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

*Westerly* extends warm congratulations to

Tom Hungerford

on his receipt of the

2003 **PATRICK WHITE AWARD**.

**PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2001

Amanda Curtin


This issue of *Westerly* in part commemorates the life and work of two great Western Australian writers, Peter Cowan and Dorothy Hewett, and includes eulogies about each delivered by Bruce Bennett. Each had a different but profound influence on the literature of the state and of Australia; each taught in the English Department at the University of Western Australia, and each left indelible memories for their students and colleagues. Peter Cowan was an editor of *Westerly* for many years and Dorothy Hewett was a friend and supporter. Both were innovators and in their lives and writing, idiosyncratic in the best sense.

In other ways though, they were very different, almost opposites. In a moving tribute to Dorothy Hewett, her old friend, academic colleague and fellow writer, Fay Zwicky, wrote of the “passionate conviction” with which Hewett lived her life. Peter Cowan too was a person of conviction, but his habitual reticence and liking for solitude was utterly other than Hewett’s passion, expressed through her characteristic exuberance. A diary entry written when she was an adolescent and recorded in the only published volume of her autobiography *Wild Card* captures this lifelong trait: “Live wildly today, forget tomorrow.” *Westerly’s* cover photograph, taken when they received honorary university doctorates from UWA in 1995, makes these differences apparent. Cowan lived most of his life in Western Australia while Hewett went to live in Sydney, yet each shared a deep love of the landscapes of Western Australia, a love which is often present in their writing.

Peter Cowan’s writing was as spare as his person; he read the early American modernist writers long before they were well-known in Australia, and was deeply influenced by their work and by that of modernist painting. He began his long, serious writing career – publishing eight collections of stories, five novels, three biographies of family members and a number of edited anthologies – around 1939, and living in Melbourne
during the last years of the war, was part of a circle of modernist artists, including Sidney Nolan and Max Harris.

Dorothy Hewett's writing is as romantic as her life. She was an early and active member of the Communist Party of Australia and remained a party member until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Despite her middle class upbringing as one of two daughters of a settler farming family at Wickepin in the West Australian wheatbelt, she embraced a working class politics. Her first novel, *Bobbin Up*, draws on her experiences as a factory worker in a spinning mill in industrial Sydney. Hewett is best-known for her poetry and plays – she wrote at least fifteen plays; one, *Nowhere*, commissioned by the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary, only two years before her death, and many collections of poetry; the last, *Halfway up the Mountain*, published in 2001 – but she also published three novels, the first part of her autobiography, numerous articles and short stories, and wrote an operetta. Dorothy Hewett was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1996 and had a lifetime Emeritus Fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. Like Cowan, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Edith Cowan University, in 1996.

Cowan too had many honours. In 1987, he was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM); in 1992 he received the Patrick White Award for an Australian writer of great distinction and in 1995 was awarded the first honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Edith Cowan University, named after his famous grandmother, Edith Dircksey Cowan. Fittingly, the writer's center at Edith Cowan University is named after him.

In a reminiscence for *Westerly*, Peter Cowan's daughter-in-law, Diana, recalled his power of concentration and something of his character:

> He loved doing woodwork. It was his release... He hated going south after a while because it was being destroyed. Too many houses and too many people... He used to go camping down there in the '50s. They'd put up this tarp alongside the Holden van and that would be that for the summer... The woodwork and coming up and helping on the house for us made up for getting in the car and going bush... The only problem with Dad was that he had... he had one saying that, if he said it, you knew you had a problem. He'd stand around and he'd go, "Now, wait on." And you were going to be there for the next half hour while Dad decided which nail was the particular one you had to use for a particular job, and he would almost go into a trance while he thought about this...
Another West Australian writer and close friend of Dorothy Hewett, Bill Grono, has memorialized both her and Cowan for *Westerly*. His memories of Hewett he found hard to capture, perhaps he said, because “she's too large and various to be so easily pinned down. ... [and] there's too much to say about her.” He did however pass on one anecdote from Pat Skevington, a Perth actor, who responded to Grono’s asking if she had an early memory of Dorothy with this:

Yes. Back in 1945. I hadn't seen her for some time, when I saw her at the bus stop one day. She was wearing a man's black trousers, a man's white shirt, a red bolero and a black hat. She looked absolutely marvelous. And I remember thinking, for the very first time, there's really something special about her.

About Peter Cowan, whom he knew less well, Grono said:

I last visited Peter during a heat wave three years ago. It seemed just as hot inside his dark, book-lined rooms as it was outside. I told him it was bloody hot and he told me it had been a bit warm lately and I could probably do with a drink.

“That'd be nice,” I said as the sweat trickled down my neck. “Have you ever thought of getting an air-conditioner?”

“No, I don’t think so. A bit of a luxury at my age.”

“They're not expensive, you know. One of those pictures up there,” and I gestured at four or five lovely A. B. Webb colour woodcuts on top of a bookcase, “any one of those pictures would pay for two air-conditioners.”

Peter flinched at the thought. “No. This will see me out.”

“Good God, Peter. You'll be saying that in twenty years’ time. Like a character in a Samuel Beckett play.”

He brightened a little. “I often feel like a character in a Beckett play.”

Then he went and got me half a can of cold, flat beer from the fridge and ten soft peanuts on a saucer.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, *Westerly* editors.
Peter Cowan (1914–2002): Reflections

Peter Cowan was one of Australia’s finest writers, but he was also a human being, with all that those two words imply.

I knew Peter first from his writings, then as a colleague at the English Department of the University of Western Australia, when I returned there from Oxford in 1967. We worked together editing the literary magazine *Westerly* and a number of books from 1972 to 1992, before I left to take up a job as Professor of English at the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1993. From colleagues who respected each other, we became firm friends. To me, this was a special relationship because I knew how Peter guarded his privacy. I always found Peter’s company stimulating and meaningful. He helped me to reimagine myself as a West Australian and an Australian. I grew to recognise the humanity and integrity of the man as well as the humour and warmth that he sometimes withheld from the world. Peter was not a man for conversational niceties or merely sociable chatter.

Peter Cowan was born in Perth in the first year of the First World War. His South Perth childhood was marked by the early death of his father, a barrister and solicitor, when Peter was eleven. His sister, Elizabeth, a family favourite, was a talented musician but she died when she was fourteen. Music is a leitmotif in much of Peter’s writing, as inspiration and solace. He once remarked to me how odd it was that someone as attuned to the wonder of silence as he was should have so appreciated baroque or romantic music – that of Bach, Vivaldi or Schubert, for example.

At home in South Perth, Peter seems to have been surrounded by strong women – mother, grandmother and aunts – and perhaps also his surviving younger sister, Mary. Peter’s biography of his grandmother, Edith Dircksey Cowan, was published in 1978, and it is her historical significance as the first woman elected to an Australian Parliament – as the member for West Perth in the Legislative Council from 1921–24 – reinforced by
Peter’s authoritative biography, that prompted the naming of Edith Cowan University after her.

Peter listened and learnt from these impressive women, and read family letters and diaries that led him to his important biographical and historical studies of earlier members of the Cowan family in colonial Western Australia. Peter led a more lonely, and in some ways a more intense and inward life as a child than his South Perth contemporary, Tom Hungerford, who describes his boyish outdoor adventures in *Stories from Suburban Road*. But Peter and Tom always respected each other and Peter edited a collection of Tom’s short fiction for Fremantle Arts Centre Press, the Press with whom Peter developed a strong working relationship from the late 1970s.

Perhaps the most formative experiences in Peter Cowan’s life were after he left school at Wesley, and the insurance company, in whose Dickensian offices he had obtained a job which gave him no joy whatever, for an itinerant labourer’s life in the wheatbelt. These were the Depression years. From 1933 to 1935, from the age of nineteen to twenty-one, he took up labouring work wherever he could find it in the eastern wheatbelt and south west of Western Australia. He enjoyed the outdoor work and physical labour, from milking cows to mending fences - and these experiences form the basis of stories in his first collection, *Drift* (1944). The outdoor life appealed and it did not worry him that he was “a sort of social outcast” because, as he said in an interview in later years, he never had any liking for or trust or feeling for social things. “I quite enjoyed the isolation,” he said.

Although Peter was attached to a number of institutions through his life, I would not say he belonged, in any strong sense - or was owned or contained by any of them. These institutions include Wesley College, where he started when he was ten, the Commercial Union Assurance Company, Perth Tech where he matriculated, the RAAF for whom he worked in Melbourne during the war years from 1943-45, Guildford Grammar School and Scotch College where he taught after the war, and the University of Western Australia. Although Peter was a fine teacher, with a total grasp of his subject and the authority of a practising writer for students of English, teaching was never his whole life, and administration was certainly not. The memorable moments for Peter were his escapes from the clutches of institutions - their meetings, administration and socialising.

Perhaps the appeal of an independent artist’s life, oblique to social conventions, was set when Peter was in the RAAF in Melbourne from 1943 to 1945, and for a year or so after the war. Peter sometimes managed to go
AWOL, and it was during this period in Melbourne that he spent time with modernist bohemian artists and writers who made up the Contemporary Art Society and the Angry Penguins – Bert Tucker, Sid Nolan, Max Harris, John and Sunday Reed. Writing took on more urgency in the context of war, and Peter never forgot modernist artistic imperatives of interiority of vision along with attention to surface appearance. All his life, he went on trying a variety of ways of rendering states of mind and feeling in a variety of rural and urban situations.

Peter Cowan met Edith Howard in 1935 and they married in 1941. Their son Julian was born in 1944. When they returned to Perth after the war, Edith, a talented dressmaker, went on to become wardrobe mistress at the Playhouse Theatre. She was the gregarious side to Peter’s reticence and she enjoyed the bohemian lifestyle of the acting world, just as Peter shrank from its excesses. Together, though, they took part in a popular commercial television Word Game quiz show in the 1960s.

At Scotch College, where Peter taught English and Geography from 1950–62, “Mo”, as he was called because of his trademark moustache, used to park his International Norton motorbike in the College grounds and roar off when the day’s teaching was over. He often spent summer holidays working the wheatbins, and writing. The motorcycle was not an affectation. He was a competent mechanic and a successful competitor in motorcycle scrambles.

After he left Scotch, Peter took up a one year writers’ grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1963 and commenced as a Senior Tutor at the University of Western Australia in 1964, where he worked until his retirement in 1979, and thereafter as an honorary research fellow until the early 1990s. When I mentioned Peter’s death to my friend and former colleague and West Australian in Canberra, Harry Heseltine, he said that Peter had been his first tutor in the English Department in 1948. He is one of many generations of West Australian students who enjoyed studying literature with Peter. In Harry’s case, his memories include Peter’s moustache and his dry, laconic wit.

Peter understood the fate of those who are captives to their job, but he was not one of them. He used teaching breaks to escape to the unsettled parts of the State – first the south west coasts, then the wheatbelt, the eastern goldfields and the northwest. Edith and Julian often accompanied him on his increasingly distant treks in his Toyota “tank”. As a reminder of his love of the open air, I recall at English Department meetings how Peter would station himself by a window, open it whatever the weather, and take great gulps of fresh air to help him recover from the stuffiness of these
meetings. He was not a corporation man. He felt his life was elsewhere, and I'm sure it was.

Peter Cowan's real life was his writing. He published eight collections of stories and five novels, together with three biographies and a host of edited anthologies. One of the main threads that runs through his work is his fascination with the relationship of humans to the Australian landscape. Out beyond metropolitan Perth, in the northwest, for instance, he wrote, "there are stretches of quite pitiless and utterly attractive landscape. Even here we put down instant towns and suburbs that are replicas of Perth - or other such Australian models ... Yet a few miles outside their airconditioning and supermarts one can die in a couple of days, left alone." In Peter's view, these reminders of a physical environment that can be nurturing or destructive are neglected at our peril. Peter's book covers, and occasional photos that we ran in *Westerly*, brought images of these half-forgotten parts of our inheritance: great boulders, wide desert plains with a ruined building, or the open blue sky. He was an environmentalist before this became common and he took these interests into the popular press with a series of commissioned articles in the *Sunday Independent* in 1969 and 1970, which were sometimes scathing about current policies and practices. Native banksias were his favourite tree.

Peter was a genuine scholar, whose work was interest and curiosity-driven, not based on institutional requirements or competitive pressures. He would go and find out things because he wanted to know. His professional interest in books led to the best collection of Western Australian literature, especially of the colonial period, that I have seen. Unlike many collectors, he actually read his books and consequently had a vast knowledge of the unfortunately still neglected field of Western Australian writing. I used to sit with Peter, from time to time, on the curtained back verandah or in the darkened interior of the house he built in Alfred Road, Mt Claremont, surrounded by bookshelves, where we would talk about literature, current events and ideas. The gloom protected the books, but it also reflected one of Peter's recurrent moods, lit up by an occasional flicker of fire from the grate and a grin at the absurdities of contemporary life.

His interests were sometimes surprising. I think Peter knew all the bird species in Western Australia, and probably in Australia. He was not just an expert ornithologist, he was an enthusiast in his understated way, when he would take Julian, a camera, and a pair of binoculars from the house in Mount Claremont, to watch the birds at nearby Butler's Swamp.
when it was still a bird-populated wetland. He knew a great deal too about fast racing cars as well as motorcycles. Father and son came together in these activities, as in photography. Later, Julian raced cars, with his wife, Di, and he became pictorial editor for the *Sunday Times* in Perth.

If Peter’s early life was punctuated with death, the later deaths of his mother and his wife in the same year, 1980, dislodged two further anchors in his life. Fortunately, his creativity did not stop, though its focus on memory and its consolations increased. He published two absorbing novels with Fremantle Arts Centre Press in the late 1980s, *The Color of the Sky* (1986) and *The Hills of Apollo Bay* (1989). The latter is his most fugue-like and lyrical work – and his most critically acclaimed – and weaves together in a contemporary style fragments of remembered relationships of the war years and after.

Peter was attuned to the experience of pain and loss, but nothing quite prepared him for the suffering of his only son during the 1990s and his death of a tumour in 2000. After that, as Peter’s daughter-in-law, Diana, said, he visibly “folded”. When Peter and I spoke about Julian’s death, Peter cried for the first time in my company. A little later, he entered the territory he had so often imagined – he became a mental hermit – but a wry, friendly and agreeable one to the staff at Guildford Village where he spent his last days.

Peter was honoured for his literary achievements. In 1987, he received an AM for services to Australian literature. He was presented with the Patrick White Literary Award in 1992 and was awarded the first Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy at Edith Cowan University in 1995. In 1997 the University opened the Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre at its Joondalup campus. He was chosen in 1999, to his amusement, as one of the Living Treasures of Western Australia. To say that these honours and signs of recognition meant nothing to him would be mistaken. But he accepted them with the modesty, scepticism, humour and grace that characterised this deep and quiet man with a great talent for writing which changed and matured over the years.

We are fortunate that Peter remains with us in his written words. He was both a risk-taker and a careful stylist with words in seeking to convey his own highly individual vision of people and places. He never wasted words: each word must count. A story should suggest rather than state its meanings: what is left out is as important as what is there; the reader must work to understand a story’s implications. I hear his voice saying these things now. But he was never a preacher. Indeed, he was a critic of flamboyant show-pony writers (and people generally) whose meaning was all surface and no depth.
Peter is thought of as a regional West Australian writer and in some respects he clearly is. But the literary figures with whom he connects are international. Two of the most important of them are a Russian and an American. Anton Chekhov's story “Grief”, which we chose for one of our early collaborative short story collections, is what comes to mind when I think of Peter and the son who died before him and the intractability of his grief. I think also of Hemingway's “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” or “Hills Like White Elephants”, two of Peter's favourites, when I think of this West Australian's ability to convey tension, mystery and psychological conflict between individuals in a spare, stripped-back style.

I know that you would tell me I have gone on too long, Peter. So I will conclude these reflections with two brief passages from your published writings - this time from your early work. Because in your heart you were a man of the land, though not in any easy, conventional sense, I have chosen brief quotations which link people to their natural surroundings.

The first is from the novel *Summer* (1964), and it expresses something of the sense of space and silence you have conveyed about living and working in the West Australian wheatlands:

He was aware of sudden loneliness, of existing against some endlessly alien and indifferent landscape, the trees silent in the heat, away beyond them the paddocks of stubble and unharvested grain, the thin dark lines of scrub; it was as if he found himself in some long-deserted and unused place where he, solitary, was without significance.

Peter Cowan's protagonists are unusual. They do not mind being reminded of their insignificance in relation to the larger forces of nature. They are critical, rather, of the peculiar blindness of societies which try to hide from these realities. Peter's character in the novel *Summer* remarks of this open landscape:

This has a kind of reality that dwarfs other places. But it's so remote that you can scarcely associate with it at all. Like existing by sufferance. And for most people that's not possible.

For Peter Cowan, it was possible. More than that, such places were a necessary reminder of human transience on this planet.

Let me conclude with another, more lyrical tone of voice in an early story surprisingly but appropriately called “Requiem”. The passage describes a man and a woman at the coast, in touch with nature and everything it can mean. These are words to take away with us:
They got up and took their towels from the bushes outside the small natural cavity the bushes formed. Then carefully they went down the cliff face where they had cut the path, and reaching the sand he ran over it and he wanted to cry out, and he felt the strength in him and the sea and the sand and the timeless place about him so that when the water closed on him he felt, yes, I have lived, if they smash me tomorrow I have lived in these things that are of more reality and of more worth than us in our meanness and filth and proud smallness.

And then the recognition, the annunciation, perhaps:

I am not really part of this, else I would stay here, else this time would be all time. But we go, and these steep cliffs, the sea coast scrub, the sloping dunes, and the white beach and the sea and the rocks are here. My eyes have seen these things and something, the last real part in me, has gone out and become part of this, and has felt that alone which endures.
DOROTHY HEWETT (1923-2002)*

Dorothy Hewett plays a vital role in twentieth-century Australian literary history. Her poems, plays, novels, stories and the autobiographical *Wild Card* prove her to be a romantic for all seasons.

Born in Perth, Western Australia on 21 May 1923, Dorothy Hewett lived until she was twelve on a three thousand acre wheat and sheep farm near Wickepin in the Great Southern region of Western Australia. Her remembered rural childhood forms a central motif of her writings, early and late. It is a Garden of Eden where “the black snakes wait and slide.”

Tom Hewett, the author’s father, had taken up farming after returning from the Western Front as a war hero with a DCM and Belgian Croix de Guerre. He remained a powerful figure in his daughter’s imagination and was perhaps the main source of her tendency to hero-worship working men with a wild side. Her relationship with her mother, René Hewett (née Coade), was more fractious. In *Wild Card* Hewett wrote that the struggle to come to terms with her mother dominated most of her life. She felt programmed to play out her mother’s “romantic non-cautionary side.”

Dorothy and her younger sister Lesley (nicknamed Dessie) shared an education by correspondence under their mother’s direction. The sisters wandered the farm’s creekbeds, riding horses, daydreaming, reading, talking and inventing games. Hewett immersed herself from an early age in Gothic romance, Australian ballads, the British Romantics, and Tennyson. She dreamt of being a famous actress and writer.

Hewett’s secondary schooling in the 1930s at Perth College, which was run by Anglican nuns, provided a partial basis for her controversial expressionist play *The Chapel Perilous*. Sally Banner, the play’s semi-autobiographical heroine, rebels against the authority figures of parents, teachers, and the church. Sally’s candour is luminous, if naïve. She seeks to “walk naked through the world” carrying truth, beauty and freedom with her.
During her first year at university in 1941, Hewett expounded pacifist and atheistic views, joined the Communist Party and poisoned herself with a household antiseptic when she was jilted by an airforce lover. Thereafter, she embarked on a life of sexual promiscuity, as a means of revenge on her parents and on her idealized concept of perfect love – "Heathcliff and Cathy, and the sentimental love songs on the radio."

Hewett was an uneasy comrade for communists and feminists. Even though she was deeply involved in both movements, she always remained a potential anarchist in their ranks. She traveled to the USSR and China as an Australian communist writer. Her last campaign within the Party was for the release of dissident writers Sinyavsky and Daniel.

Dorothy Hewett’s erotic adventures attracted wide publicity in her lifetime. Like Byron, her least favourite romantic (because she found his irony condescending), she was often presented as a libertine, but this is misleading. Her affections were intuitive and spontaneous but they ran deep. Nevertheless, she was accident-prone in love. Her first marriage in Perth in 1945 to Communist lawyer Lloyd Davies led to the birth of a son, Clancy, who died of leukaemia in 1950 at the age of three. Their marriage ended in divorce.

Hewett left Davies and their son in 1949 and moved to Sydney with one of her working-class heroes, boilermaker Les Flood. She lived unmarried to Flood in the working-class suburbs of Redfern, Rosebery and Rockdale from 1949 to 1958, and bore him three sons, Joe, Michael and Tom. Her socialist realist novel, Bobbin Up, was written from this experience, especially from a stint working at the Alexandria textile mills. She escaped dramatically and returned to Perth in 1958 when Flood’s paranoid schizophrenia took a threatening turn.

Hewett’s third attempt at a long-term relationship was more successful. In 1960 she married Merv Lilley, a Queensland cane-cutter, drover, miner and seaman who was also a poet and communist. The tall, muscular sailor and his blonde wife became a focal point for writers, students and literati at their home in South Perth through the 1960s and early 70s in what Lilley called “the backyards of the bourgeoisie”. Their jointly authored book of poems What About the People! (1963) contains some of Hewett’s most stirring ballads and lyrics. They had two daughters, Katie and Rosie. Lilley’s forty-four year relationship with Hewett survived: he was Dorothy’s devoted carer and loving husband in the last years of her life when osteoarthritis and obesity greatly reduced her mobility.

A great second flowering of Hewett’s work occurred from her early fifties, when she, Lilley, their daughters and son Tom Flood moved to
Sydney in 1974. On writers’ grants from the newly formed Literature Board of the Australia Council she wrote plays, poems, novels and stories. She became close to a group of younger neo-romantic poets, especially Robert Adamson, editor of *New Poetry*. She later jointly authored a book of poems, *Wheatlands*, with John Kinsella, one of her greatest admirers.

Her last play *Nowhere* was composed from her bed in three days – with “the brush of angel’s wings”, she said – and produced by the Playbox Theatre in Melbourne in 2001. She learnt at this time that a breast cancer had recurred yet she struggled to write more. Like Sally Banner, she had “a tremendous world in her head” and she knew that three-quarters of it would be buried with her.

Hewett won numerous awards and fellowships, and was elected a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1996.

Dorothy Hewett’s burial ceremony at Springwood Bushland Cemetery in the Blue Mountains on 30 August 2002 was proudly atheistic, as she had wished. Workers’ songs, poems and Ella Fitzgerald’s “Stormy Weather” wafted through the bushland. The crows came in on cue. One of Hewett’s five children was heard to remark, “That’s got to be Dorothy, come to see we do it right.” The hulking frame of her husband helped to carry her coffin to the grave and he read the grimly memorable Wordsworthian lines that his wife had chosen for her tombstone:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks and stones and trees.

But her words live on.

*This obituary was first published, in a slightly different form, in *The Independent*, London, 3 Sept 2002.*
In 1995, after my father died, we discovered amongst his papers a small pocketbook, covered in watered grosgrain silk, that might have once been purple but which is now a murky grey. It opened with a date, 15/10/95, and as I read on I realised that it was 1895, a hundred years old. It turned out to be a diary kept by my grandfather when he left Stawell, Victoria for the goldfields of WA – the great adventure of his life. He was 25 years old. The diary was a gift from my future grandmother, Annie Moon.

The diary covers 20 days, from when he boards the SS *Innaminka* in Melbourne to when he is about to board the train in Perth which will take him to Coolgardie, where he has secured a job in the post office. He’s a telegraph operator, and the back page of the diary is covered with Morse code dots and dashes for him to keep in practice. He isn’t going to pan for gold, he’s just looking for the chance to leave depression-torn Victoria and make a new life in the boom time of the gold rush in Western Australia.

The *SS Innaminka* is overloaded, with 430 men, and only five women on board, and when they arrive in Fremantle, there are so many ships waiting to berth that they have to wait for six hours off the Fremantle Jetty before they can come ashore. He counts his money: 2 pounds 6 shillings, and a bank draft of 5 pounds.

Reading the diary was an eerie, intimate experience. My grandfather was an orphan who left school at 12, but he had a direct, fresh way of expressing himself. I had a strange feeling of familiarity, as if I’d always known him, perhaps because there were so many echoes of my father in his account of himself. He is a solid young man of good health and strong appetite – he records all his meals. He is an upright young Methodist, a teetotaller, and a bit of a wowsershocked when people play cards on Sundays. In spite of himself, and Annie, he has an almost wistful eye for a pretty girl. He is cautious, optimistic, individualistic, conservative.

He finds Fremantle a terribly rough place. He spends a shocking night in the Federal Coffee Palace, three to a partitioned room, where he is
disgusted with the filthy language and low expression of the men, and is kept awake all night by drunken brawls. For breakfast he has a very tough steak. He takes the train to Perth as soon as possible.

He spends ten days in Perth, in a rooming house, is examined in Morse code at the GPO and waits for his posting to Coolgardie to come through. He swims in the Swan River, goes to church five times, waits his turn for a haircut with dozens of other men at the Imperial Hairdressing Saloon, is homesick, and takes two pages of his diary to record his observations, under the heading Impressions of Perth. He says:

Have been told WA is the land of sand, sorrow and sore eyes. There is certainly plenty of sand here. I suppose they have a fair amount of sorrow, although they seem happy enough. And they tell me Sandgropers have plenty of sore eyes, while we 'Tothersiders' are comparatively free from that painful trouble.

He goes on. WA is:

very sandy
has very hot days
very cool nights
rather a nice climate.
troublesome flies
roads have a white limestone surface
straw hats and soft flannel shirts are much worn here, also white pants and coats with boots.
Butchers shops are carts backed onto vacant land with a tarpaulin rigged to keep off sun.
streets are crowded on Saturdays nights. There are about 50 men to each girl so far, no pretty girls in Perth.
children are very yellow and freckled
as a whole the folks are very uncouth compared to Melbourne.

He is glad to leave for Coolgardie. He buys a mosquito net, a khaki suit, a shilling's worth of quinine and has 100 visiting cards printed at Sands & McDougall. He takes the train and the diary ends.

My grandfather goes on to marry Annie, have five children, four surviving, and become a postmaster at various post offices in the goldfields. Somehow, by thrift and good management, he sends each of the four children for a stint at boarding school in Perth, and thus ensures that they attain the middle class. He dies in Southern Cross in 1919, in the
great world influenza epidemic, an epidemic which, according to folk wisdom, took the strongest and healthiest of the population.

I speak of my grandfather’s diary not only because it shows my roots in the yellow sand, roots that are so common to so many West Australians. Because of the gold rush, the population of this state grew from 50,000 in 1890 to nearly 300,000 in 1910.

But also I find in my grandfather’s account, and in his attitudes, so many elements which I can trace in my own childhood. I grew up as a babyboomer in a suburb in Perth where all the children played in piles of yellow sand out the front of building sites, because there was always a new house going up on every street, and a steadily declining supply of vacant blocks where we could build cubbies and climb banksia trees. It was a place of postwar optimism, opportunity and burgeoning prosperity, of conservatism and puritanism, with an iron hold on middle-class respectability, perhaps because its attainment was only a generation away. But it was also combined with great physical space and freedom and enjoyment of this physicality. As a child I believed that Western Australia was the best place in the world to live, because my parents said it was.

It was a childhood which has of course been given its consummate expression in Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net*.

But my grandfather’s diary also traces other attitudes which form a West Australian sensibility. There is this question of us and them, of Sandgropers and Tothersiders, which reached its apogee with the Secessionist movement. An inherited resentment of those who came to gain and take, who judged and patronised us as backward provincials, or worse, of those who didn’t come, but stayed away and simply overlooked us. Perhaps a defiant self-congratulation or a self-deprecating sense of inferiority is common to any outlying province, but the issue of place, of here or elsewhere, is still writ large here.

A friend of mine who teaches creative writing at a university here describes trying to get her students to find stories in their life in Perth. They feel that “nothing ever happens in Perth”, that life is only properly and colourfully lived in Melbourne or Sydney. Yet Perth is a city of a million and a half people, the same size as many major European cities. A Norwegian member of the class said that “something is missing in Perth but I can’t quite put my finger on it”. They were astounded to hear that Perth has produced some very good writers and that even more amazingly, in the 80s, a band called *The Triffids*, attained international success with songs about living in Perth. It’s as if we don’t quite take ourselves seriously,
don't believe in our own legitimacy.

Certainly, I remember feeling this myself. In my sandy childhood, of beach and spare blocks and backyards, there was another strata of experience, which was reading, and all the books I read came from the Northern Hemisphere. There seemed to be an incompatibility, I thought, between the grainy inner life of fiction and the harsh white flattening light of Western Australia. And more than that, a kind of disbelief in the importance of the inner life itself. It has taken me a long time to learn that it is exactly this which is my material.

I've never set out to be a 'West Australian' writer, but if – for the purposes of a paper like this – I examine some of my processes, I realise that I can trace a sensibility that has been formed by living here.

Increasingly, because I've lived here for a long time – all my life – I've become aware of history, my own, and of the place itself. I only have to catch the train from Fremantle to Perth for this: first the port where all my grandparents arrived, then the cemetery where they are buried, then the hospital where I was born, and my children were born.

Like many West Australians I've always gone to the South West for holidays since childhood: for the past 20 years I've often stayed in Yallingup in a relative's holiday house. But it is also a place where my parents used to come, to Caves House with their friends when they were young working people during the Depression, and later to spend their honeymoon there. And they always used to tell stories of the Group Settlers and their struggles to clear the land in the Margaret River area. So there's always been another layer to the experience of being there, the awareness of the past, especially in Caves House, which has fascinated me ever since I was a child.

Somehow when I started to write my novel, Gilgamesh, it came to be set in Yallingup, on a tiny Group Settlement farm, and its time was my parents' era, the Depression and the Second World War. The values of that era were still the values that formed my generation, that in fact we had to challenge and break away from.

The narrative centres around a young woman, Edith, who transgresses by having a baby and who in 1939 sets off on a journey across the world to Armenia, in the hope of finding her son's father and making a new life. Once she arrives there, the war breaks out.

It's not always possible, or perhaps even desirable, for writers to trace the reasons why a narrative occurs to them, or why it takes the shape it does.

But if I look at the generating forces within this narrative, I can see
that it’s a story of arrivals and departures. Arrivals of strangers, come from elsewhere, to this shore, to make a new life, or to see what they will find, bringing change, and often being regarded with suspicion and hostility.

Edith’s story, and later that of her son Jim, is also a story of the yearning for elsewhere, so common to young Australians, perhaps amplified for West Australians, for whom elsewhere, where real life begins, is also the cities of the East Coast.

And perhaps for me, Edith’s journey represents the attempt to trace the connection between here and elsewhere, from the outer to the centre, to find our place in the great movements of history, and our legitimacy as players in the great human myths.

After all, we are the descendants of adventurous people.

But then Edith comes back, and decides after a while that there is as much life and love here as anywhere else. And that reminds me that some time ago I read a review of *The Shark Net* by Joyce Carol Oates in the *New York Review of Books*, a very favourable review, and when I read it I was filled with wonder for a moment, that a work that was so specific about a place – my place – with all the nuances so familiar to a Sand Person – should be understood by an American for what it was, and that it is out of the intense focus on ‘here’ that ‘here’ becomes ‘everywhere’.

* This paper was first given as a talk at the Down South Writers’ Festival in Busselton, May 2002.
WHERE THE YELLOW SAND STOPS*

There's a line I like in Louis Malle's film, Atlantic City. Burt Lancaster is strolling along the boardwalk, and he sighs and says, "The Atlantic Ocean was really something then. Yep, you should have seen the Atlantic Ocean in the old days."

I think that's how we Australians think about our geography and physiography. It's all bound up in the past.

The Indian Ocean was really something in the old days. You should have seen Cottesloe back then, Triggs back then, Rottnest back then ... While we're uneasy about the present, and hardly dare think about the future, we're very nostalgic about the past. We don't seem to be able to get enough of it. Some of us will even vote for some quite dubious politicians if they suggest they'll take us back to it.

As a writer interested in our history, I have some very conflicting feelings about the past. I've often written about it, but when I talk about it, I'm struck by a strangely familiar feeling - well beyond déjà vu. It's the sort of feeling summed up by Barry Humphries as "the anticipatory excitement of dancing with your mother". In this country, it seems the Good Old Past is always being trotted out for one more waltz. Why is this? What is it with us and the past? Isn't enough enough? These are the sort of questions that can worry me on sleepless nights.

I was first in this position twenty-five years ago, writing my first novel, The Savage Crows. At a time when my contemporaries were all writing stories about sex, drugs and university lecturers in Carlton and Balmain, I was worried that no one would want to read a novel about both history and geography - in my case a novel also involving the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines.

Nothing much has changed. In 2000, writing The Shark Net, I was worried that no one would find my memoir of Perth in the 1950s and 60s of anything but the most marginal interest.

When I was a new novelist and first invited to literary conferences, it
soon dawned on me that at West Australian literary conferences they were always talking about something called place. You’d have a whole gathering of literary academics and writers from all over the world, and they’d all be talking about place as enthusiastically as fifteenth-century Portuguese navigators. Never characters, or relationships or anything remotely dramatic, it seemed to me – in WA this one literary subject, this rather nebulous-sounding place, always dominated proceedings.

At one conference at Edith Cowan University I had the temerity to stand up and ask why this was so. I remember the conference was full of those forbidding literary dames that WA used to produce in such profusion, and they were seated on a rather high dais above the audience.

“Why the constant harping on place?” I asked Dame Mary Durack.

Dame Mary gazed steadily out into the far distance, maybe even as far as the Kimberley, and then directed a firm look down at me. “Because there’s an awful lot of it out there”.

She was right, of course. There is a lot of landscape out there. The yellow sand goes down pretty deep. But perhaps we should remember that it’s still sand, and not always the most ideal foundation to build on.

When I was a boy just arrived in Perth I was keen to carve my initials in the foundations of the old house my father had found for us. I thought the limestone’s bland façade and lemony softness begged to be scratched and scraped. Especially the big, yellow supporting stones in the front of the house.

My new friends had all dug their initials in their foundations, but their initials were all arrangements of straight lines. When I carved mine with a screwdriver something strange and fascinating happened. The D crumbled instantly and gently into a powdery cave, which engulfed the earlier R. As I watched, almost hypnotised, the cave quickly grew. Out of its mouth dribbled a pale lemon stream, and then a frightening rivulet of sand. I envisaged the whole house pouring out in an avalanche into Leon Road.

The foundation stone seemed to be melting. Soon it was more crust than stone. It was behaving like a big hour-glass, with a neat heap of fine-grained sand piling up at its base. At the same time, a thin plume of dust rose into the air like a tiny signal of disaster and softly blew away.

In fright I looked around for a rock or something solid to block the hole. The only things in sight were two of my brothers’ Dinky toys: a Ford Customline and a red London bus, and my new cricket ball. I pushed the Customline in first. It disappeared entirely into the cave. Then the double-decker bus. It vanished too. I tossed in the screwdriver but still the
trickling continued. Desperately, I even offered up my six-stitcher. The
cave swallowed it, and sand still trickled merrily onto the ground. As a last
resort, I unscrewed the sprinkler from the garden hose, and jammed it in,
vertically. The sprinkler was metal, about eight inches square. The pace of
the trickle seemed to slow. It hesitated and as I held my breath it stopped.
But now I had to put back the lost sand and cover the hole. I tried to
pick up the mound but it was so fine it just fell through my fingers. I
decided I needed to wet the sand, and quickly. Now I don't know how
normal people would deal with such a crisis. But even though the hose was
nearby, my panicked brain instructed me to urinate on the pile of sand.
Then I packed the mud into the cave, jammed it tight over the Ford, the
London bus, the cricket ball and the screwdriver, packed it around the
sprinkler, threw more mud over everything, patted it down and waited.
And it worked. The entombed offerings held fast. The plug stuck.
Maybe that's a metaphor for something.

When I try to pin down what Australians feel about our history and
geography, I come to the conclusion that we're really thinking of myth. I
think there are always two Australian myths fighting for precedence: the
Myth of Landscape and the Myth of Character. For me, the Myth of
Landscape also divides into two opposing myths: the Beach or the Bush.
Or, as I like to think of it, the Shark versus the Dingo. The Myth of
Character is largely made up of legends that have been created by folklore.
As Stanislaw Lee says, “Myth is just gossip grown old”. In this category
you'd probably put our few legendary human beings: Ned Kelly, the
Gallipoli Digger, a growing assortment of sportsmen and women – and the
occasional horse.

In this country, rather more comprehensively, we're all inheritors of the
Myth of Landscape. Unlike other urbanised, relatively new nations, our
spiritual consciousness draws almost totally on the elements and our
environment. Despite massive cultural inroads from America and Europe,
the idea of ourselves which we twenty-first century suburbanites carry in
our heads, is still either based on, or reacting against, attitudes to water
and fire held by bush stoics in the nineteenth century.

It's still a variation on the Australian Legend of Russel Ward. Taking
that a bit further, what I'm saying is that when we think of the Outback
we really mean the Past. When we think of the City and Coast, we mean
the Present. Further, when we think of the Bush and the Past we're
thinking Moral Notions, and when we think of the City and the Present
we're thinking Problems: politics, sex, crime, drugs.
In literary-geographic terms we’ve been led or chosen to believe that the city is crude, unstable, post-modern and produces serial killers. The country, on the other hand, is stable, comfy, modernist, and, for a writer, more likely to win the Miles Franklin Award.

I believe such lazy propaganda has been reinforced by our writers over the years. There’s no getting away from the fact that until the 1980s our writers were neglectful about recording the shift from a rural to a coastal/city consciousness. While our painters and photographers and filmmakers decades ago began to register the equal cultural claims of the coast and the city, our literature, against all logic, denied any claims at all for urbanity, not to mention modernity. The reasons for this are mostly to do with our cultural cringe and our over-enthusiastic aping of the established romantic English tradition.

As Professor George Seddon has pointed out, the tradition is that of William Cobbett, who christened London “the great Wen” – a wen being a sebaceous cyst, especially on the scalp, but in London’s case a parasite on the countryside, which Cobbett saw as the fount of all health and reason. This tradition, based on the rejection of the insanitary nineteenth-century metropolis, was enthusiastically exported to North America and Australia, where it still hangs on, especially among poets.

Seddon has given the example of A. D. Hope, our leading poet at the time, and writing in Canberra, the most cosseted city in a relatively comfy nation, simply following the myth of Cobbett’s rural England.

In Hope’s 1950s and 1970s description of Australian cities in his Selected Poems, still widely taught, he used Cobbett’s image of the cancerous growth of Victorian English cities:

And her five cities, like teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Cobbett was speaking of the diseased and insanitary cities of Victorian England. I, like George Seddon, find it hard to accept Hope’s description of “teeming sores” for beautiful Perth or Sydney, or indeed for any of the other capital cities. That a couple of generations of academics and educators did so shows how well this inaccurate transplanted cultural tradition went down with the punters.

One thing our writers had in common with their British and Irish counterparts like Oliver Goldsmith (as Hope’s natural descendants such as
Les Murray still do) was the romantic/political notion that moral stamina was sapped by the city and nurtured by the country. In other words, that a farm labourer was a more moral person than a factory worker or a taxi driver, a National Party voter more moral than a Labor Party voter. From his home in the comfort of London, Goldsmith lyrically mourned the decline of the Irish countryside – which he had left with all speed.

We’ve certainly had our own Oliver Goldsmiths. For the greater part of his adult life Henry Lawson lived in inner Sydney (including a 12-foot wide terrace house I later owned at 28 Euroka Street, North Sydney) and made only one unhappy trip to the Queensland border – his sole adult experience of the outback.

He did visit Western Australia during the gold rush, and camped under canvas in East Perth, though not from choice, on his honeymoon. Having come all this way, even in the middle of a gold rush, a gigantic event involving people from many nations and walks of life (lifeblood, you might think, to the country’s most noted writer) he never made it to the goldfields.

Banjo Patterson lived a prosperous middle-class Sydney life in leafy suburban Gladesville and Queen Street, Woollahra. His flight from the alleged horrors of the city “to the plains where the cattle and sheep stations are” took place chiefly in his imagination. Today he’s remembered by a plaque in Queen Street, outside an expensive boutique and just across the road from the mansions of John Laws and Paul Keating.

As a fiction writer, I’m not going to find fault with imagination triumphing over experience. What intrigues me, however, is the subsuming of these populist, romantic views into a politically correct literary-historical line. For fifty years the semi-nude bodies of Australians at the beach alarmed visiting intellectuals (mostly English), and Australian academics, often English themselves, aped their attitude. The late Geoffrey Dutton pointed out in *The Beach* how that timid sensualist D. H. Lawrence, in particular, was both fascinated and frightened by the freedom and hedonism of sun-browned and slippery Australians. His novel *Kangaroo* showed his nervousness and resentment at the happy athleticism of the teenage boys frolicking on the NSW south coast at Thirroul. He thought they were as “mindless as opossums” and their “thick muscular legs” worried him more than was probably good for him. But at least Lawrence was honest enough to see that it was the fear of freedom and pleasure in himself that he was fighting. Australian writers have also been a peculiarly dry, puritanical lot. Dutton thought it was as if our writers were still
thinking of the beach as Englishmen, nervous and resentful like Lawrence.

This moral aversion to the perceived hedonism of the beach was peculiar to our writers. Our painters, of course, from Streeton, Roberts and Conder, through Boyd and Blackman and Nolan and Brett Whiteley, have always been fascinated by the coast's artistic possibilities. So have photographers, such as Max Dupain, composers like Sculthorpe and Meale, and, increasingly, the film-makers. Why not the writers?

To take one example: one wonders why the critics for 100 years ignored Adam Lindsay Gordon's extraordinary poem *The Swimmer*, published in 1870, and compared favourably to the work of Walt Whitman, while Gordon's *The Sick Stockrider* was encouraged to gallop on and on.

This was the prevailing literary climate when I wrote *The Bodysurfers* in 1983. The coast generally made university English departments uneasy. Especially in Melbourne the beach was disliked and mistrusted as personal terrain. While Australian rules football, for example, was allowed to be embraced (it was pretty well compulsory for Melbourne academics to embrace it), the beach was seen as ideologically unsound: a common and vulgar milieu without any rules or discipline, populated by dumb surfers, sandy children and the hoi polloi. Their Anglo-Celtic skins burned easily or they got grit in their private parts or they got dumped by waves. Or they worried about sharks. In other words, it epitomised Sydney.

Of course, on the other side of the continent, growing up wedged between the Indian Ocean and the desert, West Australians found it impossible to imagine an Australian culture which did not embrace the ocean and river shores. It was the natural order of things. So I discovered when I arrived here. I couldn't believe my luck. Once I'd adapted to the local customs (or my mother had, which took a bit longer), and the soles of my feet had thickened, I was immensely grateful that the Dunlop Rubber Company had seen fit to transfer my father to its most remote State branch.

I'm still grateful. If I'd been born in WA, and not arrived here from Melbourne at an impressionable age, I would have taken the harsh and dramatic limestone coast for granted. Those first impressions of the effect of climate and landscape might not have stuck so vividly: the water shortages; the women at the beach with shoulder blades spotted like leopards; the boys who urinated on moss; my new friends who ate themselves while at the pictures - nonchalantly peeling the sunburned skin off their shoulders during the Saturday matinee. After passing these
strips of human parchment around for comparison – the aim was to tear off a complete sheet of skin from shoulder to shoulder – they’d eat them with relish, washed down with a swig of Fanta.

I have a vivid memory of a particular day in our first summer here. Nothing spectacular happened this day, and if the place hadn’t been new and novel to me there would probably have been nothing about it to remember. It was a Sunday morning and while dinner was cooking I plonked myself down on the front lawn, as six-year-olds do. The grass was buffalo. After the fine, soft grass of Melbourne, I was very impressed by buffalo. Maybe only an unusual sort of boy is impressed by grass, but I liked the tough independence of the lawn’s individual blades and runners and the way matted buffalo sprang back after you’d trodden on it. I even liked its name. It sounded more interesting than couch, or bent. As I lay spreadeagled on my back I felt totally supported by the grass. It held me up. I closed my eyelids against the sun, and felt its heat, and for the first time noticed that sensation of the amoeba shapes swimming in my eyes. I was conscious for the first time in my life of some sort of meeting of body and spirit and environment – and I’m trying to chose exactly the right word – of perfection.

The lawn, the sun, the place, my lying there, the distant smell of roast dinner, were simply perfect.

I was called in then for the meal, and I was hungry, but I didn’t want to get up. I had to tear myself up out of the buffalo grass. And with the vague feeling of regret that accompanied my rousing myself, I had a flash (and I’m sure this isn’t retrospective emotion) that this was a valuable moment, one that I wouldn’t forget.

Since the publication of The Shark Net people have said to me, “But how did you remember so much about life in Perth in the fifties and sixties?” Especially what might, uncharitably, be called trivia. When they can’t even remember what they were doing yesterday. Well, exactly. Neither can I. The past is much easier to remember, particularly in special circumstances.

It’s easy to flatter one’s home town, of course. But in all honesty I must say that the reason why the place is so firmly fixed in my mind – especially the mores and Western social habits and events of the late fifties and early sixties – is because I left it.

Western Australia is part of me, my centre, and I return here whenever I can. But I haven’t lived here since my twenty-first birthday. So it’s as if the Perth of that time is set in amber for me. Everything about it at that time is cemented in my mind.
Just as the six-year-old was rivetted by first impressions, the twenty-one-year-old was overwhelmed by the events swirling around him at the other end of his youth. If I hadn’t left Perth it’s doubtful whether I would or could have written The Shark Net. The events and the time would have naturally segued into other years and decades and happenings. Just as I needed my proximity to these events to write about them, I also needed the distance, to be at arm’s length from them.

Joyce Carol Oates recently reminded me that D. H. Lawrence formed an opinion of Western Australia, too, as well as of the east coast, where, in five feverish weeks in 1922, he would write the sporadically brilliant novel Kangaroo. I had forgotten about Lawrence’s stay here. He found a “spirit of place” that evoked metaphysical terror. Lawrence’s character, the Englishman Richard Somers, a thinly disguised portrait of Lawrence himself, having decided that Europe “is done for, played out, finished”, emigrates to “the newest country: young Australia”. At first, Somers’ sense of his new environment, Western Australia, is poetic-mystical:

The sky was pure, crystal pure and blue ... the air was wonderful, new and unbreathed ... but the bush ... the grey charred bush. It scared him ... It was so phantom-like, so ghostly, with its tall pale trees and many dead trees, like corpses partly charred by bush fires, and then the foliage so dark, like grey-green iron. And then it was so deathly still.

Exploring the West Australian bush on foot, alone, Somers, alias Lawrence, has a more alarming, visceral vision that stays with him through the remainder of his Australian adventure:

He walked on, had walked a mile or so into the bush, and had just come to a clump of tall, nude, dead trees, shining almost phosphorescent with the moon, when the terror of the bush overcame him ... There was a presence. He looked at weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all ... It must be the spirit of the place. Something fully evoked tonight by that unnatural West Australian moon.

Provoked by the moon, the roused spirit of the bush ... It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men.

While we can understand his view, he does seem to have been a man to take fright easily. If it wasn’t the semi-nude teenage boys in NSW it was the nude trees in WA.
Lawrence’s Western Australia is not mine, but I know what he means about the moon. Whenever I think of this stark coastline that I love, the word moonscape comes to mind. The moon plays a part in *The Shark Net*. Eric Cooke’s killing frenzies paralleled the full moon. My friend John Sturkey was murdered during a full moon. A recurring image to me is of moonshine on the white sand of Waterman’s Bay.

As an adolescent full of wonder at the birth of my first child, and full of hurt and resentment at either the acute embarrassment or gossipy glee of the hypocritical adult world, I sat on the step of my green cement-floored flat at Waterman’s Bay the night of the birth, and looked up at the moon. And I was angrily glad that the moon wasn’t full and huge and portentous; that it wasn’t like a movie director’s cliché, but was small and the simple shape of a baby’s fingernail.

*This paper was first given as a talk at the Down South Writers’ Festival in Busselton, May 2002.*
At the time, your salty transit
went largely unheralded.
No lawman called you forth
to drip defiantly to justice.
No concourse cheered
your brazen breasting of convention
as you rode a No. 4 breaker
to the shores of our history.
Just this: a single anonymous enquiry
into the nature of your madness,
which long after remains a nation’s insanity.

For the first time on this eager coastline,
body follows toe,
and all at once,
as if unleashed,
generation after generation
tumble after you
into the surf.
The idea of immersion stays with us
for ever,
shadowing our sand-blown suburbs
and head-above-water ways.

These days, every afternoon hums
with our rag-tag westerly pilgrimage.
Reserve shed,
we weight ourselves instead
with beach tent and boogie board,
SPF200,
surf the asphalt undulations coastward
to border ourselves towel-square
in this most central of margins.

Long after you write your own passage,
a nation of salt-struck acolytes breathes
your brine into its crevices,
beaches itself on the shores
of your reckless courage,
finding your defiance
in every fearless fronting
of that first ice-cold wave.
THE SOUND OF A BREAKING STRING

The spring rains have arrived
on the second day of spring.

We drove to town today.
The country was so dry

the forest on the hills by the highway
had begun to drink the air like smoke.

I was afraid. It was the wrong way round.
But tonight the great cord snapped and

it is almost too beautiful to write of
the effect in Cherry Orchard, Act II.

*It seems to come from the sky and is*
*the sound of a breaking string.*

Tonight it broke all over again.
The spring rain moved in.

It has the sound,
the absolute sound of rain.
DEAR JACK

to Jack Charles

I remember dragging you out of bed for *Dimboola* rehearsals. The director, David Williamson, preferred punctuality. Within days I became your chauffeur, which didn’t happen often to those of the stolen generation. Brought up in a mothering religious institution, you always as a house guest folded up bedding at one end in the morning, before departing to fully exercise those feathery fingers (tea leaf par excellence), negotiate a deal, dreamily rehearse a Jack Davis play. I last saw you on a southbound tram in North Fitzroy. Though wizened, those fine shrewd eyes still pierced. I hope the book you are writing about your jagged life travels well, right back into the sources of all that strife.

WA. INK

I’m tired of the wheatlands of Western Australia, knocked flat by Dorothy Hewett and John Kinsella, as they mythologize their pasts – not the failure of white stubble, grey townships, haunted by the black fella.
Of the many works of fiction published in Australia during the past year, two — Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* — stand above all others. Despite obvious differences of style and purpose — one is a narrative of love, loss and redemption, the other a scathing commentary on human nature and institutions — each is passionate about place. Winton situates his novel in the harsh yet beautiful landscapes of the West and Flanagan in the colonial history and topography of Tasmania. Both have a strong sense of writing from the margins, from the outer edges of the national consciousness. Winton writes, he says, against the popular tide, “from the wrong hemisphere, wrong country, wrong part of the wrong country”, while Flanagan sees isolation as a strength, a distancing from destructive politics, literary or otherwise.¹ “At the edges”, he says, “the truths of the age are sometimes more apparent than at the centre, where they are shrouded by money and power”.² These comments are disingenuous; literature is now, as both writers know, a global commodity. Winton’s West Australian setting is almost designed to appeal to an international audience, while Flanagan’s contemporary Tasmania is by no means distanced from the more destructive aspects of literary politics. Both books have been enthusiastically received overseas and have also been in competition for a number of Australian awards. *Gould’s Book of Fish* has won the Commonwealth Award and the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society, and *Dirt Music* the NSW and Western Australian Premiers’ Awards for Fiction and the Miles Franklin Award.

Tasmania has always fascinated the literary world. An isolated island haunted by its “blood-soaked history” — this phrase appears again and again — it has become disproportionately significant in Australian writing. So marked has this trend become that, according to one commentator, we risk the Tasmanianisation of Australian literature. *Gould’s Book of Fish* and
Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime* are just two of a number of recent novels set in Tasmania (in 1999 there were four) and both have had an enthusiastic reception overseas, the attraction being in no small measure due to their "blood-soaked" setting. *Gould's Book of Fish* begins in present-day Hobart, where a dubious character, Sid Hammet, discovers a copy of the *Book of Fish* by the convict artist William Buelow Gould in an old galvanised iron meat-safe in a junk shop in Salamanca Place and becomes obsessed with its provenance. It has magical properties: the cover glows with a mesmeric shimmer and the pages are criss-crossed with writing in inks made from exotic substances such as shark's blood or squid's ink. The scrawl, endless, repetitive, protean, details Gould's incarceration in the convict settlement at Sarah Island where he is ordered by the surgeon Lempriere to paint all the fish in the surrounding seas. When the book mysteriously disappears, Hammet sets out to reproduce the scrawl, the account of William Gould's life, from memory.

Both narrative and identity are slippery and metamorphosis is a key concept. Hammet and Gould merge, become the same person, then separate, only to metamorphose into a fish. For part of the narrative the convict Gould is a sea creature immersed in his own underwater cell, almost submerged at high tide. The narrative is fluid too, and not only in the ebb and flow, the tidal swell of the language. This is a "novel in twelve fish" and an illustration from the original *Book of Fish* precedes each section. No expense has been spared in the production of this volume, a rare treat in this age of mass production.

*Gould's Book of Fish* quite outdoes previous convict novels in its depiction of cruelty and the grotesque. On Sarah Island the convicts freeze, starve, are tortured and slaughtered on the whims of the Commandant. On the Tasmanian mainland gangs of escaped convicts and trusties scour the countryside for Aborigines to hunt down for sport, or massacre in the name of science, their heads then pickled in brine. The fraudulence of this is exposed when the surgeon Lempriere is killed and eaten by his pig Castlereagh. His skull, concealed in a barrel of Aboriginal heads sent back to London for scientific analysis, is taken by the English anatomists to be overwhelming proof of Aboriginal degeneracy.

Excess abounds. The Commandant, rotting from syphilis behind his mask of gold, is a megalomaniac, determined to make Sarah Island a "great trading nation", a "Venice of the South". He builds more and more palatial structures, using the groaning convicts as slaves. Urged on by a flood of letters from his supposed sister, Miss Anne, he sets out to construct a microcosm of nineteenth-century Europe - its culture, science and
technology. A National Railway Line which goes round and round in circles and ends up nowhere, a Mah Jong Hall, a Palace, an Art Gallery containing the greatest works of European art, or copies of them, are built. Trading treaties bring the fleets of the world, the Japanese, Javanese, Portuguese and Dutch to Sarah Island and chicanery and corruption flourish. The grand edifices fall into decay, crumble and rot – as empires do – and the final fire scarifies all. Meanwhile the monstrous characters become larger-than-life personifications of Power (the Commandant), Science (the Surgeon) and Enlightenment (Miss Anne) and all are shown to be corrupt.

The book is richly associative, and not just through direct reference. There are reminders of Swift (the biting satire), Joyce (the fluid metamorphosis of language) and the apocalyptic grotesqueries of Hieronymus Bosch. But the book has far more important social and political connotations. Its scathing condemnation of all notions of culture, Empire and the Enlightenment is as powerful as in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and there are many parallels between the two books. Because of its wide-ranging condemnation of colonial history and character Gould’s Book of Fish is certain to become an Australian classic. A book “with the obscene ambition of becoming the world” (291), it is, like many masterpieces, a difficult read. It’s certainly not for the faint-hearted.

A Child’s Book of True Crime, Chloe Hooper’s first novel, is a psychological narrative of adultery, murder and suicide set in modern-day Tasmania. It burst upon the international scene to unparalleled acclaim, followed by a short-listing for the Orange Award for the best novel written in English by a woman. Its structure consists of parallel narratives cross-linked by recurring motifs and enlivened by commentaries – sometimes brilliant, sometimes contrived. One is by a group of quaint and anthropomorphic animals, another by a class of children much wiser than the purblind and guilty adults. The animals, aghast detectives trying to unravel human crimes, are themselves vulnerable to road-rage, hunters and castrating vets (one of them, the Tasmanian Tiger, is already extinct). They have the most tender and “human” feelings of all the characters, while the humans behave, in the animals’ words, “like wild animals”.

The children, including the precocious Lucien, are as vulnerable to abuse as the convict children who were incarcerated at nearby Point Puer, and all the action takes place against the background of Port Arthur; haunted by its convict history and its more recent massacre.

The plot is complicated, perhaps too much so. The narrator – a teacher, Kate Byrne – is having an affair with Thomas, the father of her pupil
Lucien, whose mother Veronica has written a best-selling account of a murder at Black Swan Point, a narrative which bears a striking resemblance to Kate's circumstances. In it a veterinary nurse who is having an affair with the vet is savagely murdered, apparently by the wife, who seems to have then suicided. Or perhaps the husband murdered both of them. Kate identifies with the victim after her car has been vandalised – the fan-belt cut and the brakes disabled – and is determined to escape a similar fate. She discovers that the wife, Veronica, has colluded in the affair and even Lucien is in on it. Any of the three could be planning her murder.

The pacey and witty narrative, the dramatic intensity, the novelty of the choruses by animals and children, and the overt eroticism, have ensured the success of *A Child's Book of True Crime*. Although some commentators have judged the characterisation to be thin, this certainly isn't so of the impulsive, gullible and increasingly paranoid Kate. Meanwhile the talking animals move us into a different narrative convention, that of a children's book written, according to the narrator, to explain adult crime to children. It is packaged as a nineteenth-century book for children and, like *Gould's Book of Fish*, is a quality production.

*Dirt Music*, Tim Winton's seventh novel, is quintessentially Australian. Winton has a fine ear for dialogue and a true sense of the ambiguities of Australian society. The narrative is colloquial and laconic yet, at the same time, visionary. Winton has been labelled a “late romantic, post-colonial writer” (some ambiguity there) and criticised for his use, in this novel at least, of the clichés of romanticism: the value of suffering, the healing power of the wilderness, the redemption of love. However, in the hands of such a beguiling writer these stereotypes are moving and deeply satisfying. The novel is fast moving and finely plotted. The narrative never flags from the first scene just before dawn at White Point where a feral figure sneaks in to poach his neighbour's catch, to the denouement where the fish poacher, the unlikely Luther Fox, demonstrates the saving power of love.

White Point seems at first as a typical Australian fishing village, yet its bland surface conceals old and fixed patterns of secrecy and brutality. It is, according to the narrator, a “personality junkyard” where an assortment of blow-ins with dubious pasts exist alongside the *nouveau riche* grown wealthy from the export of crayfish. The fish-poacher challenges property rights – rights to crayfish, rights to a woman – and can expect little mercy. His dog is murdered, his truck and trailer trashed, his life threatened. Add to this the brooding sexual tensions between the three main characters, each with a disturbing past. Georgie Jutland, a fortyish nurse with a history of
abysmal relationships, has drifted into the life of Jim Buckridge, the local “big man” and his two sons (his wife has died of cancer). Georgie is already bored and resentful. Luther Fox has lost his father to asbestos poisoning, his mother to a fallen tree branch and his brother’s family, the dirt musicians, to a violent accident. The relationship between the three is finally determined by Jim’s need to atone to the Fox family. Winton manages to elicit sympathy for all three, even for Jim Buckland who, we learn, is capable of murder, arson and rape. His impulse to atonement rather than revenge is one of the surprises and strengths of the novel.

Luther’s epic journey north — to become “a secret, his secret” — involves a picaresque trawl through the most rugged and beautiful scenery of the West and encounters with a progression of stock figures — a mad junkie, caravanning retirees, a wise Aborigine and others. Yet these are more than stock figures. The caravanning wife, for instance, quotes the literary classics with ever more desperate abandon as she dies an agonising death from cancer, and the Aboriginal guide burns Luther’s useless maps and points the true path into the wilderness. Winton’s strength is not only the subtlety of his characterisation but also his passion for place; not just the scenery, although there are wonderfully scenic descriptions, but the spirit of the land.

Comings and goings: literary journeys

The pattern of the journey, the quest, has a venerable history in Australian literature. The quest for lost love, a missing father, for metaphysical enlightenment, or just the solution to a crime, recurs again and again. It usually involves a journey, a maturation, an all-encompassing discovery. I think of the magnificent moment in *Dirt Music* when the plane goes down and Luther Fox dives deep down under the sea, into the wreckage, to claim Georgie and drag her back to life. Few discoveries are as shattering as that one.

During the last year, a number of the best novels have been quest novels, novels of comings and goings, of literary journeyings. In the past the trajectory was — in life as well as in literature — away from the drabness of Australian life towards the esteemed “other”, usually the more venerable cultures of England or Europe. The cringe involved in the traditional contrast between “home” and the “other” has all but disappeared following the post-war influx of refugees grateful to be here and eager to contribute the best of their culture. Australia is now more
often seen as a refuge; still a place of departure but, more often than not, one to return to for resolution and relief.

Moreover the focus of the quest has shifted Eastward to more exotic destinations such as Armenia, Yemen or Singapore. Many contemporary quest novels are enriched by traditional folklore or myth - the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Arabian Nights* or the book of Job. These informing myths are brought to bear in a way that adds point to Australian experience without necessarily denigrating it. Nor does their use suggest that wisdom will invariably be found elsewhere. Some few novels, such as *Dirt Music* - and we are reminded of Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* - resolve the quest within Australia.

Both Joan London's *Gilgamesh* and Eva Sallis's *The City of Sealion* involve a metaphysical journey, a going and a coming back, and each explores cultural difference and identity. *Gilgamesh* is written from an Australian point of view - that of the pragmatic young woman Edith - *The City of Sealion* from the point of view of Lian, a second-generation Vietnamese Australian. *Gilgamesh* begins on an arid settler block on the south-east coast of Western Australia to which the Australian Frank brings his English bride Ada after the first world war. Their two children, Frances and Edith, grow up there in an atmosphere of failure and decay. Into the clearing in the bush one day come two fantastic strangers from the outside world bringing stories of romance, travel and adventure. They are Leopold, Ada's nephew, and the Armenian Aram, wandering the world together as did Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Mesopotamian tale, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. This “old book”, which Leopold carries with him and later passes to Edith and her son Jim, provides the mythic counterpoint to all the journeying and returning home in the novel.

In *Gilgamesh* personal identity is related, in almost every case, to the lack of a father. Edith and Frances lose their father before the strangers arrive. Pairs of young men - and the novel is obsessive in its pairing - are fatherless, finding their identity in male bonding similar to that celebrated in the “old book”. Racial hybridisation, suggesting exciting cultural exchanges, is also a persistent pattern. Leopold is both Russian and English, his father killed in the first war while Aram, an Armenian, has been raised in an orphanage, his parents massacred by the Turks. In the next generation Jim/Dmitri, son of Aram and Edith, is Australian and Armenian and, because of his foreign appearance and lack of schooling, will never be “at home” in Australia. At the end of the novel Jim sets out to explore the world as his predecessors, including his mother, have done. But in his case the pattern will be broken. He will go to Leopold who, having never known a father, will become a surrogate father to Jim.
The plot is as compulsively patterned and complicated as that of *A Child’s Book of True Crime* but, because spread over three generations is less hectic, more believable. The prose is restrained and elegant, with a total absence of sentimentality. The development of Edith during the course of the novel and the evolution of her relationship with her son are traced with great restraint. Jim’s separation from his mother, beginning with his preference for male company on the ship which takes them to Southampton, is handled with great tact. This generational repetition, suggesting the timeless patterns of love and renunciation within families, is one of the great strengths of the novel. As Jim sets out to “find his place in the world”, for Edith “the great adventure was to stay”. This is the quest novel *par excellence* and its high point is Edith’s improbable journey to Armenia at the outbreak of war to take Jim to his father, a romantic and heroic quest which could easily have ended in disaster had she not, improbably, been rescued by members of the A.I.F. fighting in the Syrian campaign. This novel, short-listed along with Arnold Zable’s *Café Scherezade* for the Miles Franklin Award, is a stylistic masterpiece.

Eva Sallis’s second novel *The City of Sealions* is also a quest novel with, once again, an informing and ancient story, this time from the *Arabian Nights*. A narrative of alienation and displacement, it closes with some hope of reconciliation. The novel is notable for its rare psychological honesty and its symbolic unity – everything is related to the sea.

Lian, daughter of the Vietnamese Phi-Van and the good Aussie “bloke” Nev, grows up on an island off the South Australian coast. Phi-Van’s memories of family massacre are destroying her and her relationship with her daughter Lian alternates between cold rage and over-protection. There are acts of savage cruelty on both sides, the most repulsive the murder of Phi-Van’s dog by the jealous Lian.

Lian learns Arabic at an Adelaide university and goes to Yemen to perfect her studies. Here she learns that, despite her mastery of the language, her immersion in the culture – she adopts the dress of Yemeni women, the *balto* and the *hijab* – and her study of the Koran, she is still a stranger, a “woman from the peripheral lands”. After a period of deep depression Lian comes to understand her mother’s pain and, pregnant, determines to return to the island and attempt to “lead her mother back to the sea”, “to make the world her home again”.

The levels of metaphor and realism are never far apart in this novel and the sea, the guiding metaphor, is cleverly woven into its every aspect. Immersion in the sea or avoidance of it defines the characters. Phi-Van, a
boat-person, hates the sea while Lian and Nev swim, dive and fish
together. Lyrical passages of great intensity describe Lian diving with
whales in South Australia and sea-lions in Yemen, and riding out a great
storm (metaphorical as well as literal) with Nev. Lian, at the end,
determines to push herself “out into the open sea”, while her lover
Ibrahim is “like a fish out of water” without her in America.

The fable being translated from the Kitab Alf Layla wa-Layla, the
Arabian Nights, by Lian and interspersed throughout the narrative, adds
point to her own story. A fisherman, Abdallah, descends to the undersea
world with his counterpart, the merman Abdallah. Despite the beauty of
the submarine world and their shared spiritual values, the fisherman is
finally repelled – these were not his kind. They were “fish, eating fish,
living as fish”. Lian concedes that there is “in the end, something deadly
about trying to belong”; Yemeni culture will always be for her a “foster”
culture, not her own. Reconciliation is to be achieved, not through
attempting to become something else, but through love and reconciliation
on a personal level, especially within the family.

In Arnold Zable’s Café Scheherazade the quest is back in the collective
memory for stories of suffering and survival during the holocaust. The
novel is centred upon the café of this name in Melbourne’s St Kilda, a
place of a thousand and one stories, and the comparison to the thousand
and one nights is emphasised in both title and prologue. The café becomes
a rendezvous for Jews who survived the holocaust and have washed up
here, haunted by their memories and desperate to tell their stories to the
narrator, the journalist Martin Davis. This is the Jewish culture of Lily
Brett’s stories, but without the deracination or ennui; instead it’s a culture
where vigour, initiative, courage and endurance are celebrated.

Zable is a masterly story-teller and there are a multitude of stories,
rapidly told, tumbling over one another, horrific in detail, redemptive for
the few. There are stories of love and loss; unbearable stories of whole
families walking into the mists of oblivion; stories of hazardous journeys,
of legendary cities, of Odessa, Kiev, Vilna, Vladivostok, Kobe, Shanghai and
Paris. There is also the story of the proprietors Masha and Avram who,
after many heart-stopping obstacles, finally meet up in the Café
Scheherazade in Paris and then create its simulacrum in Melbourne. Zable
creates an ambience where history, fable and personal memory coalesce to
re-create the old world in moving detail; the world of Tsarist Russia, of the
socialist bund and revolution, of Hasidic culture and apostasy from it, of
the many political betrayals as whole populations are scattered or
indiscriminately slaughtered. This is a thrilling book to read, not just for its many exciting narratives, but also for its magical and haunting atmosphere.

John Scott’s *The Architect: A Tale* is also a quest novel, but one from which there’s no return. It’s a fast-moving narrative in which Andrew Martin, a young Australian architect at the height of his power and success, seeks further knowledge in the old world. The novel has a toe-hold only in Melbourne; most of the *Tale* takes place in the half-light of the Northern Hemisphere, in the gloomy and Gothic apartments and streetscapes of Berlin.

Andrew falls hopelessly in love with the elderly Johannes Von Ruhland, a German architect so distinguished and reclusive that he is almost a mythical figure. Martin leaves his wife and child and falls in with Johannes’ suggestion that he pass off the Master’s brilliant plans – for an art centre in Kyoto – as his own. He wins the prize only to be denounced by Johannes as a thief and plagiarist. Lured back to Von Ruhland one last time, Martin is set up by him to be savagely killed by a gang of neo-Nazis. He has lost his marriage, his reputation and now his life. The pace is relentless as Martin is destroyed step by step and the Prologue makes it quite clear that Von Ruhland has planned this from the beginning.

Although psychologically credible, this is obviously a moral fable. Despite echoes of the Faust myth (Von Ruhland has designed gas chambers for the Nazis and is certainly a Satanic figure) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, references to the book of Job and Carl Jung’s *Answer to Job* provide a more authentic key. The God who is sometimes seen as the “Great Architect of the Universe” is, for Martin, a cruel and tormenting Jehovah. Despite, or perhaps because of his unflagging love for his Master, Martin is punished unto death.

Meanwhile new novels by Elizabeth Jolley, Marion Halligan, Rosie Scott and Georgia Blain continue the tradition of sophistication in women’s writing. Jolley’s *An Innocent Gentleman* deals with the difficulty of containing passion within the family and Halligan’s *The Fog Garden* with passion lost. Rosie Scott’s *Faith Singer* and Georgia Blain’s *The Blind Eye* deal with the corruption of Australian society in Kings Cross and the Gulf respectively. Scott’s vision is redemptive; Blain’s almost totally pessimistic.

We read Elizabeth Jolley for her clever plotting, her sympathy for her sometimes very odd characters, and the laconic, non-judgemental way in which she presents their behaviour. *An Innocent Gentleman*, her fifteenth
novel, is no disappointment. Set in the dreary English Midlands during the second war, it concerns a family crisis and its unusual resolution. The title is the key to its moral ambiguity. Of the three main characters – Muriel, Austrian-born and a teacher of German, her husband Henry, a Maths teacher considered by both to be socially inferior, and the gentleman lawyer, Mr Hawthorne – none is innocent. The “gentleman” of the title could be either the accommodating husband, the most honest of the three, or the wealthy lawyer, Muriel’s student. The latter takes advantage of her infatuation, invites her to the opera in London (interestingly enough it’s Fidelio) and, during the visit, impregnates her. The resultant ménage a trois, for which all three are to some extent guilty, parallels the situation in Jolley’s own family, described with feeling in her Central Mischief. There are the usual delicious details we’ve come to expect from Jolley, such as the episode where Henry enjoys a “quick relief job to clear away the cobwebs” from his grotesque neighbour Mrs Tonks. The resolution, where the baby is accepted by the whole family, with the Mr Hawthorne enjoying visiting rights and no doubt paying handsomely, is given added point by the epigraph from Wordsworth’s The Prelude. Following a disturbing and frightening episode in the poem, as in the novel, “Discordant elements” are assimilated. They now “move in one society”.

Marion Halligan’s The Fog Garden hovers between autobiography and fiction, between the first person narrative of “The Lapping” – this deals with the great “Cathedral of Grief” in which Halligan shelters after the death of her husband – and the remainder of the book where this experience is projected onto the fictional Clare who, according to Halligan, “isn’t me” but “is like me”. The narrative voice throughout is vintage Halligan, clever, ironic and meditative. It’s enriched with musings on literature – seen as “balm” for the soul – as well as all the “simple glorious things” of life, like friends, gardens, fine food and wine, stories and memories and above all marriage: “you plant roses, and grow children, and one of you buries the other” (184). Readers value Halligan for her storytelling, her exquisite writing, and above all for her consummate wisdom. The Fog Garden provides all three in plenty.

Rosie Scott continues her tradition of gritty urban realism in Faith Singer. This incisive novel set in Kings Cross deals with street kids who prostitute themselves, the wheezy old men who prey upon them and the crooked cops who protect pimps, drug bosses and paedophiles. Faith Singer, an ageing rock star who has lost her beloved daughter Daisy to an overdose, can no longer bear to sing. She becomes a surrogate mother to children “so battered by the world that they were barely alive”. These
include Angel, a prostitute and drug addict, and Cosmo, who dies despite her help. This is a novel of redemption; its happy ending for Angel and Faith – who incidentally gains the courage to sing again – mitigated by our awareness that for one child rescued hundreds are dragged down into mental dissolution and death.

There is little redemption, or even resolution, in Georgia Blain’s literary world. She has a talent for desolation, human and geographical. The decaying Gulf town in her third novel *The Blind Eye* is as desolate as the deserted coastal resort in her first, and both hide secrets. In *Closed for Winter* it’s the disappearance of a child, in *The Blind Eye* responsibility for the death of a blind girl. The novel is organised around homeopathy as practice and metaphor – the healing of both body and spirit – and extracts from homeopathic texts preface each section of the novel (I’m not sure that this works.) The narrator Daniel, a homeopath, is treating the self-mutilating Simon who, flush with money and drugs, has gone to the Gulf to restore his mother’s house. Simon falls in love with a beautiful blind girl in a secret garden, fertile and fragrant. She and her father, both homeopaths, are intent upon transforming lives as they have the wilderness. Simon’s responsibility, real or imagined, for her death is the crux of the novel.

**Not to be missed . . .**

It’s impossible, in an article of this length, to discuss all the worthwhile novels published in Australia in this one year, let alone short stories or detective fiction, so I’ll comment on just two more novels: n. a. bourke’s *The Bone Flute* and Vivienne Cleven’s *Bitin’ Back*, then conclude with some remarks on emerging writers.

*The Bone Flute* is deeply tragic, *Bitin’ Back* a comedy of sorts, but each in its own way has something serious to say about the treatment of women in Australian society. *The Bone Flute* is brooding, enigmatic and surreal, with all the dark fatalism of a Thomas Hardy novel. The heroine Germaine (an ironic choice) is powerless to stave off the sexual advances of her father or, later, the emotional savagery of her partner. Worse still, she’s unable to protect her baby daughter, apparently “her father’s child”, with all the ambiguity that suggests. The music of the flute which runs through the novel culminates in a surreal and shocking sequence – real or a nightmare – where the dead baby’s bones, stripped of their flesh, are carved into a flute, the music of which holds and contains the essence of Germaine’s
and the child’s tragedy. This is a deeply affecting and impressive novel but perhaps too sombre for many readers.

_Bitin’ Back_, by the Aboriginal writer Vivienne Cleven, is for me the surprise of the year. I’m used to powerful Aboriginal autobiographies but this novel goes one step further. It makes serious points about Aboriginal society, its vitality as well as its short-comings, but this time through fast-moving and hilarious comedy. The narrator, an Aboriginal woman Mavis Dooley, fights like a fiend to protect her football-star son Nevil from the scorn of the community after she finds him dressed as a woman and declaring that he is Jean Rhys. Her dialogue, colloquial, profane and scatological, carries the narrative through the misunderstandings, evasions and concluding revelation of Nevil’s true situation. Her defiant thoughts, running as an italicised commentary alongside the dialogue, reveal Mavis as cunning, wily and above all active in addressing Nevil’s dilemma. Just as Mavis _bites back_ at anyone who threatens her son, so the novel _bites back_ at the stereotyping of Aboriginal language, character and society.

I’m not surprised that _Bitin’ Back_ was short-listed for the National Award for Fiction at the Adelaide Writers’ Festival and, along with the more publicised works of Peter Carey, Arabella Edge, Andrew McGahan, Peter Minack and John Scott, judged as one of the six best fictional works of the previous two years.

Both _The Bone Flute_ and _Bitin’ Back_ are first novels; they and a number of other novels by young writers indicate the future direction of Australian fiction. Stephen Gray’s _The Artist is a Thief_, Mireille Juchau’s _Machines for Feeling_ and Ingrid Woodrow’s _Goddess and the Galaxy Boy_, prizewinner for the 2000 Australian/Vogel Award and finalists for 1999 respectively, are evidence of this. All three are novels of great vitality and imaginative range, and all three are fired up with their authors’ views of the appalling state of our society, particularly in the way it treats young people. With writers such as these coming along, with the encouragement of publishing houses such as Allen & Unwin and the University of Queensland Press, and with mentoring programmes funded by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, we need have no fear for the future of fiction in Australia.
Fiction Received 2001–2002.

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


Notes
The Three Sisters at Echo Point rise like lions in the sea, their shapes repeated in the Sorensen cypresses that stand in scattering blue light across the mountains. A lifting mist reveals a tracery of ridges and ravines, fissures in the earth. There are cliffs that can throw a human cry from rockface to rockface, until, unheard, it drops into darkness.

Everywhere there is a falling away: rocks inclined towards the east have uplifted, folded and fractured over millions of years. Heavy layers of yellow and brown sandstone are lined with red and grey shale. Volcanic necks lie on the north and the south side of the ridge, giving a coastline to this sea of air.

Jacaranda blue, only deeper.

From the dark where Freya is sitting, the house burns in lamplight. She sees the white moonskins of the tangled scribbly gums on the other side of the valley, like smoke twisting through the bush. A distant train rattles as it pulls into the station in Main Street, sounding like the shaking of teeth in an old dead head. She has been listening to it for a month now.

She has told no one that after her last drink with Philippe in the Goodbye Cafe at the airport in Hong Kong, she has returned alone.

Freya turns her head from the bush and moves across the verandah to the door. Inside the room there is a piano, a desk under the window and around it are walls of books, their covers evenly stacked in tight lengths, their reflections reaching into the night. The ceiling undulates above blades of double bookshelves; a body of books rises in every space around her. There is a heap of shoes on the floor, a wooden trunk, boxes of books, enough for the winter ahead if she runs out of wood. She pauses and listens as an animal coughs in the night. The high, high poplars rub against each other as she takes a book from the top shelf. Inside Robert Lowell's
Notebook, Philippe has numbered the names of the ex-wives in careful script, each number like a hand grenade. Placing it in a box she reaches again, and finds the book of poems he bought in the heat of the tents in Adelaide, and shyly offered to a towering Ted Hughes who wrote in the flyleaf, *Hair by hair you might pluck a life bald.*

Working like this for several hours, Freya is slowly clearing the forest of books. At night, in the heat, she has been packing them for weeks, until the walls are scraped back to themselves. She started this task the evening she returned from Hong Kong, the night's choreography giving her days their shape and meaning.

Somewhere there is the dark voice of a dog.

Tonight she starts on the novels and finds, slipped inside them, the photographs Philippe used as bookmarks. As she gazes at the photographs she knows it will never be over.

1976. Twenty-two years ago. Freya and Philippe were in a room in the school in St Denis. They had been married for one month and Philippe was teaching in Paris. One of the teachers picked them up in a cab from the Hotel Danube in the rue Jacob where they had spent three nights listening to the wall paper crumbling, and had woken suddenly in the night when the American choir girls returned to the hotel. They were down on the street, at the door.

*Happy Noo Year, Happy Noo Year,* they called softly across the evening to each other, and for years afterwards on each New Year's Eve, Philippe would kiss her neck and whisper to her at midnight in a soft American accent, and she would smile.

The next morning Freya arranged him against the dark drop cloth she had fashioned from her black winter coat hung by the window.

His pipe sat on its side on the table. White salt lay in the ashes.

*For the cover of your first novel,* she laughed as he rolled his eyes at her. *Keep still!*

He held his face to the darkness, and she took the picture.

Travelling to Fontainbleau with another teacher, the Spaniard, they followed a road in a forest of straight-limbed trees brushed in narrow waves up to the low cloud. Rain waited to fall upon a tall grey stone house that looked like a tree or a nest on the edge of the forest. In the gardens of the chateau were some yawning soldiers, hands on hips, cloaks spread. Three donkeys screamed at the train running behind the chateau. In the *jardin anglais,* an old man sat on a seat deeply bent upon the sway of the swan on the pond. Or perhaps he was asleep.
Through the trees a horse kicked up leaves and warmed the air with its steaming dung. An officer was exercising his big bay, his eyes flickering over them without interest as the Spaniard took the photo.

On the way back, the Spaniard's laugh in the back seat was like the twanging of a guitar. As Philippe's eyes met Freya's they smiled at each other in antipodean collusion.

After driving about for an hour trying to find the school, Freya finally stopped on an overpass in fog and the Spaniard, gathering his coat about him, climbed out of the car and stood on the road in the night lit by broad, searching sweeps of orange light.

Where are we? Freya asked.

We're lost, said Philippe.


Her sister must have taken this early picture, because he was young, his hair long. She must have held the camera into the breeze; Freya could hear the click in the rush of open air. There were miles of brown water. After the picnic on the shore, Freya and Philippe had fallen into the warm water, fully clothed, and the boat flapped beside them like a pelican. The hills were brown behind the sails, the sky white with the last of the Australian summer heat. They rolled in the dam with each other, their faces stretched with laughter.

When they were in the boat again, the breeze picked up and Philippe span the heron until the wind was directly behind them. He loosened the sheets then let them all the way out, and the sails swung free. Freya stretched out on her back and felt the warm water sliding along the edge of the boat, streaming over her arm. As he held the rudder steady, they ran back towards the shore, goose-winging, with the sound of metal clinking on the mast.

Blue eyes, he sang to her, baby's got blue eyes, on a blue, blue day.

And they sailed back like that, happy with the expectation of being carried home on the sure evening wind.


Built from golden cypress pine on the side of a valley, it had a silvery green roof. They slept high up in the house below a pane of glass that gave an eye to the night. In the morning the house creaked in response to the warming air and they would wake to the gulping cry of a swooping currawong. Rising, they would step out onto a small deck so high above the tree line that the parrots flew beneath them, squeaking with the sound of
two branches rubbing together in a breeze. On the deck was a table where
they drank tea and leant over the bow of the house, set upon the grey swell
of an ocean of eucalypts.

They moved into the house one June day many years ago, away at last
from the heat of the city. At nights they walked through the cemetery with
the dog, Philippe sniffing up the snowy air like cocaine. Once they sat in
the darkness on the verandah listening to Borodin's Nocturne at midnight
under the bright, cold sky, the dog at their feet as she told him a story:

* A tall woman was caressing her husband's feet, stroking him to death. They did not
catch her. Caresses leave no trace. It was a slow death and he died with his foot in the
air, and his lips folded in.


She took this photograph of Philippe not long after they first met.

There is the clean line of the cheek, the eyes averted. Her fingers
touch his cheek. There is a hollow in the skin here, a small strawberry
birthmark in the shape of a dog. His eyes are green, with hazel patches in
some lights. She holds the photograph as if tempted to lower her face
against it, to glean the scent of him. For Freya, in this moment, there is
nothing but his eyes of woven glass and the slow pulse of memory. He is
telling her the story of his family. They are young and it is the first time
she has heard this story. A bottle of Mateus sits between them on the
table. His fingers are brushing at the label, finding the rift where it lifts a
little from the cool glass. She is listening to him and watching his hands,
like birds in their shape, flashing between trees.

It was raining when they met, it was raining as the dark trees silently
observed their passage between the house and the car, and inside the
warm enclosure the car made, there was Rachmaninov. First it was
twilight, then much later when they returned, it was the falling darkness
that he stopped with his upturned palms. He whispered to her, 'I have
spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.' And
he took her head in one hand and drew it to that place between his
shoulder and throat and she felt the warm, soft brushing of lips upon her
eyelids, sealing them against a future she would not want to see. Did he
know it even then?

Freya stacks the photographs in a box. Then she picks up more books, cold
stones in her hands, and climbs the stairs to the bed in the room that hangs
like a kite over the eucalyptus forest.

Outside oil sizzles in the gum leaves. There are the blue backs of flies.
She hears the sound of a hubcap from the wheel of a car on the highway,
spinning off into the night.
Her bed is her grave. On it lies a heavy body of books, the revolver that had been handed down to him through the French side of Philippe’s family. She lies against these things, her grave goods, and falls into sleep as into a dark pool below her, sleeping deeply, entombed with a copy of the book of the dead, fully clothed in a green dress and boots. Her eyes closed to her journey, she is studying the map of it in her sleep. Informed by a boatload of memory, sweat leaks from her body as she sleeps like a creature that has had a net thrown around it in the sea. Her sleep is a drowning, a slow slipping away under water. Last night she woke in the dark, swung out of bed, hitting her bones on the cupboard. He was lost in the darkness below and she must reach down and grasp his hand and pull him up from the black water lapping at her feet.

The moon outside the window is an old one and she is the sad wife, sleeping as though her pillow has been dipped in a bucket of ether. She doesn’t move. She will wake with her head still turned to the window, listening to the sound of the wind in the eucalypts, like the sound of waves reaching at the shore, falling back, failing.

She is a shipwreck, smashed on a reef of writing.

When she opens her eyes, it is because she hears the house speaking to her in the hot morning light, the wood bending, stretching, groaning like a boat on waves of heat. Below the house the grass lies down in the heat and the willows shake their heads of hair.

A bird’s line of flight crosses the stand of gums.

She lives day after day like this for months, schooling herself in solitude: a feather knocked from the body of the bird.

For company, there is only the dog who sleeps under the house in a hollow of dirt, listening to the footfall on the brushbox floor above as Freya moves like a sick woman across the room.

She thinks about telling people that Philippe has died in Hong Kong. She rehearses the story:

_We ride the sea this night on the Celestial Star. We sit at the rear on wooden seats polished by the passage of a million people. You can trace the brass star in the wood with your finger. The two middle-aged Americans who sit in front of us absorb me and I think he is kissing her foot. I lean forward to see him carefully clipping her toenails and turn back to Philippe to laugh. But he is gone. He is falling from the back of the ferry in a moment carved in the air._

_His arms stretch out to me. His glasses are slipping on his nose. He is falling into the Fragrant Harbour. As he flies into the harbour, he parts the black water and his body makes a dark hole. Other water fills the hole. (Did I look away to see the lights of Kowloon in the soft, soft dark, and turn back to find you gone?)_
I hear five bells across the sea. A cleaving apart.
The next morning The South China Morning Post said:
At 7.30 P.M. last night a man fell from a Star Ferry into Victoria Harbour as it made its way from Central. An extensive search of the area was unable to locate him.
A body dipping into the sea.

From the verandah, the dog listens to her whispering story. The dog waits for him still, but somehow Freya knows better than to wait. She takes a pick down to the creek. She hooks into the earth and plants sentinel agapanthus under trees that stand like temples over her bent figure. She fills the holes with dirt and the heat dries her face. Like a Western red cedar, Freya is rotting from the inside, narcosing; slowly the blood in her body dries to a rusted mark.

Once again, the night swings deeply across the valley, bringing more than just the absence of light. She dreams there are people at the door who are knocking on the wood. A rescue party hovers in a helicopter out here in the South China Sea, as the house groans and rolls in the gale like a scuttled boat. The wind is sucking at the walls. The beams stretch and strain as it rolls for days; her mast is broken and trails in the sea. In the dark wind outside, she hears the sound of a murderous typhoon, the call of the whale far beneath her. The house rubs its back against a bony reef, a skeleton in the sea.

She wakes when a crack of thunder parts the air, and rain falls in. She lies still, as if carved, drilled, sawn. She thinks of the leap from Honeymoon Lookout, the cliffs of fall.

Feeling a worm in her heart moving, she hears the scream of the black cockatoo in the pines, like the bellow of a horse gone mad and in need of a bullet. She thinks of her ovaries with their eggs, an aviary – and delicate birds’ eggs shrivelling there. She is like the bride who wakes on her wedding day with a beard. It is only the light coming through the stained glass window above the bed that gets her into the day.

She fills a vase with tears and it is dark again. And every evening she sleeps in the green dress and boots. Night after night there are Chinese colours in her brain and she forgets to breathe.

Time is unmoving, like a stone, but one morning there is snow slipping on the roof. The world has shifted into winter while she has slept under the broken sky. Lace is stretched across the landscape. The cold edges in under her door. The grass and trees are starched and the ice makes eaves on the roof, stretches green in the bush, through the white snow. Her only meaning now is carved, shaped by snow; like the snowworm Freya is learning to live in ice.
She wears Philippe’s shirt, his boots. There is a rawness to her organs that finds a skin in his clothes. She runs through scribbly gums, encoded writing carved into their trunks, white like the trees of the brain, sad with arms of blanched bone. A graffiti of branches scratches at her as she passes. A flock of black cockatoos clouds the sky. Her wasting feet slide on rocks. The stones and leaves on the ground have faces.

The dog follows at a distance, accustomed to Philippe’s shirt with his smell moving through the scrub, but not this cold keening in the wind.

As she runs, there is her dialogue with grief and she says aloud, I am in Katoomba. It is Friday. She speaks so that the past will not take her. Throw back its head, hold her upside down above its mouth, drop her in and swallow her whole.

Looking back up from the hanging swamp, she sees the wooden house in the snow as it hangs over the eucalypt valley: a boat, a church, a violin. During the day it moves; expands and breathes, pressing soft cypress perfume into the air.

Night after night she dreams that her heart is sleeping in the hollow of dirt beneath the house. It waits, shivers. Some days she sees it sitting in the gutter, bent double, its hand over its mouth. She forgets to feed it and it grows thin and bony.

Like a sculptor, the kindly surgeon bends over her on the operating table, finding fragments of cardiac muscle caught in her teeth. The knife is poised above her like a pen. Without a word, he makes his incision and saws through the bone of breast which has the lightness of bird bone pushing out from inside her. He cuts her heart from strings of sinews, removes it, and sets it on the right stainless steel pan of a pair of scales on the floor. It burns red. The dog approaches and sniffs the heart, licks at its edges and takes it carefully, delicately in her teeth. She curls her lips back and tosses it into her mouth, eating it before it can be placed in a jar. The dog licks the cavity in Freya’s chest and she murmurs and wakes as the surgeon steps back to study his cardioectomy.

She hears a rat scratching in the room, but when she opens her eyes, sees that it was just the rain. She walks out into the rain and an aria of currawong song.

To clear her head of the dream, she chops wood for hours, then sits inside and watches the mist coming into the house through the open window. With the cloud in her living room, the past rolls in. She knows that we don’t know what life takes us to. The events in Hong Kong were like a coal train in the night. No lights. Just the moon catching the side of the
last truck. She was blind. She should have seen it coming. There was one
detail, merely pointed at, that she missed, and so lost the whole.

Philippe could never settle with one meaning, so there was nothing for
her to grasp, except the falling night as he surfed on the swell of language,
reaching for happiness; writing in the red ink on polished paper, naming
his gods with each thick downstroke, thin upstroke. She can see him
holding his breath as he wrote onto the empty space of the page.

What is a wound, she thinks, if not a longing for language?

Philippe was a man who selected his dog according to how difficult it
would be to bury; he placed his affections carefully, like a priest setting the
bread and wine on the altar. Freya learned restraint, silence, to never speak
of an experience because then it couldn’t be written about, and that was
the worst thing.

So nothing really existed or happened. His dialogue was with the page,
he kept it for the page. Everything was for the page. He wrote, with three
books open in front of him on his desk, greedy for the seduction of words.
He wrote in heavy woollen clothes, sometimes with a scarf about his throat
and his breath a white banner because he had forgotten to stoke the fire
and it had died down. When Freya came into the house just a cough told
her that he was there. She relit the fire, smelling the wood and ash on her
frozen hands, and saw that his thoughts were elsewhere, and he was falling
over some sort of edge, giving himself up to the jazz that played on the
radio - dark, muddy music. He was a scribe in his scriptorium, scooping
up the cream of language as it came to the top, ideas as beautiful and
fragile as inscriptions on the scapulae of deer Philippe took their life,
soaked it in lime, scrubbed away all trace of flesh and hair, dried it, and
scraped again with a knife blade, then polished the surface to give
parchment to write on.

He was afraid he would lose his voice if people came and talked about
his work, so there was no one.

There was simply his sleeping early, in summer to escape the heat, in
winter to escape the darkness, dreaming that writing would save him from
a life that was a calligram: he was the shape of his texts. He did not notice
her love for him, his gaze being upon the words.

He started taking trips to the city. She realises now that he was
researching the art of betrayal, writing his spy novel, telling himself stories
of passion, assuming another of the multiplicities of self that he kept
stored away like honey in a glass jar. She wanted to say to him, beware the
stories you tell yourself, for you will surely be lived by them. But all this
time he was intently writing about fragmentation and collapse. His grief
bloomed like a black flower, and she could smell it in the mornings, when she woke beside him.

Sometimes he lay on the black couch in his black jumper in the long late afternoons. The worst times. His eyes were often closed and it was like a sentence. The unrelenting pressure of it pushed down upon him like a wool press, squeezing out life, love.

*Anhedonia,* he murmured.

She looked it up in his dictionary while he slept.

When she bent down to him lying there, she heard something else.

*Australia.*

The grief plagued him until his heart had become a walled city, and Freya wondered if she were, after all, the cause of it.

There was just the dog, as loyal as Feather was, always with him on his wild walks, the miles he ran to escape the plague, which came without warning. It was like the beating of rain across a valley: she could hear it coming, drumming its advance, long before she could see it, or feel it.

Once he opened his eyes for a second and said that he had to remain silent to write, but for Freya, reading the silence was like trying to decipher hieroglyphics, a language stripped of vowels. It was incompatible with any alphabet she knew.

*You don't attend to the thing, Freya. Such drawing attention to love destroys it. You must not meet the gaze of love.*

Such words became weapons at her throat. It was so clearly going wrong, but she didn't know how or why. It was like wearing a dress inside out, so that the unravelling threads of her life were obvious to everyone else.

When the pipes freeze, something bursts in the toilet. She rings for help.

The plumber shuffles on the tiles in the bathroom, waves his hand in the water of the cistern.

*Australian made. Never last.*

*What should I do?* asks Freya.

*Got a replacement in the van. American, and more expensive. But you know where you are.*

*Ah,* says Freya with a smile, *I want to know where I am.*

So he moves about the house twisting, tapping pipes. There has not been another human being here for months. She is unused to movement about her, just the petal from a poppy falling from time to time, caught in the corner of her eye.

The plumber finishes his work and as Freya counts out his money, he leans on the wood of the house, which today is like a cello.

*Nice spot,* he says, looking to the fall of eucalypts hanging in the window,
where tomorrow the fog will drift across her eyes like sleep, and a river of hyacinths will flood in spring.

In early spring, Freya leaves her isle of the dead and ventures into the town past a bare tree flowering with cockatoos, beneath skeins of wild geese flying in a strange light, billowing out across the sky. Walking quickly past the Savoy where she is known, she makes her way to the darkness of the Paragon, where no one will notice her eating the edges of food amongst the tourists. She takes the booth at the back and thinks she hears the waitress say, *No humming birds. They are off the menu today.*

A man across the room strokes a woman’s chin and holds it between his thumb and forefinger like a sparrow. When Freya looks up again, the woman is taking a piece of food from his proffered fork into her mouth. Freya leaves quickly without ordering.

Outside there is a woman waiting at the bus stop. She is old with a beautiful face. Chinese. Tall. She wears a black woollen beanie and a long dark coat that completely encloses her. It has a fluff of light brown fur at the collar. Her pale hand, holding a cigarette, emerges from the dark coat. She stares at Freya in anger, and the bright sunlight around them is swallowed suddenly in grainy cloud.

Freya walks away, close to the shop windows. The wind catches her sideways as she crosses alleys. It is a wind that knows where ice and snow still lie. She passes by her favourite bookshop, having no use for books now that the dyslexia of grief has struck her. Outside the shop, a young man, a shoplifter, screams like a rabbit as he is apprehended.

*Alas!*

Freya is startled.

*Alas!*

The young man is agitated, growing insistent, very ugly. When the woman from the bookshop appears at the door, he grasps her arm.

*Alice.*

She shakes his hand from her, turns and walks away, back into the shop.

Leaving them, Freya walks back home with fresh supplies of yellow paper. In a stretch of scribbly gums, a passing bus gives her a window of cypresses, black strokes in the purple and blues of receding shadow.

That night she dreams that she is standing over Philippe’s grave murmuring, *I am the sad wife.* As it starts to rain, he hands her an umbrella that she takes and swings over her head, showering the dark hole with confetti from some wedding long ago.
Over the months, she has given away or sold all her possessions. But one 
evening, before the television goes, she sees Philippe on it.

Is he in Hong Kong? Is he in some other house, here in Australia?

He's standing beside an empty fireplace, resting his arm along the 
mantelpiece. He is wearing a white shirt, a tie. He looks prosperous. His 
hair has been cut short. The other woman is smiling at him. As the 
interviewer speaks to him of the publication of his new novel, Freya hears 
a doorbell ringing somewhere off the screen. Freya knows what he is 
thinking about all this. About the camera, the lights. There is a slight shine 
to his forehead. He makes eye contact with the camera.

There is a camera here, he says pointing at the truth, intent upon annoying 
the interviewer, refusing to play by the rules.

Writing, he says to the camera, you will abandon everything for that. You will 
betray everyone. All that matters is the work.

With the passing of time, Freya has understood that in Philippe's 
deception of her, lay the truth.

Freya sits at Philippe's desk under the window, a net of trees against the 
sky. She takes up his pen and, in a pale voice, writes, There is a floor in me, 
and I am lying on it.

She has been packing the last of his papers and pens which have lain 
here all this time, just where he left them. The pines groan. At her feet, 
the dog moves, folds her paws and tucks her head tightly into her tail to 
form a perfect circle. The cord of the blind hangs from the window in the 
precise way he had knotted it. In the months that she had been here alone, 
the tip of the pine tree outside has grown above the line of the window-
sill.

She takes a piece of yellow paper. The black ink-drops on the page are 
like the shadow of a man. With her hand upon her chin, she writes a letter 
to the dead from the dead:

Dear Philippe,

In Dachau I am kept alive in your protective custody. I am something living, but 
very still.

My arms were raised on a corner in Wurzberg, as if to be taken in your arms to 
dance. My glasses are too big for my head. Your boots are too big for the bones of my 
feet. I have lost my concentration.

I place my shaven head upon the wooden bed. The wings of my shoulder blades, a 
swirl of bone down my back like folds in stone. A calligraphy of bone - skin over stone, 
cloth over bone. A skeleton after the first year, my cells are shrinking like my liver in its 
cage.
The organs inside my skin are playing my requiem.
In the dusk of morning light I stand, still as a Chinese warrior.
Perhaps you have spun my hair for socks? Or are you on some South American street living on my golden teeth?
I long for the warmth of Baracke X with its quiet garden of snow...

Freya
She gathers together all the yellow pages that she has written upon over the months — the yellow pieces of paper that have become her company, and slips them all in between the leaves of one of Philippe’s unfinished manuscripts. It lies, in his careful script, on his writing desk, just as he had left it when they went to Hong Kong. She places her pages amongst the bones of his story, the flesh of his language.

As she lifts the papers, it is the shape of the words The Concerto Inn that first attracts her eye, like a familiar piece of music catching in the brain. Before she can stop herself, she reads the story and hears Philippe’s voice telling her the same story when they were in Hong Kong and he had not arrived back home until early one morning:

I asked the boy at the bar where I could stay the night. When he’d finished washing the glasses, he took me down along a path to the Concerto Inn where he said he worked during the day. There was a bright lamp at the door. It looked a fragile construction of bamboo, one of those curly-roofed palaces of imperial dynasties. I could see several storeys and repeated roofs, steeply pitched with projecting, upturned eaves and ridges of coloured tiles. Inside, just opposite the entrance, there was a carved screen wall. There was no one about. He led me through passageways to a red chamber where he said I could stay the night. One whole wall was constructed of a panel of windows and mirrors. There was a bed and a basin. I lay down and slept until the sun woke me. I couldn’t find anyone around so I left some money for him on the table and made my way to the dock. I was the only passenger aboard the ferry that brought me back to Hong Kong...

Like a transparent structure superimposed over Philippe’s story, Freya imagines another voice, not Philippe’s. As the weight and density of the words shift, parallel lines finally converge in Freya’s mind, and she reads between the lines. She reaches her own vanishing point and apprehends a slippage in meaning, the resonance of another narrative. It is the Other Woman whose voice she hears singing the o of The Concerto Inn. Philippe’s words dematerialise and another story takes their place, as though a fragment of someone else’s memory has drifted into Freya’s mind:

How I tried to ignore Philippe’s attentions, the billets doux at the conference in Guangzhou quoting Yeats: ‘I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.’ He brushed my hand one night over dinner at the
White Swan. He wrote me another note and had it delivered to my room. He impersonated a visiting Indian professor, but I knew who it was. He wrote, “Since the written word is so much like an historical document, an hysterical formal amendment to ways and behaviour, it would pleasure me greatly to request the lascivious and lusty pursuits of my mind upon the joys of your body. The fruits of our love shall not pass unrewarded in the annals of time.”

I laughed then because we spoke the same language. He was lost. He told me how he sat on the verandah in Katoomba and drank whisky, his father’s revolver aimed at his sadness. There was the warm breath that his language was. It curled off his tongue. It wound around me and pulled me closer. He could tell stories in the night, stories that were like jewels, stories that were strung upon ideas so rare. So he smuggled me in to him against my will. The intrigue of the affair! Back in Hong Kong, the hand upon my breast between book-signings. The secrecy was divine.

His desire grew more urgent, driven by the betrayal he was writing about. I was his reason now to chuck the lot. He’d been wanting to do it for a while. Had decided some time ago that his life in Katoomba, Freya, had to go. Now that we had found each other he could do it in one job lot. The garage sale of his life. He quoted Lowell’s “At the Altar” to me with a grin,

“I turn and whisper in her ear. You know
I want to leave my mother and my wife,
You wouldn’t have me tied to them for life.”

We went to the Mandarin Oriental and I drank calvados. There was a Portuguese band playing. He drank Mateus and told me about his childhood.

In my flat I would tell the maid to have the day off. I think she knew why. I would put on my Gloria Estefan songs. The ones in Spanish. He would whisper into the intercom, then in my bed the whispering would become more urgent. His lips upon my throat until I felt like a long-necked Botticelli. The stroke of the hand along my thigh and the accumulation of flesh he gathered there. Afterwards he would go out onto my little balcony and write. I would make him coffee. He said it was the best writing he had ever done. I found little white cards all over the flat with quotations on them, like Italo Calvino’s “There is no language without deceit.”

But they were merely moments, odd hours grabbed here and there. Until one evening I was sitting beside him at Jo Jo’s bar in the Grand Hyatt in Wanchai as he rang Freya. I heard him tell her that he was stranded on Lamma Island and would stay the night at the Concerto Inn.

He was hanging up the ‘phone and smiling down at me on the stool beside him. My legs were crossed. I lifted my face slowly to his, our eyes like lovers walking towards each other on a street. I shifted my legs slightly. My hand lay at the place where the skirt ended on my thigh. Philippe placed his perfectly shaped hand upon mine.

“We have the night,” he said …
Freya is still. She does not breathe, but sits holding in her hands the cold fact of Philippe as the architect of a carefully constructed deceit. Then she takes *The Concerto Inn*, thick now with her own dark story, and places it carefully in Philippe’s wooden trunk. Gathering momentum she packs all the precious things he has given her over the last eighteen years: the love letters, the poems. Then all the things from his desk. She is sweating. The dog licks the sweat from her legs as she drags the trunk across the floor to the top of the staircase, levers it down one step at a time. The rage steams off her back like white frost burning in sun. She drags the trunk all the way under the house into the dark, where it lodges in the damp soil. The dog sniffs at it, picking up Philippe’s scent, reveling in the memory of him. Turning away to the light at the doorway, Freya spills outside again. Slams the heavy door shut. Closes the tomb.

Through the following nights she hears the howl and cry of her own voice, like that of an animal caught in a trap. She sees rabbits grazing in the garden under the moon.

One morning, many days later, Freya hears a peculiar low moan rising from under the house and drags open the heavy door to a frenzy of flies.

The dog lies on her side, her paws crossed. Freya can see where she has worn a deep hollow in the dirt scattered with lizard bones and beetle wings. She kneels down beside her. The eyes of the dog are clouded with the terrible neglect. There is blood on her claws. Thunder rolls in from the south. Rabbits dance on the grass as she lifts the dog and carries her up inside the house and places her on the rug before the hearth. She holds warm milk and raw egg to her mouth, feeds her gently, and warms her before the fire. When the dog begins to lift her head a little, Freya’s weeping falls from her like a curtain.

Freya kneels down to light the fire. She struggles outside, only to find that the wood is wet. After all this, she is here still, in the dark. In the cold. The wind outside cuts short the moan of the pines. Shivering, she reaches for a book and places it in the grate carefully. She sets a match to it and the pages catch. She takes her photographs of Philippe and some of his novels and feeds them to the fire. She holds out her hands to the flame and his words warm her.

With the next match, she strikes a deal.

She is sweating by the time she has collected her things. She places them in a small suitcase, sets it by the door and heaps all his remaining books on the fire. It eats them and spills onto the wooden floor. A bibliocaust.
Freya steps into the dark with the dog.
The windows blaze, the stars fly smoke-trails in the night. A flock of white cockatoos rises suddenly into the night sky. Words spark above the bonfire of the house which groans and twists like a body burning on a beach, and cries to the drift of ash settling upon the hanging swamp.

_I am the mad wife_, Freya says to the house.

_I give you to the air._
This shop from the street glows like a computer screen, a fairy tale game we want to tumble into. Above our heads as we go in, gold lettering gives us filigreed tiaras.

Then reality strikes. Fluorescence above a parade of ciphered prices. The baker and his assistant trading burning glares ...

You grunt — un baguette — hold up one parental finger, wagging it like a warning, a don’t you dare dismiss me hope —

and Marie behind the counter sprinkles virtual arsenic under the nappy of tissue paper she knots around the hot, about-to-wilt-in-the-middle bread.

She’s Madame Bovary deflecting her death wish. She’s dropped out of school and now she’s ready to drop out of this crummy job too — she’s sixteen and sulky, who knows why?

Merde, ces étrangers anyone can read the smoke cloud above her head Merde, merde say the snap and wilt of her neck as she asks for her money.

Spilling back change, glaring above pain this and pain that she blitzes especially out the Hansel and Gretel door

your hand on the baton of bread conducting a hopeful movement towards lunch —

while her finger, like a lost tail twitching for its mouse, hungers to click open some better game.
Falling

1

My mother always
had dreams of
falling

she fell
each night
from the same lighthouse

the lighthouse
a thin white babel
now silent

always a still blue day
and her
falling

dressed like her
Irish mother
the white petticoat

ballooning
around her head
like white folded wings
There is an art to falling:
avoid hard surfaces
but surfaces can be deceptive
even deep water will break your neck

When falling from high altitudes
it is possible
if you dare to have the imagination
to believe it is simply flight

My grandmother never believed
you should fall in love
in her diaries she mused
on the phrase *falling in love*

and imagined parachutists
falling from WW1 planes
always into enemy territory

silken cords around her limp neck
limbs tangled in high trees
like pale broken trunks

she was a woman
who knew about surfaces
knew the art of surfacing

all life's lessons were useless
if you couldn't master this
though she would never use the word.
She lived in a time
where they used phrases like
the cream always rises to the top
one should keep to one's station in life

and it was not so much falling
as staying where you were
though she often believed
someone had sewn stones
into the seams of her pockets.

She fell all the way to Australia
even worse, Perth,
arriving in her exile
wearing arrogant black
and taking to the streets with a swagger

believing one could be free
at the end of the world
she grew careless and didn't care

and when they called her a fallen woman
she laughed showing them her body
immaculate and unbruised
free of any injury that one might expect from a fall

Is there a difference between
a fallen angel & a falling angel,
how far do they fall
before they are fallen?
Before my mother married
she grew a vision of the future:
there was a neat house with high ceilings,
a large mantelpiece with photographs
of the children as they were growing.

She imagined herself changing them every few years;
the frames would be silver embossed
and they would be slightly turned
to the the centre of the mantelpiece
and her achievement would be visible
everytime she walked into the room.

In the garden there had to be roses,
red and white roses,
and a pathway that ran straight
from the gate to the porchsteps.

and it was only in dreams
that her own mother ever
appeared
falling from the sky

her white petticoats
balloning over her head
so her face remained
forever veiled.
JEFF GUESS

THE DEATH OF ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN

1837

Finding his wife between everyone’s sheets
but his own
the pistol ball strikes him
somewhere between honour and shame.

Scripted years earlier in *Onegin*
this real life re-run of the duel
splinters first with blood and bone
shatters next the mind’s imaginary alphabet.

For two days his fingers scramble after
single letters, then whole words and phrases
and lastly the sentence he loses control over
love that ultimately becomes a death of him.

Laying his pen aside a last time
before that numb malicious morning
had him falling, always falling
forward into a darkening dislocation.

An interrupted lyric
he finally succumbs to –
ink barely dry upon a penultimate page
he is hurriedly buried in his books.
Probably in hindsight the best interment:
his challenge was never with his wife's lover
but language – getting up
from this ephemeral grave as a restless ghost.

His poems unchained, unchecked, know
no restraint, untethered now, follow him
beyond Petersburg to every farm and village,
seeking not refuge but simply to be heard.

All of Russia heard the pistol's powder flash;
felt the earthquake of his wounded falling –
but drew in dumb breaths of wonder at his
speaking now as tidal wash against their ears.
Do you remember when we dragged the dinghy
down to the reaching waves and shrieking with laughter,
helped the children in?
Time was counted by turning tides
and length of hours spent together.
How it sped then, how it dragged in separation.
We were aware only of proximity or absence,
and lived heedless of a time existing
without this glad acceptance, of instant recognition.
But Time holds no allegiance to those
who linger in its intervals
and if death severs time for one,
bright memories remain to heal another’s loss.

We sit together now while clocks still beat for you
who feel no absent joy. You have withdrawn:
there is no light of recognition in your eyes,
no memory of love.
The sea rolls relentlessly against far rocks
while Time holds us mercilessly,
bound only by a pulse’s beat.
The question “How does the settler belong?” is met by a pressing need for strategies which interrogate this old issue in new ways, particularly in regards to the discursive production of settler “belonging” in relation to Indigenous people. Both Peter Read’s Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership (2000) and Margaret Somerville’s Body/Landscape Journals (1999), are recent cultural productions which implicitly rehearse strategies for white writing as it engages with issues of settler belonging. What I wish to look at in this essay is how both texts show that settler belonging is an expression of the “epistemic violence” (to borrow Spivak’s phrase) of settler postcolonialism.

One of the major differences between Read and Somerville’s work is how they approach questions of settler belonging in relation to Indigenous people. Both ask the conscientious settler question: “How can I have a sense of belonging in the Australian landscape?” (B/LJ: 128), and “do I have the right to belong in this soul-country?” (Belonging: 9). Both texts posit indigenous belonging as a kind of gauge, which implies a relationship (of value, or depth, or kind) between indigenous and settler belonging. While the texts share this relationship with indigeneity, what happens to settler belonging after this point of comparison, of relation, is very different. Read insists that settler belonging must be articulated separately, differently, without comparison to or appropriation of Aboriginality. On the other hand, Somerville seeks a relation, a connection, a dialogue with Aboriginal women’s stories of place in order to articulate her own belonging. As
Somerville writes: “[m]y work in the landscape has been a quest for belonging, searching for a sense of home in the outside world through connection with Aboriginal women’s stories” (B/LJ:180). Both are in their own ways open to accusations of appropriation: Read because he attempts (unsuccessfully) to make Aboriginality supplementary to settler belonging, and Somerville when she explicitly states that she seeks belonging through Aboriginal women’s stories of place.

I would like to tease out some of the differences posed by Somerville’s text in order to suggest that Somerville’s postcolonial/feminist methods which explicitly interrogate the writer’s subject position (including, most importantly, writing under the threat of being appropriative), represent a substantial contribution to re-articulating both the risk of cultural appropriation and complicity as white writing’s inexorable point of departure. As I hope to make clear, this is not to suggest that cultural appropriation is a good thing, but that it is a feature of such questions of belonging and must be included as a genuine problem for settler writers concerned to express their “belonging” to country. Acknowledging the risk of appropriation is a means of registering complicity with imperialism – which is itself simultaneously presented as an obstacle to settler belonging (if not the obstacle), and at the same time the very reason why “belonging” is being sought after in the first place. To take on settler belonging is taking on the imperial, colonial and postcolonial history of Australia and the discursive arrangements by which such ethical and moral questions of “belonging” have been asserted. Consequently, the question of settler belonging must be situated within the epistemic violence that gives rise to it, or else it is in danger of becoming a sentiment which rejects imperialism as its obstacle and replaces it with Indigenous people themselves. I would prefer, as a white settler, to belong through a concept of belonging translated as, and translated through, the terms of epistemic violence which give rise to it. I read the work of Margaret Somerville as both symptomatic of and attentive to this paradox of settler belonging and Peter Read’s work as trying to avoid the negative (postcolonising) implications of the settler project to belong.

The crisis of belonging that we see in both Read’s Belonging and Somerville’s Body/Landscape Journals is one of the foundational issues for settler postcolonial studies. As Terry Goldie and Stephen Slemon have both pointed out in their work on postcolonial settler cultures, that the presence of the indigene marks for the settler a kind of nostalgia for a sense of belonging that is associated with indigenous people themselves. According to Goldie’s Fear and Temptation: Representations of the Indigene, in
confrontation with the indigene, the settler manifests a desire to “erase” the “separation of belonging” (12) by seeing themselves as “indigenous”; a position confluent with an imaginary ‘true belonging’. Goldie writes:

Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians have, and long have had, a clear agenda to erase this separation of belonging. The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? (12)

In the articulation of belonging to the land of occupation, the settler has two options according to Goldie; one is a form of mimicry of the Indigene, the other is an outright erasure of their presence in the land. While the manifestations of these strategies are diverse and complex, both betray an intense anxiety of “place” for the settler. Read’s text falls into this category of mimicry (which is itself a form of erasure), in its attempts to situate a dispossessed settler-belonging as affect of postcolonial settler culture as it engages with the fact of Aboriginal dispossession. Such an emphasis is clear from the outset where Read provides an anecdote to demonstrate the experiential grounds for his textual adventure into “belonging”. Coming across signs of an Aboriginal shell-pile alongside a childhood haunting ground, Read is struck by self-doubt about his belonging. He writes:

[my] discovery revived in me all the problems of wanting to belong in this breathtaking country of deepest personal and family memory. The hushed shell pile reminds me that Cowan Creek is deep Aboriginal country also. I ask myself: Do I have the right to belong in this soul-country? Do Aboriginals belong in some deeper way than the rest of us, even though none as yet lays a Native Title claim to it? Would such a pre-emptive claim of belonging – if that is what a Native Title claim is – reduce or disqualify my own sense? If so, must it always? Considering those questions, and how non-Aboriginal Australians are grappling with them, is the subject of this book. (my emphasis: 9)

Given that this scene is portrayed as the genesis of the book, it is worth analysing further. The “discovery” of this shell midden is said to “revive” all these feelings of anxious belonging that he had presumably experienced for much of his life, suggesting that this book is a kind of catharsis of these anxieties, or at least a presentation of them. It is clear that Read experiences the Aboriginal absence as a challenge to his belonging.
Therefore, Read’s belonging is inextricably related to Aboriginality. But this, Read concludes throughout the book, is a mistake; settler belonging should be articulated separately from Aboriginality. Read thus attempts to make Aboriginality a supplementary term in the explicit debate, which has the effect of appearing to bypass questions of appropriating indigenous belonging. But there is a telling contradiction in Read’s insistence that Aboriginality is supplementary to settler belonging which is that his work circles around Aboriginality continually. The following comments illustrates what he doesn’t want to say – which is that settler belonging is, in fact, supplementary to Aboriginality:

I’m not envious, nor do I wish to incorporate myself spiritually into Aboriginality. I want to feel I belong here while respecting Aboriginality, neither appropriating it nor being absorbed by it. (15)

I seek a solemn union with my country and my land but not through Aboriginality. (21)

Let’s intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. (204)

My sense of the native born has come – is coming. It comes through listening but with discernment; through thinking but not asserting; through good times with my Aboriginal friends but not through wanting to be the same as them. (223)

There is no sense, for all this insistence, on how settler belonging is to be achieved other than the guideline of not through Aboriginality. There is no sense either of how that might be possible (must we ignore Aboriginality entirely?) and why indeed that is necessary (the supplement threatens the “purity” of the object framed). What Read’s book has performed (despite its explicit claims to avoid it) is a recuperation of settler belonging via an identification with Aboriginality. This is achieved partly by means of an oblique manoeuvre which sees Aboriginality replaced with “depth”. The depth metaphor is an interesting one (used three times in the previous quotation) and is most commonly used to refer to the complexity and longevity of feeling. In the quotation it brings the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences of place together as if they were on par, as in not different, not differently conceived, not differently valued in social, politico-legal terms but different only in intensity of feeling. Hence Read’s “deepest personal and family memory” in “deep Aboriginal country” leads to the question: “do Aboriginals belong in some deeper way than the rest of
us?”. The possibility of Aboriginals belonging in a “deeper way than the rest of us” is rhetorically suspended by Read’s use of the word “deepest” to describe his own triumph of belonging.

Tom Griffiths also uses “deep time” as an alternative way of reading history and “place” in Australian settler culture and, like the work of Peter Read, his use of “deep time” echoes a desire to “erase the separation of belonging” (Goldie 12). An example of this appears in his article on “deep time”, “Travelling in Deep Time: La Longue Durée in Australian History”, where Griffiths asserts that “deep time” and “dream time” are not “as different as they might first appear”, which is perhaps the problem. He suggests that deep time “approaches that poetic relationship to the past captured in settler characterisations of Aboriginal cosmology as “the dreaming”. But we cannot be surprised that settler characterisations of dream time approximate settler understandings; what Griffiths’ comparison reveals is a methodology which privileges sameness rather than anything about “the dreamtime”.

In Belonging, the desire for origins and for belonging finds itself resolved only by being suspended by utopianism which signals an ending: “I think now that I am almost ready to belong” (223). There is very little sense that Read has in fact posed his non-belonging as a serious issue from the beginning, partly because of the book’s untheorised presentation of the substantive issues at stake, cast aside as what he sees as the “self denigration that portrays us as morally or spiritually deficient” and the “self defeating moral universe” of “well meaning confusion and doubt” (3). I would argue that part of the case with which Read comes to the conclusion that he is “almost ready to belong” as a “native born” is that his belonging is not really ever under any serious threat, nor are the ramifications of postcolonialism’s challenges to affective liberal humanist reassurances adequately explored. It hardly needs stating that there is no real threat to the belonging of Peter Read as white settler in terms of citizenship, access to land, access to full entitlement under the law, as is the case with the experience of indigenous people. The threat that he experiences, with an emotional force as if it were undermining his very rights of citizenship, is an ethical (rather than material) one (as Read himself admits), and one which Read seems to easily resolve by returning to an assurance of moral goodness – untroubled by questions of what weight this moral goodness might carry in a debate over differences. Read doesn’t have to negotiate a sense of belonging through a different set of cultural beliefs, he doesn’t have to deal with a legal system that is incommensurable with his own, he doesn’t have to negotiate his belonging
to a specific place (he is, at times, interested in the whole country), and he doesn't have to foreground his indebtedness to the experience of Aboriginal dispossession. It is no surprise, therefore, that the book ends with a feeling of success and a rehearsal of common aims: “belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership” (223). This is uncontroversial precisely in the sense that it doesn't really go anywhere—and it doesn't go anywhere because the author has not had the opportunity to experience the dispossession that he uses as an existential prop for articulating a sense of “belonging”. Read moves, perhaps unknowingly, into the very territory that he fears, that of colonising the marginalised position that he identifies. But here, the identification of this marginalised position (which invokes the shame of liberal humanist discourse both from within and without) has engendered an identification with this marginalised position. I would argue that this is a problem related to the way in which the writer occupies a panopticon view of “Australian” belonging which curtails a self-reflexive awareness of his own complicit position. I do not wish to suggest here that there is somehow a position outside of complicity awaiting the patient critic, but that complicity is, at this point in time, the most useful and, I would argue, the only starting point for white writing.

Unlike the work of Somerville, as I will demonstrate further on, Peter Read does not take on the substantive issues underlined by aspects of postcolonial theory. In the opening pages of Belonging, Read complains that “we writers criticise ourselves more trenchantly than our indigenous critics”(3), suggesting that the book is primarily a defence of settler belonging against other white writers who (situated as obstacles), have articulated a profound sense of unsettlement in their interrogations of white settler culture. Read seems to perceive the challenge to settler belonging as stemming from the work of other settlers (a select group at that), and not from critics who may challenge the very terms of the debate. Those settler critics whom Peter Read sets up as peddling “unsettlement” by presenting a morally denigrated settler subject, are those whose work operates largely within the same liberal humanist parameters as Read himself (including Ros Haynes, Judith Wright, Robert Dessaix). While these critics/writers have asked extremely important questions in regards to settler culture (as does Read), the debate has been radicalised (in an extension of their arguments) by postcolonial approaches which take on not only these questions of unsettlement, but the very methodologies and philosophies which bring those question to light in the first place. What I am suggesting therefore, is that part of the problem with Read’s approach
is that he begins his argument or defence of settler belonging by constructing a “straw man” of liberal humanist persuasions, when that is simply not where the most urgent challenges to settler culture are coming from. By locating a very select group of “we writers” as the most trenchant critics of settler culture, Read effectively closes down and sidesteps this avenue of debate, and therefore does not have to engage with questions as to how the very notion of belonging itself might operate within a Eurocentric framework which attempts to incorporate or erase disruptive elements. Furthermore, making “we writers” his Others supports the critical positioning of Aboriginality as a supplementary term in the explicit debate.

But what is “Aboriginality” in Belonging? While it remains rather vague (referring more to ‘true belonging” or depth than Indigenous people themselves), it seems that it is predominantly the Aboriginality heralded in the works of those critics (Read’s Others) whom Read perceives as denigrating settler belonging in favour of Aboriginal “ways of seeing”. Read has replaced their heroic Aboriginality with heroic settlerdom, rendering the battler/settler the new Indigene. Indeed, it would seem that the challenge for Read is to reinstate the settler in a position of moral goodness, something which he has been dispossessed of because of the work of these critics and because of the very fact of Aboriginal dispossession in Australia’s violent history. The solution is to assert the settler as the appropriate Object for the critics concern. This necessitates drawing the two (settler and indigene) together so closely that there is significantly less room for difference or detail, as in, “all of us are in place and out of place simultaneously” (20).

Similar concerns have been raised by Ken Gelder in his review of Belonging, where Gelder points out that the book continues a problem which began with Read’s previous work Returning to Nothing (1997) where Read draws a connection between settler dispossession and Aboriginal dispossession. Of Returning to Nothing, Gelder writes:

the non-Aboriginal or settler transformation of land into country, of a house into a home, is enabled only through the experience of dispossession. What is “shared” with Aboriginal people, then, is not just that “deep relationship” but the very experience of dispossession that enables that relationship: settler and Aboriginal people, through this strange mirror effect, have dispossession in common. Dispossession is in fact necessary in order for such belonging to occur, which explains why this book came first and Belonging came afterwards.⁹
Jane M. Jacobs also notes that *Belonging* has an “indigenising impulse” and, like Ken Gelder’s article afterwards, takes issue with Read’s depiction of the white settler’s (Margaret Johnson) comparison of her loss of her grazing property (through retirement) with that of Aboriginal dispossession. For Read, this comparison that the retiring white grazier makes with Aboriginal dispossession is proof of the depth of feelings of belonging that settlers experience. But for Gelder and Jacobs this “indigenising impulse” is suggestive of the “uncanny” senses of place within Australian postcolonial modernity. It is also possible to see the settler’s claim for comparison with Aboriginal dispossession to be indicative of the former’s ignorance about the latter. When the relationship between Aboriginal and settler belonging is presented as one of equivalence, it does not suggest to me that both are actually similar in tone, kind or intensity, but that the settler is in search of the indigene’s “privileged” (within settler culture) power to signify “true” belonging. Settler culture thereby attributes greater symbolic power to the dispossessed while maintaining for itself significant material power to determine the actual and symbolic status of both itself and its Other.

If both groups have dispossession in common, as Read wants to suggest, then what about possession? Read suggests that “[w]e cannot share the land with Aboriginals until they have their land to share with us ... belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership” (223). If Read transforms Aboriginal dispossession into a white sensibility, then in all likelihood he may then pose Aboriginal possession as a white sensibility as well. Indeed, this has been the problem for Native Title. Aboriginal possession of the land is only realised on the terms dictated by the fact of their dispossession in the first place; Native Title legislation and the recognition of Aboriginal custodianship is itself implicated in the colonial machinery in as much as Land Rights relies on the permission of settler culture, something which Read glosses over in his reference to Aboriginal custodians being granted “a simple declaration of ownership and joint custodianship of the parks and bush reserves of Gai-mariagal country” (223). Aboriginal custodianship and Native Title have never been a matter of a “simple declaration”, as Read’s own text demonstrates.

The politics and epistemic violence of settler belonging are more subtly explored in the work of Margaret Somerville. *Body/Landscape Journals* (1999) is a testament to the difficulties involved in the act of thinking through the profound and necessary anxieties of the settler position. The book is not in the service of a national drama in the same way that Read’s is (as shown by his interest in “we”, “the nation”,
“Australia”) and nor is it explicitly concerned with reassuring an anxious settler subject of his/her place. Perhaps this is why Somerville’s work has not received the same level of critical and public attention. But *Body/Landscape Journals* is also a difficult text and one that will not resolve itself into any neat category of genre or thought. It is multidimensional, containing many stories in different modes; journal writing, poetry, anecdotes, extensive quotations, the voices of Aboriginal women collaborators, feminist theory, history – and in its crossover of genres and disciplines it strikes a deliberately awkward pose. It is not simply ethnographic writing, nor is it an autobiography, or a work of fiction, history, philosophy; it is exploratory, it meanders, it travels, it appropriates and it takes risks in going into Aboriginal epistemologies and the archives of western knowledge. Somerville’s book builds on the questions posed by Read’s “we writers” (his Other critics), and she also takes issue with the very terms of the debate as conducted within Eurocentric and masculinist discourses.

*Body/Landscape Journals* is partly the result of Somerville’s years of work with Aboriginal women in the “weaving” of two collaborative texts, *The Sun Dancin’* (1984) and *Ingelba and the Five Matriarchs* (1990), where in differences between “white ways” of knowing/speaking/writing and the Aboriginal women’s ways of knowing/speaking/writing there is significant movement and slippages – spaces in which western modes of thought are challenged by its incapacity to know cultural difference. Somerville has argued that in her collaborative projects with Aboriginal women it has been critical for her to address the “issues of relationship and the process” of constructing the collaborative texts, issues which she feels that she “as a white woman, can address freely” (“Life” 95). Central to her role as collaborator was seeking the right to speak through heeding the politics of representation and the limitations posed (partly) by the epistemological tools with which she had to work. Consequently, Somerville’s work in *Body/Landscape Journals* is an account of working through the issues raised by her collaborative projects where she avoids the position of the “nonrepresenting intellectual” criticised by Spivak as an “absurdity” (288) in order to foreground the representational anxieties and epistemic violence in cross-cultural, collaborative work, as she says: “What stories does mine make space for and which ones does it displace?” (5). Her challenge is to write an “embodied presence” in the landscape of the stories and not surprisingly therefore, her work is concerned with situating the critic in the field of inquiry itself. It is perhaps useful to think of *Body/Landscape Journals* as caught in the act of hybridising, getting to know
difference through disrupting a traditional form of authoritative writing that is associated with the mastery of objects through disembodied strategies of engagement.

Somerville makes the issue of colonialism's (and postcolonialism's) "epistemic violence" central to her work though is, of course, no less implicated in it for this awareness of its critical importance. The concept of "epistemic violence" (described by Leela Gandhi as "authoritarian knowledge") is most usefully elaborated by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" on the recuperation of the native voice in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, and Spivak uses it to indicate that the knowledge we have of the subaltern is itself a product of an imperialistic relation of power that suspends the possibility of her ever speaking for herself within the episteme that locates her. Spivak's essay still represents a challenge to and a warning of the problems associated with writing the voice of the Other, especially relevant to those texts which foreground Aboriginal women's stories of place, such as the collaborations The Sun Dancin' (1984) by Margaret Somerville, Marie Dundas, May Mead, Janet Robinson and Maureen Sulter and Ingelba and the Five Matriarchs (1990) by Patsy Cohen and Somerville. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak criticises the Subaltern Studies Group (a group of Indian intellectuals concerned to write about Indian colonial history from the perspective of subaltern groups), for not attending to the "epistemic violence" of imperialism which renders the recuperation of the "real" native voice impossible, and indeed makes the project in fact complicit with this epistemic violence in its repetition of claims to intellectual transparency. Benita Parry, on the other hand, finds that Spivak's deconstructive practice mitigates against the "development of an anti-imperialist critique" because she attributes too much power to the coloniser in his/her construction of the colonised, native subject. According to Parry, Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak is not an accurate reflection of the material conditions of the subaltern but is instead indicative of Spivak's "deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard". More recently, Spivak has returned to this debate and emphasised the extent to which both positions are perhaps more empathetically situated in relation to each other; Parry's desire to hear the subaltern speak is not entirely refused by Spivak's interest in what this "voice" might actually be. Suffice it to say, any attempt to represent, speak of or with the voice of the Other must maintain a certain level of circumspection about the politics of representation, or indeed, the politics of the crisis of representation. One of the questions for settler postcolonial
writing which seeks to “undo its privilege as a loss” (to use Spivak’s phrase), is what kind of violence can be done to settler writing in order to make it prick up its ears and listen to alternative ways of seeing/being/writing/telling stories? A dialogue with Others that is attentive to positionality and the politics of listening.18 On the effects of collaborative writing on settler discourse, Stephen Muecke notes in *No Road*:

Something new begins when the answer the local gives is not forced into a universal language of rationality in order to have an understanding determined by this interrogator from a more powerful place.

Something new begins if such interrogators have to invest something of their subjectivity, if they have to negotiate, change, and learn to belong.19

Somerville and Muecke’s writing is changed by their self-reflexive (and self ironising) dialogue and writing with Aboriginal collaborators.20 Somerville depicts an act of giving up the position of rational, all-seeing, all-knowing humanist subject – who takes the world as an object that is available to be Known, open to the penetrating insights of the intellect. The giving up of this privileged position causes her some anxiety, as she goes on to describe getting sick, suffering from the dis-ease of not knowing where to stand if she doesn’t want to stand in this position of all-seeing, all-knowing intellectual after all.

Somerville documents how her writing praxis changed in dialogue with not only the stories that the Aboriginal women tell but also the challenges of writing oral stories. While cognisant of the dangers of effacing difference through the act of translation, Somerville nevertheless takes editorial control of the text and, in the example below, negotiates with Kathy, her interviewee, to allow her “orality” to mark the text. This causes considerable difficulties between Kathy and Somerville, as the following excerpt shows:

After our initial disagreement about the way I had transcribed her talking, Kathy listened to the tape again and agreed that I had more or less got her way of speaking right. She realised that this way of speaking is regarded as of less worth, even so far as to describe it as sounding “as an old black gin”. When that way of talking is translated into written form it is subject to all the power relations of written discourse. It is there, fixed, for all to see and perhaps to pour scorn on. For Kathy, the translation of her way of talking into written form symbolises a lifetime of striving to achieve acceptability in the face of shame and inadequacy about the way she is. On the other
hand, it is the way the women talk, both the individual sound of their voice and the characteristic rhythms, that is so important to me. (*The Sun Dancin'*: 15)

There is a difficulty here in the act of translation and transcription; for Somerville and Kathy’s perceptions of “voice” are opposed and both express the kind of epistemic violence that Spivak writes about. Somerville argues that Kathy should not be ashamed of her “broken English” because to her it “uniquely expressed her sense of the place” (*B/L/J*: 144). Somerville reads Kathy’s rejection of the transcript as an example of “the struggle to attain acceptance” by white hegemonic standards and, implicitly, as an example of the “pressure to conform” (*B/L/J*: 144). But Somerville’s sense that Kathy should allow her “broken English” into the text is also a pressure to conform to Somerville’s sense of the stylistic and cultural demands of a postcolonial archive which seeks to preserve the difference of Kathy’s voice. Disclosed here are two pressures to conform, two different strategies linked as vicissitudes of epistemic violence. Somerville, as scholar, critic, white writer, collaborator, is implicated in both. The difference in Somerville’s text, is that the questions that she raises (such as “[w]ho has power, who chooses what is spoken into existence?” (*B/L/J*: 63) brings these issues to the fore as part of the text’s starting point (and conclusion). Somerville’s text does not avoid this postcolonising aspect of collaborative texts, but it does alert the reader to the fact that the grounds for such work is not free of the politics of representation. This marks a substantial and critical difference between the strategies of Somerville and Read in their concern with settler belonging.

This insistence on the part of Somerville that Kathy’s text should appear in its “broken english” form is repeated in collaboration with Patsy Cohen. On the subject of Somerville’s editorial control and its effects on her collaborators, Michele Grossman has criticised Somerville’s work for what she sees as “elements of the editorial method employed … [which] generate the conceit that the textual authority of the editor is not a form of social power either seized, negotiated or assumed, but a displaced ‘gift’ conferred by virtue of abdication on the part of Aboriginal authors, whether by circumstance … or by choice.” While Grossman’s identification of a “ritual of abdication” in collaborative texts is certainly an important point to observe, I would like to add that Somerville does not appear to be as accepting of this “abdication” as Grossman suggests; the lack of interest that Somerville says Cohen had in the written form of the
book itself, is not seen by Somerville as a liberation but an even greater problem for Somerville’s concern with her own representational power in the text. Moreover, Cohen’s reticence to contribute to the written aspects of the text does not appear to be representative of all the Aboriginal women’s attitudes, as in “[e]very person I worked with in this community took a different position with regard to the important question of orality, language use and representation” (B/LJ:142). The “abdication” that Grossman suggests inhabits the text is presented more in terms of Patsy and Kathy’s rejection of Aboriginal (oral) English (which Patsy disparagingly describes as “wandering round and round”, [“Life”:102]), linked with a preference for a “written”, linear style English. I have already discussed this as an expression of epistemic violence, both colonial and postcolonial. Grossman goes on to suggest that in Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs “it is Cohen herself who is ultimately produced by Somerville’s editing as a ‘beautiful object’ to be held in the hands of white readers” (164). A similar criticism is levelled at the Subaltern Studies Group by Spivak (in regards to the Subaltern as an object of their own discursive intervention) and a similar criticism is levelled at Spivak by Parry and vice versa – each questioning the authority of the critic to speak on behalf of and create the Object/Subaltern. Each critical perspective is (and Spivak is of course implicated in this) marked by a kind of “authoritarian knowledge” which recognises itself only in the Other’s production values, and each goes on speaking about the subaltern regardless of whether she/he is silent or self-representing. What marks each of these arguments is, implicitly, the sense that the Critic is able to locate the Other either in the terms of the argument itself, or in the “real world” in which the Other is extra-textually located. In regards to the relationship between Grossman, Cohen and Somerville, Grossman suggests: “if we want to locate Patsy Cohen through her own words and choices as a textual subject, we will have to look and to read elsewhere” (164). I wonder whether or not such a desire for Cohen to be “elsewhere” isn’t also expressed by Somerville’s work in B/LJ and by Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs itself, in the sense that the text represents the failure to present Cohen as a full, textual subject; after all, it is a woven (fabricated), collaborative, cross-cultural text containing a multitude of differences which renders the textual agency of any of its collaborators (including Somerville) suspect, or at least dependant upon multiple layers of culturally differentiated meaning which cannot be sufficiently separated; in other words, it is a product of epistemic violence. In expressing the desire for Cohen to be “elsewhere”, Grossman is caught in the same bind
as the white editor/collaborator – wanting to assert the ineluctable difference of Cohen from the reading/writing strategy that also locates her textually. (I would suggest that the problem that Grossman locates is indeed the problem of the text, as the text itself seems to suggest.) But as Grossman points out, the editorial conceits that Somerville’s text present for inspection can never be a comprehensive critique of the text in advance, but then nor can they be a comprehensive account of the status of its object/subject’s textual agency either. I do not want to position the text as either having the last word or the first word on the textual agency of Patsy Cohen, but I do wish to point out that the kinds of issues that the text raises (both implicitly in Ingelha and explicitly but belatedly in Body/Landscape Journals) are problems of epistemic violence more generally – problems which effect, nay characterise, cross-cultural analyses in particular (though not exclusively). Spivak warns the Subaltern studies group and those who endeavour to liberate the Other’s voice that it is necessary to foreground the fact that such projects are implicated in what they seek to subvert. Therefore, the project must “rewrit[e] its own conditions of impossibility as the conditions of its possibility” (Spivak; 1985: 285) by foregrounding the limitations, failures, and problems in the act of writing and representing the “Other”. It seems to me that this is precisely what Somerville’s work suggests, both in terms of her collaborative work and in terms of her own sense of belonging with and through Aboriginal women’s stories of place.

And it is the limitations of “place” and the desire for an “embodied presence in the landscape” that locates Somerville’s impossible position. In pursuit of an embodied presence in the landscape, Somerville traces the work of Paul Carter, Elspeth Probyn, Liz Grosz, Liz Ferrier, Victor Turner and Trinh T Minh ha (mainly), in order to gesture towards a way out of what she describes as the “abyss of Western dualistic thinking predicated on separation rather than connection” (B/LJ: 12). She sees the Aboriginal women’s stories of place expressing their belonging and “body/place connection” which she covets: “I sensed the body and body/place connection always already there in the stories but didn’t know how to do it for me” (B/LJ: 13). Somerville suggests that it is her fragmented journal writing (which makes up the bulk of Body/Landscape Journals) which constitutes a performance of her body/place connection. It is the act of storying the storytelling (the collaborations) which becomes an act of belonging, as she writes: “[t]hrough listening, telling and writing the stories of Forky Mountain, I belonged to Forky Mountain in this sharing of the breath” (B/LJ: 130). Again, this claim to belong is disrupted by
Somerville’s sense of how this would be perceived “from the outside” (which includes herself as critic) as a problem “articulated as one of crossing boundaries” (B/LJ: 130). One solution to this problem (suggested by the publisher it seems), is to remove her voice from the text (The Sun Dancin’) entirely, but Somerville rejects this as a strategy because it obscures the production of the text; it is the way that this text is produced which is of importance to how it means. Moreover, removing Somerville’s voice from the text would render her a transparent observer, disembodied from the text and landscape which she is so clearly seeking to connect with. This disembodied voice (which she associates with academic writing and a masculinist tradition) is one of the major impediments to the kinds of (implicitly feminised) connectedness that Somerville wishes to explore.

Not unproblematically, Somerville sees her own problematics of belonging being partially restored by her proximity to Aboriginal women’s stories of place: “[w]as there a possibility of belonging through and with Aboriginal women’s stories of place?” (B/LJ: 8) The risk of appropriation is flagged here, as it is elsewhere. Somerville seems anxious to avoid the arrogance of claiming to get everything right, and also foregrounds those aspects of her text that invite criticism of its post-colonising aspects. Small consolation perhaps, but a significant departure from strategies like that employed by Peter Read (and to a similar extent Tom Griffiths) who attempt to settle differences by broad strokes of knowing. These leaps of positive faith appear to avoid the kind of “paralysis” which theorising has often been accused of inducing.

Postcolonial/feminism23 (I note the risk in naming such a thing) consists of many moments where there seems to be a kind of “paralysis” of theory (which Peter Read locates as a problem for settler culture at large), where one cannot say a definitive yes or a definitive no to the situation at hand, where the theoretical and political problems associated with speaking about cultural difference seem to outweigh the benefits of speaking at all. But the “paralysis” doesn’t ever seem to eventuate – there are no records of writers not writing or speaking for fear of colonising/appropriating. It seems that critics often confuse “paralysis” with dialogue, like that which occurs between postcolonialism and feminism: a continual re-negotiation of terms, a continual yes–no, a continued debate, and perhaps a willingness to give up on the idea of there being a happy synthesis in the long run, as Ien Ang24 has suggested. One of the most useful concepts that postcolonial/feminism includes is taking discursive and cultural limitation seriously – and that continues to be one of the most important issues facing projects such as Somerville’s, written
as they are in the wake of critiques like that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, where she challenges western feminists to rethink analytical strategies to avoid the “use of women as a group, as a stable category of analysis .... [which] assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalizable notion of their subordination ... bypassing social class and ethnic boundaries”. Such a challenge is taken up in Somerville’s accounts of her work, where projects are couched in terms of the potential for connection and disconnections between multiple voices which may or may not privilege “gender” as the structuring category for thought and identity. I raise this partly in response to criticism of Somerville’s work by Gillian Whitlock who misreads Somerville’s project and confuses Somerville’s starting point with her conclusion. Whitlock has argued that Somerville’s “use of feminist methodology here [in Ingelba] constructs a bridge which takes [her] home free, across the chasm of race and colonial relations” (165), an argument which echoes the concerns raised by Mohanty and Spivak vis-à-vis western feminism. It is a valid and pressing concern, but does not apply to Somerville’s project as simply as Whitlock suggests. Somerville does not seek to bridge differences, but maintain them where possible in the text’s multiple voices and “overlaying of multiple ways of being” (B/LJ: 109). To argue that the text “elide[s] gender and race” (165) as Whitlock does, is to mistake Somerville’s conclusions with her point of departure (as a western feminist this is part of the tradition that Somerville writes out of). For instance, in the article from which Whitlock quotes, Somerville details her initial reluctance to start the collaborative project with Patsy Cohen because she could not use gender as a structuring principle on the grounds that “for these women, gender was not a structuring category of thought” (“Life”: 108). Instead, Somerville and Cohen decided to use Cohen’s concepts of identity, kinship and place as structuring categories for the book. Nevertheless, Somerville herself locates her own voice within feminist terms, as in, “I have aligned myself with the female voice” (“Life”: 108). It is not surprising given the cultural differences between these women that they should identify (textually as well as contextually) with/through different structuring categories. Whitlock’s mistake is to assume that because Somerville identifies in this way, then questions of race and colonial relations are then elided in favour of gender in the text as well; such a reading elides the multiplicity of voice and centrality of other concepts of kinship, place and identity that run throughout the book. Somerville suggests that given that Cohen and she approached the text from different perspectives, connections and disconnections would themselves be foregrounded, as in “[o]ur two basic
speaking positions, that of reclaiming the female and that of speaking from outside fixed gender categories, appear to be in some fundamental sense contradictory. They can however, through the use of multiple voices be located in the one text” (“Life”: 109). Rather than eliding race and gender, Ingelha and the Five Matriarchs attempts to display differently articulated and valued categories of thought for the collaborators. Rendering her own voice into the text in this way, Somerville had to depart from the “traditional” model of the life history writer and “abandoned” (“Life”: 109) the figure of the ghost writer because such a figure allows the illusion that the white editor/writer and collaborator does not complicate the production of the text.

The fascination with position (and discursive limitation) in Somerville’s text leads to a kind of strategy for collaboration that Somerville sees as linking both herself to the Aboriginal women’s stories of place, and herself and the land itself. She belongs with the land (as Other) only through strategies of thinking which address cultural difference. Somerville theorises the methodology in the following list of ingredients with which to approach collaboration (and implicitly belonging). Those strategies include: “story-telling”; “Laughing at, and in our stories, and “making it good for ourselves to go forward”; “opening up a symbolic space of exchange”; “devising new movements between these intervals of difference”; “moving to the limit-edge of self, towards the other, with attitude, empathy and imagination”; “imagining what it might be like to experience, to see the world as other”; and “empathy, enabled by imagination, to participate fully in the feelings and ideas of others” (B/LJ: 220–221). This is a useful starting point for a consideration of the importance of Body/Landscape Journals and texts like it, texts which anxiously position themselves in terms of theoretical and personal risk posed by the necessity of cross-cultural engagements articulated as epistemic violence trying to know itself. This epistemic violence (which inhabits all critical manoeuvre including this one), is an issue which is not resolved by seeking to remove questions of Aboriginality from issues effecting settler discourse, nor by disrupting and hybridising all claims to know (as I have argued in relation to Somerville’s text). As we see in Somerville’s work, epistemic violence, as a feature of discourse itself, is implicated even in the ways that it is displayed! Consequently, “belonging”, as a sense, sentiment or legal/ethical principle which is imbricated within the very signification of indigeneity, is implicated in this epistemic violence as well; settler belonging is an expression of epistemic violence.
Peter Read's attempt not to write as the Other and Somerville's attempt to write with the Other represent two different strategies of white writing as it approaches questions of settler identity and belonging. While Aboriginality in both texts is critical to these elaborations, it is also necessarily subject to (and a subject of) the networks of power inherent in the operations of settler discourse. Both writers position settler discourse as potentially appropriative, and to differing degrees both are marked by the issues of epistemic violence. The effectiveness with which both texts deal with the questions raised by these issues depends on their use of writing strategies which place the writer's subject position under question. While Read makes a claim for non-appropriation of Aboriginality, his text does end up being appropriative. This is partly because he identifies the power of Aboriginal stories of dispossession, Aboriginal histories and stories of place as being partly responsible for his "weakened" sense of "moral belonging". That which he identifies as being powerful is therefore identified with as the source of his potential strength. While Somerville makes the same kinds of statements, as in "[w]as there a possibility of belonging through and with Aboriginal women's stories of place?" (B/LJ: 8) she is also more interested in how her writing position informs these appropriations and, furthermore, how forms of knowledge and knowledge production produce "belonging" itself. This does not mean that Somerville steps outside the problems of epistemic violence (impossible given that she intends to investigate questions of settler belonging), but that her writing makes epistemic violence a condition of her point of departure.

Notes
1 I would like to thank Brian Rapsey, Elizabeth McMahon and Michele Grossman for comments on earlier drafts of this article.
5 This was also argued in Somerville's 1991 article on writing life stories. "Before I came to do life story research I had spent several years living with Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory where the prior question emerged for me of
my identity in the Australian landscape. I felt alienated from the desert landscape which was so much a part of these women’s lives, and came to believe that I could only achieve a sense of belonging through my relationship with Aboriginal women. This was not through exploiting their identity or belonging, but through an interaction that was essential to us both.” Margaret Somerville, “Life (Hi)story writing: the relationship between talk and text” in Hecate 17: 1 (May 1991): 95–109, p. 97. Further references to this article cited parenthetically in the text, abbreviated to “Life”.


12 Belonging has been shortlisted for numerous literary awards, and the NSW Premier’s Community and Regional History Prize 2001. Peter Read has been invited to speak at launches, festivals, and discussions of the issues addressed in the book, as well as having its issues picked up by writers for the Sydney Morning Herald.


16 Parry, ibid.

17 Spivak has more recently commented that, “I have no objection to conscientious ethnography, although I am forewarned by its relationship to the history of the discipline of anthropology. But my particular word to Parry is that her efforts (to give voice to the native) as well as mine (to give warning of the attendant problem) are judged by the strange margins of which Friday with his withholding slate is only a fictive mark.” The Friday to which Spivak here refers, is from J M Coetzee’s Foe, and refers to the silence of this character which Spivak and others have interpreted as emblematic of the “wholly

For a discussion of the importance of the politics of listening see “Questions of Multi-Culturalism: Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak” Hecate 12:1-2 (1986): 136-142. reproduced in The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, (Edited by Sara Harasym), London: Routledge, 1990, 59-66. There Spivak remarks that in listening to and speaking with the Other, there has to be a persistent critique of what one is up to, so that it doesn’t get bogged down in this homogenization; constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on. I think as long as one remains aware that it is a very problematic field, there is some hope” (63).

Stephen Muecke, No Road (Bitumen all the way), Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987, 184-185.


In a forthcoming interview with Somerville, the question of collaborative writing comes up in relation to her work with Patsy Cohen. Somerville says that, “I did everything in my power, apart from refusing to do the work, to persuade her to take a more active role in the writing process but Patsy had limited writing ability and so she preferred to talk her story”. Probyn, forthcoming.

I have used the term “postcolonial/feminism” to describe works like Somerville’s which address issues relevant to both postcolonialism and feminism, and like that text itself, the phrase does not have to resolve itself into a synthesis of issues but is more usefully thought of as keeping them in a productive tension.

On the subject of feminism’s universalising tendencies, Ien Ang argues that, “we can talk with each other, we can enter into dialogue – there is nothing wrong with learning about the other’s point of view – provided only that we do not impose a premature sense of unity as the desired outcome of such an exchange.” “I’m a feminist but … 'Other' women and postnational feminism” in Transitions: New Australian Feminisms, (Edited by Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle), St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995, 57-73, 64-65.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial

27 Gillian Whitlock argues that, “Margaret Somerville characterises her role as a “white ghost” in the production of *Ingelha and the Five Black Matriarchs*” (164). In the article from which Whitlock quotes (“Life”), Somerville actually states the opposite and seeks to “abandon” such a fiction with the view to positioning her voice within the text.

28 Read writes: “If anything my sense of moral belonging has been weakened by so many years of painful interview and conversation” (*Belonging*: 19).
THE LIGHT GREEN WAVES

The light green waves of the grasses begin.
On the left,
    above the shoulder of the field,
under a weighted sky
Someone
parallel to me
moving and not moving
to my rhythm –
black and sharp,
feet cut off by the horizon,
like an amateur snapshot
printed on hard paper.
And then the forest begins.

My life,
    the red lips,
    wells to my lips.

_Translated from Russian by Peter Porter with the author._
I heard them talking
or perhaps pursing their lips
like snapdragons,
whispering.

I wonder what it would be like
to lay her and her and her jaw
upon my open palm,
one after another, each one.

I pass fish in the market.
their naked bodies float behind a window,
slanted sun bathers
on a bed of ice. Fin to fin.

I think of them
in the bottom of the boat,
twitching, the sun still twinkling
on their silver skin, their gasping

making them look
as if they were breathing,
as if they were talking,
as if no words even half uttered

could quite explain
their thoughts,
their pending doom,
the wilting vacancy upon their lips.
You drive just like an ex-uncle of mine, parking well in a tight spot. Early in the morning I practise my yoga. *Sukhasana* is easy, *Bakasana* is not.

After lunch you embraced me a little longer than the others, and last month you sent me a note that was too familiar. My favourite pose is *Savasana*, the corpse position.

The Chicken Palace has become *Super Stock Clearance of Sweets*, I buy a bag of snifters and force myself to think about you. The sickly honeysuckle hangs over the fence in claustrophobic festoons. Each day I pass Dry Riser Inlet, the metal fixture on my way to work.

I dream we are making labels together, that we will stick on everyone’s door. We live like cosy neighbours in a New York sit-com style apartment block. *That will never happen,* I think in capital letters when I wake up.
You ring, you send me tiny silk flowers in hard hot colours, funny ha ha cards and a packet of your favourite muesli bars. Each day I have to pass Dry Riser Inlet, the safe metal fixture on my way to work.

Over winter I leave the phone off its hook, lock the door and shut the windows. My arthritis makes it difficult to do *Halasana* (legs over the head).

Someone says, *your friend left town*. There is a rumour that you are teaching English in Hiroshima. Standing at the stainless steel sinkbench, I roll the rice in a banana leaf and secure it with a sharp toothpick. Tomorrow I will change my route to work.
Writing to Katharine Susannah Prichard in 1946, Miles Franklin spoke of her ambition to contribute to the building of a “gregarious culture”. She was expressing something of the frustration she had felt since returning to Australia in 1932 that the “independent and inclusive culture” she dreamed of was slow in materialising. In reading for this review, I am struck by the powerful irony that while the collective impression I have is of the existence of that mature, literate culture that Franklin yearned for, the books are published at a time when many Australians feel disenfranchised by a conservative, reformist government that leads Australians further from social democracy to ideological sites where debate is discouraged and ideas die or atrophy in reactionary talk loaded with what Sylvia Lawson, in *How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia*, calls “punitive admonition”. The culture that reveals itself in this year’s non-fiction is capable of celebrating a diversity of issues and views expressed in a range of cultural forms: pre-eminently there are several fine collections of essays which provide vehicles for Australian intellectuals to speak on the compelling issues of the day, from the Republican debate to land rights; globalisation, to the aftermath of September 11. There are books on poets, on women playwrights from the Great War to the sixties, and on satire in the novels of Christina Stead, on the Melbourne artist, Howard Arkley and on Picasso and Matisse, on music, and arts policy; there are diaries, letters, biographies and autobiographies, memoirs and hybrids, incorporating various modes of writing; there are histories of: the contradictions in Australian history, the First Wave Feminists, Sydney’s razor gangs in the 1920s and ’30s, the ascetic, St Antony in Egypt in the third and fourth century AD, the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, Shakespeare on the Australian stage and the pantomime in Australia, the Japanese in Australia, a Japanese war bride, Gallipoli, bunyips and Australia’s “folklore of fear”, death and dying in Australia, the activities of secret police in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, in France during the Revolution, in tsarist and
communist Russia, and in Germany; there is journalism: notably, Miles Franklin’s unpublished journalism, some of Chris Masters’ stories that did not go to air, and “Banjo” Paterson’s despatches from the Boer War; and there are travel books by David Dale, speculating on his perfect journey, and by Christopher Kremmer who floats through Afghanistan and near environs in the wild east looking for carpets, and books about the murder of Sister Irene McCormack in Peru, and about Donald Groom, the Quaker Peace Worker. There are new editions of previously published works: Monash’s letters; Clive James’ autobiographies; John Pilger’s The New Rulers of the World (2002) is spun out of his television film of the same name and includes original and expanded versions of recent essays; arguing for a “democracy” of music, Andrew Ford’s Undue Noise (2002) brings together a range of material, much of which had been published in 24 Hours; and John Hilary Martin has brought together into People of the Dawn (2001), selections from W. E. Stanner’s earlier work on Australian Aboriginal communities.

Indicative of what I am suggesting about the scope, imaginative reach and engagement of this year’s non-fiction is Sylvia Lawson’s, book of talk and stories, How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia (2002). Rigorously interrogating contemporary Australian society, “listening to voices from the cultural margins [and] the metropolitan centre”, she sources her arguments from Australia, Paris, West Papua, Britain and Indonesia. Using the techniques of fiction, memoir, history and essay, she is exploring the absences, silences and amnesia she finds and, in the process, hears voices arguing incessantly about this increasingly “conflicted, tantalising, difficult” place. How Australia works out its relations with its near northern neighbours and its indigenous people, she argues, has as much to do with national identity as Anzac Day, the Melbourne Cup or the AFL. It is a book of conversations, and while Lawson’s conversations are intimately with de Beauvoir, with the measured and politicised voice of Dorothy Green and the more flamboyant, personalised voice of Dorothy Hewett, the book also participates in conversations with numerous recent books and essays discussing Australia’s republic, reconciliation, Australia’s role in the refugee crisis, on creating a just society, Australian feminism; globalization, and with reading and writing, ways of seeing and angles of vision.

In his Boyer Lectures, David Malouf wonders if it is not time for Australia to stop asking what others – our Asian neighbours, the Americans and the British – “think of us”, and try more adventurous lives, free of watchers. This choice, cited by the editors of Republics of Ideas: Republicanism Culture Visual Arts (2001), and resonating ironically with the
Australian Government’s recent international posturing, is as fundamental to this collection of essays as it is to those brought together by Helen Irving, in *Unity and Diversity: A National Conversation* (2001), and *The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Ideas for the Future of a Civil Society* (2001); essays that flow out of that critical and emotional moment in national definition when the nation was considering the possibilities of a republic, contemplating a century of federalism, and ticking over into a new millennium.

Canvassing the likelihood of an Australian republic in the new century in the face of a voracious globalisation that problematises the idea of the nation state, *Republics of Ideas* looks for a Republicanism unshackled from its various colonial yokes, old and more recent, able to face the complexity of its recent history and, as eloquently and forcefully put by Larissa Behrendt, able to recognise the rights of its indigenous inhabitants. No less than Sylvia Lawson, the editors are raising questions about the relevance of some of the “symbols, icons and narratives of our nation and its cultural life”. What do “nation”/“culture”/“identity” mean in a globalised world, asks Mary Kalantzis. While, as far as the referendum is concerned, the consensus of the collection seems to be that, even recognising the Prime Minister’s “intransigence ... and manipulation of the terms of the referendum”, it is as well that it was defeated: Australia was not ready for it. Humphrey McQueen argues that a “No”-vote was necessary to enable the country to move ahead, since the minimalist model put up by the Republican forces was little more than a vote to continue a nineteenth-century political system. It was a great opportunity lost by the failure or inability of the citizenry to control public ideas.

Rarely far from the surface in discussions of the kind of Australia we are building for the future is consideration of the populist phenomenon embodied in Pauline Hanson and One Nation, and the eruption they caused in Australian politics in their brief stardom. Hanson surfaces in four of the essays in *Republics of Ideas* and while it is often in the context of right wing conservative racism, it is most accurately to be seen as a reactionary force, enlisting that cross-section of Australians who were concerned about the rate of social change in Australian society, and about economic hardship. This argument is most tellingly taken up by Belinda Probert and Rick Farley in their Barton Lectures, collected in *Unity and Diversity* (2001) in which they probe the social consequences of the rapidly accelerating process of change. Probert tackles it through the lens of class, and Farley through a latter-day analysis of the traditional city/bush dichotomy. They find an accelerating displacement of the middle class who still have jobs and work hard, but see themselves slipping down the economic slippery
pole. This slippage makes room for One Nation and the politics of grievance and blame that takes root in the rotten soil of frustration, bitterness and anger; and their supporters want revenge.

Race, reconciliation and the need to recognise and celebrate the different forms of diversity and sources of unity in class, gender, ethnicity and cultural and constitutional relations that shape Australian society permeate all the Barton Lectures in this collection. Mary Kalantzis laments that the Centenary of Federation was not adequately prepared for and thus continued a century of forgetting, of hiding, of obstruction, and Lydia Miller pointedly asks, "If those who constitute the state are not prepared to act in a manner that enfranchises the polity, why should Aborigines as a polity entrust their autonomy to such a dangerous institution?" In the process of outlining the neglect and denial by generations of governments, she sees no validity in a politically opportunist, expedient government that ignores the Reconciliation document which envisioned a "united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all".

As they were designed to do, the "Bartons" take their place in national conversations that must no longer be put off. No less than Unity and Diversity, The Alfred Deakin Lectures, drawn from seventeen different sessions and more than fifty speakers, and ranging widely through the natural and social sciences – from astronomy, to the Human Genome Project; sport, to speculations about the brain of the future; conservation, to architecture and town planning and the future geographic and social reality of the country – are also speculating about Australia's future. Furthermore, picking up themes from the earlier books in this review, the powerful imperative is that any image of the future must include consideration of Australia's role in the Asia-Pacific and its attitude to indigenous people, refugees, and multiculturalism in practice; and it must include consideration of the consequences of globalisation and a "networked world".

Bringing together earlier work and expanded versions of some recent essays on power and its abuses, John Pilger's The New Rulers of the World (2001) participates centrally in the conversations that I am suggesting link the above books. In Pilger's bleak view, the new Rulers – powerful governments and agencies controlled by the US, promoted and promulgated by transnational media corporations, dominate and transcribe the current and future world, ever widening, not reducing, the divide between the rich and the poor. Pilger explores this "new" order, tellingly exposing it as the "old" imperialism gentrified by the term of globalisation.
Chapters focus on the systematic carve up of Indonesia since the 1960s; on the “vindicatory” bombing of Afghanistan which has devastated the landscape but not run al Qa’ida to ground; on the Iraqi threat and the influence on the Bush administration of the right-wing dominated “Wolfowitz ['total war'] cabal”; and, against the background of the celebration of the Sydney Olympics, on the continuing subjugation of the Aboriginal people. We know the story, Pilger says: recognition of an Aboriginal history in the history of this country is to locate dispossession, massacre and resistance beside a white history of heroic endeavour and progress in the face of a resistant environment. But to promote this inclusive history is to risk being accused – in one of those phrases that seeks to close off debate and diminish the subject – of fostering a “black armband view” of history.

In a much less polemical way, stories of the dispossessed and stolen, their voices silent or muted, are kept alive in *Storykeepers* (2001). Edited by Marion Halligan, this superb collection brings together eighteen well-known Australian writers, each of whom was asked to respond to the work of a dead writer. In many cases these, too, are conversations between writers and books, and contributions by Carmel Bird, Lucy Frost, Henry Reynolds, Bill Gammage, Beverly Farmer, Cassandra Pybus, and Alexis Wright (evoking her grandmother, Granny Ah Kup), provide a spine to the collection, releasing voices or stories of Australia’s Aboriginal past and continuing present into an extended conversation that knits/knots the collection together. Elsewhere in the collection, Delia Falconer, perhaps, takes her brief most literally and builds a moving story around an imagined meeting between the aging master, Kenneth Slessor, and a tentative acolyte who has tracked him down at his favourite haunt. Elizabeth Jolley responds to Peter Cowan, Tom Griffiths to Francis Ratcliff’s *Flying Fox* and *Drifting Sand*, Gary Crew reacts bemusedly to finding similar concerns to his own in Ernest Favenc, and Greg Dening reads Bligh’s journal. Each of the contributors is seen “rummag[ing] in [the] ragbag of what it is to write in Australia”; and considering what events we take from our past, the stories this past offers up.

In a different, but related way, the fifteen contributors to *Words for Country* (2002), exploring language and landscapes, are pondering why certain stories become attached to or grow out of particular places and are unpacking some of the cultural “freight” carried by “landscape”. It is impossible, of course, as we turn into the new millennium, to think of landscape and language in Australia without considering the politics of land rights and original inhabitants whose languages are embedded in
landscape speaking for it, to it, and out of it. Not surprisingly, several of the contributors ask whose place it is; who belongs in it and can speak for it. For Rebe Taylor, writing of her place, “land, not blood, secretes memory”.

Inevitably, *Storykeepers* and *Words for Country* are about reading writing and, as Dening puts it in his elegant piece in *Storykeepers*, “reading to write”. Fortunately, one of the choruses of *The Writer’s Reader* (ed. Brenda Walker, 2002), is the injunction to budding writers to read. As Nigel Krauth says: “Any student of creative writing who does not read – no matter in what genre – is not committed to the task.” While Peter Bishop’s anonymous American poet pleads: “Read! Read ... until your head is bursting with words and images and rhythms.” And “day dream”, argues Michael Meehan, who finds the notion of a willy-willy – a force-field of “power, rhythms and energies” – useful as an aid to describe what plotting in the contemporary novel might be like. Rather than dwelling with those certainties that can deliver “instructions: lessons, guidelines, wisdom and sometimes reassurance”, he wants an author speaking “from the heart of the whirlwind”, dealing, as Glenda Adams puts it, following Barthelme, with the “not known”.

This is a writing guide and not a self-help manual: just as David Dale doesn’t instruct readers how to travel in *The Perfect Journey* (2001), but notes a number of the variables, *The Writer’s Reader* does not presume to tell readers how to write, but merely wants to provide a “general guidance and recognition” and exposure to “particular techniques”. It has an inbuilt understanding of the vagaries of the imagination and the slipperiness of language; of the paradox of the profound urge to make writing and the fragile instability of the process. Accordingly, the book takes as its subjects, those “engaging” but “intransigent” elements of writing: the relationship between the work and the self; structure; issues of originality and authenticity, character, location or place, narrators and the consequences of point of view.

In many cases, Walker’s contributors are taking the reader into their confidence. Chris Masters’ *Not for Publication* (2002), while it is a kind of manifesto about why he is a journalist, is also a sharing of insights into how he practices his craft. His advice to anyone wanting to follow is to acquire balance. This is more than fairness, he explains, it is to find ways of accommodating the “contradictory elements” of passion and objectivity. And it is this “balance” which seems to have been a part of that vital education that “Banjo” Paterson acquired in his brief spell as a correspondent at the Boer War, from November 1899 to July 1900 (R. W.
F. Drooglever, ed. *From the Front. A. B. ("Banjo") Paterson’s Dispatches from the Boer War, 2000*). For, having gone thrilled at the prospect of an adventurous war and being crudely contemptuous of anyone not white or British – that is, thinking as a regular colonialist – we notice a gradual disenchantment with the war and a growing sympathy for the Boer. At the same time he began also to make clear distinctions between “the smart and wide awake, ... hard faced Australians” and the “heavy, vacant ... look” of the British, pre-empting Bean in seeing in the Australians, versions of a new breed. And, if one of Paterson’s great frustrations was that his dispatches were transported by sea mail and, for his contemporary audience, were robbed of the impact and immediacy of the telegraphic report received through Reuters, in retrospect, reading these letters as a kind of continuous narrative, the digressions and diversions which Paterson introduced to compensate for the delays are a feature. That is, it becomes a tale told with panache.

Turning occasionally for anecdote and light relief to Paterson’s *Happy Dispatches* (1934) and poems arising out of the experience, and writing excellent clarifying and amplifying linking passages, Drooglever gives readers a good view of the war from Paterson’s perspective. Once Paterson settled to the task – the editor suggests that his initial reports were as “formal as a starched collar” – and had thrown off, or found ways of evading the shackles of self-discipline and the literary straitjacket of simply reporting the facts, he finds a lively, dramatic and engaging style with ample room for his dry Australian wit.

In a year which has seen the passing of the last of the Gallipoli soldiers, attention has often been on Australians at war and, for anyone interested in the Great War battles involving the Australians in Gallipoli and in France the *War Letters of General Monash* (ed. Tony Macdougall, 2002; a new edition of the 1934 collection of his letters to his wife,) are indispensable reading.1 Notable for their detachment and objectivity, candour and intellectual rigour, we don’t look here for affectionate exchanges between husband and wife but, knowing his audience and perhaps with one eye on posterity, Monash sends her extraordinarily detailed accounts of his war work. He is a man absolutely engaged with the task in hand and the letters reveal his amazing capacity for, and attention to, detail. Nowhere is his style better understood than in the series of letters, from 12 to 19 December 1915, dealing with the retreat from Gallipoli. Monash was also, however, conscious of the very broadest perspectives of the war: an ability to see the big picture was one of his great strengths. So that his fury over the horrendous losses and disregard for the welfare of the men in the “hair-
brained ventures” embarked upon at Bullecourt and Paschendaele, is to be understood in the context of the deliberations of the War Cabinet and Hughes’ inability to come to England to represent Australian interests.

For Les Carlyon (Gallipoli, 2001), refuting C. E. W. Bean’s jaundiced comments about Monash’s inappropriateness to command the Australian Corps, Monash was “the greatest military commander Australia has produced”. Leisurably and expansive, this latest Gallipoli, following Masefield, Moorehead, Robert Rhodes James and Hickey, is for the general reader. Told in the vernacular – “Braithwaite fussed over etiquette like a viceroy’s butler”, and occasionally sounding like a VB ad.: “Death was there when you rolled a smoke or told a joke or carted water” – there is the sense that we have read it all before; but it’s a great read. The occasional use of the second person is effective, enabling Carlyon to collapse time and the distance between teller and reader, and to introduce readers intimately and expansively to the forbidding landscape of the peninsula which defeated the men as surely as the enemy. It is as romantic (if not as apologetic) in its way as Masefield’s and as urbanealy written as Moorehead’s; it is comprehensive in its treatment of all battle zones on the peninsula; it releases many voices into the text, some of them new; and the cameos of the principle figures, invariably evoking their inner life and foibles, are a feature of the book. Of the hapless Stopford, he writes: “He could not lift his briefcase into the train when he left Victoria Station for the Dardanelles ... [If his] fire had ever burned, [it] had gone out.” And he gets the complex role and influence of Ashmead Bartlett right, I sense.

What Paterson and Monash would have made of a poet like John Forbes is a matter for conjecture but they might have enjoyed a good yarn over the intricacies of warfare, for war was among what Peter Porter calls Forbes’ “eclectic marginalia”. Seeing poetry as a vocation in a way completely foreign to Paterson, John Forbes died young and is sadly missed from the Australian poetry scene. Edited by Ken Bolton, Homage to John Forbes (2002) collects into one volume essays, poems, interviews and letters by numerous hands in an attempt to illuminate the man and his work. Although they are written out of love and affection for Forbes and are underpinned by a profound sense of loss, most of the contributors are able to see his blemishes as well as his beauties. So Ken Bolton, who sees Forbes as “our token, our talisman, our mascot, our one who goes before”, can also write of his obsessiveness, his difficult and testy nature, his vulnerable ego, quirks and damaging weaknesses which, as age and illness bit, became more exaggerated.
Like Bolton’s essay, others are anecdotal, mixing memories and discussions of the poetry. In the process, they provide a kind of narrative of Forbes, the poet; and serve as the beginnings of a biography, perhaps, while all the time showcasing the poetry. The only extended critical essay is Ivor Indyk’s “The Awkward Grace of John Forbes”, which is a fine piece, comprehensive and suggestive, in which Indyk makes a crucial distinction between Forbes and the New York poets he so admired. In reading Forbes after O’Hara, he suggests, “we miss the appearance of ease, the confidence of articulation, the assurance that all things count, even the most ordinary, which a powerful culture confers on its poets. What we have in abundance is irony, springing from a deep sense of limitation, and intractability.” His point is that, while Forbes may seem, like O’Hara, to be going on his “nerve”, the Australian is always aware “of the dangers lurking beneath, distance, in comprehension, lack of control, violence ...”.

A book like this has several ambitions, of course, not least to mark out a place for Forbes in Australian poetry. There is not the same urgency to find Les Murray’s or David Malouf’s place in our literature. Their places are secure and they are well served by two recent collections of essays. Edited by Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross, The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays (2001) brings together nine new essays, fitted to this most intelligent, erudite and craft-conscious poet: four from Australian critics and five from scholars closely associated with the University of Copenhagen. Although the collection is not comprehensive in the poetry it singles out for consideration, the studious attention given to Fredy Neptune (by Line Henriksen, Clunies Ross and Charles Lock) is welcome. In other essays, Peter Steele finds a “lexical zest” in a poetry in which “mouth and eye conspire to give freshness all the room it needs to move” and, in attending to the interplay of sound and image in the poetry, anticipates Nils Eskstad’s useful discussion of Murray’s “soundscapes”. Martin Leer addresses Murray’s poetics of place; Christopher Pollnitz looks at the discursive “middle-distance poems”; and Peter Pierce reads the prose collections and finds A Working Forest (1997) far from what Murray calls his “narraspeak”.

More modest in conception and scope, David Malouf: A Celebration (2001), published by the Friends of the National Library and compiled by Ivor Indyk, includes a brief introductory essay by Indyk; four essays which mix anecdote with criticism; and a small sampling of Malouf’s poetry matched to the essays. Set in motion by Indyk, for whom Malouf is “a master of intimacy”, capable of closing “the distance between writer and reader to create an intimacy which is lyrical, sensual and immediate”, the
common thrust of the essays is in the delineation of a private/public interplay between his life and poetry. Vivian Smith’s essay is notable. Finding in Neighbours in a Thicket a poetry “drenched in a sense of belatedness, of the burdens of history, culture and political ferments for an Australian in Europe in the middle of the Cold War”, Smith is struck by the emergence of a unique voice, its registers and the consistent interplay between ... the big picture, or the grand subject matter, and the deliberately understated approach and tone that so nimbly sidestep the grandiose.” This, too, as Bolton says of Forbes, is central to Murray’s vernacular, and is Malouf’s Australian voice.

As different as these three poets are, a feature of each of them is their prodigious reading. Picking up Anne Gray’s elegant edition of the first volume (of a planned four) of The Diaries of Donald Friend (2001), I am struck by Friend’s precocious eclecticism. As a fourteen or fifteen-year-old Friend was variously reading Isadora Duncan’s provocative biography one day, seeing The Iron Mask on another, anticipating with delight the possibility of seeing Mlle Pavlova again, dipping into Omar Khayyam, painting “Spanish” miniatures and taking lessons from Sydney Long, “curing his soul” with Beethoven, and investing in Japanese cloisonné vases and admiring arrangements of yellow objects d’art on another. Friend emerges as an exceptional, early-flowering talent, whether as a conversationalist, writer or artist. He was a prolific diarist and this edition, comprehensive in scope and generously interspersed with his drawings, runs from his schoolboy diaries of 1929, through his Nigerian Notebooks of 1939, to five separate selections from his war-time diaries from June 1942 to December 1943, when he was twenty-eight.

Indulged by his mother whom he adored, and who clearly saw and encouraged his talents and located him in a refined world, he dreamed of a brilliant success for himself “being blessed with a genius for art and a talent for writing.” One of the strengths of the Diaries is that it keeps the two forms together. They read like an artist’s journal – or a collage bringing together fictional, biographical, historical material, drawings, journal entries – and in them we see him thinking through an idea, experimenting with approaches, responding to the world immediately around him. Populated by a cast of characters, central to whom is his mother; artists; friends and intimates who include Arthur Benjamin and the Ogoga, Ruler of Ikerre; and sundry men in the ranks, Friend is always the dazzling star of the diaries and, it has been said, what we have is a wonderfully and arrogantly opinionated “self-portrait of a personality in flux”, who rarely stayed long in one place or with one group of friends. Articulate, spoiled,
snobbish, intelligent, indulgent, manipulative, confused, witty, sensitive, the diaries also reveal him as capable of self-reflection and self-deprecation. Lamenting the “lack of companionship” he felt among the “warm, stupid, kindly” enlisted men, he notes, however, that he is “like an envious cripple squinting with venomous malice at those who possess talents that I do not. But just the same they are talents I would despise to possess.” To escape his boredom he would flee to Bon and Tas Drysdale’s to drink gin and talk, “the most glorious thing”, and have immense fun making dramas like the one in which Donald played a “subaltern and occasionally a half-fay French girl called Ziska who danced the troika and sang czardas!” The dramas ended, he remarks, “only when the gin and rum had run dry.”

We begin to see the growth of a mind in the Diaries and that is also where Clive James’ real interest lies in Always Unreliable (2001), which brings under one cover James’ three volumes of autobiography. For, as accurate as these memoirs seem in their external detail, James’ consuming interest is in tracing his psychological development as he spirals out from Unreliable Memoirs, set in Australia, to Falling Towards England and May Week was in June, engaging with an ever-widening world. While we may have seen something of the later James in young Clive’s scholastic successes and in his poems in the first volume, it is in the two later books that his prose style and signature wit most clearly forecast that future which, with fascination, delight and envy, we have watched unfold over the last two decades.

The postwar Australia that Clive James grew up in provides the temporal zone of Susan Sheridan’s study of the Australian Women’s Weekly, Who Was That Woman? Established in 1933, by the 1950s and 1960s, the Weekly was reaching one in four families: it was a national media institution. Driven by questions about the target audience; the Weekly’s expectations of that woman; and her dramatic changes in “identity” over the twenty-five year period of the principal focus of this study (1946 to 1971), Sheridan and her co-researchers Lyndall Ryan, Barbara Baird and Kate Barrett probe this popularity and examine the ways in which the Weekly constructed a female-centred world for its readers. Locating their study in the context of earlier research by Susan Windship and Jill Julius Matthews, they argue, however, that it was not a narrow women’s magazine; that it offered women “the sociability, the connections” outside the family that were absent from many lives. They recognised that magazines like the Weekly, “took on the role of educating women as consumers …, creat[ing] the conditions necessary for successful advertising by directly addressing women, in images as well as words, and providing a mix of “survival skills
and daydreams" that matched the diverse routines and interrupted rhythms of everyday life for women.

Susan Sheridan and Susan Magarey (*Passions of the First Wave Feminists*, 2001), acknowledge each others’ intellectual support in preparing their two widely differing books; and their concerns are distinct! For, if Sheridan is focusing on the education of the middle class woman as consumer; in her reappraisal of the standard image of the first wave of Australian feminists around the turn of the twentieth century, Magarey’s concerns are more fundamental to the rights of women. Rather than grim-faced harridans, “wowsers” and narrow moralists bent on spoiling “men’s pleasure”, she wants them to be seen as “passionate” – in every sense of the word – political activists, central to whose agenda was a reconsideration of sex and sexual relations. Magarey mounts a forceful argument that moves these women – centrally, figures such as Rose Scott, Vida Goldstein, Henrietta Dugdale, Mary Lee, Edith Cowan – far from the God’s Police stereotype. The force of the Woman Movement campaigns over the thirty years from the 1880s was to resist and contest discursive stereotypes in which women were positioned by discourses that focused on gender and men by a discourse based on the “testosteronisation of men’s bodies”. They were opposing the notion that women were chattels in which, as Goldstein explained, they “were regarded primarily as sex creatures … to be chosen by men … as outlets for the impulses and alleged needs of men.” Their rebellion was not against sexual relations but against the exploitation of women’s bodies.²

Not surprisingly, Miles Franklin is a continuous presence in *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* for, in her fiction and her personal life, she provided role models for its central figures. *A Gregarious Culture: Topical Writings of Miles Franklin*, edited by Jill Roe and Margaret Bettison, brings together occasional pieces, reviews, essays, texts of addresses, broadcasts and interviews, and letters, first published in newspapers and magazines in the United States, England and Australia. Here it is possible to trace her progress from bush girl to feminist, from committed social worker to literary nationalist, and to find an energetic and individualistic prose contributing to the development of the gregarious culture that she sought. Running chronologically from “An Australian Bush Girl” (1894 to 1906); through her experiences in the US (to 1915), England, during and after the First World War (to 1920); it culminates in the prolific period of publication (33 pieces) after her return to Australia in 1932. Of particular interest are her observations of American women, drawing on her experiences in the US, where she worked for the American women’s trade
union movement and wrote for *Life and Labor*; the series of essays she sent back to Sydney from London during the Great War; and the work of her last twenty years which reveal her deep engagement with Australian literary culture, its development, and the threats to its growth.

In her last twenty years, Miles Franklin was in a dialogue with Australians and their literature, and one of the concerns of this essay has been to try to capture something of the tenor of the conversations that are currently engaging Australians. In an interesting way, the new bi-annual journal, *conversations*, a journal of general cultural and literary interests, reflecting the philosophic, geographic and cultural interests of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at ANU, is contributing to this impulse. Superbly produced, one senses at every turn the creative and meticulous hand of Ian Templeman, the editor. It is something of a coup for the Research School to have him but they have put him to good use! The first number sets the pattern for those that follow; with 10 pages of poems, including five translations from ancient Chinese; an intimate reflection on the “majesty and the madness, the mayhem” of the 1999 General Election in Fiji; evocative photographs of Flinders Island; short stories; and a piece of life writing. In subsequent issues there are music and lyrics from two Peggy Darocsman songs; selections from a long narrative poem, *Yashodhara: Six Seasons Without You*, by Subhash Jaireth; a fine essay on Friend’s *Diaries*; and some Hardy Wilson drawings from a trip to China in 1922–25. That is, in *conversations*, as I have tried to suggest in this review, we see a diversity of contributors, working in a range of forms and genres, engaging directly and critically with their own culture(s), while raising their eyes to the horizon and engaging directly with others.

Miles Franklin would have jumped at the chance I have had in the last couple of months to read across the non-fictional output of a culture and would have relished the arguments that are taken up and unleashed in these books and essays for, to return to Sylvia Lawson, just I have to Miles Franklin, in them we can hear, across this difficult, tantalising country Australians conversing and arguing about who we are, where have come from, and where we are headed; those crucial questions of national identity that cannot be resolved without consideration of our history and our external relations in the region. We hear, as Edward Said was calling for in his essay in *The Deakin Lectures*, the collective efforts of intellectuals acting across many fronts as “lookouts”, discerning the possibilities for “active intervention” whether performed by themselves or “acknowledged by them in others”.

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Non-Fiction 2001–2002

All titles are referred to directly or indirectly in the review


Cowan, James, Journey to the Inner Mountain: In the desert with St Antony. Sydney: Hodder, 2002.


Notes

1. The Monash War Letters and Sebastian Smee's book on Picasso and Matisse, included in this review are in the same series.

2. Ironically, in *Razor*, Larry Writer suggests the social context for his history of the gang-land savagery that flourished in East Sydney, over control of the rackets that sought to control prostitution, the supply of alcohol and drugs, and betting, between 1927 and the Second World War, lies in the consequences of the reforms influenced by the activism of the first wave feminists, the Church, and temperance reformers, which resulted in the banning of street prostitution, and alcohol sales after 6.00pm.
At first you think the taxi will hurl you through the gates marked Bangkok Baptist Mission. But the driver swings the wheel and skids down a slippery dip lane to brake in the courtyard of The Dragon. Day and night the Baptists endure this bad-tempered entrance. You remember as you unload your pack, that the pastor from Kentucky claims there's advantage in worshipping next door to Bangkok's most raided hotel.

"You people," he drawls, "give the converts a real good picture of life before the flood."

Is it only six months since you last stood coughing in the exhaust fumes left by an angry driver? Farangs going Dragon sit with maps on their knees; haggle like children; don't tip. Six months ago did you blink so much, like a diver fitting a face-mask for the first time? Did the backpack thump like a scuba tank as you puffed across the lobby to the teenage porter?

He still talks the hippy slang with a face as solemn as the judge who sentenced Willy.

"Haven't got no single, man. Got a double, okay? H block, room 15. You split with the other dude. Have a groovy stay."

You hesitate on flippered feet. A breeze stirred by the afternoon rain saunters over to fill your lungs with coolness and your mind with delusions of safety. You dive for the green palms of H block.

You're kicking slowly across the undulating lawn, past the shady pool with its jury of light-tanned travellers, mostly young men, who glance up and measure the newcomer. Is he cool? The backpack is old but the trousers are pressed. Fair hair. Could be a Scand, dodging the winter. No, the skin's too wrinkled at the side of his eyes. Could be an Aussie bussed in from the peninsular? So where are the thongs? Not a narc? Good for a hit?

Then you're through the shoals, walking over warm concrete. Thai maids, hair twisted in bright scarves, cease their polishing of the brass railing and move aside. You knock on door 15 of H block.
Someone offers an international “yeah?” and calls from her bed that you’d better not be a pervert and she needs three days rent in advance. You mumble about not too much sleep in Kuala Lumpur … not being a rapist.

“Pervert, I said,” comes the reply in a strong Australian accent.

The next view through the mask is of Chris, curly hair, white arms, the product of one year on the road. She lays down her copy of The Island. You’re beginning to feel part of a best seller yourself.

“Peter … this uh German Guy I was with … he’s had to fly back to Germany because he hasn’t got a passport. You see he’s Armenian or something and doesn’t have real German citizenship and there wasn’t any room in his book for more stamps. That was … uh … to be for the visa to Japan. We were both going to Japan. So he told them, three times he told them, please leave that last section blank … Hey, have you got any real cigarettes?”

We smoke the duty-free.

The sleepless nights on the Malaysian train heave in the stomach but suddenly slide the right way, so that they ballast the tumbling fall into slumber that takes you more sensuously than you can recall in years. For a minute you achieve the ultimate, you forget why you came.

“But they didn’t. So he’s had to fly back to Germany, all for a piece of paper. Just one space left and they have to stamp it …”.

I surfaced to the sound of scuffling in the wardrobe. The walls were cracked and bare but for a poster celebrating Thai Air’s inaugural flight to Chiang Mai. Considering the dope and duty-free smoke which must have curled about the room since that first take-off some years ago, the poster was in excellent shape.

Chris drifted past eyes half-closed, fingers gracefully preparing a bong. She stretched out on her bed, put a spluttering Chinese match to the bowl and sucked deep.

“So I’m off to Japan.”

The ceiling fan was revving like a Spitfire propeller. As the bamboo blinds stirred forwards and back, chopstick shadows feasted on Chris and the bong.

“Japan. Yeah.”

She was talking now in the softest of voices, part sad, part western-spoilt. “I mean this is a guy’s town. When I come back from Japan in two weeks … I’m going down to Phuket to lie in the sun … uh … have a rest, you know. Then I want to go do India. That’s where I’ve always wanted to go, you know.”

I did know. Two years before in an identical room Willy and I had rocked to the wrap-around juke box tunes rising from the pool and talked
Asia, Swearing an unspoken oath that we would keep hovering, keep scrimping, talking the language, passing the joint, getting to India.

Chris pushed the bong across the lino. I had meant to keep a clear head but, what the hell, there were some inevitable traditions at *The Dragon*.

By noon the next day I was struggling to stay upright in a tuk-tuk headed for prison. As the three-wheeler driver slip-streamed through the roller derby of Silom Road, my nose drew a hundred memories from the street woks and noodle carts which overflowed from every laneway. Above all, there was the reek of durian. That fruit may have the aroma of a crumbling drain but the Thais adore it. Old *farangs* say that once they developed a taste for durian they were addicted to Asia for life. I wondered if Willy had the habit by now. Then I remembered that you can’t get delicacies like durian in gaol unless you have real money. There was no facing Willy until I’d done my job; had some hope to offer. I clapped my hands at the driver and yelled a change of direction.

Bangkok must be the only international drug capital where the undercover agents leave business cards at the major bars. I didn’t have a contact this trip, the Drug Enforcement Agency changed personnel too often, so I had the tuk-tuk drop me at *East of Eden* in Pattpong Road. The barman passed me a lacquered spittoon holding a dozen cards and politely turned up the Dixieland background music as I fended off the hostesses and made my call.

She’s from Ballarat.

By the pool we chat about the lawless past of that old gold rush town. I joked about there being similarities with Bangkok. Chris changed the subject. “How come you’re here?” she asked.

“Do you know a George C. Scott film, *The Last Run*?” I reply, feeling eloquent after a few glasses of *Mekong* whiskey.

“Nah,” she says, with a pout.

But I’ve warmed to my subject.

“He plays a retired gunman in Spain. A girl asks what he’s doing there and he says he’s looking for the guy responsible.”

“Responsible for what?”

“His wife’s plastic surgery.”

“Her surgery...?”

“Yeah, he says to this girl as they’re driving in this fast BMW – “My wife went to Spain to have her breasts lifted” – then he changes gears – “I thought she meant with plastic surgery.”
“Come again?”
She was from Ballarat alright.
“That’s my way of saying I’m looking for the guy who took my girl.”
“Bullshit. You’re after cheap dope.”
“Okay,” I owned up, “so where do you get it?”
She smiled for the first time. “Try the Alamo.”
She gestured at the stone wall protecting the poolside eating area. “See those pegs in the wall? If you climb up from the rock garden you can stand on them and signal how many sticks you want. They’ll pass them to you. 400 baht a stick.”
Fashions and prices change. Last year they called it McDonalds and the rate was 80 baht less.
“What about quantity stuff?”
“Wouldn’t know,” she shrugged. “Taxi drivers?”
Conversation ebbed. When I offered her a spray can of mosquito repellant she gave me the surly look of an ozone lover and departed. I stayed by the pool. An open bottle of Mekong is a good way to make contacts.
Chris didn’t steep well that night. Her muttering reached across the room, sabotaging what little drowsiness I could muster. I moved to the bathroom for some breeze from the louvre windows.
A market garden hungry for every centimetre of soil lay below. It spread to a railway line, jumped that and flowed to the ladder ramps of some ruined stilt houses. In an hour I saw three runners creep from those houses and lope across to scale the walls of the hotel. The Alamo was enjoying excellent poolside service.
Chris was still nervous after breakfast. She’d always done things with Peter, she said and since he’d gone she just sat around The Dragon. Today she had to get out. Would I go along?
Our floating markets tour took us roaring along the narrow klongs in a motorised barge which flicked muddy waves against the blackened stilt houses along the bank. The guide sang through his megaphone that around the next bend a monkey might be picking coconuts and sure enough, he was. If we were lucky, he predicted, a wise old man might greet us and sure enough, there was a noble greybeard. bowing low before the muzzles of our twenty cameras.
Some washerwomen on the banks of the klong looked up to see our bow waves sluicing their morning’s work. Chris winced. Her eyes mirrored their trapped, entranced gaze.
A villager was paddling past. I hailed him, stopped the barge and in a few minutes we were shopping in a local market. Chris bought incense and
candles. I tipped a pick-pocket we caught in the act. That afternoon we dined on the best fish I've ever tasted.

"I want to be buried here." Chris sighed, licking her fingers. "With my mouth open."

As I put her on a bus for The Dragon she hugged me and smiled at my surprise.

During my interview that afternoon I should have been thinking of Willy but my mind strayed to that smile.

When I got back I found Chris pacing the room. She was alternating between the bong and the last of my cigarettes. The story was out in five minutes.

"I've got four pounds of hash inside the sleeping bag. It's for ... uh ... that guy ... the one Peter knew - in Tokyo. It's all fixed up. It'll be easy I'll make $5,000 ... for walking through a gate."

I couldn't believe it. This idiot child was spilling to a stranger she'd known for two days. Chris misunderstood the look on my face.

"No, really. I can look really straight. With my hair up and uh ... I've got this dress."

Someone next door was playing an Indian flute. Chris let her batik dress fall and keeping clumsy time with the snake charming lilt, begun rummaging through the wardrobe. It should have been erotic - a woman barely out of teenage dressing slow motion in a cobra basket of a room overlooking a moonlit garden. When Willy peeled off travelling shorts and T-shirt and slid into Western dress, it had been a turn-on. Chris though, looked like a little girl playing with mummy's clothes. Her lopsided, low-cut bra made the image more ludicrous. I put my arms around her.

We spent the night making slow, soothing love; dozing, smoking, not saying much.

For a week we settled into a type of domestic routine. My interviews were taking longer but I made sure I was back by dusk.

Chris and I would go to local restaurants, window shop and chat with other travellers. We even attended the Thai boxing at Lumpini stadium and the same night, glanced inside the Baptist Christian Mission. The converts looked as they were the one who had gone the ten rounds with the Lumpini pros. We were becoming known. I was hearing things. Then I met the Tokyo contacts.

I knew who they were as soon as I walked into our room and saw the skinny one whose hands shook and eyes looked as if he'd been around too many mosquitoes. His companion, Klaus, wasn't "into raves". He worked at isometric exercises as the skinny one gave me some tips on Thai
marriage laws. When Klaus was satisfied I had fully appreciated those biceps under his Indian shirt he settled into what he called a lotus position. It put me more in mind of the squat used by Thai boxers. Whenever I looked his way I seemed to be getting a very malevolent "Ohm".

"Don't say it!" she warned after they had finally zombied off.

But I couldn't resist. "Fee fi fo fum," I taunted. "I spy the style of a smack freak bum." That was the rhyme we used for the Alamo's special Customers.

Twice that night Chris woke screaming, but I couldn't comfort her. She was going through the courier's hot spot; when the strain of whether to go or pull out strikes like malaria.

I was eating breakfast by the pool when Chris made the entrance I was dreading. She wore her airport clothes. There was no childishness now in the red summer frock, high heels, the pinned-up hair and make up. Ignoring me, she ordered fried noodles and produced a bottle of Mekong.

One way of looking relaxed and seductive at Customs was to be slightly boozed. But it took practice. Willy had trained on gin and tonic.

The DEA agent was pleased with my report and insisted on driving me to the prison. When I emerged my nerves weren't up to a tuk-tuk. I hailed a cab to Pattpong Road and by 5 p.m. was booked on to next morning's flight to Sydney.

I don't carry any weapons. Junkies don't notice them, nats have seen too much TV and Thais just have to scream faring and a nationalist army arises in the street. However, I do pack a can of mace. My hand was deep in my shoulder bag and resting on that spray as I mounted the stairs to H block. There were no freaks about. Chris was back in batik and vacant-eyed as usual.

I sat down next to her on the bed and began my sermon on risk. It was pointless. She had passed through the hot spot.

Remember, the first rule of the house, mate, I warned myself. Look after number one. This lady has chosen, right? Right, I agreed and then the flute music curled through from next door, stirring some pleasure in her sleep walker eyes. I couldn't stop my stupid tongue. "You won't be making the flight, Chris."

She looked up.

"If you do you'll end up in gaol. Have you ever been inside a Thai gaol? You prowl a concrete room with 50 other women and that's your recreation. You starve unless you have money coming in. You shit in an open drain. No toilet paper. Just your hands."
“What are you on about? Why am I gonna end up there?”

The grass was wearing off.

“Because this town breeds double-dealers. What’s to stop those freaks spilling to the cops? Or your Peter who had to fly home. Heard from him lately?”

She flopped her arms around my waist and smiled up.

“People get away with it every day.”

I grabbed her wrists.

“The pros do, Chris. The pros. But not the small fry. The narcs need someone in court to justify their existence. There are twenty-seven Yanks in this town, living like sultans because they’re busting degenerates for America!”

“How’d you know?”

“I know. The system is primed for targets like you. Any informant splits the value of the court fines with the cops, and they are heavy fines, Chris. Your $3,000 is small beer compared to a regular income in Thai fines. So why should Peter and the boys have to do something dangerous like smuggling?”

She pulled free and screeched at me. “You’re a narc!”

The flute seemed to pause. I remembered the thin walls.

“No, Chris,” I hissed back. “I’m lower than that. I’m a stoolie, a snitch. And you know why – because a girl your age, Dutch girl called Willy, met some people through me. Met some Peters. I talked her into doing it. We were going to travel forever. She’s done two years in Rama prison. Quite a bit older-looking now, and she’ll be dead in another five unless someone pulls strings.”

“You’re a narc!”

“I sell a few names, that’s all. Twice a year I drop into Malaysia and Thailand and listen. Then I pass on my info to the DEA. They compete with the Thais for the easy busts.”

She moved to her shoulder bag, apparently uninterested. But I was charged now with the relief of confession.

“Do you think I do it for money? The DEA doesn’t even pay for my flights. But I score some remission time for Willy. Wouldn’t you want someone to do it for you? I only knew her a few months for Christ’s sake and two years later I’m trying to make up for introducing her to the wrong guys.”

You would have thought her only worry on that hot Thai night was how unwrap the stick of gum in her shaking hands.

“Have you dobbed me in?”
“Do you think I’d be telling you this if I had?”

“Have you!” She was almost screaming. 

“Your smack freaks are targeted. Your name hasn’t been mentioned. But they’ll involve you. Dump the stuff. If you take that flight to Tokyo, you’ll go down.”

Chris moved to the bed, chewing gum, not looking over as I packed. I thought we could talk it out. But during my two minute shower she and the hash went out the door.

Many times that night I threw my back against the barricaded bathroom thinking a pounding in the corridor was the sound of the main door being kicked in. To stay awake, I watched the plankton runners, gliding across to the Alamo knowing I was more vulnerable now than those all-nation dreamers waiting above the pool for their nightly whitebait.

Before dawn I removed the louvres from the bathroom window and jumped. I zig-zagged across the field, ran through the stilt houses and plunged into the back-streets that I’d memorized from a local map.

I changed taxis three times before reaching the airport. Customs was slow. I watched for any uniform coming at me. The officials are the ones who really worry me. They move the big stuff.

Everything went all right and I caught the Qantas flight. My neighbour was a first-year student high on Asia. Sex had been his turn-on. He didn’t ask what I’d been doing so I didn’t bring up HIV.

As always at Mascot my pack went missing. Neat or not, pack carrying short-stayers from Bangkok experience inexplicable delays with luggage. The Customs agent chatted with me as we waited for it to be found.

“See any drugs over there?”

“See them, you can’t go anywhere without it. Do you see many?”

“We catch twenty a week,” he lied, watching my eyes and smiling. “Mostly through fizzers.”

“Fizzers?”

“Informers.”

It was easy to return his gaze and nod. I was home. My double-dealing was finished.

They brought the pack. As I grabbed hold two Federal cops did the same to me.

The caution was given in a second. Out came a pound of hash stuck with gum to the inside of the bottom pocket.

“Told yuh,” said the Customs man.
THE GREAT THING ABOUT A HYPOTHETICAL SELF

It's a cosmopolitan sky
For now, a boat is moored
The lips of the wharf kissing its side
All the while I'm thinking this in lieu of you:

When I'm pressing my face in your welcome mat
Your neighbour licks a light post
She says it tastes like exhaust fumes whisked in
With pancakes & honey –

(I'm none the wiser)

I sit all day, asking myself
Is this it?
Cigarettes & muesli don't amount to much
That's the great thing about a hypothetical self
Courageously he runs out in the drops
Of milieu, feeding your addiction

& you, the beggar, plead hopelessly for more
Salvaging every lampshade and cupboard
From the side of the road –

It's chuck-out week & your youth punishes you like a milk-less fridge
DAVID LUMSDEN

HEAD-ON AND CHARGED WITH PERHAPS

our crash seat on this injured matter
with its year swerve and blue veil of air
belts us to a destiny that we
star-spun front seat occupants
strapped in the collision zone
await like an amazing bang

the orbit is unending
art is air
every soul is an expatriate
and neither distraught prayer
nor any jumble realm
has power to extort a clear result
from void terrain or angular momentum
Johannesburg, 1988

I watch from the doorway of our house –
Mercy, the nurse, holds my father’s hand
leads him gently to the car,
white headed, stoop-shouldered,
he accepts her strong dry hand.

Mercy tells me of strikes in Soweto –
people told to withhold their rent,
but with no office to approach
when evicted, their boxes,
pots, pans, blankets and clothes scattered
around them on the road.
Government leaflets in their turn say
Do not support the boycott –
yet compliance would risk scorched rubber and ash, a burned house
roofless, her daughters and their children
under a cold burning sky.

Mercy goes to church on Sundays,
prays from a full heart. She walks
through the township dawn,
her wide body a warning
to tsotsis.
Each night
she comes from Soweto
to the white suburbs
to care for my father.
When he died she walked
into our house with its candles,
hips arthritic, bent with stroke, still massive.
Round the family table
she held our hands, opened her curled Bible
closed her eyes, and sang.
Her voice like a bell,
you could feel God at her shoulder,
waiting over the horizon.

"tsotsis" – township gangsters
The last time I saw you, George, you were dead. Imprisoned in hospital light. Now I imagine things are dark for you, if they are anything at all.

We buried you near a eucalypt. On the day, sunlight was just how you adored it, with your eyes closed halfway, warmed in a wicker chair you had pushed out onto the dying grass. I never took much notice, except when oily clouds filtered the light and you frowned, adrift in the yard like a bird whose wings would not dry. I wish I had studied you, examined the shadow you cast or the restful promise of your dangling limbs. As I look back, it is possible I believed I could have fallen asleep just by walking too near you or resting on the grass at your feet.

And you didn't see me, George – how could you, half asleep in your chair. I was part of an irritating world you observed only when it had darkened you with shade. If you saw me at all, it was looming over you, blackening your light.

I cannot remember how many years it has been since you died, although I know it has been many. The difference between living and dying does not seem significant any more. Who is dead and who is alive? I picture you pruning the roses that will outlive us all. I raked up the leaves from around your grave with my hands and put the longest stem in an old jar of water.

It seems a ridiculous fact to tell you, and perhaps you know already, but before I left the cemetery I lay down on your grave, the stone so cold beneath me, and stared up into the sky. Then I closed my eyes, trying to empty my mind of thoughts, but imagining how it could be that I would not exist, imagining an absence of everything. You know it better than I do, George, and I wish I could ask you. How foolish I would have seemed; an old woman lying on the grave of her dead husband.

Strangers now live in the house. Can you remember when we bought it, wondering about the lives housed by our wood and stone? So much of our lives is nothing. So many of us leave the world no different than how
we found it. They haven't left much of the garden and I am told that they built a swimming pool over the grass you tended with such care and futility. Thank Christ they left the rose beds.

That is how I still see you, pruning shears in your gloved hands, frowning with concentration, stems and thorns stacked at your feet.

Now our lives are the memories of door frames and window sills as others sweep the floors or polish the mantles. They can have it for it is only good for so long and after that it falls away to nothing. You know all this, George.

Many years ago there was a time when I had yet to meet you. It never occurred to you to ask what it might have been like, before you arrived so hopelessly dressed, but never without a carnation in your buttonhole. There were many hours when I did nothing but sit behind a closed door and stare at the ceiling, a pursuit that these days drives me to such acute boredom. What could there have been to think about? Whatever it was, there was no end of it, so much so that my adolescence seemed an age of unending contemplation.

"What can she be doing in there?" my mother asked to whoever would listen. "Not even a sound." I passed hours as if I was swimming laps.

There were men before you and, I imagine, women before me. They remained in the silent gulf between us. Whatever was left unspoken was left unchanged, as if we could not affect anything that we could not say. I could count half a dozen affairs that I almost had, those more beautiful than the one or two I did. Is that to say that I did not keep faith with you? I should say I did. How can years of ordinary bondage be tainted by a few hours of indecent pleasure? We had children, for Christ's sake; we came to more than hot air and perspiration, we came to more than the childish impatience of ravelled clothes. Before you it was simple, as if the touching of bodies had no meaning.

"What can she be doing in there?"

On summer evenings there was never more to do than to listen to the cicadas. How could I have explained that narcotic - all damp heat and the smell of flowerbeds? Voices in the kitchen as women took turns at stirring the pots.

My father and the boys always returned after dark, swearing quietly in their exhaustion. You met him once, standing at the door; a strong, tall man of few words, who was happiest when he had something to lift or a hole to dig. That summer he was sinking a fence, digging trenches out near the edge of the bush, the sweat pouring off his blistered back. He laughed when I raised the mallet to drive in the guidepost, but I did it only to save
the blisters weeping on his hands. He took the mallet from me and drove
the post himself.

Silent action became a language between us, his huge hands picking
me up, setting me down out of the way. The few words he did have set me
on the path that wound up next to yours. If this letter were for him, I
would thank him for that.

At the time I could have killed him for his terrific silence that could
suffocate a room. He'd think we didn't notice, but we would be gasping for
air. The boys understood it, even enjoyed it, out in the yard or the bush;
they would follow him without need for speech. For me, silence came only
with isolation, behind a closed door, half tucked up in a single sheet.

When most men die, they do so loudly. They hallucinate, leap from
their beds, argue, fight death with their fists. My father closed his eyes and
died without a word, without even moving, as if death has been how he
had lived his entire life.

From those ashes you came, with an umbrella and a crumpled hat,
standing in our doorway. Somehow it was my father's decision, the words
of a man with no words. "Get your coat and go with him. The poor boy's
been waiting. Walked all this way when it wouldn't stop raining, so hurry
before he falls to pieces on us." Then my mother laughed. Do you
remember? How she used to cover her teeth with her open hand whenever
she laughed? Then Dad would grin his closed lipped grin. That is exactly
how it was.

George, I don't know why I am writing to you. There nothing left for
us to say. All the words are useless. It is as though I am talking to myself,
which I can do without a pen or paper. Could I be putting everything in
order, arranging the furniture in a room I will never see again? If so, how
can I begin? The greatest art is sometimes silence. This means I should
not begin.

But I am not beginning, for this is something that I could never have
begun.

"Get your coat and go with him."

Of everything I remember, there is one time I will make my last
thought. I will remember an April of many years ago. There was a swamp
with reeds and I was so young and small that I could lie on the reeds and
they would support my weight above the water. The light came in through
the trees. I fell asleep and woke when night had fallen. I will remember
the weightlessness upon the reeds and the child I was, imagining it to be
a throne. Carried above the heads of servants. Idle thoughts, George, but
with a beautiful substance. Alone in the bush, suspended above the
swamps, I listened to the singing of birds.
I got my coat and went with you, smelling you in the car all the way, a heavy scent somewhere near old, rotting wood. You drew me in close when we danced and somehow I was reassured by the weight of your cotton suit. Then it was months before I saw you again, because my father died. When I did, you didn’t smile like you did the time before, but held my hand, as if you thought I might have fallen apart had you not been there to hold me together. At the time I thought you were like a word inserted into a sentence, one that had been, or should have been, forgotten. I often thought of you standing in the doorway, soaked through. Then you became all the sentences I understood.

Outside the window I can see into the garden, or imagine I can. I am sitting at the old kitchen table, the ancient cloth spread across it. There can be no explanation for it, but I made up my face and did my hair before sitting down. Later I will visit your grave and deliver your mail.

The best time is in the evening when the shadows of the trees have grown long and the crowds have gone. Head stones turn red in the sun, especially the angels that tower above us. When the light is like that I look around, wrap my coat tightly and lie myself down on your grave. Just the sound of leaves and the wind in uncut grass.

Then I long for that moment to be upon me, the thought of harsh swamp reeds cutting my skin, the darkness falling on me and the first feel of— I will try the word—of dying.

George, where are you when these thoughts eat me alive? Why do I hunger for the stone of your plot behind my back and just enough sun so that it still warms me?

Damn it, George, you know more about it than I ever could, but I know it so well. I will go there. The time will come, whether I am ready or afraid. The time will come when shadows cast themselves. They will fall without light, darkness, ground, or walls. They will fall upon themselves in a world they comprise alone. Nothing can stop it and that, finally, becomes the tragedy.

I am now everything that I ever was. It is enough, George, for the words fail me. In the entire world there are so many saying so much, so much and so little. Now the words are useless, so I must end. Goodbye, I say, though to whom, I do not know. Goodbye.
GRETTA BEVERIDGE

THE LOST MOLOCH

It was a whale. A whale breaking through the desert floor, red sand streaming down its grey sides in fan-shaped showers. As its head dived back into the earth, Gina could see black spots along its pale belly. In a second the scalloped tail waved its white underside like a flag and was gone.

Gina straightened her head. Her mother, Faye, was in the passenger seat, messy brown curls spilling around the sides of the head rest. Gina's aunt, Wendy, was driving, her hair like a thatched hut from Africa, long blonde bits bobbing over short brown. Wendy never sat still, even to drive. Most of the time her hands weren't anywhere near the wheel; they were waving, jabbing, tapping, pushing the radio buttons or twisting the little dangling crystal ball on the rearview mirror to make sunbeams dance on the roof.

With music loud in her ears, Gina couldn't exactly hear Faye and Wendy's words. She wanted, but didn't want, to hear. Wanted to know, and didn't, her future.

If she turned her head to the side, Gina would see the whale again. Eyes shut, she moved her head like a sloth, slow motion, to face the side window. She opened her eyes in time to see the sheeny smooth mark in the desert that meant a whale had just disappeared underneath. Then they were past it, on, on, with the low bush covering everything. Not one big tree to lock your eyes on, feel pleased as it came nearer and satisfied as it went - you were that much closer to the end of the trip. They were sailors on a dried-up ancient ocean, rolling on through an empty red sea. Empty except for the whales.

"Gina! Gina! Take it!" Her mother had her arm curled behind her seat, offering Gina a Yowie. Gina took it, and her mother muttered to Wendy. "She's not all there", or something like that. Gina could guess the meaning without hearing the words.

It was a new series Yowie, one Gina didn't have already. The chocolate outside was always OK, but the animal inside was the best. She couldn't
figure out what it was at first – something with spikes all over it. A moloch, a Thorny Devil, a special kind of lizard that lived in the desert, in the place they were driving through right now, it said on the instructions. She joined the plastic bits into a prickly creature, short and stumpy.

Wendy stuck out her arm, fingers waving, and Gina put the lizard and its explanation onto her aunt’s palm. “A moloch,” Gina said, pulling out her earphones.

Wendy read the paper in quick glances. “Moloch’ with a ‘c’ sound at the end, not a ‘ch’,” she explained. “Interesting.”

The lizard fitted over the locking knob on Gina’s door. It perched there, bumpy and cute.

“I’m only 35,” her mother said. Gina put her earphones in, but left the sound off. Hear some, not all.

Wendy took a long time to reply. Her arms waved on both sides of the steering wheel, palms roofwards, fingers spread. “An adult with responsibilities.” The car rocked under her hands’ return to the wheel.

Through dust and smears, Gina studied her mother’s face in the outside mirror. It was one of the secrets of the back seat, the kids’ place where adults hardly ever got put. People didn’t know you could see them rolling their eyes, pulling their mouths into ugly shapes.

“Emus. Bloody buggery emus.” Wendy was pointing ahead. A group of five birds dithered on the side of the road, waited until the car was almost level, then spat out, heads forward, feathers flopping, legs lifted like trotting horses. The car swayed with braking.

“You might tell me if you see them,” Wendy said when they were travelling straight.

“I didn’t.” Faye looked out the side window. So did Gina. No whales.

“Hold us up for days if we hit one.”

“Do it! There’s one. There’s two!” Gina saw spit fly out of her mother’s mouth.

“Why put it off? Seems to me like you’ve already decided.”

“Thanks so much for your thoughtful comments.”

The crystal ball jiggled under the rear vision mirror and Gina let her eyes swivel with it until they hurt and she was dizzy. The sun was burning into her cheek and knees. Wendy’s brown eyes filled the mirror, meeting Gina’s, then flicked away. With her head turned slightly and her lips mostly closed, she muttered something to Faye.

“She gets on with you,” Gina thought her mother answered.

Faye screwed her head over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows in a question to Gina.
“Are you OK?” Gina thought her mother would say, but Faye’s lips stayed in a straight line. Gina hoped the lifted corners of her own mouth said “Yes”, but was afraid she had only looked “sulky”, her mother’s favourite word. What question had she answered?

Eyes closed, Gina remembered snorkelling. Not floating star-shaped like the other people, but walking carefully across the shallows where the sun lit the clear water in long bars, bent over with her face in the sea. She had felt other eyes, had turned through the water and seen a crowd of black and white stripey fish stopped behind her. They moved their faces upward, sideward, down – anywhere else. Us following you? We were just going this way. Their eyes swivelled to see if she’d moved on. Gina walked for a few seconds, then spun round quickly to embarrass them. They were too fast – their tails waved innocently towards her. She waded on, happy to have company.

Her head snapped up. She’d been asleep. They’d stopped, and Wendy and her mother were rummaging in the console between their seats. “Wee stop,” Wendy called as both doors slammed. Gina tried to remember where she was. Faye and Wendy had gone off in separate directions, disappearing into hollows on either side of the road. Gina unwrapped toilet paper from the roll. Outside, the air was warm and new, smelt of dirt and honey, Gina decided after a few breaths. The sisters were already back before she had left. “Here.” Her mother gave her a box of matches. Wendy called “Mind the snakes.”

Squatting to set the damp toilet paper alight, Gina saw a dusty red lizard under the next bush. Not a stumpy moloch, but a racehorse with speedy body and a long skinny tail. It was still, ready to run, and its eye swivelled like the coral fish, watching her from the shade of hundreds of pink flowers that streamed along drooping branches. She struck the match and the lizard sped off, its front legs high and its back legs sideways like a frog’s. Gina followed her footprints almost to the road and stood with eyes shut. If she breathed and breathed, maybe she could store this alive smell inside, fill her self with the bush.

The engine roared and she ran to get in.

The car smelt of orange peel. Her mother spoke from the driver’s seat. “You look retarded, standing with your eyes shut.” Before Gina could answer Faye changed gear and was on the road. Wendy turned. “Are you OK?” She smiled and waited for Gina to say “Yes”, then fiddled with the radio knobs. “Music to forget by,” she said.

“No chance. MYOB.” The reply was sharp even through the static that hissed in the speaker near Gina’s left ear.
“Family. It is my business.” Wendy wasn’t scared of her sister. Gina had seen Wendy standing straight while her older sister had her nose almost on Wendy’s, raving like a principal. Gina had seen Wendy rock back ever so slightly, then shift her weight onto her toes so that her head bent forward. Faye’s voice had softened, then stopped. If she grew tall as her mother, Gina hoped she might stand nose to nose with her and win.

“Take her, then”. Her mother was murmuring, but the words were clear enough.

“Your offspring, your problem.” Wendy probably thought she didn’t know that word, “offspring”. They were talking like she was stupid. A baby. Earphones in, music on, but soft.

“My chance, my turn. New man, new town, new life.” Faye snapped off the radio and settled into her driving. Caught once more in the rear vision mirror, Gina quickly turned away. A flock of budgies raced them in a tight ball of small sharp shapes. Too fast for Gina to see their wing beats, they dived and swerved alongside. Not like emus, who panicked and ended just sad heaps of feathers that lifted in the wind of passing cars. Budgies stayed on one side of the road, kept pace, held together until they were tired of the chase and then vanished over the crusty red sand into the glare of the sun. They survived to roll in the air another day.

The music growled – flat batteries. The Gameboy ones were the same size, so she swapped them. Music filled her ears for a minute, then groaned and stopped. The road was too bumpy to paint her fingernails without splodges. Her diary was boring: full of “Then we did this” and “in the car”. Not safe to put the truth on paper.

The whales were exciting, but she’d get a cricked neck with it twisted all the time. Every 10 k, she would turn. Past her mother’s left arm, with the big plastic wristwatch and glassy sapphire ring, through the steering wheel, the numbers rolled over until a zero was on the end.

Perfect timing. The desert heaved and a whale surfaced. If she was out there, Gina would have heard the puffing sigh that sprayed sand into a coloured fountain. Flowering bushes hung like streamers on the whale’s body, then slid off its smooth skin. This whale flicked its tail and was gone, but beside it was another one. They were travelling together because they wanted to. Nobody was making them stay close. She tried to find a way to recognise the second whale next time, but it seemed to be the same as its friend. Maybe next time she could see a different mark, or a shape in its flukes.

Nothing had happened in the car. Her mother’s hands grabbed the wheel; Wendy was reading a book. Gina waited for the kilometres to go by.
The numbers moved very slowly. At 5 k's Wendy lifted her head and said "Mum'd have a bit to say." Faye didn't answer.

Nanna was more of an emu than a budgie, Gina decided. There'd be no help there.

When zero was at the end of the numbers, Gina checked the scenery. No whales. A bottle tree – she'd seen a few of them. A tree died, someone stuck a bottle on the end of one of the empty branches. Someone else thought "Great idea" and put another bottle on a different branch. People must stop specially to stick their empty bottles on this tree, right in the middle of nowhere. If Gina ever came on this road again, would she remember to bring a bottle? You could make a wish while you stretched and slid the neck onto the wood. What would she wish? Mother stay? Mother go?

The radio was on again. A man was talking about being a tribal kid, in the bush. "Everyone was family," he said. Faye jabbed Wendy's arm and turned the radio up. "My mother had three sisters. If anyone asked me who was my mother, I'd point to all of them. They were all my mother. That's the way it was."

"Huh!" Faye punched the air with her fist. "It's a sign, Wendy, it's a sign."

"You...". Wendy spluttered. The sisters laughed the same; mouths wide open, heads bent, hair over their eyes.

It was a long time later that her mother said "Petrol", and swerved into the driveway of a roadhouse. The three of them pushed open the doors and unpeeled themselves from their seats. The air was hot, so hot outside. They stood on wonky legs and stretched their arms, like monkeys let out of a cage.

No one else was at the petrol pumps, but groups of Aboriginal people sat on the ground around the building. A woman's voice shouted from inside the roadhouse, and then a kid roared. There were lots of people fighting in there. Better stay in the car, Gina thought, and closed the door. Faye opened it. "I thought you wanted batteries." She left the door open. Gina followed. A woman walked out of the shop, carrying a small dark child on her hip. She didn't look at them. Right next to Gina she yelled at someone somewhere else, and Gina jumped.

Inside it was cool, air-conditioned like the car. Five boys were running around in front of the counter, shouting and laughing. Their clothes were filthy and way too big for them; their hair hung in dreadlocks, but their eyes and teeth shone. Slowly Gina realised there was no fight, no big
trouble – they were buying icecreams. Among sounds that didn’t seem like
words, she heard “Paddlepop”. Behind the counter a big white man
grinned and shouted “What kind of Paddlepop?” More laughs, more roared
conversation in their own language. The kids hopped on bare feet, held up
ten-dollar notes in brown fingers with pink nails, took their icecreams and
piled through the door in a shoving knot.

Gina watched them through the window. The boys ran to the small
groups and held out icecreams for everyone to lick. So many mothers,
fathers, brothers and sisters – would that be better?

Her own mother, her really truly mother who wanted to give her away,
grabbed her arm and dragged her to the counter. “Batteries. What kind?
The man wants to know”. The service station man smiled at her while she
rubbed where her mother had pinched.

Now Gina didn’t need to watch the speedo go round. She could time her
whale-watching by the music.

A song finished. There was nothing close to the road. But in the far
distance, on the line where blue sky met red earth, the black shape of a
whale threw up like a shadow on a wall. It stood on its tail for a second,
then fell backwards and vanished. Gina craned her neck as it leapt and
leapt, outlined against the sky. She had not seen that before.

Another song ended. Time to look. The sun had swung over to the
other side of the road, and in its setting light, sand ran like blood down the
sides of a pair of whales, one slightly ahead of the other. They dived and
disappeared, rippling the ground with their huge bodies. Another flicker of
movement, and five dolphins leapt together, small and neat, like Yowie
toys compared to the enormous whales. They dived, surfaced, dived,
following the whales, or the car; Gina was not sure. One more dive, and the
window was empty.

It was late. She could sleep, like Wendy, but her legs were aching from
sitting still. Quietly she undid her seatbelt and tried to stretch her legs
across the car. Her mother turned, but said nothing. Gina leaned forward,
stretching her arms, and looked through the front seats at the rushing
white lines.

There was something on the road, a small something. “Look, look.”
Gina leaned onto the console, wedged her shoulders between the seats
and pointed, close to the windscreen.

“Get out!” Her mother elbowed her in the chest, hard. The car swerved.

“Stupid girl!” Faye was shouting to Wendy, looking back and forth from
the road in quick jerks.
Gina breathed open mouthed, trying to get air into winded lungs. “It was a moloch. I saw its bumps.”

“Shut up.” The car took off and Faye started to sing in a deep, put-on voice.

“For God’s sake, Faye.” Wendy struggled upright. “Calm down.”

It was no use trying to stop. Gina felt her mouth open wide and a horrible wailing came out of it. She was bawling, like a little kid. “It was a moloch. I’ve never seen a real one. You could’ve stopped. It was a moloch.” The words dribbled with tears and snot.

“Stay! Stay! With this?” Faye was screaming over Gina’s noise. She reached her arm behind Wendy’s seat, and raised her hand. Gina was too slow, was always too slow to duck, and took the backhanded whack right across her face.

They moved even faster. Wendy swivelled to see Gina, then straightened her head, wordless. Gina opened the window. Air stung the scratch where her mother’s ring had dug into the skin. She cupped her hurt cheek in one hand, and with the other flicked the plastic moloch off the knob, spinning it into the dusk.

She had nowhere to go but on. Nowhere to go but with.

There was salt on the wind. The whales were always there, somewhere, gliding through warm sand and when they felt like it, throwing themselves into the cool sweet darkness of the bush.
A PLACE FOR THE SPACE BETWEEN: 
FICTOCRITICISM AND THE UNIVERSITY

This is an essay about the fictocritical concept of a “space between” the categories of literature and criticism, and the relationship of this metaphorical space to the institutional places in which fictocriticism circulates. The “space between” refers to a space created by the epistemological collapse of critical distance in postmodern theory, a textual no-man’s land in which a generic intermingling and hybridity of form takes place. Fictocriticism, however, could perhaps best be described as a term around which a number of theoretical and institutional negotiations between the creative and the critical takes place. Rather than offering a single authoritative definition of the term, I will attempt here to describe how fictocriticism is constructed out of an ongoing series of provisional self-definitions.

“Perth in the late eighties.” This was the opening line of the introduction to *No Substitute*, an anthology of prose, poems and images, according to its subtitle, which was published in 1990 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The originating moment for the writing collected here, as Noel King and Anna Gibbs point out in the introduction, was the formation of an “enormously productive” (9) writers group, which led to the establishment of deSCRIBE, a writers’ weekend comprising part of the Perth Fringe Festival in 1988. This physical place, according to King and Gibbs, was also a site for the fashioning of “a space that might be designated postmodern” (10). In describing the work conducted in this space they write:

Generic mixings and mergings taking place in the indeterminate discursive spaces between fiction and autobiography, fiction and the practice of performance, give rise to a “contaminated” writing, a writing of compounds and mutations, a hybrid writing which is not just not any one thing, but *not* any one thing. (10–11)
This passage gives voice to the metaphor of a “space between” generic boundaries which has become the prevailing trope of fictocritical discourse. The work presented here is often fragmentary, and “experimental”, seeming to shift between fiction and essay. Many of the contributors were connected to universities in Western Australia, especially Curtin and Murdoch, and to writing programmes in those universities.

In the same year that *No Substitute* was published, the University of Technology, Sydney, established its Masters of Arts in Writing. This was launched at a conference entitled “Subject Writing Object” which examined the blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in contemporary Australian writing. While the new Masters degree was concerned with developing students’ writing to a professional level, its coordinators, Stephen Muecke and Amanda Lohrey, also hoped to “encourage new forms of writing, such as imaginative writing in the area of non-fiction”.

At the same time that the degree was launched Noel King had moved from Perth to take up a teaching position at UTS. In 1991 Muecke and King collaborated on an essay for *Australian Book Review* entitled “On Ficto-Criticism”, thus giving a name to the work King co-edited in *No Substitute* and to the work which Muecke hoped to encourage at UTS. This essay takes the form of anecdotal musings by Muecke interpolated with an italicised theoretical meditation provided to him by King. Muecke reminisces that in 1972 Barthes’ *Mythologies* had provided him with an epiphany, that it represented some new form of writing, which he could not at the time define. He did not lift his head from “heavy theory”, however, until he met up with King at UTS.

King, we are told, had arrived from Perth where “there had been a really productive little group of writers working – some of them – in what Noel called “ficto-criticism”. For fictocriticism, then, *No Substitute* was the moment of arrival, and this essay is the moment of naming. In asking where this “ficto-critical stuff” came from, Muecke says he was provided by King with a quote from Fredric Jameson in 1987:

“Ficto-criticism” makes a lot of sense to me. It is very clear that there has been a flowing together of theory and criticism. It seems that theory can’t exist without telling little narrative stories and then at this point of criticism, criticism seems very close to simply telling stories. It is an advanced and energetic form of conceptual criticism. (13)
What is curious about this is that Jameson is talking about the merging of theory and criticism, rather than fiction and criticism. This quote is taken from an interview with Andrea Ward where Jameson discusses various aspects of postmodernism, including the collapse of "critical distance". Jameson argues that intellectuals need to acknowledge the narrative elements of postmodern theory— which he attempts in his own writing (what he calls "culture critique") by using history as an explanation for the anxieties of contemporary cultural experience. He does not discuss any deliberate incorporation of "literary" techniques, or a generic intermingling of fiction and critical theory. This, nonetheless, is how King uses the term. "When ficto-criticism arrives", King writes, "what departs? Presumably the stable and separated bodies of 'fiction' and 'criticism', replaced by compounds, mergings, mutations and mistake's" (13).

In response to this Muecke writes: "I had thought it was just a matter of some critics writing anecdotally or autobiographically, incorporating stories about how they came to know into accounts of ('objective') knowledge and in the process becoming more readable" (14). What is being established here is fictocriticism as a move within theory, a mode of critical writing which echoes the work of Barthes and Derrida.

King draws attention in this essay to Rosalind Krauss' idea of the paraliterary, and it is worth describing this briefly as this will continue to be described as the North American counterpart of fictocriticism. Krauss argues, in "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary", that if the nature of modernist literature forced readers to reflect "on the conditions of its own construction", so that reading became "a much more consciously critical act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a postmodernist literature should be the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form". Krauss makes no mention of the metafictional work of writers such as John Barth or John Fowles as moves beyond the "exhausted" possibilities of modernism. Instead she claims that the "literary products of postmodernism" are "paraliterary" works by Barthes and Derrida which collapse distinctions between literature and criticism. This work, she claims, is ignored by the "critical establishment", but is nonetheless being enthusiastically received in graduate schools of universities (294-5). "And what is clear is that Barthes and Derrida are the writers, not the critics, that students now read" (295).

The effects of the assimilation of the work of Barthes and Derrida into what John Guillory called the "theory canon" in graduate schools is taken up by Muecke in a 1992 essay entitled "Marginality, Writing, Education". This essay proposes to discuss "the question of marginality under
postmodern conditions”, especially in relation to Aboriginal identity in Australia. Muecke argues that academic interest in notions of marginality have contributed to a growing enthusiasm in the humanities for non-traditional theses, such as audiovisual presentations and “the inevitable appearance of écriture in thesis writing as the influence of Barthes and Derrida becomes more prevalent” (267). According to Muecke, the analysis or the expression of marginality in the academy lends itself to experimental writing:

These effects coagulate as a style sometimes called ficto-criticism which signals another breakdown, between the purely literary text and the critical commentary. In other words, a ficto-critical literature can include its own criticism, and critical or theoretical texts are increasingly making it a virtue to employ the techniques of fiction writing. So the literary text is no longer central to the marginalia, the comments. The opposition begins to break down. (267)

Here Muecke maintains a distinction between a work of literature and a work of criticism, but suggests that each can adopt a ficto-critical style, one which extends the possibilities of criticism, enabling criticism to operate within a literary text (in the way reflexive commentary might work in metafiction), or to appropriate literary techniques to explore its own status as writing. Muecke went on to practice fictocritical writing himself, publishing No Road with Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1997. This book was reviewed as an example of fictocriticism, and has been described as “the first fictocritical monograph published in Australia”.

Noel King, on the other hand, went on to consider the relationship of fictocriticism to the broader practice of academic criticism. In a 1993 essay King discusses the importance of Ian Hunter’s neo-Foucauldian work to an understanding of postmodern celebrations of “surface”. King draws on several of Hunter’s essays, as well as his book Culture and Government, to characterise his overall position as an argument that “contemporary critical writing has come to conceive of itself as an intensely self-interrogating activity”. Eschewing notions of hermeneutic depth in order to continue skimming new readings off the surface of a text, contemporary criticism has refashioned depth in the figure of the critic. Each new act of textual commentary is a critical occasion for a new act of self-interrogation. It is precisely this understanding, however, which demonstrates the continuity between postmodern criticism and earlier forms of critical activity – where it is the absence of knowledge within the reader which is the source of a
lack of understanding of the text. It is the "deployment of a post-Romantic cultural apparatus which results in the enigma of the text becoming the enigma of the one who reads it" (6). This "critical practice – the problematisation of self and text or, more accurately, self via text – constitutes not so much a formal description of a text as a particular use or deployment of a text for an ongoing activity of self-scrutiny, self-shaping, self-problematisation" (6).

Criticism is no longer to be defined as an epistemological task, but as an ethical practice. King argues that this move does "break down the distinction between criticism and literature, but in a manner quite different from the strategies outlined by the advocates of the ficto-critical and the paraliterary. For Hunter, criticism and literature fall within a single zone of being: ethical practices. They are not related as subject to object or structure to experience" (23). So according to King the "paraliterary or ficto-critical move" is "a move within a particular game rather than a description of the rules of the game" (23). What he is suggesting here is that Hunter provides an overarching description and historical explanation of the way contemporary criticism operates, while fictocriticism is a mode of criticism within this overarching description. Nonetheless they both have the effect of breaking down distinctions between literature and criticism.

Hunter's approach is to consider a textual artifact as constituted by both a text and what a critic does with it. If a new model of criticism is to be forged out of this insight, then it would require a self-reflexivity about the ethical practice of criticism. "Hunter's critique of an epistemological mode of criticism", King claims, "proposes a model of criticism which would notice what was done with the textual object, noting what operations were performed on it. Such a view construes the text as a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self" (15).

The comparison which King makes between Hunter's description of criticism and the fictocritical move within criticism leads to the possibility of conceiving fictocriticism as the logical outcome of Hunter's insight. In other words, fictocriticism can be seen as a mode in which the ethical formation of the critical subject is foregrounded as the originating motive of criticism, but evades Romantic notions of selfhood by seeing this critical subject as the product of a textual performance.

At a 1995 conference for the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Heather Kerr discussed fictocriticism in the context of an anthology of fictocritical writing by women which she was preparing. Kerr draws attention to King's passing comment that fictocriticism is different from Ian Hunter's description of criticism as an ethical practice. She then claims:
Looking at the texts offered so far in our quest to gather a collection of Australian women's fictocriticism, I am struck by the possibility that Hunter’s model, rather than sitting in some opposition to the project, actually describes the protocols some of our potential contributors wish to regard as fictocritical... It looks to me as if the fictocritical performance, writing as performativity, is being understood as a particular ritualistic practice of a ‘self’ and that the text is being regarded as a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of that self.10

Hunter had in fact offered a new historicised description of the whole field of contemporary critical practice, rather than a model for a new critical practice. As King suggested, Hunter used Foucault’s “description of ethics as a ‘practice of the self’ as a model for generating a different understanding of the practice of literary-cultural criticism” (7). Hunter’s suggestion that a text and the critical operation performed on it constitute a single artifact is not to be taken literally; they only constitute a single artifact in Hunter’s description of criticism as an ethical practice. Hunter himself is maintaining a critical distance from his object of study. Fictocriticism, however, is literally one text, it is an occasion for the staging of an ethical performance of a critical self by commenting upon itself; its own condition as a hybrid genre (even though it may also refer to other texts). That is why it is a move within a game, rather than a description of the rules of the game. It is not a metacritical discourse. However, King’s offhand marginal comment on fictocriticism within a study of Ian Hunter’s work, a passing reference to their relationship, has become the basis for a definition of fictocriticism as a move beyond the “problem” of hermeneutic depth and postmodern surface which Hunter has described. It is in Kerr’s paper that the phrase “a space between” is introduced to describe fictocriticism, a phrase which has its origins in the passage from No Substitute which I quoted earlier.

The anthology Kerr was discussing was published in 1998 by the University of Western Australia Press. Entitled The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism, it was co-edited by Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck. It is obvious from the subtitle of this anthology that fictocriticism is a mode of writing which has gained prominence amongst women in the academy (and most of the contributors are academics). In 1997 Anna Gibbs, a contributor to The Space Between and co-editor of No Substitute, asserted that there was “a strange forgetfulness around the term fictocriticism as it’s used in Australia now”, suggesting that fictocriticism made its appearance “in the writing (mostly non-academic) of women very...
well aware" of works by feminist figures such as Cixous and Irigary. This awareness was manifest, Gibbs claims, in the feminist anthology *Frictions* published in 1982 by Sybylla Press and edited by herself and Alison Tilson. "Much of this writing blends essay and fiction, shifts suddenly between fiction and poetry, makes use of indeterminate forms like the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés – all manner of literary detritus" (1). Gibbs posits three institutional trajectories for the spread of fictocriticism in universities. It "began to make its way into the universities", she claims, "initially through women's studies courses, and then through the advent of courses in 'creative writing', as well as through the influence of “the so-called ‘autobiographical turn’” of cultural studies (1).

Fictocriticism can be seen to derive from feminist uses of the critical "I" in the 1960s as a challenge to androcentric academic objectivity; a challenge embodied in the axiom “the personal is political". This feminist trajectory is taken up by Helen Flavell in her review of *The Space Between*. Flavell argues that while Amanda Nettelbeck described fictocriticism in her introduction as the result of the influence of postmodernism, she herself felt that work collected in the volume was influenced more by feminism. "By relying predominantly on postmodernism and the ‘big’ male theorists like Derrida and Barthes to explain this collection of writings by women", Flavell asks, "is Nettelbeck’s essay in danger of following a critical tradition that excludes and invalidates women’s work?"^{12}

I would argue that the North American counterpart of fictocriticism is not the “paraliterary” but what is called confessional criticism.^{13} The term “confessional criticism" appears to derive from Elaine Showalter’s introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), which is indicative of its own indebtedness to feminist challenges to academic criticism. But confessional criticism is also indebted to the post-structuralist critique of critical and philosophical modes of writing as metalanguages, and the subsequent rejection of the epistemological relationship between these modes and an unquestionable truth. If the disinterested and impersonal prose of academic writing can no longer provide access to knowledge, then the intellectual as a political subject becomes the only enabling motivation of critical activity. The move beyond post-structuralist theory characterised by confessional criticism is realised in localised narratives which are embodied in the contingent truths of the anecdote, and a naming of personal and political investments in the object of study. Each act of criticism is an occasion to enact a form of identity politics, where the critic does not so much express an essential self, but performs the role of critic.
Like confessional criticism, fictocriticism develops out of a tradition of liberating criticism from its parasitical dependence on literature. This tradition of liberation has two strands: either a distancing from literature as an object of study, hence making criticism into a science (from philology to structuralism); or a move towards literature by claiming the use of a creative faculty in criticism (aestheticism and impressionism), or collapsing the generic boundaries between literature and criticism (poststructuralism).

In 1996 Anne Brewster, another contributor to The Space Between, presented a paper entitled “Fictocriticism: Undisciplined Writing” at the inaugural conference for the Australian Association of Writing Programs. “If there is a generic division or opposition which ficto-criticism seeks to mediate”, Brewster claims in her paper, “it is the demarcation inscribed in academic production of the genres of high art (fiction, poetry, drama) and the essayistic modes which purport to study them (commentary, criticism, analysis, theory)”. Brewster argues that an “event contiguous with the emergence of ficto-criticism is the burgeoning of creative writing programs in Australian universities. Indeed a number of the academics interested in and writing ficto-criticism are involved in creative writing program’s (29). These programmes, she suggests, “on account of their own anomalous and anxious positioning”, open up a space for the introduction of “hybrid and cross-generic projects”, one of which is the “conflation of fictional and critical discourse’s (30). Creative Writing classes become a literal place where students can explore the fictocritical space between. “The enthusiasm with which students versed in theory take to fictocriticism in creative writing classes”, according to Brewster, “suggests that in a creative writing program they have a license to do what can’t be done in the more formal literary or cultural studies essay, that is, personalising the theory and making it over in their voice” (31).

Brewster does not state that fictocritical writing necessarily should be taught in Creative Writing classes, claiming instead that she is merely tracing a genealogy of the form, articulating the institutional sites at which it is appearing. No account is provided, however, of how fictocriticism might provide options for the student of Creative Writing who is not “versed in theory”, of what sort of license it might provide for the writer of traditional literary genres, or of why its practice is not allowed in classes devoted to the study of theory.

A cynical way of considering this is to see Creative Writing as a way of accommodating fictocriticism by bringing it into the academy through the back door, but leaving it on the doormat. As a “genre” fictocriticism
provides a certain amount of academic credibility to Creative Writing because of its overt and reflexive engagement with critical issues. In turn writing programmes can act as a form of generic containment, protecting the boundaries of the traditional academic dissertation from fictocritical contamination. In a 1993 discussion paper delivered to Melbourne University, which proposes that the Department of English with Cultural Studies set up a doctorate in Creative Arts, Philip Mead points out “the unique version of Creative Writing that has evolved in the English Department, namely a combination of and negotiation between critical, theoretical and creative writing”.

He argues that an institutional recognition of fictocritical writing could be achieved through this doctorate and that it would also benefit the discipline of Creative Writing. He suggests that “we might also want to think about how we could introduce and accommodate that hybrid kind of writing which is called “ficto-critical”. The idea would be to strengthen and define the area of study [sic] Creative Writing, and make it a co- and/or prerequisite of English Department and literary, Cultural and Australian Studies offerings.

Fictocriticism emerges in the institutional circumstances where those teachers and students who have the desire to write and hence become involved in Creative Writing, are also influenced by poststructuralist/feminist theory. This is due to the fact that Creative Writing and “theory” developed in Australian universities at the same time. If fictocriticism is a metaphorical (postmodern) space between theoretical and literary genres, the discipline of Creative Writing is an institutional juncture for this space, a literal site for negotiation between the demands of the academy (theory) and the demands of the literary market (literature), plus the attendant theoretical binaries of objectivity/subjectivity, and exteriority/interiority. Fictocriticism can thus be seen as a product of institutional forces, the teaching of Creative Writing alongside the teaching of Theory in Australian universities.

In “The Investigation”, Helen Flavell constructs an “academic fiction” around two protagonists: a male, moustached, professor at a traditional sandstone university who is made nervous by his students’ enthusiasm for the “new critical genre” of fictocriticism, their desire as students of Theory for a more personal and lyrical response to the texts they study; and a young female student known as Anna. “Anna is 24 and a postgraduate student. Her university doesn’t have sandstone arches and ivy creeping; she’s been brought up on a transdisciplinary diet of various subjects levelled under the umbrella of ‘communications’”. She’s studied creative
writing, journalism, won a prize for an essay in cultural studies, and thrives on reading contemporary theory." What is being constructed here is a generational (and gendered) narrative describing the institutional and interdisciplinary conditions for the emergence and popularity of fictocriticism. This narrative may be too stereotypical to function as an accurate description, but it is instructive of the way in which proponents of fictocriticism wish to position it as a marginal yet dynamic practice within the institutional power structures of the New Humanities.

It is possible now to argue that fictocriticism is a textual space for the postmodern writer-critic, and Creative Writing the literal place (although not the only place). In discussing the function of Creative Writing programmes in the university, Kevin Brophy refers to "continuing tensions between so-called critical-theoretical writing and creative writing, a tension that might have been defused for some by recent explorations in factional or ficto-critical writing". Yet how is this defusion achieved? If one decides to write fictocriticism one consciously determines to blur generic boundaries in their writing, via a hybridisation or mongrelisation of disparate textual elements, and thus enact or perform a critical operation. If generic boundaries are blurred, however, this only takes place within the hybrid form, it is performed each time by a fictocritical act. This is why it is a performance of the critical self rather than a stable genre. As Anna Gibbs writes, it is "a hit and run guerilla action, tactical rather than strategic". These last two terms recall the work of Michel de Certeau, who described strategy in spatial terms and tactics in temporal terms. According to Gibbs, "fictocriticism is not iterable, surprise being of the essence, and no two impasses in writing or debate are ever exactly the same ... It is, in essence, performative, a meta-discourse in which the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale" (1). So it is a tactical, temporary raid on strategic divisions and hierarchies. It prises open a "space between" genres and knowledges.

Unfortunately, this temporary mongrelisation, tied to an ethical performance of the critical self, is often accompanied by a narrative of supersession, as if the epistemological breakdown of the barriers between literature and criticism effected by post-structuralism had also made a generic collapse inevitable. In an editorial for the journal Paradoxa, Brian Attebury claims that metafictional and fictocritical "violations of boundaries tend to make people very nervous", as if these "people" might feel an impending redundancy for their conservative genres. We may also recall Noel King’s question: when fictocriticism arrives, what departs? For King, it was the separate bodies of fiction and criticism. But what is meant
by this departure? These bodies have obviously not departed, they are not redundant, they only depart within the fictocritical text itself, within its own performative moment of hybridity. The suggestion that fictocriticism may serve as some exemplary dialectical resolution between the poles of writing and criticism – or, more precisely, between literature and critical theory – cannot be sustained. Rather than negating or rendering obsolete the distinctions it challenges, fictocriticism requires their continued opposition for its aesthetic dynamism and offers yet another mode of writing within a plurality of options available to the writer.

This brings us back to what a postmodern writer-critic might look like. The postmodern project of “hybridisation” is to break down barriers between genres, to recognise that genres are institutionally conferred categories, or at least rhetorical conventions, rather than essentialist modes. If followed to its logical extreme, however, collapsing boundaries within literature, and between literature and criticism, into a generalised “writing” means erasing rather than celebrating or multiplying difference. Obviously this erasure is neither possible nor desirable. Hence postmodernity is best described as a plurality of genres, and each new hybrid splice (fabulism, magic realism, metafiction, fictocriticism, creative non-fiction, confessional criticism) is an addition to this plurality rather than a negation of pre-existing options; an addition which, moreover, requires the existence of the genres it spliced in order to retain its hybridised identity. This plurality means an erasing of hierarchies rather than generic differences, and a loosening of boundaries, retaining the conceptual differences of genres but exploiting their practical possibilities of permeability (rather than contamination).

Rather than the traditional writer-critic whose criticism derives from their creative practice and serves as some form of illumination of it, or the postmodern version who enacts their dual identity within the single hybridised work, what is required in a “post-Theory” academy is a collapsing of the figures of writer and critic into a concept of the intellectual. This intellectual will respect the discursive difference, but not hermeticism, of varying modes of writing, rather than attempting a polyglot homogenisation under the aegis of postmodernism, and move between these modes as his or her political requirements dictate; not with a unified subjectivity or theoretical position to express, but with a plurality of subject positions to adopt.
Notes

6. It should be noted that the journal Paradoxa defines “paraliterature” as fictional works which exist outside the canon of accepted genres, such as science fiction. I have not encountered the use of the word paraliterary elsewhere.
8. See Muecke’s biography on the website for the Transforming Cultures research program at UTS: http://www.transforming.cultures.uts.edu.au/


19 “Bodies of Words”. 1.

20 This quote is from the editorial for volume 4, number 10 of *Paradoxa*, reproduced on the journal’s website at: http://paradoxa.com/excerpts/4-10intro.htm
Light and bass; the fever pulse. The synthesizer shimmers, strawberry sweetheart and plastic. Cigarette smoke hangs; a stinging, drowning haze. Breathing through it is a struggle, my mouth open. Sweat drips from the ceiling, mingling with my own, running down, damp tendrils clinging to my cheeks. A torrent of feedback pounds my ears. Railings and elbows crowd my ribcage. A great mass, palms raised in belief, we heave

Against the stage.
Here a creeping tiger stalks,
Charged with his own beauty.
He is Jarvis Cocker:
A devastating one liner
Delivered with
Arched brow and
Painful cheekbones.

Beneath the lipgloss and snake hips
Lie dirt and menace.
Beneath that
Lies what saves us.

On his spider legs, Jarvis crawls
Towards ME
Hissing
About feeling uncomfortable standing only in your
Underwear.
Stabs his finger
Electric
He says:
There’s No Escaping
The Fact That
I'm A Girl
And He's
A Boy.

For an instant, his eyes
Are too real,
My stomach shrinks.

It's so black outside it feels like there's no land and no sky, just the four of us in this little rusty hatchback hurtling through space and time. My best friend Claire's driving, listening to us all crapping on and beaming her big generous smile; her boyfriend Rowan, crouched in the front, unconsciously cradling his skateboard like a proud Mum and gazing adoringly at Claire; Nickers, knees up in the back with me, luggage where our feet should be, her freckled face screwed up and announcing in a loud silly baby voice—

"This weekend is gonna rock like nothing else, awright? Wait till you meet my Dad, he rocks, he's so cool. Everyone calls him Ruffy, cos he's rough as" she snorts at the joke.

"You're so Aussie, Nickers," I tell her, knowing she'll take it as a compliment.

"Well that's what it's like in the country. You guys think I'm Aussie, wait till you meet some real Mt Beauty bogans, wait till you meet my Mum in her tracky-dacks and her moccies."

"What's her name, Shazza or something?" grins Rowan over his shoulder.

"Cheryl!" Nickers and I squeal. Claire laughs at us, without losing her quiet focus on the road. Being near her makes my heart ache.

Lulled by the sweaty warmth of the interior, I rest my forehead on the cool window pane and let headlights pass me by like comets.

I held Claire's hand on her first date with Rowan, a few weeks back. She was too shy to meet him alone. The three of us hung out in this plush red bar in the city; Claire was driving, so Rowan and I shared the bottle of wine. Another time, the two of them swung by my place in the hatchback, Claire hanging her head out the window—

"Hey Mandy! Wanna come to the movies?"
I bolted up my driveway and scrambled into the back seat.

"Hi Rowan, how's it going?"
"Cool."
"So what are we going to see?"
Claire told me once that Rowan had said if he wasn’t going out with her, he’d probably want to date me.

Afterwards I felt hyper and started showing off, careering around the empty carpark and mimicking scenes from the flick. They stood together and laughed at me. I tip-toed up to them, like a silent movie villain, whisked Rowan’s skateboard out from under his arm and took off with it, cackling. Claire jumped straight into her car, revved the engine and sped after me. I was cornered.

“Alright, alright, I give up,” hands in the air, skateboard relinquished to Rowan’s loving attention. But Claire was still rolling with the game. As I stepped into the car, it lurched forward, knocking my elbow painfully. Horrified, she leaped out, smothering me in a bear hug.

“Oh Manda, Mandy, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, are you OK?” Arms around me, she peered into my eyes, concerned, guilty.

“It’s alright, I’m OK, really,” I smiled. “It’s just my elbow.”

“Ohhh, sorry sweetie,” she held me tight, I closed my eyes, allowed her to wrap me up. Her body was warm through the fluffy mohair. My face rested in her smooth sweet hair. Her breath was like faintly sour lollies.

Later, we dropped Rowan off at the station. As the train trundled in he looked at me, then looked at Claire. He kissed her goodbye, lightly on the lips, hands around her waist. I watched, imagining he was kissing me, our noses getting in the way, wondered what his saliva would taste like. The two of them released each other, and Rowan turned to look at me again.

“Bye Amanda,” he said, stepping forward, leaning his doughy white moon face towards me. Our eyes cinched. He paused, inches from my face. I raised my eyebrows at him. He offered me a puzzled look in exchange.

“Bye, Rowan,” I said, holding his gaze. He stepped back, entered the carriage, and waving from the yellow lit window, was gone.

“I thought he was going to kiss you then,” Claire laughed.

“So did I,” I said.

Then, slowly, “actually, I think I wanted him to.”

“You should have!”

“What, like you wouldn’t care?” I grinned at her. She shrugged.

“ Probably not.”

We sniggered and she put her arm around my shoulders.

“I’m so so sorry for bumping you with the car.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry, it was worth it to get hugs off you.”

“Amanda! You can get hugs off me anytime you want.” She hugged me again.

“But Rowan’s there,” I complained to her shoulder. “I don’t want to get in your way. Don’t you mind me muscling in on your dates all the time?”
“No,” she snorted. “Don’t worry about Rowan, he’s just a stupid boy.”

Arriving at Nickers’ place at last, we pull up beneath low rain-heavy branches. Drops shake over my head as I emerge from the overhang. I stand up straight, reaching my hands up to the brilliant heavens, stretching out my back and inhaling air like ice. Mt Beauty.

Nickers’ Mum, in her nightie and moccasins, greets her disapprovingly at the flywire door.

“After midnight, Nicolette? Well, better late than never, I suppose.”

She reserves smiles for the rest of us. Her steps are heavy down the short hallway as she shows me where the toilet is.

Taped to the pine-lined wall inside the bathroom is a cheesy old poster of a blonde girl playing tennis in a minidress, pulled up so you can see her scratching her bum. I slide the door open, catching Nickers walking past me in the hall.

“Nickers, what the fuck?” I burst out.

She doesn’t return my mirth, and with a stony face she says simply “It’s my Dad’s.” I can see I’ve done something wrong, but I don’t know how to fix it, so I say nothing, and she walks away.

Nickers has her bravado back in the little yellow kitchen. Waving her spatula she fries up a mountain of bacon and eggs, spilling out stories of Mt Beauty Boganism and laughing at all her own jokes. We eat our midnight feast around the kitchen table under warm orange lights and a framed poster of Mick Jagger. Godzilla plays on the telly, then turns into music videos, flickering over our faces as we lie curled up in the darkened lounge room, Nickers on the couch, Claire, Ro and I side by side on rubber mattresses. The telly is switched off, and Claire and Ro roll up together beneath the blankets, leaving me a lonely island in a rubber sea. But Rowan reaches out and takes my hand, drawing me into the huddle. Drifting into sleep, I breathe in his rich male scent, I can sense the hair on his arms and the strength of his muscles.

The next morning, for a laugh, Nickers cuts my long, black hair, chopping off big chunks out on the verandah, the mountains looming grey and clean above.

Propped against each other, Ro and Claire press advice on us –

“No, shorter on that side, it’s uneven.”

“Leave the fringe as it is, yeah, like that. Oh, maybe shorter.”

At last the kitchen scissors are still. I stand up and take a first, anxious look at my reflection in the window. In the glass my silhouette is long and lean. My hair is very short, rough, cropped. It ... looks ... good! It really does.
Short and funky and sexy and, I don’t know, I feel kind of dangerous all of a sudden.

Later that day, when we’re heading out and I’m wearing a black shirt and jeans and I put on a long line seventies leather jacket, Claire ruffles my hair and gives me a funny smile.

“You look like Jarvis,” she says.

Jarvis. He wasn’t always cool. In Sheffield, England, circa 1987, he was too tall, too thin. He wore spectacles like safety goggles, perched on his too-large nose. He was an obscure, overwrought twenty-three-year-old adolescent, all big woolly quiff and nervous, long-fingered hands.

Tonight he’s at a party in someone’s flat. Not just anyone in fact, but a girl he likes. The flat is tiny and cheap. Still, it’s flashy and spacious compared to the cold, dark hole that Jarv inhabits. Dark because the bedsit’s single light bulb blew last week and he hasn’t been bothered to replace it yet; cold because he can’t afford to heat it (he’s between jobs).

The key pieces of furniture in his flat are a yellowish charity-shop sofa, a sizable dent in the wall (inherited from the previous tenant), a mammoth hi-fi, and the lingering odour of a youth misspent.

The girl who’s throwing the party is named Susan. She’s an art college graduate, a receptionist for a company that manufactures insulator batts. In her spare time she still paints; the walls of her flat are lined with canvases, all acid colours and geometric shapes. Her guests, squeezed between the sofa, coffee table and refrigerator, loudly bemoan all things Thatcher, spilling wine on the carpet and nodding their heads to The Smiths.

Jarvis hates The Smiths.

“Essentially, I’ve been doing the same thing as The Smiths for years with my band Pulp, only darker.” He informs a bewildered group hanging round the kitchenette.

“I mean, of course it’s excellent when an indie band actually gets recognised, it’s just that it’s so typical that it’s a band that’s really easy to listen to that gets famous. The English public just doesn’t want to be challenged anymore.”

Perching on a stool in the studio, Jarvis croons intently into the microphone, his eyes scrunched shut in concentration and his hands clutching the headphones. The other band members roll their eyes behind his back.

He imagines he is Nick Cave, or Scott Walker, projecting his melancholy soul into the hearts of adoring listeners. Gathering despair like
storm clouds he sings deeper than his natural range, flattening the notes. As the song reaches its climax, he wails:

"And I'll curse my pride!
Curse my pride!
Curse my stupid pride!"

Susan's standing by the open window finishing a cigarette. Jarvis releases the captive audience in the kitchenette and ambles nonchalantly towards her. He retrieves a self-rolled cigarette from his pocket.

"Hi," he greets her, propping himself against the window sill and lighting up.

Susan thinks he's "a bit weird, but sweet" and asks him to roll her one too.

"Here's one I prepared earlier," he says, thinking you smooth bastard, and reaching into his pocket for a second cigarette, rolled at home with this exact moment in mind. His fingers fumble. I left it behind, he realises in horror, blushing.

"Oh. I thought I had an extra one, sorry," he explains, and fills the awkward silence by fiddling with cigarette papers and tobacco.

"How's the band going?" she asks, charitably.

"Oh, yeah, great thanks," he smiles at her. "Actually we're releasing another album this year."

And he's off. At first Susan receives the monologue amiably, but it quickly becomes evident that she finds her fingernails more interesting than his band. "Sweetness" only gets you so far, especially when you're "a bit weird."

For God's sake, shut up, Jarvis, he thinks.

"Do you want to see my Spiderman impression?" he asks her brightly.

She's back. "Spiderman? What, can you climb walls or something?"

"Well I wish I could. I mean, I think that would be a really useful skill in this modern age."

She laughs. "Do you? Why's that then?"

"Well, before the industrial revolution being Spiderman wouldn't have done you much good; there wasn't really anything big to climb up then, just haystacks and the odd barn, I suppose. But with, like, the advent of the big city, and skyscrapers and so forth, it's become a real pain having to walk around things all the time. I mean, if you were Spiderman, you wouldn't have to bother with streets and corners and things like normal people, you could just - woosh - out come the cobwebs and right up the buildings and over them."

Miraculously, she finds this funny. "I suppose it would be good if you wanted to spy on people in flats," she suggests.
"Oh, well, I do that already."
More laughter. Yes!
The night wears on. Jarvis drinks a lot. Tangerine hexagons and pink trapezoids swirl before his eyes. Morrissey stops warbling and someone puts on Cyndi Lauper. The sofa is pushed against the wall, and the girls start dancing. Jarvis lolls in a corner, sulking. Susan has stopped paying attention to him; there's a handsome geezer from London who's giving her the eye. Why do girls go for smarmy bastards like him? he wonders, and even slurrily raises the topic with a couple of blokes standing nearby. They look up for a moment then go back to their conversation.
Jarvis shrugs his shoulders at them.
"Susan," he calls out to her. She doesn't hear him.
"Susan!" His voice suddenly sounds very loud. Susan turns round, puzzled.
"What is it?"
Other people are watching now. He feels a bit silly, but ploughs on.
"Err, I never showed you my Spiderman impression."
"Oh that. I thought you were joking."
Was he joking?
"No, you'll see, I can climb up walls!" he laughs, and stumbles towards the window.
People exchange glances.
He heaves himself up onto the window sill.
"Jarvis, you're not really going to do that are you? Shit. It's three storeys. You're pissed, just go and sit down or something." Susan speaks quietly.
Crouched on the edge of the sill, he turns to reassure her, saying, "No, I was only joking - "
Loses his balance and falls.
There's a scream. He clings to the side of the building, his legs swing in empty black air.
Susan, terrified, appears at the window. The party noises have stopped, and other faces materialise beside Susan's. Someone laughs, covering their mouth.
His fingers are stretched white with pain. They're attached to a ledge of crumbling decorative brickwork, serving a functional purpose for the first time in its history. There's about three feet between him and the window above, and a thirty-odd foot drop to the road below.
The shock clears his mind. He breathes the cold, sharp air quickly in and out.
His feet graze the side of the building, searching for a foot-hold, but
the fancy brickwork has run out and the wall is smooth. “I can’t climb back up,” he whispers.

A tangle of willing arms descends from the window. One hefty looking bloke leans halfway out, stretching his hand down to Jarvis with all his might.

“Come on mate, give us your hand,” he strains, attempting an encouraging look. But it’s no use. No one can stretch quite far enough.

This is really it. The only way is down. There’s no chance he’ll be able to drag himself back up to that flat. He’s going to fall, and if he’s very very lucky, he won’t die, just break every single bone in his body.

It’s not fair, he thinks. This is no way to die. He’s always imagined that his death would be profound, dignified, an event; tragic and touching and generally well-staged. But this is tragic in completely the wrong sense: dangling foolishly from the side of a building after a few too many pints and a sad stunt to impress a girl. Where’s the dramatic soundtrack? Where’s the meaning in it all? Twenty-three years of loafing about ending in a totally ignoble death. The kind of death you read about in the papers for light relief.

So be it.

He shuts his eyes tight, unfurls his aching fingers, and drops.

It’s alright Jarvis.

You poor thing, lying on the road with your body all broken. But can’t you smell it in the damp bitumen? Something’s changed at last.

All of a sudden you’ve stopped assuming there’ll be a happy ending.

And when your bones finally heal up, you’ll decide to pursue a slightly more sensible goal than pop music: education. And then, ironically, you’ll begin to make music people actually want to listen to. I promise.

By 1995 you will be a pop superstar, a national icon. You’ll headline Glastonbury. You’ll get arrested for mooning Michael Jackson live on television. Girls will want to shag you. In fact, you’ll become so famous you’ll wish you weren’t anymore.

Of course, the adulation won’t last forever (it is pop we’re talking about here, Jarvis) but the point is, you’ll make it – your mark. Just wait and see.

Back in Melbourne, Claire got sick of Rowan. She just stopped calling him.

I ran into him after a few days of this. He seemed bewildered:

“Do you think Claire wants to break up with me?”

“No! Of course not.” I don’t think he believed me.

She wouldn’t ring him, so I did.

“Uh, it turns out you were right, Rowan. Claire doesn’t want to see you
anymore. Sorry about what I said the other day, I didn’t realise.”

His voice was wounded. “I don’t get it. What did I do wrong?”

“I don’t know, Rowan. I don’t really understand it either. I guess sometimes this stuff just happens.”

“But, I thought she really ... I mean everything was just, so ... the four of us, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“It probably sounds stupid, but I thought we’d be like that forever”. “But I’m sure we’ll all stay friends. It’s just that Claire doesn’t want to be your girlfriend anymore. Just give her some space for a while, and then she’ll probably give you a call, and we’ll all be back to normal.”

I thought I’d better go see him and find out if he was coping. Nickers hadn’t seen him since Mt Beauty, hadn’t even called him. Because of Claire. I felt sorry for him.

I sat next to him on his bed. Very, very close, our shoulders just touching. I played with the elasticized tops of my black over-the-knee socks. Stretching them slowly with one finger and letting them spring back around my thighs. I brushed his shoe with the tip of my own and glanced at him, sideways through my lashes. His fingers were grateful on my cheek. He kissed me with fleshy wet lips. I didn’t breathe. I kept my eyes open, and when he stopped kissing me he opened his. They were out of focus, big and sad and watery blue.

I went round to Claire’s place the following night. She was blow-drying her fringe in the bathroom mirror, trying to get it to sweep smoothly across her face in a perfect imitation of a Sixties Mod girl.

While I was waiting for her to finish with the dryer, I played with the liquid eyeliner. I’m not very good with make-up, and this stuff was messy and hard to put on right. I pressed up close to the mirror, trying to squint through one eye while keeping the other shut, but I ended up getting silver blobs on my eyelashes and dribbling it all over my cheek.

Dabbing at the drips with damp cotton wool, I realised how close I was to the mirror. My face was all I could see; it overwhelmed me, so pale, vast and boneless.

I stepped back in disgust. Immediately the warm cedar bathroom returned with the gentle noises from the loungeroom nearby; Claire’s family talking quietly and watching TV. Claire was patiently combing her fringe over her forehead, her face fixed with concentration.

I watched her for a moment, then announced, “I kissed Rowan.”

She stopped combing and looked at me carefully.
She was silent for ages. I chewed on my bottom lip.

“Aren’t you angry?” I asked at last.

Her mouth squirmed and her eyes roved the walls, settling on the ceiling.

Finally, she said “No, not angry. Not really. I guess I kind of saw it was going to happen anyway.” She looked at me. “If he makes you happy, well,” she smiled and shrugged.

“I’m such a terrible best friend.”

“No you’re not, Mandy, you’re great!”

“I’m a bitch.”

“Don’t be silly,” she kissed me on the cheek, squeezed me, and smirked, “Truth is, I don’t want him anyway, man. If you want him, you can have him.”

I couldn’t help laughing at this. “He is kind of a disposable boy, isn’t he?” She rolled her eyes in agreement. “He’s just, always ... there.”

Claire picked up the silver eyeliner from the sink.

“Let me show you how to put this on.” She shook her head at me. “What’s that mess on your face? You haven’t got a clue, have you?”

She unscrewed the cap and placed one hand on my shoulder.

“Now hold still and close your eyes.” Breathing softly and close to my face, she stretched my left eyelid flat with her thumb and deftly applied a fine wet line, then did the same to the other eye. She smiled at me, one hand on each of my shoulders.

“Perfect.”

Tonight I’m going to see Rowan, for the last time. The city rushes, gleaming with neon moonlight. I’m striding down Lonsdale Street to the skate park. I’ve got my walkman on, Pulp, of course, and Jarvis is heavy breathing in my ears, whispering about agony and revenge, and about “the way that things that aren’t supposed to feel good, sometimes do.” The whole street pulsates with the bittersweet synthesizers. Petrol fumes and the scent of cigarettes, glace cherries, and cheap, sharp wine infuse the crisp air. Emerald shards crunch into the concrete beneath my polished footsteps. Orange beams herald the growl of Friday night motors in sleek metal bodies. My long leather jacket slaps satisfyingly against my thighs.

Rowan is waiting for me at the tram stop outside the skate park, I see him across the road as I wait for the green man. He doesn’t notice me. He looks anxious, dumpy in his baggy clothes, the ubiquitous skateboard propped against his leg. The lights change and he sees me walking towards him, gives me a pathetic wave. I flash him a smile, but feel sickened. It’s not really fair to do this to him, I think, but somehow it seems like he deserves it.
CRAZY LOVE

Weighed down, taxiing, her heart bothers her. No turning back. Big hole where the door was, wind surging in, tin sheds rush past then a lightening, grass behind, below. Grins all round. Cars, animals reduced to toys his hands that woman's naked body a train line intricate patterns, dams. They've been warned about dams. The instructor shouts but she's tired of advice. She knows what she must do. Gaining height, circling.

Engine cuts. Number one nods, steps out onto the wing strut. Everything's stopped. Just wind hissing, puffed overalls cracking, the instructor's voice. A shadow passes, a shout swallowed by the wind. The back arch is feeble.

Her turn. No room for fear. She's had about enough of fear. Now she is spreadeagled, then she's away, sucked into a tunnel of gravity that bed falling kissing her stretch marks calling one thousand two thousand three thou ... wind stuffing her mouth what can she say gagging her shocking her back arch forgotten she thinks she hears herself screaming it can't be her. The static line rips her open with such a jerk her crash helmet slips forward, blinding her. Relief. Temporary end to confusion.

She shoves the helmet back, drifts, separate from the big picture, sees the canopy below, searches up, around, blue beyond dark circle, this brittle marionette laughing aloud out there where nobody can hear, laughing without certainty into the wind.

She adjusts toggles, tries steering towards the white cross. People dot the distance growing larger but she can't see him leaning against the bullbar, waiting. She hopes she's doing OK, watches out for fences, water, any unforeseen danger as the world comes into sharper focus. The ground really does rush up. His hands. Her body. She's going to hit hard.
MARK O’FLYNN

ON RECALLING THE SHOPPING COMPLEX VOTED UGLIEST BUILDING TWO YEARS RUNNING

Those small stunted suburbs have gone now where my father swam thirty short laps before work. The soft slop of his freestyle permeating dreams I brokered behind adolescent curtains. Gone, now, though geographically speaking every spare quarter-acre block where imagined massacres flourished has been built upon. Here a fence torn down; where once were trees there now exists a shopping complex to which all roads lead, bright as a distant city. The cattle tracks of my path to school buried under aggregate and gravel. I could spell the word asphalt before any other kid in class. Gone the paddocks where Bronwyn Maddox dared slap the great long sausage of the horse’s penis with a wooden ruler as we cringed on the safe side of the wire. Gone too the horses. Gone Bronwyn, also. The first gutter I lay drunk in. The short cuts and alleyways, creekbeds and misspent scenes of lust and torture, of which my mind is never free. Go then, you decrepit half-built suburbs buried under bitumen’s deep scar. Every adjective’s extreme.
Even the flooded quarry where we were warned never to swim for fear of repeating the prophetic drowning of our young classmate, unmarked but by barbecues.
Duckless.
Though the drifting oil slick’s spectrum, still the same.

My dad, he was a quarry man.
for the big screen TV
of weather,
the city’s hazy histogram
and the unsteady horizon.

But also nights:
a missing suburb
in sugary dark,
it’s capital
a small-scale city
of radar and eyes.

I like the way planes dwindle
to tail-lights, shed
their angry skins.

And every avenue ends in take-off.
Every poem begins
on the ground,
then is shot heavenward.
On a Suffolk beach I met the captain of the world’s first submarine. In green oilskins he marched towards me along a stretch of golden shingle. He seemed to come from nowhere. He hadn’t: I was simply not looking his way. I had been engrossed by the sight of strangely mesmerising North Sea currents, sending water surging in and out of what looked like a lagoon.

In impressive English the captain said the submarine, that designed by the Spaniard Isaac Peral, had gone aground in shingle. He said it was around the corner, behind the Martello tower to the south.

The complexion of the captain of the world’s first submarine was grey and blue and blotchy, as might be expected of someone habitually shut up in deep water. Serious and solemn, he adjured me to keep the presence of the vessel and its crew a secret. I agreed, not because I believed him but because I saw no immediate problem in agreeing. He told me he commanded the real thing, famous for its flawless trials of 1889 in the Bay of Cadiz.

We were standing in one of the world’s forgotten places, Shingle Street. Forgotten by people, by trees and sizeable animal life, and so by time itself.

It did not therefore seem strange that he should speak to me at length, and present the historical background to his sudden appearance. In a plot set in motion by Isaac Peral himself, the submarine had been appropriated in vengeance at the unappreciative naval authorities of the day, who wanted outrageous changes made to his design. If I cared to know the background, the captain said, Alfonso de la Pezuela, his great-grandfather and Isaac’s right-hand man, had switched the original for a 77-ton replica in 1914, as the great submarine was on its way to being mothballed in Cartagena. Charged with transporting the marvel, Señor de la Pezuela and his team of nine had made the switch in a cove close by Cadiz. The replica was taken on to Cartagena where, at his great-grandfather’s orders, its hull was filled with cement so that it would not budge again (the cementing,
carried out by night, was a further act of vengeance). The replica did move once, said the captain, although that was of no relevance to anything. It had been to Seville and back for a show, full of concrete and not the real thing. Now the impostor was back on stilts, on a plinth of cement with jets of water playing on its belly, on a forlorn esplanade in Cartagena.

He was sure I would not tell. Thousands upon thousands knew but had not told that the *Isaac Peral*, which he and the crew called *el cigarre*, had been travelling the coasts of Europe and North Africa for the best part of a century. Why had it? I asked. He took a sheet of paper from his jacket. In English were the ten questions most often asked him.

1. Why are you doing this?
   Because it is fun.
2. Why is it fun?
   There is a mission that makes it fun. The mission is to see that the whereabouts of the *Isaac Peral* do not become public knowledge.
3. But why is the boat not discovered?
   Because no one is looking for it.
4. How is it people nonetheless do not find out about what you’re doing?
   They do find out. But they do not tell. That would end the fun, and they respect that.
5. How do you survive?
   By research. We are experts at research. We research every place we want to go to. We find the inaccessible coves. We find the people who will help us with food and repairs and supplies.
6. Who are the crew?
   We are ten men, all relatives of the original ten men. We are not allowed to leave the submarine. We have chosen this life. The only other condition in selecting us is our height. Tall people are not suitable for submarines.
7. What happens to a crew member when he gets sick or old?
   Doctors must come on board. If a crew member is too sick or too old he is replaced by a son or another in his family.
8. So there are no women?
   No. The rules were made in 1914 and will not alter.
9. Isn’t it strange to be on your way for weeks at a time and have only sporadic contact to the outside world?
   Perhaps. We are old fashioned. We know this. But we keep up with technical developments because our research has to be the best. Recently, we were donated a laptop notebook. For that is our secondary mission, you might say: perfection in research.
10. How far can you travel?
396 kilometres at three knots, 284 at four knots, 132 at six knots.

He took back the paper. Now in its fifth edition, it was for information, not for copying. Having to photocopy papers ashore, he said without elaborating, had on occasions placed the crew in awkward situations. He said he would enjoy practising his English with me. He had been studying it ever since he had acquired an English grammar near Gibraltar. I put to him further questions. His name too was Alfonso, like his great-grandfather and compadre of Isaac Peral. Isaac had had many grudges against the government. He did not want el cigarre to be museumed like a stuffed steel animal. Hence the idea of the replica. The switch was extremely difficult to engineer, in every sense of this word. The Isaac Peral was 22 metres long and had a beam of 2.87 metres. In English these figures were 71 feet by nine.

We strolled on, towards the white coastguards’ cottages for which the hamlet of Shingle Street is best known, insofar as it is known at all. There customs officials worked and lived, I warned him, but he was unworried. Did he not miss his family? I asked. Yes, he said. That was the price. Everything had its price.

What about sex? I said. Sex? he said, as if hearing of an invention he might have missed. Women, I said. He got out another sheet of paper with English words. Women, I said, wimin, an unphonetic word. Mujeres, I tried in Spanish. Ah, ah, he said. We have no, no tengo.

Dressed in the same oilskin green, another man came up almost running, his presence announced by the chatch chatch on the shingle. Ah Ramón, said the captain – who abruptly turned his attention to the water skating across the shoals, the same sea-scape he had caught me observing – diga las cosas al este hombre, talk to this man, Ramón, I must study the North Sea one moment. Si capitán, said Ramón saluting before adapting this salute to flick back a great flap of hair. The mid-length style of his hair minded me of the 1970s. He asks about women, said the captain. Mujeres.

Ramón and I walked slowly. We are ten men, señor, he said. So sometimes we go and find women. Except Oscar. Oscar is our chief navigator, although probably the youngest such in the whole of Spain. We have him not because he is good at navigating, he is not good, we have him because his family threw him out. He wants men, there are always men who want men. He wants us too, most of us, but he cannot have us. Oscar has to wait, like the rest of us.

The captain’s footsteps trudged up in the shingle.
Do you know women here? said Ramón to me under his breath.
Women? I whispered back. I don't.
What? said Ramón. I can't hear you.
I don't know a soul, I said loudly, I'm not from round here. I'm just here
for a conference. A conference on tree care.
Care? Care? said Ramón.
The captain joined us.
Good, he declared without specifying what he was referring to. I hope
your questions have been answered, he said. Ramón speaks English well,
indeed we all do. We have nightly spelling bees.
We made chitch chotch sounds as we headed for the tiny café besides the
cottages. A chill gust accompanied us, causing us to pull our coats more
tightly, as a front of dark and powerful clouds moved up majestically from
the south.

I bid the captain sit at the only table, but Ramón stood staring at the TV
behind the counter. I glanced at the screen: a lady on all fours was
scrubbing at a paw-marked kitchen floor.

Women! said Ramón expectantly.

Hardly had we reached at the menus when two men in official caps
walked in. Are you officers of the customs? the captain asked. Indeed, they
said. The captain explained his difficulties with the submarine while
immediately handing them the paper with the questions and the answers.
We have nothing to declare, he added. He turned to the counter and
ordered three teas.

Are you from the institute? one man asked the captain.
I have told you, he replied.
It was my turn to be given a questioning look.
I'm out walking, I said. I'm attending a conference of foresters at
Snape.

I know, he said. You still have your badge on, Mr Squires.

Meanwhile Ramón kept out of the way, twirling a stand of postcards
with towns along the Suffolk coast.

If you really have a submarine round the corner, the other said finally,
it will almost certainly float off with the next tide. As submarines do. I
suppose you have engines. You are bound to have engines.

Of course. Two electrical motors each with thirty horses' power. Six
hundred and thirteen batteries. Two propellers.

Three, Ramón interposed.

All right, three, said the captain. Two vertical propellers and one
horizontal. We now have a spare propeller on board as well. Please give me my paper back. Thank you.

If, the man repeated at the door.
They left.

If? said the captain to me.
A treasured English word, I said, if. We even have a poem called that.
I have not heard of that, said Alfonso puzzled. Tú, Ramón?
No.
Our country is nonetheless full of poems, Alfonso remarked.
Not nonetheless, corrected Ramón, however.
They did not believe you, I said. So I don’t know what they will be thinking.

No, the captain agreed. But if they are right about the tide, all we can do is wait. But I think they know nothing about submarines.

I must have this card to send to my mother, said Ramón. It is called “the house in the clouds”. Look. She will not believe this building.

Well good luck, I said.

You are not going? said Alfonso.

I should. I have a seminar. It’s several miles by car.

Ramon stopped the postcards twirling, his hand on a black-and-white photo of what I guessed was Benjamin Britten. You have a car, señor, he said desperately.

Wait, said the captain. Do you not want to see our great ship? Our pride? I know it is not at its best, resting as it is, beached. But you will not have this chance one other time. You can ask the other woodsmen for their notes. Like in the school. But you cannot see the Isaac Peral again. We don’t dock in the same place twice.

We are not docking, Ramón commented. We misjudged the currents.

It was a complicated situation Ramón. You cannot imagine, señor, he said to me, how difficult manoeuvring through the oilfields is.

Oscar, Ramón remonstrated, Oscar is to blame. Oscar was looking at pictures of men instead of his tables, I saw him. His tables were upside down.

Yes, yes, said the captain. Let us not go through that again. So you do not want to see ... the very deck where the queen of Spain, Maria Cristina, once walked and stood ...

No. Well yes, I said hesitantly. It would be interesting, of course. Highly ... An extraordinary vessel. And you being captain, but ...

I see. It is for you to choose, señor Squize. Off my back is no skin.
But I really should go.
Yes, you are leaving. Goodbye. You will keep this secret.
Oh yes.
Adios.
I left. The North Sea was still sluicing back and forth across the shoals. Short sharp waves crowded on each other’s backs. I looked left and right, taking in the strange beauty of the shore called Shingle Street. No soul was in sight. The sky was closed with the cloud from the south. It started raining. I looked back to the little café. Ramón waved from inside. He beckoned frantically. He came out chattering fast.
Please, señor. I do not know how to say this. I think our capitán does not want to be alone, but he cannot say. We men are with ourselves all the time, we need, I need ...
He pulled out a map.
What about this place? he said. Ipswich.
I drew a blank and said: You got me there.
Got me? Las chicas? He looked up at me hopefully.
I said I didn’t know.
Please come back, señor. Talk to our capitán Alfonso, el pobre. Please.
I agreed, I don’t know why.
Despite the vast empty acreage of the beach, he stepped aside. After you, he implored.
The captain, whose complexion had darkened in the meantime, as if taking on the light and darkness of the weather beyond the window pane, looked up astonished. He had two charts spread across the table.
Yes?
Yes, I replied, not knowing exactly what this meant.
He rolled the charts together. And please, he said, you will call me Alfonso.
I sat back down and ordered more tea. I offered to pay for Ramón’s postcard. Ramón said he would have to go back for his address book. Wait, Alfonso said.
Alfonso suggested we play some hands of Bézique to fill the time.
The time?
The time the crew would need to make things properly shipshape for a visitor, of course.
And Bézique?
It was a favourite of his great-grandfather’s. I had no idea how to play, but he sent Ramón to fetch the cards. This game is not so difficult, he said. After a month or two you can maybe win. It is my joke. Go go, Ramón, go. And take the charts. And salute.

Go! After we play, I take you and show you the Isaac Peral. We are so proud of him. In any case we are rid of Ramón now. That Ramón, much stupidness.

I voiced the notion that the captain might be glad to get away from the whole of the crew.

They are good men, he said. I would trust them with my life. I would trust them with the world's first submarine.

There was the sound of more scrunching steps.

It was Oscar, not Ramón.

Why did Ramón not bring the cards?

Blond, young, his dark blond eyebrows prominent, Oscar broke down in tears and set his head on the table.

Come on, said Alfonso. This is no good.

They are so cruel to me, Oscar said, they say I must go. Ramón says he cannot go backwards and forwards all day, he is not a delivery boy. I must go. I must run fast along the stones or they will throw them at me. I have no friends on the Isaac Peral. He knows? he added suddenly as he became aware of me.

Yes he knows. He is coming to see el cigarre.

You are from here, señor? I want to stay here. I have my passport with me. I want asylum in the United Kingdom.

Pst! said Alfonso, that is not possible. Asylum asylum, wherever we go all I hear is asylum. If you stay, we all go under. Collect yourself.

Blond Oscar sighed loudly, took out his passport and looked at the first page.

Can I stay and watch you play?

You may, said the man who told me he was the captain of the world's first sub-marine. It may not be so interesting for you: I shall win and win. Here are the cards, señor. I know all the English terms. Royal marriage, sequence, double bézique, ten for the seven, ten for the last trick. These are points, these tens, this is why we have these scorers that go round and round. They are very beautiful, are they not? See how this purple is set against this yellow. Such a sense of colour. You know our Velázquez.

You don't mean Velázquez, interrupted Oscar. You are crazy, he said for my benefit. Ramón says we are a team of crazies. El equipo crónico. Read this paper and tell me what you make of us, he said handing me a paper like the one Alfonso had.
Ramón Ramón, said Alfonso angrily.

Look at this photograph señor, said Oscar back with his passport. Do you think it looks like me?

By now the captain had the table filled with upturned cards. A double bézique, he said presenting two queens of spades and two jacks of diamonds. This is the best you can get – five hundred points. *Quíntientos*, as they say on the Canary Islands. Yes there are two packs. Very beautiful. We cut. Now I cut. The king of hearts. I deal.

It is impossible to know if I was fortunate with the cards, or if the captain had overreached himself, but he lost the series to two thousand points. Alfonso turned on Oscar. I told you, he said to Oscar, we should have stayed in the oilfield until we had a sensible plan. I am not the capitán, retorted Oscar, I advise but you decide, you are Alfonso de la Pezuela. Go leave me, he said to Oscar, may the dirt of birds fall on your head. Oscar agreed to go out and study the North Sea waves. But talk to no one, he ordered.

Alone again, Alfonso wanted a second series, this time to two thousand five hundred. I want to see the Isaac Peral, I said trying to turn our talk in that direction. According to this sheet of paper shown me by Oscar, I said, the vessel could only accommodate a crew of six, not ten.

No, ten, said Alfonso as he flicked the thousands pointer on his score card round and round. It says this but this is not true.

Look on the paper. Don’t you want to see for yourself?

I know this paper. Why should I want to see it again?

Does it have a periscope?

Of course.

What about this, *a chemical system to oxygenate the air*?

Yes. Please deal. Like I said, first two cards, then three, then two again.

Eight.

*Three torpedoes.*

No no. No torpedoes. Not any more. Not since 1914. They are in cement at the end of the esplanade the *Paseo de Alfonso XII*. We put them in our replica and hoped one day the hot sun would blow up the *paseo*. I am joking. We are strictly peace-loving. The Soviet authorities know we are there but they know we are peace-loving and they leave us.

They are not called Soviet now, I told him.

No? He shrugged. It is on account of such strategies, he resumed, we can continue our mission. It is your turn to pick up a new card. You cannot hope to do well without eight cards to play from. Ah, my trick again. Yes, we are peace-loving. Isaac was a naval officer but he turned his back on the
navy. We do not consort with navies, defence departments. The military-industrial complex, he said pleased with the expression. We are not going to sink anyone’s fleet. You keep your Francisco Drake. Miral!, if we had not been peace-loving we would not have agreed to be shown on our Spanish postage stamps.

You negotiated with the post office?

The Peral Post Stamp. That was a long time ago.

But the Americans must know of you too.

I don’t believe so. I explain something. There are fish who make mistakes. The barracuda sees your shiny wristwatch and thinks that is a lovely swarm of fish, I must eat that. The shark swims under you and sees you with your surfboard. He thinks that is a lovely seal, I must eat that. Now America sees our submarine and says, that is a wreck, a whale, a piece of oil rig. The shark: the shark bites and tries out what he sees. Bites a bit, then he notices this seal is horrible, so he stops. Do the Americans, however? No, they don’t. They don’t check, they are so sure they are right. They are the shark who does not check. Don’t you agree, Oscar?

Oscar’s gone. You sent him out. Perhaps he’s gone back on board?

Of course, how stupid, the captain said, I’m so used to having him around. They’re always there, all the time. Oscar has his boo-hoo, boo-hoo, every time boo-hoo and then it’s over; Isaac is his home. Asylum! Ah, the ace of spades. Very valuable indeed. Look, I play the nine of spades. You cannot take that, you would be stupid to take that. I win the trick and I get the ace for my seven. You see how it works. A most beautiful game. Oscar should not have given you his paper. I am afraid I must confiscate it. You will give it to me, please?

After we have gone to the ship.

Very well. After this series we shall go.

The tide is advancing, I pointed out.

Yes, he said. Four aces. A hundred points. You will not catch me this time. Where is your forest?

Losing the second series, Alfonso left the café brooding. The rain held off. The shingle was still golden although the sky was overcast. Listen, I said with a hand to one ear, the stones are moving at the mouth of the lagoon. It is not a lagoon, said Alfonso, it is a river. We discussed the movements of the local coastline. I told Alfonso about Dunwich, its medieval centre now submerged. Where today the main road leads straight over the cliff. You could explore ancient Dunwich, I suggested. Alfonso was not greatly interested. Our spotlights are not strong under water, he replied. The sands are moving every-where. In the North Sea we are sailing over a desert.
The Martello tower to the south was up for sale. Alfonso ignored it. Now he was ignoring everything. He said he was preoccupied by the task of refloating. It was dangerous to refloat a submarine, it could easily get damaged. It could even break in two. It would be a hazardous manoeuvre. Not everyone could stay up safely up on deck.

I nodded.

In truth submarining was a hard life, he continued. You had to suppress fear of small spaces. Fear of slicks of oil. Of having nowhere to go when you had to get out. There were no windows, nowhere to jump. Even the captain's bunk was impossibly narrow. He had not turned over in a bed for eighteen months. It was like sleeping on a plank. Death in a submarine was excruciating; life in one ...

Slamming us from nowhere, a new wind blew his sentence to a standstill. We paused to get adjusted to the bluster.

Soon, he assured me, we would be rounding the spit where the vessel was. First we would see the conning tower - the ancient conning tower, like a funnel - then the grey upper half. Then, depending on the tide, the red lower half and, although beached, something of the glory of the great cigar. The wind dropped as we turned the corner.

There were clumps of reeds in what also looked like a lagoon.

The captain shivered.

This is wrong, he said. This is not as it should be.

In what way?

There was not nearly so much water here before, he replied.

This really is a lagoon, I said firmly.

I know what's in your mind, he said suddenly, bitterly. It's obvious. You think there is no Isaac Peral. But I must tell you this is of no importance to me, none at all. What does it matter what you think? What does it matter, now or later?

I suppose not.

At least you have not seen her beached. I said you would see her glory, but in truth el cigarre on land is not a pretty sight.

Alfonso, I said turning to face him, I think you owe me an explanation. Alfonso shrugged.

I do not think this, he said.

Let me guess, I said. You are going to say they have left you behind.

Yes, they have left me behind. But why are you angry? It is a difficult, terrible situation.

Having missed the seminar, I settled for watching the currents cross the golden shingle one last time.
So where are you from Alfonso? I said. What are you doing here?
I told you, it is of no importance.

We looked at the sections of North Sea water, great tarpaulins of grey and yellow. Like a compass needle, the captain turned to gaze beyond the lagoon entrance. He was facing the direction of Belgium, where a small wave rippled as at first four struts, then the periscope, then the ancient conning tower broke the surface.
**LUCY DOUGAN**

**“I FIND A SPACE FOR IT SOMEHOW”: NEW POETRY**

What kind of space does poetry occupy – do poets occupy – in our culture? In *Bestseller* (Vagabond Press, 2001), MTC Cronin is blunt:

> But this poetry I speak of  
> which has the stillness  
> of a leaf or a road  
> Which has a loudspeaker in its hand  
> Which has more relaxed glitter  
> than a skyful of country stars  
> Remains as still and quiet and reticent  
> as the poet would be  
> if asked in a public place  
> “Are you a poet?” (“These Days”)

All books of poetry, taken as a whole, represent an argument about the available public spaces for poetry, an argument about what it means to be a poet. This argument may not be openly articulated, as it is in Cronin's book, but it is carried on just the same, as an argument, poets enter into with other poems and poets, with other alien and familiar poetic practices, or with other expressive forms. Much recent Australian poetry, a little embarrassed, perhaps, to be asked that question in public – “Are you a poet?” – has been shaped by just such an argument with the dominant expressive form, narrative fiction. There seems little doubt that the ascendancy of fiction in the mainstream literary marketplace has had a profound influence on the direction of Australian poetry. With established outlets for poetry shrinking (and new publishers, armed with recent cheaper desktop technologies, proliferating), more poets have been encouraged to try their hands at a novel, or have turned to verse novels, or have become conscious that a collection of poems must have some greater narrative coherence. The poem as a unit of meaning is therefore likely to
exist in (an often productive) tension with the sequence of which it is a part.

Deborah Westbury's fourth book *Flying Blind* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002) is a good example of a collection shaped by a controlling narrative. Images and situations are shared across poems and these interconnections allow meanings to resonate beyond individual poems. This careful building of linkages creates not only a narrative in time, but also a sense of space and generosity.

The title of the collection keys in subtly to a cluster of images and preoccupations — with eyes and watching, navigating and being lost, panicking — which converge in the impressive title poem (placed in the very middle of the book) that charts the fatal plane crash of J. F. Kennedy Jnr in 1999. In this poem Westbury moves deftly between the reportage of a public tragedy (how more public could one get than the Kennedys?) and a meditation on how it is that we lose our way. Seven lines in, the poem tells us that "we cannot see it". Watchers are framed within watchers: from the narrator who surveys the "moonless" night-sky through an attic window "full of clouds", to the coastguard mapping the sea-bed for the wreck of the plane, to the cursed Kennedy clan, ("gathered/ for a wedding./They look up, they look away") and finally to Ted Kennedy, who, in trying to navigate J. F. K. Jnr's final moments, remembers the child photographed at his father's state funeral:

... unable to reconcile the evidence
of absence, the blankness out there and the false horizon
in front of him —

at the end, the fear for which there is no answer.

After a sea of words describing impeded vision, the narrator returns to scanning the unreadable sky and closes the poem with an apt and arresting image that ties together the poem's themes of fate, flight and disorientation:

you follow news of the search, your mind
wandering after birds — whether they fly on nights
like this, where they go to die, and if, opening
a ribcage smaller than your hand, you'd find
a gyroscope there besides the heart
and a tiny arrow, spinning around, confusedly.

The conjunction of narrator/bird/ribcage is modified in "The Diagnosis". This provides a good example of the way in which Westbury's collection
builds the map of its meanings through echoes sustained between poems. Even though “The Diagnosis” is far less ambitious in scope than “Flying Blind”, it borrows the latter’s reach and territory via the shared image. When the narrator’s worst fears are confirmed after a mammogram her inner panic is imagined as a “spirit flying in terror from her body/ and beating itself against the frosted window”. In a movement typical of many of Westbury’s poems here, her narrator is calmed by reconnection to the ordinary, the loved:

... she remembered the boy,
and, whispering his name over and over,
her ribcage opened
and the bird came quietly in

Westbury’s poems also share much broader thematic linkages. Many lost children, mainly sons, haunt Flying Blind and these all link in turn to Westbury’s brave autobiographical poems on this subject. The title poem and “The Tattooed Boy” deal with historical lost boys, whilst poems such as “Crime & Punishment” and “Her Son’s Keeper” depict betrayals of sons. Other poems like “Blue”, “Our Father” and “watching the wrestling” deal in different ways with unnurtured children or unhappy families.

A sense of the poet as careful watcher emerges throughout. Westbury’s personae are consummate quiet observers of both neighbours and strangers. Her world is often peopled by the lost and the marginalised. Her scapes include industrial wastes, shopping malls and country cafes. She moves with ease between an unselfconscious vernacular language that fits these territories and something more literary.

The Dantesque journey that the book takes through loss and grief is not without its “Virgil” moments. The epigraph for the first poem, taken from Victor Frankl, makes it clear that suffering creates its own kind of beauty (“What is to give light must endure burning”). Westbury writes sensuously of ordinary moments and connections that keep us going. These are centred on a hand-warmed coin passed from a toll-way attendant, babies growing in bellies, a yearned for love-child, even “two ruddy faced tellers” clutching their “sliced white” on the way home from work. There’s an earlier and memorable Westbury poem about living on hope. This book begins with “sulphurous air” and ends almost with eyes resting on “evergreens”.

Tracy Ryan’s latest book Hothouse (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002) is, like Westbury’s, also thoughtfully ordered with the similar aim of
building a sense of narrative through a cathartic inner journey. The “Hothouse” space frames the book’s central theme of displacement inside poems with flower/plant associations. Poems in this group are also often slanted statements of an aesthetic that is bound up in the poet’s shifting responses to austerity and abundance in the natural world.

As a mode, antipastoral has always attracted Ryan. In the antipastorals of this book abundant growth is viewed with ambivalence, even suspicion. In “Joseph’s Coat” the narrator declares, after the gift of a houseplant invades “my ideal/ the bare wall or floor”, that “only so much flourish/ can be faced”. There is “small room/ for green”. Again, in “Green”, a poem that rather reverses the lessons of Seamus Heaney’s “Death of a Naturalist”, the voice of the poem looks back to childhood memories of things that didn’t grow:

I learned you could tend
and tend without
recompense – you either
had it or not.

This thwarted growth is expressed in a series of menacing images that close off rather than reveal the mysteries of fertility (the “sly smile” of broad beans, the “blind eye” of coconuts). Several poems that follow also work around the axes of austerity and abundance. In “She Gives”, a mango, an exotic out of place “in an English winter” is “an embarrassment/ of riches, roundly/voluptuous” and its very materiality resists the text - it is “too gross for metaphor”.

Ryan’s flower poems naturally carry the freight of that tradition and sit inside broader systems of literary meaning about romantic love, femininity, fertility and mortality. They build the sense of a personal history that spans the experience of different places. In this way, the textual (via the language of flowers), growth and sense of place intertwine to build a narrative about the northern and southern hemispheres (or more explicitly England and Australia). As the book makes ready to move from north to south, there is a grouping of poems that use images of buds to trace a sense of opening out. In “She Takes Away”, companion to “She Gives”, the gift of a bunch of tulips fail their promise and “will not open/ ... except by chinks”. Here the lover is absent but in the next flower poem, “Outside the glasshouse”, the experience of unfurling camellias is mediated through that presence:
I hold back: double pink, double red,
such richness best at a distance
or I am swamped
unless it’s instinct
tells me not to intrude
between you and the beauty
of your response.

This poem marks a turning point from all the others that describe frustrated growth. Even though there is still wariness of abundance (the lover photographing the blooms approaches them “as one might/ a timid animal” and their “glut of colour” is “almost insulting”), a change of tone is registered in the camellias’ considerate staged flowering (“Not all at once”), their “longevity/ and faithfulness”. The poem’s title also signals that we are moving beyond the confinements of the hothouse.

Buds, hothouses, even stanzas burst in “Homecoming” when the narrator returns to:

... this
letting it all find space. A release
a return to the wilderness.

The narrative of north/ south – austerity/abundance is, of course, too neat, and too neat for the bounds of Hothouse. Although the south is figured as a “release” and is connected to the erotic in the poem “Regeneration”, nature here also smacks of that Australian “weird melancholy” (“Moreton Bay Figs”, “Oleander”). Towards the very end of the book there is an interesting shift from the very ground that has given the collection meaning and shape. In “The Last Orchid” the voice of the poem declares: “ignore the orchid/ mere symbol unable to inspire, a woman/is not a flower”. This pronouncement clears the way for two last flower poems that float free from the previous language of flower associations. In the first of these, “Fragile Cycles”, encounters with the “small, sparse” white spider orchids provide a new frame for dealing with loss. The narrator describes the orchids as “new and artless”. It is precisely their quality of artlessness, the fact that they are not literary in the same way as flowers from the northern hemisphere, that provides the world-weary voice of the poem with a new “point/of departure”.

Robyn Rowland’s Fiery Waters (Five Islands Press, 2001) also unifies poems around female sexuality and the seasonal. Although there are some
strong poems about ageing and illness, there is a tendency for autobiographical elements to overwhelm. Too often the space for poetry here belongs to the New Age or to that sort of shorthand for the poetic moment, the lyrical surroundings of bungalows “smothered in green bougainvillea”. Rowland’s lush, emotive style is light years away from Ryan’s elegant, angular economy.

Dorothy Porter’s *Other Worlds: Poems 1997–2001* (Picador, 2001) offers a different model for unifying a collection. Here, as the title of the book suggests, Porter continues her exploration of alterity. Strangeness, wildness, set-apartness, and the inhabiting of radically different consciousnesses: these are well-established Porter territories. In the first three parts of the book that otherness spans the various worlds of deep space, a poetry festival at Medellín, dead, violent civilisations (Rome, the Aztecs), and the Northern Territory. These worlds are related to each other by their shared sense of drama, danger and death wishes.

The deep space section opens the book. Here, space is turned inside out to mirror human frailty. There is a head-spinning confusion of bodies and space as “star-gazing” and disease are elided: “Space is white/ with melanoma spots/ for stars.... Let me end in fire”. The experience of deep space provides its narrator with access to fiery extremes (almost to a sense of the divine) and the coming of disease is evoked with ecstatic prayer. The body as microcosm of the universe is turned on its head in “Disaster” when the contents of a Petri dish are likened to “distant constellations”.

The language of the whole collection works hard to eradicate over-civilized poeticisms and goes for earthy, Anglo-Saxonisms (or Ockerisms) such as “chundering”, “scum” and “pong”. But another literary sensibility also haunts Porter’s pages. Beyond or beneath all her wild spaces lies that “other world” of poetry, and of what it means for Porter to practise poetry. This frame is given to the collection largely by Porter’s use of Keats. The first hint of Keats occurs in another series about mortality baldly entitled “Death”. In “VII” the princess and the pea is elided with sleeping beauty in a piece about the risk of breast cancer:

... you approach  
the tangling kingdom  
of empty palaces  
where everything tastes  
of autumn.

Three consecutive poems towards the centre of *Other Worlds* build on this Keatsian motif to explore the productiveness of dreams, enchantment,
immersion and doubt. In the first of these, “Faith”, the narrator defends a life “illuminated and/ choked/ by dreaming” because those dreams:

... burn and smelt
this world, this life
into great messy
plundering sense.

In “The Pool” the voice of the poem describes the importance of immersion in the subject for the poet. To enter imaginatively the consciousness of another is to be able to possess the “iguana’s cold-blooded/ hungry nerve ... And lose./Lose thermostat./ Lose skin./And then, only then,/I can sing.” This absolute immersion is reminiscent of Keats entering the pecking of the sparrow on the path. Finally, in “everything becomes mysterious”, Porter revisits Keats’s conception of negative capability:

those eerily lovely
ethane moments
when you’re utterly comfortable
with not knowing

The collection’s most explicit intersection with Keats comes in the section entitled “Poet In Medellín”. Poetry and the irrational meet most forcefully in “the hot diesel-scented night’” of this “hallucination city” where visiting poets read to mental patients with “otro mundo stares”. In the final poem “Parque De San Antonio” Porter prays to be blest “with Keatsian soul/ enough to listen” and wonders at the very end “Did I wake or sleep?”

Waking and sleeping, or rather that state of suspension between the two that is so beneficial to the making of poems, is also evoked in Robert Gray’s latest volume, Afterimages (Duffy and Snellgrove, 2001). Yet Gray’s long, graceful lines are a whole other world away from Porter. Gray’s poetry has always been after images insofar as he is a consummate imagist committed to a poetry that describes the material world with exactitude. But this title also suggests the intensity of memory – those vivid sense impressions that remain after our eyes have closed, or after we have left a place behind (like Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility”) – and the intensity of Gray’s engagement with questions of how it is we perceive the world. The title also alludes to Gray’s love of the visual arts, and there are many references to art throughout the book. Gray’s drawings,
which accompany the text, share the same meditative quality as his writing. Similarly, the characteristic longer lines of Gray’s poetry that are so well fitted to thought, hold the gestural sense of a deft, sensitive sketching.

Gray charts a wide territory in *Afterimages*: from solipsistic nocturnes to the extraordinary bonds between fishermen; from Sylvia Plath’s graveside to Thomas Hardy’s self-tortured writing life. Although the book’s subjects seem disparate, shared preoccupations and images emerge. Hardy offers an interesting frame for several of the poems. “Summer, Summer”, the opening poem of the book, does as much as any well-conceived short story (which is how many of Hardy’s poems may be described) and recreates a quietly devastating moment at an English cricket match. This is an atmosphere piece full of the right, crisp sounds and tangential thoughts to communicate both the match and that half-interested, wandering, erotically charged state that belongs to spectatorship in the poem:

Canvas chairs and crumbs and the match from Lords kept low
on the portable,
and some
of us are stretched along the turf, and half turning the head,
at times, can watch
from under
cover, the pair who, laughing near, wine-flushed,
now each begin their slow ticklings with grass stalks.

At the end of the poem the lovers abandon the match for their love making and the reader is left in a Hardy-esque moment to contemplate a spectator who “will never have his hand upon a firm breast again”.

Something of Hardy also appears in the prose poem “A Poem of Not More Than Forty Lines on the Subject of Nature” in its musings on isolation, the secret life of the external world and the bleakness of an indifferent universe:

So clear is the night, and so heavily-laden,
I think I can hear, far off, the roar of its terrible, rampaging machinery.
I am on a planet that is lying face-up to those burning faces like dice.

This poem shares common ground with “Chameleon” and “Xanadu in Argyll”. These all concern the working spaces of a sort of Ur-poet: “this one room”, “a borrowed house in the country” or the dream room of “Xanadu”:
... that place where I stayed, 
or else have dreamed, and never saw, perhaps, 
or not like this. A room that opened wings 
each side of a small bed: the low, stretched wall 
of whitewashed plaster.

“A Poem of Not More Than Forty Lines ...” and “Chameleon” trace disorientation and self-recrimination that belongs to “the crossing-point of night”. Although there is doubt, these are productive storms and, ultimately, these poems seem to be about the space that can be borrowed for poetry or the space of poetry itself:

This is a house, though, where I lie: I could find within it, through certain rooms, through many rooms, things that seem laid out for me. It is a house left me by default. A strange house, that was not made with hands.

The winged bed, the whitewashed plaster and the whole Coleridgian dreamscape of “Xanadu in Argyll”, complete with its “hillslope” of “ferns”, is a whimsical and joyous work portrait, and ends with the image of the poet “always found, a moment, leaning in that doorway, when evening’s coming on.”

The reading in gardens, the hands trailed along books, the borrowed houses and the scattered taste edicts of Afterimages all remind us that Gray’s world is a highly aestheticised realm. His poems are so well made, his lineation so keyed to communicating consciousness, character, and mood that at times his poems are as encompassing and satisfying as small films. Those who believe that Gray’s autobiographical work lacks a sense of intimacy could do no better than to read the stand out poem of this volume, the tender portrait of the poet’s mother, “The Dying Light”, to revise this judgment.

Les Murray’s new book, Poems the Size of Photographs (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), is as idiosyncratic and challenging as ever. Like much of Murray’s work it is a book that sends readers searching for a key, a set of tools for decoding. His syntactical oddities can make readers strangers inside their own language, so that reading becomes an exhilarating struggle. Perhaps one clue comes from material on the back cover of the book. Instead of the usual edifying blurb there are these two faux naïve sentences framing the sepia photograph of Broadaxemen: “Les Murray lives on the east coast of Australia between Forster and Gloucester. Most of the poems in this new collection are short, though some are longer”.

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The rhyme between Forster and Gloucester puts one in mind of nursery rhymes and seems to offer an appropriate foretaste to the riddles, aphorisms, and nonsense rhymes that dot Murray’s book. The other clue is the photograph. Smallness is significant here, both the irregular size of the book and the brevity of many of the poems. Through this spatial frame, Murray invites us to “read” through a stack of “sepia ancestors”, to hold them in our palms.

Many of the poems carry the strange tension of photographs in that they freeze in time a random moment that can only ever be part of the story. In uncontrived photographs all meaning derives from something taken by chance. This is so in the eerie poem “At the Falls” that dramatizes an ugly incident witnessed between a husband and wife on a mountain walk. When the woman “falls painfully” her husband spurns her with angry embarrassment and the narrator predicts that:

Over the years, this memory
will distil its essence: fear

of the house her eccentric man
inhabits, and what is done
there, or away from there.
That she is the human he has married.

This bizarre “snapshot” holds the exact tension of the photograph without clues, without narrative certainty. The use of the words “house” and “human” help to emphasize the inhumanity of the husband’s nature. Beyond this moment, he is constructed as beast-like, as a figure belonging to strange tales.

The strange tale or yarn is another focus of the book. “At the Falls” is followed by two more tales: “True Yarn” and “An Australian Legend”. All three poems function as monstrous stories about the Antipodes. They describe freak waves and “wild mirror-image” fighter-amazons. A feature of Murray’s strange tales, and of the book as a whole, is his use of the sublime. Poems like “The Annals of Sheer”, “At the Falls”, “Mythology” and “Apsley Falls” are all set at heights and imbue the natural world with terror and beauty. They are all vistas that seem uninhabited by the human gaze, nature poems that seem almost only themselves – they are like von Guérards on Heidelberg “Nine by Fives”. This egoless gaze is something that Murray actively strives for in the wonderful “On the Borders”:
That hawk, clinging to
the eaves of the wind, beating
its third wing, its tail

isn’t mine to sell. And here is
more like the space that needs
to exist around the image.

In this book the habitable for Murray, the sense of a body being at home in the world, adheres to poems about the basics: work, clothes, childhood smells. There are some memorable work snapshots such as “To Dye For” and “The Cut-Out”. And words are to be lived in too: “and why not a whole metropolis/ street signed for its own life and ours:/ Childsplay Park and First Bra Avenue” (“Reclaim the Sites”).

If Gray is always “listening to” things, then the things of the world sing all the time to Murray. He celebrates the music of the non-verbal world and finds it everywhere (“The Tin Clothes”, “Touchdown”, “Pop Music”). “The Barcaldine Suite”, one of the book’s finest poems, is an origin story of music that lists the “ambient sounds that music has dipped up/ in its silver ladle”.

In *The Clothes-Prop Man* (Wakefield Press, 2002), Martin R. Johnson is also concerned with work, and yarns that belong to folk culture. This verse novel makes use of working-life photographs too, documenting the building of the South Para Reservoir in South Australia in the 1950s. This volume recovers stories of other lives, and shows Johnson’s honesty and respect for his project. The section called “Married Workmen’s Camp” includes some of the best work in the book, especially the beautiful poem “Wind”. The balances between the documentary and the lyrical, autobiography and history, are a strength and pleasure of this book.

Murray, Johnson and Geoff Page all evoke a sense of the earthy through the remembered smells and textures of rural childhoods. Page’s fifteenth book, *Darker and Lighter* (Five Islands Press, 2001), begins with twinned autobiographical family poems. These opening poems balance between them many of the preoccupations of the book as a whole: place, genealogy, mortality, regret, love. Perhaps most importantly, they trace the means of salvaging what might be needed from the past. They are also originary Adam and Eve-like fables of what it is we inherit and save from parents, and also of how we might begin to let these things go. In the first of these, “My Father’s Tile”, Page describes the life of a souvenir tile from his father’s “one trip only”, an object concentrated with absences, holding
The tile is mainly grass and sky
and has the echo still
of summer afternoons back home
from where it hung there on the wall
looking out across the river,
days that go on somewhere still.

Several poems in Page’s book ruminate on the melancholy way in which memories will outlive the objects to which they adhere. The tile here, or the mother’s letters in the following poem, may well become the son’s rubbish. But it is the text that the tile carries (“‘Don’t scratch against the grain’ ... Now that’s a way to live your life”) that moves the poet on to the point of letting go of the possession. It is the life beyond things, the life of words and memory, that promise a kind of salvaging. Even something as dispersed as scattered ashes can hold it all together:

I find a space for it somehow –
that memory of Argentina
and 1938

: in a brain that’s ashes now
scattered on a morning curve
that slopes towards the river.

“Sermon” and “The Kelpie’s Back” deal with absences and the textual again, but in the context of writers and readers. In the first, Page explores the paradox that eventually text is all that’s left, but that it can never divulge the whole inner life of the writer. (This is very like the sentiment at the end of Murray’s “The Barcaldine Suite”: “and there’s no one on earth/ who knew us by heart”.) “The Kelpie’s Back” laments all the ghost poems from old anthologies that die with their readers. The poem’s closing cast of readers evokes an earlier Australia: “... Women at/ small cedar tables/ ... drovers lonely at a fire”.

A thread of nostalgia for the 1930s runs throughout the book from the vivacious women in “Three Widows” who “talk the thirties back between them”, to the glamorous mise en scène of “Lipstick” to the thirties beauty of “The Face” on whom age has conferred “this extra grace”, and finally to
“Scott and Zelda” still quaffing back “quick martinis”. Page, who is a consummately economical scene setter, seems to connect this period with both glamour and gusto. The most playful of his rhymes, one of the pleasures of his work, also recall popular songs from that era:

Love is just a roadside crow
flattened by the sun,
the kind of accident that might
occur to anyone.

Page’s poetry can’t help but be touched by his teaching life and there are poems in the collection about the fragile lives of adolescence. In this he shares ground with John Foulcher. Foulcher’s *The Learning Curve* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002) is a new addition to that productive sub-genre, the young-adult verse novel. In a well-paced orchestration of different voices, it charts the rather grim lives of students and staff at a Catholic high school. Among the best things are the rhythms of the prose poem “Why Alan Won’t Come to School” and the bleak poems set inside the conventions of English tests. In his fine book, *How Not to Kill Government Leaders* (Wakefield Press, 2002), Stephen Lawrence also touches on the space poetry might hold in school lives and the extremities of adolescence. He shares with Cronin and Peter Boyle a desire to write about poetry’s status and social efficacy:

Is this poetry?

Writing’s most embarrassing
and poorest cousin. (“Is This Poetry?”)

Peter Boyle’s third book *What the Painter Saw in our Faces* (Five Islands Press, 2001) explores the blessings, frustrations and limits of attempting to know the world through words. It is a book suffused with the colour white. If blue belongs to Westbury and Ryan, red to Porter, mauve to Gray, the colours of earthiness to Page and Murray, then white is Boyle’s colour – the white of stars, of flowers, the white of “the soft inner side of the elbow”, the white of visions and dreams, of vulnerability and of the numinous, and significantly of emptiness and of not knowing. The narrators of his long-lined poems frequently declare that they are lost. Two poems open with the phrase “I don’t know”. At different points and in different moods this sense of being lost intersects with a failure of language, or more precisely the sense that, in Boyle’s words: “the passion for words that overflows/ is
your own private and chaotic death” (“Everyday”). In “I want to see the world beginning” the narrator desires to travel beyond the world of words and naming into “the first day” of the “earthly world”. Here an Eden asserts itself, clouds are free from “their would-be interpreters” and “words have made very little headway”. Conversely, in the beautiful, elegiac prose poem “Missing Words”, Boyle’s narrator catalogues things and moments for which no words exist:

The sound the clock makes when it is disconnected and taken down from the wall but can’t lose the habit of trying to jerk itself forward. The look of old socks drying on a rack in the kitchen all through a winter night, hanging starched and sad opposite the wedding photographs. A word for your face when you can’t love but would almost like to try.

This equivocation about the efficacy of words is also brought to bear on the social possibilities of poetry. “Japanese Poet on the train to the Medellín Prison” asks very plainly “what do you give the Central Juvenile Detention Centre of Medellín”. The delicate symbols of the Japanese poet’s culture (mulberry leaves, paper of five colours, and apple seed) hold a grace and integrity but ultimately: “She doesn’t know how she could measure/ any poem against the rapist and the murderer/ and the crack dealer”. The poem also shows the intense empathy in Boyle’s poetry for his female subjects. (see also “Cecile” and “Woman at the Museée d’Orsay”).

This book is one of the most satisfying of the year’s work precisely because of this kind of inclusiveness and the tender, generous nature of others observed. Boyle can have a dark hour of the soul and still write convincingly about the washing or sleeping children at the same time (“At the centre of our lives”). Despite its deliberations on both the private and public failures of what one of his poems calls “Your silent unwanted art”, there is a great dignity and courage in Boyle’s poetry.

Perhaps another review might have visited the coincidences of shared particular spaces that occur between books, such as Gray’s and Murray’s delighted encounters with a fox, or two very different visits to Sylvia Plath’s graveside (by Gray, again, and Rowland). But the books above also share broader commonalities. They visit dark places, “other worlds”, things lost and salvaged, adolescence, the work of other poets, and the limits of language. This commonality suggests that poetry will always find and inhabit the spaces that it needs to, if only readers can “find a space for it somehow”.

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Poetry Received 2001–2002

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

*Blue Dog Australian Poetry* v.1 no.1. Poetry Australia Foundation. Wollongong University, 2002.
*Boyle, Peter. What the painter saw in our faces.*
*Cronin MTC. Bestseller*. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2001


Langford, Martin, *Sensual Horizon*.


*Wagtail – 1 people like that and other poems by joanne burns*

*Wagtail – 2 November in Madrid and other poems by Peter Boyle*


On the headstone's frame, her photo blooms and swells –
weather, or sight, scratches across
her double-breasted coat, crabs at her eyes,
but her cheeks are flesh, the face
visible, whole, a child's gazing
up at God or the camera. Her coat,
all buttoned and sealed up.
A child, finished or not.
A thought, fingered in the pocket, barely formed before the camera flashed her out of time, and parents buried her with prayers for her future – and roses coy toss out a careless petal,
a notice of resurrection, and vanish, in a cough of their own dust. She is left to rot in peace.

She hesitates. Turns slowly in her grave and cannot turn back.

She is a long way from God.

Above herself, she records the sun's persistent angle. Her blue eye stares out the stone. What does God see? Passing, she draws me in, and I stumble,
as if in suddenly loose soil. But her touch leaves no trace. Her seeing seeps from its frames and breathes the visible air. Even her faith must return to its element. She enters the slow infinity and forgets. Prayered-in, by a foliage of tongues which murmured with the beginnings of prophesy, rustling swaying bodies of Christians, clothed and made naked by their own closed eyes. An old woman etched in sudden light, her tongue knotting inside the cheek; a prayer working up and down her face like treadled thread; and on the platform, above a packed array of shoulders, cuffs, Pastor John, smoothing his tattered grey suit. - Waist-deep in ocean, he baptised the cripple who rose from his chair, legs growing back. Nothing stirred the faint stirring; patterns shimmered and slanted, the hot sun, an uninvited sign, crashed through the blood-red curtains and circled with the dust; then voices, as if from other bodies, other times, burst out in a wordless torrent that would pierce the sky with upward rain. She saw not the heavens but their heads, gleaming with the bulbs of new stories, and when she shut her eyes as if to pray, a music grew in the pitch and clamour, and their sounds, their cries like Daniel’s roar
Burn us, Lord! Burn us and let us be redeemed!
wistful flames in her ear. A sudden sea, surging round Noah’s prow - and her life, all bundled in repentant prayer passes his eye like a fleck of dust or slant of rain, brief unsteerer. God – jolting in His mirror.
Did Noah never snarl the hair
of a giraffe, imagine a world?
Cowled in a wooden womb, the species,
Shem and Ham and Japheth, and unnamed wives.
Was it peaceful at the helm?
Or was his weathered, wind-slapped skull
still poked and mocked by people no longer real?
— who would not heed the flood
that seeped into their very rooms,
warped their wallpapers, unsettled
their dinner plates, and floated their carrots away;
invaded their speaking mouths, inching above
the windows of their aquarium houses
— as anything but rain, brought on
by a hidden cloud, from which,
like swimming dogs, they ran,
in mortal fear of Weather.
Not even a little boy
stopped to believe he might rise, that his eyes
constitute a hole, through which
whole trees could be withdrawn, histories
and deeds unravelled
within his seeing, to the needle-point
of never-having-been. That his memory, too,
would simultaneously vanish, and he
touch light by being light, with hands
more music than any music they could play.
God's burn, sunlight veining a leaf:
could she, with an accidental turn
toward a world imaginable to Him,
shake Him with a wash of finite gaze?
With priseable cracks, her picture.
A young and unrebuked stone
flowerless, in a fraternity of weeds,
shouldering the wind-tunnel gasps
and sound-emptying bells of Lygon Street trams,
among blackbirds and frail, pink-clad widows
who bend, effortlessly between prayer
and three-cornered conversation.
Stubborn upright,
a whispering wall, the unyielding vocal echo
of one who shouts, though inaudible in the surge,
*Get Thee Back, God! Thou Hast Made
Thy Bed, Now Lie In It!*

But her silence grows, her
forgetting is steep. In a moment, her moment
will come. All He needs to recall her is a flash
of light, a thought, barely formed.
PEACH-SKIN

flocked like a tiger’s pelt reminds me of you, my first bite a mouthful of flowers. I save you one honey-red as wine, plump as a bee-stung cheek and when you arrive, offer it up – I sing praises to the naked, downy skin with its heart of coals until, half laughing at me, you eat.

A thousand still lifes burn to cinders. Oh, you eat that peach.
AFTER LONG SLEEP

I
Across the courtyard your neighbor leaves all lights burning.

II
Rain forces the ferns slowly down.

III
After long sleep how the nerves quiver. One note ascending, a knifepoint of pleasure you feel as pain.

IV
Some piece for the flute the neighbor’s child keeps playing.

V
Open your window. Though you thought you had lost the world, crowned in spires the World finds you.

VI
Molten silver, that same note, same note until she strikes it true.
I think you come back here often, 
visiting as you used to do all those back to Bridget Connolly, 
– to sit on the bench by the main drive 
under the tall gum-trees 
and listen to the magpies – if you’re lucky 
when walking among the graves, earlier on, 
you’ll start up a hare; in the neighbouring paddock 
there’ll be at least one horse 
looking randomly over the fence 
– and you’ll see 7SD (as it was) 
on the far hillside where I walked, before we were married, 
picking flowers to give you, but not blue-bells 
(the they’ll break your heart, you said) in that faraway time 
which visiting your grave brings always so close to me. 
I am happy again, in a different world, 
and hope you are, too. And I still don’t deserve it. 
You would like her. And she would like you.
EVENING ON A COUNTRY ROAD

for Liz

When we drove down from the late sunlit road into this shadowy region where trees reached over us and the sun mere memory, one of us said: “It’ll be dark soon ...”

An obvious and commonplace remark, going nowhere, yet as soon as uttered it struck us as a premonition? a prophecy? a mood from outer space? – something in the phrasing and the timing made it seem resonant between lovers.

It’ll be dark soon ... Thinking about it since, it’s not possible to decide why those few words, uttered at the close of a pleasing day, should be so memorable, as if one had been given a walk-on part and a single line, only to find, surprisingly, that what was spoken immediately acquired a value not evident in the script but one which had those roadside trees leaning forward, a silently comprehending audience.
CONTRIBUTORS 2002

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LUCY DOUGAN'S first collection Memory Shell (Five Islands Press, 1998) won the 2000 Dame Mary Gilmore Award. She is an assistant editor of the literary magazine HEAT.

MARCELLE FREIMAN is a lecturer in creative writing and post-colonial literatures at Macquarie University. Her book, Monkey's Wedding (Island Press, NSW) was published 1995, and her poetry is widely published in journals in Australia and the UK.

JO GARDINER lives in the Blue Mountains and works as a psychologist with adults, young people in custody, and disturbed adolescents in a specialist education unit in Penrith.

JEFF GUESS has seven collections of poetry, the most recent being Living in the Shade of Nothing Solid (1998). His new collection Winter Grace is complete and in preparation now for publication in 2003.

JACK HIBBERD has written 40 plays, and has published three novels and two volumes of poetry. His most recent is The Genius of Human Imperfection (Black Pepper, 1998). He is working on a third: Madrigals for a Misanthrope.

NATHAN HONDROS lives in Perth and is preparing a collection of stories with the working title The Short Life of Rodney Small.

JEAN KENT'S most recent collection, The Satin Bowerbird (Hale & Iremonger), won the 1998 Wesley Michel Wright Prize. She was a resident of the Literature Board's Keesing Studio, Paris, in 1994; her more usual home is at Lake Macquarie, NSW.

ROLAND LEACH'S latest collection published in 2002 is Darwin's Pistols by Picaro Press. He is the proprietor of Sunline Press which has released three hardback poetry collections, and has many more in the pipeline.

MARGARET LEWIS is a retired school teacher. She belongs to a group of women writers who meet to discuss their own work, and also have workshops. She writes only when she has something to say.
JOAN LONDON’s third book, Gilgamesh, won the Age Book of the Year for Fiction in 2002. She lives in Fremantle, Western Australia.

DAVID LUMSDEN lives in Melbourne and works as a software designer.

MELINDA MARSHALL is a new young writer who lives in Melbourne, although her heart is in London. If she can find the time between backpacking and writing fiction she may one day complete her BA (Hons) at Melbourne University.

MEGAN MCKINLAY is a West Australian writer of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. She completed her PhD in Japanese literature at UWA in 2001 and has just finished her first novel.

MARK O’FLYNN’s second collection The Good Oil appeared in 2000. He lives in the Blue Mountains where his play Eleanor & Eve was produced earlier this year.

VIVIENNE PLUMB is an Australian living in New Zealand. She held the Buddle Findlay Sargeson Fellowship in Auckland, New Zealand during 2001. Her novel, Secret City, is to be published at the end of 2002, and she has been invited to read at the Ninth World Poetry Reading in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in October 2002.

FIONA PROBYN teaches in the Gender Studies Department at the University of Sydney. She has articles published in Australian Feminist Studies, Australian Humanities Review, Meanjin, New Literatures Review, Senses of Cinema and the Journal of Australian Studies. Her research focuses mainly on postcolonialism, feminism and Australian settler culture.

JAMES QUINTON, new to the cult of the untrue, considers himself part of the generation God forgot about.

JOHN SAUL’s short fiction has appeared in publications throughout the UK and in France, Germany, Italy and Australia, and in anthologised form in a number of books put out by Serpent’s Tail. His collection, The Most Serene Republic: love stories from cities, was highly praised by London’s Time Out. He hopes to see two novels published in the near future.

IAN C. SMITH lives in the Gippsland Lakes Area with his wife and four young sons. A collection of his poetry will be published late in 2002 by the Ginninderra Press.
ROGER VICKERY was born in Ballarat and lives in Sydney. Since returning to writing in 2000 after a twelve year break he has won several short story and poetry awards.

SHIRLEY WALKER is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of New England. She has published several books and many critical articles on Australian Literature. Her most recent publication is a memoir, *Roundabout at Bangalow*.

ELLEN WEHLE is an editor and performance poet living in Boston. She says having a live audience “helps winnow out the weaker poems”, and writes for both the spoken word and the page. Work is upcoming in *FIELD*, *Terra Incognita*, and *Runes*.

PETRA WHITE was born in Adelaide in 1975; she is studying for a BA in English & German Literature at Melbourne University, and working part-time as editor and tutor.

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