in a book.

Yes, he said. Getting my bearings in Mallorca.

I’m reading A Winter in Mallorca by George Sand.

Well, he said, two people reading. It’s an ancient art.

Reading is?

Yes, he said: reading is.

I sipped my wine. There were stars out over the mountains. Reading is. I asked about his book. It was a history book.

Long ago, under the same stars, there were kings of Mallorca. The last,
Jaume III was killed in battle at Llucmajor. He had striven to reclaim the island from his hated cousin of Aragon, who had held it for six years. By the time they were reinstalled on the island, Jaume's forces were sick, debilitated, and they fought. Jaume was beheaded by a common soldier. It was 1349.

Michael looked at me steadily as he poured himself water.
I've looked carefully at the map, he said.
What map? I asked.
Several maps.
You like to be thorough.
I am.
Is it also an ancient art?
Being thorough? I don't know.

Apparently, careful study of these maps revealed the very path of C171 was the line of march taken by Jaume's army. On this ancient track, Jaume passed Willy's studio going east, that is, from left to right. The following week the armies of Aragon tramped by in the same direction. Another week and the same armies of Aragon, but reduced slightly in volume, passed back from right to left. There followed a week empty of marching armies. Willy and Terry would have waited, looking right, listening for the sound of feet from the right, in a march that never came. Jaume's army did not, could not, would not pass again. In the week following that week of waiting, Mallorca was declared definitively part of Spain.

"Denise I was just aiming to be friendly."
"Back, Willy. Just put the coffee in the cup. Then push it this way."
"Why sit so far off? I don't bite, Denise. Come on."
"It's a big table out here. I'll sit where I like."

It's no use telling Willy about souls, but the drop of blood of a singer may appear in one word on one note in one song. Everyone has their drop, which may appear in a remark, a gesture, an insight. A kiss.

Even then, only the persons themselves may be aware they are showing their souls. Recognising them is almost impossible.

"Something to eat, Denise?"
"No thanks. Why do you keep calling me Denise?"
"Isn't it obvious. Or would you prefer something more – more tender?"
"No. Let's change the subject."

Does Willy have a soul? Surely, somewhere, even Willy. This place has a soul: in an old rusting van. A line of dark trees.

"OK Denise. Change to what? Do you know any air hostesses? Flight attendants?"
“Forget it, Willy. Do you think we’ll make money on all this?”  
“We have to. Or we have a problem. And we have a problem anyway.”  
“What?”  
“Because, Denise, as I don’t need to tell you – our young customers out there don’t buy their music any more. What’s more, they don’t even have to decide what to buy, because they don’t buy. They don’t need to discern what’s good and what isn’t. And it’s good to be able to choose, it makes you –”  
“ – stronger”  
“Stronger, thank you. Denise. Now I’m a discerning person.”  
“I was wondering about that.”  
“I choose you.”  
“I choose Michael.”  
“Well, that’s illuminating.”  
“It’s been an illuminating break, Willy. For you at least.”  
“It’ll be the last. It’s back to work. I make it tres horas.”

I see the Plaça waiting for them like a film set. Its narrow triangle, dull as dust. The church dominates less like a church in a square than a silo in a field. There are shut doors, a dingy supermarket, the red-awned Bar Tabú and white Café Colón. Will they stop there, and where will they go? Willy and I ate breakfast to a jangle of discotheque music in the Bar Tabú. Café Colón – we saw through the doors – has marble-topped tables and white crockery painted brown and swirlingly Café Colón, but is even more dead to business than the bar.

The Harley draws up, or does it draw up? If it draws up, it will be not to local consternation but to indifference. Indifference, because there is something impenetrable about Llucmajor: impenetrability is a crimson thread running through it. It is crunchy nuts and handmade shoes, is old discotheque music and marble together. Llucmajor is as exciting as a tablecloth; such is its soul.

(For the soul of a place, unlike that of a person, is never disguised; is precisely what is on view; is as it appears.)

My talk with Willy has cut a knot. Now I can sing fulsomely. I can see Michael in front of me and I can’t describe the moment we kiss but I think there must be many opportunities for people who want this, if he wants this, and I sense he is coming to want it.

“That’s it, Denise. Just drop everything, leave it where it is.”
“Finished?”
“Just Mike now.”

Damn right, Willy. I leave the silvery microphone, go and join him and Terry in the next room. He’s in the thrall of his switches. Now I’m done I’m less tense. I feel like I’ve been drinking wine. Last night we drank enough. I can still see Michael pushing back the table to make more room for himself.

So what, he asked, befell George Sand?

I was able to tell him that after a dire winter on Mallorca with a sick Chopin, she claimed Mallorcans were a lazy bunch, lazy for not exploiting the natural riches of their island. Instead of turning more pesos by, say, organising the transportation of more oranges to a second port as well as a first, they mooched off and ate the oranges themselves. They sat around playing cards.

Also an art, said Michael.

We looked at each other without wavering.

Reading is.

Thoroughness may be.

I remember too thinking: to George Sand Mallorca lived in an air of defeat. It felt like a dilute version of what it could have been.

She could have claimed that king Jaume’s contribution, his drop of blood, had been to leave the island with this desultory air. So ignoble are souls sometimes.

If we lie in bed together I will tell him about souls. When we lie there.

Forget the stripes on the melons. Let’s skip Llucmajor, Michael. We can reach Willy’s down the back roads.

OK Chrissie. That may be shorter.

We go so fast.

Do you want us to go slower?

No. It’s a thrill.

I had plucked a plum from the tree beside the studio and was peering in through the windscreens of the Citroen, wondering if animals might use a rusted old van, and what animals could these be, when I heard a motorbike stop at the gates and heard the buzzer press for Willy and heard Terry bark and heard desperate tyres. The plum was full of juice. I felt the juice on my chin just before I heard the motorbike approaching, I guessed it was them. The juice felt good, in the way I had come to realise that all excess, trying everything, can feel so good. I had put everything into those songs, as I knew Michael would too. The moment I heard the Harley I ran with Terry to greet him.
"THEY HAVE TO COME SOONER OR LATER IF YOU STICK AT 'EM": HORSE-BREAKING AS METAPHOR IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL DISCOURSE

I am the captain of my pain
’Tis the bit, the bridle
The thrashing cane
The stirrup, the harness
The whipping mane
The pickled eye
The shrinking brain –
O brother, buy me one more drink
I’ll explain the nature of my pain
Yes, let me tell you once again
I am the captain of my pain

It is the contention of this essay that popular Australian representations of the breaking of wild horses consistently speak of a number of racialised and gendered anxieties. Tim Flannery argued in 2003 that the “Man From Snowy River” myth of the mountain-bred boy who captures a wild stallion and becomes a “man” in the process epitomises a whole series of “beautiful lies”: “lies” that have led Australia to what many perceive as a current environmental and humanitarian crisis. Flannery drew attention to the way in which “our worship of the self-reliant stockman neatly sidesteps the fact that the men of the cattle frontier were the shock troops in our Aboriginal wars.” Indeed, it is demonstrable that in many of the classic “horse stories” set in the alpine region of south-east Australia, the capture and taming of brumbies facilitates the process of “indigenisation” for white Australians. Brumbies were historically part of the ecological arm of European colonisation of this country. And yet, through their positioning as the “spirit
of the land” in texts like A. B. Paterson’s “The Man From Snowy River” (1890) and Elyne Mitchell’s _Silver Brumby_ series (1958–66), they have provided waves of new immigrants with a means of “earning” legitimate possession and a sense of connection to the land. I have argued elsewhere that the presence and/or absence of real indigenous “others” is often a striking anxiety in the south-east Australian “horse-breaking” texts. Despite the contrasting situation as regards to the actual presence of indigenous stockmen in the nor-west of Australia, I seek to demonstrate here that a consistently “gentle” iconography of “the bit, the bridle” is also utilised in Jeannie Gunn’s _We of the Never-Never_ (1908) and Katherine Susannah Prichard’s _Coonardoo_ (1929).

According to her memoir, _We of the Never-Never_, Jeannie Gunn entered the “Never-Never” in 1902 “sitting meekly on a led horse.” She left just over a year later having learnt to “hand[el]” a “little brown filly,” freshly cut from a brumby mob (236). That the controlling of wild horses is an integral component to this memoir of frontier life is not so surprising, given that a station like the Elsey in the Roper River region of the Northern Territory needed 200 horses over the course of a year and drew these from a roaming pool of stock (154). More significant, and as yet unremarked by literary criticism, is the way in which Gunn uses the mastery of horses as a felicitous metaphor for a number of things within the text, ultimately legitimating her own white female presence in the North with an extended play on this particular image.

Gunn published _We of the Never-Never_ in 1908, six years after the unfortunate death of her husband and her return from the Elsey Station. As Katherine Ellinghaus notes, _We of the Never-Never_ is frequently listed as one of Australia’s most popular books, and has rarely been out of print since. Not least amongst the reasons for this is Gunn’s status as a pioneering white woman: a fact that is of particular interest to feminist scholars seeking to reconstruct a formerly neglected aspect of Australian history. Since 1990s’ wider recognition of Aboriginal dispossession, however, the book has become difficult to read as anything other than an “artifact from our colonial past.” Peter Forrest’s analysis of Northern Territory historical documents, published in 1990, Francesca Merlan’s 1996 publication of Mangarrayi testimony, and the publicity surrounding the Elsey land claim, lodged in 1991 and finally won in 2000, resituate Gunn’s account of gallantry, forbearance and humour in the North as a spectacular compensatory narrative. Not only was the Elsey station evidently some of “the worst pastoral land in the continent” in 1902, plagued by Redwater (cattle) disease, low meat prices, and, just five years previously, a cyclone, but it had been, since 1881, a particular focus for
violent confrontation with Aboriginal people.\textsuperscript{11} It is instructive to compare these brutal facts with Gunn’s romantic catalogue of the joys of doing things from scratch; of being reacquainted with the deep meaning of simple things. Forrest also pointed to the widespread fear at the time “that the coming of the white women would end forever the ways of life which were the reasons for so many men staying in the Territory” – “ways of life” amounting to “sexual enjoyment on demand and without responsibility.”\textsuperscript{12} It is noteworthy that, far from acknowledging the relationships of white stockmen with Aboriginal women in her text, Gunn displaces it with a picture of remarkable celibacy. We are at one point asked to believe, for example, that a traveller who had apparently seen “neither a cabbage nor a woman for five years” would lament the cabbage first (127)! Gunn’s “never-never” has been exposed as\textit{terra nullius} in microcosm: a blatant and frenetically anxious attempt to wipe out or “mask” prior ownership of land and inscribe it as an imaginary idyll.

What I want to add to this discourse is recognition of the role wild horses play in both these racialised and gendered masking functions of the text. These occur primarily in relation to Jack the Quiet Stockman, one of the Scottish station hands who breaks horses on the Elsey. Jack is introduced as a young man who “had always steered clear of women” on account of them being “such terrors for asking questions” (48). When he hears that the boss has brought a wife with him to the Elsey, his first reaction is to try to leave. Although it is Aeneas Gunn who initially dissuades him from this, it is Jeannie Gunn who eventually wins this reticent extreme of settler masculinity over and changes his views on white women. This triumph, mediated through an elaborate play on horse-breaking, becomes Gunn’s means of salvaging achievement and purpose from the otherwise tragic experience of her frontier encounter.

Gunn is drawn to Jack, and he to her, when they meet at the horseyards to look at freshly mustered stock. When asked to choose her “fancy,” Gunn astutely picks the colt Jack has already selected as prime catch. This gives her the first glimmer of his respect, whereas Gunn’s appreciation of Jack’s “inner character” is won as she watches him break the horses:

\begin{quote}
If anyone would know the inner character of a fellowman, let him put him to horse-breaking, and he will soon know the best or the worst of him. Let him watch him handling a wild, unbroken colt, and if he is steadfast of purpose, just, brave, and true-hearted, it will all be revealed; but if he lacks self-restraint...he will do well to avoid the test, for the horse will betray him.
\end{quote}
Jack's horse-breaking was a battle for supremacy of mind over mind... To him no two horses were alike; carefully he studied their temperaments... – using the whip freely with some, and with others not at all; coercing, coaxing, or humouring, as his judgement directed. Working always for intelligent obedience, not cowed stupidity, he appeared at times to be almost reasoning with the brute mind, as he helped it to solve the problems of its schooling... (73)

Because Jack demonstrably achieves the trust of wild horses, sometimes within minutes, Gunn has her proof that he is “just, brave, and true-hearted.” Here, as in recent media items in Australia about horse “whisperer” Monty Roberts, there is slippage between the man who can quietly achieve the “surrender” of horses and the “good” man whose views and methods must ultimately be sound in other respects (76). Having established Jack's credentials in this way, the stockman himself becomes a prize that Gunn seeks to win. The horse hails him and, recognising the value in this, she needs him to hail her to validate herself.

There is a lot going on in this passage. If Jack is a “good” man, not cruel and inflexible, but “humouring” and “self-restrained,” he not only deserves his mastery when it comes, but it is represented as downright inevitable: “they have to come sooner or later if you stick at ‘em” (76). Over the page, he speaks with “a strange ring of ownership in his voice” (77). If it immediately seems that the “beautiful... surrender” of more than horses is being spoken of here, this is because the structural logic of the passage is used throughout the text in specific relation to the traditional owners of the country. Gunn positions herself in a slightly earlier passage as “having got the mob well in hand now” by deploying similarly adaptable tactics of coaxing, humouring, and coercion (53). “The mob” in this context are not brumbies but her Aboriginal staff, whom she demonstrably helps “solve the problem...of [their...] schooling” by letting them think she is stupid. In another key passage, Aeneas is excused for his part in a “blackfellow hunt” because of his personal adherence to a “give and take” policy of fair “recompense” (185). It is salutary that no “wild” blackfellows are killed on this occasion, but, wild horses “being [another] one of the problems of the run,” three brumby stallions are shot instead (189). There is a slippage between wild horses and indigenous people at such moments in the text, with the “gentle” method of horse-breaking functioning both as a model of colonial relations and a self-legitimating rationale for their existence.

Gunn also displaces the issue of sexual relations between coloniser and
colonised through her use of horse-breaking imagery. Having established Jack’s sound “inner character,” Gunn needs him to acknowledge hers. She textually achieves this, not by explaining his real reasons for regretting the arrival of white women in the North, but by teaching him to read. Significantly, reading is figured in the text as a kind of super species of horse-breaking. “You don’t say he’s got the whole mob mouthed and reined and schooled in all the paces?” (217), is an example of the way horse-breaking is used as metaphor in this part of the text – with “the whole mob” here standing for the written word. It is through the one-upmanship of teaching a horse-breaker to “horse-break” that Gunn proves her skills have valency in the North. If he is “just, brave, and true-hearted” then she must be even more so, and bringing the boon of literature to the North must be an even greater justification for coming. Jack’s hailing of Gunn with the gift of a newly broken filly is the symbolically fitting conclusion to this spectacular colonial fantasy.

I use the word “fantasy” because of what happens to Gunn’s logic when the horse-breaker in question is not white. Most stockmen in the North and West of Australia were not white (nor even male):¹⁴ and hence the argument that he who is hailed by the horse as master has an ethical mandate for dominion is patently false. This fact is itself acknowledged in Coonardoo, where the horse-breaker and most of the stockmen are Aboriginal. However, in many other respects, Katharine Susannah Prichard’s 1929 novel perpetuates Gunn’s representational tropes of the brumby. Like We of the Never-Never, this text projects supreme horsemanship as supreme belonging; again providing a point of access for white Australians to the land, but this time also naturalising the incongruous presence of white settlers and horses in the Nor-West of Western Australia from the imputed viewpoint of Aboriginal people.

Many critics have noted the way in which Coonardoo is a progressive text in its representation of indigenous Australians in some respects, and complicit with imperialist discourses in others.¹⁵ Prichard’s tragic tale of Hugh Watt’s love for the Aboriginal station-hand, Coonardoo, on his remote cattle station undoubtedly broke new ground in Australian literature when it appeared in 1929. No one had previously dared use the word “love” to describe these cross-cultural sexual relations, nor had they given so much textual space to pondering the complexity, motivation and comparable depth of Aboriginal traditions.¹⁶ On the other hand, the novel undeniably espouses now discredited Darwinist views about the inevitable extinction of the Aboriginal race.¹⁷ In one of the most recent critical responses to Coonardoo, Anne Brewster has argued that Doris Pilkington’s Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence
should be seen as “writing back” to Prichard’s text. Brewster observes that Pilkington’s narrative, set in the same time and place as Coonardoo, points up the way in which Prichard displaces the “vast [State] apparatus[es]” of “Protection” into an individual relationship of honour and love. As a consequence of such scholarship, it would now seem impossible to read Coonardoo in purely aesthetic terms. Yet Prichard’s text was still ranked in the top thirty in the list of “Australia’s Favourite Books” put out in 2003, and in many ways remains an iconically enigmatic and resonant Australian “literary” experience.

Attending to the horses within the novel may be a means of reconciling these somewhat conflicting assessments of Prichard’s legacy. Horsemanship is used in Coonardoo in two principle ways: to discriminate between characters who belong in the Nor-West and those who don’t; and to establish a marker of functional happiness and joy within the text which naturalises European colonisation. That is, when Hugh contends that his “regard for Goonardoo” is only “admiration of her horsemanship,” he is actually speaking a species of truth. Both of Hugh’s other love interests are scared by the wild Wytaliba horses, as was his father, and four of his daughters. None of these characters could find happiness in the Nor-West. Coonardoo, by way of contrast, is “the best stockman on Wytaliba” (221) and perfectly at home there. Admiring someone’s “horsemanship” in this novel, is already code for an admiration of much more than their ability to sit a buck. Mrs Bessie Watt was a “great horse-woman” (43), so is Hugh, Phyllis, and, despite his faults, Sam Geary. Cock-eyed Bob is not bad, but rather overflaunts it. Billy Gale, on the other hand, has the “slouch and bend of a horseman”: he presents as “something free and untamed” — with “the air of someone belonging to the country” (190). All these characters can demonstrably “hack it” in this remote country in direct proportion to their horse-handling skills. A kind of hierarchy of respect is established, in which it is significant that the Aboriginal characters, Goonardoo, Winni, Chitali, and, especially, Warieda, rank highest of all.

Warieda is the “pride of the station” because he is the “best horseman and breaker in the Nor’West” (152). It is worth unpacking exactly what this means. Warieda has lived all his life on the property in communion with his ancestral land and traditions: this handsome leader in his “white moles” (126) represents Prichard’s extreme counterpoint to the “degraded wretches... remnants of a dying race” whom one apparently finds on the coast (121). He also employs rather different horse-breaking techniques to Chitali, whom we are told is good, but not quite as good. Whereas Chitali uses fairly conventional “cowboy” methods, Warieda greets his catch “like a brumby boss”:
[He goes] up to the horse, his arm, the dark sinewy arm of a black that was like the branch of a tree, stretched out before him. Imperious, irresistible, he approached, something swaggering, gallant, of a triumphant lover, in his attitude. His hand going straight to brain communicated the spell of the man, in the language of the flesh, an old forgotten flow of instincts. Warieda was nearer to the horse than any of the white men about him. Handsome, aboriginal [sic] as he was, that was perhaps the secret of his power.

Warieda’s hand reached the forehead under the forelock of silky black hair. The filly quivered and broke away; but came up again when Warieda held out his arm with thin fine fingers stretched. Gently, every gesture slow, restrained, he rubbed her between the eyes, under the forelock, along the nose; the little mare snuffled the dark hand, so caressing, reassuring, sleeking and rubbing her. It passed over and over her thick-haired pelt which had known no touch but the wind’s, or a leafy branch, on the hills. (58-59)

Note the way in which Warieda’s “branch-like arm” becomes metonymically a “leafy branch”; the imputation that the horse-breaker’s “Aboriginality” somehow places him “nearer to the horse than any of the white men”; the blatantly sexual language. Over the page, it is hard not to snigger when the long-widowed Mrs Bessie declares that she’d “sooner watch Warieda horse-breaking than do anything I know” (60). It is clear from this passage that, when the fortunes of the station are aligned with Warieda’s horse-breaking skills, they are being aligned with a combination of potency and understanding quite literally rooted in a connection to the land.

This cuts two ways. If supreme horsemanship is a natural extension of Aboriginality, then it stands to reason that the white horsemen who approach this standard can also find a connection to land. Through horses, anyone can become rooted and potent, symbolically attached to the wind and the hills. In this sense, a good horseman is more than a man: he is a man who has already passed a test of belonging. On the other hand, by implying that horsemanship is an “Aboriginal language,” Prichard is able to suggest that the incursion of white settlers and their stock into the Nor’-West is a blessing for Aboriginal people. Coonardoo, for example, claims that “the joy of her life was to ride out over the plains...with the men and the horses” (17). This is very like Mrs Bessie’s claim about watching Warieda already cited, and Phyllis’s
later claim that she “never enjoyed anything more than watching Hugh cut out on Circe” (185). Such horse-inflected moments are set up as “the good things in life” by the text, belying the fact that they are actually relatively recent importations. While it is undeniable that many Aboriginal stockmen did take to the new lifestyle with pleasure, the point here is that horses are presented in Coonardoo and as much part of the Australian landscape as thunder.

The “gentling” of wild horses functions in Coonardoo, as in *We of the Never-Never*, as a metaphorical means of “deserving” the land. Despite a different geography and proportion of indigenous workers, both these texts mirror the “Man From Snowy River” texts of the east in mythologising a non-coercive relationship with horses. Horses are emphatically not subjected to the oppressive or sado-masochistic connotations of “the bit, the bridle” in any of these Australian settler texts. Indeed, it is only the inadequate Mollie Watt who utilises any language about “whips” and “scourging” in this text (148). Here, such references are part of a carefully developed sequence in which true horsemanship is linked not to violence, but to a “language of the flesh” akin to making love (59). Mollie, with her whips and “clicking tongue,” just doesn’t get it. A gentler iconography of “the bit, the bridle” is endorsed by both Coonardoo and *We of the Never-Never* for the ultimate purpose of staging legitimate possession via right of passage. The remarkably consistent deployment of horse-breaking in Australian cultural discourse is not only noteworthy but speaks of deep-seated anxieties we are yet to completely unravel.

Notes


3 Flannery, 6.


5 Mrs Aeneas Gunn, *We of the Never-Never*, 1908 (Milson’s Point: Random House, 1990): 14. All further references are cited in the body of the text.

Ellinghaus, 90.

See, for example, Peter Forrest, *They of the Never Never*, Occasional Papers No. 18 (Darwin: Northern Territory Library Service, 1990); Francesca Merian, comp., *Big River Country: Stories From the Elsey Station* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 1996); *Elsey Land Claim No. 132* (Canberra: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1999).

Forrest, 6.


Merian points out that, after Gunn’s departure in 1903, a policy of “systematic extermination of Aboriginal people over the whole area” was increasingly implemented (xv). Some of the “bush-folk” immortalised in *We of the Never-Never*, and especially Head Stockman Dan and the Dandy, continued at the Station and were personally implicated in this violence (Merian xv).

Forrest, 8–9.


*Goonardoo* was number 27 in the “List of the Top 40 Aussie Novels” put out in 2003 by the Australian Society of Authors. See “Authors’ top reads,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 May 2003).


McGrath, 46–47.
The nights had suddenly gone from being mild to cold. A brittle wind blew every morning across the flat, making her eyes water and nose run when she stood at the edge of the lawn. She would look out towards the hills, watching the bleached grass ripple as though it were solid like water. A stray cow might bellow and a dingo might howl from somewhere out there. By mid-morning, the wind would have dropped, the sun would be strong and the light would have washed out the colour of the earth. By then she would have been up for six hours. She always started before dawn because that was when John wanted breakfast. Sometimes he would drive out to where the men were mustering but most of the time he went with the bore mechanic to learn where there was water. Half a million acres: much of it stony country where rangy cattle clustered in small mobs. They were wily beasts, difficult to muster and the terrain was hard on the horses. That's what he told her when he came home at night.

Susannah looked down at the diary left behind by the previous manager. John had been studying it over breakfast. It told him where the other man had found cattle last year, how many head had been sold and where they had gone. The men's wages were listed at the back. She hadn't seen any of the stockmen yet, only Gerry now and then. They were still out at the stock camp. Before John left he told her there was a cattle truck coming. The driver would drop off some fruit and vegetables from the co-op in town. Then the truck was to continue out to the yards to pick up some steers for the meatworks. John used the Flying Doctor radio, a thin metal box with black knobs that sat at the end of the bench in the kitchen. It crackled with static and heaved with the sound of a sigh breathed into a microphone. But other than that it was silent. She hadn't told John she didn't know how to use it. She turned the knob marked channel. It clicked heavily into the next slot. A woman's voice spoke loudly through a whining, celestial noise.
“She said she’d manage. There was nothing more I could do for her. Over.”
More static before the woman replied.
“Yeah. He took her to the races. What more could you ask? Over.”
She clicked on to the next channel. It was a male voice.
“to be picked up Monday. Over.”
Back to the woman.
“Knew when she didn’t come on that she was gone. Wouldn’t go to hospital. Had the men to look after, she said. They sent out the plane to pick her up. But it was too late. Over.”
Crackle.
“Yeah. Don’t know how he’ll cope. Or the kids. Over.”
She switched it back to the other channel and gathered up the papers and the diary and returned them to the old table that was pushed against the wall in the sleepout. John was using it as a desk. She could hear the boys in their bedroom.
They were eating lunch in the kitchen when a truck rumbled over the cattle grid into the station paddock.
She stood at edge of the veranda as the boys tore across the yard. Dust caught up with the vehicle as it stopped. A hand swung the door closed and a man in a blue shearer’s singlet and brief stubbies shorts emerged from behind it. He pushed his hat further back on his head.
She was at the fence with the children.
“I have the map. My husband said the cattle are at number eight yards. He said to follow this race.” She pointed to the stony track that led away from the homestead. It wound around the workshops and the homestead yards and down towards a creek. On the other side of the creek was a wire gate. The track continued over the hill. “You need to go through that gate and then follow the map after that.”
“I know it,” he said.
He was looking at her instead of where she was pointing. Ollie was trying to escape through the fence. She let him go, gritting her teeth. Ned pulled to go after him. She gave up on both of them, conscious of the man watching her. The children crawled through the fence.
“Come back. Not outside the yard,” she said weakly.
“Where do you want this stuff?” asked the driver.
“I’ll show you.” She spoke over her shoulder.
They reached the step up to the veranda.
“Would you like a cup of tea?” Her face reddened. She hoped he had to get going but it would be rude not to offer.
"The cattle won’t be ready," he said, following her into the kitchen.

She moved awkwardly, aware of him behind her. He set the stores down by the cupboard. The kettle had boiled a little while ago. His chair scraped the concrete floor. Through the louvres she could see the boys playing in the dirt beside the truck. The fan creaked above their heads. Red brown hair coiled moistly above the neckline of his faded singlet. He seemed vaguely amused about something.

"How’s your old man doing?"

She looked blankly then realised he was referring to John.

"Fine. I think."

"He was up here before, wasn’t he?"

"Yeah. A few years ago. Before we were married. He was a jackaroo."

"I know him, eh?"

She wanted to ask how but something in his manner kept her quiet.

"He was that fella that got in trouble."

"Oh..." she straightened her shoulders. "I don’t think so."

He leant back in his chair, smiling.

"He thinks he knows this country. He’s just had a taste of it. That’s all."

She brought the mug of tea up to her mouth and swallowed noisily.

"Have you always been a truck driver?"

He moved in his chair, leaning forward as though to get up but settled back in it again.

"Done all sorts. Cartin’ cattle, tingin’, horsebreakin’. " He looked into his mug. "It isn’t the same now. Too many cowboys."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"They were ringers back then. " He seemed to be talking to himself.

"Now you wouldn’t pass the time of day with any of them."

He looked out the window. There was a long pause. A cricket started up in the corner. She would look for it when he was gone.

"You know things have happened up here. Things you lot know nothing about."

He leant back in his chair, crossing his ankles. His calves were muscled and scarred.

She couldn’t contain herself.

"What?"

He looked at her and shook his head slightly.

"Nah," he muttered. Not telling.

"I don’t know anything about this country."

She was pleading.

His eyes narrowed. She was stripped bare.
“You see them old yards by the turnoff from the main road.”
She nodded.
“There are yards like that about every ten mile or so through this country. You don’t know how they got there, do you?” He was waiting for her to react but when she didn’t he continued. “Blackfellas,” he said. “They cut em, eh? Big solid trees you get down by the creeks. They dragged them one by one behind donkeys. They’d dig a big hole, same height as you. And if they got it wrong they’d have to sit there for twelve hours, no dinner, nothing. And if they moved they got shot.”

The fan whirled lazily above them, clunking when it caught momentarily at the same point on its rotation.
Someone might have seen you, down there in the fading light. You with all your heart, the barefoot wanderer from the east. Just a shadow in that light. A lone silhouette on the edge of the world. You don’t think of the land behind you, of the rushing night. You just stand and know your place. You watch a sunset like you’ve never seen one. This is your life, and you know your place.

In another life he’s walking whiskey, twenty-two in the city. Bang bang: footsteps on a pavement. Night-time streetlight he keeps the beat: bang bang he’s a country boy. Later he picks a fight with a uni crowd at the pizza joint. Throws a hook and watches the kid spin like a top. He’s sober and sorry before the kid hits the ground, thinking about home, thinking about dad and mum, and the farm. This time it’s a young kid on the deck, and he wills them to make this pain go away. But now he’s down and they’re into him with the boots. Before he blacks out he’s crying. At last he’s crying.

Back at the farm they want to know why he’s chucked it in. He says it’s his knee, that he’s slow and they won’t sign him. They see the lie, but what can he tell them? That he couldn’t fake it? That it was all a lie? That he doesn’t know?

– Anyway, I’m here for the muster.

There’s an awkward silence. His mum goes back to the stove and his dad mumbles something about the crop and he’s out the door before it’s registered. Before it’s got time to sink in. That look. That split second look between his mum and dad. What was that? A silent agreement? Like everything, he’d missed the point.

He comes in after work one day and there’s a book on his bed. There’s no note but he knows it’s mum. He crashes down to give it a go and avoid the looks out there in the kitchen. He doesn’t know that it’s him in the book. He can’t imagine the places it’ll take him. He doesn’t know this book will change his life.

Out in the scrub the old Holden’s parked up in the shade of a few gums.
A teenage girl in her school uniform rummages in the glove box for condoms. She pulls out the book.

- What’s this?
- It’s a life – my other life. You should read it.

She opens a page and feels his hand up her skirt, inside her knickers. She drops the book and hitchs up her skirt to straddle him. She is the envy of her friends. When he was school captain they dreamed of him. Her dad would kill him. She undoes her bra and cradles his head against her breast, feeding him her nipple. She leaves on her schoolgirl skirt – he likes her to leave it on. She feels his rough hands cupped against her buttocks and his cock inside her. He fucks her and fucks her. He feels the tightness of her cunt and the warmth of her juice run down his balls. They will fuck until he comes, and the guilt and the shame of what he is doing will follow, and it will be more than he can bear.

She hands the book back to him.

- Ahh, you read it!
- Your other life – am I just your Lucy Wentworth?

She’s embarrassed to ask it and afraid of what he might say. The question cuts him like a knife. He thought she was too thick to work it out, but now its there and he can’t go on hiding from it. He takes her breast in his mouth before he blurts out the truth. But it’s enough to let her know that this game of grown ups is over, and this guy’s gonna bolt for sure.

It’s evening out in the muster paddock. Two brothers ease along the fence line, rolling in time with the pitch and rock of the truck. One drives, his arm sweeping the spotlight in a wide arc of scrub. The other nurses a gun, following the light with a rigid stillness. He fingers a spent casing and tells himself he’s Quick Lamb in the wheatbelt – Mr. Crackshot. Theirs is a silence that only brothers can know. They’ve done this all their life: lived, shot, played, cried and fought side by side. They know each other better than they know themselves. The night is hot, thick with the heat of the earth. There’s a brooding edginess to the sky that has the roos on the hop. Suddenly the driver swings onto a mob and lurches for the shooter. He lines up the boomer who’s stayed to challenge. He’s blinded but won’t leave to protect the mob. Through the sights the buck’s chest heaves in panic and wonder yet he won’t run. He can’t. He lowers the gun, maybe more like Quick than he knows. His brother says nothing, just sits there at the wheel and nods his head.

- Go.

It’s an order and he knows what it took.

- Yep.
- Where?
- West.

And there it is.

Around the table they huddle over a map, giggling like schoolkids. Mum points to a dot and smiles. Dad spills his beer and yelps like a kelpie.

Up on the hill the old Holden crunches into second and pulls out onto the blacktop. It’s early, but already there’s a glow in the East. He idles there a minute. Inside the cab he’s tense. The cold air stings, fogs the windscreen. He clears it with the jacket, and checks a fuel gauge that hasn’t worked for years. Before him is night. Before him is a long and lonely road. Before him is a chance at a life. He feels the tyres flex away into the night, already in the life of a west coast world.

At a lonely roadhouse he stops for fuel and sees three camels and a blackfella walk out of the scrub. As they cross the road the old fella gives him a nod and they disappear back into the bush. He blinks, and wakes up to the overfilled tank pissing fuel all over him. Back on the road he wonders about the blackfella. He drives on smelling of super and the road unravels out of darkness toward him.

He sees the border behind a foggy windscreen. There’s just the one bloke on the crossing. He wanders over:
- Anything to declare?
- No mate.
- Where you headin’?
- That way.

The border guard knows all the types – these young ones, the hobos with their dreamy looks and bullshit preachings. They’re usually back within a month. All homesick and sullen looking, running back to mummy in the east. This one’s a bit different though, bit of a steely edge to the kid. It’s got his back up.

- Best you pull over soon young fella. Roos ya’ know, pretty bad this time of night.

He nods to the guard but this awkwardness is killing him. He drives off. The old bloke watches him go and wonders if he’ll see this one again. The kid’s rattled him and he’s not sure why. He stands there in the cold stillness of the desert, watching the red glow of the taillights fade into the night. Up past Eucla he takes a dirt track to the left, doesn’t think about it, just does it.

Around midnight he leaves the ute and tracks off into the dunes. Up on the crest he reefs off his clothes and walks naked and blind into the blanket of moon shadow below. There’s no sound down here, and nothing moves but the slow soundless dunes around him. He hadn’t meant to come here. It was
just an impulse up there on the highway and before he knew it he was on the station track. There’s a vague memory here, a nostalgia. Thundering down the dunes with dad and his brother. Is that why he’s naked? Is it the freedom he longs? That innocence? Up the next dune he tracks out into the light, and beneath a full moon retraces invisible footprints across a silver landscape. Past the telegraph ruins he wanders through a pearly world until at last he’s reached the end. On that last dune, naked, with the known world behind him he stands on the brink, before him the Great Southern Ocean. Moonlight slips in a silver stairway from shore to horizon. He’s filled with a sense of where he is, as if time and space have ceased and all that has happened has led up to this point. He has a sense of who he might be. Time falls away and he stays there into the dying night, naked and alone on a lonely sand dune. He holds on as though he rides a knife on the edge of the world.

He wakes himself calling the dog off but it won’t let up. There’s a bark. The moment catches him and he throws open the swag to see a bloody great dingo leering out of the darkness. He fumbles for a weapon. Finds something hard and pings it at the bastard. There’s a yelp as the torch smacks it across the nose and it falls back to the edge of the clearing. There’s the soft pad of a footfall and bang he’s up there into the ute holding his privates like they’ll save him. He stands there a minute, straining in the darkness. Nothing. He does a bolt down to grab the swag, thinks bugger the torch and jumps into the cab. Makes it. His heart is pounding. There’s something out there he can sense it. He fumbles for the keys, finds them and turns her over. He takes a big breath and flips on the lights and there’s four of the mangy bastards right there at the door. He tramps it and flies out of the truck stop in a scream of dust. Fifty k’s down the road, freezing and hungry, he manages to stop and pull on some clothes.

He wheels around the river past the old brewery and for the first time in months he feels himself relax. The engine hums its familiar tune. Yachts bob out on the ferry wake. He winds down the window and a hot easterly rushes in and turns the cab upside down. There’s rollies and reefers and all kinds of shit flying everywhere, and then they’re out the widow and into the Moke that’s too far up his arse anyway. The driver’s givin’ it to him but he can’t stop laughing. Smoke in a Moke. He’s lost it, killing himself laughing and what a fool he looks driving past the uni with his Vico plates and his arm out the window floggin’ the old girl like a wild horse, scared any minute now he’ll piss himself if he doesn’t stop. He drives on, past the millionaire mansions, past the sign to Fremantle. He drives on in a dream.

I have west coast sand between my toes, I know my place. I watch this day end with a sun that dips in an ocean horizon. At my back lies a desert
interior, and the 2000 miles through which I've fled. Dust settles like a dream. I am back in the west. I know my place.

*Quick Lamb and Lucy Wentworth are references to characters in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (Sydney: McPhee Gribble 1991).
Let me begin by saying what I'm not going to do in this paper: I'm not going to do what used to be called a "close reading" of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*. I'm not going to wheel out a theoretical approach through which to interpret the text, as if the reading I could produce by that means were somehow more authoritative than any other. Instead, what I will do is situate Winton's career and this particular novel in what can be called the field of Australian literature. In using this term field, I mean to indicate the whole system involved in the production and reception of Australian literature. This is now a very broad spectrum of institutions, personnel, practices and values that is surprisingly complex and diverse. It is now so extensive that it isn't even confined to Australia. And academic literary criticism — in the sense of theoretically-driven textual analysis — is only one part of that field. Many would say that it's not even the most important part.

This idea of a "field" derives from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Much of Bourdieu's work was done on French art culture of the nineteenth century, but it has been widely used in recent years as a tool for thinking about how other culture industries work, including print culture, cinema and music. When Bourdieu talks about a field of cultural production, he means to identify the entire set of institutions, personnel, practices and dispositions that work in combination to shape its possibilities and outcomes. In the case of print culture, these include the publishing houses that produce and distribute books; the bodies that award literary prizes; the government departments that give grants and frame cultural policy; the shops that sell books; the reading groups in which books are variously discussed; the mass media that report on books and writers, including newspapers, radio and television; and the schools and universities, which set courses, select some books and writers above others, and publish literary criticism in scholarly journals. Working in these different institutions, each with its own values and
practices, is a range of personnel involved in books and writing: they include authors, literary agents, editors, publicists, reviewers, academics and school teachers. As David Carter observes, in the last twenty years, the field of Australian literature has achieved a certain maturity or “density” that allows it to be self-sustaining in relation to other fields, including the global print economy.2

This account is not meant to be comprehensive or even theoretically rigorous, but it gives some idea of the field of cultural production that both enables and constrains what it is possible for a writer like Tim Winton to achieve. Cloudstreet does not have a single and definitive meaning. Rather, it is a textual site that lends itself, albeit actively rather than passively, to a variety of uses. It is a commodity produced by many hands that circulates through a range of institutions and practices, and which comes to have many different meanings and uses as it circulates through the field. A good deal of a book’s meaning is produced by what the French critic Gerard Genette calls paratext: that is, the “heterogenous group of practices and devices” that mediate a book to its readers, ensuring its “presence in the world,” its “reception” and “consumption.” These comprise both peritext (the devices located inside the book, such as chapter titles, prefaces and epigraphs) and epitext (the devices located in the physical and social space outside the book, generally with the help of the media and the web, such as interviews, promotional dossiets, and weblogs).3 The field of Australian literature is so diverse that it puts different tastes, values and preferences in competition with each other. Editors and publicists, for example, don’t have the same “vision” for a book as its author, but they make an important contribution to its eventual realisation. Newspaper reviewers do not value the same books as university lecturers, and they tend to use and interpret them in different ways. These divisions within the field also affect us as individuals. I might want to say very different things about Cloudstreet if I were in a university English tutorial as opposed to a book group in a friend’s lounge room. I might read it very differently on my Christmas holidays at the beach to the way I would when preparing an article about it. This means that there is no single kind of reader or way of reading — rather, there are different ways of reading that any one individual might practise in different situations.

Academic literary critics are often reluctant to concede that there are more important influences in the field of literary production than themselves. But the reality is that the academy has had a powerful influence in shaping literary taste for only a relatively short period of time. In Australia it was not until 1950s that the universities began to teach Australian literature and to shape its values. In the case of the secondary school
classroom, it was not until the 1960s or even 1970s that Australian novels, poems and plays made their appearance alongside Shakespeare, Dickens and TS Eliot. Prior to this time – roughly the mid-twentieth century – it was more likely to be the journalists and free-lance public intellectuals who had the greatest influence. This was the situation Patrick White wrote about in 1968, recalling his return to Australia from London in 1947:

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is.¹

As recently as 1958, then, Patrick White was lamenting precisely the absence of the complex and mature literary system I’ve just described. Ironically, it could be argued that academics today are once again losing ground as arbiters of literary taste, as general readers look to other sources such as newspaper reviews, radio programs and reading groups.

Tim Winton

Let’s turn now to Tim Winton’s place in this field. I’m not going to attempt a comprehensive biography of Winton for the same reason that I’m not going to do a full critical analysis of the novel – this is because literary biography, like literary criticism, is just one among many ways to approach books and authors. But we do need a few facts in order to map Winton’s career on to the field.³ What we want to understand is how the phenomenon we call “Tim Winton” is an artifact of – that is, something produced by – the system of Australian literature.

Winton was born in Perth in 1960. He spent his early life there and at Albany on the far south coast of WA. During the late 1970s and early 1980s he was among the first students to graduate from a new course in creative writing at WAIT, the West Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). Creative writing courses are now common in Australian universities, but at the time it was among the first of its kind. Winton became a professional writer in 1981 when, at the age of 21, he shared first prize in the Australian/Vogel National Literary Award for what become his first novel, An Open Swimmer (1982). Winton now has national and international reputations, and his books have been translated into other languages and adapted for the stage. Cloudstreet (1991) in particular has attracted major attention, and has been set widely on university and secondary school curricula. Some reviewers in the early 1990s asked whether it might be “the Great Australian Novel.”
Winton began writing *Cloudstreet* in Paris while staying in an apartment maintained by the Literature Board of the Australia Council to give Australian writers an opportunity to live in Europe. The Literature Board is the major institution, dating back to the 1970s, through which public funds are granted in support of creative writing. As the acknowledgements page of almost all his books will show, Winton has been a frequent recipient of Australia Council grants. He has also won a staggering number of national and international literary awards, some of them worth tens of thousands of dollars. *Cloudstreet* received the National Book Council Award, the West Australian Premier's Award and the Miles Franklin Literary Award. In 2003 the Australian Society of Authors conducted a poll to determine the top 40 Australian books. *Cloudstreet* was rated number 1 and *Dirt Music* number 4. Patrick White and David Malouf also made it into the top 10. Surprisingly, perhaps, Peter Carey did not, with *Oscar and Lucinda* appearing at number 11.

These few dates and facts reveal the relation between Winton's career and the history of the field. Winton was born at almost exactly the time when Australian literature became institutionalised as a marketing category, as an object of government policy, and as a field of study in schools and universities. He went to university to study creative writing at exactly the time when such courses were being established. He wrote his first novel, won a prize for it and had it published during a period of massive and unprecedented growth in the system of prizes and grants that arose to foster Australian literature. And he went on to be a regular recipient of Australia Council funding. In other words, Winton's career corresponds exactly with what David Carter calls the moment of "maturity" or "density" of the Australian literary system.

What would have happened if Winton had not been born into this mature system? We can get some idea by looking briefly at the career of the person who taught him creative writing at WAIT. As a young student in the late 1970s, Winton was taught by the novelist Elizabeth Jolley. The differences between their careers are startling. Jolley was born in England in 1923 and emigrated to Perth in 1959. She arrived in Australia to find what Patrick White had just described as "the Great Australian Emptiness." She'd been writing for years but couldn't find a publisher and had to work as a nurse, a real estate agent, and at various other jobs before being appointed as a tutor in creative writing at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1974. Later she became a key figure in setting up the new course at WAIT. Although Jolley had been writing for many years, her first book was not published until 1976, when she was well into her 50s. From that point a flood of books was published, some written long before, and her reputation soared during the 1980s, a decade now regarded as a golden age for Australian women writers. Now although
there are many reasons why Elizabeth Jolley was relatively slow to publish and achieve fame, one of the major reasons that both her career and Winton's took off exactly when they did was because they corresponded with a key moment in the growth and maturity of the field of Australian literature. Winton's career, in other words, like Jolley's very different career, can be seen as an artifact of this field - that is, as something both enabled and constrained by it - something literally made possible by its enormous expansion in the 1970s.

The Tim Winton Phenomenon
To understand more about the Tim Winton phenomenon, I want now to ask, which elements of the literary system have been most active in enabling his success? I’m curious about whether his success has been academic or what we might think of in the broadest sense as “popular.” In other words, has it been the universities and academic critics that have contributed most to his reputation? Or have those elements of the system outside the universities been more important? Here again, the contrast between his career and Elizabeth Jolley’s is instructive.

Jolley’s reputation is sustained by those sections of the field associated with ‘the literary.’ Her books have attracted mainly theoretically-driven (especially post-structuralist and feminist), text-based readings by academic critics, but they are not widely “popular” in the sense that Winton’s are, and not all of them have remained in print. Winton, on the other hand, has had surprisingly few academic articles written about his books: Andrew Taylor’s article in *Australian Literary Studies* is a rare exception. But he has been very widely set on undergraduate and secondary school curricula, he maintains a constant presence in the mass media, and he is a favourite with reading groups and the educated general reader. Readings of his works have been less theoretical and text-based, preferring instead author-centered, thematic and regional approaches. Where writing about Jolley’s novels has appeared as critical analysis in scholarly books and journals, writing about Winton turns up most often in the form of interviews, feature articles in newspapers and magazines, and on radio and television.

Let’s look at the evidence for this. The electronic database *Austlit* lists hundreds of “works about” Tim Winton – round 400 in fact. But very few of theme are academic books or articles published in serious literary journals. The vast bulk of this *epitext* is short articles in the mass media, especially newspaper, magazine and radio reviews, and notices about his many awards. Second to this is a large amount of biographical material, especially author profiles and interviews. Even a cursory look at the media reports shows that
they come in waves, reflecting the publicity campaigns associated with the promotion of new titles and the annual cycle of literary prizes. This is now one of the most important components driving the literary system as a whole. The novelist Kate Grenville has said that “Prizes give writers headlines in a society where writing doesn’t usually make headlines. This society doesn’t value writing as much as we’d like it to, but it does value competition.” Prizes impress publishers. They know they can use them to promote an author. And the media are fully complicit in publicising awards, especially if they create controversy or heated responses. There have been numerous scandals and controversies such as the Demidenko affair of 1995–6. The number and variety of Australian literary awards continues to grow, but there are a select few that are capable of creating a reputation, endowing critical acclaim and attracting constant waves of media attention. These are the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the New South Wales and Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards, the Banjo Awards (prior to 1988 known as the National Book Council Awards), the Australian/Vogel Award, and the Children’s Book Council Awards. Winton has won most of them at one time or another. I find Kate Grenville’s choice of the word “competition” interesting – she realises that this part of the system is governed by the logic and values of the market place, with its competitions and top-ten lists, all of which exist to promote authors and books as commodities.

The secondary schools curriculum
Another element of Winton’s success has been the penetration of his books into the lucrative secondary school curriculum. Writers and publishers are especially keen to crack this high volume market, where books are sold as class sets. Being set on courses has two important consequences for sales: it makes sales figures high, and it extends the sale period beyond the year of release, keeping titles in print sometimes for decades. Some Australian authors have virtually based their careers and reputations around the secondary curriculum. It would not be difficult to draw up two distinct lists, one of “literary authors,” whose works are not often set in schools but are often out of print, and one of “school text” authors who are rarely out of print. The poet Bruce Dawe is a leading example. Dawe’s reputation as Australia’s favourite poet derives substantially from his long association with the secondary school curriculum. His publisher, Longman, is a textbook specialist and does not otherwise publish poetry. Dawe’s Collected Poems has never been out of print and sells in massive numbers. Yet his career and reputation are artifacts of this niche market, and he does not have quite the status in the tertiary sector that he does in the secondary sector. By contrast, more
“literary” writers like Patrick White and Christina Stead are rarely set in high schools because their novels are regarded as “difficult.” Even though White is our only Nobel Prize winner, his most famous novels are often out of print.

Like Bruce Dawe, Tim Winton has now established himself in this important niche market. And like Dawe, this is reflected in the kinds of books and articles that are written about him. To date there have been three books about Winton, and these reflect his popularity with the general rather than the academic reader, and with the undergraduate and secondary school curricula. Academic criticism often takes a text-centered approach and has been driven in recent years by theories like poststructuralism, feminism and deconstruction. By contrast, the issues and approaches that dominate the three books about Winton are author-centered and thematic, focusing especially on biographical and regional issues. These approaches are more representative of the secondary curriculum. Reading Tim Winton, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lynn Jacobs, is typical. It begins with a selection of quotations from Winton's many interviews, organised thematically according to his life story, his regional background, and his family-centered and Christian values. These author-centered issues are set up in Winton's own voice, then echoed in a series of readings of the major novels, including Cloudstreet.

Author-centered and thematic approaches are also reflected in the many Winton web sites. Type “Tim Winton” into Google and you’ll come up with two main kinds of site: first, publishers and book-sellers’ promotional material, and second, sites relating to Winton resources for the secondary school and undergraduate class room. For example, Trinity College, a private secondary school in Perth, keeps an on-line resources site to assist high school teachers and their students to teach and study Winton and his books. There are no links to academic articles. But there are hot links to publishers’ sites, interviews with radio and TV journalists, news items about his prize wins, and short reviews by students and fans. There are even sites where essays can be downloaded for a fee, tailor-made to assignment topics. There are also web sites by school students exchanging views about their favourite author.

At this level of fandom, Winton operates much like a popular TV star in a show like Neighbours – to which Cloudstreet, significantly enough, has sometimes been compared. Here's a blog kept by a fan:

Tim Winton is my favourite Australian author. The man is a creative genius. He writes as himself, a Western Australian bloke who spent his early childhood in Perth before being transplanted into the country when his Dad was stationed to a town called Albany on the south-west coast...
I've just seen a fascinating interview between Winton and Andrew Denton on *Enough Rope*, and am looking forward to reading *The Turning*, a collection of short stories that has just been published.\(^4\)

Notice how fandom operates. The approach here is not “literary” or theoretical or text-based. Fans read Winton biographically, assuming that his novels are a transparent expression of his life. Note too the ease with which fans move from Winton’s persona and novels to his other media manifestations such as the appearance on the Andrew Denton show. And finally, note the promotional aspect, the link to the latest Winton title. This is typical of the way celebrity operates in the mass-media. For Tim Winton, we could substitute Britney Spears, Brad Pitt or David Beckham.

**Literary celebrity and the public sphere**

In talking about literary celebrity, I’m drawing now on the important work of Graeme Turner.\(^5\) Turner has shown how books and literary celebrity are caught up in the representational systems of the mass media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Publicity and promotion are now part of the author’s profession. Successful authors are expected not only to make regular appearances at universities and writers’ festivals, but also in the pages of the weekend newspapers and on television chat shows. Peter Carey turns up in *Elle* magazine, Thomas Keneally on *Burke’s Backyard*, David Malouf on breakfast television, and Tim Winton on *Enough Rope*.\(^6\)

But the literary discourses favoured in the media are not those of the literary academy. In fact they are frequently anti-academic, and particularly hostile to theoretical modes of literary enquiry. Graeme Turner gives the example of David Malouf being interviewed by Liz Hayes on Channel 9’s *Today* show. When asked what his latest novel was “about,” Malouf was clearly embarrassed at having to come up with a simple answer. Liz Hayes did her best but was visibly uncomfortable when Malouf began, “It’s about the Latin poet, Ovid …”\(^7\)

It would be interesting to compare the public media personas of Australian authors. Winton’s is obviously very different to Malouf’s. Malouf appears as a sage-like, cosmopolitan man of letters. Winton is younger, and more down-home and folksy. An important part of his persona has been his physical appearance, which is a constant theme of the many interviews and newspaper articles about him. There is a distinct Winton look: the plaited pony tail, the flannel shirt or T-shirt, the jeans and the Blundstone boots. And there is his love of fishing and the sea, his close family life and his Christianity. What do these signs mean? At first, they appear to signify a
young or at least young-ish author. But is it really fashionable now for a man in his mid-40s to have a pony tail? The “real” trendy young authors of the 1990s, the so-called “grunge” novelists, lived in inner Sydney or Melbourne; they had spiky hair and body piercings; they talked about hip hop, not rock and roll; sex and substance abuse, not fishing. Winton's persona, then, signifies not a radical young writer, but a slightly old-fashioned identity committed to regional and working-class traditions; one resistant to the postmodern and metropolitan trends of inner Sydney and Melbourne, someone who espouses tradition, family life and Christian values, which are associated with regional rather than urban Australia. In a number of interviews Winton has sought to distance himself from the Sydney and Melbourne literati, and from academic literary networks. These themes are inscribed in Cloudstreet in Rose Pickles's brief flirtation with the aspiring modernist poet Toby Raven and their humiliation at the hands of Perth's literati, who gather in the University suburb of Nedlands.

Is Winton, then, one of the Great Australian Authors? If we take Malouf as an example, the Great Writer is usually male, intellectual, metropolitan and sage-like, with interests in high culture. Women writers cannot easily assume this mantle. As Gina Mercer has shown, Helen Garner is usually gendered as emotional rather than intellectual, and her novel The Children's Bach (1984) was considered too “small” and “slight” to be a Great Novel.* Similarly, Winton is regional rather than metropolitan, physical and intuitive rather than intellectual, young and egalitarian rather than sage-like and elitist; he likes rock music, not opera. Winton's down-home, regional and populist persona may therefore be a barrier to academic or literary Greatness which, in any event, he openly rejects.

Cloudstreet
So far I've been trying to work out which parts of the national literary system have been most active as paratext in mediating Winton's reputation. It is important, though, not to fall into a naïve determinism, which would see the author and the text as passively produced by the system. In fact, as we've just seen, the author is actively involved in providing a product—both the persona and the text—which has positive attributes that are attractive to the system, or to certain parts of it.

Let's try to think, then, about Cloudstreet as contributing actively to its own reception. What kind of book is going to be successful in this system? What kinds of qualities will it need to achieve success in this field, or within certain of its niches? What kinds of stylistic and thematic features will be preferred? In particular, what were the tastes and interests of the Australian
literary system as a whole during the period when the novel was written and first received – the late 1980s and early 1990s?

As a novel conceived, written and received during the decade around 1990, *Cloudstreet* was much affected by the moment of 1988, the Bicentenary of European settlement in Australia. In so far as the Bicentenary affected the arts, it created a distinct climate of expectations, values and interests that can be seen reflected in the literature of that period.¹⁹ I’d note the following interests, in no particular order:

- an interest in the Australian “identity” at all its levels, and the ways in which they might be connected – regional, national and international; or, to put this another way, an interest in achieving, simultaneously, a sense of Australian regionalism, nationalism and internationalism
- related to this, a fascination with history, with Australian traditions and their place in the modern world
- an interest in certain affective qualities to be achieved and performed at this time, such as “nationalism,” “celebration,” “community” and “consensus.”

What kind of book would fulfill these interests?

- an historical novel of considerable scope and substance
- an historical novel demonstrating the connections between the regional, the national and the international
- a novel tracing the relation between tradition and modernisation
- a novel that celebrates the extraordinary in the ordinary, the transcendent in the material
- a novel about community
- a novel whose style and concerns could be read back into the tradition of the Great Australian Novel, but also forward into international print culture
- a novel that would appeal “consensually” to popular, middle brow and high brow readers
- a book and an author that formed a “saleable” and prize-worthy package at this time, that could be marketed, celebrated and “loved.”

In approaching *Cloudstreet*, then, there is a strong expectation that a Great Australian Novel must be grounded in a regional or local identity, while also
attaining more national or universal significance. This is especially so with writing from West Australia, which has a strong sense of its regional identity. Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1968), for example, was taught in schools and undergraduate university courses for many years. It is about a boy growing up in Geraldton on the coast north of Perth, then moving to Perth as a young man. More recently, Robert Drewe’s *The Savage Crows* (1976) and *The Bodysurfers* (1983) established Perth, the Swan River and the city’s beaches as a character in fiction. Winton has acknowledged these regional influences.

The sense of the national emerging out of the regional is artfully inscribed in *Cloudstreet* by the two initial settings with which it opens, and the two families’ moves to Perth. The Pickles begin in Geraldton, the setting of Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, while the Lambs move up to Perth from Margaret River in the south, whose Karri and Jarra forests were the subject of another WA classic, Katherine Susannah Prichard’s *Working Bullocks* (1926). The plot, then, folds the regional into the urban, the traditional into the modern. In the Perth suburb of West Leederville, the two families both encounter and resist modernisation – World War Two and the coming of the Americans, the Bay of Pigs crisis, the assassination of Kennedy, the coming of modern supermarkets and the new brick suburbs. The plot of Winton’s saga enfolds the regional in the national, the traditional in the modern. Put another way, it discovers the regional as national.

This theme is doubled, at another level, by the novel’s discovery of the extraordinary within the ordinary, its quest for metaphysical transcendence within ordinary Australian life. This is a central theme of *Cloudstreet*. The metaphysical is folded into the physical and the everyday, just as the regional is folded into the urban, via the river. The Swan River is a conduit, bringing traditional Australian life in to the modern city, and also a switching point between the physical and the spiritual. We see this in the celebrated boating episode, when Fish Lamb looks down into the river and up into the stars at the same time. Ordinary family life is seen as sacred and devotional. Although *Cloudstreet* is therefore set in urban Perth on the cusp of modernisation, it is as if the modern urban world does not quite exist for these two families: regional life-ways, and the forces of the natural and even supernatural worlds are channeled right inside the city by the all-pervasive water of the river and its relation to the night sky. The novel’s spiritual quest for atonement parallels the Bicentennial quest for social consensus and community. These two levels, the social and the spiritual, are constantly inscribed in the plot: in Oriel Lamb’s performance of neighbourly love through good works in a bad, perhaps manifestly evil world; the coming
together of the two families through the marriage of Rose and Quick, and the birth of their child Harry; the final removal of the fence between the two backyards; and Quick's recognition during his vision in the wheat field that he is, after all, his brother's keeper. The novel's twin themes of social consensus and spiritual transcendence are strongly supported by Winton's public references to his Christian, family-centred values.

Another common feature of the Great Australian Novel is that it has tended to be an historical saga. I'm thinking, for example of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (1955), which has many similarities to *Cloudstreet*. The status of historical fiction was greatly enhanced by the Bicentenary and its popular historicism. Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985) and his Booker Prize-winning *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) are both sweeping historical sagas that operate simultaneously at the regional, national and international levels. Although it was not published until 1991, I would regard *Cloudstreet* as Winton's Bicentennial book.

Andrew Taylor asked Winton about the historical and nostalgic aspects of the novel in a 1996 interview. Taylor asked:

*Cloudstreet...it's the childhood of your parent's generation, isn't it? Why did you choose to write about that generation in particular?*

Winton replied:

*I remember walking around in the streets of the City of Perth and being appalled. What I hadn't realized before was how much of the city had been destroyed in the orgies of development in the 1960s and 1980s. The places I grew up with...had simply become mythic because the bulldozers had got to them and those shiny reflective shit boxes had been put up in their place...I was re-imagining it...the city of your parents, the city of your grandparents...It sent me off...thinking about the destruction of community, the destruction of neighborhoods...the loss of the corner shop, all the kinds of things that people get nostalgic about for good reason...Plus I was documenting all the verbal history and the nonsense and the tall stories I'd grown up with...listening to all these people talking in accents and inflections that had become pressed out of reality, out of existence by the Americanisation of our culture.*

Winton is quite explicit, then, about the novel's nostalgia for lost places, for an Australian accent and culture that are pre-American, pre-modern, pre-
1960s. These qualities find expression in the novel’s rich registration of Australian idioms of the 1940s and 1950s, and its superbly lyrical descriptions of places and landscapes in and around Perth. This goes a long way toward explaining the popularity of the novel, at least for a certain generation of readers, the baby boomers, who were the major cultural force in the 1990s, when the novel was published. But nostalgia is by its very nature conservative: it prefers the past to the future; it is at best ambivalent about modernity; it prefers the local and the traditional to the global.

Stylistically, too, *Cloudstreet* can at once be read back into the Australian tradition and forward into certain forms of internationalism. I’ve already mentioned a number of Great Australian Novels whose saga form is echoed in *Cloudstreet*, such as Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*. But it was another aspect of the novel’s style that allowed it to seem fashionable and even international in the 1990s – that is, its affinities with magic realism. This is most often associated with the Latin American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1971) combined elements of the national historical saga with eruptions of myth and magic into the plot as if they were “real.” Winton flirts with magic realism in a few notable episodes, such as the fishing episode at Margaret River, where Quick sees the Aboriginal angel and his boat magically fills with fish. This Bruegel-like domestication of one of the miracles in the New Testament is an example of Winton’s quest to locate the extraordinary in the real, to show, literally, that ordinary life overflows with divine grace.

The other important magic realist device is the haunting of the house by two dead women: the old lady who turned her home into a charitable institution for Aboriginal girls, and the Aboriginal girl taken from her family who committed suicide in the house. This is almost certainly derived from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which is set in a house haunted by the ghost of a negro baby killed by its own mother to save it from a life of slavery prior to the American Civil War. Eventually the houses in both novels are exorcised by the establishment of a positive community, and especially through the nurturing efforts of women. Angels and spirits were in fashion in the 1990s, appearing in a number of other Australian novels, short stories and films, including Helen Garner’s *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992). Winton, though, risks the charge that he is appropriating Aboriginal and African-American trauma as a way of expressing the dilemmas of poor white Australians.

One other element of *Cloudstreet* that has contributed to its popular readability is its rich and much-publicised interaction with Winton’s own biography, which he discusses in almost every interview he gives. Like Oriel
Lamb, his grandmother lived in a tent; one of his grandfathers was a vaudeville performer like Lester, who kept mannequins in his shed; his father was a policeman in Perth during the 1960s like Quick Lamb; and he used to listen to his father telling stories to his mother. Quick and Rose's son Harry is born around the time of Winton's own birth in 1960. These biographical inscriptions indicate how a text can interact with the public life of its author's identity, which Winton actively promotes.

In its style and themes, then, *Cloudstreet* operates simultaneously at a number of levels. Its greatest achievement, I think, is the way it orchestrates them:

- it locates the national in the regional; or elevates the regional to national significance
- it richly recreates the colloquial speech and places of an era that is now felt to be lost, and for which Australian readers of a certain generation feel a great nostalgia
- it locates the spiritual in the physical and the everyday
- it performs an appropriate affective response at each of these levels: a sentimental commitment to region and to nation; a nostalgic interest in history and tradition; a “celebration” of grace, community and atonement in ordinary life.

The negative side of these strengths is that they make Winton seem like an anti-modern, anti-metropolitan, even anti-intellectual writer. This makes Winton a novelist quite unlike his contemporaries, such as Helen Garner and Peter Carey, who are distinctly modern, cosmopolitan writers. He is also distinct from the younger “grunge” writers who came after him in the mid-1990s, beginning with Andrew McGahan's *Praise* in 1992. Winton's persona and values are more akin to those of the poet Les Murray, who also champions the traditions of the rural battlers above the metropolitan and the modern.

There are, then, both positive and negative reasons why, in the 1990s, the field of Australian literature, in its broadest sense, established *Cloudstreet* as a Great Australian Novel. Or, to put this another way, Tim Winton and *Cloudstreet* have done all that the field of Australian literature, in all its diversity, expects them to do. It was the ideal Bicentennial novel, championing traditional Australian values and social consensus, and appealing to the varied historical, literary and even spiritual interests of mainstream, middlebrow, middleclass Australian readers.
Notes


5 The following biographical information is derived from *Austlit.*


8 See, for example, Paul Salzman, *Helplessly Tangled in Female Arms and Legs: Elizabeth Jolley’s Fictions* (St Lucia: UQP, 1993).


10 Cited in Anne Galligan, “Build the Author, Sell the Book: Marketing the Australian Author in the 1990s,” in *Australian Literature and the Public Sphere*, eds., Alison Bartlett, Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee (Toowoomba: ASAL, 1998): 152.


17 Cited in Turner, “Australian Literature and the Public Sphere,” in Australian Literature and the Public Sphere, 1.


PAUL FAHEY

TAKING TO THINGS

The plain, the lines of trees, the semi-distant hills all tilt as one comes around the bend in the road, about to descend the slope.

The sway of the world that governs us is there. It’s not unlike the lift that you feel deep in water with aqualung and flippers when a tiny foot-move, with arm-adjustment, enables you to glide over or past the rock that suddenly faced you.

It’s not exactly flying as a bird can, entirely at home in the element it moves in. But it is, I think, at least as if the air, at ease, eases us to notice that all of us who live here, birds of a feather, take to things at an angle.
Sharp winds as I hit the beach; rain that will stay
far off, a spray from towering cloud-surf.
I pass the co-ordinates of a gull, its head
a stone’s throw from raised wing planted in sand.
A day of odysseys... With hauled water,
children build worlds between tents and tideline,
the youngest in bliss as waves lick and jump
like a small dog. By the pier restaurant -
adventures in sipping and forking - a squad of
catamarans have blown in from Torquay,
the sailors jubilant, striding up the beach.
Under nib-scratched waves, a gold skin covers
ribs of sand. Dreambodies plumb water’s weight,
store cold as quickness, heat as strength.
Copulating turtles plop sideways into the lake as the amateur photographer approaches — if only all caught *in flagrante delicto* had such swift cool escape! The waters are not, however, underpopulated: each of these almost unnoticed shadows is a burst of dark life, a small head here gulping at the August sun, congregations of carapaces, blurred shapes at ease in their green piazza, surfaces rife with silence. Even Aeschylus could have felt no premonition here, where life swims microcosmically without a sense of menace, as if peace could always be the same as ignorance, face of fate casually neither denying, nor saying yes.

**RIG VEDA CONSEQUENCES**

He swore to his wife that he would agree never to be seen fully naked. But the gods, as is their delight, tricked him and in one stroke of lightning showed him up to angry Urrasi as the mortal manikin that he was.

She left, tossing mortality like a useless skin at his feet,
returned to the lake
and adorned herself
in the water-bird garments
of eternity.

He found her, pleaded, held out
his frail flesh to her. But she
had played the game that mortal women
play and here was no contest;
I give birth to fire and life,
she said, while all your descendants
will be surnamed Death.

What man now snug in his bed
can ever be sure on waking
that what he clasps will be
a familiar form or simply restless air
where once a goddess slept?
NIGEL GRAY

ALI ISMAEEL ABBAS
(Iraq 2003)

Never forget the names:
Bush, Howard, Blair.
(Howard is the little one in the middle,
so little you would hardly know
he was there.)
Never forget the major pair:
Bush and Blair,
like Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee,
twin towers of brutality.
Your medical treatment,
far from your rubbled home,
they will use for election victory.
They will shake many hands
(though, of course, not yours)
in the course of the campaign.
They will rouse mothers and fathers galore
(though of course, not yours –
who can never be roused again).
They will claim they care
(though you know better).
Bush, Howard, Blair:
Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee,
and the little grinning one in between,
those three stooges
who murder language
with impunity,
as if words were children.
We lost our limb whilst still a twig: Ever since our love’s been still.
Were that soul to live again – rise, as if to calling – find a frame,
then the much-loved bastard that we buried would finally have a name.

We rekindle the flame in the tomb of our affection.
By candlelight, the walls, incarnadine, resemble a womb of arcane protection.
You emerge from this seamless skin. For too long moth prone, your soul now hovers
with our shadowy lovers. Pleasure seekers, our profane worship is bald, shivering with purpose. We leave as treasure keepers.

If ever a conception refutes our origins, defies an interminable death,
it’s yours, from me, back to me, lulled by the waters of the Lethe.
And yet you’ll come into the world maligned: too much Mars in your horoscope.
Yours a nativity of agitators and insurgents, an arrival toasted by irreverent orators;
one of whom finger a strand of small stones.

Opinion is cleft across Channel and Bank: I’m considered dissentient,
my child misbegotten, from an alliance they resent. Diverse advice: from retirement
to prayer to abortifacient ‘remedies’. Only sacrifice can appease these judicious men: Druids each and every one.
For what shall I atone? I will hold her proud head up,
and not a single, precious drop will spill in their votive bowl or cup.
5.
The epitome of our marriage is this wedding photograph – more’s wrong with the picture than the frame – an ignominious ceremony; comrade you traded your name, for a ring – beneath the flag of the Irish Brigade, one free hand upon your revolver, an enemy of the King. Now I’ve a battle on the home front to win. That swaggering Hector – he’d relegate me to a lesser order, an Irish rose motif sewn on a fabric border; my own narrative within. Separation: an unsanctioned relief. Independence, still the theme of every speech; each word curls like a leaf.

6.
Tonight the Abbey became a sideshow of knock-kneed prevaricators – vindicators of their so-called hero despite his obloquy. Wrongly they judge him worthy. But even fools can set their terms – they scratched my name on a shard of stone. For all the good I’ve done, the world’s still full of mice and worms.

7.
They monitor my public silence. My private discourse is my only recourse, a jeremiad that I vent although it falls on deaf ears. If, outwardly I pretend, if I conceal my disillusionment, at least it’s a perjury that no-one hears.

8.
Gyres: one such place is prison, where time encircles itself, mensurable by a roll-call, a meal, a turn of a key in the lock. As always, I’ve relied on myself, counted five menses on my own body clock. Free to go, it’s not the same as free to roam; the cuckoo in me is resolute. Faith renewed, I tell the mirror cynic I know – God leaves no-one destitute – then I return to a ransacked home.

9.
By sea cliffs we walked, talking symbols into crag and nest, and those which represent us best – I chose the gull; pensive you debated its portent of danger or death – you, who see me as a swan, if as a bird at all. I’ve been your ancient literary queen, and thrice I’ve had the chance to be your wife –
but I've had more, not less to say.
Face-full of a sudden airborne spray I tell you why.
Sea birds are visionary. They drink the wind with every cry.

10.
Your proposal was impotent. Complicit with her predictable answer I gave my consent.
Charmed by her lunar temperament, giddy from Minnaloushe’s mystic dance –
a heady infatuation for romance wound round you, like an incantation for a spell;
yet her cascade of luxuriant hair fell – only on translations of her favourite French writers.

11.
One remained constant: In days gone by, he and I made lofty plans.
As yet they lie, inchoate. In a Tower of Babel, our venerable dead;
learned, rowdy, dispossessed – accustomed to otherworldliness:
to meditate on their lot.
I could not tolerate a life half-led. Without my own key, I’d have severed my braid
and clambered down – prepared to face the Dagda at the gate;
fearing nothing but a mirror’s reflection of one grown sedentary and staid.
THE BALCONY
(for wendy whiteley)

awake beside the old railroad tracks & disused jetty, listening for the last of the cicadas. a commuter train from milson's point flashes its morse in the bridge's dark undercarriage. who was there to witness our subterfuge? without permission we imagined things differently the white line of a seagull or the slow & fastidious ferry from garden island transepting the bay. or there is a garden & in it the statues grow past adulthood to cancer-stone & petrified driftwood — débris of those whose lives we are far from now. a vapour trail arcing at dusk drawn by a child's finger across mirrored glass & staring at the smudge-divided cruciform

forgetting the gun in the drawer, the nude shamming dead upon the divan — aware that the real enemy is within. partially blind or gradually mad. black on the canvas silence on the screen an empty sheet of white paper — each singles out its opponent. but why does it seem necessary to make the assumption or pass the judgement?
DEAR SUE LETTER
for Sue Williams

No matter who you are and where you come from, no matter what I was once and now am, ever since I’ve enjoyed your intersecting compassionate intellect which sees us eye to eye with things great and small... so my sonnet letter to you begins: rolling craft afloat and a cork assure – ing finger triggers that the line’s alert to nibbles; adventures that may, sweet bait on the hook, breed ecstasies not captured in photographs but sumptuously hidden in novels we like and the pursuit of tales which are the fictions of the universe, and this verse to you that refuses to rhyme.
Cogito

Redundant, middle-aged, for makeshift shafts of time adrift in shady fantasies, he's found and lost the plot. So what, he thinks, dead-pan as movie heroes might. To fill the day, he wanders scarce-equipped to meet new-fangled life: bank robbers, beggars, muggers, porn-shop entrances and exits.

He is thinking, therefore he exists among quotidian signs and wonders, never suffers circumscribed unravellings that writers put you through but minor dips into imagination's tide: what might be taking place in other heads, believing he's opaque, transparent all at once, like anyone with anything to hide.

How do conductors know exactly who has paid the fare? Who has got on, got off, the when and where? Whenever ticketless he tries to weather what's afoot, conceal the sleight, sit still
but always finds the patient
watcher near his shoulder
trained to spot the guilty
twitch, the lowered head

(he'd know for sure his wife'd
been cheating on him seconds
after coming home).

He knows for sure
he'll never know what everybody
seems to know. Or do they?

Buttoning down the doubting surge
he wanders double-thinking
with himself to take a lift
and ponders why the 14\textsuperscript{th} floor
is actually the 13\textsuperscript{th}.

Never worked it out. If danger
lurked in 13 wouldn't' 13\textsuperscript{th} floor
be dangerous no matter what
its name? Would God be bothered
by a number switch? They
(who are 'They' anyway?) must
consider deity a humbug if
they thought He wouldn't twig.

What kind of world is this
that hands us questions,
answers of this sort? What
are we like, he thinks, if
this is how we catch ourselves
in thought, a spectacle
avoiding making of ourselves
a spectacle?

More like a spectre,
guessing when and how we might
meet death, escape the train
conductor's gimlet stare, or,
peering at libidinous magazines
with awe, too coy to pick one
up, ducking the fat man at the
till's bored gaze, still
pondering that 13\textsuperscript{th} floor.
Part I. The Little Aristocrat

At 23, Jing was not married. He had not done anything great in his life. Probably the only great thing he had ever done was to survive the Great Cultural Revolution like hundreds of millions of his fellow countrymen, contrary to the Western belief. He was a small man, with a large square white face shaped like the Chinese character for nation that easily got sun-tanned in summers but went back to its creaminess in winters, a feature that would often draw comments from people behind his back: “How come he looks so white?” Or “Did he originally come from the cold North?” Or “Was there a foreigner in his family?” He had ambitions but did not quite know what they were. When he was an educated youth in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, he had wanted to go to school to spend his days reading books instead of planting rice and wheat in spring or carrying the back-breaking rice stocks on a shoulder-pole back to the village in summer and autumn. Now that he was a truck driver, after he graduated from the wrong school, a driving school, the old urge returned that he wanted to learn more, to know more about the world outside the little village of one hill, forty-odd households and one creek.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was at an end and China was beginning to open up. For the first time, the university entrance examination, banned for many years, was reintroduced, bringing a ray of hope for aspiring youths such as Jing, who had spent years farming the land with peasants in a mountain village by a nameless creek and had, as luck would have it, got where he was, becoming a driver in the Truck Team attached to the Shipyard in White Sand. Apart from his whiteness, there was nothing to suggest what this small man was capable of, standing in his blue overalls wearing a coat with a badge that showed he had received training from a driving school. No one paid much attention to him in the Team. They had seen the likes of him
in the past: kids sent by their powerful parents to stay in the Team as a jumping board to launch them somewhere else when opportunities arose. No one stayed long enough to strike roots. As Old Canton, an experienced mechanic who had been demoted from his position of professorship in a university for some overseas-related reasons, said, in his heavily accented Cantonese Mandarin, the Team was a temporary haven for the well-connected “bastards” before they got onto some better jobs. Few in the Team questioned the legitimacy of this practice, though, taking it for granted that it was part of a reality in which if one had power one would naturally take advantage of it before it was too late, just as Whooping Xu – he earned the name because he was suffering from a chronic bronchitis – aptly put it, youquan buyong, guoqi zuofei (one should make use of one’s powerful position before it’s too late).

Jing had no powerful parents although he did have some connections. His aunt worked in the Bureau of Transportation Administration. Over the phone, she told him he had two choices: he could either stay with the Provincial Transportation Team or go to a shipyard. It did not take Jing long to make up his mind. The Transportation Team was a hell of a job, where you had to drive trucks around the province and between the provinces, rising before daybreak and going to bed at midnight if you were lucky. The money was good but not worth the risk involved. Some classmates of Jing’s from the same driving school had come to early grief, breaking their backs or necks as a result of head-on collisions or their trucks being overturned. The shipyard did not sound like a bad idea. If there was not much work to do, judging by the word shufu or comfortable, that Aunt used, it was even better for he could effectively use the time for his studies. He enjoyed reading and would very much love to go to the university one day, his secret wish being to follow his father’s early career in becoming an English major. So, it was with some expectation that he came to the shipbuilding factory and registered at the Team one spring day.

The shipyard at White Sand consisted of three parts: a dry dock with a half-finished ship sleeping in it, surrounded by heavy lifting equipment that scarred the sky; the central part with a row of black-tiled, white-walled office rooms; and, to the side, a stand-alone two-storey building wrapped in rusty sheet steel salvaged from sunken ships. From the dock on the edge of the Yangtze River, Jing could see, miles downstream, the Great Yangtze Bridge between Snake Mountain in Wuchang and Turtle Mountain in Hanyang, the river lined with ships of all kinds. At the sight of the surrounding weeds turning green in the cracks of the mud left from last year’s flood, Jing’s heart
gave a leap. This was where he was going to spend his next instalment of life, possibly alone again, like in Grass Village, for he did not know how long he was going to stay in this strange place. And, when the shrill siren of a five-level passenger ship pierced his ears, his eyes were drawn towards its familiar sky-blue shape with three red Chinese characters painted on its bow: The East is Red, chugging away against the stream on its way to Chongqing, a City of Mountains. Outside the walls of the shipyard was a flatland green with river growth, willow trees and soft hair-like grass, shimmering with small ponds or industrial lagoons. His sense of loneliness was relieved by the comforting thought that he could come here in the evenings if being alone with oneself was too much to bear.

When he went to the Truck Team the next day, Jing was disappointed by what he saw. It was not just the ironclad ramshackle affair that assaulted his eye. Added to that was the stark reality that the Team did not even have a proper parking site next to its repair shop, shaped like a box open on one side beneath the steel structure. In front of the open side, there was a strip of muddy ground covered with sands and deep dry ruts where the assorted vehicles were parked, some head first, some tail first, depending on the driver’s whim. Nothing like what he had seen in the Transportation Team, with shiny dark-green Jiefang, Liberation, or its semi-trailers, hundreds of them that occupied the expansive old Horse Racing Ground in neat military rows, these were inferior stuff of unknown brands. One bulgy-headed 4-tonner resembled a Jiefang but turned out to be a Hubei, a brand that Jing’s mates in the driving school would scoff at. A Fiat with peeled paint perched over a black hole with one wheel gone. An elephantine truck stood in his way, dwarfing him, that he had never seen before. Next to it was a tiny little specimen that could neither be called a car nor a truck as it was too small for either, a cross between Hubei and Jiefang in miniature form, looking like a poor little joke.

All told, there were less than ten vehicles.

When he stepped inside the workshop, it was like stepping a century back into a darkened cave. Jing was astonished to see a cave painting: A room of tools, lining the walls, hanging from the ceiling and carpeting part of the floor. Spanners, pincer pliers, boxes of screws, screw drivers, crankshafts, crankcases, ignition plugs, and a lingering smell of grease and oils assaulting his nostrils. Sitting in this cavern were a group of people, frozen, as if painted, in various postures. Old Canton on a tool box covered with a clean towel, scowling at this nondescript newcomer, holding a smoking cigarette in his right hand and a large mug of tea in his left, his hand hovering over it as if
over a fire; Whooping Xu coughing and turning his thin chin around as he reached to open his cabinet to fetch a spanner when he noticed the student-faced Jing; Old Zhu quickly suppressing an abusive, “Cao, here comes another one,” by presenting a smiling face with an “Oh, that’s good, that’s good,” in response to Ba, the team leader’s introduction.

In as few words as possible, Ba told Jing what he was supposed to do. He was to act the replacement driver for anyone who could not come to work due to illness or family commitments. If there was no work available, meaning no vehicle was left unoccupied, Jing was to stay around and see if there was anything he could help with in the mechanics’ workshop.
He has lived in this coastal town for many years, long enough to know its skies and how they change from light to dark to light. In his house there is a wall of glass that overlooks the restless ocean and behind this wall he paints drowned and drowning women. Sometimes he paints the women naked, sometimes he gives them white dresses that gather and flow about them like lovely shrouds. Sometimes (though very rarely) the women are strewn with flowers - his floating Ophelias, he calls these flower-strewn women.

His fame has grown, his paintings have become much sought after, they hang on important walls in great cities of the world. He has captured sadness, the critics say, the sadness that is unique to women. Because of his fame, women come to his door from time to time. To reach it, they must climb a long, steep path from a beach where waves move endlessly against fine white sand. Behind his glass wall he can see the women climbing towards him, and he will watch them come and marvel at their female grace. He does not open the door to all these pilgrim women but sometimes, having watched a woman ascend, he feels he has no choice. Not all the women to whom he opens the door are beautiful (though most are, it has to be said) but all have a quality of sad beauty that interests him - sometimes it is the way light catches at their hair, sometimes the movement of a shadow across their eyes, sometimes a hesitation he sees near their mouth.

They come into his house and he takes them to every room but one; in each room they visit there are paintings of drowned and drowning women. This is what they have come to see, this is what they have expected, but when they see these paintings in such profusion they are overcome with feelings that are deeper than anything they have known. They tell the artist he has seen inside their hearts, the secret sadness there, the grief that is beyond words.

But it is not beyond words. They will then, without exception, tell him what it is that his work has so remarkably stirred in them: their sweet first
love, lost when they were young and careless and did not know it could not be found again; the child they carried, only for it to be born lifeless; the child that lived, only to die; the child that did not die, only to live in endless pain; the endless pain of a love they could not have; the father who came too close, whose touch was wrong; the mother who would not touch; the unsaid words that would have revealed their heart; the ache they can never lose.

He listens to these stories with a stillness the women find comforting; though he does not offer sympathy or advice, they know, they know, he has truly heard what they have said to him. And there is always one other thing the women want: it is that he should paint them drowned or drowning, naked, or perhaps in a white dress that gathers and flows about them like a lovely shroud. They want to see their face in the water, they want to see the secret sadness there, the grief that is (they think) beyond words. The artist tells them he will do this thing for them, but there are three conditions: the woman may see the painting when it is done but it must remain with the artist to use as he wishes (perhaps it will stay here, in this house, with the hundreds of other paintings of drowned or drowning women, perhaps it will hang on an important wall of one of the great cities of the world); the woman must make love with the artist; the woman must leave the artist’s house after they have made love and she has seen the painting, never to return.

Though these are harsh conditions to come from such a seemingly gentle man, most of the pilgrim women agree to them, such is their need to see their secret sadness, if only for one day, to have its nobility revealed. And so they go with the artist to his bed where, he tells them, he will move against them like the sea moves against the fine white sand on the beach below. Some of the women are taken by the poetry, or what they think is the poetry, of these words, though others are less sure. However, they allow him to grunt and suck above them, though often they will be crying long before he has finished. You see, he says then, you see how your sadness has come forth? And then, true to his word, he will paint them drowned or drowning (he decides which it is to be), naked or in a white dress that gathers and flows about them like a lovely shroud (he decides this, too – he is the artist, after all). The women will then stand in front of these paintings, sometimes for hours, seeing, for the first time, the manifestation of their secret sadness. The artist allows them this time but when he has decided it is sufficient he asks them to leave. And they do so without argument, most of them.

On this particular day rain is falling, as it so often does in the coastal town where the artist lives. He is watching a pilgrim woman climb the steep path towards his door, and, as always, he is taken by her female grace. As she comes closer he sees she is beautiful, with long, dark hair and eyes that hold an
interesting sadness. So he opens the door to her, invites her into his house, shows her the paintings of drowned and drowning women. She is affected, as all pilgrim women are affected, cries, tells him her name is Shelley (a name that belongs with the sea, with things that are hidden, he thinks), tells him (as he knew she would) of her secret sadness. Her story is of a child who died, her child, a boy. He drowned, this boy (and so perhaps the paintings are doubly painful for her to see, though she does not say this). She tells the artist the boy’s death was an accident but he watches her with his usual stillness, listens to what is deeper than her words, and thinks perhaps this is not so, perhaps this woman is not telling him everything. He does not care about this; it is the woman who interests him, not her story. When she has finished she asks the artist if he will paint her as a drowned or drowning woman (he knew she would ask this) and he says he will do so, subject to his usual three conditions. She agrees, and they go to his bed where he tells her he will move against her like the sea moves against the fine white sand on the beach below – she does not seem to hear him, makes no response, anyway. Then he grunts and sucks above her, looks into her sad eyes and is done. She does not cry during any of this; it is as if her mind has gone to another place, he thinks. Afterwards he paints her drowned and naked, and then she stands in front of the work, drawing in its secret sadness, seeing herself (she tells him) for the first time. Eventually he asks her to leave but she just smiles at him and says she has come home.

This is not what the artist wants, of course. He broods behind his wall of glass, watches the ocean, watches the rain, tells her he cannot paint; no sad women will come through his door if he is not alone. She must leave, he tells her, if not for him then for her sisters, and for the sake of art. But she will not go. She spends much of her time in front of the artist’s mirror, studying her eyes. Sometimes she will use the artist’s paints and canvas, attempt to recreate what she has seen, what the artist has already rendered in his painting of her. She studies this painting, too, tells him again it shows her sadness, shows her heart, asks him to reveal his secret. He shrugs, says it is only a painting. She sleeps in his bed but he does not tell her now about the ocean and the sand. Sometimes he grunts and sucks above her but this is not what he wants – not for more than a few moments, anyway. Weeks pass, and then months. The artist watches many pilgrim women climb towards him but he does not open the door to them. Eventually – because he needs the sadness of new women, because he needs to paint again – he decides he must act as he has acted in the past when he was unable to persuade a woman to leave. He does not want to act in this way – he truly does not, it gives him no pleasure – but, he tells himself, he has no choice.
So he takes Shelley to a room in his house that he has kept locked for the whole time she has been with him. She has, of course, asked him what is in this room, asked him to open it for her. But he has until now refused to do so, telling her it is just more paintings of drowned and drowning women, no different from the ones she has seen. But now he tells her to come with him to the room; he will unlock it; he will show her something she has not seen—and when she sees what is in the room he will give her two choices. She agrees, says the room will surely reveal something of the artist's heart, something she will need to see in order to better know her own, something that will enable her to evoke, transform. He unlocks the door. The room, like the other rooms in the house, contains paintings of drowned and drowning women. But unlike the women in the other paintings, the women in these paintings are strewn with flowers; arum lilies in particular. These are my floating Ophelias, he tells her—you may look at them and then either you must leave my house forever or you must allow me to paint you as I have painted them: strewn with flowers, floating. Shelley enters the room, regards these paintings, sees immediately they have captured a deeper, much deeper sadness than any she has previously seen, including that deep sadness she has seen in the painting of herself. It is truly a transformational sadness, she thinks. Yes, she whispers, yes, losing herself among the flowers. What is your choice, then? the artist asks her. She replies it is her only wish, her only longing, to be painted in such a way. He knew this is what she would say.

He tells her she must then come with him to a place, where the delicate and elusive quality of light on the water will allow him to create what she wants. He has lived in this coastal town for many years, he says, and knows its skies and how they change from light to dark to light. There is a pool he knows, surrounded by high walls, surrounded by rocks—if she looks at the paintings she will see this pool—and it is here they must go if she is to become a floating Ophelia, as she desires. She is anxious to go immediately to this place but he tells her they must wait until later in the day, when the sun is at a particular angle and the water in the pool shines in a particular way.

Finally he tells her the time is right, collects everything he needs to paint her, and they set out for the pool. He leads her down the steep path to the beach where the water moves against the fine white sand, though he does not draw her attention to it. They go along this beach for some time, heading south. Eventually they reach an inlet. He leads her along a path beside a river, through dense bush, until the river disappears underground and they hear the sound of roaring water. She thinks it is a waterfall but when they reach it she sees it is a weir from which water spills down a high wall into a pool surrounded by rocks. This is the place, he says. She sees there are arum lilies
growing beside the path, she sees the light on the water is as delicate, as elusive, as he said it would be.

You must pick a garland of lilies, then plunge into the pool and remain in the water while I paint you, he says. She looks with some apprehension at the water – it must be cold, and the drop is a long one but she knows more surely than she has known anything that she must see the painting, must see herself as a floating Ophelia, with all the guilt and grief and, yes, hope she feels in her woman’s heart: hope that the secret sadness may in time leave her (though she knows it will not); hope that the artist may in time love her (though she knows he cannot). So she picks a garland of lilies, moves with female grace to the edge of the weir and, with only a moment’s hesitation, leaps into the water which immediately closes about her, pulls her down just as the artist knew it would. Within seconds she has gone from his sight. He paints her from memory. The light is perfect. Then, as darkness begins to fall, he starts to walk back to his house. The rain comes just as he reaches it.
Each evening, on the television, I find myself watching for blood. There it is, and there. In films, it appears like a child’s painting, what we imagine blood to be, and what I too would like of it. In one, a woman carves her arm with glass, working as studiously with it as if she were preparing a menu or an installation. Another woman, in a quick half pirouette toward him and away from her bright sink, stabs her startled husband in his buttery chest. A man breaks open his wife’s head with a hammer as she bathes. Her meagre blood sprays one inoffensive trail across his face as a child might from a water pistol.

And then, one evening, a German KFor soldier stammers something like people were herded in this room, a policeman threw in grenade, finished them with machine gun...so much blood it ran down walls into basement.

And I am at my kitchen table, surrounded by a vase and papers and pens and washing. I am holding on to an open book, a book someone has given me. I am looking out the window, beyond the computer where one day I will write, into the almost-dark, at the newly turned earth at the base of the lemon tree and at the white chrysanthemum my son laid there. And I remember the first time I see a basement. I am in Vancouver where, even in summer, the air is sharp with cold and the light shifts all day with the rush of clouds. In Vancouver I felt for the first time that I was on the edge of something, standing on its very edge as if land were just a platform after all and I was leaning out over that edge much too far northwest and into the teeth of something huge and inhospitable, feeling its teeth pricking my ears and nape. So, I could understand the need for basements: the central heating control unit; the stack of precut firewood; shelves lined with tinned and bottled food; the ham radio; a water tank. In the evenings, they tell me, he will excuse himself and disappear. He has people to talk to in Fiji, South Africa, Argentina, England, New Zealand, Poland. His disappearance is not to be taken personally, and am I quite sure that I understand?

After we ascend the simple concrete steps, my host makes tea in an elegant pot and we sit by the large windows that overlook their garden, green and moist and soft with July light. And it is here she points out to me...
something I am having trouble seeing. Have you ever noticed, she says, how the Negro has a prominent forehead? I look at her for a few moments. Behind her own head, wind blows her wet trees about and the slant of the sun catches drops of water on so many leaves that, for a moment, there is light enough for it to be as if jewels are falling. Did I nod? Or is it her, that encouraging nod, the nod of someone grandmotherly, two generations ahead, and me both unaccustomed and disbelieving, respectfully nodding back? Well you see, then, she says. Like monkeys.

Should I be afraid?

In the Christmas of 1959, my parents found a photographer whose paper and chemicals were so stable that the colour shots he took remain as reliable as if we were still standing there, my mother and I. My child hair springs from me like angry copper wire. My eyes look deep into the lens, my gaze direct, if apprehensive. Behind, the Christmas tree is large and furious with lights. I wear long white socks and tiny blue, buckled shoes. I could not be called a beautiful child but there is something intense, something that flushes me now with a quick embarrassment. I stare into the parent’s eye, down the long lens of history, and spy something there, moving.

The hair on the back of the photographer’s neck rises up. The shutter opens. Her cardigan is blue; the pleats in her skirt are small, white knives. Keep very still, somebody says. And she does, knowing already the harshness of light, what this might mean. She keeps very still, knowing the flashes of things in the world—fireworks, the sun on the water, anger, the blades of knives.

For decades I continue to see ghosts. They run and run around the house; they stare in at windows, hold their limbs up to the glass. They like a game. They know just how much to show, for just how long, and how quick to run. They are not the ghosts we read in books—those elegant, serious figures. They don’t stand tall or turn slowly to meet one’s gaze. They are not sad. These ghosts like to hide; they are nimble and young.

They appear, of course, in unexpected places: in the street, walking away; on a passing bus; exiting a bank or cinema. I have learned the ways of ghosts— that they sunbake, drive cars, enjoy parties more than I do, and that they must have access to surveillance equipment. This can be the only explanation as to how they follow me from house to house, suburb to suburb, beach shack to wheatbelt farm, to interstate cities and other continents. They even follow into dreams, where they smile and pull up a chair, or watch me pass by, leaning easily in open doorways.

My girl, come closer. What is it?
Nothing, grandmother.
What is it you want?
Nothing at all.
What is it you want from me?
I want nothing from you.
You want nothing from me except - what?
I want nothing, not one thing, no thing at all. No thing - no stone, no tree, no blanket, no cup or car. No book, no word, no touch, not one song. No thing, no thing. No house, no house from you. No fire or light or star or dawn. Turn your back, your stoop, your tight black shawl. Turn your long thick hair, your skirts, your coins, your crucifix, your strong brown arms, your singing arms, your arms once full of bracelets and your bracelets full of song. Turn away. Be still. Be statue, be stone. Ask nothing. Ask me nothing. Ask nothing of me. Don't look, don't look my way, don't look at me. Do nothing, be nothing, be not one thing to me. Not one thing. Leave me. Leave me. Leave me be. Be a tree, be stone, be still. Let me leave, let me just walk by. Let me leave, let me leave, believe me. Be a tree, a stone, be a stitch, be still. I will take up threads. I will stitch you up. My needle is sharp and intent. I'll use skin and hair - my angry wire hair, your long thick pleated hair. I'll use your shawl - unpick long black threads from the tight edge of your shawl. I'll use your house, your light, the long light of your stars. I'll use your arms, your soft, your singing arms. My needle is immense; my needle is obliging. My needle offers neither resistance nor opinion. My needle does my bidding, my dumb needle. Your eyes and lips like three dumb leaves. I'll sew them up with my own dumb needle, our skin and hair and your own dumb song. The dumb leaves of your face.

Hosanna, Hosanna, I've seen you always, everywhere I look and sleep. I want only to touch you. Come closer. Please, just one step closer. Speak.

Someone phoned me. He had heard about the story I was hoping to write and he had a book that might interest me. He had found it in his late father's shed. I drove to his home, an old, sprawling, stone house by a river. Frogs and cicadas croaked and whirred in the thickly shaded lilies beneath the trees along the bank. He stepped out onto the wide, cool veranda, and handed it to me. I knew it at once: The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. I had a library copy at home. I smiled and thanked him. And don't worry, he grinned, I don't work for the Turkish secret police. I looked down at the book, searching for something to say. I felt my mouth move, but no sound came. Believe me, I've thought about that, I heard myself say at last, not looking at him. Then we smiled and I thanked him again, and all the way home I could think of nothing else.

The book is open to page 17, to a letter written by a Mr Rushdouni about what happened in the city of Van in 1915. I don't even know where Van is but it is something someone has said that has stopped me, something Mr Rushdouni reports that a Mr Proudian's wife says: Show me at least the bones of my dear one.

Read me slowly, my paper skin is brown and folded. Open me here, and here. I am dry with years and dust. You are breathing me in. Look - I am all
over you. Open yourself here. And here. Open your mouth, your hands, your arms, your eyes. Can you smell me? This is my undoing. I am unravelling my skin, my skin thin as paper. Hold me. I am coming apart. For you. Despite you. I am old between your fingers. What will become of me?

Hovsanna, Hovsanna, I have seen you always.

My blood is hot beneath my skin; it takes my anger everywhere it goes. My veins are stretched, grandmother; they throb. Blood rushes to the end of the line and back, ninety seven times a minute, carries itself, its cargo, to the tips of my fingers, the edge of my ears, the beds of my nails. Cells open in my sleep, divide, divide and multiply. My nails become thick, white, curve. The speed of my blood, the speed of time. I am a sudden forest sprouting, my hairs curl black from my skin. I am evening morning evening, a flushed sky. I am bougainvillea, hibiscus. I am rampant lantana. I am wasp, ambulance, pillar box red. I am blistered, sunburned, fevered, rashed. I am pandemic; I am volcanic, flood. I am all bridges swept away. I am the tumbling of houses; the floors all slip beneath our feet.

I am the Earth split open, Mount Saint Helens, her bare southern face, that great grey scar. I am ash, Krakatoa, a darkness over land. I am a B29, its belly open. I am a plane falling. I am all blood slowing. I am breath and prayer, vapour, space. I am the suffocating chambers of the dead, the Jewelled Lady of Pompeii, fingers curled about her rings, her throat packed with dust, her mouth forever wide against the avalanche of time.

Slow me, my heart, the hurtle of my blood. Give me this: a long cool night, new sheets, crushed ice against my lips; a wide bright bowl glazed blue, its twitching rim of yellow fish. Stand it by my bed, fill it brim full. Let me hear you tear an old white sheet. Fold that soft familiar cloth, let me hear you dip and squeeze it, the soprano trill of water falling. I will imagine fountains, lakes, the rowdy course of water over rocks and into streams, the thundering of rain onto mountains of trees. Let me feel it slide against me, against my skin, my feet slide in the mud as I descend, panting and driven, slipping through a forest like a throat.

Allow me this: beneath this ring of light from soft bed lamp, meniscus taut and glistening like skin trembling as I shift my weight, this hot, this burning mass of me; that turning, my breath, my bloodied anger, the splitting off of all my cells, will make that mark upon the world, that trail.

And give me this: a day; a beach in the curve of a bay, a steep cliff at my back; a small, cold stream; a wide blue bowl of fruit. Give me bluster and sun; time enough to feel my bones long and white against the sand, my quiet unrepentant heart, the patience of my belly.
SARAH FRENCH

SUNFLOWERS

Short, broad, fierce
my warrior mother
spine curved
like a question, marked
by years of unrequited
hunger, you
squinted at the world
through tri-focals
only one ear could catch
the frequency
of the moment
in the other shell
just the echo
of your father’s fist
trapped forever
like a hissing sea.

The frost of your uniform
the white flag
of your cap
a lie of surrender –
babies nested
in your arms, photo
after photo
of these smudged survivors
born too soon
yet somehow, they snuck
their way through pavement cracks
then bloomed
like sunflowers, huge
outrageous as velvet
paintings, loud against
the whisper
of hospital walls.
ANDREW TAYLOR

THE IVY ROOM
from Rome

Those long afternoons reading *New Scientist*
looking up as people came and left
with daughters spouses chatted with the staff
from time to time declined a cup of tea
nibbled a biscuit watched as the timers chimed
evening gathering and one by one
the chairs around me emptied –

one issue of *New Scientist* lasts three hours
if you read the Letters and the Book Reviews –

released at last I’d make a dash to the loo
Sarah would drive me home and then I’d cook
dinner for you and manage to eat some too
after a glass of vermouth and lemonade.
My sex drive idled in neutral much of the time
as chromosomes forbidden to uncurl
withered and let the cells around them die.

The Lesson Today was Patience, we would agree
or maybe Perspective, sorting things out
so that death was not to be feared and life
– for this was the same – is a gift enjoyed
with love and not a rag-bag of regrets.

Those afternoons finished a year ago –
my body has still to accomplish a task called life
alone, without drugs, but with you. That’s when
I hit on the plan to come to Rome
and write a poem that would see me through
for another six months.
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CAROLINE CADDY is a West Australian writer who has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies and broadcast on National radio. Her book Beach Plastic won the 1990 Western Australian Week prize for poetry and Conquistadors won the National Book Council Banjo Patterson award for poetry in 1992. Her book New and Selected Poems will be published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 2006.

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“Very Pale Meat” is extracted from Marion M. Campbell’s new novel, Shadow Thief, to be published in 2006 by Pandanus Books. Her previous works include Lines of Flight, Not Being Miriam and Prowler. She teaches Creative Writing in the Department of English at the University of Melbourne.

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ANDREW LANSDOWN'S latest books are a collection of poetry titled *Fontanelle* (Five Islands Press: 2004) and a collection of stories titled *The Dispossessed* (Interactive Press: 2005). His fantasy novels *With My Knife, Dragonfox* and *The Red*
Dragons are scheduled for publication as a trilogy by Omnibus/Scholastic in early 2006.

Simone Lazaroo was born in Singapore, and migrated with her family to Western Australia in 1963. Her award winning novels The World Waiting to be Made and The Australian Fiancé have been broadcast on radio, and The Australian Fiancé is currently being adapted for film. Simone was the David T. K. Wong Fellow at the University of East Anglia in England in 2001. Her third novel, The True Body, was written as part of her PhD, and will be published by Pan Macmillan in 2006. She lectures in Creative Writing at Murdoch University.


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Kate Lyons won the Nita May Dobbie Award in 2002 and her first novel, The Water Underneath, set in an outback missing town, was runner-up in the 1999 Australian Vogel Literary Award. Her poems and short stories have been published widely in literary journals.

Peter Manning seems to have a preference for characters and narratives that might evoke a sense of don’t look down, of uncertainty and precariousness. We are the stories we tell about ourselves, yet these stories are not our “real” life.

John Mateer is a poet and art-critic. His recent publications are an essay on Domenico de Clario for a major show of the artist’s work at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, a travelogue, Semar’s Cave: an Indonesian Journal, and the book of poems The Ancient Capital of Images, which gathers together work previously published in chapbooks in South Africa and Japan.

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MARCELLA POLAIN has published two poetry collections with Five Islands Press, *Dumbstruck* and *Each Clear Night*, teaches writing at Edith Cowan University, and is WA editor for *Blue Dog: Australian Poetry*. “Skin” is from a novel (entitled *The Third Collision*, forthcoming from Fremantle Arts Centre Press), about the Armenian Genocide.

TRACY RYAN lives in Western Australia and has published two novels as well as four volumes of poetry, the latest of which is *Hothouse* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press: 2002).

PHILIP SALOM was born in Western Australia but now lives in Melbourne. Best known as a poet, his *New and Selected Poems* and *Sky Poems* both won international acclaim and *Sky Poems* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in London. His most recent books are the collection *A Creative Life*, a hybrid novel *Toccata and Rain* and the republication of his earlier novel *Playback*. His new collection *The Well Mouth* is due out in September. In 2004 his poetry was recognised with the FAW Christopher Brennan Award.

JOHN SAUL was born in Liverpool, England, and now lives most of the year in Hamburg in Germany, where he is a translator. He has published two novels, *Heron and Quin* and *Finistère*, which London’s *Time Out* said deserved to make the shortlist for this year’s Booker Prize. A collection of short fiction, *The Most Serene Republic: love stories from cities*, has also appeared.
Kim Scott’s most recent book is Kayang and Me, a collaboration with Noongar Elder Hazel Brown. His second novel, Benang, won the Miles Franklin Award, the WA Premier’s Book Award, and the Kate Challis RAKA Award.

Sari Smith was born in Collie and lived for many years in Western Australia. She has published short fiction widely, is currently writing a memoir of sibling bereavement and teaches Creative Writing in the School of Creative Arts at Melbourne University.

Rebecca Smith is completing a PhD in molecular biology at Monash University. She loves travelling and is fascinated by the spiritual and biological connections of humans with the natural world.

Andrew Taylor’s Collected Poems was published in 2004 by Salt Publishing, UK (www.saltpublishing.com). He is an Emeritus Professor at Edith Cowan University, and has recently completed a book-length poem while on a residency at the E.B. Whiting Library in Rome funded by the Literature Board of the Australia Council.

Alf Taylor was born in Perth and spent his early years there with his family. He then joined his brother at New Norcia Mission. As a young man he worked around Perth and Geraldton as a seasonal farm worker, then joined the Armed Forces, living in several locations around Australia. He began publishing his poetry in the 1990s.

Barbara Tamperton’s first collection of poems “The Snow Queen takes lunch at the Station Cafe” was published in Shorelines (FACP: 1995). Her second, Going Feral (FACP: 2002), won the 2002 West Australian Premier’s Book Award for Poetry. “The Lighthouse Keeper’s Wife” won the 2002 Tom Collins Poetry Prize which Barbara has won twice.

Jessika Tong is twenty three years old and has been published in the Taj Mahal Review, Polestar, Arrow Publishing, Valley speed poets zine etc. She is resuming study in Bachelor of Fine Arts Literature

Karen Welberry is an Associate with the school of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry at La Trobe University, Melbourne. In 2005 she lectured in Australian Literature at La Trobe University and Victorian Literature at the University of Melbourne.

Linda Weste is currently completing a Master of Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. Recent works explore the use of “voice” in “personae” poetry, monologue and script. Other “subjects” include Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall, the biblical Judith, and the artist Jackson Pollock. The latter poem was published in Best Australian Poetry, 2004.
TERRI-ANN WHITE'S stories and other writing have been published widely; books include a collection of stories entitled *Night and Day* in 1994, and *Finding Theodore and Brina*, a family saga, in 2001.

DAVID WILKINSON left his home town in country Victoria in early 2003 with a full tank of petrol and a feeling in his gut that he'd find answers in the West. He found an Arts degree and a friend, but what David was searching for proved more elusive. He still lives on the West Coast.

TESS WILLIAMS is the author of two science fiction novels, *Map of Power* (Random House: 1996) and *Sea as Mirror* (Harper Collins: 2000) and co-edited the collection *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions Through Science Fiction and Feminism* (UWA Press: 1999). She has just completed a one year Research Fellowship as writer in residence at SymbioticA, a science/art collective allied to the School of Human Biology at UWA. She is writing a non-fiction book on evolutionary theory and has begun her autobiography.

MYINT ZAN is currently teaching at the University Malysia Sarawak in Malysia.

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