



# westerly<sup>59:2</sup>

*the best in writing from the West*

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Department of Culture and the Arts

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## From the Editors

This issue of *Westerly* is a special one, marking *Westerly*'s sixtieth year of publication and the retirement of its co-editors. We have marked the occasion by revisiting, in some detail, the six decades of *Westerly*'s history.

Six people, current and past editors and those closely connected with the magazine, have each written on one decade in *Westerly*'s history. These essays will also be attached to the online history of *Westerly* which is being prepared for our website. They not only provide snapshots of each of those decades, but also indicate many of the changes in sponsors, movements in production and staffing, ups and downs in the journal's finances, external pressures reflecting a changing environment, technological shifts and so on. More than that though, they provide a rough map of all the creative and critical work published over those years. Names that have become well-known in Australian literary culture emerge in what is a rich cultural history.

The journal has been deluged with material for this issue, some of it in response to invitations from us. Making selections from all this wonderful writing has been difficult, but there is a marvellous range of work in this issue, which truly represents *Westerly* at its best.

Saying goodbye to *Westerly*, after a long association with the journal for Delys Bird and a more recent one for Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, will be a wrench. But to be able to finish on this high note, with a bumper issue, vindicates our belief in the importance of a literary journal like *Westerly* for writers and readers alike.

Delys Bird and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, co-editors.



STORIES

*David Whish-Wilson lives in Fremantle. He is the author of two crime novels set in Perth: Line of Sight and Zero at the Bone. His most recent book is Perth, part of the NewSouth Books city series.*

## The Cook

### David Whish-Wilson

A *father is God to his son.*  
My father said that before I killed him, but he wasn't talking about us.

His own father. His father's father. His father's father's father, perhaps.

Said it before I pulled the trigger on his .303.

Today I leave Casuarina Prison after five years—no step-down into minimum.

But not because of what I've done — what I know.

My history as a speed cook, forced to stay in the SHU, with the psychos, peds and catamites, to keep me away from my suitors. There are five bikie mobs in Perth and they all want to own me, despite my history with the needle. I've avoided them because that part of my life, it's over. They aren't the kind to take no for an answer, but I'm not complaining. I haven't done the time hard, not like my earlier stretches. Not when even the screws have watched all four seasons of *Breaking Bad*—the same screws who call me Heisenberg with a



mocking respect, although I was always more Jesse Pinkman than Walter White.

Their respect isn't for me, the waster, but for the science of the thing. The working with explosive materials in confined spaces. The alchemy, what I see as chemistry, following a recipe. The mystical transubstantiation of base materials into the manna of heaven, as another old crim described it.

I make no such claims myself. Starting with sulphate back in the eighties; bog-standard crank, learnt from a smuggled copy of Uncle Fester's Cookbook, whose recipes I have adapted, improved over the years, the ice I made was sought after by the criminal and social elite who could afford it.

I didn't come cheap, but that is simply the price of blood. I hear stories now and then. Like a gun manufacturer will hear stories. Like the brother of a cell-mate of mine who after a three-day binge injected his cock and lost both legs to gangrene. Stories of psychosis and ruin. Violence and poverty visited upon innocents. You get the picture, and why I've had enough.

The only man I confided my decision to is the prison psych. Nothing to do with going straight, or walking the line. I told him that the very worst things I have done were done with the best of intentions.

Isn't that punishment enough?

My second son, Danny. The only person in the world I want to see. Waiting for me outside the prison gates, sun shearing off the bonnet of his Valiant Charger.

This is a good sign. On the prison wireless I've heard Danny's running wild, working as a deckie for Gary Warner, although everyone knows what that means. Warner is the only non-bikie crim who, because of his Calabrian connections, gets to make speed and ice and ecstasy, distributed through the insulated Italian smack networks.

Warner is the same bloke who most pundits think offed my first son, Kevin, those five years back, after he ripped him off for a kilo of pure.

That Danny still has the Valiant means something. It was my gift, once he got his licence, to celebrate his coming out of foster care, and it means that he hasn't gone too far off the rails.

Danny was thirteen the last time I went inside. *Keep your friends close, and enemies closer.* The kind of Machiavellian dictum that a thirteen year old needs to understand. Last thing I said to him. Danny never visited me in jail because I wouldn't allow it.

If he had, I wouldn't have told him any different. Play it smart, but don't let them stand over you. Once you're down, life will keep kicking.

Danny doesn't get out of the car. He's seen detective inspector Brett Ogilvie, smoking a rollie beside his fleet vehicle Falcon, perk of his shift to Federal Police. He's parked, deliberately, behind a black TRG mini-tank, stationed there in case of a riot. Like the US President's wartime speeches, back-dropped by rows and rows of jug-jawed soldiers, a wallpaper of quiet menace.

This whole prison release thing is a movie cliché, but there you have it. The hard-looking kid in a muscle-car, the concerned cop, the sunlight on my pale skin, my squinting eyes.

Danny passes me some Oakley sunglasses, and the world goes feather-soft. Both of us ignore Ogilvie as we cruise down to the main road, but as we turn left towards Fremantle a black Hummer limo enters from the right. I keep my head down but can't avoid Mastic's mutt face framed by panels of tinted glass, in the rear. He simply points at me, as the sergeant-at-arms of The Nongs is given to do, master to his minions. Mastic will have chilled beer in there, the kind that tastes like chemical soup, and some hard-faced prossies with plastic tits.

'Should we go back?' Danny asks. 'I been hearin ...'

'That he's been protecting me. I know. It's bullshit.'

'I forgot to ask. You want to drive?'

'No. You drive.'

I saw it in Danny the moment he picked me up, but I hoped I was wrong. Two minutes inside his flat proved me right. Fit-pack on the coffee table, base of an upturned Coke can for a spoon. He worked the powder into the water and drew up a shot, passed it to me. I shook my head, looked at him coldly. Baby blue eyes and ice-cream skin, hair like finely blown toffee. Like his mother.

He looks hurt. All his childish needing to please, there on the surface. Softness, vulnerability, and it catches in my gut.

Because where I've come from, the first instinct is to squash it, in yourself and others. What the psychs call learned behaviour.

And then it comes through, the deeper and stronger, longest held.  
The moment of his birth.

My quiet, tender child.

My second son.

Working the fit into the serpentine vein on the back of his hand, the puff of blood in the glass, driven home.

He smiles and caps the fit, lights a Styvie, slumps in his chair.

I can't take my eyes off him. My youngest boy, grown into a man. I barely notice what my hands are doing, although he watches closely. He is both in the first flush, but long gone, and yet there is time to catch him. After all these years, it's not far to go. To follow my child. That he not be alone. Wherever he assumes he's going.

Thinking that he knows where I've been.

It's only when his friends arrive that the trouble starts. Two rat-faced morons that are clearly his best mates, kids Kevin's age, early twenties. Juvie boys, the kind that Warner attracts. Strangely androgynous and PVC white, all the usual tats and prominent labels. Dickhead hip-hop on the iPod dock. Porn on the laptop. Ice in the pipe. Laughter with a dull edge of malice. Eyes vague and fierce. They repulse me, disappoint me, but not only because I fear their unpredictability. The kind I've been among these past five years. The kind as likely to stick

a pencil in a sleeping man's ear, heel of the hand forcing it home, as to suck him off for a cigarette.

They can see what Danny is.

Not like Kevin.

'Danny, you ready?'

Danny takes the pipe and sucks it down. The smack was strong, and not because I'm green again. I can hardly lift my head. Danny is just as greedy on the pipe as they are, something I wouldn't have expected.

'Ready for what?'

'Never mind, old man. Stay here an' nod off.'

Danny can't meet my eyes. Starts gathering his shit: ciggies, wallet, knife. The other one is back from the bedroom, lugging a green sports bag heavy with iron.

I shake my head, start to rouse myself.

I have left Danny with his brother's world, a world that Kevin belonged to, mine before him. I feel like stabbing my fit into the kid's eyes. He can sense it, too, and laughs.

'Yo, Danny, your dad is *fierce*.'

Where I want to go. The only place I've been where my radar doesn't ping, once, twice every minute. Where I can sleep easy. The place where my father lies unburied, at the bottom of a mineshaft. Not a place I ever expected to yearn for.

But there is peace there.

I wait behind the wheel of the stolen Camry sedan while they do the armed robs — three of them. Two servos and a late night chemist. Not a few k's from where they live.

Such is the life of a moron.

They whoop and rap and smoke the short drive back to the port city, down along the eerily quiet Capo D'Orlando Drive, through gritty sulphur halos and clanking marinas and the smell of diesel and antifoul and rotting seaweed. We park before the long line of

Warner's crayboats and trawlers, strung with red and green halogen caps, decks awash in hard fluorescent light.

Danny and his friends divvy up the eight hundred cash and transfer the weapons from the stolen car to a nearby Falcon ute, the rush of the thieving gone now they're at work.

Prison full of kids like this. There because they want to be, the stupid ones to prove themselves to others, the smarter for themselves.

But Danny's not prison material, and his friends aren't the kind to stand by him, should he be marked out for special attention.

I hadn't allowed Danny to talk about what he was doing for Warner, either in the car or at his flat. Ogilvie would certainly have bugged the car, perhaps the flat. But I let the others in the Camry bray how they worked the presses for Warner, who'd been importing high-end E from Amsterdam, cutting it down by 50% and re-pressing his own pills with his own logo: Jagger lips.

The kids worked the presses all night, another shift worked days, cray season nearly over. Warner's fleet could easily get out into international water, to trawl up submersible barrels tagged with homing devices, his MO now for close to two decades.

Danny and the kids expect me to take the Camry and leave, but when I don't, there is anticipation in their eyes. Mastic has offered to knock Warner for me, but because I've always refused, it's assumed that I intend to do him myself.

Warner has never denied killing my son, Kevin.

Warner strides down the dock towards me, white gumboots stained with fish-guts and scale, black boardies and skin-tight bluey, bunched forearms and hairy hunched shoulders, the body of a worker.

Danny stays beside, but the other kids draw back.

Warner right in my face, stale sweat and ashtray mouth, flecks of fish blood on his cheek, eyes yellow beneath the sulphur light, moths batting around our heads.

Ogilvie will be watching from nearby.

He knows our history, was a beat copper when Warner and I ran plantations for Joe Italiano in the Gascoyne. Warner married into the family, took on the fishing licences as both a cover and a going concern, has done well, never gone to jail.

I've gone the way of most. Habit. Jail. Habit. Jail.

But along the way I've taken on the trade, become the best at what I do.

A good cook is excused things that put others in shallow graves. Except for one thing.

Warner puts out his hand, but he's so close it's more like a jab to the stomach.

Ogilvie will be watching, long-lens camera at his eyeball.

But Ogilvie is not the only one watching. Danny flinches when I take Warner's hand, something that is noticed by Warner. 'You got work to do?'

Danny's face is unreadable, until he meets my eye. Disappointment. Disbelief. A flash of something else.

I have chosen Warner.

Had in fact chosen him years earlier, made a promise of sorts, when an emissary of Warner's was transferred into the SHU. A wiry old Noongar crim, with blurred tattoos and oiled rockabilly hair, large fighter's hands. He told me about Danny, his message not couched in threat. Said Warner thought I'd like to know. Because of that unspoken history of ours. Fathers both dockworkers, did time together at Freo jail, drifted into the only union that would have them, the Painters & Dockers, before my dad went bush. Did he want me to hire Danny, or fuck him off?

Warner could see that Danny was no hard nut, had his father's weakness for the powder, but missed his father's luck. I say luck, because like most junkies my age, it's always the people around me who die, people like Danny's mother, so many others. I survive, like a curse.

But not Danny. He was headed one of two ways — neither good.

Hire him, I'd said. Then nothing else. No news. No threats, or further importuning.

I'd appreciated that. And I had my own reasons for wanting to be close to Warner.

I go back to Danny's flat and have a shot, drift quietly in my body, seated slumber, nodding bringing me round. Hours pass like the years have passed, my whole fucking life, sleepless but asleep, the old anaesthetic.

The deal is good. Warner's set-up is good. I'll be making MDMA at nights on a customised trawler, out on the Sound, when it's still. Plenty of ventilation, all the newest kit. The precursors there, dropped off in the shipping lanes, direct from India.

Ogilvie can't get to Warner, not with his connections. Warner has men in the Ports Authority, the local drug squad. The Federal coppers would work alone for this reason, but they would need boats and choppers to get to the floating lab, and Warner would hear.

Warner is also safe from The Nongs and the others, because of his father-in-law, even if I'm not. Mastic has boasted widely that if I don't work for him, then I won't work for anybody. Has put it about that I owe him, for his protection inside, and now he'll have to demonstrate that he isn't full of shit. His signature demonstration involves a ballpein hammer.

I'll live on another boat, nearby the lab, safe as long as I don't leave the port. I've told Warner that I'll work for a year, pocket the money, take Danny and head elsewhere, up North, or New Zealand, start again.

He doesn't trust me, but that's no surprise. It's still worth his while.

I'll be close to him, and I'm a patient man.



The explosion at the port rocks the apartment, sets clarions in the street to wailing. From the kitchen I see flames down on Capo D'Orlando, fizzing white, incendiary secondary detonations, oil black streaks over the watercolour night sky.

The moment I think of Danny my legs weaken, and then I see him limp into the street. Vomit into a gutter. Limp towards the Charger, pop the boot, drop in a canvas bag, lean his weight on the closed trunk.

I understand. Feel a surge of panic. Start grabbing stuff, hearing Danny's key in the lock.

Turn, stand to face him.

'Warner's dead. Danny? *Warner.*'

His face tells the truth. He's burned on his neck, suppurating red blisters, what looks like a broken wrist wedged into his armpit, pupils dilated, in shock.

Eyes already on the coffee table, the fit-pack and powder.

I sit him down and fix him, watch his pupils screw inward, take the Charger keys from his hand and help him to his feet.

Dawn finds us out in the mallee scrub, beyond the wheat-belt and into cattle country, headed north. The dirt reddens and the heat falls hard and granite mesas rise out of the plains and dry gullies. Beneath the gnarled trunks of the mallee and currajong and corkwood the horizon fills with a floating carpet of pink and white everlastings, surreal. Danny is in a bad way, and I fix him twice in cutaways beneath the feathery shade of beefwood and quandong, but then the packet is done. I'd stopped at a 24 hour chemist on the way out of Bassendean, had bought downers, painkillers, burn-salves, bandages, whatever they had. The blankets from the beds in the flat. Stuff from the cache of stolen property in the bedroom cupboards, to trade perhaps, some cameras, binoculars and a telescope, a fucking leaf-blower, some mobiles and laptops, miscellaneous tools.

That was before I looked inside the bag in the boot. Saw the cash, banded and loose, range of colours, no time to count it — and a handgun, a .38 S&W snubnose, no bullets.

I pay for petrol with cash at Payne's Find roadhouse, buy food for a few days, put us back on the highway north. The vintage two-door Charger is a distinctive ride, but eats the road between the towns, a few more hours we're in Cue. I take a dirt road before we hit the main street, buildings like a stage-set in a Hollywood mirage, then head west towards the Rock, parachute of dust curling over the floodplain of poverty bush and salt-grass, the abandoned gold diggings of Big Bell on the horizon north.

We get to Walga Rock when the sun is overhead, Danny still dazed and mute, angry because I'd chosen Warner, but afraid of what he'd done. The Rock slopes high and red beside the road, granite dome filling the sky, plated like a half-buried turtle, a lone wedge-tail circling in the higher thermals. I drive the opposite direction over the graded lip of red gravel and twenty yards into the bush. From here on there are no roads. I return to the lip and build it up again, sweep over our tracks with a mistletoe switch. It's slow going, lost in the low scrub, every now and then getting out to climb a beefwood, trying to catch a glimpse of the blue-grey monolith to the east, no name beyond what my father and his father called it, home.

It takes four hours to drive the twenty k, at walking speed. Danny is too sick to get out and guide, and not wanting to stake a tyre, I circle round the fallen acacia and dry gullies over plains of purple mulla mulla and flannel bush and everlastings, knee-deep dry grass, plovers and bush-quail sailing off in brief clucking parabolas, waves of locusts rising like a parting sea. It's hot on the vinyl seats, but the setting sun to the west is the best compass I have. Working slowly through a clump of fruiting quandong, hundreds of green and red budgerigar chirruping above us, I see the sparrowhawk and know we're close. It glides above us, taking a good close look through unblinking eyes,

circling before rising off the scrubline in an effortless arc. I remember that the sparrowhawk feeds on the swallows at the rock, and follow it. Soon the broad red flank of the granite monolith looms before us, a couple of hundred metres high, unlikely as always in the broad flat plain, the red dirt around it as trackless as I'd hoped. We circle round to the eastern side, into the shade, looking for my father's camp, marked by a screen of casuarina and the quandong planted by my grandfather, its seeds buried beside jam wattle saplings, to feed off its roots.

I drive the Charger into the cleft of rock that curls beneath an overhang, invisible from the air, and turn off the ignition. Immediately the eerie silence settles over us, just the ticking of the overworked engine.

I help Danny climb out of his seat and sit him against the smooth trunk of a leaning redgum. Light him a cigarette and set off to get firewood, dragging the dry mallee boughs caked in dirt, a few sticks of sandalwood. I set a fire in the cave, in the ancient fireplace used for so many thousands of years that the rock has melted into a scoop, ochre handprint of a Wadjari child on the smooth wall above. When I leave the cave Danny's still slumped against the tree, but has lifted his sunnies, watching a young male bower-bird perform for him, flacking its wings in a fan dance, hopping on its thin legs.

The anger that made Danny do to Warner what I wouldn't is gone now. Won't meet my eye.

'What's that?' he asks.

'Bowerbird. Young male. No pink on its back. He's trying out his moves on you.'

'So I shouldn't laugh.'

'How's your neck? Your arm?'

'Flies are bad.'

'Wipe your arse with your shirttails, keeps the flies away from your face.'

'Really?'

'No.'

I lift the collar of his shirt and pull back the gauze on his burn, still angry red but the blisters have stopped weeping. Important to keep the flies off, so I set about applying the salve over the dry powder I'd caked it with earlier; lay down some new gauze.

'That one of your dad's sayings?' he asks.

'Good guess.'

'Don't piss on my back and tell me it's raining.'

'You remember that?'

'Sure. He's tighter than a stocking on a chicken's lip. Face like a pox-doctor's clerk.'

Image of my father, face red with drink, propped up at the Fremantle Workers Club, the idiom of his generation bustling in the air, laughter.

Before he went mad, wouldn't leave his room, pissed off out here with his rifle and a single bag of clothes.

'I ever tell you about this place?'

'No.'

'You need water?'

'I need hammer.'

'None left.'

Danny's face goes ugly for a moment, brought back to normal with a strained effort. 'S'alright. My fault. All this.'

'Wait here. Watch the show.'

The bower bird, who's been silent and watching while we talk, resumes his dance as I leave the camp, zebra finches techno-thrumming in the mistletoe by the cave. I walk up onto the rock, and climb through the fading light onto a ledge that looks over the desert, mallee scrub to the horizon in every direction, a mob of kangaroo grazing near the soak. The gnamma holes on the rock still hold fetid water, tadpoles squirming in the shallows; poor man's caviar, my dad used to call them, swallowed them live and whole, as his father had taught him.

Beneath a slab of red granite streaked with long quartz veins I pull out the oilcloth and sports bag, shovel and pick, ammo box filled with Dad's cutlery, ledgers, tools.

It takes two trips but I get the lot down to camp, leave it near the old fireplace, coals glowing. Unwrap the .303 from its oilcloth. Grease is clean and golden. No sign of rust. Not enough moisture in the dry desert air. Bullets dull brass in their cardboard cartridges, couple dozen of them. I load one into the breech and sight on the mob of goats that have come down the rock to observe, the billy goat coughing, staring at me down the sight, never seen a human before. I sight on the smallest kid, take in his colours, for later, when the food runs out. My father lived out here on goat and grass seed johnny-cakes for months at a time. Quandong in season. Tadpoles. Frogs. Bush turkey. His father before him. Famous among local prospectors. Had been so confident he'd found El Dorado he'd traded a ten ounce nugget for a crate of sherry, before the hole went dry. It was when Grandpa died that my father followed him out here, worked the hole deeper into the granite and greenstone bands, gelignite and pick and shovel, mercury and cyanide extracted, right through summer. Dug out enough to pay for his smokes and bullets, but not much else. Everything listed in a shivery hand in his ledgers.

I take the rifle and the shovel and go and dig out the soak, hefting the dry sand that becomes damper, the rifle laid over a rock beside me.

The soak begins to fill with muddy water, and I keep digging. I had a lot of time to think on the drive up. We could live out here, make furtive trips into town, pay with cash. This is somebody's land, part of a cattle station the size of Victoria, no reason the owners would ever find us. My father and his father had never cared whose land it was, had always kept the .303 handy. This wasn't the kind of country you walked up on someone unannounced, even if you were the owner. Hunters out here. Prospectors. Fugitives.

But Warner is still alive, and Warner knows my father's diggings were near Cue. The logical place for a city-boy to run, with Danny.

Warner knew that I was going to have a crack at him. Most likely, he would have offed me after a couple of good batches. But he wouldn't have expected it from Danny.

Cue was eighty k to the east. Lot of country between us. We would probably be safe here.

Not a lot of other options.

It's a feudal world, the drug trade. My only other choice is to go to Mastic, bow and scrape, swear undying loyalty. Hope he can protect us.

Or go dog for Ogilvie, and hope for the same.

But no legs in either option. Once I'm no use, they'll burn me to trade up, part of the game.

The sun has nearly gone and the light softens in the warm shade. Tiny tree frogs begin their migration from the gnamma holes to the grass and nearest scrub. A babbler singing on the rock. The sparrowhawk flies over for another look.

I watch the water drain into the soak clear and sweet, lob the shovel into the grass and carry the rifle over to the camp. Danny's still leaning against the gum, staring up at the rock, at the fat retreating tail of a giant bungarra, belly scraping rhythmically on the rock, flicking tongue tasting the air.

'It walked right past me. Wasn't scared at all.'

'Top of the food chain. Probably the same lizard I used to see here, twenty years ago. Dad used to shoot goat for it. The odd feral cat. Lives in a cleft of rock up there. A good sign. Keeps the snakes away.'

'Talkin like a bushie already. What's the plan? Stay here for the night? I'm gettin real sick.'

'Don't be an arse. If you'd killed Warner, we might go back, one day. Years from now.'

'A hospital. Morphine, for my bust wrist.'

'Not a chance. We're here until I figure it out. I've got some pills.'

Danny's face turns ugly again, and I know the look.

'Can you walk?'

'Sure. But I need some pills.'

‘One pill, every few hours.’

Danny’s first time coming off. I’ve done it a hundred times, maybe more, and it will be hard to watch him suffer.

He thinks it’s bad already.

Before it starts I want to show him the mine. We walk through fifty yards of scrub, ancient trees evenly spaced, has the feel of an orchard planted by a careful hand, everything radiant in the last warm light, to the edge of the mineshaft.

‘Careful.’

My hand across Danny’s chest. Just a big hole in the ground, vertical, my grandfather’s hand-sawed boughs framing the edges, perfectly square, dug out with a pick and shovel.

‘Why here?’

I shake my head. ‘I’ve always wondered that. Don’t think my dad knew either. Just that it produced a bit, for his dad. Between them, they worked it for close to twenty years.’

‘He died out here, didn’t he?’

I ignore the question, looking down into the hole. ‘We’ll have a better look tomorrow. But first, what my father told me when I was your age. Don’t wander. At first, all the trees look the same. It’s easy to get lost, and hard to get found. In this heat, you’ll last two days without water ... three at the most.’

‘But the rock.’

‘You can be fifty metres from the rock in this scrub, not see it. Just do as I say. Don’t wander off.’

‘Ok.’

We’re nearly back to the rock when I hear the chopper. It’s gone dark enough for the searchlights to stand out against the red horizon, the clear twin beams of white light sweeping towards us.

We make it to the cave before the police chopper sights us, turning slowly around the edge of the rock, looking for our camp, but the searchlights make one thing clear.

Either Warner has a mate in the local coppers, out doing his bidding, perhaps even up there with a rifle, or else the fire at the



wharf got too big for Warner to control. Meaning there's a general manhunt out for us. Meaning every copper in the state is on our tail.

If it's Warner pulling the strings, and they find us, we're dead.

Warner's name is on the line, and he will never give up. Plenty that went up in smoke, not covered by insurance.

Beyond forgiveness now, or recompense.

Even for a prized cook.

I dose Danny with three pills at once, bed him down in a nest of blankets, leave him a pot of water, the rest of the food, scratch crude directions into the cave floor, should I never return.

Walk out into the night, rifle over my shoulder, the full moon rising over the eastern horizon, enough light to drive by.

It takes me five hours to make the road, following our earlier tracks, another hour to get into the Cue town site, make the roadhouse just before it closes. Fill up the Charger, pay using Danny's credit card, make sure my picture on the servo surveillance video is clear. Do the same at the bottle shop. Hope to Christ the coppers don't get me in town. I'll have to go down shooting. The strong possibility that one of them is owned by Warner. Don't want to be beaten to death in the Cue cells. Don't want to give up Danny's location. Don't want to *not* give it up, under torture — leave him out there alone, helpless.

I make small-talk with the bottle-shop owner, mention I'm camping at Walga Rock, take my half-carton and leave. Watch from my car to see if he runs to the phone.

He doesn't, which is not a good sign.

Coppers are looking, but not asking.

I return along the dusty track beneath the risen moon and make camp not far from Walga Rock. A big fire, within plain sight of the road, near the car. Pile a few bags under the last two blankets, on the ground by the fire, two sleeping scarecrows, then walk back to the road with the leaf-blower, use it to blow away the car-tracks into the first fifty metres of bush the other side. When I've built up the graded lip again and I'm sure that our track is covered, I retreat back to the nearest flank of Walga Rock with the rifle, spend a night shivering

and watching the road, herd of goats using the wallaby path behind me, coughing and snorting, my smell like an odd dream among them. I leave the rock only to keep the fire at the camp going, the urge to lie down and sleep strong.

Back in my stone eyrie I keep myself occupied cleaning the .303 by moonlight, with screwdriver and strips of my shirt, hope to hell the sight is still good. Count the stars coming out as the moon sinks to the horizon, as the inky darkness settles for an hour before the first flushes of dawn, there behind the distant lights of Cue.

I hear the chopper just before the sun spills red over the horizon, high up in the dark sky, just the distant syncopation among the winking stars, one of them moving slowly around the rock. I crawl beneath the nearest wedge of granite, to mask me from their infra-red, and settle down to wait. I'd placed the two swags as near the fire as possible, the whole camp glowing white on their screen.

It's working as I hoped. One of Warner's copper stooges in Perth, alerting him to the time and place of Danny's credit card use, last night. The chopper sent out to confirm the campsite. Warner likely on a light plane these past hours, Perth to Meekatharra, the short drive from there to Cue.

He'll be coming armed, in company. He'll want his money back, but this isn't about money.

An execution.

An example.

Done himself.

The chopper circles for a while then heads back to the town, dropping in altitude. I hunker down on the cold granite ledge and draw a bead over the plain, looking for plumes of dust.

The thought of Danny, probably awake now, shivering and sick.

The certain knowledge that if I die, he dies too.

The last of us. The only good one.

I'm trying, but it doesn't feel real. The .303 heavy in my hands, the rifle my father taught me to use, when I was Danny's age.

And always the question I've been asking myself, ever since I decided to follow Danny — to never leave him, until he's safe from my world, from me, my good intentions.

At what point did I pass from being The Son, to The Father? It wasn't at the boys' birth, or even during their childhood. I was no real parent. Kevin always a pain in the arse. But Danny, never far from my mind. Knowing that until I find a place for him somewhere safe, I will not be able to die in peace.

Because my father did not die in peace.

The moment of his death the answer to my question. The moment I pulled the trigger, his eyes on mine, but grateful, I passed from being the son to the father. A father in a fatherless world. The godless world that he had lived in, when his father had died. What my father meant.

My father had been out here, dying, alone, when I found him.

The cancer, right through him by the time I arrived, just out on remand, come to collect something I'd left, the only bloke I could trust.

He hadn't told anyone he was dying. He didn't have any meds. No transport to get into town. Too weak to walk the twenty k to the track, to hitch a ride.

It was already too late. The depth of his suffering. The sounds he made, like a flayed animal. The cancer in his brain. Helpless in his agony.

I broke parole and stayed with him. Couldn't leave him to go to town, for help, too far gone. Made him broth that he couldn't swallow. Fed him my own pills, useless.

Then the moment came. He was ready. Eyes became clear for a moment, drawn out of his delirium by the pain. Lost. Confused. Understood where he was. What was happening. His last act of will. Told me to do it. His own hands, no good.

Told me that I could do it.

I knelt before him on the cave floor, the .303 barrel in his mouth, his eyes on mine, watering, afraid. A paste of snot and blood, mixed with the red dirt, in his hair, his eyes, his mouth, in his bedding, all over his skin.

He said it then. 'A father is God to his son.'

I hear the Hilux engine before I see it, the plume of red dust rising out of the riverbed, settling over the red gum and casuarina grove, the car parked there amid the cover. One vehicle. No chopper. Cops keeping it at arm's length. Warner and one other, a Maori bloke I know, Morgan, who knows me, a good bloke who's come to do me in. Both armed with shining new shotties, a Sunday stroll, walk in the park, hunting the junkie and his junkie son, their navy blue jumpsuits like coppers' or miners' uniforms, black boots and caps, should there be any witnesses.

No witnesses out here.

I wait until they're in a sparse patch of cynic grass framed by a field of white everlastings, no cover beyond a few crumbling termite nests, shoot Morgan first, the crosshairs on his chest true, swing the bead onto Warner, who's pitched into the dirt, put a bullet into his shoulders, load another, put two more into each of them, watch their skulls burst like puffballs, red spores settling over the dirt, then start running, down the flank of the covering rock, towards the dried riverbed, to get in behind their vehicle, in case there's a driver.

There isn't. The Hilux is parked on a carpet of casuarina needles, the tracks of emu and roo and goat in the dried mud around. Windows down, passenger seat reclined, Warner having snoozed on the drive in, the bastard.

Doesn't look like a rental. Or a copper's car, on loan. In the glovebox I find the rego—a company car, Styx Gold Ltd, from a nearby mine, an Italiano family company.

Iced coffee cartons on the floorpan, some bacon egg roll wrappers, breath mints, Warner's cigarettes.

On the back seat, an overnight bag, two new sleeping bags, dunny paper, some cash in a bum-bag, wank mags, a blue tarp and two shovels, a jerry-can of fuel.

Warner no mug.

He'd make me dig our grave, mine and Danny's, pile on wood then pour on the fuel. Burn us into ashes and bone rubble, cover us over.

Gone forever.

I park the Hilux fifty metres into the bush, walk back over our track, build up the graded lip of gravel road and use the leaf-blower to cover our trail. The Valiant is waiting hidden in the river bed; its rego plates in the tray of the Hilux.

Warner sits beside me on the drive to the rock, buckled in, reclined, the other bloke in the tray, wrapped in the tarp. Both of them bled out already, into the dirt.

I want to keep this car, for later. An Italiano company vehicle, unlikely they'll claim it as missing.

Would raise too many questions.

No sign of the chopper either. Same reason. The slightest sniff of something gone wrong, Warner's stooges will abandon him, start covering their tracks, deleting searches from computers, wiping the flight-logs of choppers, until his body is found.

But it will never be found.

Danny takes one look at what's inside the Toyota and says, 'Oh, what a feeling.'

Late afternoon. All day driving and walking. Parking the Hilux in the cave, before I walk back to Walga Rock to collect the Charger.

Now Warner and Morgan are in the front seat of the Valiant, strapped in, sightless eyes staring over the bonnet, beginning to smell bad.

Danny stands aside and smokes, says nothing as I roll the Valiant, slowly, carefully, over the lip of the mineshaft, wanting it to slide, which it does, crashing once or twice on the way down.

I have no idea how deep the shaft is, and I will never know. Danny helps me drag the lighter firewood and tip it in. I put whole dried boughs down, mallee, beefwood, sandalwood, whatever is at hand. Pour over the fuel, follow it with a burning torch of poverty bush, stand back as the whump of heat rises in a vertical column of shimmering clear.

Keep feeding the fire, the compressed explosion of the Charger's tank, the sound of crumbling rock, superheated, the support boughs burning through.

The work of generations, collapsing in on itself, spume of red dust  
rising out of the shaft.

An end to it.

I am tired and covered in blood, dirt, charcoal. Haven't slept for  
close to sixty hours. We retreat to the cave. No words are necessary.  
We'll camp here, a week or two, perhaps a month. I'll hunt and cook.  
Danny will get clean.

Then we'll move. Enough cash to last a year, if we're careful.

A new start. New Zealand. Different line of work. Set Danny up  
with some kind of trade. Sit back and give him a chance.

The light in the cave is soft and red, like a child's crayon drawing.  
There's nothing to do now but sleep, rest, live my father's hermit life  
for a while, walk the rock, feed the bungarra, watch the light over  
the desert change as the gnamma holes dry up, as the birds fly to  
the coast.

I feel it for the first time in a long while, my eyes upon my son,  
feeding the fire: my father's presence in the cave with us, and it's not  
the violence of our last moments which haunts me, but the feeling  
that he is looking over us, perhaps, and then I am asleep.

*Robyn Mundy's work includes The Nature of Ice and the young readers' Epic Adventure: Epic Voyages (co-authored). Her short fiction is widely published, and 'Everlastings' was a place-getter in the Katharine Susannah Prichard Short Fiction Award 2013.*

## Everlastings

### Robyn Mundy

**T**he *Prospector* verily fangs along. Kalgoorlie to Perth in under seven hours. Elledy glides through the carriages, shakes a black bag. 'Rubbish,' she cries airily. The regulars know to separate the cardboard cup holders. 'Thank you, kind Sir.' Elledy's feeling My Fair Lady-ish, she's feeling out of time. It's like peeling off a weighty coat in favour of a strappy summer dress.

She hears Ruth in the Buffet Car tell a pair of tourists, *they wash up nicely*. The lady can't decide between the *Prospector* tea towel and the Western Australian wildflower design. Her husband casts a dubious eye over the contents of the pie warmer. Ruth quietly counsels the woman. 'I keep one or two extras on hand for last minute gifts.' Elledy loves Ruth. She's everybody's favourite hostie. If they issued a Lifetime Employee Award for Dedication and Goodwill, Ruth would be frontrunner. Elledy fixes herself two instant coffees, no sugar for Tony. She notes a Violet Crumble Bar on the staff discount sheet. The drawn-out space between departure and arrival feels airy as honeycomb, syrupy with pleasure.

Elledy moves up front to the engine car. Sets the coffees down. From the driver's seat the stretch between the Goldfields and the

wheat belt is all gimlets and mallee, the last of the salmon gums. A swathe of yellow pasture cleaves the landscape. ‘Couple a weeks, Tones.’ Elledy plants herself beside the driver’s seat. ‘Everlastings’ll be out in flower.’ Lordy. Listen to her. At eighteen she wouldn’t have known a wildflower from a weed.

Elledy’s been a hostie on the *Prospector* since she changed her name and left the city for a new start in the Goldfields. This Christmas she’s up for long service. A decade of her life, though you’d never go skiting years of service to anyone ’round here. Jean’s been head hostie since the Pleistocene. *Young thing like you*, Jean urges, *you ought to spread your wings. Explore the world*. Then there’s Ruth and Tony, they were teenage sweethearts on the train—in *the days of coal and steam*, if you believe half of what Tony tells you. Now they’re racing to the finish like kilometres of track.

Tony pulls out a dog-eared travel brochure. The World’s Great Rail Journeys. ‘Trans-Siberian,’ he says. ‘Booked and paid for. Me and Ruthie gold class all the way.’

She’ll miss them something awful. They’ve been like parents. ‘I should be happy for you.’

‘Ain’t over ’til the fat lady sings,’ chimes Tony. ‘A rendezvous in Ulaan Baatar. Meet you third yurt on the right.’

They’ve invited her to join them before. She never gives a yes or no. You’ve got to love big dreams.

Long service leave. Her workmates all nudging her to go somewhere. Three months. It sounds more like a sentence.

The way the other hosties tease Elledy makes her fret that she doesn’t belong. *Patron Saint of Train Travellers*, Jean will say with a Mother Superior sigh. Elledy doesn’t set out to be *noncompliant*; she doesn’t think herself better than anyone else. She just can’t stand back and do nothing while passengers try to heave their heavy luggage up onto the rack. And when did it become *not our responsibility* to give a parent a few minutes’ break? Jean says she’ll catch ringworm, or worse, the way she messes about with those snotty-nosed dark kids. No one, though, could accuse her of snubbing safety. She



just doesn't get the new OH&S regulations that tell you it's in your best interest not to be kind.

The face reflected in the *Prospector* window could be younger than a girl facing thirty, it could be Elledy at eighteen, floating on dreams in her first year of study. Back then she was ramped up for the lead role in her first proper play, lingering at the academy after rehearsal when she should have been on her merry way. Ewan had toasted untapped talent and stardom-to-be. *No Limits* the motto back then. The smitten actress, her enigmatic director, guzzling straight from a bottle he'd nicked from his parents' wine fridge. She'd been tipsy on French champagne and full of huff and bluster at the latest parking infringement slapped on the windscreen of her tinny Nissan Sunny. Back then she'd have held her arms aloft and beseeched to that storm-ridden sky: *Who, for pity's sake, has time to walk from the overflow car park on the other side of campus?*

Her dad used to say she'd be late for her own funeral.

That afternoon Elledy remembers navigating side streets to short-cut traffic, music pumping, crappy wipers smearing rain across her windscreen. It wasn't racing, late, late, to the hairdresser that had her plant her foot. It wasn't necessarily the thrill of imagining herself a *Pretty Woman* knockout in the cupped scarlet ball dress her father in Adelaide had sent her the money to buy—without which, she'd cried on the phone, her life would as well be over. No, Elledy was reckless with imaginings of Ewan who she'd hankered for all year. Hours before the event, as if he'd sensed she'd given up, he'd finally asked her to the student ball.

All the never worn gowns in the windows of the Salvos.

Elledy tells passengers that being a hostie on the *Prospector* is the best job in the world. She's always on the go. She never feels confined. She's on her way to Perth, has two days off work, a ticket to a play. When she thinks of how life could be, who'd ever leave this kind of freedom?



Elledy has the program open on her lap. *A poignant study of fractured lives.*



She loves the hubbub and anticipation before the curtain goes up. She catches snippets of perfume and wafts of highbrow talk from men and women seated around her. The ushers go about their work unnoticed, their fitted waistcoats and dark trousers not unlike her Transwa uniform. Sparkles catch the light. Bling. Glitter. Hemp. Theatre is the place where people spend as much to dress down as up. Not that she splashes out, except at the op shops. She rents a modest flat behind Kalgoorlie Station. When she stays down in Perth she lodges at the CWA—best budget B&B in town, walking distance to everywhere. Plays, musicals—any live performance—is Elledy’s singular extravagance, the piece of her old life she can’t pack away.

Truth be told, the productions that appeal, comedy or calamity, are those with cast and crew she knows. If she should ever raise the gumption to make her presence known, those on stage would think her a voyeur, her obsession with the theatre a morbid coveting. Others from her past would push easier, mainline ways to get a hit.

When actors Elledy once knew stride across the stage, she feels a grazed intake of air at how *good* they’ve become. *It could have been you*, a soliloquy needles in her skull. An old flame like Ewan, writer and director of tonight’s premiere—he wouldn’t even recognise her now.

The house lights dim, the curtain lifts. The stage remains in darkness but for a meagre flickering light. Surround speakers hammer out rain and the drone of city traffic. Elledy tunes her hearing to a car, to small scrapes of rubber on a road. From somewhere on the darkened stage a girl chats in youthful chirrups. You can hear she’s revved up. Full of herself. Maybe she’s talking on a mobile phone. The stage gradually lightens into being. Elledy sees a man hunkered down on a stationary bicycle, his rapid pedalling creating the illusion of speed. The bike’s headlamp pulses through the sound of rain.

A prickling begins deep beneath her skin. She listens to car tyres squeal in arcs.

The stage suddenly blooms into a strobe, a speaker beats a brassy discord. Behind the cyclist a film clip screens a staccato of cars, wheels carving through the puddles. She knows what's coming. She feels the thud through her gut as the car—*her* car—wallops that cyclist and plucks him clean off his bike. She sees his body bounce on her bonnet limber as rubber—*oof*—like a mannequin in a simulated crash. The audience gasp and Elledy is momentarily transfixed by whatever set-up of wires and pulleys allows an actor to tumble slow motion through air, seemingly weightless above the stage. Panic grabs her. She wants to rise from her seat, escape this assault. She can't bring herself to move.

A glow illuminates the girl standing front of stage. Her red hair is aglitter, coiffured into twists. Cinderella in a shimmering green ball gown. Ewan got that bit wrong. Elledy's dress was scarlet. She hadn't even made it to her hair appointment. She listens to that girl's broken voice. Her jumbled machinations.

Elledy wonders at a playwright's capacity to hold the mud map to a carcass for so long. The theatre is an unearthing, the body of a long ago girl pulled from the slough. She sits in the dress circle, bearing witness to the rot of her life being aired and flung across an open stage.

The actress grips an imaginary steering wheel. Her stiletto taps a trembling dance. Ewan inhabits the scene as if he were there in the car beside Elledy. He captures that girl's collision of thoughts as her Nissan Sunny spirits away with a staved-in bonnet and smashed windscreen.

A girl whose name back then was Maddie. A girl on P-plates whose panicked bolt won her the trifecta: Blood Alcohol Content; Seventy-five in a Fifty Zone; a Hit and Run that paid out three years for manslaughter.

She can't discount Ewan's skill. The way he pitches that girl's curdle of horror against self-preservation tugs at her heart. It makes her bones loosen in her skin, has her cry softly for that frightened girl

in a way she's never wanted to before. If Elledy could glide down on a wire she would cradle her younger self. The audience, pitying gazes from those around her: they don't hate Maddie: they feel for her too.

Strange, thinking back. Ewan wasn't one to squander empathy or care. Not in real life. At least not on her. Contrary to the love interest he brings in to the play, Ewan never visited Elledy in prison. No one from the academy offered support. She knew she only had herself to blame. One bad apple can taint a bowl of shining fruit.

Did Elledy feel sorrow for that cyclist? Was she weighed down with regret? With shame, self-loathing?

Then and now. Each and every day.

Her dad had driven his truck across the Nullarbor to visit her at the Correctional Centre. He'd looked at her bitten-down nails and gathered her hands in his. That's the feeling of her father she still holds: a tender press of meaty hands.

When Elledy was granted early release on good behaviour, a woman came to the prison. If Ewan had been present to witness that encounter—Elledy bawling and pleading forgiveness, the woman weeping—he'd have gained some extra mileage for his play. A blow to the face would have been easier than the photograph the woman set down between them. Father of little girl twins. A whole and happy family. What meaning could she draw from that silent offering but a widow's curse of everlasting pain?

Elledy can still hear applause as she hurries out from the theatre restroom. She thinks to flee this wretched place before people pour onto the foyer. *Boof*. Slam into a waiter. Her bag upends. Drinks and glass spill and splinter across the polished floor. She's on her knees retrieving loose tampons, pens, her strawberry lip balm. Theatre staff help mop the mess. People. Voices. Footsteps. A forgotten laugh as a slender figure in green suede brogues saunters by. Ewan. He catches her eye, he turns away. 'Ewan.' Elledy gathers her bag. 'Ewan,' she calls.

What is she doing? Madness to follow.

He's at the foyer steps, blocked by the crowd coming down. She taps his shoulder, waits for him to turn. 'My God,' he says, no skerrick of discomfort. 'Maddie?'

It feels out of time to hear her old name. She hasn't heard it spoken since her dad passed away.

He doesn't look much different. Less hair, perhaps. Still beautiful. 'This is insane,' he speaks with faultless geniality. 'It's been ... years.' A tall man approaches, touches Ewan's elbow. 'John,' Ewan says. She feels an apprehension. 'John's the producer.' Elledy shakes his hand. 'Madeleine's an old friend. Academy days.'

'Fantastic. Super.' John's enthusiasm fills the stilted silence. 'How did you enjoy it, Madeleine?'

She casts about for words. 'It packed a punch.' Ewan looks contrite. Why she feels a slide toward pity, she doesn't understand. She pushes back the prickle of tears. Don't, she commands her brain. You wanted to act. You act.

'Did Ewan share our very good news?'

She shakes her head.

'The show's off to Melbourne and Sydney next year.' John pats Ewan's shoulder. 'Big things in store for this wonder boy.'

'That's huge. Congratulations.' People crowd. Voices escalate. Elledy plucks a string of defiance from a girl she used to be. 'I was wondering,' she says to Ewan. 'The guy, the boyfriend in the play, do you think he would have ... you know ... visited her in prison?'

Ewan blinks. John rushes in. 'I felt the actions and motivations were entirely faithful to the character.'

'I didn't. I never got that feeling.'

Ewan stands mute. He gives John a look that might be pleading. 'So.' John takes command. 'Shall we, Ewan? Lovely meeting you, Madeleine. We appreciate your support. Tell all your friends to come.'

She isn't done. 'I have another question.' She wants redemption. John throws a flicker of impatience. 'What would have become of that girl?' Elledy says. 'After. When she got out of prison.'

Ewan's face grows tight. 'It's not for me to say.'

‘But she’s your creation. You’re the playwright.’

John clears his throat. The finger he raises holds the magic answer. ‘I think a better question is to ask *ourselves* what becomes of her. Does she remain in purgatory? Find self-forgiveness?’ He puts two fingers to his chin. ‘Ewan passes the outcome to us, the audience, to reflect, to ponder.’ His hip brushes Ewan’s arm.

It strikes Elledy: they’re together.

Ewan gives the taller man a nod that feels like gratitude. Something snaps in Elledy’s chest. ‘I think she starts again. I think she goes on to have a good life and becomes more compassionate.’ She could be back on stage. ‘I think she discovers good things, things she never had in her old life, and she makes friends with decent people and she loves and is loved in return.’ Ewan blinks. ‘That boy,’ she says to him. ‘Back then. Would he have even cared for someone like her?’

John raises an eyebrow. Ewan looks at her evenly. ‘Perhaps he was still trying to work himself out.’

Evidently so.

John’s tongue clicks. ‘I’m sorry. Ewan’s needed elsewhere.’

‘I know this much,’ Elledy ignores him. All she’s seen and learnt from working on the train. People who’ll face forward. Those who’ll sit and look the other way. ‘That girl might have done a dreadful thing. But she’d never steal someone else’s suffering and bandy it about.’

Ewan slumps. She waits for the apology. But he inflates, raises his chin, a *you ought to know better*. His mouth shapes into ... scorn. ‘It all comes from life. Every writer. Every work. You do it to walk in someone else’s steps. To understand.’

‘Ewan.’ John’s voice sounds a warning.

Ewan softens. ‘Maddie, I want that girl to forgive herself. If she’s moved on, found happiness, I’m happy for her.’ She hears it in his voice: a quality too heartfelt for performance. ‘Really,’ he says. ‘I am.’

She nods. Bereft. Of words. Of bluff.



The *Prospector* barrels up the track. East into the morning sun.

At Merredin, the halfway stop between Perth and Kalgoorlie, they wait for the westbound *Prospector*. Some disembark, new passengers board.

Elledy scoops up a toddler going walkabout across the tracks. ‘Hup we go, Mister. Shall we find who you belong to?’ Last year she was awarded an employee certificate for retrieving a boy on a skateboard when he sailed over the city platform. *In Recognition of Bravery and Personal Sacrifice*. She had to smile at that.

Jean sounds the whistle. ‘All Aboard for Kalgoorlie!’

Elledy helps a mother sort her luggage, attends to a mix-up with the seats. The girl in 15B sits alone. Nervous hands. Anxious eyes soaking up the land. Rewind a decade and she could be Elledy, on her way to the Goldfields to start again. A chance conversation with the Buffet Car hostess who put in a kindly word.

Ruth and Tony. Trans-Siberian. Not a *yes*. A *maybe* is what she’s told them.

Sun glosses the first of the salmon gums. Puddles lay milky beside the track. ‘Gorgeous day for it, Mr Mack.’ Mr Mackinlay is on his annual pilgrimage to the Kalgoorlie Race Round. ‘I always think the wheat belt looks full of promise after rain,’ says Elledy. ‘All new and shiny and bursting to become.’

Mr Mackinlay’s washed-out eyes bathe her in a kind of fatherly love. ‘Quite the little Banjo Paterson this morning.’ She probably sounds young and silly to an old seasoned cockie. When it comes to crops, the right amount of rainfall, Elledy wouldn’t know a reprieve from a curse.

He turns his gaze to a pasture of canola stamped yellow on the hillside. His face softens to a boy in a meadow with all his life before him. ‘There’s all the promise you could want.’

Everlastings dot the gravel as if someone’s walked beside the track sprinkling boxes of confetti. It’s Elledy’s favourite time of year. Everything renewed.

Mike Williams's two novels *Old Jazz* and *The Music of Dunes* were published by Fremantle Press, and his poetry and short fiction have been published in various Australian journals.

## Ironing with Leonard Cohen

### Mike Williams

It's chilly now and Jude's tucked herself inside my jacket, snug as a tick. I can feel her excitement, the electricity of it. Seven years old and she's a dune creature, a beach rat, a little wild and wind blasted like salt grass, already comfortable with the ocean and the coastal heathlands. It's as though she belongs here far more than her vagabond parents ever will. I pull my coat tighter around us both and smell my daughter's dark hair. It smells of ocean and salt wind. We're going to watch the whales until it gets dark and then we're going back to eat some fried rice—Jude's favourite. Laura should be back by then. She had taken the van to drop off one of her driftwood chairs for a café up in Ravensthorpe.

I want to be a whale, says Jude.

What would you do if you were a whale?

If I saw people drowning, I would save them and take them to a magic island.

You would be a busy whale.

But I'd still like to sleep in my bed so you can read me stories.

We have some more *Hobbit* to read tonight, I tell her.



I've trailed the pod of southern rights along the bay in the kayak and sensed their awareness of me; I like to think we have a silent pact of respect and nonaggression. At night we can hear them rolling and turning in the bay.

The first stars are visible as we head back to the house, on the boarded track through the dunes. Laura's back. We'd heard her drive in and the slam of the van door. The house lights create a glow behind the dunes, and we can just see Laura out on the verandah.

Jude calls out, Mum, I saw the whales.

Jude scampers ahead as I head around to the boatshed to make sure the doors are secured against the rising wind. I'm hungry and ready to eat.

I stamp sand off my feet and go up to Laura on the verandah. She hands me a glass of wine and smiles. She says, Another successful sale, and guess what?

Tell me.

I have an order from her brother in Perth.

That's great, I tell her.

She holds up the bottle of chardonnay.

I'm hungry, says Jude. She's sitting on the boards, drawing something on a large ring-bound sketchpad.

A shower for you first, Jude, says Laura, before you turn into pure salt.

Do I have to?

Yes, you have to. Come on. Laura puts her glass down and lands a kiss on my cheek. You promised to cook, she says.

I'm right on it.

Hurry up, says Jude.

Shower, you, says Laura, shepherding Jude off into the house.

I take my wine through to the kitchen and heat up the wok and throw in diced fish and vegetables, a touch of chilli and splashes

of soy sauce; a bowl of cooked rice stands ready for the mix. I can hear fun and games from the bathroom, and the shower running. I'm thinking of Marcia's phone call this morning, and how Jude's excited about her visit—watching Marcia paint, and her trendy London clothes. But mostly I'm thinking of the 'situation' her visit will create. I should have told her that it was not a good time. As usual, I had been seduced by her eagerness. I have a photo of her taken outside the Soho gallery, where she worked in those days; black felt hat, her thick auburn hair tumbling down, and her mocking smile. I'm tempted to go and fish it out, but I don't. Christ, she's just coming to paint, to capture the light down here. There's no problem. There really isn't.

Later, with our bellies full, Jude asleep, with another chapter of *The Hobbit* read, the dishes done, kitchen benches wiped down, I'm encamped on the couch, reading a Raymond Carver story. Laura's in Leonard Cohen mode. This means she's ironing. Beach rats like us have little use for ironed clothes. Despite her hippie nature, Laura used to be right into ironing, but these days she only irons when she's unsettled about something. Laura's Zen space: Leonard Cohen on the stereo and her working the iron mindlessly, tirelessly, smoothing out creases, looking for crisp perfection. She'll iron every item of clothing she owns and then I've seen her start on mine and Jude's. I swear she would iron the cat if she really got desperate. One day I'll write a poem about it. I can even see it as a title for a collection, *Ironing with Leonard Cohen*.

So the night is full of Cohen's 'Suzanne' (tea and oranges, China); Laura smoothing clothes, the demonic hissing of the iron, Jude with dreams of whales and hobbits, me considering the impact of a visit from Marcia.

In bed, I nestle against Laura's back and say, It's great about the chairs.

Yeah, she says, but I know her thoughts are far from chairs.

Look, about Marcia ...

Not now, okay ... I'll cope with it.

I put my arm around her waist, my hand on her belly.

The southern rights are rolling and crashing in the night water. I think of blue ice, Antarctica, wind-blasted seas. I smile at Jude's whale imaginings from earlier. I tell Laura about it.

She never tells me things like that, Laura says. I'm no mother, not really.

I don't see Jude complaining.

That's because you're around. Read me something.

I click on the lamp and reach for *In a Marine Light* and I find Carver's poem 'Shiftless' and read it for her. After, in the dark, I feel tear tracks on her face.

It's windy now and the window rattles. Sand blows off the dunes. I get up to wedge a folded bookmark into the bedroom window frame. I can hear the whales and Laura's breathing. Outside it's moonless and windswept. Queen Anne's moving her food bowl around on the kitchen floor; she's been restless all night. Some mouse around or something. I go and pick her up and dump her on the bed. She gets the idea and curls up in a hollow on the quilt. She's getting too old to do any serious nocturnal hunting, but she's restless all the same. Maybe it's those whales in the bay, permeating all of us with their energy, true as ice and stars.

I wake just after three and I fix the rattling window again, and as I lie back down I realise Laura's awake too. I can feel we're about to 'talk'. And when she does, Laura's voice is calm as the even control of her ironing. But there's no Leonard Cohen to diffuse the words.

Maybe you should just have it off with her and get it out of your system. She's hooked on you. She may not even know it, but she's hooked. You are too. Listen, it's all right—we can't control attraction.

I say nothing, this is old territory. I sit up on the side of the bed and look out to the scrub and the dunes beyond the peppermint trees.

I know you love me, Laura says. Who else would put up with me? Listen, there's something else.

What?

Laura sits up and reaches for my cigarettes. She only smokes in a blue moon. I have a bad feeling. I go to turn the lamp on. Don't, she says, her hand on my arm. I look at her in the shadowy nightlight; her black hair is down, loose. She flicks the lighter and I see her olive face like a mask in the flame. She says, I saw Angela today up in Ravensthorpe ...

I get up and turn to the window. I guess I knew it would be this. Deep down, I knew it would be this. I don't know what I feel. The first time it happened I felt blind anger, betrayed, inadequate. Now I just feel numb. I can feel Laura's eyes on me. I turn and face her. She's got the quilt wrapped around her against the cold.

It's me, she says, the way I am, you know that. I have to be honest with it. It's sex, that's all. I just need it with a woman sometimes. It's not that it's bad with you ... it's just different.

You told me it was over.

It is now ... she's going back to Geraldton to live.

That's why you've been pushing the Marcia thing—it makes you feel better.

Probably. But it's true as well, isn't it?

I don't know ... I don't know, okay?

She smokes the cigarette slowly, holding it at arm's length between drags. I light one myself and turn back to the window.

I want you to fuck me, says Laura. I know you want to.

I stub out the fresh cigarette. I'm angry at myself for being turned on by the situation. But she's here, naked, vulnerable with this confession. I'm charged with both anger and desire. What I should do is walk out on it. I don't. I go to the bed and place my hands in her dark hair. God, we're a mess aren't we? she says.

Afterwards, in the cloying dark, we are quiet. I don't know where my thoughts are. We smell of sex. We can hear the sea rolling in.

When I'm on the edge of sleep, Laura says, I'm right about Marcia.

And as we lie, each lost in our own guilt, I'm remembering last summer:

*I'm on the beach with her and the morning is warm and everything is calm and we're walking on the firm sand at the water's edge. Jude's at school up in Ravensthorpe, and Laura's in the workshop with Joni Mitchell cranked up on the stereo, giving the gulls some fierce competition. Marcia had been working almost ten days solid on a painting, but today she's taking a break.*

*What will you call it?*

*Frank's Place: Late Afternoon Light, she says, without hesitation. You like that?*

*She's wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, paint-splattered jeans, a clean white blouse, sunglasses. Her arms have tanned.*

*One of these days, Frank Harmon, I'll paint you an owl. They're in your poems a lot. So, one day you'll get your owl.*

*We walk in the drowsy sun. By the rocks at the end of the beach I swim to cool off. Marcia sits on the sand and reads a paperback she's pulled from her cloth shoulder bag. I dry in the sun as I sit beside her, then lie back on the sand, my hat over my eyes, and soak up the warmth. A gull squawks. Marcia turns a page.*

*A little later, I leave her reading on the beach and walk up to the shed to where Laura's cutting a length of driftwood to secure to the back of a chair. I make some tea and I sit quietly, watching her work.*

*Something on your mind?*

*Marcia will be gone next week, I tell her.*

*Are you saying that because you'll miss her?*

*I'm saying that it will be just the three of us, and we can get back to normal.*

*I grab my cigarettes and light one, and both of us look down the curve of beach through the shed window, at Marcia, still immersed in the book.*

*She never swims, does she, says Laura.  
It's not her thing. She's here for the light.  
And for you.  
I let that one go, as she knows full well I will.  
It's going to be hot, I say.  
Yeah. Give me one of those smokes, will you.  
I hand her the pack.  
You know nothing is permanent, says Laura, nothing at all.  
But she's not looking at me, she's still looking away through the  
window and down the long curve of beach.*

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## The Clarity of Things

Jose Dalisay Jr

Ciriaco Lagmay and his wife Lumen arrived at Terminal 1 of Kingsford Smith just past seven on a bright March morning, on a nonstop Philippine Airlines flight from Manila.

It was early, very early in the Australian autumn, with the temperature hovering in the mid-teens, and while young children and backpackers found it warm enough to lounge around the airport in T-shirts and shorts, Ciriaco and Lumen shivered against each other, clutching each other's hand down the ramp on their way to the Immigration counters. It had been sweltering when they left Manila, and even when a cousin who had read up on these things had warned them about how Australia's climate was all different and topsy-turvy, they had come in the flimsy rayon sweaters they had been forced to buy once on a trip to Baguio, in the northern highlands; that was their measure of cold—Baguio-cold, where your nose stung and you sniffled a lot but where no one ever froze to death.

They shivered, but they smiled and giggled all the while, even when Lumen's oversized carry-on bag—a cheap pink bag with blue handles that they had had to buy in Cubao at the last minute, just to get everything in—snagged on a bump in the carpet and lost one of

its small wheels. Ciriaco had to let go of Lumen's hand, and he fell to his knees on the carpet, looking for the hard plastic ball.

'It has to be here somewhere,' he assured her, 'and if I find it, I'll fix your bag.'

A knot of irritated travellers built up behind and around Ciriaco. Lumen stood aside, wishing him well and never doubting that he would find the ball. When he turned suddenly to one side, he caught a banker's pinstriped leg in his jaw, and Lumen gasped for a second, but Ciriaco came out beaming, the ball in his hand.

'I told you,' he said, 'although I'll bet you didn't believe me!' But he knew, of course, that she did. She had always believed him. She had said nothing to the contrary when, many months earlier, Ciriaco had told her that they would sell the farm in Daraga as well as everything else they had—a few pieces of jewellery left to Lumen by her mother, his share in a brother's rice mill, and the flaming red Cubao-Angono passenger jeep that Ciriaco had bought after three years in Dubai, back when he was a bachelor—to go to Australia. He had a cousin in Fairfield, on Weeroona Road. Fairfield sounded like a pleasant place, although he had no idea what Weeroona meant. It would be enough.

He took her ailing bag, along with his, and they joined the slurry of foreign-looking travellers finding their way to Immigration. She touched his arm, very lightly so as not to break his stride, but he could tell how nervous she was. He put the bags down and embraced her. And then he held her at arm's length. Through the tinted window, he could see another airliner landing on the shimmering runway.

'What is your name?' he asked her formally in English.

'Filomena,' she said, gathering an evenness in her voice, 'Batacan.'

'Good, very good,' he said. 'Why did you come here?'

'I—I want to see Australia. I am a tourist.'

'Ah, a tourist! What do you want to see?'

'Oh—many things.' Lumen had studied well, looking up places and attractions in a glossy magazine. 'The Sydney Opera House. The Sydney Bridge. Kangaroos! Koalas ... Ah, the animal that looks like a duck but has black hair?'



‘The platypus. *PLA-ty-pus*. Do you have any money?’

‘Yes—three—three thousand US dollars. Here, in my bag. We—I will change it, in the bank.’

Ciriaco stared proudly at her, while she waited for his verdict. ‘You are a very good liar,’ he said, smiling and holding both her shoulders.

She wanted to collapse into his arms but he had taken the bags again, and handed her the pink one with her name on it.

‘And now we must pretend,’ he said. ‘We are no longer man and wife. Just for the next few minutes.’

He winked at her and it seemed to perk up her spirits. It was a complicated issue: Ciriaco had secured his tourist visa before marrying Lumen, shortly after returning from Dubai, and in a moment of confusion, fearing that his married status would complicate things, he had decided that she should apply separately for her visa as a single woman, and she had agreed, as he knew she would.

There was a long line—several long lines—at Immigration. Ciriaco wanted them to take different queues, and it distressed her. ‘Let us share the same fate,’ she implored him. ‘The person who would let me in will let you in as well.’ It made good sense to Ciriaco, and he felt even prouder of his wife.

‘Which one?’ he asked her, scanning the options. There was a bearded Indian, a pale blonde woman, and a fat, fiftyish man.

‘I choose the *bumbay*,’ she said with an impulsive flair.

‘All right,’ he said, even though he thought that the woman would have given them a better chance. He felt relieved to give her this much of a stake in their immediate future. ‘I will fall in behind you, three persons away.’

‘Citoy,’ she said, struggling against the urge to hold him and be held, ‘what if they turn me away?’

‘Then I will lie so badly that they will have to send me home as well.’

He spoke with such certainty, such plainness, that she could not resist moving closer to him, but taking care to look in some other direction—at a splashy poster advertising Sydney’s attractions—and saying past his ear, ‘I will always be your wife.’

‘Of course, Lumen,’ he said, ‘but you must stop worrying that finger.’

She had been rubbing the finger where her wedding band had been. He had promised to buy them new ones in Sydney—‘Just think, it will be like getting married all over again!’—but leaving them behind had caused her the most grief. But Ciriaco was right. Sometimes, he had told her, as he himself had been told, they stripped you naked in a room full of blazing lights, and one never knew what the new airport X-rays could find.

There were a few heart-stopping moments. Just before she stepped up to the Immigration man, Lumen had half-turned towards Ciriaco, and a scream rose up within him—no, no!—but it was only to pull up her bag, which had sagged on its bad corner. The *bumbay* took Lumen’s passport and asked her a few questions, which she fielded with aplomb. That’s a good woman, Ciriaco thought, why, that’s my wife!

At the embassy in Manila, Lumen had bluffed her way through two visa denials, gaining more confidence each time, while he had nearly given up after his first visit to the consul. ‘We are fated to go to Australia together,’ she had told him, pressing his palms together at the fast-food stand outside the embassy. ‘I have prayed very hard, and the Lord will not let us down. I have already begged His forgiveness for all this lying that we have to do, and I can feel Him smiling down at me.’

Ciriaco had laughed when she said that—he believed in God, but the God he knew struck erring people down with a terrible vengeance, like his gambler-brother who had been stabbed dead in a beerhouse brawl—but she was all seriousness, and his unexpected humour had lifted the pall between them, as it often did.

And now it seemed that God, indeed, had chosen to wear a dark and bushy face beneath a turbanned head, and to speak in a hard, rubbery tongue mediated only in the slightest by what Ciriaco would come to know as an Australian accent. He told Lumen a joke that she could not understand, then stamped her passport and waved her on.

She dragged her bag to a chair nearby and sat, pretending to be going over her tickets, but she glanced over at her husband every other instant, wishing to tow him across the yellow line.

When it was Ciriaco's turn, the agent looked him in the eye, spreading his passport out on the counter top, and called another Immigration officer over. Ciriaco's hand went to the plastic ball in his coat pocket, thumbing it over and over like a single-beaded rosary. Ciriaco understood what the problem was—he had grown his hair long in Dubai and had kept it that way, mindlessly, for his new passport picture. Then he had paid a gay hairdresser good money to make him look more respectable, more tourist-like, and now his new blow-dried creation sweated in the nippy air.

'Is this your signature?' the other man—tall and hollow-cheeked in a dark blue suit—asked Ciriaco.

'Yes, sir.'

Ciriaco's signature looked like a bedspring with the coils flattened over to the left. He was left-handed.

'Bloody hell,' the man said, and then he told the agent, 'Make him sign something.'

The officer flipped over a blank immigration card and Ciriaco signed his name with the man's ballpoint. It was a slim and slippery pen but Ciriaco performed the task with a flourish that impressed the two men.

'Now, write A-B-C, no, write a complete sentence in English. You understand? Anything,' the tall man insisted.

Ciriaco wrote 'I love' and he would have written 'my wife', seeing how Lumen now half-stood in her seat with the bag in her arms like a baby, but he caught himself at the last second and he wrote, instead, 'Sydney.'

The tall man laughed and said, 'So do I, pal, as long as this weather holds.'

'It's very cold,' Ciriaco said.

Now the turbanned man laughed as well as he flipped the passport pages to where Ciriaco's tourist visa was. 'Cold! Twenty years ago—'

‘Betty and I were down in Thredbo last winter,’ the tall one said. ‘*That’s* cold. Give him an extra month, let him know what it feels like!’ Then he left, and the agent processed Ciriaco’s papers.

When they stood outside the terminal, Ciriaco and Lumen hugged each other tightly behind a massive concrete pillar, and Lumen—who was four inches shorter than her husband—squealed when the ground beneath her vanished in a swirl of blinding daylight and Ciriaco, smiling in his new hair.

‘I have three months!’ she said.

‘And four for me,’ Ciriaco countered. ‘But I will wait for you,’ he added quickly.

‘No, I will wait for you—or is it you who will—’ She paused, confused.

He put his arm around her.

On the plane, not knowing how to adjust the overhead air vent, she had pulled a maroon corduroy jacket over her sweater, and while that weekend in Baguio had given her a foretaste of the temperate zone, she was shivering again in the unfamiliar cold that came with dazzling skies. It should have been dark and cloudy, she thought, or drizzly even, but she felt giddy with light, though chilled in the pit of her stomach.

‘We have enough time,’ he said. ‘We have each other, and enough time.’

Autumn passed, and winter, and still they had each other. And now even more time, because they had cast themselves beyond the pale of the law, as they had planned to do from that very first hour.

Ciriaco’s cousin was in prison for a bungled grocery hold-up in which a five-year-old boy had been shot, but he had turned over the lease on his apartment to Ciriaco, in exchange for fifty dollars’ worth of toiletries and cigarettes on Ciriaco’s monthly visits.

Lumen made that one room as liveable as a Filipina woman could, and they spent most of their seed money on rent and bargain furnishings from Target, until they learned about discount stores

and, later, about Goodwill and Salvation Army thrift shops, from one of which Lumen salvaged a daisy-print bedspread, 'Made in the Philippines', for a dollar-fifty.

Unwilling to yield their passports with the expired visas, they could not open a bank account, so Lumen kept their money, tightly wadded, in a jar on the uppermost shelf of their modest cupboard. Ciriaco insisted on keeping that cupboard full of canned goods—sardines, peaches, corned beef, Chinese bamboo shoots, and whole-kernel corn—at all times.

In the days they looked for jobs. In Dubai, he had been a machinist—he had dropped out of engineering in his junior year—but he could find nothing in the classifieds that did not demand papers. Lumen had taught in the primary grades, and her English was good, but she learned, from their Syrian neighbour who was a clerk in a bank and who went to night school at the community college, that teachers here needed something called 'certification', and it seemed insuperable to her, because she had left all her diplomas and employment papers behind.

'We'll find something,' he told her on their seventh week, over pork and beans scooped out of an 8-ounce can.

The beans caught in his throat when she said, 'Yes, of course we will, I've never doubted that.'

They saw a few fellow Filipinos in the local Catholic church, and Lumen felt like running across the aisle and over the pews because she could hear them speaking Tagalog, but Ciriaco had warned her against friendliness, especially towards their countrymen, because he had heard awful stories about people collecting bounties by turning in illegals—people who came from the same town or city, and relatives, even.

'But they don't look the type,' she said. These Filipinos were dressed in smart black jackets with sparkling studs and coats with furry collars. They made a lot of noise in the foyer, and during the Offertory one woman kept adjusting the python of pearls on her front as she stared at Lumen, who seemed mesmerised by the beads.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said. ‘You don’t know what’s in their hearts.’

And so she kept to herself and to her husband, deferring, again, to his wisdom in these matters. He had seen the world—he had passed through Bangkok on his way home from Dubai—and he knew and understood the way of people everywhere more than she did.

In their ninth week, Ciriaco found work as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant a few blocks from where they lived—‘Imagine, Lumen,’ he cried, ‘I don’t even have to pay for transportation!’—and they celebrated the event with a movie—*Teesh and Trude*—that neither one of them could make much sense of, but which they laughed and giggled through all the same, despite the hushes around them from people in long black coats and leather jackets. Then they went home and made quick but happy love, and fell asleep in each other’s arms, and did not stir even as police sirens scoured the neighbourhood as they always did on nights when the Sydney Swans won and people drank more than usual and used football as an easy pretext to settle other scores.

About three weeks afterwards Lumen came into a great piece of luck of her own. She had a special dinner cooking when Ciriaco came in from work, rubbing the cold out of his ears. In the Australian way, which she had begun to pick up from watching all kinds of shows on a black-and-white TV set they bought for twelve dollars at a Goodwill store, she asked him, the words rolling with teacherly clarity off her tongue, ‘So, how are you going?’, hoping he would ask her as well. The chicken *pochero* was bubbling in the pot, and Lumen had made sure that the meat would be soft enough for Ciriaco’s brittle teeth; he had always been too fond of sweets.

Ciriaco seemed surprised at the question and mumbled something about his boss, a Cantonese named Luk, and the scalding his hands had received from the high-pressure spray they used. Lumen wanted to fold him into her arms, but she had something better for him than her paltry comforts.

‘I’ve found a job!’ she said, and she giggled and Ciriaco giggled as well, stumbling into her embrace, and neither saw nor would have minded that thick soup dripped from Lumen’s ladle onto the kitchen floor.

‘What job?’ Ciriaco asked, settling into a chair.

‘They call it a “custodian”,’ she said authoritatively. ‘I’ll be sweeping floors, wiping tables, turning the lights off, locking doors. And guess where—in a church! I’ll be in charge of the church office, you know, where the priest—or the pastor, I think they call him—works—’

‘The pastor? Which church is this?’

She stirred the vegetables, looking deep into the ochre broth. ‘It’s a Protestant church, out in Cabramatta. They call it the Beacon of—of something. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind—do you?’

Ciriaco laughed, and Lumen felt at ease.

‘Hell, no! A job’s a job. How did you get it?’

‘Samantha—remember that big black woman who runs the Salvation Army store?—she goes to that church, and she heard about this job because this custodian who was Sri Lankan left for Comden or Cowra—something starting with a “C”—and she got me to meet the pastor, and he was very nice, didn’t ask me too many questions. They’ll give me three-fifty an hour.’

‘That’s—let me see—about 28 dollars a day,’ Ciriaco said, computing the phantom figures on the table with his bare forefinger. He made four dollars an hour. ‘We’ll make a lot of money,’ he said. ‘We can make a baby—an Australian baby,’ he joked.

She smiled thinly, taking care not to break the spell. They were in their early thirties when they first met, and they had been trying for a child but she had never got pregnant. It was something they left to God and rarely talked about.

Five years passed, five long winters endured in a yawning silence that became harsher than the landscape, harsher than the winds that blew down the mountains and over the water, wherever it was they happened to be.

They could no longer tell how that steep downward spiral had opened beneath them, who fell first and who failed or neglected to catch the other in time.

Some time in their second winter, Ciriaco had begun coming home late, and then later than even Lumen, in all her generosity, could make excuses for. The Chinese restaurant had a fixed closing time, and while Ciriaco would have made some friends, Lumen knew that he couldn't finish three beers without keeling over. Sometimes Ciriaco did stagger in drunk at two in the morning, and she could understand the occasional need for men to indulge themselves beyond their acknowledged limits; but what she could not fathom—what she feared—was the guilt that came off his sweaty body in hard-edged gestures, in the way he shrank at her touch, even in his sleep.

Later it would all spill out, in a torrent of tearful admissions, inevitably followed by bewildered arguments and recriminations: Ciriaco had met a woman at the restaurant, a waitress from Guangzhou, and they had gone to bed a few times, he said, but no more; she had moved on to another cousin's place in Fremantle.

Lumen tried to accept the revelation with a brave face and all the forgiveness she could muster, but left alone in the day, shutting the windows of the pastor's office against the gathering cold, she would burst into tears. Later she would take long walks on the harbour, beneath the bridge, dulling her senses with the overflow of sunset, the scree of the silver gulls chasing the ferry boats and the enormous sky. Sometimes she would get home later than Ciriaco would, and no one asked any questions, fearing the answers.

One night, across the table, as he sipped his soup, she announced that she and the pastor had fallen in love, and that she was leaving Ciriaco. He shuddered and wept as she told her story of how the pastor had listened and comforted her in her pain, and a trickle of snot formed in his nose and dripped into the mung beans, but no one minded; then he rose in a heaving spasm of rage and slapped her and shook her to stop her talking. Lumen staggered back. When he moved to say he was sorry, she ran to the bedroom and would not let him in, and they wept on both sides of the bolted door.

The next morning she stepped over his sleeping figure on the floor and never returned.



They met again, of course; he even met the pastor, a prematurely balding, fiftyish man named Thomas, who said that he was sorry about what had happened, and that he had advised Lumen to go home if that was what she wanted, but that it was Lumen's decision to make, and no one else's.

'Yes,' Ciriaco had said adamantly, 'she should go home to me now! She is my wife! You are living with my wife!'

But Thomas had taken a deep, sad breath and said, 'She's staying with another lady, a member of our church. She's not with me.' And then he had added, 'But neither, in this country, is she with you. By home, I meant home in the Philippines. She'd be safe there.'

Ciriaco had many things to say to that, and he did, but he might as well have been talking to himself as it changed absolutely nothing, and whatever may once have been crystal clear now seemed lost in this murk of joyless language.

Over the following months, the invariably difficult meetings, rushed to reduce the pain, gave way to phone calls, then SMS. Things seemed more civil that way, with the occasional 'How r u?' and 'Im ok' and 'Happy birthday' and 'Thx'; his 'I miss u' went unanswered.

Once, outside the casino at Darling Harbour, where he had taken to bingeing at the slot machines, he had called her and harangued her in a drunken ramble for half an hour. She never spoke back but he knew she was listening because the line remained open until his phone credit gave out.

The long drought of silence was broken a year later when she called him to report, out of civility, that she had married the pastor to legalise her stay in Australia—a more complicated process than it sounded, but this was a beginning—and that they were moving to another place in New South Wales, a town called Jindabyne—she had to spell it out for him—near the Snowy Mountains. 'Snowy' was all he would retain from this conversation, a phenomenon that remained a fantasy for most Filipinos—and even Sydneysiders, for that matter.

Without a Tax File Number, Ciriaco had become adept at finding the odd job, fixing faucets and carburettors for quick cash, which

also meant staying close to home within the relative safety of a small network of friends and acquaintances. He could not even say if Lumen was now more than an acquaintance. When, deep in the guts of a crusty Nissan, he wondered how she looked, the image of her when they first met—bobbed hair, tight smile, a sky-blue polka-dotted dress that went over her knees—kept coming back to him, as much a mystery then as untrodden snow. Married? How could the pastor have persuaded her to marry him? Or did she do the persuading, employing the ruse of singlehood by which she had gone past Immigration? ‘Save me’ was all she would have had to say, and—he told himself with bitter certainty—the Devil himself would have done her bidding.

On the bus to Jindabyne, Ciriaco stared at the SMS that had shaken him out of his stupor: ‘Pls come Jindabyne St Martins Hospital ASAP thx Lumen.’ It was a new number she was using but she had signed her name, and it felt strange that she would do that, or had to do it, so distant had she become. But Jindabyne, according to the clerk at the bus station, was only about seven hours away, passing through Goulburn, Canberra and Cooma, place-names Ciriaco had heard on TV and must have seen on some map but had never visited. He had suited up for what he expected would be a torrent of snow, unaware that the ski resorts were still farther away, and that Jindabyne itself was simply an accommodation base, along a lake of the same name; but it was deep in July and it was chilly enough in Sydney for Ciriaco. He had piled on an oversized army jacket from the Salvos store, and had stuffed his Nokia into the front pocket, near his heart, the easier to catch any incoming message. He had tried calling Lumen, but she hadn’t answered, and he had decided to just pack up and call in sick at the Vietnamese garage where he now worked. He had just over three hundred dollars in cash stuffed under his mattress, and he took all that, having no idea how much a bus ticket to Jindabyne would cost. When he forked out the eighty dollars over the counter—one-way for now—he wondered how long his money would last, or how long he would have to stay in Jindabyne. One part of his mind said ‘Not too long,’ but he found himself hoping otherwise.

It was mid-afternoon when Ciriaco arrived at the hospital, dragging his backpack, still dizzy from the long ride; he had had only a cup of coffee and a doughnut during a quick stop in Canberra, but his stomach was roiling at something else. He had not seen Lumen in over two years and the last time, in a Macca's in Moorebank, close to where she worked, had not been pleasant, ending as usual and seemingly for good in ugly rancour, with him blaming her for every downturn in his life. She took it as she had learned to do, unmindful of the embarrassment he was causing everyone, all the people poised to savour their Mighty Angus and McMuffins—in stoic silence, which she ended only by saying, 'I don't think we should see each other again,' and then rising to go. He had been too proud to chase after her, forcing himself to slurp his coffee, and the next thing he knew she was marrying another man.

But now she was taking his hands in hers again outside a private room with the pastor's name printed on a card on the apple-green door, and she was the most beautiful and the saddest thing he had seen all at once, back to her old bobbed hair, looking slim in her sweater and jeans. He had to suppress the urge to embrace her, even if it didn't feel like she would have resisted. Something like shyness or even shame came over him, and he hung his head low like a truant schoolboy.

'Thank you for coming,' she said, pressing his hands.

How warm hers were, even, especially, in the cold.

'What happened?'

'He had a heart attack, and they operated on him last night.'

'Will he live?' As soon as he asked the question—a curious boy's question—he realised how poorly it could come across, how fraught with malice, but the quickness of her reply assured him that she had taken no offence. It was all too early and too late for games.

'I don't know.' She looked over her shoulder as if to check if anyone else was looking—the nurses' station was three doors away—and then she said again, with more palpable anxiety, 'I don't know. They worked on him for more than six hours. "Wait and pray" is all they're

really telling me. I didn't get any other details. I—I had no one else to talk to, to tell me things I can understand. So I looked for you.'

'I'm here, Lumen,' Ciriaco said, barely audibly, as his throat went dry.

'Let's take a walk outside,' she said. 'I have an hour, maybe two. But not too far.'

'Of course.'

The hospital stood on a hill overlooking Lake Jindabyne, and they took a cobbled pathway down to the bottom. It was a pretty walk, dotted with trees, and on some other day it might have called other things to mind, but at this moment a frosty gust curled up from the lake.

'Let's sit here,' she said, settling on a bench along the lakeshore road.

A yellow bus full of children passed them by, and the song they were singing lingered in the air, something with a vaguely familiar tune but with strange words like 'bandicoot', which neither Ciriaco nor Lumen caught on to. The air was full of strangeness; on the way to Jindabyne, Ciriaco had marvelled at the granite boulders in Berridale, and his first glimpse of the Snowies made him feel that he had passed on to another country. Strangest of all was their sudden proximity to one another, an instance they acknowledged with respectful silence, choosing what to think before choosing what to say.

Sunset came early to Jindabyne in late July, and the purpling of the sky was reflected in the lake at which they stared.

'They say that there's a whole town under that lake,' Lumen finally said. 'They say that sometimes, when the lake is low, you can see the steeple of the old church, just beneath the water.'

'Is that so?' he said, with genuine astonishment. From where they sat, he could see nothing on the glassine lake but the tinted clouds.

'But I've never seen it,' she added quickly. 'We live far from here, maybe another thirty minutes' drive. It's my first time in this hospital. I had no idea how sick he was.'

He caught her glancing at the building behind them, where a man lay in bed, tethered to machines Ciriaco knew nothing about.

When she'd said 'It's my first time in this hospital' she'd held herself tightly, and Ciriaco felt like putting his arm around her, but again he checked himself.

In the smallest of voices, she started to tell him about her life with Thomas and her duties as a pastor's wife; he noticed her new wedding band, even though she had wrapped two fingers around it. Despite her position and her efforts to live up to it, she had not made many friends, and she wasn't sure why, although she suspected that it had to do with the way she spoke English.

To relax her, Ciriaco brought up odd Australian words he had heard in the shop, things like 'chokkie' and 'fisho', and she sounded amused by 'footy', saying that Thomas was a big sports fan, leaving her some time to herself and to her own diversions; but the only other Filipino she had met in Jindabyne ran a souvenir shop downtown, and he belonged to another church.

Her words washed over him like a gentle breath, saying little but meaning much. What he wanted to ask, above all the small talk, was if she really loved the pastor. But now, beside her, he could not bear to raise the question, even more fearful of the answer. When he mentioned 'fisho' he looked at the lake and tried to imagine the submerged houses and the fish darting through their broken windows; their owners were either long buried or had moved on to higher ground.

'What will you do if he dies?' Ciriaco heard himself saying, again surprised by his directness, which was a way of asking other things.

'I don't know,' she said, leaning forward and cupping her face in her palms.

He could see the ridge of her spine through her sweater, and she was shivering, so he put her hand on her back, and left it there. It seemed to calm her down, and he began rubbing her back in small circles, a light massage, and she did not protest. While he did this he told her about his life in Fairfield and his job in the garage, choosing to dwell on the better aspects, his growing skill at automotive mechanics, the satisfaction of his boss and of his customers at his

workmanship. 'You were always the best,' he heard her mutter, and he kneaded her shoulder, and she leaned back to give him traction.

They were settling into an old routine, performed years ago and an ocean away on the sofa in front of the TV, and as often as not they would end up cuddling and kissing, and even making love as the evening news droned on about city traffic and foreign wars.

He could feel the temperature dropping around them, and yet his hand felt like it might scorch Lumen. She turned to face him, and their eyes seemed to see through time. Ciriaco put his palm on her cheek, and she put hers over it. But when he sucked in his breath and said, 'Lumen, I want to kiss you,' she dropped her hand and stood up, bracing herself.

'I'm sorry,' he hastened to say, 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'Citoy,' she said, using his old nickname, 'I wanted that, too ... but it isn't right. It isn't fair—'

'No one will know, Lumen. Please, we could pretend, just for today—'

'Someone always knows, Citoy, someone always sees.' She took his hands and said, 'I'm sorry I asked you to come.'

That should have hurt him badly, Ciriaco thought, but somewhere in this past hour he had learned something worth the long ride and the even longer wait ahead. 'I'm not sorry I came.'

He looked up the hill to where the lights had been lit and the windows glowed orange. 'We should be going back.'

They retraced their steps up the pathway, saying nothing, and at the top they caught their breath and looked down at the now-black water. Lumen could believe that something wonderful was just there, and that one day, when the waters of the lake receded, she would see it in all its old glory, and on that day, in the overwhelming clarity of things, even all by herself, she would know what to do.

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## City of Ghosts

### Francesca Sasnaitis

*The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place.*

—Michel de Certeau

Perth, November 2012. It is Friday night and the Art Gallery of Western Australia is open until 22:00. I invoke Marco's ghost and ask him to join me. We were lovers once, so long ago I scarcely remember our time together, before he left on the voyage from which he never returned. He was gone so often and for such extended periods of time, at first I did not realise that he was gone for good. I will never forgive him for leaving.

In the foyer of the gallery an artist, accompanied by a keyboard player, is performing against a backdrop of shifting patterns. She moves like the incarnation of multi-armed Kali, goddess of time and destruction. Throaty sounds issue from her mouth. Colour and light play over her simple floor-length shift—she becomes one with the wall. I sit on a high stool and I drink steadily through the bottle of Watershed Shiraz I pretend I am sharing with Marco. My tongue makes a dry cat's lick and sticks to the roof of my mouth. The wine bears an unholy amount of tannin.

The artist has cut stencils from the street maps of Perth suburbs—places like Welshpool, Canning Vale, Yangebup, Fremantle, Cottesloe, Karrinyup, Marangaroo, Wanneroo, Joondalup, Jandabup—leaving

a filigree of roads and rivers intact. The stencil-maps have been exposed onto transparent film. These transparencies rotate in an endlessly shifting order in front of the spotlights trained on the wall. We watch the symbiotic response of shadow and movement, light and the rhythms of the music, an improvised piece composed of vaguely familiar riffs: shades of Brahem, Couturier, Mingus; echoes of *Le Voyage de Sahar*, *Nostalghia*, *Epitaph*. As we watch the shifting maps, the familiar two-dimensional grid becomes three-dimensional. A sprawling cityscape made up of all the different suburbs, seen at once and yet separately, melds together; rivers change their course and a far older landscape reasserts its supremacy. This delicate, foreign landscape hovers above the streets I have walked, like clouds above a mountain peak. By some strange alchemy we are able to see the city before it became the look of intent in the founder's eye, to see the city for the first time, without memories.

Industrial zones morph into grasslands, mountain ranges, seas, lava flows and desert dunes. Suns rise and set. Clouds skitter across skies every version of blue, grey, gold and rose. A barely audible cry sneaks between the notes. Blood pools in the shadows. The transparent city recedes and an undulating forested landscape sprawls over the wall of the foyer. We breathe in time to the rustle of wind through the eucalyptus leaves, and can no longer recall the sound of traffic nor the routes of the streets. An old friend of Marco's (I have forgotten his name), a character famous for telling the tales of many cities, or the tale of one city in many guises, says that a city should never be confused with the words that describe it.

I want to linger here but the landscape is too unfamiliar—a couple of sturdy buildings, a forest at the back door, a tent, a woodshed, white sheets hanging on the line, the slope down to the river covered in wildflowers, a black swan in the reeds, the tilt and sway of a sailing ship at anchor. I want my city back. I want to recall the translucent glow of dusk given off by the lights that illuminate and permeate the streets, parks, manipulated rivers, tamed hills and minor cliffs of the coastlines. How, I ask Marco, can I translate this landscape back into



a city? How can I free the city from the landscape which consumes it? Is it ever possible to return to where we began? Is it desirable? I read somewhere that the inexplicable is interesting and that the interesting is pleasurable. Am I asking to return to the inexplicable? I ponder.

The artist transposes words and music into painting with light. The new old-landscape owes its life to her song. She winds back the clock. In order to recapture the original city, my words must equal hers in artistry; I must do more than catalogue the characteristic features, the marks and the changes I witness. My words must be more than transmitters of information, more than descriptors of a photographic likeness. To capture that ineffable something beyond faithful reproduction my words would have to transcend, translate, transmute, revitalise, restore. I can't imagine being up to it.

Each softly shifting shadow is a reminder that I have wandered a pace from my original question. The city exists in history (or myth) with my question embedded in its topography. Marco is poised to reply, his lips parted and the tip of his tongue protruding slightly, when he is interrupted by voices which reach us from a nearby table, but faintly, as if from a distant suburb.

'I can't see,' says the man.

'It depends on the light,' the woman replies.

Drawn by their conversation we retrace our thoughts from one blind alley to the next narrow crevasse, seeking a path onto wider boulevards, a higher outcrop and more open vistas, when we are brought up short by the mournful tones of a violoncello coming from nowhere, as if conjured from thin air. We are reminded of the melodic roar of traffic, which once permeated the landscape. Their voices are closer now, audible even over the irregular bow of the cello. In a brief lull, we bring ourselves to tear our eyes from the projection, turn around, and spy the couple sitting behind us.

'It depends on your angle.' The man is kneeling, as if in prayer. He is too close to the ground; he has no perspective.

His companion, an art teacher, wonders about the logistics of rendering such a fragile metropolis.

‘Sorry for intruding,’ I say, ‘but I have been walking the streets of this city for some time. I have wandered along St Georges Terrace and through London Court, and I have meandered along the banks of the Canning River and down to Bibra Lake. I have taken the old Stock Road north and ventured ever further west. I have hit the edge of the continent at South Beach and made my way to the quays of Freo. I have waved farewell to ferries plying their trade to Rottnest and to ships sailing over the edge of the horizon and into that beyond where Marco might still be lost. I have made my way past fisheries stinking of neglect and silent shipyards, through working men’s suburbs to streets unmistakably inhabited by the wealthy. I have seen houses grow like a high school chemistry experiment, slabs stacked one upon the other in a strange facsimile of human habitation. I have been lost in the back streets of Subiaco. I have mistaken golf courses and man-contained parks and lakes for the real thing. The Swan winds through my dreams and shadows shift with each step I take. My shoes leave no prints. The city is not fixed, but depends on light to sustain its form and determine its longevity.’

‘Gosh,’ says the art teacher, ‘it must take a long time.’

Her response is odd. What does she mean? I do not understand whether she is talking about the length of time it took me to wander from one end of the city to the other, south to north, east to west, or the meticulous care with which the artist crafted the stencils that have disintegrated the city. Either way, I seem to have lost my gift for articulating the environs through which I pass, for mapping streets blocked to drivers and creating the fiction that the city actually exists, that it is more than the effect of shadows and fog, displacements and condensations.

I reiterate my original question, ‘How can I liberate the city?’ Marco finally has the opportunity to reply, but chooses to tell me a story instead.

*We were a party of six, including myself and Calvin (aha! the friend whose name I had misplaced), Carl L\_\_\_\_\_ our resident botanist*

*and William W\_\_\_\_\_ our geologist, the four of us wanderers dedicated, as you know, to finding the lost city, and the other two experienced guides and natives of the region, Mogo and his off-sider, a fellow we dubbed Molly D, as his name was otherwise unpronounceable.*

*Towards dusk one evening we found ourselves stranded on a high mountain peak shrouded in mists which writhed about our feet, as if to send us sprawling over the closest precipice, and which twisted around our necks, as if to strangle us. There was nothing we could do but pitch camp where we stood, uncertain though we were of our location and safety, when suddenly a breeze parted the fog and we found ourselves looking down upon the dream of a city.*

*The far horizon was invisible in the gathering night, but closer, a chill white moon illuminated the domes of governmental and cultural mausoleums, the glazed roofs of mansions and their terraced gardens, and reflected off the glass of multi-storeyed buildings and polished bronze statues. Moonlight shivered off the waters of channels and slunk between the shadows of trees. Moonlight cast silver over the distant sea, which held the last rays of the sun in its cold depths. Nothing disturbed this perfection, not the cry of the furtive night parrot, nor the rustle of a chuditch in the undergrowth; neither a voice raised in cheer nor in anger. The silence was, in fact, so grave that our ears began to imagine the mournful cries of the bush stone curlew in the swirl of the mountain mist.*

Marco is lost in reverie. I breathe a careful sigh. His tale of a magical city hovers in the air around us. Depending on his mood, or mine, he may one day finish the story. If I thought there was any pleasure to be exacted from a swift telling I would insist on a speedy conclusion, but I am afraid that any ending is likely to be depressing—it so often happens that a visit to a great city is fraught with melancholy.

If I were willing, I could perhaps finish his story myself, but my version would only be an approximation, a hint at the ghostly

city. My story would contain the invented and the illusory effects of erroneous perception. My version would be the story of a city laden with the thoughts, the lives and the deaths of its inhabitants, a Babel of languages and customs. The weight of memories contained by such a city would be crushing. Only cities made of shadow and light, cities as transparent as fine lawn or flywire, cities blue-veined as the crook of an elbow, cities gridded like the squares of crossword puzzles and squared like pages of drafting paper, cities mapped in a tracery of weaving lines, thick and thin and constantly changing, evolving, breaking, bridging, only cities such as these could hope to bear the weight of so much humanity.

The zoom on the camera of my iPhone is not powerful enough to penetrate the labyrinths of this city; to separate one layer from the next; to contemplate sheet by sheet the meaning of these streets and waterways. And even if I were able to photograph this city what would I achieve except a representation, a facsimile? I could append a photograph of a single moment in the constantly shifting scene, which would only serve to make clear that a representation shows nothing—none of the magic, none of the aura of the original—except the mask of the moment. Only if you know how to peel away the mask will the photograph reveal its truth.

Thus the wanderer, explorer, traveller, migrant, refugee arrives in the new city and understands nothing until she or he is able to hear with the inner ear of the native speaker, or to see with the eye of familiarity. Not every visitor to the city has Marco to show them the way or to translate the language. ‘Without stones there is no arch,’ says Marco. I do not think he is referring to the motes of dust glinting in the beam of light. I think he means that without words there is no sentence, no sense, no story. He continues:

*We bivouacked where we stood, on the edge of the precipice, praying for a calm night and a sleep undisturbed by dreams. Mogo brewed up a foul smelling tea from bitter herbs he produced from a pouch he carried somewhere about his person, assuring us that*

*this medicinal brew would bring us rest undisturbed by the tossing and turning commonly associated with the fear of dosing in such precarious circumstances.*

*We did indeed sleep like the dead, until cold and damp, and what we at first mistook as the cackling of a native bird, woke us from slumber. Dawn was breaking in the east but had not yet reached our shelter, then, as the sun crested the peak at our backs, and revealed the valley below and the formless sea in the distance, we identified the strange cackle as laughter. Our two guides had decamped in the night, leaving us saddled with carrying our own supplies, and staring down upon a flood plain from which rose nothing but scrub and gum. There was no magnificent city—their laughter called us fools—no city other than the city invented from shifting mists, the witchcraft of the moon, reflections from tall ghost gums and the winding river, and our own fevered desires.*

With these words, Marco lowers his head to his chest, closes his eyes, and drifts off. Once again I am left holding an empty glass, hoping an empty bottle might yield one last drop. There is no more to be learned here.

On my way home from the gallery I drop into an overpriced gourmet supermarket in South Perth—I am surprised they are open so late—where one occasionally finds unusual brands and rare produce. My footfalls echo in the eerie vacuum between the shelves. There are no other customers; only a single weary cash register operator mans the exit.

I walk up and down the aisles, often retracing my steps because I can never remember where products live, nor understand the logic of supermarket shelving. I often have recourse to the laminated yellow store directories hanging at each intersection. On my way out, with a few necessities in the black plastic basket over my arm, I walk down an aisle I have never seen before. The shelves here hold a strange miscellany which would not fit elsewhere. The navy blue label on a jar of roasted red peppers catches my eye: a billowing sail; a ship

on the high seas; a view through the arch of a palace window. I am compelled to add the jar to my basket. The synchronicity is too tempting—the name of the brand is Marco Polo—and besides, I like marinated peppers.

With acknowledgements and apologies to Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Chris Marker, Robert Walser and the various translators of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

*Three of Simone Lazaroo's published novels won the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Fiction, and her novels have been shortlisted for various national and international awards. Her fifth novel Lost River: Four Albums was published in June 2014. She is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia.*

## Flying Home

### Simone Lazaroo

After sleeping only an hour or two on the plane from Paris as it chased a lost day across time zones, Cheryl Jones dragged her bags through Changi Airport's terminal three. The transit lounge's digital screens flicked to 5.30 a.m. The carpeted arcade of global-brand shops seemed like another kind of city, quieter and blessedly beggar-free. Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Armani. She dragged her Galleries Lafayette bags past Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks and a corpulent Akubra-hatted man lounging at a dim sum counter; almost collided with a Chinese toddler meandering on his small blue ride-on suitcase behind his parents.

In the dimness behind the food court, travellers slept on every vinyl couch, yesterday's newspapers or scarves covering their faces. No place for her to rest, and all the designer shops were closed. But a shop named Old Singapore was open, one wall papered with an enlargement of a sepia colonial photograph showing a pale plump couple in a trishaw pedalled by a malnourished Chinese man. Cheryl fingered familiar navy blue patterned sarong-kebaya hanging from a rack near the shop's entrance.

'Special price on authentic Singapore Airlines hostess uniforms designed by Christian Dior,' called the young Chinese shop assistant,

hurrying towards her. Cheryl turned and walked away quickly, too exhausted to deal with hard-sell or to distinguish between the genuine article and fakery. And what was really eastern, and what was western? On her way to the lavatories, she fingered and bruised the petals of real oriental orchids in pseudo-Grecian urns, but her touch left no mark on the plastic ferns around a slate-edged pool. There, giant orange koi fish rolled their toy-like eyes and thrashed hungrily. Beyond them, butterflies hanging from ferns in a glass atrium might've been artificial, dead, or just sleeping until the sun rose over the runways.

Behind the pristine lavatories with their Royal Doulton fixtures designed for squatting in some cubicles and sitting in others, Cheryl noticed more signs: *Prayer Room. Meditation Room.* Her pulse hastened as she made her way towards them. At last. Space to rest and collect herself.

The meditation room was furnished with nothing but grey carpet, a chrome shoe-rack and a few fine ornamental tree-branches spray-painted white, uniformly cut and held in place by a chrome bar against the laminated wood-grain wall. The room wasn't much bigger than her walk-in wardrobe at home. The sign on the wall between the two rooms read:

*Please remove your shoes.*

*Please observe solemnness.*

*Please board your flight on time.*

She entered the prayer room without removing her shoes. Wouldn't there be more tinea and other diseases in tropical countries?

Women's prayer cubicle to the left, men's to the right. Only a curtain and a chrome luggage rack divided them. In the men's cubicle, an Asian man in a sarong and white shirt knelt on the grey carpet facing the laminated wall. A burqua-clad woman knelt in the women's cubicle. Cheryl took a furtive snapshot of her with her iPhone, hid it in her pocket again. Finishing her prayer, the woman in the burqua glimpsed her, placed her hands together under her chin, smiled and bowed. Cheryl couldn't return the gesture, for her hands were too full of her Paris purchases.



Those people in the prayer room reminded Cheryl of something she'd seen before. Something to do with their gestures of supplication, but jetlag fogged her fleeting insight. She only just heard the final boarding call for her flight, muffled by the rustle of her shopping bags.



Australia was the biggest country on her in-flight screen's map from Singapore to Perth, no longer just a fragment in the bottom right-hand corner. The archipelago between Singapore and northern Australia showed names she'd never heard of: Padang, Pontianak, Kalimantan. She imagined primitive thatched villages on the edges of jungles and rice-fields.

The air hostesses looked less impeccably groomed than on the Paris to Singapore flight. Dandruff in the fringe of one, a hard edge to the blusher on the cheeks of another. Most of the economy class customers were more shabbily dressed than on the long-haul flights too: sloppy surf-brand t-shirts, windcheaters and badly fitting jeans. But the man seated next to her sported greying buzz-cut hair, a carefully trimmed cricketer's moustache, beige Ralph Lauren polo-shirt and permanent-press trousers.

'Owya goin luv?' he asked. Another disappointment. His monotone, dull as his blunt over-tanned face. 'Name's Trevor. I'm in prawns. Been exploring a few opportunities in Asia. How about you?'

'Cheryl,' she replied reluctantly.

'Chezza, ay?' He grinned, winking one pterygium-cornered blue eye. She could've wept. 'Been doin' a bitta clothes shopping?' He nodded at the bags stuffed under her seat.

A hostess came towards them handing out headphones. Just in time. Cheryl grabbed one, tore the plastic-bag open, pulled the fiddly circular black foam pads over the plastic earpieces, shoved them on and scrolled through the channels with her handset. The same films as on her earlier flights. She selected *Gravity*, but the astronaut falling through dark space towards earth still made her feel squeamish. She

turned the volume to zero, left the astronaut flailing mutely but kept her headphones on, to dissuade Trevor from talking to her further. She turned to the window and watched the Indian Ocean shift from light blue around the Indonesian islands to cobalt as the archipelago receded.

She chose glutinous rice and chicken over the omelette for breakfast, but this time the Asian meal was the wrong choice. The rice seemed too hard and cold, the chicken bland and meagre. Trevor heartily raised his forkful of omelette at her.

‘Cheers!’

She adjusted her earphones more firmly over her ears and studiously picked her way anti-clockwise around the smaller satellite plastic containers: the strawberry yoghurt top left; the white bread-roll and foil-wrapped tablet of butter; the minuscule triangle of pineapple topped by a glace cherry; the reconstituted orange juice in the gulp-sized plastic tub; the almost thimble-sized UHT milk. She turned to the Kris World in-flight entertainment magazine again, noticed for the first time the recent Walter Mitty film. She selected the channel, squirted some of her UHT milk into her plastic cup of lukewarm tea, but most of it sprayed her new Custo shirt, making it stick slightly to the breastless side of her chest. Trevor hadn’t noticed. She mopped her shirt, fast-forwarded the film a bit.

Not a beggar in sight in those Manhattan streets. She found the idea of the nerdy Life magazine photograph librarian Walter going all the way to Iceland just to track down a lost cover-page photographic negative ridiculous, but her heart beat a bit faster at his dreams of being more desirable; of finding love and glory in his big city life. Dread rose in her like reflux: her own dreams of finding love overseas during her last scrap of sick-leave hadn’t come true; she had nothing to return to but her passionless suburban life and thankless job. All those upper-middle-class parents haranguing her about developing their five-year olds’ genius. All those designer-clothed pre-schoolers reluctantly succumbing to the rules of classroom imprisonment.

Let them run wild!

On her screen, Walter Mitty crossed heaving seas and enormous expanses of white snow; lost and found himself in enormous wildernesses. Freedom, the wider world; she'd always wanted them. Why had she ever become a primary school teacher in suburban Perth? Over-zealous principals, curriculum deadlines and interminable staff-room politics. She'd read somewhere that stress could raise your cortisol levels and trigger cancer. Should she stay in her job, even though it might cause her a relapse?

She had no option, of course, no partner or substantial nest-egg to fall back on. As Trevor opened his can of VB, she took a gin and tonic from the drinks trolley hostess and immediately resumed staring at her screen. Mitty had found the photographer in Iceland. Her miniature yellow plastic swizzle-stick snapped as she stirred the ice in her plastic tumbler. After fumbling the two yellow pieces from her drink to her tray-table, she fast-forwarded to the more suntanned and desirable Mitty after he'd returned to Manhattan. He'd lost his job, but in a blaze of cover-page glory, and, after a minor misunderstanding or two, found true love. Cheryl wished her life could be more like that, its complications and tedium prolonged no more than necessary and duly rewarded.

Mercifully, Trevor had fallen asleep in front of *Gravity*. His head lolled away from her, revealing criss-crossed lines on the side of his plump neck, greying stubble along his jaw-line. Cheryl kept her earphones on just in case he woke, switched channels to the flight-path map as the Mitty film credits rolled. The map showed the plane equidistant between the top of Australia and the last few islands in the Indonesian archipelago. Not even half-way home. She glanced out the window at patches of sea between cumulus clouds, wondered absent-mindedly if another boatful of refugees was somewhere down there, making its way to Australia.

She took her iPhone from her pocket and scrolled through her photos of Europe. The pewter grey towers of Notre Dame sandwiched by the leaden sky and silvery Seine; the dazzling jewellery counters

and soaring stained-glass dome in Galeries Lafayette. The austere fort walls and intricately filigreed Nasrid Palace rooms of the Alhambra; Barcelona's softly glowing Sagrada Familia interior and shadowed Gothic district streets. Typical tourist snapshots, but among them were her photos of beggars. The spry gypsy woman kneeling, hand outstretched, near the entrance to Notre Dame; the prostrate youth wailing louder than the peak hour traffic in Madrid; the long-bearded man on the church steps opposite her Barcelona apartment. How picturesque they all looked on her phone's screen, striking their timeless poses of supplication, historic buildings behind them.

Like other tourists, she'd mostly avoided the beggars. Not that they'd been particularly dangerous, or that she'd been in any rush. She'd hurried past because she'd been embarrassed. To be honest, it wasn't just their outstretched hands and shabby clothes. She'd been more embarrassed about what they might've revealed about her.

Was she too mean, lacking in empathy? Even from this distance, it seemed too hard to weigh up their needs against hers. She scrutinised on her phone's screen the gypsy's outstretched hand clasping the empty paper Starbucks cup. A tourist had told Cheryl that some beggars gave most of their money to wealthier pimps. It'd seemed a good enough excuse for not putting any coins into their cups. Most of all though, she'd justified not giving the beggars her money because she'd no doubt need it herself, sooner or later. You don't know what lies ahead, she reminded herself as the plane dipped slightly. A real crisis in the Australian economy. A recurrence of the cancer. Would she ever have enough money to buy her way out of that?

She scrolled through the remaining photos until she reached the more contented looking burqua-clad woman on her knees in the Changi Airport prayer room, switched her phone off, put it back in her pocket. She looked through her scratched plane window at the burnt umber earth of north-western Australia, only a few thin roads and gaping mining pits interrupting the flatness. Walter Mitty would've died down there.

Further west, a few barren islands scattered across the sparkling ultramarine ocean.

The Indian Ocean, one of her few consolations for living near Perth. Small settlements clung to its coast as the plane nosed southwards through sunlight more saturated than she'd seen in all her time away. Were the occasional dark shapes in the water sharks, whales or just the shadows of clouds? She squeezed past snoring Trevor's outstretched legs, glad no-one was queuing outside the toilets.

After a wee and face-wash, she went through the small compartments underneath the lavatory mirror. No French perfume dispenser on this flight, but she pocketed as many tissues as she could, a few packets of toothbrushes and miniature toothpaste tubes. Might as well get her money's worth.

On her way back to her seat, she asked for another gin and tonic and a savoury sandwich from the hostess in the galley. She barely made it over Trevor's knees without dropping her plunder into his lap, pulled the sealed cellophane bag open as quietly as she could so she didn't wake him. Slowly chewing the soft white cheese and bread, she glimpsed sand-plains gradually disappearing under grey-green scrub, then bleached wheatfields and paddocks, scatterings of corrugated tin roofs reflecting the noon glare. A quarry swallowed the tiny shadow of the plane.

As roads, houses and sheds appeared more frequently among darker green patches, the captain announced they'd soon begin descending into Perth. She looked down at the outskirts of her birthplace. The random erasures of wilderness, the half-hearted buildings and, just visible in the distance, the city so new and small compared to the ones she'd just visited. But cleaner and much safer.

So safe it made her feel like screaming, sometimes. All those great northern hemisphere cities. A real international traveller. But what if she'd behaved like any average Australian tourist? Awestruck by the displays of wealth in shops and cathedrals. Avoiding anything too heavy. Evading gravity and the outstretched hands of beggars. Because you couldn't really trust anyone, except maybe yourself.

She washed down her sandwich with the gin and tonic. She didn't even believe she could rely on the kindness of her friends and colleagues, let alone strangers. The plane dipped and the alcohol surged to her head in a giddy rush. Trevor woke, belched, fastened his seatbelt. 'Ow's it goin', Cheryl?' He winked at her.

'Better when I get out of here,' she snapped, turning quickly to look out the window again as they hovered over the most isolated city in the world.



Early the next morning in her bed, she dreamed some of the beggars she'd encountered overseas were making themselves at home in her house. The San Francisco panhandlers smoked a joint in her bed. The Notre Dame gypsy washed her clothes in her shower. The man who'd slept on the church steps opposite her Barcelona apartment sat in her lavatory, drying his beard with her hairdryer. His beard had grown thicker and longer, down to his knees. Bees hummed in it.

'How dare you invade my home!' she shouted.

'You invaded ours!' the man retorted, the swarm of bees spreading from his beard through her rooms, some of them settling on her face and hair. She'd be stung, surely. Her heart pounded with fear and rage, waking her. Her anger continued as she pulled on her old beach dress, stumbled to the kitchen and turned the kettle on. She'd taken that trip overseas to lift her spirits after the mastectomy, experience big city sophistication, maybe even find true love. Not to be depressed by memories of beggars and poverty for the rest of her life. However long or short that might be.

Ants crawled in her kitchen sink, looking for water. Her coffee and muesli tasted stale. Outside on the Hills Hoist, two magpies warbled before swooping on the neighbours' dog biscuits next to their new barbecue. The glare hurt her eyes after Europe's softer skies.

Time to go to the beach, before the sea breeze came in. Only a few more weeks and she'd be back at bloody work. Her special

mastectomy-concealing swimsuit smelled mildewy; she'd left it wet in the laundry sink before her trip. She grabbed it and a handful of dollars, which she hid under her car seat. She drove past the war memorial and the local shopping centre, crossed the bridge and turned left at the road leading to the docks and the beach. A crane unloaded containers from a Mediterranean Shipping Company freighter; a tug ushered a NYK Lines ship to the dock.

In the beach car park, she scanned the area between the kiosk and the dunes for other people. Since her mastectomy, she'd felt too scared to swim when the beach was empty. A few of the regular old beachgoers had died in the years since she'd started swimming here. One day they'd be there bobbing in the shallows with their friends, the next day they'd disappeared forever. On the paved area in front of the squat blonde-brick change-rooms, their swimming mates had installed an aluminium bench seat bearing small plaques engraved with their names.

*In memory of Di, lovely lady of the beach.*

*In memory of Archie, one of us beach boys.*

*In memory of Pete, good mate to all.*

Old Bill waved at her from the bench as she walked across the car park; tilted his towelling hat at her.

'Cheryl! You've been missed!' He smiled cheerily through his yellowed teeth. 'Hey, Frank!' he called to the middle-aged man locking his Fairlane sedan a few metres away. 'She's back.' He winked.

She saw Frank's lower abdominal muscles tense above his black Speedos as he tried to pull his paunch in.

'How was Europe, Mademoiselle Cheryl?' Frank asked. His terrible attempt at a French accent. He'd tried to impress her with it a few times before she'd left for overseas.

'Good thanks. Well. Better get going before the breeze comes in,' she said abruptly, hurrying into the change-rooms to put her swimsuit on.

When she emerged, Frank and Bill had gone. A young man in a hooded windcheater sat on the bench next to a bundle of blankets

and sleeping bag. Just a typical young Australian yobbo. She hurried along her favourite path through the dunes to the tattered hem of the ocean. Her heart accelerated as she heard him following her.

‘D-did you know magnification shows beach sand is actually tiny fragments of shell that once housed living creatures? I’ve seen photos of it?’ He spoke in a tentative voice that rose higher at the end of his sentences, so that they all sounded like questions. ‘The magnified fragments look like jewels? But they’re too small to see with the naked eye?’ He’d caught up with her. His panting sun-reddened face; mid-brown hair bleached towards its shoulder-length ends, grey tracksuit pants and windcheater, thongs. He cleared his throat, looked down at the wet sand. ‘The waves, delivering and taking life from under our feet?’ She turned away and walked into the shallows. Maybe he was a loony. Every now and then someone escaped from the hospital’s psychiatric ward. Thank goodness for the beachcombers nearby. ‘Spare some change, Miss?’

‘Didn’t bring any money,’ she lied, pulling on her goggles and mask. As she waded in deeper, he retreated back up the sandy path to the blankets and sleeping bag on the bench seat. Surely he wasn’t homeless. He looked better dressed than most of the beggars overseas, and far less dirty. No need to feel guilty about him. At least this city had enough social services for people like him.

She walked into the sea up to her chest. A couple of younger swimmers swam zealously beyond the break-line. She stayed where her feet could still reach the bottom, trod water for a minute. The calm light-filled water buoyed her body and spirits. She swam northwards through opalescent reflections of sky, towards the distant ridge of Norfolk pines and mansions of glass. An after-image of the young man beseeched her behind her closed eyelids. She picked up just enough speed to leave it behind and to stop thinking too hard. *Towards my healthy and brilliant future*, she repeated to herself, a mantra timed by the dogged gurgle of her breath through her snorkel. For a few minutes, she couldn’t stop thinking about how far she was from her destination. But swimming through the warmer currents,



she felt almost weightless, and it didn't seem so hard to believe wellbeing and more overseas travel would be hers soon. She rolled over to float on her back, watched a jet soar over the ocean towards the northern horizon, and wondered how planes could possibly fly carrying so much luggage.

*Laurie Steed is a short story writer and Patricia Hackett Prize winning author from Perth. His work has appeared in Best Australian Stories, Award Winning Australian Writing, The Age, Meanjin, Westerly, Island, and elsewhere.*

## One and Only

### Laurie Steed

**M**e. Emily. A party, few months back. Kegs on tap, eight to late, with *The Bends* on repeat. High school crew, and a bunch of gatecrashers. Passed out in the spare room. Woke up to a guy with his tongue in my mouth, his hand down my pants. Told him to stop, but he kept going until Alex came in and threw him against the wall.

Jay was in the next room, alphabetising the CDs.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you my two amazing, confounding and profoundly annoying brothers.

Alex is out of favour. He has no one to blame but himself. Maybe if he opened up more we'd be less inclined to think the worst, 'cause what are we meant to think when he misses birthdays? What are we to assume when he never answers the phone?

Jay is the favourite. Mum loves him. Dad loves him, or did until he up and moved to New South Wales. And we love you, Jay. Don't ever forget that.

He's the work-in-progress. I'm the director's commentary, and 'it's ok, that weirdness, it's part of his uni degree. One day he will be such a big shot, and we'll have to book appointments and everything.'

Mum has been flaky since me and Jay moved out. She's worried; it's his first time living out of home. She thinks we'll band together ... That the more we grow to love each other, the less we'll rely on her.

Today she calls early, just to say 'hi'. That's the official reason. We talk for a minute, then she skips to the same track.

'Do you ever hear from your father?'

'You want to get back together?'

'No, it's just, with Jay's eighteenth coming up ... I thought maybe we could surprise him, get your dad back ... If you're in touch.'

'Let it go, Mum.'

'You'd tell me though. I mean, if you were in contact.'

'How,' I ask, 'is this any of your business?'

And yes, he writes to me, and no, it's none of her business.

Monday to Friday I work one to five, the dependent people of the world queued at my counter. On days off work, I miss that. I like the look of someone who needs me. It means I can help. That I make a difference.

They come in, and speak clearly when asking for their medication, as if it's a packet of biscuits. When it's a prescription, they hand over the script in silence, but hold up, free and easy; you're not done yet, not by a long shot. Which brand do you prefer? Have you used this before? And why won't you look me in the eye?

Many look sad, most afraid. I smile. I like to think I make a difference.

Who's to say we don't help them just by being here? Who says we need to go through life alone? It's important, I think, to know that somewhere, someone will let you in.

Some nights I have sex dreams. Tongues licking lips, moans, cries, flesh that turns to clay. My feet are stuck. They're all around, grasping at me.

Let's pretend I do something about it. Meet a guy. He takes me home. When I wake the next morning, I'm happy. Choose a mug, wash it out, and wait for the kettle to boil.

Let's pretend our bodies melt when we fuck. That I can leave if I want to. That when he says, 'I have to go to work,' there's freedom in knowing that I'll never see him again.

I know I'm stalling. But let's pretend, for a moment, that there's reason to the things I do.



When I walk into a room, I get looks.

I'm OK, I guess. Worth a second look. Blonde dyed brown, slim, but with bumps to keep the boys looking.

Cross the room at Dan or Toby's 21st: half-smile, shake of the head, and out to the garden.

Eyes deep blue; the colour of the sea, as Dad once said, before he moved to the land of the lost.

I looked up the trip. Three days on the train. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and then you arrive.

Like I said, Dad writes me letters. No need to write to Alex, he's already been over, but he still writes letters to Jay, although as yet, Jay has never written back.

Some nights I drift up, and away from the family tree. I'm alone, and it doesn't matter what they do, if they care, or whether or not I'm adhering to their standards.

I walk into a room. If I like a guy, I'm going to have him, sooner or later.



Saturday morning I'm hunched at the table, half-hung over and nursing a coffee. Jay is fully dressed, with me in my pyjamas. I wouldn't mind, but he's staring.

‘What?’

‘Who is it today?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you trying to be alternative?’ He squints. ‘What’s that on your hand?’

‘It’s a barcode.’

‘Are you “on special”?’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘It’s a statement, Jay. About the world.’

‘It’s a bit sad.’

‘Yes, Jay. That is what’s sad.’

He dips a Tim-Tam into his coffee, watches it melt, chocolate slick spreading out to the edge of the cup. He drops the Tim-Tam, licks his fingers clean and skulls his coffee.

‘Where’s Dom? I thought he was here.’

‘Touché.’

‘No, really. Where is he?’

‘He had to work.’

‘You like him?’

‘Yes, Jay. I’m besotted.’

Jay smiles. ‘You make a great couple.’

‘We’re not a couple. I mean, it’s not as if we’re mutually exclusive. Alex went to school with him. Says he’s a Neanderthal.’

‘This, from the missing link?’

‘Nice one. You been working on that for a while?’

‘Came to me last year,’ says Jay. ‘That and “Brother Bonobo”.’

We smile. I push the plate over, and he takes another Tim-Tam.

‘Jay.’

He points a finger at me, like he’s a game show host.

‘You got this week’s rent?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Jay ...’

‘I do, it’s just I’m saving up to see Dad.’

‘You don’t know where he is.’

‘That’s why I’m saving up.’

‘I can’t keep covering you.’

‘Isn’t that what big sisters are for?’

‘No.’

‘You say that, yet here we are, having this exact conversation.’

‘Jay —’

‘I’m almost there. I promise, once I get a ticket, I’ll pay you back.’

He empties the remaining Tim-Tams onto his plate, puts one into his mouth, and wanders away to his bedroom.



Mum says my room is different. I say, ‘I know. I’m different.’

It’s darker now. I like the way that PJ stares back from the poster, naked, her head tilted, hair arched up, perpetually airborne. She gets it. We should go out together; we would tear this town apart.

I pull the blinds. Write a poem. Words stick in my throat. I scratch the paper; lick the pen marks off my hand.

Lie on my back. Close my eyes.

Remember Dom at the foot of my bed, naked, proud. Like he’s done anything other than been given a Y chromosome.

Comes closer. Standing. Waiting.

I shake my head. ‘Not gonna happen.’

‘Maybe you’re a lesbian.’

‘Maybe you’re a moron.’

Open my eyes. Go to ring Dom, then see the time on the phone.

And I find myself a job. If I’m lucky, I’ll hold on to it.

I’m on Fairfield. Blue rinse crew, roses pruned and watching me from behind the curtains. Occasional scowls from the old bitches. Poor thing, did you see the holes in her tights? Can’t she go and buy some new ones?

I’m on Scarborough Beach Road, strays streaming into the Alehouse. Man boys, football jumpers tight over tees, already half-pissed, saying, ‘What do you reckon, boys? One for the rotisserie?’

I want to knee them in the nuts: to see if they think with anything other than their dicks.

Jay says he's embarrassed to be a man. That gender roles are so often based on a series of ideas that were dated from day dot. He says we are locked in an ideal perpetuated by movies and music, and then laughs as if amazed by the intricacies of his mind.

I tell him that he doesn't have to live in our ideal. If he did he'd walk into Myer, switchblade through the chiffon, tear apart the tulle and walk out.

He might appreciate what we go through. He will never have to understand.



Being a pharmacy assistant is not the same as being a pharmacist. Irrate octogenarians, bothered mums and men with mysterious rashes often explain this to me while repeating their need for fungal powder, bum cream, or oil of Olay.

I get it: they need relief. Twenty milligrams of attention, three times a day.

So many problems. So many products.

Jay does not agree with medication. He writes about it in his diary. I know, not cool, but here's an extract:

'Medicines, I believe, are for the hollow-eyed serfs that surrender to the work-a-day existence. Medication is symptom shorthand, a global Band-Aid to a world that's losing touch with reality.'

He needs a girlfriend.

I need to finish my shift. To get to the florist, Coles and Target, because Jay, in his infinite wisdom, bought Mum a tree-shaped jewellery holder for her birthday.

I finish my shift. A junkie, who can't get what she wants, tells me I'm a bitch, a stuck-up cow and too young to have taken on such intricate responsibilities. Outside, a parking officer prints a ticket. He looks before sliding it under the wiper as if he's the guilty party.



Jay gets in at six, as I smooth the icing around Mum's cake. Carrot's her favourite, crushed walnuts capsized in thick vanilla icing, and yes, it is a family recipe, but it's nice to have something we do that's not based on fear, or a sense of obligation.

I would normally have lemon wedges on top for decoration, but mung bean Jay put them in his Coke. He says it's science, whatever that means.

I slide the cake into the fridge. Before I close the door, he's there.

'Don't touch it.'

'A little bit? Just a piece?'

'I have to get drinks. What do you want?'

'Ginger beer?'

'What are you, sixty-five?'

'It's the best.'

'You're so strange. You have cash?'

'No.'

'Did you get your ticket?'

'Um, no.'

'So you've got cash.'

'Oh, right, I see what you mean. No, not anymore.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing, it's just the Nintendo 64 came out this week. Had to get in quick, or I would have missed it.'

'We need that money.'

'We could play Mario. I bought an extra controller.'

'We need money, Jay.'

'Yes ... and wrapping paper.'

'We've got some. It's in my room.'

'What sort?'

'You want to go buy it?'

'That's cool,' says Jay. 'It's raining, I think.'

'Not that you would notice, you drip.'



I head out. Buy some drinks, some extra wrapping paper, and then head over to Dom's. He's not there, so I sit on the verandah, thinking, please come home. I won't be mad if you just come home.



It's dark when I get back. The door's wide open.

I think about going to the cops, but what would I say? That my house is eerily quiet? That I get panic attacks when the power's out?

I walk in, flick on the hallway lamp. Mum's scarf is draped over the table. Her gloves, too.

'Hello?'

The fridge is open. Broken glass near the dining room table. A plate on the floor, the cake mushed underneath. Icing on the wall, up high, as if the cake has been hurled across the room.

The phone rings. I let the machine take it. It's Mum.

'Em, are you home? It's Jay. Something's happened. I'll call in a bit.'

My door's open; he pulled the throw rug down.

I ring Dom. It goes to message bank. I tell him I need him, and what's the point of being with somebody if they're not there when you need them?

Mum calls again. I pick up on the second ring.

'Where are you?'

'Jay's at Bells Lake. He's in a bad way.'

'Where's Alex? You want me to call him?'

'He's here.'

'Oh.'

'What have you done, Em?'

'I didn't, honest.'

'Yeah, you did,' she says. 'I have to go. We'll talk later on.'

She hangs up. I walk back to the kitchen, pick up bits of cake with a half-broken plate. Slide shards, crumbs and icing into the bin. Close the lid. Wash the muck off my hands.

Feel the pain in my gut but it's stuck. Punch myself in the stomach, but my fist bounces back. It hurts, but not enough.

The wrapping paper. He went into my room for the wrapping paper.

My nail polish is tipped over. It's dripping onto the floor. All the drawers are open. My bed is covered in letters, all from Dad. The letters to Jay are mostly on top, some unopened.

Maybe he didn't find it.

I pick up the paper, sorting it into a pile with shaky hands, checking dates, beginnings. Go through again, no luck. Maybe I threw it out?

Turn right, and the mirror's tilted back. My PJ poster's been torn down the middle.

See the letter, scrunched by the bed. Pick it up and open it. I already know what it says.

*I'm sorry Jay no longer wants to talk to me. Tell him that I love him, and would love to see him, whenever he's ready.*

Dad writes me letters from wherever he is, however he feels on any given day. I could tell you what he says, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that he sends them to me.

I'm his favourite, Jay. Don't ever forget that.

*Nicholas Hasluck practised law in Perth for many years. His novel The Bellarmine Jug won The Age Book of the Year Award and he has been twice shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award.*

## Deaths Foretold

### Nicholas Hasluck

At that time we had various rooms in the city that were suited to the unusual nature of our work. Their location was known only to some of those whom Toby Asplin liked to call his inner circle, for within that circle were the few whom he really trusted, confidants whose identity was never entirely clear to me, nor to the rest of our outfit. They were probably disclosed to 'C' alone—our anonymous but ever-present superior in faraway Whitehall, the counter-espionage controller to whom Asplin submitted his coded and increasingly terse reports.

We used our rented rooms, situated mostly in the busier parts of the city, in order to interview prospective agents and informers, or to question those who crept back to us from time to time with their supposedly important findings, hands out for the promised fee. They kept us interested, these mercenaries, by crafting hints about shipping lists or armaments or troop movements, foreshadowing dire revelations in days to come before they slithered off again, disappearing into the streets and alleyways below, eyes alert for the next transaction.

Too often their so-called findings were laced with misinformation concocted by our German counterparts, the enemy operation that

was supposed to be the subject not the censor of our inquiries. So it sometimes seemed to me that our rooms in the Athens of November 1915 were little more than vantage points poised on the edge of a chaotic no man's land, overlooking entanglements of unreality, afflicted by the truths and untruths of war. Our rooms were linked by that at least to the turmoil elsewhere. The Western Front had become a grim mosaic where the language of gains and losses seemed meaningless and where much of what was said about plans and offensives to lift the morale of those who served the Allied cause—in the trenches or behind the lines—had to be taken with a chunk of coarse salt.

I kept these fugitive thoughts to myself (like much else that worried me about our clandestine pursuits) being determined to do my bit dutifully and without complaint, as so many others have done in times past when they heard the call to arms. Nonetheless, sent to Athens to act as an interpreter, attached to the intelligence services housed in the pine-scented premises of the British School of Hellenic Studies, it troubled me after a few weeks to find that I had gradually, almost invisibly, been drawn into a more sinister role in Asplin's unit, for the simple reason, as he explained it, that I was obviously accustomed to keeping things to myself and I seemed to fit. It happens everywhere in wartime, he observed ungraciously. To make things happen one has to make do with whatever is at hand, from manpower to weapons.

The unreliability of our informers meant, of course, that the dingy rooms at our disposal—sparsely furnished lodgings with a bed, a wardrobe, and a table flanked by two rickety chairs—were mostly in a state of turnover. Whenever the location of one of our rooms was discovered by the Palace police or the agents of the enemy, the address in many cases having been divulged by a disaffected or insufficiently bribed former 'friend', the room in question was immediately replaced by some other habitation. This in turn, cramped, dimly-lit, equally down-at-heel, was rented out (pursuant to our usual practice) to a provincial worker or some other fictitious tenant—a loner who had made his way to the city in search of work.

The out-of-town loner's role was quite often played by our driver, Alexis Brusa, who had, at Asplin's insistence, managed to suppress his initial distaste for impersonation and was beginning to enjoy his posturings, cap pulled down to hide his bald head, a thick scarf tucked under his chin to serve as a costume. Animated by this meagre disguise, the truculent Brusa haggled with landladies and their indignant sons, raising a fist occasionally when the part demanded a show of strength, foreclosing any further argument by leaving his mark on the rental slip with a decisive grunt.

Rumour had it that before Alexis Brusa came to us from the slums of Mytilene he had once backed over a fellow driver to enforce repayment of a debt. It was probably this, or some other incident like it, that added flair to Brusa's theatrics, encouraging him to look beyond the steering wheel and improve his act, fending off histrionics on the other side with a hard, unblinking look until he had closed the deal at a figure less than the price chalked up on the board outside.

Brusa's formidable presence ensured that his counterfeit demands for living space were heeded and that his illusory loner—if only on a rental slip—enjoyed a brief but perilous existence, before the room was vacated, its purpose served.



Ruses and subterfuges were our stock-in-trade, for in Athens at that time rooms in the city were hard to come by, especially within the central district where most of those we had to keep an eye on scuttled to and fro. A neutral city, the streets were swarming with all sorts of adventurers and opportunists as the German-led Central Powers vied with the British-French Entente to recruit Greece as an ally in the European struggle.

The constant turnover, the variety of rooms we had to acquire and quickly abandon after some unexpected act of betrayal, didn't entirely surprise me, for I soon realised that anything could happen in this ancient and contradictory realm. But what did surprise me,

astounded me in fact, on the fateful morning we found a would-be informer, Cy Lapidès, in one of our rooms, a knife in his throat, was how it came about that the room in question was put at risk. Why was it selected for a meeting with this particular man? A sudden death by stabbing in our own domain reeked not only of betrayal but of further deaths and betrayals to come. An attack upon the precautions that until then had served us well.

So who was this Cy Lapidès and why did he matter, I had to ask myself, staring at the corpse with Toby Asplin beside me, equally aghast? Who was this man from Smyrna? A con-man, according to an entry in our card index system, who was said to be 'grasping and more than usually unreliable!' What secret did he bring with him to the empty room and why did his assailant feel obliged to get rid of him, leaving him in runnels of blood, the knife-handle beneath his chin glinting?

The questions kept coming. As if reminding us that we still had work to do in this world, including the anguish of looking back, going over things again, from our first encounter with the dead man to matters of concern along the way.

In that regard I recalled immediately that I had complained about fixing a meeting in our room when Asplin swept through the door of my quarters at the British School that very morning, a good half hour or so before the time set aside for our rendezvous with the man from Smyrna.

'What do we know about this fellow?' I was determined to find out as much as I could before we dashed off to keep our appointment. 'What can you tell me about Cy Lapidès? This so-called man from Smyrna?'

I was at my shaving-mirror as I spoke, knotting my tie. I could see Toby Asplin behind me on the strip of Persian rug by my dresser, spick and span in his linen suit, smoothing down his dark glossy hair, fiddling with his moustache. He was keen to get moving, to bundle me downstairs and into our four-seater Sunbeam that was probably waiting at the kerb below, engine running, Brusa at the wheel. But I wouldn't be rushed.

‘Cy Lapides!’ I had to keep my scorn in check. ‘He was ready to meet us here at the British School. Now, instead, you’ve fixed a meeting in one of our rooms. I don’t like it. He sidles up to you at the Panhellenion Café, so you tell me, claiming to be recently arrived in Athens. Here from Smyrna. But nothing to prove it. And within a few hours he’s inveigled his way into meeting us at a place we’d prefer to keep secret. A *new* room, in fact. According to the index card, he’s supposed to be some sort of import agent. Tiles and pottery and so forth. The usual nonsense about shipments coming in and going out. Code for information, perhaps. The rest is mostly a blank. I smell a pottery-sized rat.’

I pointed to the Lapides card to underline my point, there on the dresser, in front of my guest, inviting Asplin to check my summary. ‘Nothing to show what he wants of us,’ I added, ‘apart from a few sly hints, according to your notes, about a forthcoming offensive in his corner of the Aegean. Hints we’ve heard before.’

The irascible Toby Asplin fastened not upon the card but upon its presence among my tie pins and knick knacks. ‘Left lying about, eh?’

‘Rest easy,’ I counselled. ‘I spoke to our archivist yesterday evening, and picked up the card after dinner in the Mess. It’s been with me ever since. Held well and truly under wraps.’ I tapped my collar box. ‘Brought to light less than a few minutes ago to await your arrival. Ready for our chat with Cy Lapides.’

I had forgotten how excitable Toby Asplin could become. My placatory words, far from having the soothing effect I had intended, brought forth an outburst.

‘Under wraps, he says! Under wraps! A glib response if you’ll forgive me for saying so.’ In a characteristic gesture Asplin had buried both hands in the pockets of his pale linen trousers and begun to stride. ‘Glib to the outer edge of waffle. You know as well as I do that our systems have to be bullet-proof. We have our critics. In Whitehall. In Naval Intelligence. On Lemnos.’

He rounded on me, finger upraised. ‘This fellow Furnell, for instance. Arnold Brooke Furnell! A Lieutenant Commander, no less.

All the way from GHQ in Alexandria, where the only thing they ever seem to think about is how to abort the Berlin to Baghdad railway, or whether some jihad aimed at Suez is on its way. So here he is in Athens, our esteemed visitor, sniffing the breeze. A review to improve coordination, or so he says. But what's it all add up to? What's it mean in practice? Picking us to pieces to suit their own agenda. A missing card could be the last straw.'

A lack of coordination between the various British agencies had certainly complicated our work of late, but at times it almost seemed as though, in Toby Asplin's mind, we were threatened more by mysterious forces on our own side than by those working against us for the Turks and the Germans.

His latest fears were probably due to a sense of personal insecurity. Outranked by the heads of the other agencies, Asplin was well aware that he was described behind his back by 'certain people' in the services as an amateur. Being a novice myself, I sympathised with his frustration. Things had gone well to begin with, but the harder we worked, the more we expanded, the more difficult it became to cover all the enemy initiatives, to monitor the hotchpotch that was Athens in those tortuous days. The boundaries between counter-espionage and propaganda ventures, for example, had become increasingly problematic.

Indeed, less than a fortnight before the day fixed for our meeting with Cy Lapides one of the government broadsheets had published a long account of headless corpses being washed ashore on a beach near Old Phaleron, victims of the British secret police allegedly. Then, just as the controversy was dying down, dismissed as simply one of the many baseless rumours that swept through the city from time to time (all too often nurtured by Baron Von Kessel's coterie of German sympathisers), we learnt from one of our informants—much to our horror—that the story wasn't entirely fiction. Hessian sacks had been found by local fishermen containing the beheaded carcasses of three pigs. The sacks and their contents had been disposed of, according to our confidant, quickly enough to avert an official inquiry, but regrettably, not before rumours of British wrongdoing had begun to spread.



We let our informer have his fee, but worse was to follow. It was only a few days later that Lieutenant Commander Arnold Furnell turned up at the British School, without forewarning. A swarthy, long-serving naval officer, straight-backed and sure of himself, there he was before us in blue serge and gold braid, with papers from GHQ in Alexandria to show that he had been instructed to review our operations.

Taciturn as a rule, or so I inferred from my exchanges with our unwanted visitor during his first day in Athens, Furnell was nonetheless inclined to blurt out jots of information about this or that to serve as small talk, although in some cases he should have known better. And so it was that at morning tea on his second day in Athens, when the talk by chance turned to ruses designed to confuse the enemy, Arnold Furnell happened to let slip, with a loud guffaw, that he himself had supervised the beheading of the controversial pigs.

The plan was to put the carcasses in sacks and let them drift ashore, he explained, then let it be known that this was an example of Turkish infamy. Unfortunately, according to Furnell's rendition of the story, his confederates on shore—a group that probably included our informer—must have double crossed their employer, and in pursuit of yet another (and presumably higher) fee, had sold the secret to a German sympathiser. Passed up the line, the carefully contrived scenario destined to become a rumour about headless bodies in hessian sacks, soon came to Baron Von Kessel who made the most of it, reshaping the story until it reflected badly on the British.

Stunned, devastated by what we had just been told, Toby Asplin tackled the storyteller furiously, castigating Furnell for the blood-soaked extremity of his actions, regaling him with the risk of the plan backfiring (as it had done) and, above all, denouncing him for his failure to liaise with the British intelligence teams ashore, an alleged lack of coordination being the very thing that he had been sent to Athens to investigate.

Lieutenant Commander Furnell, with the obstinate look of a seasoned naval officer who had been battered by worse seas than this, listened to Asplin's tirade quietly, sipping his tea, saying nothing.

Until Asplin had finished. Whereupon Furnell raised a gnarled hand to repel any renewal of the onslaught, saying briefly but savagely. 'In wartime you do what has to be done. And sometimes, when the stakes are high, the quicker the better.'

That such a man had been sent to review our operations left Asplin fuming, but the orders were there. Cooperate! Brief him fully! The innuendo that a professional had been despatched to fix up an outfit that had fallen into disarray was inescapable. Asplin was stuck with it, but the thought had left him constantly on edge, especially in Furnell's presence.

I sensed that Asplin was on edge as I quizzed him in my quarters about Cy Lapidés. My superior was worried about Furnell, no doubt, but also about our forthcoming meeting with the mystery man from Smyrna. But I had to persevere. Find out what had prompted Asplin to arrange a meeting at our recently-acquired room.

'Why couldn't he come here to the British School if he had to see us?' I inquired. 'Which would leave him free to fall back on the usual cover story? Selling artefacts from Smyrna or whatever.'

Asplin's expression became grave at this. He had found a perch for himself on the edge of my bed, seated in the triangular space created by my partly-drawn mosquito nets like a sultan-in-exile holding court in the doorway of a cheap pavilion. 'The fact is ...' My colleague glanced quickly this way and that as if he feared we might be overheard to our disadvantage, even in a room attached to our own headquarters. 'The fact is that a message from Lapidés reached me after I arranged to meet him here. It shook me. I had to answer it.'

I took the hint and closed the door to the landing. 'A message?'

'Yes. Alexis Brusa brought it to me. It seems that, unbeknownst to me, our very important visitor, the esteemed Lieutenant Commander, prevailed upon our driver in my absence to provide a tour of the city, going first to the Acropolis, finishing up eventually at the Panhellenion Café. Which is where I met Lapidés a few days ago. Lapidés must have recognised our car, or perhaps he was well-briefed by whoever sent him here and knows a bit about us. Not just about

our presence at the British School, for that's where we had previously arranged to meet, but about Brusa and other members of our team.'

Asplin shifted on his perch uncomfortably. 'In any event,' he continued, 'yesterday afternoon Lapidès sent me a note. To say that a man he had seen previously in the vicinity of the British School had spotted him in the street, and made a threatening gesture! So in his note Lapidès begged permission to change our meeting place. He feared that the person he had seen was after him. And only by a change of plan could he avert the risk of death.'

'A gesture? What sort of gesture?'

'A knife gesture, he called it.' Asplin demonstrated by drawing a finger across his throat. 'Like that! One can't ignore the fears of these would-be informers. If they're not trailing one of our opposing agents, they're being followed through the back streets themselves. So I scribbled a reply, proposing a meeting in our room tomorrow morning. Which is now *this* morning.' Asplin glanced at his fob watch. 'In about twenty minutes' time.'

'Does anyone else know about this morning's meeting?'

Asplin grimaced. 'Now there's a peculiar thing. Not being entirely sure about Brusa's reliability I decided to have a chat with our esteemed visitor.' The speaker made a chopping motion. 'The carcass man! Furnell. To find out whether he had noticed anything unusual at the Panhellenion Café or elsewhere in the course of their excursion.'

'And did he say anything of interest?'

'Indeed. While walking with Brusa in the street outside the Panhellenion, Furnell saw a chap he knew to be a businessman from Smyrna. Surmising that this was the very man we had arranged to meet. Furnell went on to say that he signalled to the fellow. In the way he used to do when they had dealings together. To let him know that this brief encounter in the street was to be followed by a more significant meeting in the morning.'

'Did Furnell say what his signal consisted of?'

He didn't say, and I didn't press him. I was talking to him shortly after sending my note to Lapidès, by which time I had changed the

meeting place. That seemed more than enough to remedy the man from Smyrna's apprehension. There will be time enough later, I concluded, after you and I have spoken to Lapides this morning, to go back to Furnell and ask him about the nature of his signal. I can't imagine him making a cut-throat gesture in broad daylight.'

'But nor could you imagine him putting pigs in hessian bags.'

'True. I'll have to press him hard about his so-called signal.'

'And about the nature of his previous dealings with this fellow.'

'Exactly. There's something very odd about the whole thing ... but still. One has to keep moving.'

Asplin buttoned up his jacket. *Keep moving*. Reassured by his usual mantra, our leader had obviously regained his aplomb and was keen to get going. So I opened the door to let him through to the landing.

'Yes,' I called after him as I locked the door, noticing that Asplin was on the stairs already. 'It's about time we had a good long chat to Cy Lapides. To hear his side of the story. Test him.'

I put away my key and turned to face the row of marble statues lined up in the half-light along the landing wall, an array drawn from the archaeological school's vast collection, some with missing limbs, others with chipped torsos, or damaged profiles.

They stared back at me with sightless eyes, the legendary figures, these old reminders of distant battlefields and deaths foretold, a thought that prompted me to add a warning to my call in a way that seemed quite uncanny half an hour later, by which time we were dwelling upon the scene that awaited us—the man from Smyrna's corpse, the bleeding throat, the contorted features, the lifeless gaze.

'It probably doesn't matter where we meet.' I crossed the landing to join Asplin on the stairs. 'This is war. We may well learn more about the likely outcome of the next Allied offensive by meeting Lapides in our room, face to face, than by meeting him anywhere else. You can learn a lot by the look in a man's eye. It can tell you what the future holds.'

Richard Rossiter is the author of *Arrhythmia: Stories of Desire* (UWA Publishing, 2009) and *Thicker than Water: A novella* (UWA Publishing, 2014).

## Spirit Places

### Richard Rossiter

As a little girl, she'd led the neighbourhood pack into exploring the bush alongside the riverbank. Then, as they got older, into the back yards of houses, and, later, into buildings that were locked up and desolate: offices, or private houses, that for some reason no one wanted to sell, or had forgotten about. All she required was a screwdriver to a latch or, occasionally, a brick eased through a window pane. When inside, she had no desire to desecrate or to leave her mark with graffiti or bodily excretions. She ran along passageways, opened doors into rooms that sometimes looked as if the occupants had just stepped out. Then she would stand there, feeling the presence of another human being who'd once sat in the broken chair, pulled out the drawers of the desk, answered the phone. For a moment she would get the sense of a life not her own. She would rifle through filing cabinets left behind and, usually, empty. But sometimes she would be rewarded with a discarded diary, or a notebook with cryptic messages. *Phone Chris. Meeting at 11. Return DVDs. Lunch at Cleo's. Check chooks.* She could tell straightaway whether it was a man or a woman from the handwriting or the doodled decorations on the page. She would begin to form a picture of what the person looked

like, how old they were, whether they were married, or not, whether there were children. Whether they were bad tempered. Whether they were gay, or straight (sometimes). This was the greatest pleasure of all: to construct an imagined life from a few bits and pieces they'd left lying around.

As she grew older, so too did Antoinette's fascination with the past lives of people she scarcely knew. She read a novel called *The Wide Sargasso Sea* and for a while believed she might have discovered something of a former self in the main character, also called Antoinette. Her favourite pastime was to get in her car and drive, often for many hours, until she reached places, groups of houses, even whole townships, that were no longer inhabited. They were ghost towns that had quickly arisen, often out of the desert, when gold or other precious metals had been discovered, and then the mother lode had run out or become so thin it was no longer profitable to mine, and so, just as quickly, the towns disappeared. When the people left they sometimes took the towns with them, brick by brick, timber by timber, to build elsewhere. And then, years afterwards, if the shire could be bothered, or thought there was a buck in it, they would erect plaques on the site of a house, or hotel, or hospital, and you could stand there and imagine (sometimes with the help of a photograph) what had been there before. She could picture the hundreds, or thousands, of people who had walked down a street, usually a dirt road, worked in the hot, dry earth, woken shivering on bitter, cold mornings. People who had loved, hated, got drunk, procreated, made a future or gone mad and killed themselves. People who had sat in the still of the evening, murmuring to each other as the sun set, astonishingly beautiful in the dusty, smoky air. All that, Antoinette could see by staring at a plaque, glinting in the sun in the baked earth.

Where there were empty houses in empty streets she could walk among the shades of people long dead, imagine their smell, their callused hands, feel the fabric of their clothes. See them in bed under their thin covers. She could even pick up their crying babies and rock

them in her arms before lowering them back into a safe cot, covered in flywire to protect them from insects. At times Antoinette was frightened by the presence, material and palpable, of the past, but began to accept that it could not wound her, not bodily. She would brush the flies away from her own eyes, her own mouth, but they were back in an instant.

When she turned her gaze away from the north and the east and looked southwards, the world shifted. Here, it was not precious metals that had disappeared from the earth, but trees, at least decades old, fed into mills year after year, mostly for paper that had a shop life of a few weeks, or months, depending on the demand. When the trees were gone, the people followed, their neat wooden cottages now standing as a trace, a memory, of how their inhabitants had spent their lives: turning trees into timber. It was here, in the shade of the remnant forest, that Antoinette's thoughts turned inwards. She thought about her own family, her parents and grandparents (at least the ones she knew of). She looked at the wood stoves in the cottages and remembered her bustling grandmother, her home-made recipe book with the careful annotations, the pages at the end that were filled with comments on her life, her husband, her children, including Antoinette's mother. Her grandmother was happiest when something she'd planted was growing strongly, vegetables or flowers. She would count them and record the results. *Today, 11 daffodils and 2 jonquils and 3 lettuces ready to pick.* Antoinette imagined her sitting at the kitchen table, writing, while waiting for a cake to cook, or the jam to reach its setting point, or attending to a joint in the oven. Then, if the children were not interrupting, she would have time to note down her recipes for living, the need to look beyond the windowsill, outwards to a world that was not purely domestic. She was a forward-looking woman who lived in the outer suburbs when there was still a patch of bush and wildflowers at the end of the street. She looked forward to her trips to town and, once, a voyage by boat to Adelaide. She wrote, *I was seasick for many days, but then the ocean calmed and I enjoyed myself.* She was frightened of planes, but loved

going on the train, especially when she and her husband, Leonard, and the three children journeyed to Albany, south, or Kalgoorlie to the east. She had sisters to visit at these towns and sometimes went by herself.

In her exploration of the past, people and places, Antoinette always expected to find something. She didn't know what, exactly, so she could never say to herself, or others, *I am looking for ...* It was more a sense of anticipation, a faint humming in her body, at what might turn up, unexpected, as she moved around in the bric-a-brac of lives past, but not totally forgotten, lives not without a presence in the present. She extended her beat to the empty stretches of the coast, making for distant headlands behind which, she felt sure, something was waiting for her, ready to be rediscovered. It reminded Antoinette of when she was a child, before the gang, and she would look for money at places where people had gathered, like the show grounds, or the speedway, the beach, the football oval. She would walk for hours, her head down, eyes busy, searching. And often she found what she was looking for: a stream of coins fallen out of a pocket of a man (most probably) stretched out on the slope of the banks watching the action in the arena, or a single coin, even a note, at the beach; and jewellery that had slipped off a wrist or finger in a careless or heated moment.

More earthily, Antoinette recalled digging for potatoes with her grandmother and her excitement, pride even, when her grubby fingers closed around a fat potato lying hidden in the dirt. Her journeys along the beaches were reminiscent of these earlier pursuits: around the next corner she would find something of value, or mystery—maybe a boat washed ashore, with its sails flapping and no people on board, or a person in the shallows, still alive, just, and needing to be saved. A glass fishing float that had come adrift and ended up on the shore. Once she'd found a wooden settee, of all things, fallen off a boat, presumably, and washed up on a reef. Or maybe (and this she considered only for a moment) she would come across people, naked, on the edge of the sea. Perhaps a couple making love. Or a



man, alone, brown all over with a strong, muscled back. He would turn to her and wave, and smile. Perhaps she would join him.

Her beach phase lasted a number of years, but it eventually seemed to her a superficial pursuit—a sidetrack—and so she turned away from the coast. She found the ocean defied her imagination: it was too big, too empty (and at the same time, too much itself); it was, simply, too abstract. She headed, once again, to the heart of the country.

Inland. She needed to go inland, away from the edge. Back to the empty streets and houses fringing the desert. She carried a swag and made much of the journey on foot, accepting occasional lifts when she felt exhausted, or when she was running out of food, or water, and needed to stock up at the next town or, more likely, a service station in the middle of nowhere. Now called a servo, to save breath. When she finally arrived at a town with no people, she discovered for the first time (like so many others before her) that there was *in fact* no one there. She was thirty-three years old. The past, finally, had disappeared, and the people with it. For her, the houses no longer held together; instead they became their shaky parts: iron, timber, stone, nails. Tables, merely pieces of wood joined together. The words on headstones in the graveyards so eroded that you could make no sense of them. The brief histories, written for the tourists, just words, black marks on paper. Antoinette felt bereft. If the past was no longer there, if the centres could not hold, if everything was falling apart, how, then, was she to live? All she could think of was to go further out, to keep moving.

One black, moonless night, when darkness had arrived even more quickly than she had expected, she saw the outline of a utility parked in a clearing about one hundred metres from the gravel road. There was a fire alight. She walked up to the group, a man, two women and four children. They were the colour of the night, the earth, the sky and the trees. She sat down, as if invited. She told them she was looking for the past, she'd lost it somewhere along the way. They looked at her, puzzled for a moment. Then one of the women spoke: *So are we, missus. Think it's a long way away.* After a while, the other

woman added: *Yeah. A long way. Mebbe too far.* The men and the children stared at her. One of the boys did a handstand.

The next day she arrived at a vast, dry lake, the surface cracked with salt. And to her surprise, out there, standing as still as posts, were people. Naked. They looked very thin, and parched, but even from this distance she could see they were tough, hard as iron. They were survivors. As she walked closer, her eyes watering in the glare, she saw there were men and boys with handsome penises and women and girls, some with their breasts low to their bellies; others, less used, pointed out to the world, their vulvas arched expectantly. Antoinette worried about them, these people, this community surrounded by desert, stuck in the lake in the boiling sun, without protection. She would go back to the lake's edge and gather some water from the tank, so thoughtfully provided. All day she worked, walking to and fro, each time carrying what she could in plastic bottles, pouring it at their feet so the moisture could be absorbed into their bodies, their cells plumping out, replenished. When evening came, the late light casting shadows of the lake people, she did not want to leave. So, like the others, she took off her clothes and stood there, also a shadow, filling a space between a man and a woman, roughly her age, she thought, and faced the setting sun. In time, darkness blotted out the edge of the lake and then the figures around her; stars were brilliant in the blackness. When the wind sprang up from the east, it chilled her to the bone. But she knew when the sun rose after the long night, and every other night, she would be warmed through her strong back, through her intestines, to the skin on her belly and breasts. Alongside the others, the men and women and children, old and young, black and white, she would grow thin and tough, her eyes hooded, her feet steady. She would wait.

In 2003 sculptor Antony Gormley placed fifty-one sculptures on Lake Ballard, a salt lake fifty-one kilometres west of the Western Australian Goldfields town of Menzies. The sculptures were derived from laser scans of the town's inhabitants and cast from an alloy of molybdenum, vanadium and titanium, elements found in the Archaean rock of WA.

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## The Moon Still Speaks

### Rashida Murphy

His name was Sohrab and he came from Shiraz. He had never heard of a wine called Shiraz because his religion forbade him to drink wine. But a few months in the company of my brothers and cousins changed that.

Sohrab spoke of his hometown with its blue domes and tiled arches and large squares and tree-lined avenues. The moon-patterned courtyards of his beloved Shiraz were so different from the dusty little village he found us in.

‘Town,’ I reminded him. ‘This is a town. Officially. Soon we will be a city.’

‘Town, huh! This is a village and you are all villagers. And soon I will go to *Amrika* and study at Stanford.’ But that was later, once he’d learned sufficient English to insult us.

It didn’t take him long to get used to us: my brothers and cousins and uncles and aunties and parents. He had a large family, too, back in his crimson city that shared its name with the liquid my brothers were so fond of. My twin sister and I were the youngest and when he practised his hesitant English on us we tried not to laugh.

We lived in a remote North Indian village that had been elevated to the status of a 'college town' because of the abundance of colleges run by Jesuit priests and Spanish nuns. Dark-bearded boys from Iran and Palestine had started trickling in to live and study here because it was cheaper than going to Stanford. They didn't speak to each other—the Iranians and the Palestinians—they shared a religion but not a language. They dressed better than the Indian boys and paid rent on time. For several months we had four boys sharing two rooms in our house.

When Sohrab first came he was just another curly haired boy with thick spectacles and a funny accent. He wore stiff white shirts and round brown moccasins that were too big for him. His eyes were huge behind those glasses. The heavy frames left dents on either side of his nose when he took them off. He polished those glasses constantly. He was blind without them and he put them on as soon as he got up in the morning. Once I found him fast asleep, after a night out with my brothers, with his glasses on. I teased him about it the next morning and he said, 'I can see my dreams better if I sleep with my glasses on,' with such seriousness I didn't know if he was pulling my leg. It was hard to tell with Sohrab.

Then there was the moon. He had a relationship with it. Even sober, he behaved strangely when the moon was full. He giggled and sat on the roof with a cigarette so he could look at the moon and talk to it.

'Cancer,' my sister said. 'He was born in July, under the sign of Cancer. That's why he's a bit loony.' And we looked at him sitting on the roof with a bottle of London Pilsner beside him, blowing smoke rings into the air. My father threatened to shoot him with an air gun if he didn't come down. The aunties muttered that he was definitely 'touched' and kept their prepubescent girls away from him.

Another time he lay down on the dark gravel path outside our house and my brother nearly ran him over with his blue Lambretta. 'What's the matter with you, you idiot,' my brother yelled when Sohrab lay motionless on the dirt, looking upwards, as if hypnotised.

Sohrab patted the ground beside him and invited my brother to lie down. ‘Look,’ he said. ‘Just look. It’s moving. It’s getting closer to us and if we keep looking, it will come for us. And we can go to it. Don’t you see?’

My brother didn’t want to share a room with him after that and my father said, ‘Well, he can’t sleep with the girls, can he now? You know what foreigners are like. This one’s a little mad. So what? Just ignore him.’

My mother tried to feed him constantly, especially after the revolution, when she knew he had lost his family. Lost. As if they were misplaced or hiding somewhere and would come out after the Ayatollahs won the battle against Saddam. Sohrab cried at night in his sleep and his glasses were streaked in the morning. My mother hired holy men to exorcise the evil that surrounded him and instructed us all to say prayers in a language we didn’t understand.

We had just heard that his sister Roohi was also dead, along with his *Baba* and *Maman jun* and three younger brothers. One of those brothers and his friend, who would later become President of the Islamic Republic, had been hostage takers at the American Embassy in Tehran.

‘Reza and Mahmud will kill us all. My country in the hands of savages—we will all die now,’ said Sohrab. ‘Reza is *shaitoon*—he is devil. And *Amrika* is even bigger *shaitoon*!’ And that was the first time I heard an Iranian call America the great Satan. I held him in my fifteen-year-old arms and he cried, trembling and lighting one cigarette after another and promising me he would look after me like a brother.

There were many places Sohrab and I could go to escape the people in our house. Our favourite was the pond where the turtles swam slowly between the hyacinths. Occasionally we would lift a turtle out just to watch him freeze instantly into a motionless ball where seconds earlier he had been weaving through purple haze, eyeing us as he popped his head above the water near our feet. Once Sohrab tossed his cigarette butt in the pond and I made him climb in and fish it out.

‘And you call me mad,’ he said, dripping, slimy and smelly, his hand holding the offending butt. ‘You take that animal out of the water to torture him every day and you think one cigarette is going to kill him?’ He squelched away without looking back and didn’t talk to me for a week. He didn’t get angry often, but wading in the green pool upset him and he walked away from me with his back hunched and his head down.

And then everything changed.

Mothers ran away, fathers emigrated, girls married, boys drank excessively, the revolution became a fixed point in history and a generation became homeless. We scooped out a large hole in the ground and laid childhood to rest along with the family cat and a torn picture of a beautiful Persian girl in a wedding dress. My twin and I married solemn older men and went to live in the city, where no one cared that we came from a broken home. Sohrab wanted to go to Iran the year he caught bronchitis, and my brothers tried to stop him. ‘You’re not well,’ they said. ‘Get better first. The revolution does not like sick, short-sighted people.’ But he went anyway.

For six years I wished I hadn’t made Sohrab angry the last time I’d seen him. My sister said she heard he was back in the northern town with its Jesuit colleges. She said he wasn’t well. She told me not to get my hopes up.

My brother found Sohrab in the college town and brought him to the tiny flat in that frantic city, where I sat nursing my infant daughter. Silently, my brother led him to me, guiding him towards the soft couch, untangling my hand from my daughter’s fist and placing it into Sohrab’s. This friend of my youth, the one we had laughed at so often, spoke first. ‘What is her name? Your daughter. What did you call her? What does she look like?’

‘Roohi,’ I said. ‘I called her Roohi after your sister. And she has green eyes.’ I didn’t ask him how he was.

The specialist came to our house and shone a torch in his eyes and asked him a hundred questions. After nearly an hour the doctor

gestured that I follow him out to the balcony where we could talk above the roar of traffic, away from Sohrab.

‘He doesn’t *want* to see,’ said the doctor. ‘I’ve come across cases of trauma like his before. I can fix everything else, you know, the diabetes, the malnutrition, the stoop. But there’s no physical reason he can’t see. He doesn’t want to. My advice: keep him comfortable.’

Comfortable.

Cover him with a warm blanket and drip feed him, like you did with the kitten you found freezing outside the door when you were small. Check every hour to see if he breathes. Wipe his eyes and mouth. Let him hold your baby girl and guide his claw hand to rest on her head. Tell him about her. Describe her curly brown hair and sharp little nails. Cry when he can’t hear you. Don’t talk about his dead sister and mother or his father and brothers. Don’t remind him of his domed city with rubble in its squares and guns in its mosques. Don’t speak his language. Don’t tell him that he will die far from home, among people who cannot purify his spirit forty days after his body has been buried on an alien shore. Ask him if his dreams are blurred. Ask him if the moon still speaks to him. Pour him a glass of Shiraz. Light him a cigarette. Take him to the balcony so he can feel the moist evening air on his face. Read him the line from Matthew Arnold that first occurred to you when he said he was Sohrab and you wondered if his father was Rustum. *Who art thou then that canst so touch my soul?* Make him a platter of saffron rice and chelo kebabs. Remember that rice makes his tummy hurt.

Rosie Barter is a Fremantle writer, who broadcasts on ABC Radio, and has been published in *indigo* and *The Trouble With Flying and Other Stories*. 'Not Sweet, Not Sweet At All' won second prize in the Lyndall Hadow/Donald Stuart Competition 2014.

## Not Sweet, Not Sweet at All

Rosie Barter

Thirteen, and as pale as milk, she sat at the attic window, looking out across her father's red dirt paddocks all jostling with fat black steers. She longed for the bravado of her two younger brothers, stocky bold boys with no time for her. They hissed as they kicked her under the dinner table: Cecilia! Cecilia! Sissy, Sissy, Liar!

Sometimes, to save her daughter from their tyranny, her mother had Maisie, the maid, take Cecilia's meal up to her on a tray. After dinner she would come to the attic to listen to her daughter read aloud from *Girls Own Annual*. The latest tutor had vanished one evening without warning or his pay. He must have trudged across the mulga plain through chilly night and parched day to reach the nearest settlement. No word was ever heard from him. But the children's mother could not help imagining his skeleton picked over by dingoes and crows.

By day Cecilia would lie for hours on a chaise-longue, hands crossed over breasts, slender feet pointed downwards. Up to the ceiling she gazed, at the roundels of white plaster fruit and nesting birds. She gazed and waited for the words to come: poetry, humming with its own rhythm. Its cadence lifted her hands to shape the air



with silent music. Her fingers sang and lilted, wept and galloped, caressed and pierced, tracing the words that came in rills and eddies. Then she would get up, take her sewing frame to the window and begin.

At the convent school, before her father insisted on bringing her home against doctor's advice, the nuns had taught her stitchery: embroidery, drawn-thread work, patchwork, tapestry, appliqué, crochet. Now, as she pierced the fabric, drove the needle beneath a single thread of weave and out again, the colour, the pattern, the form grew on the fabric until it became a hymn of praise. The choir of her mind sang Hosanna! She glowed.

Even her father could see it. Painting with thread brought colour to Cecilia's cheeks. When he next went down to Kalgoorlie he would visit the haberdasher with Cecilia's shopping list, for her fourteenth birthday.

The night before he left, Cecilia came down to dinner. Her eyes flashed; her list was complete. She had asked for umpteen hanks of sateen thread in colours even she was not sure existed: forget-me-not, daffodil, rosella red, almond blossom, heliotrope, clotted cream, pea-green ... She wanted needles, pins, crochet hooks, a length of fine linen and two more of *peau-de-soie*, a heavy buttery silk. Even her brothers were quiet as she read out the list, her voice as clear as pinged crystal.

From her window, a week later, Cecilia saw the cloud of dust approaching. She was waiting on the verandah when her father stepped down from the pony-trap. He handed her a basket crammed with hanks of thread, an armoury of needles, hooks, pins, even a tracing wheel and a pair of tiny pearl-handled scissors.

But no linen, no silk. The shipment from London was delayed for two months; Kalgoorlie had none, even Perth could not supply.

Cecilia sulked in bed until her mother brought in a tea tray and coaxed her up to visit the new piglets. Dressed in a brown calico pinafore, she allowed herself to be led to the pen, where her mother left her.

Ned, the young farm-hand, held out a wriggling piglet. Its snout was as tiny as a bud on the pink miniature rose that struggled in the heat up the trellis. Cecilia stroked the piglet's skin. Like silk, heavy silk. From within she sensed music, heard voices; the choir swelled, her eyes blazed. She cradled the piglet closer, and when the boy asked her to release it to its mother's teat, she pulled back.

Ned reached out his broad, flat hands.

Come now, Miss, he said. Y'can hear the sow a-cryin' for her baby. Y'must give it back now.

Cecilia turned away, crushing the piglet to her chest.

No, she said over her shoulder.

Please, Miss Cecilia, he begged, and a ruddy flush stole up his neck and under the freckles of his ears and cheeks.

She spun around and fixed him there.

No! I shall feed it myself with an eyedropper and it will be my pet.

The boy could only shake his head as Cecilia whirled off, marched across the yard, through the house, up the stairs and into her attic room. She locked the door. She laid the piglet on a shawl in her basket. With the eyedropper used for her medicines, she mixed a little laudanum with the milk meant for her tea. She dribbled it into the piglet's mouth. It closed its eyes and snuffled into sleep.

There was an urgent rattle of the doorknob. It was her mother with the dinner tray. Go away, Cecilia shouted, I'm asleep.

Then I shall leave it here, in case you wake hungry. Cecilia heard the tray clunk onto the floorboards. She listened for footsteps on the stairs. None came, just her mother's voice, tight and thin. Ned tells me you took a piglet. Is that so?

The girl came back like a hawk to prey. He gave it me to hold. It jumped from my arms and ran off under the water-tank.

Her mother cleared her throat. I see. So where is the piglet now?

Cecilia looked at the door as she fondled an ear of her sleeping pet. A queer little laugh threatened to burst from her; one hand flew to her mouth to quell it.

How should I know? she called out at last. Now go away so I can sleep.

Silence from her mother, then footsteps receding, metal toe-tips on shoes clipping down the stairs. Her mouth prim, Cecilia turned back to her work.

By the paraffin lamp's dim light, Cecilia pored over her bounty of new thread. There were shades as muted as a morning mist, sonorous tints like foxglove and others as brazen as the magenta bougainvillea over the outhouse. There were hues that brooded like a storm, or reviled like mould on old bread, or sucked the soul like an undertaker's shroud.

For her beloved piglet pet, she laid out glorious hanks of sateen in the spectrum of the rainbow. She took out the finest of her new needles and threaded it with rich poppy red. With the snoring piglet on her lap she gently eased the needle's point into its hide. She took care to penetrate only the first tissue-thin membrane. The needle slipped through, drawing with it a line of poppy red now blanched beneath translucent skin. It emerged into a noose of thread. And when she drew it to its extent it formed a perfect loop. The piglet squirmed in its sleep as she stitched a chain of bright loops that spiralled over its sleek rump.

With the colour of ripe mulberries Cecilia stitched a second spiral beside the first, then another, in orange. The third one glowed like Stradivari's famed violin varnish, said to be the source of his sublime sound. Cecilia heard it. Across the paddocks it came: a faint, reedy melody of strings. It trembled her throat, pierced the night air with the song of angels. Ave Maria! She was on fire, chanting.

The wick of the lamp suddenly stuttered, the light dimmed. But it did not matter. Spirit was her beacon, sung praise her map, her eyes mere instruments.

On Cecilia's lap the piglet squirmed as she felt for its belly. There she stitched a lazy-daisy bouquet in saffron and mauve. With blues from pale sky to indigo she blanket-stitched edges of velveteen ears, appliquéd lace down the spine, made a rainbow tassel for the tail, and

sewed a collar of pearls about the neck. The symphony of her mind crashed around her, demanding she keep up. But when her thimble slipped on the needle, the piglet shrieked. With her handkerchief Cecilia dabbed its blood, a mere drop. She threw down the thimble, glad to be rid of its clumsiness, and stitched on.

Outside the horizon smouldered. Dawn seeped over the land. She administered more milk, more laudanum, to her quickening pet.

Again she took up her needle, this time threaded with white as bright as a rabbit's underbelly. Gone was the symphony. What had come was cradle-song. Her lips breathed the words while her blood pulsed to its comforting, eternal refrain.

Bye baby bunting, Daddy's gone a-hunting, she crooned, searching out naked spaces for satiny stars, moons, clouds until there were none.

With the pearl-handled scissors Cecilia snipped the final thread. She sank the needle into the pincushion and lifted the piglet into the basket beside her. Then she pushed back her chair and rose up just as sun flooded the room and a flock of black cockatoos screeched over the roof.

Cecilia took off the calico pinafore of yesterday. Over her shift she let fall a white muslin dress, high-necked, with a pin-tucked bodice and slim sleeves buttoned at the wrists. She rolled on white lisle stockings, securing them above her knees with garters. Then she stepped into her spoon-toed kid boots, laced and tied them.

The piglet in its carnival costume hardly stirred as she carried it, in her arms, downstairs to the dining room. From the kitchen she could hear the kettle boiling, the clank of a frying pan, Cook nattering to the maid.

In the dining room, the table was already set. On it was the perennial centrepiece, a cut-crystal fruit bowl. It stood empty save for a few shrivelled green apples. There, beside the fruit, Cecilia nestled her slumbering sacrifice. Then she edged the bowl from the table, and holding her breath from its weight she carried it to her father's place at the far end. She sat in his high-backed carved chair. She sat, hands in her lap, her thumb stroking the roughened pads of her fingers.

Last night, after the thimble's dismissal, her hands had raced with arpeggios that soared and plummeted, had led her into a mania of repetition, had numbed her to the incessant pricking. But no longer. Now she sat listening to nothing other than the clock ticking, waiting until she smelled her father's pipe or heard her brothers' clatter on the stairs. She sat with the piglet in the fruit bowl, ready.

Cecilia heard the boys thump across the hall, the tussle to be first to the door, their grunts and blows as it flew open.

The boys rattled into the room, and stopped.

Sissy Liar sat at the far end of the table in their father's place. She wore her white church dress even though it was Tuesday. Directly in front of her was the fruit bowl. Something was in it besides fruit. And it was moving.

Their sister's eyes locked with theirs. She rose up, lifted the piglet from the bowl and held it aloft. It snored, legs splayed, hoofs quivering. She held it there.

At the other end of the table the boys stood, mouths agape. Sissy Liar was smiling, a strange sort of smile that passed right through them. They could not move. Behind them the door clicked open, they caught a whiff of pipe, heard their father's breath hiss between his teeth. He pushed between them, the rough tweed of his sleeve grazing the younger one's cheek. But even he stopped, stifled by the awful void of his daughter's gaze.

It was the smell of bacon, wafting from the silver tureen being whisked through the door by Cook, that broke the spell.

G'morning all, she chirped, bustling into the room and plonking her burden onto the starched white cloth. Maisie will be bringing tea and toast. She rubbed her hands and peered down the table. Miss Cecilia? What's that you've got there?

Cecilia's smile vanished. The piglet squealed, wriggled from her grasp and teetered down the table towards the tureen. Cook stared.

My word, she said, stepping backwards. You've been very busy, dear.

There was a hush.

That will be all, Cook, her employer said, striding down the room to stand by his chair. On your way out, kindly call my wife in.

He tapped Cecilia's shoulder. Take your seat, he said.

The boys sat down, glum.

When Cecilia's mother stepped into the room she saw it; the girl's gaze was fixed on her brothers, and on her face was a smile. It was not sweet; it was not sweet at all. Now, here was her daughter rising from her chair, a colourful bundle under one arm, bacon knife, glinting, held high with the other.

The mother rushed forward; she stopped.

Lord! It was the lost piglet, dressed like a doll.

But when she looked again she realised what was so, she understood it all: the kaleidoscope of colour stitched to its pale skin, the pinched-shut eyes, panting mouth. She felt the creature's pain. She strode up to Cecilia, looked her in the eye and slowly reached for the knife. She eased it, little by little, from her daughter's frozen fist until she held it in her hand, and stepped back.

Cecilia sank onto her chair. She began to hum a hymn, too loud, far too loud. Louder and faster she hummed as she rocked the piglet to and fro, to and fro.

The woman looked to the end of the table, but her husband glanced away, jaw slack, shaking his head. Into the needlework box he had planted his last seed of hope. It had taken root and blossomed there. Who could have known its perfume would be poison? It had bewitched his child. Better to have been stillborn. His shoulders hunched. He closed his eyes. He turned to the wall.

His wife, however, knew what had to be done, should have been done long ago. Out of the room, up to the attic she climbed. She laid the valise on the bed. From drawers, wardrobe and chest she selected only the clothes her daughter would need: plain, practical clothes. Two each of nightgowns, shifts, pantaloons, stockings, pinafores, blouses, half a dozen handkerchiefs, a bonnet, a shawl, boots. From each item she shook out shadows, smoothed away sorrow. Into each

fold she tucked her hopeless love. Finally, she slipped the small leather-bound Bible, given to Cecilia by the nuns, between a pair of mittens.

But the needlework basket with its seductive sateen thread, velvet pincushion, glittering needles, gaudy buttons and beads, she thrust deep into the womb of the wardrobe and pocketed the key.

*Susan Midalia has published two collections of short stories: A History of the Beanbag (2007), shortlisted for the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards; and An Unknown Sky (2012), shortlisted for the Steele Rudd Award. Her new collection of stories will be published in 2015.*

## The Inner Life

### Susan Midalia

Those pills the guy at the hostel gave me for the plane, they haven't knocked me out like he said they would. They haven't even stopped me thinking. Is Charlie angry with me? Or maybe she's worried or scared but how would I bloody know when she won't answer my calls or texts? I squirm in my seat, should get up and have a stretch, do push-ups or something, but the guy next to me is spreading across the armrest and blocking my way and if he starts with his snoring again I'll ... Forty, fifty years old, he must be, in a T-shirt with The New Pornographers plastered all over it, thinking he's so cool. I put on my headphones and check the screen for movies but it's just a bunch of stupid rom coms and mindless action stuff. So why do people think blowing other people up is *entertaining*? I take off the headphones, slump back in my seat with four hours still to go, when all I want is to see her, talk to her. *She lost a baby, Joe*. Outside the National Gallery in freezing cold London with all the pigeons flying around and Zoe phoned me, just calling to say hi she says, and it's so friggin' hot here hottest summer on record and how cool to have snow and then it all came rushing out. About the baby. And when I found my voice I said *is Charlie*



*alright? Why didn't she tell me? Why? And Zoe said she's OK, Joe, everything's OK.*

Such a dumb word. *OK.*

So first no one tells me anything and then Zoe tell me bits and pieces and I don't know what to do with these fragments she's given me. Tramping round the place, checking out the world. I was gunna look at all the famous paintings, my last big chance, but instead I went back to the hostel. Curled up like a kid and wished I could fall asleep.

The sky through my window's so blue and not a cloud anywhere, so bright I have to turn away. Trying not to look at the guy in his stupid T-shirt, his head thrown back against the seat. He's out for the count now and that's not fair either.

The New Pornographers. They're a crap band, anyway.



You know you're back in Perth when there's no warnings every twenty seconds about unattended luggage and a beagle's wagging its tail and the guy at customs says *g'day*, waves you to the door like he'll meet you later at the pub. Then I walk out, looking, and Mum's there, waving like some girl at a rock concert when she sees me. I feel something drop inside me but I fold her up and give her the biggest hug because I *am* pleased to see her, really pleased. Feeling her arms around me, helping me to breathe. She rubs my stubbly face and *dear Joe*, she says. I hitch up my rucksack, tell her I want to get going. Go home.

I try not to walk too fast, I've forgotten how short her legs are and she's telling me I look thinner and did I eat properly? Outside now and the heat hits me in the face, almost knocks me out. Forgotten this as well. Hottest summer on record, she says, and I tell her I already know, kind of snap at her, standing in front of the parking machine and she looks at me all pained and tells me she's sorry and I tell her I'm just really tired. And I'm sorry too.

The air con in the car still isn't fixed but she's decided not to, fuel efficiency, pollution and all that, she says, and she winds down the window. Like she's trying hard. I look out and see the same old massive fake cactus in front of the fake Spanish motel, the gross pizza and hamburger joints and some new and incredibly ugly vomit brown apartments with no windows. And all the thundering trucks so Mum has to shout now and I can't hear what she's saying as another one roars past. Road works everywhere, a four-lane highway turning into eight, or is it six? The only thing that saves this city is water: the pure, clean ocean, and a river winding through a dead heart of steel and glass and money. I can't wait to get out of this joint.

'So it was all good, Joe?' she's saying. 'You'll have to tell me all about it. And photos? We can have a slide show.'

I nod, lean my head against the window.

I jolt upright and look around. We're sitting in the car and we're in our driveway.

'You nodded off,' Mum says. 'We're home.' She's smiling full on. 'I was just wondering,' she says. 'Looking at you while you were asleep ... wondering where all the years have gone.'

Gone gangbusters, I think. Nineteen going on twenty, intrepid bloody traveller, globe-trotting Joe. Who made Charlie pregnant and then she lost it and I don't even know what to feel.

'I could sure use a shower,' I say.



So I phoned her and told her I was back and all she said was *it's better not to see each other*. And so I started kind of yelling at her, I don't know what the fuck got into me, and she hung up. Sent me a text straight away: *dont call me again ever*. I mean, how can she say that? I don't know how it happened or what happened but it must've been pretty awful and sad and all I wanna do is see her, talk to her. I said I'd use a condom but she said no, it was fine, she was on the pill, and I believed her, why wouldn't I? And it's not like I'm in control

here, it's not like I've had sex with millions of girls. Only one to be exact, before Charlie, and it wasn't all that great, we were both kind of drunk, and I remember thinking next day, OK, it's done now, no big deal. But Charlie, she was different. Danced like a crazy thing but really smart and warm. She made me feel good just holding her, not being in a hurry. And talking. And when I told her I was going travelling for a couple of months, that was all OK too. We said we'd stay in touch and we did, and I even sent a postcard of the catacombs in Paris, hoping she'd think that was neat.

She lost a baby. That's the only thing I know for sure.

It's really windy at the beach today so there's no one here except surfers on those big booming waves, sleek in their black wetsuits. I could never do that, out so far, just you and those waves, you'd have to be kind of crazy. Man against the elements, hey? I'm not that brave.

I can't stop thinking about her. How she told me what she wanted and how she asked me what I wanted and that felt good too, really good, it was exciting just telling her. The words. But she cared as well. I mean, it didn't feel all mechanical, it was like it mattered, just lying together and taking our time. It was her and it was me. Charlie. Joe. And then what would've happened if she hadn't ... lost the baby? One of Zoe's friends had an abortion and it just broke her up, she was never the same again. Would Charlie have done that? At least let me know? All that time, when I'm sitting on trains and going to all those galleries and cathedrals and pubs, maybe she was scared out of her mind. She should've called me and I would've come home.

I could've been a father. And that seems so ... so unreal. I mean, what do you wanna be when you grow up, Joe? A doctor or a vet? Drive a fucking fire truck? I just wanna talk to her, that's all.

The sand's whipping my face now, that stinging feeling I remember. It's the feeling of my childhood, and my dad wrapping me up in a great big towel. I see him every other year when he flies down from Queensland, and a few times I've been there myself. Waterworld and Dreamworld and all that stuff you like when you're a kid. He got married again to a nurse, like Mum, but that didn't last long either.

Mum told me once about her marriage. She said there was no one to blame, it was just a bad mistake.



Meet me at the café, I said to Zoe. Just meet me.

‘She’s not really talking to me either,’ she says. ‘Just a few texts and she says she’s OK but that’s all I know.’

Zoe clasps my hands and hers are as warm as toast and it settles me. We’ve grown up together. We know each other like no one else.

‘You feel gutted, don’t you?’ she says. She lets her hands rest in mine and then takes them away and I want them back.

Our coffee arrives and we both sit back and Zoe points out the leaf on top, so delicate, she says. And have I seen the guy who does 3D animals in the froth? Kittens and crocodiles, you can watch it on YouTube. And now she’s going to TAFE to study fashion design and how fashion’s really art. She tells me there’s this really cool guy who makes dresses shaped like a teardrop, so beautiful it made her cry. She’s got these amazing violet-coloured eyes, Zoe has, and all the guys fall for her but we’ve never felt like that about each other. Then I tell her how I might not go back to uni. She stops drinking her coffee and says, ‘You’re not going all downhill, are you? Over Charlie? You’re clever, Joe, don’t waste your brains working in that bottle shop.’

‘That bottle shop paid for my trip,’ I say, and then I hear what else she’s telling me. ‘And *you’re* clever too,’ I say. ‘Just cos you don’t go to uni.’

‘Yeah, that’s what Mum reckons. Only she says it so much, it drives me crazy.’

So then I tell her it’s not just Charlie and it’s hard just saying her name. It’s kind of other stuff as well, like I didn’t do that great at uni and how philosophy’s fun and challenging and all but it’s not gunna do much in the world. Except maybe help people think rationally, you know, like that’s ever gunna happen in this place, is it? And then I tell her about Florence, how I went inside a cathedral, not one of

the famous ones but there was gold everywhere and huge chandeliers and this priest in a deep purple robe with these really heavy folds. And then I go outside and right there on the doorstep, there's this beggar with his bowl and he's all bent over and his hands are gnarled and his face looks like he's dead inside.

'So what do I do, talk Socrates with him? A bunch of Jean-Paul Sartre?'

'So what *did* you do?'

'Gave him some money. Which doesn't help, either.'

Zoe puts her hand on mine again. 'Just give it some time,' she says. 'You don't have to solve the world's problems when you're nineteen years old.'

'You're sounding very philosophical,' I say, and she gives me the finger.

I'm feeling better, sitting in the sun with Zoe, and the coffee's as good as she said it would be. The place belongs to one of her friends so she's trying to support it, and they don't sell baby fucking chinos. The sun's shining on her hair now, it's gold and kind of fluffy and there are trees full of leaves behind her, she's a painting in a frame. Maybe it would be easier if I liked her, sexually I mean, but I just don't go for her in that way. You either do or you don't, I guess.

'You could go round and see her,' she says. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

I try to picture it.

'She could slam the door in my face. Scream at me.'

'And would that be any worse than now?'



I don't phone. To let Charlie know I'm coming. She might not be home or someone else might be there, but I'm already seeing myself with my foot inside the door saying I won't leave until she talks to me. I never thought of going round and now I'm thinking maybe I didn't really want to see her after all, deep down, but I'm still walking

and it's not too hot today, a bit of a let off after days and days of steaming heat. It's like the summers go on forever, start in October and end in September. I check my phone, nine o'clock, and I suddenly remember: she's got lectures at eight in the morning. How can you do that, I said, and she told me it was easy. Because she loves maths. I don't get it, never got it at school, but she told me how maths is beautiful, it has purity, it's almost cold, like a statue. And I'm lying in her arms, we've just had sex at her friend's place and I remember it, can't stop remembering how kind of wild she was and so loud at the end and it excited me again, and then she starts talking about maths and statues and she's blowing my mind, she's so damned smart. She's the first person in her family to go to uni and they think she's kind of weird and her dad keeps saying all you need to do is add up and stuff, what's the big deal? Are you the first person too, Joe, she said, and I told her how my mum has a nursing degree. Not your dad, then, she said, and so I told her that stuff too but how I don't really miss him because you can't miss something that you don't really know. She didn't say anything cos she knew there was nothing to say and she put her arms around me, with her white spiky hair all damp with sweat and she doesn't wear any stuff on her face, she's just pure. But not cold, she wasn't cold, ever.

She might be sitting in a lecture room right now, paying attention. Not giving a shit about me.

I nearly get run over by these crazy cyclists with their arses way up in the air, and joggers too, they're everywhere. And people with dogs, people on bikes just for fun. A mum with a pusher and a little kid jumping up and down next to her, bursting with life. Sunny Perth. Fresh air, people running, pedalling, jumping. All the beaches. That guy in my English tute, he said he blamed the sun, how there's too much of it in *Or-stralia, hence people cultivate the life of the body instead of the inner life*. What a wanker, I mean who says *hence* when they're at home?

I check my phone again and it's ten minutes since the last time and the sun's getting hot on my back. More people on bikes, as swift

as birds, darting and weaving. Maybe I should get on a bike, ride around Australia. Ride around the world. There was some guy on TV, some writer, who said he just walked all the time, all day, every day, for miles and miles. He said that walking was a way of finding yourself, who you really were, unplugged from a GPS, an iPod. That walking was a fight against corporate control. So maybe riding a bike would be kind of the same, you'd be using technology, sure, but you wouldn't have to be plugged in, it'd be just you and the road and the great outdoors. Maybe Karl would be into that, I could ask him.

*Self*, that was the guy's name. *Will Self*. Which is a neat kind of name for a writer.

So I'm outside her house now and all I can do is stop and stare, it's so ugly. That yellow brick that looks like limestone but isn't, and that bloody fake lawn. Don't they know about the toxins? From recycled rubber? But I'm walking up the path to the front door and my heart's beating fast now and I pull myself up straight. Knock four times. Trying not to be too loud. I wait. Hear footsteps inside and the door opens and it's Charlie peeping out and she's as beautiful as ever, with that spiky white hair and the biggest smoky grey eyes. We don't say a word just stand there staring at each other and then she opens the door and steps aside to let me come in. I feel my heart still racing and I'm taking deep breaths and my hands are bunched up tight. She looks ... she looks like nothing's different.

'I said not to,' she says.

'Well, I'm here now.'

I want to take her in my arms and just hold her but I know that'll make it worse. Then she nods to follow her. Into her room. She closes the door and there's nowhere to sit except on her bed. She sits down and I sit down next to her, not too close, and everything feels weird, it feels like we're in a play or something. But I make a start, I want to make a start.

'I wanted to see how you were ... are,' I say.

'I'm fine.' She's looking at me dead straight and her face is almost angry. 'OK?' she says. 'End of story.'

I don't really know what to do with this tangled-up stuff. Her hostility. But I tell her I feel bad. For what happened to her. And how I don't understand, how she said she was on the pill. And I can hear it in my voice, accusing her, and are you saying I'm a liar, she says. Well she was definitely taking it, for six whole months and she's getting really mad and I think she might scream at me. But then she stops. She looks at me all hard and kind of steely.

'I got really sick for a few days and I was throwing up all over the place. And so the pill didn't work, did it?'

Her eyes are as grey as winter.

'I would have come home if you'd told me,' I say.

'That's why I didn't.'

I'm just not getting it, I don't get her at all.

'It was my baby too, Charlie,' I say. 'We could have ... I would have helped you if you wanted me to.'

'Well, I'm glad you think it was *your* baby,' she says.

Her voice is so cold now it's hurting and I've got nothing to hang onto.

'Why wouldn't I, Charlie,' I say, 'what are you talking about?'

'Haven't you heard? What people say about me?'

I don't say a word.

'Like, I'm a slut,' she says. She's looking at me real close, almost daring me to speak. But then her face kind of softens and it's a heart, her face, so tiny, so pale. 'There was only you, Joe,' she says quietly. 'When we were sleeping together. I would never have done that to you.'

It's like this great big world of other people is going on around me, without me, how I don't know a goddamn thing, and she's sitting there in front of me and I don't know her either.

'It wasn't bad,' she says calmly. Out of the blue. 'I was only seven weeks and there wasn't much blood ... and I wouldn't have kept it anyway.'

She doesn't use the word.

There's a loud knock on the door, and a loud voice.



‘Charlotte? If you want that lift you’d better get a move on. I’ll be in the car.’

We wait for the footsteps to disappear. Charlie tells me I can go out the back if I want, her brother’s at home but he’s asleep in his room, he’s always asleep. So I get up, turn at the door for one last look.

‘I’ll call you, OK?’ I say.

She shrugs. ‘Whatever.’

I open the door, look around for my escape.

You think you know someone, holding them in your arms and talking. And then you find you don’t know them at all. And it freaks you out. Not knowing them.

I walk away in a hurry and don’t look back, even though I want to. And then I remember the picture. That postcard of the catacombs. I wish I’d never sent it.



I’m clearing the dishes from breakfast when there’s a knock on the door, and then a bright kind of girly voice calling down the hallway. It’s Frieda, says Mum, remember her little boy? I won’t believe how much he’s grown, apparently. Frieda comes in carrying him on her hip and he’s naked, all plump and white, a jumpy fat little slug.

Mum holds out her arms but the kid hides his face in Frieda’s chest. So bloody hot, she says, hope you don’t mind him in the nuddie, he’s toilet trained, and Mum’s laughing and saying, *do I look that old?* And I’m watching the two of them talking and laughing and all the time the kid’s hiding. Then Mum starts on about me, here’s Joe, she says to Frieda. Talk about stating the bleeding obvious. Just back from Europe, remember? And then she’s on about the pancakes I made for breakfast, so yummy, you wouldn’t find better in a café. Here is my son: Exhibit A. And then the kid swivels round and he sees me, looks me up and down and then lets out this huge great scream, *don’t let the giant get me.* And he’s hiding away, then looking again, hiding again. Mum brushes back his hair that’s all gold and

curly and damp with sweat and tells him I'm a very friendly giant who looks after little boys.

Joe the friendly giant. Someone should write a book.

Now Mum's scrambling in a cupboard and next thing you know he's a drummer, this naked little kid sitting on the floor and banging a saucepan with a wooden spoon. *Your favourite toy as a child, Joe*, says Mum. Telling you things you can't remember, it's like your identity doesn't belong to you. She bends down in front of the kid and he gives her an almighty whack on the face with his spoon. Mum's laughing but Frieda's upset, tells the kid to say sorry. Liam. That's his name. Sorry, he says, in this tiny little voice and I walk to the sink and turn my back cos I'm trying not to cry.

She said it like it didn't even matter. Charlie.



Yesterday down at the beach I nearly said something to Karl but in the end I didn't. He thought I looked a bit down but I didn't want to say. He's a really strong swimmer, really pounds through the waves, and he does weights and all, so I tell him about my idea. Cycling round Australia. He said sure, why not, maybe next summer. He's not a great talker, Karl. He saves up his words for when they matter. Like when we were at this party and this guy he was seeing got stuck into him, called him all sorts of names and said some pretty private stuff in front of everyone, everyone staring. But Karl just stood up straight and said *thanks for being a really good friend, the kind that stabs you in the front*. I told him later that was really cool.

I've been up since six o'clock, an early morning swim. Part of my new self-improvement plan, ha ha. There's only a few surfers and a bunch of old guys who swim every morning, all through the year, it doesn't matter how cold it is. They belong to some old guys club, I saw it in the local paper, how they've been coming here for thirty years or something. I reckon that's neat, to know people all that time and maybe being old wouldn't be so bad. Maybe you've left a lot of

useless stuff behind you. Like, just get in that water and enjoy every moment. Just feel glad to be alive.

And then my mobile rings and it's Karl, and he's telling me he didn't make that up, you know, the line about a good friend stabbing you in the front. Someone else said it first, he says, it was Oscar Wilde, but he was trying to impress everyone and he just wanted me to know. And I think that's kind of nice, telling me. It's ethical. So I tell him that's OK, it doesn't matter anyway, because someone else always says things first.

That discussion in my philosophy tute. *Originality, authenticity, sincerity*, trying to understand the difference. It really did my head in.



I should have gone to The Greens meeting but they emailed another bloody massive agenda. Last time I went, before Europe, before a whole lot of other stuff, it took forever just to get through *Apologies*. Then I hear this knock on the door. Mum's at work so I know I have to answer and I'm thinking it's one of those god-botherers, the ones who bring their kids along. I really hate that, the little boys in ties for Christ's sake, or the little girls in frilly white dresses. I mean, what fucking chance do they have? And there's knocking again and OK, OK, I'm going down the hallway, ready to tell them I don't need to be saved or maybe I can use Karl's line, that I'm a Satanist with cannibalistic tendencies. I open the door and it's her: Charlie. I stop myself from saying what are you doing here cos she's got that look on her face again. Steely.

'So, are you gunna ask me in?' she says.

She's in jeans and a black T-shirt and her arms are SO bare and golden brown and she knocks me out again. So I stand aside and let her pass, watch her watching me.

'You said you'd call me,' she says. All defiant.

'And you said *whatever*.'

Her face kind of puzzles up.

‘I didn’t know what else to say.’

And so I take her in my arms and hold her against me, my face against hers. All I know is I’ve never felt like this before, this girl in my arms who just *fits*.

‘We messed up, didn’t we?’ she says.

I take her hand, lead her into my room and we sit on my bed. Just sit.

‘I was scared,’ she says, and she’s looking at me closely now. ‘I was scared you’d think I tricked you. I should have trusted you.’ She takes my hand, just holds it softly. ‘I take the pill because I know I want to have sex,’ she says. ‘That’s not being a slut, that’s being sensible.’

I tell her she doesn’t have to defend herself to me and she tells me she isn’t, that she just wants me to know who she is. And I can see it now, real clearly: that I’m only just getting started.

‘So *was* it bad?’ I say, and she shakes her head.

‘It happened so quick and there wasn’t any pain, really.’ She’s still holding my hand. ‘I didn’t want to keep it,’ she says. ‘The baby.’

‘And I wouldn’t ... it would have been your choice,’ I say.

I put my hand over hers. We fit.

‘It *did* make me feel sad,’ she says, ‘but most of all it made me angry, my body stuffing up like that.’ She looks at me closely again, with those dark grey eyes that undo me. ‘But just so you know,’ she says, ‘I don’t want you to be full of pity and hey, Charlie, how awful and all that. I don’t want what happened to ... define us.’

‘Us,’ I say.

She puts her hand on the back of my neck, pulls me towards her. Kisses me softly, so softly, and we fall back on the bed and lie together in each other’s arms and keep very still. And it’s good, the stillness. The waiting. When I know there’s so much to wait for.



So Mum wants to know what I’m doing, packing stuff into the esky at this hour of the morning. I tell her I’m going on a picnic. With Karl?

she says, tilting her head to the side like she always does when she wants to ask but kind of knows she shouldn't. I tell her it's no one she knows, it's someone called Charlie, and I feel my face going red.

'Her real name's Charlotte,' I say, and I'm feeling even redder. So I say how it's not her real name but her legal name and there's a philosophical difference. Mum's smiling away now and would Charlie like to come to dinner sometime, she says. She's got that look in her eyes like I know she's happy for me, how she's always saying she just wants me to be happy, and so before I know it these words come stumbling out.

'Do you ever miss him?' I say.

'Who?'

'My dad.'

She looks startled.

'Never,' she says. 'Why are you asking me?'

And I want to say it's your inner life, tell me about your inner life, but I think she might just laugh and tell me all about her kidneys and intestines and all the nurse's stuff. So I shrug and say it's just that I've never asked her before. Her face goes all soft and she walks over to me and wraps her arms around me, gives me a gentle hug but doesn't let me go. And I rest for a moment in her warmth, feeling safe, the way I've always felt with Mum.

So maybe I *will* ask Charlie to dinner even though I'm not too sure she's the kind of girl you ask to meet your mum.

But then again, maybe she's not any kind of girl. Maybe she's Charlie.

Michelle Michau-Crawford lives in Perth. In 2013 her short story 'Leaving Elvis' won the ABR Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize. She is currently working on a collection of linked short stories.

## Happy Haven Holiday Park

### Michelle Michau-Crawford

It is time to get moving again. She's stagnating. Happy Haven Holiday Park, this decrepit rundown excuse for a retreat by the sea in the industrialised outskirts of Perth, certainly hasn't been much of a haven. Two years, and she is still under-employed and mostly invisible. She's weary of sitting up in bed night after night, attempting to close out the mistakes of her past, trying to visualise warm and fuzzy images inspired by the sound of the waves lapping faintly on the beach several hundred metres from her van. Where to go next, though? She'd got it so wrong last time—she'd relaxed and allowed herself to think she had found a place to belong.

She's mentally redrafting a letter of response to last week's letter, the second Karl has sent her since she'd shot through and made that ridiculous gesture. No apology, but an olive branch at the least. *Dear Karl, I am pleased to hear that your life is going so well. Yes, we did share some good times. I'm sorry I won't be able to make the trip north to visit you both this year, I am actually about to head to Europe.* Yes, she'll head overseas. She'll get a working visa for Dublin, or London, somewhere she can blend in and exist without drawing too much attention to herself. Come to

think of it, maybe she can get citizenship as Gran had been born somewhere over there.

Opening her eyes for just a moment, Louise thinks that at last, now that she's decided to leave, she can feel it—the ocean—soothing her. Realising it is just one of the newer park residents tapping rhythmically on the metal side of the van, she grows annoyed at being jolted from her decisive moment.

'Don't be afraid,' he says.

Pulling the oversized t-shirt she wears to bed over her thighs, she wiggles off the bed and stumbles in the half-light towards the window, grabs her manky cardigan off the back of the chair and drapes it over her shoulders. Winding the window open she peers through the gap between the flyscreen and half-wound-out window and tells The Whisperer that she cannot help him, that she is alone. He should go to the caravan park office and ring the emergency bell if he has a problem. He ignores her. They *need* to go to hospital. They don't want to drag her out in the night. But they have no family, no friends. They are new here. Could she just watch their kid till they get back? A big ask but he is desperate and his wife won't leave until something has been organised. And to top it off, the car won't start.

'Please.' Then come the tears. Rolling down his face. 'We need you.'

The Whisperer leads her across the caravan park, past the toilet block and along the crumbling bluestone and asphalt path to the section this month's caretaker reserves for transients. He talks quietly the whole time with one of those one-tone modulated voices adopted by yoga teachers and meditation facilitators. She's straining to hear. They'd seen her, she thinks he says—on the beach just the other day—untangling a seagull caught in fishing line. She shows him the sore and festering fingers of her left hand, pecked repeatedly as she'd struggled to free the seagull. Though she doesn't say so, she's seen them about the park in recent weeks. She aims not to absorb too much of what goes on around her, tries not to let it get in. But the

fluorescent pinks and oranges of his head wraps are as impossible to ignore as the happy family portrait the three, soon to be four, present.

She got into her car about two years back and removed the rear-view mirror. One hard yank was all that was required to separate it from the roof where it had hung precariously from one loose screw. Leaving the mirror on top of the letterbox at the start of the three kilometre red dirt driveway, she'd imagined Karl's perplexed look when he found it. Pushing the accelerator right to the floor on the corrugated gravel road, she'd laughed out loud as the car slid about and she momentarily lost control of the vehicle. By the time she reached the highway and turned south she was pissed off with herself for her stupidity. The side mirrors were covered in a thick coating of red dust. By then she'd gone too far and she really couldn't look back.

The aerial had snapped off months earlier so she'd travelled without any music on the car stereo, refusing to rest until the fatigue won. Once or twice leading up to those moments she imagined herself taking one hand off the wheel, veering into the path of an oncoming road train, being done with it once and for all. A couple of times she stopped for a bit and pulled off the road, tried without success to sleep in a truck bay.

Body and brain-achingly tired for the last one hundred or so k's before hitting Geraldton, she drove with all the windows down so that the searingly hot wind blasted her senses. Sitting in the parked vehicle at an automated car wash on the fringes of town, she watched the brushes work through the layers of pindan red from her windscreen, jumping in her seat as the high-pressure jets of water switched on and sloughed through the pink-stained soapy froth. She thought then of that old Colgate ad on the telly when she was a kid. The teacher dips a stick of chalk into a glass of blue water, pulls it out and snaps the chalk in two. What was it that she'd said? *The plaque, it gets in*. Something like that. After leaving the car wash she'd pulled in to the first motel she saw. In her homogeneous dank little room



with dead-bolted window and a view of the skip bins, she'd draped a towel over the rust-flecked bathroom mirror and turned the shower on as hot as she could bear. Then she'd scrubbed and sloughed at her own pindan ingrained plaque layers.

After an adequate and unmemorable meal in the motel restaurant she climbed in to the sagging motel bed. Pushing the highlights of the last slanging match she'd had with Karl out of her mind, she allowed herself to think of Leslie Mulligan, decided that the next morning she'd drive down and see if his boat was moored at the fishing harbour. Plotting the coincidental encounter—*Gosh, it has been ... what, at least ten years?*—imagining the delight in his voice as he recounted the moment he'd first spotted her there, casually meandering among the fishing boats, she'd succumbed to sleep.

The child sleeps on a folded down table converted into a bed. Louise thinks of Leslie. He'd told her of sleeping on a table-bed in the same park when he'd come here as a small child. Maybe it was the same van? As far as she recalled, the Mulligans had never had their own van, hiring instead the same caravan with a canvas annexe each year. The sheets never stayed on the vinyl mattresses and into the night Leslie used to wake sweating and tangled in the sheets. As he'd grown older and the siblings kept appearing, he'd moved in to the annexe and slept on an air mattress that went flat each and every night.

The little girl has a thick, luxurious mass of dark hair fanned out behind her head. Spreadeagled, she is draped in a faded blanket. Her skinny little arm sticks out and in one hand she clutches a ratty flannel elephant. Louise allows herself to process this detail before looking around the shabby but immaculate caravan for somewhere to sit and absorb the events of the past five minutes.

Seated on the edge of the other bed, she focuses on breathing, counting on each inhalation and ensuring she exhales for approximately the same time. In and out, in and out, don't think, don't feel, don't think, don't feel. Two minutes before, she'd handed him the

keys, whispered the quirks of the car—*no rear-vision mirror, no aerial, the doors don't lock, don't worry about that, let them take the wreck if they want it*—his hand on her cheek, then palms together, head bowed. *Thank you. Bless you. Namaste.* All bases covered. The Whisperer must surely have noticed the panic rise to the surface before he removed his hand and Louise stepped up the caravan step, careful to tread lightly and not rock the van and wake the child? His fingers, warm and alive on her face. How long has it been since anyone, other than Gran on her bi-annual trip to see her, has raised a hand in kindness? She recalls the time when, after three interminably long weeks of the primary school Christmas holidays without her best friend to amuse and distract her, she'd nagged Gran to take Granda's patched-up old green ute and drop her at the bottom of Leslie's road. She'd walked up the hill to the Mulligan place. With each step her excitement grew so that by the time Leslie's mum opened the door she was beside herself and burst into tears when Mrs M reached down and hugged her. *We've all missed you, munchkin.*

A small tatty poster stuck on the wall of the caravan. A perplexed looking chimp drops bananas in the toilet, a bubble from his mouth, *what happened?* Next to it a photo, slightly blurry, a snapshot of a laughing toddler on her dad's shoulders at the beach. The mother turns towards the child, a yellow kickboard in her hand. Rosie had a kickboard just like it. She'd spent hours lying on her tummy in the blue plastic, metal-framed wading pool on the verandah, arms outstretched, kicking her little legs while Louise watched from the nylon-webbed deckchair beside her. *Look at me, Loulie, watch me swimming.* Ready for the often-promised trip to the ocean.

The Whisperer's child sleeps messily and noisily. Occasionally she calls out garbled words. Louise tries not to intrude on the private world of the dreaming child. In the hour or so that she has been here she has learned to breathe without counting. The child has thrown her blanket off, curled herself in a foetal ball and unrolled onto her back. Lulled by the child's rhythmic breathing, Louise wonders how the little girl will react when she wakes and sees a strange lady sitting

on her mother and father's bed. Imagining the fear on the child's face, she forces the image from her mind, and stares instead at the orange floral cafe curtains over the tiny kitchenette. Orange daisies. In that last week there'd been daisies around the house in the Kimberley, tough bush daisies. Karl had surprised them, coming back from a trip to Broome with a crate full of hardy plants. *Look girls, a garden, our own forest!* They'd rushed straight outside at Rosie's insistence and planted them immediately. Karl sat on the verandah, watching. Later, as they checked Rosie before going to bed themselves, he'd told Louise that he'd sorted things while in Broome. They had an extra week with Rosie. On the way out of there she'd pulled the daisies out, upturning them so that their roots wilted under the force of the forty-two degrees Celsius sun.

By morning trying to find Leslie had seemed a bad idea. She'd decided to continue, as planned, and surprise her Gran. She'd calculated that if she didn't stop too often she'd be there by nightfall. But instead, after following a relatively short five or six hour drive, she'd checked in to the caravan park and was directed to an onsite van with a metal annexe stained with bore water. As she'd signed her name on the register she'd had a sense of déjà vu, but at that point wasn't sure why. She'd told the feral guy with the torn and faded happy pants, and the smell of wet mouldy wool emanating from his body, that she'd stay a week. After he'd shown her the van that was to become her temporary home, he'd run through the rules of the park: *no parties, no dirty washing to be left soaking in the ablution block sinks, empty your bins regularly into the correct receptacle ...* Later, walking back past the amateur fishermen and women, stepping over their discarded blowfish, washed up rubbish and beer bottles on the beach, she'd remembered the souvenir t-shirt that Mrs M had given her after one of their annual holidays. She'd forgotten that Happy Haven Holiday Park was the place that the Mulligans used to visit in summer before they took to visiting the more appealing beach

towns in the south-west of the state. She'd heard so many stories about the caravan park. Crossing the neglected playground with its rusting monkey bars and dangerously corroded slide, she'd paused as she reached the onsite family cabins and realised that despite never having been here, she felt as though she somehow knew the basic layout.

After that first week passed she figured she'd stay *just another*, then one more. Before she realised it, weeks had passed into a year. Then two years and somehow she'd managed to exist without forming attachments. At some point she'd acknowledged to herself that she had never actually intended going back home that day to see her grandmother. Maybe this had been where she was heading all along.

There is a message scribbled in marker on the fridge door. *There is no sense*. Louise contemplates it as she sits perched on the edge of The Whisperer's bed, resisting her need to leave the caravan and walk the hundred or so metres to the toilet block. She watches the sleeping child and attempts to see her without going back inside her own head. The Whisperer had pulled her close to him. *Just watch her until we get back* before running off to be at his wife's side.

She'd been watching Rosie that day. Karl wasn't there. It had taken over an hour for him to arrive after she'd called him on the two-way radio. He'd screamed at her over the radio. *Why the fuck did you call them? It was not your place!* It wasn't the time or place to try and explain then, that she was trying to do the right thing, that she had wanted to break down the barrier and thank Ruth for allowing them the extra time with Rosie. How was she supposed to have known that he was pretending to have the dates confused? The time or place to try and explain, to make sense of the situation, didn't come until much later, when she'd been here almost twelve months and sent him that first letter.

After his ex-wife and the police officers had left with distraught Rosie, Karl hadn't run to Louise's side to seek or offer comfort. He'd

been furious, dangerously so. Della had copped a Blundstone boot in the guts simply for being there. Running to stand between him and the cowering bitch, Louise challenged him to kick her too, if it would make him feel better. She'd held her arms out to him then. But instead of accepting her embrace he'd pulled away. *She is not yours. Don't interfere in our lives!* Grabbing the keys off the table by the back door, he'd stormed out.

The Whisperer's child kicks off her blanket and wriggles as though her legs are trying to run her off to the faraway places of her imagination. She scrunches her nose as her unruly dark hair tickles her and laughs out loud a bellowing hearty laugh of someone older than the five or so years that Louise guesses her to be. Resisting the urge to reach forward and wipe the hair from the face, to scoop up the child and draw her close and inhale, Louise stands and stretches from side to side.

They were out the back by the verandah, filling the paddle pool. Rosie, remembering her yellow kickboard back in the house, came running back to her to tell her she was going inside to get it. Pulling her squirming little body close, Louise had inhaled deeply and sung: *sugar and spice, all things nice*. Rosie pulled away. She was on a mission. No time for indulging Louise. She ran in, and then back out. *Loulie, Loulie. There's my mummy and some mans at the front door.*

The Whisperer's child stirs, props herself on her elbows, and fixes Louise with a disconcerting gaze. She yawns and opens the conversation with a question. 'Do you like peanut butter?'

Standing by the door that day, holding it open, aware that in Karl's bitter and twisted mind she had betrayed him, she'd reached to Rosie and gently squeezed her arm. She'd thought then of her own baby, signed to someone else's care ten years earlier. Did she, or would she ever, know Louise even existed?

The Whisperer's child wants more stories. *My daddy tells me lots of stories*. Louise opens the cereal box and pours a bowl of Weeties.

She finds milk, sugar, spoon and her own voice, and begins a story. A stilted and stolen story. One of Leslie's stories. An awkward wonky story of the *good old days, the better days, the days when life was drifty and dreamy*. Days when kids would help Dad pack the car up for the annual summer migration, panicked calls from the back seat when they set off: *Didja remember my lilo, my new bucket and spade*, and from the front, Mrs M, *my magazines?* The good old days, the better days, the days of tinned Spam and beetroot on white bread for lunch. Cricket on the radio. Beer (for Dad) and shandy (for Mum). Half tipsy Mum'd be seated in her new Christmas terry towelling shortsuit on a striped deckchair. Dad making a production of meal preparation in his *Kiss the Cook* Christmas barbecue apron while the kids raced around in the near dark, pulling old ladies' undies off the line and hoisting them up the flagpole. She points, then, to the photo of the family, the little girl with the kickboard. She starts to tell of the fun they'd had, her and Rosie, planning a beach trip for the next time Rosie came to stay.

'I was her nanny,' she says. 'But I wanted more ...'

And because she expects that she will never reveal herself to an adult with the story that she keeps locked inside, she tells another story, of a young woman, barely more than a child herself, gifting her own baby girl to a family who could give her all the kickboards, beach trips and peanut butter she'd ever desire. The Whisperer's child listens solemnly, then climbs into Louise's lap and rests her head against her chest.

'To a Queen and King?'

'Something like that.' Louise breathes deeply and allows herself to feel. 'I'm going away soon,' she adds quietly as the child reaches up and gently twirls her nose ring. 'On a plane, across the sea, to begin my life.'





HISTORIES

## Beginnings: 1956–1965

### John Barnes

What's in a name? When the English Association of New South Wales decided in 1939 to publish a journal of its own, it chose the name *Southerly* 'to suggest its Australian character' and 'its relations to England' [Stuart Lee, in Bennett, *Cross Currents*, 163]. When *Westerly* appeared in 1956 its name, rather like a flag proclaiming the State of Origin, had the effect of placing the new journal in relation to Australia, not England. According to Robert Smith, the founding editor, the title was not intended to denote 'regional identity' but 'a fresh breeze' blowing aside 'commercial imperatives and moribund conventions' [*Westerly* 2006, 10]. However, to Australian readers of the new journal the title signified that the 'fresh breeze' was blowing *from* the West.

Before *Southerly* and *Meanjin* (established in 1940), literary magazines had seldom flourished for very long, some not lasting beyond the first hopeful issue. *Westerly* was one of three new journals, established in the mid-fifties, which proved to be stayers. In 1954 the *Realist Writer*, the bulletin of the Realist Writers Group in Melbourne, was transformed into a national journal, *Overland*, under the editorship of Stephen Murray-Smith. In 1956 the Australian



Association for Cultural Freedom began publishing *Quadrant*, with James McAuley as editor. Unlike these two new journals, *Westerly* was not the creation of a group with a specific political agenda—or artistic credo, for that matter. Remarkably, it was a student initiative, as its predecessor had been. The Arts Union of the University of Western Australia (then the only university in the state) published *The Winthrop Review* from 1953 to 1955, and remained the publisher of *Westerly* until 1963.

Even more remarkable is the fact that—unlike the other journals mentioned above—*Westerly* began without the editorial continuity and support that one thinks of as essential in establishing a new journal. Guy Howarth edited *Southerly* for fifteen years; Clem Christesen edited *Meanjin* for 34 years; Murray-Smith had been editor of *Overland* for 34 years at the time of his death; and McAuley gave up *Quadrant* after seven years. These editors, who already had public profiles when they began, had time to seek out donors and to build up networks of advisors and contacts, attract contributions from major cultural figures, plan ahead and shape their publications according to their individual vision. The editors of *Westerly*, however, during the years that it was published by the Arts Union, were university undergraduates, who stayed only one or two years and worked with tiny annual budgets. That alone made it difficult to see any long-term future for the journal except as a local student production, no matter how much promise individual issues might show. Yet, most remarkably of all, within seven years it was to become a literary quarterly with a national status.

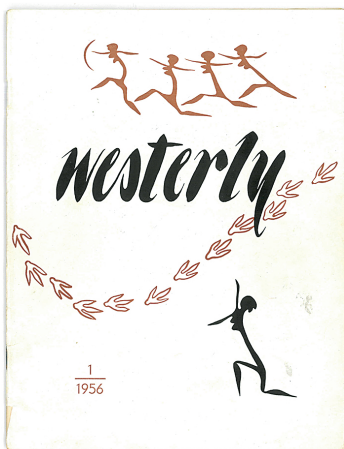
The creation of *Westerly* seems to have come about almost by accident. When R. W. Smith was appointed by the Arts Union to edit *The Winthrop Review* in 1956, there was no plan to change the title or the nature of the publication. However, the taste and temperament of an editor gives a publication a distinctive flavour; and usually a change of editor means a shift, however subtle, in emphasis and direction, and often an unmistakable visual makeover. As he explained fifty years later, Smith was resolved to make the publication ‘more visually

interesting and topically varied'. This led to conflict with 'the private operator responsible for having it printed', whose business was selling advertising space. Presumably anxious to preserve this business, the man (whom Smith does not name) took the extraordinary step of registering the title in his own name at the Companies Office. Smith and his helpers ended the inhibiting business arrangement, which had denied 'the editorial right to determine the contents of each issue, because of potential offence to advertisers', chose a new title, and set about raising the needed advertising revenue themselves. And so *The Winthrop Review* disappeared and *Westerly* appeared.

*The Winthrop Review* had aimed to publish 'the best that is thought and said in the Faculty of Arts'—a modest version of Matthew Arnold's famous formulation—but had been prepared to include writing from outside that was 'of sufficiently high standard'. *Westerly*, in a much more attractive format, did not announce itself with any flourish as breaking with the past. The notice to contributors did, however, quietly introduce a new approach, welcoming material from outside the campus and declaring that the journal was 'always willing to open its columns to constructive comment'. Having said that 'controversy is not invited for its own sake'—a remark which may have been intended to reassure university authorities who

always worry about the good name of the institution—the editor made it clear that he wanted to encourage 'a wide range of opinion and diversity of topics'.

Initially, then, *Westerly* aimed to be a journal of ideas. The six issues which Smith edited had articles on topics as diverse as 'Populate and Perish: The Problem of the North', 'Australia and Asia', 'An Anthropologist at Home', 'Jewish Literature in Australia', 'New



Elements in Australian Drama', 'Goldfields Ballads', and 'Ibsen and Shaw'. Smith's editorials set the tone: clearly and energetically written, they engaged with contemporary issues, both local and general. From this perspective it is notable that in his first editorial he pointed to 'the unhappy condition of Australia's aboriginal [sic] people', and that in the second year he published an article by D. W. McLeod, 'Aboriginal Enterprise in the Pilbarra' (2:1957). Another sign of the early interest in the experience of indigenous people was a short story, 'A Place in the Mob', written by an established local non-indigenous author, Donald R. Stuart, which appeared in the second number.

After the first year the editor reported with satisfaction that contributions were coming in from all over Australia, circulation was rising, and the journal had readers 'from Hall's Creek to Hobart' (1:1957). Although a 'little magazine', averaging in size about 40 pages and published only three times a year, it was soon beginning to be spoken of along with the literary quarterlies of the eastern states. Ken Inglis's review in the *Melbourne Age* (31 May 1958), which hailed *Westerly* as 'the most successful student publication since Melbourne's *Present Opinion* disappeared about ten years ago', is indicative of the impression which the new journal made outside W. A. Taking over in 1958 the second editor, Warwick Wilson, found it appropriate to congratulate his predecessor on having achieved a 'high literary, critical and artistic standard', which 'has provoked the respect and admiration of our readers, both here and in the Eastern States'. With copies of *Westerly* appearing on the shelves of bookshops and libraries and on the coffee tables of the literati throughout Australia, Smith had struck a blow against 'the tyranny of distance' as it manifested itself in a sense of cultural isolation.

In the beginning the strength of the journal was in articles and reviews rather than creative writing, but that gradually changed. The shift in emphasis from discussion of current affairs towards poetry and fiction and literary critical topics does not seem to have been the result of a deliberate change in editorial policy. It may, in part, have

reflected the interests of the editors themselves; but perhaps just as significant was what was happening on the literary scene. In the last number of *The Winthrop Review* (3:1955) an historically interesting note by David Hutchison congratulates his co-editor (and fellow-student) Randolph Stow on the acceptance of his first novel, *A Haunted Land*, by an English publisher. Hutchison, himself already known as a poet and critic, goes on to note that Stow's novel is the eighth by 'a Western Australian author' to be accepted that year. There was now a steady stream of publications by local writers—Kylie Tennant was quoted (*Westerly* 2:1960) as remarking on a disproportionately large number of fine writers in W. A. compared with other States—but it was the youthful Stow's impressive emergence as a novelist and poet that attracted most attention, both locally and interstate. In a *Westerly* review (1:1957) Warwick Wilson coupled *A Haunted Land* with Patrick White's *The Tree of Man*, seeing them as heralding 'the coming of age of Australian literature'. Two years later, by which time Stow had won the Miles Franklin Award for his third novel, Jeana Bradley wrote: 'I feel that we in Western Australia should have a measure of pride in his success' ('The Stamp of Greatness', 1:1959).

Pride in the success of local authors had to be tempered, though, as Warwick Wilson recognized in a thoughtful editorial entitled 'Whither *Westerly*?' (2:1958). To those who saw the journal as 'a product bearing the label "Made in Western Australia"', he declared that when *Westerly* set out 'deliberately to parade West Australiana across its pages' it was not fulfilling its purpose. In his note to contributors the next editor, Bruce Lawson, made it clear that the pages of the journal were open to all, and voiced a hope that would be repeated when the journal became a literary quarterly: 'Original stories, poems and articles on any theme will be welcomed by the editor, especially those from young writers in all States and abroad' (1:1959). An outstanding contribution to this number was a poem, 'Once I rode with Clancy ...', by Dorothy Hewett, who had returned to Perth as a student after ten years. Whether, at 36, she might be regarded as a 'young writer' was open to question, but she was

undeniably West Australian. In the three numbers edited by Bruce Lawson there was more poetry than there had been in previous years, and the standard was certainly higher. Interestingly, of the fifteen poems published that year only two were from a writer outside Perth. In each of the three numbers Dorothy Hewett, who was to be a fairly regular contributor from now on, had one poem, and J. M. S. (John) O'Brien had two; while a third Perth writer, Griffith Watkins, had one in each of two numbers.

The local contribution was less in the short stories that appeared in 1959, but a second Aboriginal story ('Growing Up', 2:1959) by Donald R. Stuart stands out as the best of an undistinguished lot. The previous year the Fellowship of Australian Writers had donated a small prize for the best short story submitted for the second issue of *Westerly*, and none of the entries had been judged worthy. This led to a conscious effort by *Westerly* and the local Fellowship to encourage short story writers, locally and elsewhere. A short story competition with prizes totalling £100 was announced in the second issue of 1959, and the first number for 1960 published the prize-winners. An interesting straw in the wind was that in the section open to students under 25, no first prize was awarded but the second went to Frank Moorhouse, 'a New South Welshman and an external student of Queensland University'. Over the next ten years, five stories by Moorhouse were published in the journal.

In 1960 *Westerly* was edited by Hal Nicholson and Peter Abotomy, with—perhaps surprisingly—Dorothy Hewett in charge of accounts. An editorial entitled 'Intellectual Adolescence?' (2:1960) sounded a familiar note in student publications, deploring local attitudes to culture; in the same number a successful W. A. author, G. M. Glaskin, asked for a local literary prize, 'firstly to keep our writers writing, and secondly to keep them writing about W.A' (Premiers' Prizes were a long way off). Of particular note in the third number was a small extract from a novel in progress—it was to become *Wildcat Falling*—by Colin Johnson, then aged 21. The editors commented that the novel 'would represent probably the first attempt on the

part of an Australian coloured person to set down the inside story of frustration, resentment and bewilderment that is the lot of so many of his people'. By now *Westerly* was clearly committed to creative writing and literary critical topics, and in the third number all the articles were about literature: H. H. Wilson on 'The Status of the Writer in Australia'; Dorothy Hewett on Kylie Tennant; Vincent Buckley on James McAuley; David Bradley on Douglas Stewart; and Dymphna Cusack on 'How I Write'.

The third issue of the following year, in which a high standard of both creative and critical writing was maintained, demonstrated that *Westerly* was beginning to contribute to what we might now call the national conversation about the arts and culture. It contained a critical evaluation of the fiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard by Richard Sadleir, who had taken over the editorship with Alan Fels. He added a note that *Meanjin* would be publishing a commentary on her work by Jack Lindsay, which would 'be interesting, by way of contrast with, or illumination of, the views expressed here'. Sadleir's essay ruffled feathers among local writers, who were not used to having local reputations challenged by local critics.

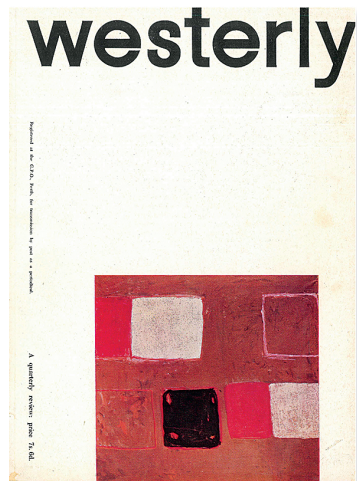
The 1961 editors had begun rather shakily, featuring in their first number an old-fashioned and second-hand article, reprinted from *The Scots Magazine*, on the poet, Will Ogilvie, who had returned to his native Scotland where he was still living after having made a name as a bush balladist in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century. After this lapse, the second and third numbers were all the more impressive. In the second, an editorial with the consciously cheeky and unconsciously sexist heading, '£250 Will Make an Honest Woman of Us—An Appeal to the C.L.F.', reported that a request for a subsidy had been rejected by the Commonwealth Literary Fund. The editors were indignant that one reason given for the rejection was that *Westerly* was an undergraduate magazine. They pointed to the lists of names of contributors, 'which it would be impertinent to class as undergraduate: in this *Westerly* the appearance of Mary Durack, Randolph Stow, Dr. Taft, Peter Cowan, John Meredith ought to give

an indication of the scope and standard which we attempt to attain, on very limited means’.

Those means were indeed limited. Each year the journal received £200–250 from the Arts Union, and the editors raised what revenue they could from advertising. Literary journals are seldom, if ever, profit-making ventures, which is a major reason why so few survive for long without some form of subsidy. By the time that *Westerly* appeared, the idea that governments should support the arts was gaining ground, and both *Southerly* and *Overland* were receiving subsidies from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. *Westerly* needed such a subsidy if the potential that had been shown over the six years of its existence were to be realised. The editors appointed for 1962, J. M. S. O’Brien and Ian Brumby, determined to transform the journal into a literary quarterly that the CLF would find it hard to refuse.

After issuing an indifferent first number of 32 pages in the usual format, the editors (with the assistance of Sally Trethowan, John A. Hay and Eugene Schlusser) produced a number of a scope and quality never achieved before. It combined the second and third numbers and was renumbered as vol. 1 no. 1 of ‘Western Australia’s first Literary Quarterly’. With a colour reproduction of a William Scott painting recently purchased by the Art Gallery of Western Australia on the cover,

128 pages of text and 16 pages of illustrations on art paper, including five colour blocks, it was a lavish production, comparable with anything coming from the Eastern States. The Arts Union was still listed as publisher, but ‘some financial assistance’ had been received from the University Bookshop. The contents, predominantly by local contributors and on local subject matter, ranged over creative writing,



art and architecture, theatre, music, literary criticism and philosophy. The editors did not appear to be exaggerating when they wrote that there was no lack of material. Reviewing the issue in *The Critic* (11 January 1963), Max Harris indulged himself with a slashing attack on an article about W. A. artists by Patrick Hutchings, but concluded by congratulating the editors that ‘despite the ratbaggy of the 128 pages, the fact has been established that “Westerly” can become a worthily national periodical’.

So *Westerly* began, as it were, a second time. The first number for 1963 announced the appointment of J. M. S. O’Brien as permanent editor. The publisher was still the Arts Union and for a couple of years a student editor assisted O’Brien. A large editorial board of academics, writers, and one student representative was named, with a separate management committee headed by the chairman of the University Press. Allan Edwards, Professor of English, was on both, and the English Department informally provided secretarial assistance. By the second number the University Press had become the publisher, and a grant of £800 had been received from the CLF.

On the face of it the future of *Westerly* was bright. It had enthusiastic backing in Perth, where John O’Brien had networked effectively, forming links with writers, artists, and academics. The journal could count on the support of the local Fellowship of Australian Writers, including four leading FAW members—Henrietta Drake-Brockman and Mary Durack (both of whom were on the editorial board), John K. Ewers, and Alexandra Hasluck—who had contributed prose to the memorable 1962 issue which, according to O’Brien, had secured the CLF grant. Whatever the CLF Advisory Board of writers might recommend—and it had previously recommended in favour of *Westerly*—the final decision lay with the leaders of the three major political parties. Paul Hasluck was then a minister in the Menzies government; both he and his wife were writers of note, and the local FAW was inclined to regard him as ‘our man in Canberra’. O’Brien claimed that Hasluck had shown the copy to the Prime Minister, who had been so impressed by an article from Tom Gibbons, ‘Seven



Deadly Dogmas of Modern Art', that he had changed his mind about government support for the journal. Over many years Menzies had publicly expressed his dislike of modernism in art, and O'Brien's reading of what happened was probably accurate. From the perspective of 2014 it is hard to credit that a Prime Minister would personally be so involved in a grant to a literary journal; but in the 1950s Clem Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*, was able to secure an interview with Menzies to discuss the situation of his journal when he was refused a grant. *Westerly* had received a substantial initial grant, and hopes were high that it would receive a regular subsidy of a similar size.

A literary quarterly had been established in W. A. in a surprisingly short time, as a result of the energy and conviction of John O'Brien, who had made the project his own. After a false start some years before in Agricultural Economics and a life of varied occupations, he returned to UWA to study English at the end of the 1950s as a mature age student. Between 1958 and 1962 he appeared often in *Westerly* as a poet—his poem 'The Scholar' had won the F. W. Simpson prize in 1958 and had been featured in *Westerly* 3:1959. An ebullient personality, he was at the centre of a lively student group in the Student Literary Society, which in 1960 started *The Critic*, a monthly devoted to reviews of the arts and some books, where few punches were pulled.

Compared with *The Critic*, the pages of which fairly crackled with electricity generated by critical exchanges, the new literary quarterly in its first year was inclined towards staid scholarship with copious illustrations, including colour blocks, and line drawings. As editor John O'Brien had brought to the journal a greater interest in art and design than any of his predecessors; and the first four numbers reflected his tastes and idiosyncrasies. Probably few readers would have expected a new literary quarterly from Perth to carry articles on 'Calf-Bearers and Ram-Bearers' and 'Recent British Sculpture' (1:1963). The net was cast wide as far as subject matter went, but with successive numbers *Westerly* did start to have a recognizable

character. During 1963 there were articles on Dutch and Portuguese explorers (3), local painters (3), theatre and drama (4), music (2), and literary criticism (4). Almost all the contributors were academics from UWA. As the University celebrated its jubilee in 1963, the editor may have thought it a wise tactic to have two articles in the fourth number on aspects of the site: the text of a long talk by the Professor of History, Fred Alexander, who had written a mammoth volume on the first fifty years of the institution, as well as a scholarly article of wider interest by Phillip Parsons of the English Department on the new Fortune Theatre in the new Arts building. By the end of the year regular readers knew to expect stories and poems in each number from established as well as new writers on both sides of the Nullarbor.

The flow of creative contributions, especially poems, did not slacken in 1964, but after the first number, which had an excellent account of Mollie Skinner and D. H. Lawrence by Marjorie Rees (who had been Mollie Skinner's friend and typist), scholarly articles were a rarity, and academic contributors were conspicuous by their absence. The second number was late, and carried but one article. Behind the scenes the editor blamed this on 'perplexities and financial paroxysms arising from the meagre Literary Fund Grant'. O'Brien was sure that *Westerly* was far from decline—as some of us who have been on the editorial treadmill know full well, hope springs eternal in the breast of a journal editor—but in an editorial he all too accurately defined 'lateness of appearance' and 'an emaciated look' as 'symptoms of a journal's approaching demise'. It was a diagnosis that looked like being confirmed by the following two numbers which were late in appearing: they had attractive covers and were stronger in content, but clearly below the level of the previous year.

During 1965 the situation deteriorated further, at the very time when the journal received a significant boost. The Patricia Hackett Prize, endowed by a friend in memory of the daughter of Sir Winthrop Hackett, the famous benefactor of UWA, was 'for the best original creative contribution' in *Westerly* each year. It was worth 100

guineas (which converted to two hundred and ten dollars after the introduction of decimal coinage in 1966), a sizable sum when one considers that the total annual CLF grant to *Westerly* was £250. The prize was announced in 1:1965, which devoted 16 of its 72 pages to tributes to Patricia Hackett. John O'Brien praised the Hackett family contribution to 'the cultural life of Western Australia' and referred to himself as the 'editor of Western Australia's only quarterly—a journal which, in its emaciated years, was offered the hospitality of the University of Western Australia—writing in offices in Winthrop Hall at the University'. This gave a misleading impression that *Westerly* was now comfortably and securely established, and that the 'emaciated years' had been left behind. The first two numbers were late in appearing, and apart from reviews there was only one article—a very good one (Patrick Hutchings on Alex Colville, a realist Canadian painter, in 2:1965). Worse, no further numbers were issued in 1965.

At the end of its first decade *Westerly* was in a perilous position. Within the University the editorial advisors and management committee members became more and more frustrated as copy sat on the editor's desk but no numbers appeared; local writers were concerned that a vehicle for getting creative writing into print might disappear. By mid-1966 the harassed editor had put together what was labelled as a double issue of nos. 3 and 4 of 1965. A mixed bag of stories and poems, with one article (on a minor Melbourne poet), it was about the size of a regular issue, which made it hard to avoid the feeling that the readers were being sold short. (When it was distributed later in the year the management committee decided that it should be charged as a single issue.)

It had seemed an ideal set-up when the University Press, of which John O'Brien had become Executive Officer, appointed him permanent editor; but he had found himself unable to manage the demands of both an expanding press and a developing journal. A change to the editorial arrangements seemed inevitable. In August 1966 the University Press Board invited four academic members of

the editorial board to take full responsibility for the publication: Peter Cowan, Tom Gibbons and myself from English, and Patrick Hutchings from Philosophy. We had contributed over several years and had done our best to help the editor by interesting potential contributors as well as reading and preparing material for publication. Most important of all, we were convinced of the potential of the journal, which we felt was needed in Western Australia.

The priority for the four of us was to get back to regular publication. This was made easier by the fact that two of the numbers planned for 1966 had been special issues: one was to be guest-edited by a lecturer in Anthropology at UWA, and the other, featuring previously unpublished writing by local-born writer, Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie, by Peter Cowan. The editorial team announced a publication schedule, and four numbers appeared in quick succession in little more than six months. By February 1967 Peter Cowan could assure the management committee that the editorial and production aspects of the journal were well under control, and that by the end of the year publication would be up to date. The possibility remained, though, that the University Press might with little warning decide that it could not go on subsidising the journal.

Working closely together, the editorial committee shared tasks, but most of the time Tom Gibbons (who was a painter as well as an English lecturer) and Patrick Hutchings (who was an art critic as well as a philosophy lecturer) took responsibility for the design and cover of each issue, while Peter Cowan and I concentrated on written material. We were strongly committed to *Westerly's* future as a literary quarterly, publishing creative writing and articles of general cultural interest. We had supported payment of contributors from 1964 onward, though the journal was struggling financially, and hoped that the Patricia Hackett Prize would attract writers of quality. Of the four, I had had the longest association with *Westerly*, having become a contributor first in 1958, a few months after arriving in Perth. In 1963, soon after my return, John O'Brien invited me to join *Westerly's* editorial board. I was already on the *Meanjin* editorial

board, but when, in order to help the struggling editor, as well as reading submissions I took on the role of *Westerly* reviews editor at the end of 1964, Clem Christesen decided, quite rightly, that I could not serve two masters. Inevitably, perhaps, my view of how *Westerly* might develop as a literary quarterly was coloured by my experience of *Meanjin*.

Peter Cowan was the only West Australian on the editorial team: Tom Gibbons (from England), Patrick Hutchings (from New Zealand) and I (from Melbourne) were, at best, what Allan Edwards used to call 'honorary West Australians'. That *Westerly* survived a near-death experience owed much to the willingness of Peter Cowan to take upon himself the extra burden of putting numbers together and seeing them through the production process. As well, he sat on the management committee and attended to time-consuming and tedious practical details, such as writing grant applications and dealing with the advertising agent. For Peter Cowan, the continued existence of the journal had a personal significance that it could not have for the rest of us. As a young writer in Perth he had felt the absence of cultural stimulus. The discovery of *Angry Penguins* had been for him 'a sudden revelation of possibilities that one had not thought existed' [*Cross Currents*, 138]. *Westerly* was not another *Angry Penguins*, but he knew at first hand how much it mattered—more in Western Australia, perhaps, than anywhere else in Australia—to young writers that there was a journal valuing individuality rather than conformity. He drafted the statement that accompanied the first issue of 1966, in which the new editors announced their hope that '*Westerly* will devote a proportion of its space to the experimental work of younger writers'. That was as far as we went in defining what might distinguish the journal in the future.

This focus upon the creativity of younger writers, giving them the assurance to be different and encouraging them to take risks, was expressive of the same outlook that had led to the foundation of the journal a decade earlier on the campus at Crawley. (Incidentally, I think that *Westerly* is the only one of the major Australian literary

quarterlies to have been begun and continued for the whole of its existence on a university campus.) In the expansive years of the 1960s, as *Westerly* now began a new phase of its existence, change was in the air and we were buoyed by a belief that a Perth-based publication could bring something distinctive to the Australian cultural mix. We looked to a future in which—to borrow Robert Smith’s metaphor—the fresh breeze stirred up at UWA would blow with increasing strength across the Nullarbor.

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## Consolidation: 1966–1975

### Elizabeth Webby

As John Barnes has indicated in his essay, 1966 was a year of transition for *Westerly*. An editorial committee made up of staff members of the University of Western Australia replaced John O'Brien after the experiment of appointing a single editor led to delays in publication. At the end of this next decade there was a further transition, with two members of the editorial committee, Bruce Bennett and Peter Cowan, appointed as editors, and the publisher of *Westerly* now the English department instead of UWA Press. But number four of 1975 ended on a decidedly hopeful note, announcing that the print run had been increased to a thousand copies, with subscriptions and sales up by 'approximately 40 per cent'.

1966–75 was a decade of widespread social and cultural change, with challenges to established power structures from students, women and people of colour. There was also growing interest in Australian literature, with the Whitlam Government providing increased support for the arts via the Australia Council, and the work of new poets, playwrights and novelists published by new presses like Currency and UQP. Another note at the end of 4:1975 announces the establishment of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press that, like *Westerly*, was to play a

leading role in the publication of new Western Australian writing. One of the pleasures of reading through *Westerly* for this decade is to see the first appearance of work by writers who were to go on to become major literary figures. Some of them—such as Elizabeth Jolley—were from Western Australia, but others, like Murray Bail, were not. Also apparent is the growing academic interest in Australian literature—a course in the subject was introduced at UWA in 1973—though during this decade *Westerly* continued to publish many articles dealing with local issues such as heritage conservation.

Given the delays in publishing the journal in 1965, it was August 1966 before the first issue for that year appeared. In a tipped-in supplement, the new editorial team of John Barnes, Peter Cowan, Tom Gibbons and Patrick Hutchings announced that they had taken over from John O'Brien and sketched their plans for the rest of the year. As John Barnes has noted, two special issues were already in preparation; they were to appear in October and December, with the final number for 1966 scheduled for February 1967. The supplement also advised that the new editors hoped to give more space to 'the experimental work of younger writers'.

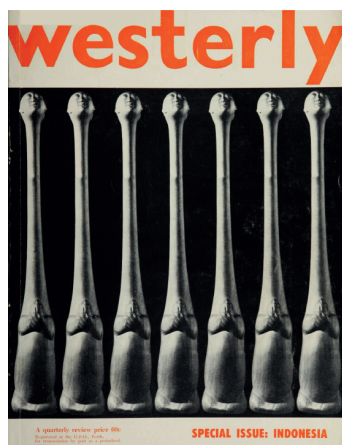
Number one, 1966, the last to be edited by John O'Brien, was a fairly slim volume of 62 pages, devoted mainly to new fiction and poetry by writers who, apart from Nicholas Hasluck, were not to make a substantial contribution to Australian literature. The most interesting items today are the review articles, especially the two that focus on *Crisis in the Humanities*, a 1965 Penguin edited by English historian J. H. Plumb. The lengthy review by then UWA librarian Leonard Jolley (husband of Elizabeth Jolley), later to join the *Westerly* editorial team, is highly critical of what he terms 'a disappointing book', pointing out that 'It would be possible, without any great effort, to compile a bibliography of several hundred articles all dealing with the questions: What are the humanities? Why do we teach them? And are we teaching them successfully?' So speaks the librarian, one might think, while also reflecting on how many thousands of articles would now have to be added.



But the review shows that Jolley read extremely widely, and was a decisive critic.

Of the two 1966 special issues, the one on Indonesia, guest-edited by Dr M. A. Jaspén of the UWA Department of Anthropology, shows that one of *Westerly's* distinctive features, interest in the literature and culture of Australia's Asian neighbours, was present almost from its beginnings. This issue featured essays on the Indonesian language, as well as translations of poems and stories, and some illustrations of art works, the liberal use of visual material being another distinctive feature of *Westerly* at this time. A few years later, 3:1971 had a focus on Malaysia and Singapore, with stories and poems by many writers who were later to make regular appearances in *Westerly*, such as Shirley Lim and Edwin Thumboo, as well as articles on Malaysian drama, 'Literary English in the South-East Asian Tradition' and 'Race, Religion and Nationalism in Asia'. The journal's growing international reach is also apparent in 1974, with poets from Sri Lanka, Ghana, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan represented in the second issue, and translations of Japanese fiction and Korean poetry in the third.

The special issue on Seaforth Mackenzie also carried a photographic inset, mainly of photos of him, together with a biographical essay by Diana Davis. The rest of the issue was devoted to some of his unpublished poetry, prose and short stories, edited by Evan Jones, though there was also a substantial collection of reviews. The highlight of the fourth issue of 1966, the first produced by the new editors, was undoubtedly Dorothy Hewett's long poem 'Legend of the Green Country', winner of 'First Prize in the 1965 ABC Competition for a long poem suitable for broadcasting'. Reviews continued to be



feisty, with William Grono forthright in his condemnation of Clement Semmler's study of Kenneth Slessor as 'a dull, inadequate, and *irrelevant*, little book'.

In their first 1967 issue, the editors again signalled their intention to encourage younger writers, defined as those under thirty, inviting contributions of 'stories, poems, criticism, general articles' for a special issue later that year. In the event, it did not appear until 1968, with hindsight a more appropriate year, given the focus in subsequent Australian literary histories on 'the generation of '68'. The most notable feature of 2:1967 was a story by a not-so-young writer, Elizabeth Jolley, only her second to appear in print. Number three included stories by Murray Bail and Frank Moorhouse, both of whom were then still under 30. Moorhouse had had work published in *Westerly* as early as 1960. For Bail, however, 'The Silence' was his first appearance in a literary magazine and, before the publication of his first collection in 1975, most of his stories appeared in *Westerly*. Instead of the planned special issue on young writers, 1967 concluded with one focussing on West Australian writing. As well as another story by Elizabeth Jolley, it featured fiction by such established authors as T. A. G. Hungerford and Henrietta Drake-Brockman, extracts from works in progress and an interesting literary memoir by J. K. Ewers, 'A Writer in Perth'. Among the poets, regular contributors William Grono and Dorothy Hewett appeared alongside newer authors like Ian Templeman.

As John Barnes has noted, editors Tom Gibbons and Patrick Hutchings both had strong interests in art and were responsible for the cover and design of each issue. No doubt they were also responsible for the greater emphasis on art earlier in this period, such as the valuable piece by John Reed on 'The Nolan Retrospective' in 1:1968. Reed, along with his wife Sunday, had supported Nolan before he became an established artist, not always to Reed's own advantage. Not that this is apparent in his very appreciative essay, though there is 'an interesting footnote' in which Reed notes that 'Nolan as a young man was essentially a "modern"' but is now 'somewhat remote from our younger painters'.

Interestingly, among the poets in the 'Young Writers Issue' was Sweeney Reed, the son of Joy Hester and Albert Tucker who had been adopted by the Reeds and published three small collections of poems before committing suicide in 1979. Other younger writers in this issue, however, went on to make significant contributions to Australian literature, including Michael Wilding, Rhyll McMaster, Roger McDonald and John Romeril. Others, such as Brian Toohey and Bob Hodge, were to make their marks in literary fields other than poetry. Also among the twenty-six poets was one 'Timothy Kline', now known to be Gwen Harwood, who was then 48. While Harwood's use of pseudonyms is usually explained in terms of editors' prejudices against women poets, her hoax of *Westerly* was, it seems, more in the spirit of the Ern Malley affair. She must have been delighted when the editors chose no less than three of her poems! One was titled 'From a Young Writer's Diary'; another, 'Soldier, Soldier', an anti-war poem, pointedly ends, 'It is I who lie unmanned'. Biographical notes were included for the young writers, with Kline claiming to be '21—born Tasmania and lives there. Clerk, interested in boat building and canoeing. Working on a novel. Poems broadcast'. A more elaborate version of this note appeared in Tom Shapcott's anthology *Australian Poetry Now* (1970), with poems by Kline also published in *Southerly*, *Overland* and the *Bulletin*, along with new ones in *Westerly* in 1969 and 1970.

This issue ran to over 90 pages, since it also included work by young artists and tributes to the recently deceased Henrietta Drake-Brockman. There was also a change in the regular advertisement on the back cover. Previous issues had featured a life mask of Keats with a quotation from his 'The Eve of St Agnes' and the by-line 'Keat's (sic) glowing imagination could only conjure up exotic delicacies which in the modern world are available at every one of Tom the Cheap Grocer's 165 stores throughout Australia'. For 2:1968 this was replaced by an illustrated passage from Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', using the same by-line with her name substituted for Keats'. This was, however, the last appearance of Tom. The ABC

advertised its Arts programs on the back covers during 1969, with Swan Lager taking over from number four of that year until 3:1972. The University Bookshop, a regular advertiser on inside pages, then claimed this prime position.

While 3:1968 reverted to the usual size of some 60 pages, there was a significant change in the editorial team, with Leonard Jolley and Bruce Bennett being added, Margot Luke named as executive editor and David Walker, whose art had featured in the Young Writers issue, as art director. The much more contemporary design and layout, credited to Jill Yelland, was not repeated in later issues which returned to the previous format. David Walker vanished from the editorial page, and Margot Luke and John Hay were added to the editorial committee. 4:1968 is notable for an early poem by J S Harry, an essay by Patrick Hutchings, with illustrations, on the nine Nolan paintings in the UWA collection, and a clutch of reviews. The most distinctive was again by Leonard Jolley, a no-holds-barred critique of *John Dryden and the Poetry of Statement* by K. G. Hamilton, Professor of English at the University of Queensland, condemned for producing 'a leaden sense of dullness and depression'.

Despite Jolley's claim that literary critics were too fond of making much of little, 1:1969 stands out for featuring more literary criticism than previous issues. Again, contributors did not confine themselves to local writing, with Chris Wallace-Crabbe's 'Robert Lowell's Version of History' appearing alongside E. A. M. Coleman's 'A Modest Radiance: the Poetry of Chris Wallace-Crabbe'. More popular genres were also considered, with Hal Colebatch discussing the place of science fiction in contemporary literature. 3:1969 carried an important essay by Ronald M Berndt on 'Aboriginal Sites: An Australian Heritage and an Australian Responsibility', another piece that still resonates today, since danger to sites from mining, tourism and the weather remain.

1970 saw Tom Gibbons and John Barnes leave the editorial committee but the mix of new poetry and fiction, along with articles on both literary and non-literary topics, continue much as before. As well as more poems by T. F. Kline, there were several from Vicki

Viidikas, a story by her, and others by Frank Moorhouse, Elizabeth Jolley, Murray Bail and Michael Wilding. This year's issues had a particular focus on the wreck of the *Batavia*, with Philip Tyler writing on problems in safeguarding the wreck site in number one, and recounting the story of the mutiny in number four. Trevor Williams joined in in number three, with 'Observations on the Theory and Practice of Public Administration' in relation to government attempts to conserve the wreck site. That number also focussed on another significant local issue: the success or otherwise of UWA's Octagon Theatre and its resident company. Literary commentary was mainly confined to reviews. Fay Zwicky tackled fourteen collections of poetry, bemoaning the 'lack of craftsmanship' most demonstrated, though giving due praise to Francis Webb's *Collected Poems*.

Though featuring a portrait of former Prime Minister Robert Menzies on its cover, 1:1971 added 'drama' to the list of 'stories, poems and reviews' often included on front covers, alerting readers to a special focus here on Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous*, performed at the New Fortune Theatre the previous January. As well as photographs of the production and an excerpt from Act II, there was an interesting assessment by Jean Whitehead, pointing to the essential ambiguity at the heart of the play. This wide-ranging issue also included Sylvia Hallam's valuable survey of 'Research in Anthropology in Western Australia' and, as signalled by the cover, a rather odd article on 'Ethical Proof in Three Speeches of R G Menzies' by an American academic, Marion B. McLeod.

The second issue for 1971 was most notable for a review by Elizabeth Jolley of stories by another Western Australian writer, Lyndall Hadow. As a reviewer, Jolley came from the same mould as her husband, concluding: 'Excellent stories for ships' libraries or for reading under the hairdryer if you have already written your grocery list and have nothing to do. But what is wrong with Australia where writers such as this can be published in alleged literary magazines?' Since several of Hadow's stories had appeared in *Westerly* this was a rather pointed comment; no further reviews by Jolley were

published, though her long poem, 'Orchard', appeared in 1973. In the final 1971 issue, it was the turn of Dorothy Hewett, now a member of the editorial team under her married name of Lilley, to deal with the continued influx of new collections of poetry—seventeen in all, including early collections by J. S. Harry, David Malouf, Robert Gray, Robert Adamson, John Tranter and Michael Dransfield. Hewett looked back to a similar sense of a poetic renaissance in the 1940s but concluded that, despite their faults, 'the young now are better poets than we were, there are more of them and, apparently, they have a bigger audience than just themselves'.

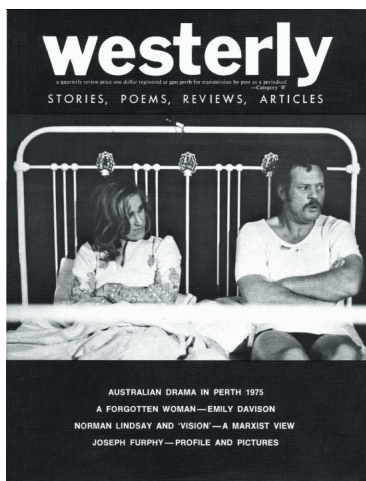
Despite the increase in publication of poetry noted by Hewett, the first number for 1972 opened with an editorial statement headed 'AUSTRALIANS ABROAD': 'At a time when prospects for writing and publication in Australia have never been less favourable, *Westerly* in this issue has invited contributions and comments from expatriates and those who have recently spent some time abroad'. Many of those included here had links with UWA, though Murray Bail contributed an interesting essay on 'Writing in Another Country', noting that 'In the literary magazine sector—most important for emerging writers—England actually has three, which is fewer than Australia ... In America and France the stronger condition of literature can be traced to their magazines'.

The third issue for 1972 was especially notable for its focus on another art form now undergoing a revival in Australia—film. As well as a survey of what had been happening recently with government support for the industry, and an essay by Veronica Brady on 'Public Taste and Film', it included historically valuable commentary and scripts by three of the pioneers of the revival, Albie Thoms, Tim Burstall and Arthur Cantrill, together with some stills. Brady, who had joined the UWA English Department in 1972, was to become one of *Westerly's* most regular contributors of essays and reviews. Her early interest in Patrick White is apparent in the next issue in a highly critical review of Patricia Morley's *The Mystery of Unity* (1972), rightly said to be too programmatic an approach to White,

turning him into ‘a Christian apologist’. This was followed a year later by an equally long but appreciative review of *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), seen as coming ‘closest to success in the impossible task White sets himself of uttering what is in fact unutterable’.

The last few years of this decade show *Westerly* taking an increased interest in Australian writing, prompted no doubt by the increased production of both creative and critical material. 4:1972 also included two articles on Judith Wright, an extract from Dorothy Hewett’s new play, *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly*, again with photographs of the production, and Margot Luke’s account of the controversy that greeted it. Australian drama also featured in 1:1974, with Margot Luke surveying the plays presented at the 1974 Perth Festival. *Catspaw*, a folk rock-opera by Dorothy Hewett written for the Festival, was much better received than her previous play despite being let down by its music and ‘vital elements in the cast’. The final issue for 1975 included Collin O’Brien’s very interesting survey of Australian plays presented in Perth during a year when works by Jack Hibberd, John Romeril, Alex Buzo, David Williamson, Peter Kenna and others had featured. A profile of Williamson had also appeared in number two for that year.

During 1975 work by the new wave of writers in fiction and poetry continued to appear in *Westerly*, with stories by Colin Johnson, later better known as Mudrooroo, and Finola Moorhead in the first, and an interview with Johnson in the third. While the first short story collections of Peter Carey and Murray Bail received a warm welcome in number four, a more hostile reception awaited some new works. Number three included a highly positive review by young Sydney critic Carl



Harrison-Ford of Kate Jennings' ground-breaking feminist anthology, *Mother I'm Rooted*, plus her own collection of poems, *Come to Me My Melancholy Baby*. But an accompanying footnote informed readers that 'Poets Fay Zwicky and Dorothy Hewett were also asked to review Kate Jennings' books. Both were very critical of the books and did not wish to review them.' Hal Colebatch had apparently also declined to review Jennings' books alongside Dorothy Hewett's new collection *Rapunzel in Suburbia* but could not resist a few digs at it as containing much 'simply beneath criticism as poetry'. For him the idea of an anthology of women's poetry was 'intrinsically fatuous'. Unfortunately, in comparing a poem from the anthology with one by Hewett, he chose a passage that had to be censored after a libel challenge from her former husband.

In a rare editorial in 2:1975, Bennett and Cowan pointed to *Westerly's* contribution to 'the development of a more lively and varied literary and cultural life in Australia than was evident a decade ago.' The issues produced over this decade, with their mix of work by new and established writers from both Australia and overseas, and increased attention to Australian poetry, fiction, drama and film, certainly confirms this.



*Dennis Haskell is one of Australia's best-known poets and critics. He was co-editor of Westerly from 1985 to 2009.*

## The Phoenix Rises Repeatedly: *Westerly* 1976–1985

### Dennis Haskell

By 1976 *Westerly* was in its twenty-first year, the age of adulthood and full citizen's rights if it were a person. As such the magazine was an established part of the Australian literary landscape and had certainly established itself as the magazine of prominence for West Australian writers, the means by which they might become known. It published four issues per year throughout the decade, in its traditional large page format and for half of the years using drab covers and a somewhat raw layout style. Black and white prevailed; any colour printing was expensive. Given the precariousness and tribulations of producing a literary magazine, *Westerly* had remarkable stability in its personnel: it was edited by Peter Cowan and Bruce Bennett throughout the period until I joined them in late-1985, when Bruce Bennett was in Indonesia. By then Bruce was the important figure; Peter Cowan's editorial work was restricted to short fiction, photography and general advice. Peter knew more about the short story form than anyone I have ever met and his comments on submissions were often sarcastically and slanderously witty; I was glad to be a poet! He was laconic, shy and reclusive and for a new chum not easy to work with but he had local

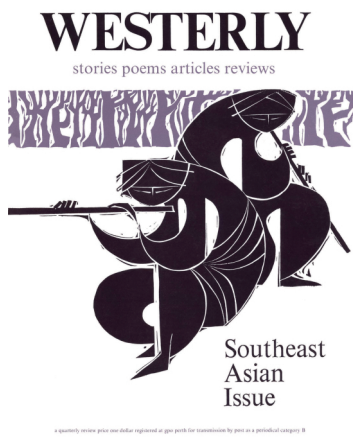
experience and knowledge that I then had little of and Bruce had enormous respect for him.

In 1976 they worked with an Editorial Committee; by 1977 these had become “Editorial Advisors”: Patrick Hutchings, Leonard Jolley, Margot Luke and Fay Zwicky. In my wild erratic fancy, visions come to me of Peter Cowan at meetings with the notoriously acerbic, difficult Leonard Jolley, the University Librarian, who would be astonished to learn that he is now best remembered as the husband of Elizabeth Jolley. Margot Luke and Fay Zwicky were to have long associations with the magazine, Margot mainly on fiction and Fay mainly on poetry, although she was also an important contributor. Others to have notable editorial advisory involvement during the decade were Veronica Brady, David Brooks, Hilary Fraser, Susan Kobulniczky (now Midalia, one of Australia’s best short story writers and as passionate about the genre as Peter Cowan), and Harry Aveling (for much of the decade exotically known as Swami Anand Haridas). This editorial stability and the greater administrative staff then available enabled the magazine to survive the smoke and fires of literary magazine production with an outward calm.

*Westerly* has made its reputation principally in Australian, especially West Australian, and Asian literature. Beginning with its first issue in 1956, it is the Australian literary magazine which has most consistently encouraged an engagement with Asia. During the decade 1976–1985 it was particularly strong in this area, not only in publishing creative and critical Asian writing as a matter of course but highlighting Asian writing in special issues or special features. The year 1976 included a collection of Southeast Asian writing and a cover by Hu Te Hsin of ‘Girls Playing Flute’. The image became the logo for the biennial series of symposiums on ‘Literature and Culture in the Asia Pacific’ which began in 1982, originally organised by the *Westerly* Centre (formed that year under the name “Centre for Studies in Australian Literature”) and the National University of Singapore. The logo was sourced from an exhibition of ‘Recent Batiks and Graphics’ held at the Ampang Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in October–November

1975. Hsin, born in northern China in 1926, toured Malaysia in 1961 and became a lecturer at the University of Malaysia in 1969. This kind of close connection with South-east Asia twenty-five years before the 'Asian century' may seem remarkable to eastern states Australians but reflects Western Australia's geographical location; Perth is as close to Singapore as to Sydney and is in the same time zone as many Asian cities, including Singapore, Beijing, Taipei and Hong Kong.

*Westerly* in 1976 also included publication of a collection of modern Japanese poems, while 1979 saw an Indian Ocean issue that contained work by W. S. Rendra, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Ee Tiang Hong, Geraldine Heng, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Keki Daruwalla and Chandran Nair—an impressive list. Heng commented that it was 'an antidote to parochialism and narrow nationalism'. Such antidotes continued: in 1980 articles on 'Literature and Cultural Identity' by Darmanto Jatman from Indonesia, Kishori Charan Das from India and Chrisopher Koch; in 1981 an issue on Chinese writing from 1979–1981 in the recovery from the Cultural Revolution; in 1983 'An Indian Selection—Contemporary Writing' guest edited by Ron Shepherd which included Meenakshi Mukherjee on a selection of Indian novels (one of them Anita Desai's *The Clear Light of Day*) and Yasmine Gooneratne analysing the work of Ruth Prawar Jhabvala; in 1984 an issue that drew on an Indian Ocean Arts Festival and associated conference, and which included poems by Kamala Das and Ee Tiang Hong, papers by historians Ken McPherson and Frank Broeze and the Malaysian novelist Lloyd Fernando plus Helen Watson-Williams on Rushdie's *Shame*. Apart from these special issues *Westerly* regularly published Chinese and Japanese poems,



both ancient and contemporary, translated by the Hong Kong resident Englishman, Graeme Wilson, who was awarded the annual Patricia Hackett Prize; and poetry by the Malaysian and Singaporean Ee Tiang Hong, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Chin Woon Ping, Dudley de Souza and Edwin Thumboo. There was much less Asian fiction but notably the September 1980 issue included 'The Chess Players' by the Hindi writer Premchand in translation. Much of this writing was later anthologised in the collection *Westerly Looks to Asia*, published by the short-lived Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies in 1993. The period also saw the publication of two indexes of material in *Westerly*, a reminder of life in the pre-digital age; they were valuable in their own time but are now completely redundant: a search of the *Westerly* website will reveal all you need to know, and give you access to the works themselves.

Of course, Australian writing was more extensive than writing from Asia in the magazine. Surveying ten years of a magazine thirty to forty years on is to take a fascinating tour through literary history. In the end a literary magazine is only as good as its contributors and looking backwards you have to remind yourself that many major figures were not major then. *Westerly* helped make some of them so—this is one of the key functions of literary magazines, and a key reason to support them financially. In order to maintain reasonable subscription and sales figures (always a struggle for a literary magazine, especially one located in and identified with a relatively small population centre) newish writers must be mixed with those who already have a reputation. Looking back reveals that at any point in arts history the first ones now might later be last; the times are always changing and a magazine must be deeply engaged with both the present and the past. *Westerly* published established writers such as Bruce Dawe, Rosemary Dobson, William Hart-Smith, Gwen Harwood (including one short story), T. A. G. Hungerford, John Millett, Peter Porter, and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, as well as Peter Cowan and Fay Zwicky. However, much more noticeable is the number of writers then making their way who are now widely recognised for

the quality of their work, amongst them Robert Adamson, Doris Brett, Lily Brett, John Bryson (who was awarded the Patricia Hackett Prize), Andrew Burke, Caroline Caddy, Heather Cam, Marion Campbell, Alec Choate, Hal Colebatch, Peter Corris, Jennifer Compton, Julian Croft, Liam Davison, Sarah Day, Adriana Ellis, Diane Fahey, Beverley Farmer, John Foulcher, Marion Halligan, Rory Harris, Philip Hodgins, Pat Jacobs, Colin Johnson, Victor Kelleher, Peter Kirkpatrick, Jerri Kroll, Martin Langford, Andrew Lansdown, Joan London, Shane McAuley, Rod Moran, Mark O'Connor, Geoff Page, Glyn Parry, Andrew Sant, Margaret Scott, Jennifer Strauss, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Gerard Windsor, and Tim Winton, as well as Peter Goldsworthy (who was first published in *Westerly*), Susan Hampton, Nicholas Hasluck, Graeme Hetherington, Elizabeth Jolley, Jean Kent, Julie Lewis, Dorothy Featherstone Porter (as she then named herself) and Tom Shapcott who were regular contributors.

This is far from an exhaustive list. Among the exotics and surprises, apart from the short story by Gwen Harwood, are one by the critic Noel Macainsh, who regularly published articles in the magazine; poems by the American Robert Creeley (in 1976); stories by Alison Tilson (now better known as a scriptwriter for such outstanding films as *The Road to Nhill* and *Japanese Story*); a story by Peter Murphy about cane toads as early as 1979; poems by Michael Ondaatje (interviewed in the same issue of 1982 by Tom Shapcott); poems by the leading New Zealanders Elizabeth Smither and Lauris Edmond; a story by a Czech writer, Marta Kadlecikova, one by Swiss Jung Federspiel, and one by the Italian Giovanni Andreoni. While *Westerly's* focus has generally been on Australian and Asian writing, during this decade it published material from everywhere; a review of John Updike's work appeared in 1979 and of Craig McGregor's edited book on Bob Dylan in 1980, while in 1985, no. 4 included an interview with Canadian, George Bowering. Amongst the stories, Joan London's 'Travelling' (4:1984) went on to be included in her marvellous collection *Sister Ships* while Elizabeth Jolley's 'Woman in a Lampshade' (2:1980) and 'Hep Duck and Hildegard the Meat'

(1:1982; later to be part of *Mr Scobie's Riddle*), and Tim Winton's 'Urinals' (2:1982) and 'Scission' (3:1983) were works by local writers that first saw the light of day in *Westerly*.

I co-edited *Westerly* with Bruce Bennett and then with Delys Bird from 1985–2009 and I don't think we ever published an issue without typographical errors, despite the fact that the page proofs were checked by the authors, by us and sometimes by a paid proofreader. This decade had its share too: Robyn Rowland was 'Robin' on one contents page but she's probably used to that—certainly more so than Tim Winton who became 'Tom Winton' in a Notes on Contributors (together with the laconic note, 'His novel, *An Open Swimmer*, has just been published'). My favourite is in a 1976 draft advertisement for the magazine in which 'Chris Wallace-Crabbe' became 'Christ Wallace-Crabbe'. Many of us admire Chris but even he might find this a bit much; unfortunately the error was picked up before publication. The miracle is that there weren't more errors; this was the period when submissions were sometimes handwritten and had to be typed as well as typeset, the first proofs were in long galleys before the second (different) proofs came in page format. Communication with authors and funding bodies was often by letter or telegram; it seems like a hundred years ago!

For many readers looking back, and certainly for researchers, the most important part of the magazine is critical writing, in articles, interviews and book reviews. While *Westerly* was published quarterly it published individual book reviews. These reviews provide a scattered cook's tour of literary history for the period: Delys Bird regularly reviewed David Ireland's novels, Brian Kiernan reviewed Patrick White and David Brooks reviewed A. D. Hope, Vincent O'Sullivan analysed Bruce Dawe's *Sometimes Gladness* (1985 edition), Brenda Walker reviewed David Malouf's *Antipodes* and Veronica Brady Chris Koch's *The Doubleman*, while one review was contributed by Geoff Gallop, later Premier of Western Australia. Many notable books of the period received attention, including works by Glenda Adams, Jessica Anderson, Murray Bail, Rosemary

Dobson, Robert Drewe, Helen Garner, Germaine Greer, Elizabeth Harrower, Shirley Hazzard, Clive James, Drusilla Modjeska, Frank Moorhouse, essays by A. A. Phillips and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Tim Winton, Judith Wright and others; the emphasis was decidedly on Australian books, especially books of poetry and fiction. Paul Hasluck reviewed a collection of Christopher Brennan's work, comparing Brennan to a wedgetail eagle. The same issue (2:1982) presented the most interesting review of the decade: Fay Zwicky's analysis of Peter Porter's poetry collection, *English Subtitles*. Zwicky, a very different sensibility to Porter, wrestled with the poems, finding that 'Behind the toneless, fundamentally unmusical voice of the poet speaking to nobody in particular ... lies a tenuous grasp of identity'. Nevertheless she found the poems 'genuine enough and enlightening enough' and asked herself, 'so why do I harbour these grudging reservations?' Her conclusion was that despite—perhaps because of—the poems' 'very real intellectual sophistication' Porter 'can sometimes be self-protectively evasive'. The previous issue had presented a Bruce Bennett interview with Peter Porter, the first signs of interest that would later lead to Bruce's critical biography *Spirit in Exile* (1991). The issues Zwicky raises are still ones to be grappled with in reading Porter's work. Zwicky is one of the most independent, passionate and incisive literary critics Australia has ever seen.

One writer whose career was closely followed in *Westerly* was the once local Randolph Stow. Both *Visitants* and *The Suburbs of Hell* were reviewed, the latter twice, while *The Girl Green as Elderflower* received a review article and Bruce Bennett interviewed Stow (with photographs) in 4:1981. Graeme Kinross-Smith provided profiles of Francis Webb and of Les Murray. Regular contributors of critical writing included Veronica Brady, Helen Daniel, John Hay, Noel Macainsh and Fay Zwicky plus the editors, Bennett and Cowan. Work drawn from seminars provided a focus as in the special issues already mentioned and in features on 'Regionalism in Contemporary Australia' (Cowan, Hungerford, Jolley and Moorhouse) and 'Writers and Their Audience' (Nancy Keesing, Humphrey McQueen and Stephen Murray-Smith)

but the articles in any issue could also be eclectic. A 1978 issue, number 3, published essays on environmentalism in WA, ancient Japanese poetry, contemporary Australian women's poetry, and Fay Zwicky's reflections on Christopher Brennan's reputation. The second issue of 1980 included no less than nine articles, the authors including Veronica Brady, Helen Daniel, Harry Heseltine, Leonie Kramer, Noel Macainsh, and John McLaren.

As is the case now, essays could also concentrate on individual authors, such as Peter Cowan writing about Grant Watson, Tom Shapcott about Elizabeth Jolley, Helen Daniel about Nicholas Hasluck, Algerina Neri about Shirley Hazzard or David Headon on 'Les Murray's Literary Language'. Headon comments, 'He is so very, but not offensively, Australian'; Les must have been disappointed by that 'not'. Under Peter Cowan's influence landscape and history featured strongly, with some straightforwardly historical essays being published, for example, on Dutch shipwrecks and on Charles Court; in later years essays needed to have a literary or cultural orientation. Amongst a great deal of writing that rewards repeated reading are Graeme Turner and Delys Bird on 'Australian Studies: Practice Without Theory', Paul Eggert on D. H. Lawrence and Molly Skinner, Fay Zwicky's 'Rumours of Mortality' about poetic elegies (ranging from Milton to Baudelaire to T. S. Eliot and considering 'the repressive entity of self'), Adam Shoemaker on Ion Idriess and Colin Johnson plus a reply from Colin Johnson, Dorothy Hewett's ruminations on the 'society of lotus eaters' in Western Australia and on the city of Sydney, Carolyn Polizzotto's biographical article on German born painter Elise Blumann (including sketches by Blumann and photographs), and Elizabeth Jolley's 'Horace in the Southern Hemisphere'. Aboriginal writing received increasing attention, from Kateryna Arthur, Veronica Brady, Emmanuel Nelson and Adam Shoemaker. No particular school of literary analysis was insisted on and the overall impression is of wide-ranging variety.

An outsider might have expected financial stability for *Westerly* by the time of its emergence into magazine adulthood but its financial



situation has always been, as one might say, ‘finely balanced’. In 1977 the editors provided a public note about funding difficulties; Bruce Bennett had written to the Literature Board saying that ‘*Westerly*’s financial situation is precarious’ and requesting increased funds, which were not forthcoming. Nevertheless, the ratio of grants to sale and subscription income was over 4:1. In the absence of a wealthy benefactor a literary magazine always sails close to the financial wind.

Two other external events had dramatic effects during the decade. In 1976 a libel action by Lloyd Davies against his former wife, Dorothy Hewett meant the expurgation of a poem and a book review from an already published (in 1975) issue. In 1984, number two was late but provided one of the first covers of real interest: it showed the charred remains of the issue which had been almost ready for delivery when a fire took hold at the printer’s! At the suggestion of poet Michael Dugan its reprint was called the ‘Phoenix Issue’. It is a symbol for the magazine’s whole history as it has arisen again and again from near financial conflagration.

The last words should belong to a writer. In his poem ‘A Sad Case’ (3:1980) William Grono sardonically presents the opposite situation to that of the phoenix. The poem’s speaker, whose mind “has retired / to Cypress Villas Garden Suburb” looks across to a friend as they drink at ‘the new Lord Forrest Tavern’: ‘Behind his head, a purple lobster reared / and teetered, legs flailing feebly in the deep blue glow’.



*Delys Bird has been a co-editor  
of Westerly since 1992.*

## The Golden Years: 1986–1995

### Delys Bird

For most of this decade, *Westerly* enjoyed a relatively stable financial situation, secure, dedicated administrative support and a strong subscription list. It's a significant period for these reasons (as well as others of course), and the first issue of *Westerly* in 1986 recognised, in its Obituary for John O'Brien, the major influence of his editorship from 1962 to 1965. It was during his time that the journal 'first received Government funding and began publishing as a quarterly'. O'Brien was *Westerly*'s first contracted editor and it was during his tenure that *Westerly* became more firmly established at a national level, as one of a range of literary magazines—*Westerly* being the first from the West—able to attract funding from the Commonwealth Government. That first issue also listed for the first time, quaintly, 'Secretarial' (Caroline Horobin) and 'Typing' (Dorothy McCormick), together with editors Peter Cowan, Dennis Haskell and Bruce Bennett and editorial advisors David Brooks, Margot Luke and Hilary Fraser. My own long association with *Westerly* began when I became one of these advisors in 1988, poetry editor at the end of 1990, and co-editor at the end of 1992, with Bruce Bennett, Peter Cowan and Dennis Haskell. *Westerly* lost one of its most influential

editors when Bennett left UWA for Canberra early in 1993; however, he remained part of the editorial group as Eastern States Editor. Peter Cowan officially retired at the beginning of 1994, leaving Haskell and myself as co-editors for the next nearly two decades. A *Westerly* editor from 1966, Cowan was recognised in a brief 'Editor's Note' as 'the longest serving editor of any Australian cultural magazine' (1994:1). Cowan's quiet presence, editorial acumen, acerbic wit and vast knowledge of Australian fiction and history were greatly missed.

During this decade, *Westerly* had consistent administrative and infrastructure support from the English Department at UWA. Caroline Horobin was named Administrator in the third issue of 1988. She worked part-time with the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature (now the *Westerly* Centre, which publishes *Westerly*) and part-time with the Department, and *Westerly* paid a tiny contribution to the English Department towards those costs. Horobin managed the office—and the editors!—from the mid-eighties until her resignation from UWA in early 1999. This long period when *Westerly* had ongoing, dedicated administrative support with little drain on its budget was unique in the journal's history. Horobin's leaving coincided with the increasing financial pressure on Australian Universities, felt especially in the Humanities, and the English Department could no longer support the journal as it had. *Westerly* became responsible for its own administration and could only afford very part-time assistance. In Horobin's time, she and one of the editors would assemble the journal physically, then send it in hard copy to the printer for setting and printing. From around 1992, it was made print ready in the *Westerly* office using a desk-top publishing programme. These were productive years for the Centre, which published an average of one scholarly book a year as well as the journal.

*Westerly* remained a quarterly in large-page format throughout this period. While the cost of subscriptions gradually increased—an annual subscription in 1986 was \$16.00 posted; in 1989, \$20.00; moving to \$24.00 in 1993—the single issue price remained at \$5.00. In 1987, there was an announcement in the third issue that

subscriptions could now be paid by credit card. This innovation, so much taken for granted now, was followed much later, in the last issue of 1993, when it was noted that articles could be submitted by email, or on disk. *Westerly* was also available from the beginning of 1994 for subscription by email for \$10 as well as in the traditional hard copy, but few subscribers took up this offer and the idea lapsed. The title page of 3:1987 also carried the byline ‘The National Quarterly from the West’ for the first time, one later dropped, and the list of Advisors was re-named Editorial Consultants—a group of noted scholars and writers from across Australia and overseas. Importantly, that issue was also the first to credit a cover designer, Susan Eve Ellvey; formerly editors would choose an image for the cover and simply send it with the internals to the printer who would make it up. Ellvey went on to produce what became the signature *Westerly* covers, using original artwork from West Australian artists whenever possible. Ellvey remained *Westerly’s* designer until the first issue in 1994, when she moved away, and was succeeded by Robyn Mundy, who stayed with the journal for at least a decade and a half. *Westerly* now publishes Robyn’s stories.

1986 had been a busy year for *Westerly*. The first issue was a special issue, on ‘Literature and Locality’—continuing the practice of occasional themed issues. It is unusual in that it contains only two stories and two poems. A short introduction to the articles which make up most of the issue notes *Westerly’s* ‘long ... interest in literature as it emerges from or relates to particular regions of Australia’ (17). These articles draw on writing from localities as diverse as Gippsland and Australia’s tropical north. Ian Templeman, founder of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, celebrates ‘A Decade of Publishing’ and there are ‘Personal Views’ of the press as a regional publisher by Elizabeth Jolley and Peter Cowan. Bruce Bennett’s addendum, ‘Writing West’, refers to ‘the buoyant state of Western Australian writing’ (96), indicated by the Press’s anniversary, and its continued strength. New novels by Tim Winton and Archie Weller had been launched at Writers’ Week in Adelaide in March 1986, and Peter Cowan’s selected stories, *A*

*Window in Mrs. Xs Place*, was also published that year. The second issue has a 'Focus on Elizabeth Jolley', with a clever, unattributed cover photograph showing Jolley, seated and reading, while another Jolley peers out at herself, from behind a partially drawn black curtain. *Westerly* first published Jolley's work very early in her career and continued to do so. Articles in the issue by Dorothy Jones, Helen Daniel and Andrew Riemer were important additions to what was then the growing critical attention being paid to Jolley's work.

A second 'Special Issue' that year, 'The 1930s' (4:1986), has an 'Introduction' that acknowledges the spasmodic nature of such issues at that time: '*Westerly* has published special issues from time to time' (5), and ends hoping that the topic 'may contribute to a revival of interest in a critical decade' and thanking the Literature Board of the Australia Council for a subsidy (\$2,000) towards its production. It's a big issue, made up solely of articles, on topics as wide-ranging as censorship; working-class women in depression fiction; modernist art and architecture in Perth; on the novel, poetry, newspapers; on art (specifically that of Beatrice Darbyshire) of the decade, and one that summarises some of the findings of a survey carried out by Dorothy Green and Sandra Burchill arguing the very modern idea that studies of Australia, with a small 's', have been going on 'since the arrival of the First Fleet' (59). Applying to the Literature Board again in 1987 for some extra funding for another special issue, Bruce Bennett wrote that the 1930s issue 'was one of the most successful we have undertaken, ... described as "an undiluted pleasure" by Barbara Jefferis in *The Australian*, and receiving favourable comment ... from readers throughout the country'.

It's during this decade that special issues began to appear on a regular basis. And while *Westerly* remains resolutely wedded to the practice of publishing unsolicited material which goes through a rigorous, independent editing and/or refereeing process, it is also often the case that some of the material, at least for special issues, is commissioned. 'Australian Expatriates' (4:1987), published responses to their expatriate experience invited from 'Australian writers,



artists, critics and teachers' (5) including Glenda Adams, Peter Porter, Jeffrey Smart and Randolph Stow. Stow replied to the invitation with a brief message which the editors then wrote asking his permission to publish. He agreed. It begins, 'I'm sorry to say that I can think of nothing to say on the subject of being an expatriate' (9). In the correspondence for this issue are letters from others who declined—Shirley Hazzard wrote that she was 'in the middle of a

difficult piece of my own work' and further, that 'I don't think of myself as an expatriate ...'.

In 1988, the special issue, 'Imaging Western Australia' appeared mid-year, as a 'Bicentennial Issue' (2:1988). A brochure of the Western Australia Council of The Australian Bicentennial Authority listed it as one of a number of West Australian publications supported by the Authority in that year. *Westerly* received a grant of \$8,800 from this Authority in that year towards this unusually large issue, although the assistance is not formally acknowledged. The back cover announces 'Poetry and Prose by Western Australia's best writers, including: Philip Salom, Andrew Lansdown, Faye Davis, Alec Choate, Julie Lewis and Marion Campbell', and 'Articles & Reminiscences' from 'Elizabeth Jolley, Veronica Brady, George Seddon, Peter Cowan, Dorothy Hewett and more!'.

The nineteen eighties have been tagged, retrospectively, as the decade when women's writing was recognised as a significant category in Australian literary culture. The feminist politics of the 1970s had shifted and shaped the production and reception of women's writing and this new wave of women's writing unsettled the largely male dominated canon of Australian literature. At the

end of the decade, *Westerly* entered what had become an energetic field of debate, publishing a special issue 'Keeping Mum: Australian Representations of Motherhood' (4:1989). In the editorial, guest editors myself and Dennis Haskell noted that *Westerly* special issues were generally 'devoted to a topic in Australian cultural life which has received little critical discussion' and that 'the representation of motherhood in Australian texts has rarely been analysed, even by feminist critics' (5), a statement which now seems outmoded given the ways mothering has been examined—critically, creatively, socially and politically—since then. The issue includes articles by a number of well-known feminist critics, including E. Ann Kaplan on 'Discourses of the Mother in Postmodern Film and Culture'; stories from Elizabeth Jolley, Julie Lewis, Carmel Bird, Marion Campbell and others; among many poems are ones from Katherine Gallagher, Jan Kemp, and Jennifer Strauss, and there's an extract from Drusilla Modjeska's memoir of her mother, *Poppy*. This important issue marks the end of a significant decade in *Westerly* publishing.

In the early 90s, publication of special issues settled into a pattern, always located at the end of each year. 'Suburbia' (4:1990) was followed by 'Eyeing the Environment' (4:1991)—with a large number of articles, including two that are particularly notable. George Seddon's 'Journeys Through Landscape' features photography by Richard Woldendorp, whose work is also on the cover, and regular contributor Veronica Brady writes on 'The Environment: A "Bran Nue Day" or a Very Ancient One?'. 'Beyond Good and Evil—Justice in Australia' (4:1992) was next, with a number of articles on a range of issues both literary and cultural, then 'Crossing the Waters; Asia and Australia' (4:1993). These signal the range of socio-cultural issues *Westerly* focussed on. In 'Crossing the Waters', guest editor Beverly Hooper, Director of the Centre for Asian Studies at UWA (together with Harry Aveling, Head of the Division of Asian Languages at La Trobe University) writes that the issue 'continues the *Westerly* tradition of attention to the diverse cultures and societies of our neighbours', a 'feature of the magazine ever since it commenced publication in 1956' (5).

*Westerly* has indeed always looked towards Asia, but it is also the case that during 1986–1995 fewer writers from the Asian region were published than in previous decades. This issue features the poetry of Kirpal Singh and Edwin Thumboo, who were published fairly regularly, and Hersri Setiawan, while there are stories by Dewi Anggraeni and Shahnnon Ahmad, with a piece of ficto-criticism by Sang Ye with Sue Trevaskes and Nicholas Jose and articles by Koh Tai Ann and Ouyang Yu—also a regular contributor of poetry and articles. Number 1, 1994 carries a notice announcing the forthcoming ‘Mediterranean Issue’—the first time a special issue had been flagged in advance—that describes *Westerly*’s special issues as having a very coherent focus: ‘Each year the Summer issue (no. 4) of *Westerly* is a special issue of poetry, fiction and articles on a selected theme’ (2).

While this decade had been one during which, as I’ve indicated, *Westerly* enjoyed a relatively stable financial situation, with quite substantial funding continuing from the Literature Board of the Australia Council (the journal’s most generous funding partner in this period) and the WA Department for the Arts. However, finding ways to market a small literary journal is always a headache. Great covers count—*Westerly*’s remain distinctive—as do high production standards and varied content, but it’s always proven difficult to achieve a level of professional distribution or raise *Westerly*’s profile other than very locally. A one-off grant of \$4,000 in 1993 from the Literature Board to promote *Westerly* meant that many schemes were proposed and some undertaken, with the help of a commissioned marketing expert. One of her most successful ideas was to have postcards made of several standout covers and distribute them as widely as possible, through coffee shops, book shops and so on.

Despite this initiative, *Westerly*’s funding situation worsened late in 1994 as the golden years drew to a close. The annual funding application to the WA Department for the Arts for 1995 was greeted with the news that the grant would be reduced by \$4,000, almost a quarter of the amount it had been receiving for some years; that the journal could expect more drastic cuts in the future, and should



seek other funding strategies. At the same time, Literature Council funding for 1995 was savagely slashed by \$9,000 representing more than a third of that expected. The co-editors responded in the first issue of 1995 (wrongly attributed on the cover as 'Number 5') 'From the Editors' Desk', announcing both the theme for the special issue that year, '*Westerly* Goes to War', marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and an issue on which *Westerly* was itself going to war, '*Westerly* Funding: The Bleak Future'. Having already written to their funding bodies to preview a change in the cover price and subscriptions structure, the editorial response to these cuts went further. Each issue of *Westerly* 'for the foreseeable future' would be limited to a maximum of 96 pages with no internal colour. In addition, 'regrettably', levels of payment to contributors would be reduced.

The editors went on to point out that '*Westerly* is a non-profit making venture that survives only with the assistance of the Department for the Arts and the Literature Board, and the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature and the English Department at The University of Western Australia. The Co-Editors are not paid.' At the same time, they wrote, the Literature Board of the Australia Council planned to review its funding of literary magazines, with 'the likelihood of [more] funding cuts' and 'a proposal being mooted that the Board fund fewer, larger magazines'. Such a proposal 'may limit even more severely ... the chance for Western Australia to be heard'. They urged *Westerly* readers interested in 'the role of magazines in Australian literary and cultural life' to make their own submissions to the Literature Board on these issues. While funding is always a concern to editors of small literary magazines, and *Westerly* has gone through many such crises over its six decades, it has survived throughout that time on tight budgets, much voluntary labour and the continuing presence and support of the writers and readers who keep the journal alive. And one positive result of the announcement of bad times is that subscriptions and sales increase for a while.

As had been the case in earlier decades, during this period *Westerly* published a mixture of creative work and critical articles,

in varying proportions, with an increasing number of book reviews. Numerous emerging writers who went on to become more established and sometimes very well known are here. Kim Scott first appears in *Westerly* as a poet in the second issue of 1986. Shane McAuley, Sarah Day, Diane Fahey, Michael Heald, Jean Kent, Paul Hetherington, John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan, Andrew Lansdown, Andrew Burke, Jennifer Compton, Paul Hetherington, Shirley Lim, Jill Jones, Anthony Lawrence, Roland Leach (poetry editor for the last three years), Lawrence Bourke (poetry and articles) and Jan Owen are among the poets who appear throughout the decade. Barbara Brandt (later Barbara Temperton) has stories and poetry and Marion Campbell stories and critical work. Nikki Gemmell and Brigid Lowry are among the newer story writers. Others are like Sari Hosie, whose first *Westerly* story was published in 4:1988 and who continued to contribute over several years, then disappeared from the writing scene.

At the same time, *Westerly* featured the work of renowned writers. The striking black and white cover of 1:1987 is an engraving by Arthur Boyd, 'Narcissus', the title of a book (one of several) published from a long period of collaboration between the artist and Peter Porter. Porter writes in this issue, 'Working with Arthur Boyd', about collaborations between writers, musicians and painters and specifically of his 'fulfilling' (69) experience working with Boyd. His article is illustrated with several of the engravings from the book. Porter was a writer-in-residence at UWA from February to April, 1987, and the cover of 3:1987 features a photograph taken of him during that time and no less than six new poems, written during the residency. More follow, and 3:1995 carries an interview by John Kinsella with Porter on his collaboration with Boyd. Ee Tiang Hong's poetry appears once or twice and an Obituary in 1:1990 recognises him as, 'a pioneer in Australia-Asian literary culture' (2). Among others with already well established reputations are poets Fay Zwicky, Les Murray, Eric Beach, Dorothy Hewett, with stories and critical work too, Bruce Dawe, Hal Colebatch, Alec Choate, Ian Templeman and Jeff Guss for example. There are stories from Julie Lewis, Joan London, and Pat Jacobs while

Robert Drewe and Alan Seymour contribute occasional prose pieces. It's in the rich and varied work *Westerly* has published throughout its history that its heritage lies, and *Westerly* has continued to play a major part in the 'buoyant state' of Western Australian writing Bruce Bennett noted in the first issue of the decade.

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## From the Nineties to the Noughties: 1996–2005

**Paul Genoni**

The results of the financial stress that had become apparent towards the end of *Westerly's* previous decade were felt immediately in the first issue of 1996. The obvious change was a reduction in the physical size of the journal, now packaged as a compact A5; a less obvious change was an increase in the cover price to \$8 per issue (up from \$5), and \$36 for the annual subscription of four issues (up from \$24, postage included). An introductory 'note from the editors', explained that both of these changes were related to 'squeezes in our funding', and reported that it was the first time the price of the journal had increased in over a decade. The editors (the well-established team of Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell had been joined by Ron Shapiro from issue 4:1995) also explained that the smaller size was the result of 'a feeling that it was time for a change and that this new size and shape suits readers of the 1990s' (2).

The editors returned before year's end with a longer explanation of *Westerly's* financial circumstances (4:1996). Published under the heading 'Westerly survives! Westerly thrives!', the editorial informed readers that the current year had been 'one of the most difficult in [the journal's] history' (4), while also including a strident statement

of confidence in the journal's future. In particular it reported that the immediate financial pressure had been eased by increased government support for at least the coming three years. The editors' optimism was supported by their announcement of increased subscriptions, sales and wider distribution, resulting in a 'record' print-run of 2000 copies of the current issue (the annual 'special issue' devoted to Australian Jewish writing).

This editorial was also significant for two other reasons. Firstly, in an indication of the incipient digital transformation of scholarly publishing that would impact upon all literary journals in the coming years, it was announced that *Westerly* now 'has its own home page on the Internet' and looked forward to the possibility of 'internet subscriptions'. And secondly, it was announced that John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan had joined the *Westerly* team as editorial consultants. Kinsella had been a contributor for some time, and he and Ryan would both go on to make substantial contributions to the journal not only in their editorial capacities but also by regularly authoring reviews, articles and creative content. Indeed the following issue (1:1997) gave notice that Ryan would be replacing the redoubtable Fay Zwicky as poetry editor, with Zwicky having served two terms in the role dating back to the mid-1970s.

The year was bookended by another change to the editorial staff, with the final issue (4:1997) announcing a minor shake up, with Margot Luke and Julie Lewis retiring as the joint fiction editors. Luke is one of a number of individuals who had a long engagement with *Westerly*, with her involvement stretching across three decades. It was also announced that the incoming editorial advisor for prose would be established fiction writer Chris McLeod, joining Ryan (poetry) and Brenda Walker (reviews).

The summer special issue (4:1997) was also noteworthy for its innovative marriage of words and images. Guest edited by Jenny de Garis and carrying the title 'In Lines and Colour: Art and Literature', the issue included a series of brief articles in which nearly thirty authors responded to some six works of art (by Arthur

Boyd, Margaret Olley, Richard Larter, Janenne Eaton, John Brack and Guy Grey-Smith) drawn from the collection of the University's Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. This opening section was supported by a further five critical articles that addressed a number of aspects of the intersection between art and literature. This issue—which incidentally briefly reintroduced colour reproduction to the journal's internal pages—served as a savvy and timely reminder of the variety of representation and interpretation that *Westerly* had long championed and practiced.

Indeed in reviewing the articles published during this second half of the 1990s, it is 'variety' that is the hallmark. There was still plenty of room given to established forms of critical literary readings and scholarship based around single authors (both historical and contemporary) or thematic studies, but the journal was also open to articles that explored general aspects of contemporary literary culture, charting changes in the practice of writing, reading and research. Examples include Kevin Brophy writing on the emergence and effect of university based creative writing courses (3:1997); John Ralph on the use of pre-textual drafts (manuscripts) in critical practice (3:1998); Brophy again on the use of fiction as a classroom-based research tool (2:1999); and Peter Burke reflecting on some of the dilemmas involved in his own practice of writing historical fiction (4:1999).

In so far as any theme could be discerned in the critical work, it might be grouped under that very-90s concern with 'identity'. In several cases this was reflected in the identity-politics associated with authorship, including the celebrated cases of Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson (3:1996, 1:1998) and Helen Darville/Demidenko (2:1996, 1:1997). The concern with identity also spilled into critical examination or discussion of various aspects of identity formation, with an emphasis on forms of hybridity. For example Indonesian poet Goenawan Mohamad reflects on his exposure to Australian literature and culture (1:1996); Silvia Albertazzi on 'translated indentity' (2:1997); Andrew Taylor (3:1998) and Kathryn Buselich (4:1998) consider various textual representations of cross-cultural identity in

an increasingly ethnically diverse Australia; and Miriam Lo (4: 1999) contemplates the potential for cross-language translation to reflect the complexity of hybrid identity. *Westerly* was clearly mirroring a nation (and a world) in which, to borrow Lo's words, 'dislocation, fracture and strange new unions' (9) were increasingly the norm. Indeed it was becoming ever more apparent that the interconnections between Australian and Asian identity and culture that the journal had long featured were increasingly real and relevant.

Perhaps also drawing inspiration from issues of identity the 'author interview' was a popular form during this period, giving authors the opportunity to establish and validate their own authorial presence and identity by reference to their literary craft and lineage. Interview subjects included Kim Scott, Dorothy Hewett and Rodney Hall (3:1996); David Foster (1:1997); Ruby Langford-Ginibi (2:1997); Bruce Dawe (1:1998); and Venero Armanno (2:1999).

The continued well-being of the *Westerly* creative writing pages was apparent in the late 1990s, with comfortably in excess of half of each issue dedicated to poetry and short fiction. But quality was also consistently high, as can be evidenced by scanning the poetry pages at random. Issue 1:1998 illustrates the point particularly well, with new poems from (amongst others) Peter Porter, Bruce Dawe, John Kinsella, John Masteer, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Philip Salom. And whereas the presence of widely published poets and fiction writers continued to be a feature of the creative writing pages, many 'first-timers' also had the thrill of being published alongside those with established national and international reputations.

This mentoring by the editors of a rising generation of young writers and scholars was a feature of the journal in this period. While young and aspiring authors were frequently exposed through the *Westerly* pages, issue 1:1998 announced that the special issue for the year would be a 'young writers issue', focusing on those under the age of thirty. The announcement noted that this issue would be published thirty years after the last such initiative, and reiterated the names of the numerous now established writers who had been featured in that

1968 issue. The fostering of young talent also extended to the editing of this special issue, with established poet Andrew Burke (who was himself one of the young talents featured in the 1968 issue) being assisted by ‘twenty-somethings’ in Sarah French and Shaun Tan. Perhaps it is no coincidence that French has since gone on to become a successful poet, while Tan remains the only Academy Award winner to edit an issue of *Westerly*.

The editorial support for emerging talent also applied to *Westerly*’s scholarly content throughout this period. PhD students from UWA (and elsewhere) were frequent contributors, most commonly as reviewers but also providing full-length articles. A number of these authors have gone on to make significant contributions in academic positions in universities in Western Australia or elsewhere, including Tony Hughes-D’Aeth, Tanya Dalziel, Angeline O’Neill, Roberta Buffi, Deborah Hunn, Tony Simoes da Silva, Lucy Dougan and Stephanie Green. Notably, Hughes-D’Aeth would also eventually emerge in a senior editorial role with *Westerly*, and Dougan as an editorial assistant.

Not only was new talent emerging in this period, but so too were new regimes of research assessment that would significantly influence Australian scholarship and publishing in the coming years. Issue 3:1998, was therefore the first to carry (in ominously bold type) the declaration that ‘All academic papers published in *Westerly* are fully refereed’. Refereeing of scholarly publications has long been the norm in science disciplines but has less of a tradition (and arguably, purpose) in the humanities. However, increased government oversight of research and publishing has effectively mandated that this external review of submissions be used as the benchmark for independence and quality. While refereeing is largely transparent to readers, it is anything but to editorial staff responsible for managing the process, for whom it adds a considerable workload.

A change to the senior editorial team came at the end of 1998, when Ron Shapiro stepped aside to leave Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell once again working as a co-editorial team of two. In terms of *Westerly*’s immediate future, however, a more significant upheaval



came of the end of the following year. The third issue of 1999 included an 'Announcement' of a quite radical shakeup for the journal, with the decision made that from 2000 *Westerly* would be an annual publication, with the single number to appear in November/December. It was also announced that the journal would be affiliated with the John Kinsella edited *Salt*, then being published in the UK. The announcement reported that these changes were the result of recent 'government funding cutbacks to universities [that] have resulted in the withdrawal of administrative support for the magazine' (2). The editors repeated the announcement in the following issue (4:1999), this time quite presciently prefaced with the declaration that, 'No, we're not worried about the milenium [sic] bug', and also declaring that under the new arrangement the journal would achieve 'much wider distribution, and a broader and more international profile' (2). Several years later in a further editorial (2005) Bird and Haskell provided additional explanation, noting that the decision to shift to an annual volume had been driven by 'a reduction in funding to Australian universities and difficulties created by the Australia Council' (10). They also noted that the change 'enabled the publication of a large issue more acceptable to bookshops because it had a labelled spine and resembled a book' (10). This attempt to increase circulation by producing a more 'bookshop friendly' version of the journal seems also to have been behind the earlier decision to reduce the physical size to A5. There is no evidence, however, that significantly improved bookshop sales were achieved by either change, and subscriptions have remained the principal means for *Westerly's* distribution.

While the editors put a brave and optimistic face on the decision to publish only one issue per year, it cannot have been easily or willingly made. The outcome was inevitably that *Westerly* published a reduced volume of both creative and critical writing. While the first of the annual issues (2000) was expanded to 200 pages (retaining the A5 format), it nonetheless amounted to significantly less pages in the course of a year than had been the case with the four issues, which had

recently been in the range of 130–150 pages each. For authors looking for the rapid publication of new work there was also the inevitable disincentive in having to wait for an annual publishing cycle.

The first annual issue also revealed further changes on the editorial front, with Pat Jacobs commencing as editorial advisor for prose, and Marcella Polain in the poetry role. This issue also announced a slight geographical re-alignment, likely influenced by the association with *Salt*, with a brief note from the editors declaring that the journal's 'area of concern has been extended to include the whole of Asia, rather than just the Indian Ocean region as previously' (6). Another (unannounced) change commenced with this issue was that the annual format made the established reviewing function somewhat redundant, and it was therefore replaced by three invited, lengthy review essays covering recent publications in the areas of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. While this shift to an overview of recent publishing may have been forced upon the editors, it proved to be a remarkably successful response to *Westerly's* changed circumstances. The challenge of summarising a year's output of writing and publishing has attracted many of the country's foremost academic critics and writers and provided them with an ideal forum for some feisty appraisals not

only of individual titles, but of the wider condition of Aust lit.

The annual issue for 2002 used its front cover to announce the somewhat sombre contents, by breaking with the tradition of using (mostly) Western Australian artwork in favour of a dual photographic portrait of Peter Cowan and Dorothy Hewett. Cowan (b. 1914) and Hewett (b. 1923) had passed away in the middle of the year, and both had made substantial contributions to *Westerly*, Cowan in his long stint as editor, and Hewett

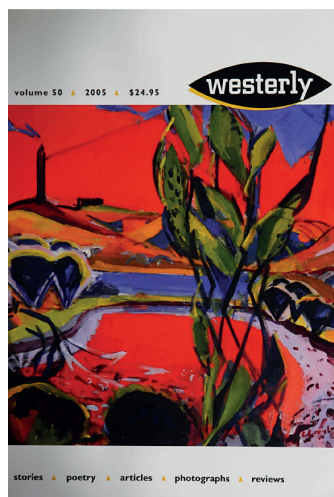


as both author and subject. Bruce Bennett in a pair of lively accounts of these two contrasting personalities, chose not to dwell on their contributions to *Westerly* but rather to emphasise their importance as major figures in the national literature.

Sadly, the front cover of the following issue (48, 2003) also carried a portrait of a recently deceased author with a strong *Westerly* affiliation, former fiction editor Julie Lewis. The issue commenced with a remembrance of Lewis' life and work by Pat Jacobs, and continued with extracts from Lewis' own dictated memoir of the disease that eventually killed her, edited by Joan London. This issue also saw the introduction of a new fiction editor in Brenda Walker, while Mark Reid took over the task for poetry.

The annual issue for 2005 was, not surprisingly, used to mark *Westerly's* half-century. In a journal not given to lengthy editorialising, Bird and Haskell took several pages to summarise a number of the important achievements of this period; to foreground some of the major changes the journal had experienced over its span; and to look forward by speculating that 'Who knows? In fifty years time subscribers to *Westerly* may read it off their visually enhanced mobile phones' (11). Typically, however, the celebration was tempered by a note of caution that the existence of small literary journals 'is always fragile, dependent on a relatively small number of dedicated readers, the sponsorship of government arts bodies and philanthropists, and the energy of a few dedicated individuals mostly working in their spare time' (9).

The editors also invited and received a contribution from former editor (and then still serving editorial consultant) Bruce Bennett. In an article bearing the title, '*Westerly*



through the rear-view mirror', Bennett surveyed his own time as editor, highlighting, *inter alia*, the role of the journal in helping to 'foster a remarkable renaissance in the short story over this period' (15). He also emphasised two points also made in the Bird and Haskell editorial, by noting *Westerly's* significant contribution not only to Western Australia as a region, but to the appreciation of Australian regionalism more generally; and the journal's longstanding and continuing commitment to freedom of expression.

This special issue also put on full display *Westerly's* ongoing vitality and relevance. It was, fittingly, a 'bumper' issue. Weighing in at 296 pages it was the largest issue yet produced, and the number of Western Australian poets (thirty four) and fiction writers (twenty) who responded to the editors' request for material for this celebratory issue was proof of both the vitality of creative writing in the West and the continued high regard held for the journal. On a sadder note this issue also noted the passing of long-time former fiction editor, Margot Luke (1925–2005).

This 50th anniversary issue was launched at The University of Western Australia on December 1st, 2005, by the then Premier Dr Geoff Gallop. Dr Gallop's speech recalled many of the journal's high points of the past five decades, noting many of those who had either provided editorial guidance during this period or made their mark as authors. Modestly, he neglected to mention his own contribution (as Geoffrey Gallop) as a review author some twenty years previously.

*Westerly* entered its sixth decade in apparently good health. The journal continued to be guided by the long established and experienced editorial team of Bird and Haskell, and despite the ongoing financial pressures had been (as we would now say) both 'restructured' and 'right-sized' in order to remain viable.

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## The Little Magazine in the Digital Age: 2006–2014

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth

I have the task of bringing this history of *Westerly* up to the present moment. Anyone who has read histories that do this will notice that there is always a slight, unavoidable wobble as the spectre of present reality starts to disturb the calm description of the past. So, perhaps I will start from the point of the present and get it out of the way. At present *Westerly* exists in a still functioning ecology of little magazines including *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *Island* and *The Griffith Review*. We all still adhere, more or less, to the basic twentieth-century idea of a magazine that mixes creative writing with critical commentary and selling this on a subscription basis to a small but loyal coterie of readers. But there have been major changes to this ecology, the most significant of them being brought about by the inauguration of the digital age, whose heralds we have already seen in the earlier essays. In this sense, little *Westerly* is no less exposed than Rupert Murdoch. It is worth noting that *The Bulletin*, the most important magazine in Australian history, closed its doors during this period—2008 to be exact—after 128 years. Its owner Kerry Packer died in 2005 and his son James has since moved out of publishing and into casinos—at least that way you can control the odds.

The digital age has also transformed the academic world that has nurtured *Westerly* for nearly 60 years. The Law library at UWA bears practically no resemblance to the place where I spent two miserable years as an undergraduate in the early 1990s. The long dusty rows of shelves bearing the law reports are all gone and in their place are little islands of computer terminals. Over in the Reid library, things are changing just as surely. The catalogue is now as likely to list an e-book as one in paper and journals have almost all gone online, often exclusively. Typically, now, one does not subscribe to a journal but searches online with keywords and strikes articles directly. Academic journals are no longer gatekeepers but knowledge brokers whose main function is to referee and ratify articles so that they may enter the academic knowledge market which is now run by large publishing groups—akin to supermarkets or Amazon.com—who aggregate articles and sell these electronic archives to libraries who make them available to their users. With the advent of this new environment, *Westerly* has been repeatedly approached to join the stable of one or other of these companies, but has steadfastly refused. The reason was not just that we wished to preserve our autonomy, but that the mixture of creative writing and critical essays did not map very well onto the models of these businesses. Even creative writing was being drawn into the digital octopus: the first Kindle was released in November 2007, the first iPad in April 2010.

But what were things like in 2006 for *Westerly*? As we saw in Paul Genoni's essay, *Westerly* had been publishing as an annual since 2000. This continued in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The journal continued to be edited by the indefatigable pair of Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, with editorial assistance from Brenda Walker and Richard Rossiter (prose) and Andrew Taylor (poetry), and cover designs by Robyn Mundy. These last three of the annuals contain a number of significant publications. In 2006, there was a reminiscence from the long-lost original editor (1956-57) of *Westerly*, Robert Smith, who had seen notice of the 50th anniversary of *Westerly* and made contact with the magazine. Smith provides a vignette of the intellectual and

cultural milieu that saw *Westerly* take over from the *Winthrop Review* as the journal of the Arts Union at UWA. It was a time in which geographical isolation was met by a mixture of self-reliance and an active reaching out to the world—most remarkably, in *Westerly*'s case, the Asian world so long the subject of ignorance and antipathy in Australia. The poetry in the 2006 issue contains work by poets emerging at the time, notably Sarah French and Michael Farrell. The 2006 issue also contains a valuable interview with Ray Coffey, a co-founder of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press (now Fremantle Press). And speaking of Fremantle, there is, too, an essay by Graham Nowland on 'the port as a threshold of consciousness' which reviews the treatment of Fremantle in the approximately 75 (!) novels in which it appeared between 1879 and 2006. This essay pairs nicely with Alison Bartlett's in the 2007 issue on Craig Silvey's portrait of Fremantle from his debut novel, *Rhubarb* (2004).

A lot can happen in a year, so in 2007 *Westerly* was again in commemorative mode, celebrating the life and work of one of Australia's leading post-war writers, Elizabeth Jolley (whose portrait by Ben Joel graces the cover) and the groundbreaking ecologist and theorist of landscape, George Seddon. Each had significant connections to *Westerly*, with some of Jolley's earliest work appearing in *Westerly* ('The Rhyme' 4:1967, 46–49) and there was an issue of *Westerly* devoted to her work in 1986. Seddon's pioneering regional environmentalism found a strong ally in *Westerly*, particularly in long-time editors Peter Cowan and Bruce Bennett. Cowan was an early environmental campaigner, writing for newspapers and fighting to save remnant urban bushland (such as Lake Claremont), and his fiction showed a detailed attention to ecological matters that was certainly ahead of its time and recognised as such by other early literary environmentalists like Judith Wright. Bennett, too, was committed to regionalism, place and the environment. Seddon's work appeared in and was enthusiastically reviewed by *Westerly* under the editorship of Cowan and Bennett during the 70s and 80s. Perhaps less known is that Seddon reviewed Randolph Stow's first

volume of poems *Act One* in the first number of the 1958 *Westerly*. The three reminiscences on Jolley—by Lucy Frost, her biographer Brian Dibble, and Tim Winton—are each significant, but Winton's in particular is important because, for one, he rarely writes literary criticism and also, because Winton is the most famous of the many hundreds of aspiring writers that Jolley taught in creative writing at Curtin University and in workshops elsewhere.

Another nationally renowned creative writer to have found a home at Curtin is Kim Scott and his increasing prominence is seen in this decade of *Westerly*. There is an essay on 'rhizomatic kinship' in his work by Hilary Emmett in the 2007 issue. Kim Scott's own essay, 'A Noongar Voice, An Anomalous History', in the 2008 issue is an important contribution to the contact historiography of the south coast of WA and essential reading for anyone studying the intellectual evolution of Scott's second Miles Franklin-winning novel, *That Deadman Dance* (2010). This novel was written under the auspices of a creative writing doctorate at UWA and supervised by *Westerly* editor, Dennis Haskell. Another Indigenous writer doing a PhD in creative writing with Haskell was the Noongar / Yamatji poet Alf Taylor, whose poem 'Hear This, You Elders' appears in the 2007 issue. The emergence of Aboriginal history and experience into the mainstream of Australian life is something all too easy to take for granted. This was a period of significant contest around the place of Indigeneity in the narrative of Australia, seen in the 'history wars' sparked by Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, 2002; 2008. There was also a secondary contest between historians and creative writers epitomised in the clash between Inga Clendinnen and Kate Grenville in which Clendinnen (*Quarterly Essay* 3:2006) criticised Grenville for comments she made about the ability of fiction to capture history in ways that were missed by historians. So Kim Scott was certainly working within a charged atmosphere.

2007 also saw the launch of a major new competitor to *Westerly* in the Western Australian literary scene—*Indigo Magazine*, edited by Donna Ward. *Indigo* had grown out of the lively 'Out of the



Asylum' writers' group based at the Fremantle Arts Centre (a former asylum). *Indigo* was dedicated entirely to Western Australian writing and during its four annual editions, the last in 2010, introduced a significant new space for WA writers. To that extent, it was heartily welcomed by *Westerly*, and we advertised *Indigo* in *Westerly* (and they advertised us) and attended each other's launches. *Indigo* did hurt *Westerly* in one direct way, however, when they were preferred for ArtsWA funding in 2008. This was understandable in a two-horse race because *Westerly* clearly served other interests as well as those of WA writers. Nevertheless, concerted lobbying by *Westerly* editors and others convinced Arts bureaucrats, and the independently appointed funding committees they convened, that *Westerly* and *Indigo* could and should co-exist. Indeed, with renewed funding from the State Government we were able to publish two issues in 2009 and have been publishing biannually since then. So, in some ways, *Indigo* was a blessing in disguise because it forced a concerted rethink of our purpose and mission.

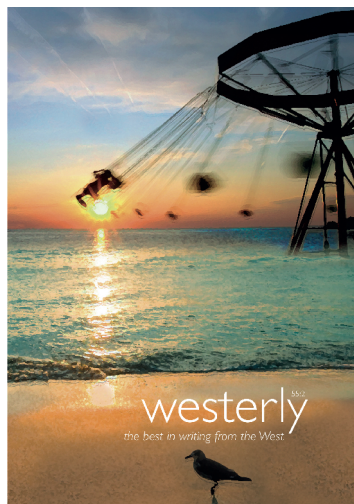
The first of the bi-annual editions appears as 54:1 (2009) with a completely fresh design from Robyn Mundy. The design featured a full-colour bleed of the cover image (a delightful beach scene by Helen Norton) and a new by-line—'the best in writing from the West'—probably inspired (though not consciously) by the emergence of *Indigo* and a need to remind state funding bodies that we served a crucial function for local writers. The title word 'westerly' appeared in lower case and was part of the successful design overhaul by Mundy and Delys Bird that has been used ever since. Inside the covers of the first 2009 issue was a set of three essays on the artwork of 'Eddie Burrup', the fictional, Aboriginal persona used by the artist Elizabeth Durack (1915–2000). When the identity of 'Eddie Burrup' was revealed in 1996, a storm of controversy erupted, and it was seen as yet another egregious case of cultural appropriation. It was not enough that the Duracks had stolen the land of Aboriginal people to build their 'Grass Castles', now they wanted to steal their identity as well. So the argument went, and there was certainly some merit in

the charge. But it was not quite the same as the other identity hoaxes ('Helen Demidenko', 'Wanda Koolmatrie') that were the almost inevitable result of the fetishisation of 'identity' in the 1990s. A decade or so on, this revisiting of the debate in the pages of *Westerly*—by Louise Morrison, Ted Snell and Durack's daughter, Perpetua Durack Clancy—added some much needed nuance to what was a complex cultural situation. Other important contributions in this issue were a history of Fremantle Arts Centre Press's earlier years by Per Henningsgaard and an account of the production of Dorothy Hewett's landmark feminist/autobiographical play, *The Chapel Perilous* (1970) by Susan Sheridan. The play was written while Hewett worked at UWA and the *Westerly* office peeks out onto the stage of the open air New Fortune Theatre whose unique qualities Hewett used to great effect in this production. The first issue of 2009 was the last co-edited by Dennis Haskell, who had been in the role since 1985. The issue also contained three essays—by Michael Wilding, Robert Dixon, and Jennifer Strauss—from a mini-conference to mark the retirement of Bruce Bennett from formal academic life.

The move to bi-annual publishing allowed the return of the practice of devoting one issue each year to a particular theme. The special issues in the ensuing years were amongst the most important work that *Westerly* has done in recent times. In the middle of 2009 I joined the *Westerly* editorial partnership, working with Delys Bird, and filling the considerable shoes of Dennis Haskell. Dennis had accepted an appointment as the Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and rightly regarded this as inconsistent with editing *Westerly*. The second issue of 2009 is one that stands right near the top of *Westerly's* achievements over the decades. It was an all-Indigenous issue guest-edited by mother-son duo, Sally Morgan and Blaze Kwaymullina. The emphasis was, understandably, on Western Australian Indigenous writing—Noongar, Yamatji, Bardi, Palkyu, Nkinja, Malgana—but there are also contributions from prominent Sydney artist Bronwyn Bancroft, whose image provides the cover, and South Australian elder of the Adnyamathanha Yura

peoples, Walha Udi Marvyn-anha (Frederick McKenzie Snr). There are poems, memoirs, traditional dreaming stories and a short-story by Kim Scott, 'A Refreshing Sleep', that centres on a massacre site from near his ancestors' country on the south coast.

The highlight of 2010 was a special issue devoted to the work of Randolph Stow. Stow had died in May of that year and Dennis Haskell organised a commemoration at UWA's Winthrop Hall, which involved Stow's extended family. Three previously unpublished Stow poems were procured and there were essays on Stow by Gabrielle Carey, Bruce Bennett, Tony Hassall, Roger Averill and Sam Dutton. A lovely image of a merry-go-round in the sea was created for the occasion by Rosalie Okely.



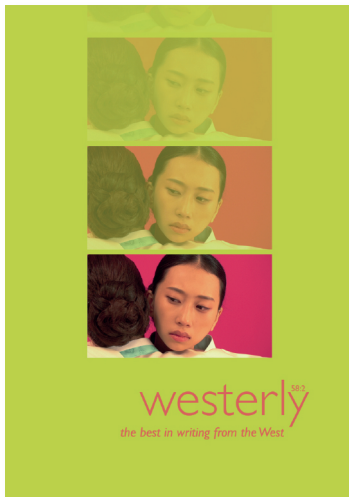
2010 also marked the arrival of Lucy Dougan as a dedicated administrator for *Westerly*. Lucy's appointment was made possible by establishment funding for the Chair of Australian Literature, for which UWA had successfully bid when the former Howard government had decided, out of the blue, that Australian literature needed a Federal boost. The first appointed chair was Philip Mead and his arrival has significantly helped the Westerly Centre and *Westerly* magazine.

In February 2011 the Westerly Centre hosted a symposium to honour the retirement of Dennis Haskell and the first issue of that year contained a number of the contributions to that conference. The papers at the symposium reflected the particular interests that had marked Dennis's career—poetry and poetics, Asian literature and Australian literary culture. The second issue of 2011 was guest-edited by Shalmalee Palekar under the title 'South/East Asia', featuring writers from across India and the Indian diaspora, but also

from Nepal, Malaysia and the Philippines. 2012 started with the devastating news that Bruce Bennett had died after a battle with cancer. A commemoration was held at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. Bennett had joined the Editorial Board of *Westerly* in 1968, became co-editor with Peter Cowan in 1975 and steered the magazine through most of the next two decades, before leaving to take up a chair in Canberra in 1993, while always remaining in touch with *Westerly*.

The special issue for 2012 was 'Writing and Ethics' and built partly upon a session hosted by *Westerly* magazine at the Perth Writers' Festival that year as well as a number of other writers that were contacted to contribute to the topic. Benjamin Law wrote about the evolution of ethics in the emerging sphere known as social media, which has troubled the traditional distinction between public and private expression. Alice Pung wrote about the decisions she made in writing autobiographically, a topic also tackled by Rozanna Lilley, daughter of Dorothy Hewett. There was also an emphasis on Aboriginal writing, with essays by Kim Scott and Blaze Kwaymullina that comment on the imprisonment of Aboriginal people and by Tiffany Shellam and Clint Bracknell on the contact history of the south coast of Western Australia. A panel at the Perth Writers' Festival was again the inspiration for the special

issue—"The Beauty Issue"—in 2013. Stemming from a polemical essay by Dennis Haskell, the issue confronted the perception that art and literature had, for various reasons, moved away from the celebration of beauty. The issue intersected with the 'Bliss' exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and three artists featured in that exhibition contributed to the beauty debate in this issue. Ali Alizadeh responds to Haskell's essay by arguing that beauty was still a crucial element of art, but it was not



beauty as it had been traditionally defined. Cathryne Sanders wrote about the aesthetics of Australian houses as they have appeared in a range of novels and Susan Lever discussed the concept of beauty in the fiction of David Foster.

2013 also lists for the first time a 'Web Editor', a role taken on by Paul Clifford. Paul had originally worked on a long-standing *Westerly* project to digitise its back-set. A project finally completed in 2013 which meant that every issue of *Westerly* going back to 1956 could be downloaded free from the *Westerly* website. Paul also rebuilt the website—westerlymag.com.au—replacing the rather primitive site that existed previously and gave us a significantly enhanced digital presence, including independently sourced content not found in the printed edition. Entering 2014, Delys Bird announced this would be her last year as *Westerly* editor, a role she has fulfilled for twenty-two years, joining Dennis as co-editor in 1992, with the departure of Bruce Bennett. I also announced my intention to step down, although after a much shorter tenure. It is not possible to adequately capture the sheer energy and commitment that Delys has brought to the role of editor. The recent years have been happy ones in the life of *Westerly*. With the arrival of Lucy Dougan and Paul Clifford, there has been a really excellent team of dedicated workers. Delys runs a tight ship and we all know when each stage of the journal's production must be completed. There is also the gruelling, never-ending rounds of funding applications and grant acquittals that take so much time and energy. Even in an age of dwindling subscriptions there has been no let-up in the quantity (or quality) of submissions and these are dealt with by Lucy and Delys in the first instance before being sent out to our independent fiction and poetry editors. These latter roles are fulfilled by esteemed local writers, and have included Mike Williams, Julianne van Loon and Amanda Curtin (prose) and Barbara Temperton and Roland Leach (poetry).

The current reality is a digital one and *Westerly* has entered it with a new and independently housed website, digitally co-published issues, a complete digitisation of its back-set and even a 'face' on

FaceBook. New opportunities and challenges await the transformations that digital life is instituting. In 2007, Megan McKinlay's volume of poetry *Cleanskin* was chosen above 52 other manuscripts and published, thanks to one-off funding from ArtsWA, as a special supplement to *Westerly* together with a CD of her reading the poems and with an introduction by Dennis Haskell. The first poem, 'Spoken Word Blues' takes up some of these matters with an understandable ambivalence:

*Westerly* says  
that they'll make a CD,  
that they'll burn us and render us  
digitally.

McKinlay's poem is prescient, even in its irony, about the direction the world was moving in.





POETRY

*Fay Zwicky has published eight books of poetry, most recently Picnic (Giramondo, 2006); edited several anthologies of Australian poetry, a book of short stories, Hostages and a collection of critical essays, The Lyre in the Pawnshop. Her awards include the NSW Premier's Award, the WA Premier's Award, the Patrick White Award and the Christopher Brennan Award.*

In Rehab.

## Fay Zwicky

Dr Kiberu comes at dusk  
pierced with the passion of dense knowledge,  
a cool Nigerian cat in black,  
geriatric oncologist supremo.  
His winking buckle guides my eye. I've been so lucky.

Propped on my air mattress like the Pope  
taking stock from a high window, a grand  
river vista shrouded in mist, dotted with  
little lights, my head full of Wordsworth and  
Westminster—O school, O poetry, O history—

*The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*  
Not everyone has been privy to such visionary  
company: was ever such a time before or since?



After long silence my broken world sits sweet  
with memory, its beauty dries my tongue.  
He said it's not the best news, could be worse.  
There are two kinds: aggressive and less aggressive.  
Are you religious?

I said I could be but not so you'd notice.  
Religion's not my business, said the doctor.  
Comfort, maybe. I wish I'd better news for you.  
Being well brought up I thanked him warmly.  
My mother would have been so proud.

At least some things were shared—our shortened  
breath for one. And Dad would have produced his  
corny oft-repeated joke about all being quiet  
on the Western Front. I didn't get it in the old days  
but couldn't face his halting repetitions, feigned  
to know the gist in our formal family way: there  
would be all those years ahead to understand.

*Shirley Geok-lin Lim has published three collections of short stories and seven of poetry; two novels; and a memoir, Among the White Moon Faces (American Book Award). She was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980.*

## Palimpsest

### Shirley Lim

Malacca's hot and noisy  
alleys, sluggish monsoon drains  
gurgling oily water swirling  
past drowned Norway rats, cardboard  
trash and floating pink plastics.  
Goleta's broad and silent streets,  
sunny mute in dry July,  
lavender spikes, fallen mashed  
maroon plums on sidewalks.

Yellow petals of golden  
showers cover where I walk.  
In June it was royal purple  
jacaranda flowers. White oleander  
and crimson bougainvillea drape  
like dramatic curtains that will  
never open for a play.

The old tragedies and loves  
play on in the ancient Stadthaus,  
ghosts of Portuguese nuns  
mysteriously with child  
mysteriously dead, ghosts  
of the massacred and mysterious lost

in history books, and actors  
strutting their power, pressing  
the rabble people like yellow  
petals underfoot.

Home stretch

Shirley Lim

Homing in, homely, homesick—  
a word raising tremors  
and combats—returning  
and leaving, funeral  
and rest home, a word with no  
stillness, no stand still.

Homing pigeons, home schooled,  
home cooking. Homing  
device and where the heart is—  
neither infallible  
for the home stretch.

*Fabiyas M V is a prizewinning writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India, the author of Moonlight and Solitude. His fiction and poetry have been published in numerous journals and anthologies.*

## My Illiterate Mother

### Fabiyas M V

A software to read and write is not installed  
in my mom's system.  
We download pages of ignorance. Sometimes,  
her monitor is blank.

Our neighbours wake up hearing the divine songs  
from a rural temple,  
when I jump up listening to the metal words  
rattling in the kitchen.

She pours calumnies into the ear-buckets nearby  
from her vast tank.  
There are pores on her palms, and her liquid money  
always leaks through.

My dad is often tossed on her tongue. Today  
the sea is serene.  
I hear the roar of some unnamed anxieties  
from her white shell.

I grew up on her barren lap. My tap-root  
went down so deep.  
I resisted the droughts. Thanks, Mom. I owe you for  
all my burning blooms.

*John Mateer's most recent books are Unbelievers, or 'The Moor' and Emptiness: Asian Poems 1998–2012. He is currently developing a radio-work with the Malay people of Katanning and the Cocos-Keeling Islands for the international contemporary art project SPACED2: Future Recall.*

## Three Cape Town Sonnets

from *João of iGoli*

### John Mateer

They didn't believe he could speak their Afrikaans,  
so all the way to the party in Woodstock the Queen's  
English was theirs, even with Sha and João's seeming  
aloofness. Maybe she'd invited him along on the chance  
they would kiss, start something. The hip house was red  
inside, a carved wildebeest trophy up on the wall,  
a guide to Xhosa on the table, everyone knowing, employed.  
Sha was angelic, glorious in her new dress, taller  
than her shadow. In those days poor João's soul  
was as broken as a bottle, his mind just an ear  
straining to hear what shattered in the gutter. All  
he thought, when Sha's gay cousin rhapsodized on the wonderful  
darkness of his Congolese man, was: *We are now  
in that future we almost lost.* Always innocent, our João!

Almost a nest, among the boulders up on Devil's Peak,  
the rubbish, mattress of newspapers, cardboard folded  
over into a bed: a bergie's home. João, weak  
from a melancholy that meant he couldn't eat  
and had to pretend to be present, saw that memory, unfaded,  
of his last visit to the Mother City, those misty  
paths along the Mountain and the chains up Lion's Head,

where his Dad, long gone, had taken him, reminiscing  
on when his own father had force-marched him, The Boy. Patriarchs  
always want to be Moses, but are really disconsolate, homeless,  
all wandering up the Mountain until mist or dark  
descends forcing them into caves, sleep's wilderness,  
that dassies, bergies or even devils won't dare enter.  
João, remembering, thought, *Men roam the world to be fatherless.*

There in the glarey Sea Point street stands his grandmother  
as if in an eternally summery Lisbon, this dear, proper woman,  
thin from eating too little and smoking, one eye covered  
with cotton-wool, the black patch. This João remembered  
nearly half a life later: their leaving and her standing alone.  
She must have been talking, yet, like his own mother,  
withdrawn, stoic. Still, to him she was newly from Tristan da Cunha,  
love-child of a temperate nymph and privateer or sailor,  
quietly hopeful of a new life after the volcano, between India  
and grim London. What, João, is that your last and earliest memory,  
of a castaway wordlessly blinking, looking past you,  
staring forever up at Table Mountain, that huge wall, its blue?  
Always remember whole continents were found by being lost.  
Anyway, according to Tibetans, *Mother is Space, her depths you.*

*Nandi Chinna is a poet, essayist and researcher at ECU.  
Her latest poetry collection is Swamp; walking the  
wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain, and her poem 'Cut  
and Paste Lake' won the 2014 Tom Collins Poetry Prize.*

## The Green Jumper

### Nandi Chinna

As his frame began to disappear into his skin,  
arms poking out like kindling,  
his chest a collapsed nest  
abandoned by birds;  
I gave my father the green jumper.

He pulled it over his head and grinned,  
*gee whizz this is a really good jumper.*  
He kept it for best, for going to town,  
wearing it layered over the top of an older,  
more frayed jumper, but still feeling cold.

Months after he died I find it  
stuffed behind the driver's seat of his ute;  
a curled sleeping animal  
smelling of sweat and dust.

When I hand wash the jumper  
the water in the sink swirls black.  
I push and pull, kneading out the clay earth,  
the farm dogs and diesel,  
the traces of medication and disease.

Five times I wring and sluice,  
the freshwater becoming  
lighter and lighter,  
but never running clear.



*Peter Bibby is a poet and dramatist whose work is widely published. His broadcast work includes the verse feature Island Weekend (ABC). He was founding editor of Magabala Books, Broome.*

## The Young Cousins

### Peter Bibby

I love to see them jumping off together  
and backwards, let the air and the river  
receive them with plaudits and splashes  
let the divinities of the waters divide  
as they overarm to crowd beneath the ladder  
their faces bunched, a family of flowers.

In so doing this together they declare  
some with fingers pinched on their noses  
a backstep ahead, some a breath behind  
with mock dismay but calm in daring  
they know not where but know they are going  
six in a backward jump at the count of three.

The wet wood of the decking is a mirror  
the surface waits for what will emerge.

*Caitlin Maling has published poetry throughout Australia, including recently in Best Australian Poems and Australian Poetry. Her first collection Conversations I've Never Had is forthcoming with Fremantle Press.*

## Donnelly River, 13

### Caitlin Maling

On the diving board above the dank dam water  
Luke's lifting up my bikini top again.  
A Ceausescu baby, he arrived fully formed,  
since then he's never not been touching one of us  
and I think his parents named him after a Disciple  
so he would always be surrounded by hovering ghosts and histories.  
On the banks below, all my parent's friends are on second marriages,  
3rd homes, and my divorced parents who are 4th and 5th generation  
go back just as far as this country lets us.

I wish the water wasn't water.

I'm sick of falling and righting and warming and cooling.  
On the edge of the board, fighting off Luke's need for closeness,  
I'm just jumping and jumping and hoping for wooden splintering or  
flight.  
I try to name the things I see in time with jumping  
and it's all paper-bark-gum; snowy-gum; white-gum; red-gum; mallee.  
Every family holiday in Australia might as well just be gum-gum-  
gum-gum-  
gum-gum-gum. It doesn't matter that they have leaves  
and sometimes flower, nothing falls,  
the sky is always a eucalypt haze stretching,  
making you think there's a horizon.

In the water, my sister has figured out how to lock her legs round my  
middle,  
hands round my neck and push me under.  
No matter how I land she's on me.  
Each time she circles her arms and expects me to float,  
I dive to where the water's only brown, like you're inside amber.  
Only I know to follow the air up  
once it erupts past your teeth like a hatred  
and fights the sediment to the surface.  
If I jump high and straight enough,  
slash into the water toes and fingers flexed down,  
maybe I can plant myself among the weeds  
and let the bottom-dwellers refine me, skin-fleck by skin-fleck.

Still things can change.  
Dad was shoveling sand to protect his new baby  
while I watched from the porch hammock,  
my copy of Mishima on my chest like a confession stone.  
The sound of the shovel in the half-granite dirt making me look over  
my pages  
as a snake with storm-cloud skin came through the house,  
down the steps, and straight at Dad still shovelling  
I said nothing  
yet Dad turned in time struck the head clean off.  
The park owner said it must've been the mother-snake;  
now the babies would die without her to dig them out.  
Dad's wife made us move cabins anyways.

Now, next to my towel, the boy from the next door cabin is calling out,  
asking me when I'm coming down  
and if I want to walk back along the track together.  
He's a high-jumper at WAIS, which means he's hot,  
a boy who would normally throw stuff at me on the bus,

but here I'm the only teenage girl,  
so he's willing to pretend for both of us that I'm hot too.

Last night I practiced mothering his younger brother.  
I held him on my lap, stroked his hair  
and let the high-jumper see how I could care.  
I told the boy his autism was ok with me.  
But he'd never been told he was different  
and he leapt from the top bunk like he was being axed from himself.  
He ran round the small cabin punching the walls,  
screaming *I'm not special, I'm not*.  
His parents said I should leave,  
so the high-jumper and I lay on the dirt between cabins,  
closing our eyes, lightly pressing on their soft sweating folds,  
pretending to see the stars.  
When I opened mine he was leaning over me,  
his head engulfed by the corona on my retina,  
his face moving in a way stars shouldn't,  
closer and closer,  
and I didn't want any of that or in that way,  
and so I hit him with Mishima on the brow  
and ran back to my cabin  
to keep my stars on the roof above my bed.

I can see all the roads away from the campground from up here.  
In the distance above the damn gums  
is the jetstream of a plane  
taking off or landing.

*Meg McKinlay is a West Australian poet and children's writer. Her poetry has been published in numerous journals, and her collection, Cleanskin, was published by The Westerly Centre in 2007.*

## Welcome Stranger

### Meg McKinlay

It's how we were raised, on the logic  
of gold: all of us just a pickaxe away  
from a brand new life. You can never stop  
digging, that's what we were told; walk away now  
and the very next swing hauls fortune down  
upon some other head. But who's to say  
how many years wasted here, and perhaps all this faith  
is its own kind of fear? Blood blisters burst  
on marriages and our palms cleave firmer  
to the handle, all salt and sweat  
and tears. The earth opens  
its dead veins the length of us and still  
we're out here swinging: one more thrust  
of the shovel, one last fall  
of the blade.

## Nagoya Plumbing

### Meg McKinlay

This morning I fell in love  
with the boy who fixed the pipes.  
Through the intercom, his hopefulness  
shone clear as a bell. We are the people,  
he said, who have been fixing your pipes and we are  
sorry for any inconvenience whether now earlier or sometime  
in the future whether directly indirectly or having nothing in fact  
to do with our services, such as they are, still we are sorry but  
if you could take a moment just one moment to see that your  
water runs now strong and sure and clean as you might hope.  
And here's what I hope while I spin  
obedient taps: that he dreamt of this  
always, of metal and earth, that it wasn't his feet slipping  
sideways off some cram-school elevator. I hope  
he knows his work is a whole and perfect  
offering. I could say all this and more  
besides, could tell him where I come from  
boys like him salute the sun with great  
hairy arse-cracks, leave trails  
of disdain across a nation  
of floors. Instead I spin the taps while he breathes  
down the line and when I tell him yes,  
thank you, the water is fine he says, oh!  
what a relief; we simply could not  
be more pleased. And down the long, grey corridor  
the next buzzer chimes.

*Virginia Jealous's work includes travel journalism, essays and poetry. Her most recent collection of poetry and prose is Hidden World (Hallowell Press).*

## Mute herdsman

Doi Saket

### Virginia Jealous

Say nothing but that which can be whispered,  
muffle-mouthed, into the ear of an animal.

Hold to the calm of cattle and mud-wallow bliss  
of buffalo, their scatterdrop headshake;

the steady peck of egrets underfoot,  
of mynas deticking hides of beasts

where back-scratch tamarind can't reach.  
No need to speak aloud here. There are voices

all around you, you answer them  
in your own tongue, in your own time.

*Renee Pettitt-Schipp lived in the Indian Ocean Territories for three years. In 2010 she was short listed for the Trudy Graham Biennial Literary Award, and in 2011 and 2012 (respectively) she won and was highly commended in the Ethel Webb Bundell prize for poetry.*

## Pinggiran

Cocos (Keeling) Islands

## Renee Pettitt-Schipp

*Seperti hujan terbalik*

Like rain inversed

tiny fish

push into air

bodies showering toward

high cloud

*tempat ini adalah milik*

*sendirian*

this place belongs

to itself

you arrive on its terms

remain

terrestrial    peripheral

*kehidupan belum tentu*

life is tenuous

here on the merest

suggestion of soil

that contracts



expands  
with the lagoon's  
slow exhalation

a rhythm we all  
wait for  
live by  
*hari-hari ter gantung*  
days poised  
on the rush of its breath.

With thanks to Pak Yati, Mak Sofia and Ashley Schipp for translations into Cocos-Malay.

*Alamgir Hashmi is a Pakistani poet and critic; a university professor in Europe, America, and Asia. A Rockefeller Fellow, he has won many honours and awards for his work, which has been widely published and translated.*

## Numbers

### Alamgir Hashmi

It may be rational but hasn't overtaken  
death, this counting of years gone by  
or yet to come; that in B.C.,  
they used to die of numbers decreasing,  
just as the tide neaps for all,  
all to a quiet harbour.

Talk of the time for them to swell:  
Nineteen ninety-nine, or so,  
as all earth's waters meet above  
its crepuscular motions  
occluding the skies with countless stars.  
Degrees of deathly waters rising.  
Useless arithmetic.  
They warned us  
with needle eyes of lightning,  
almost heard,  
so that we would prepare ourselves.  
Examples fall short  
of this precise moment  
wherein substance makes little sense  
and even words perhaps cannot pass.  
A recession would be reasonable  
for those here, around, hence.

There was talk of pound, shilling, pence,  
circulation of blood lines across the tough  
borders of sight, opinion about weather.  
About life, what do I know?  
Enough!

*Vivienne Glance is an academic, and a practicing playwright, actor, and theatre director. She is currently an Honorary Research Fellow at The University of Western Australia.*

One by one

## Vivienne Glance

I won't let the summer fill me with song for I am silent  
in the inverse of this tree, as intense as a pelican's flight in rain.  
I know good times won't keep singing, but an empty lake

is as resonant as infrared. It resounds around me as claw prints  
of waterbirds become stone. Listen to the clouds  
sweeping underground, surface polished to concrete persistence.

The whiff of past afternoon vibrations or winter reflections  
feel like ultraviolet arpeggios. The stiletto notes  
of all this cacophony does not disturb my stillness.

I watch as a fish chorus breathes in unison  
and, one by one,  
entire pools of inheritance are stolen  
by a heron's persistent stare.

*Zhu Jian is a Chinese poet now based in Xi'an,  
particularly known for his vivid short poems. His translator,  
Yi Zhe writes in both English and Chinese and teaches at  
Changsha New Oriental School in China.*

## Some and Others

### Zhu Jian

Translated from the Chinese by Yi Zhe

They want to be  
a tree  
or  
a small animal.

But they're unwilling to  
change roles with  
their own pet dogs  
and to be reincarnated as  
a pig.

They ask for freedom,  
saying that I do what I want to,  
that no man can control me.

I considerably sent a knife to them,  
when they claimed suicide.

With a flash of coldness,  
my face cut by the knife,  
I hurt them  
in an inhuman way.



*Jake Dennis is a jazz, swing, and blues singer and second generation Burmese migrant whose poetry has been widely published. He won the 2014 Right Now: Human Rights poetry competition.*

## Evening

For Nana

### Jake Dennis

Like a bather by Degas but smaller,  
grandma sits on the hotel bed,  
her brown irises shadowed blue,  
wet grey hair dyed brown,  
crow's feet wrinkles like running ink,  
clear water drops on her bare shoulders,  
her hands' skin loose as fabric,  
language drifting away, leaves down a river,  
her silvered soles travelled through Myanmar,  
through Thailand, through Singapore, into Australia,  
over stone, grass, brown mud, black dirt, red dust,  
her longyi gold and covered with flowers,  
a soldier's photograph in her purse,  
her pensioner's checks spent,  
cooking until the end,  
she stares at us.

Maree Dawes's first poetry collection *Women of the Minotaur*  
(2008) was adapted for *Poetica* in 2009. A verse novel,  
*Be Right Back*, was published by *Spineless Wonders* this year.

You must never begin your work with a knot

## Maree Dawes

roll clunk, roll clunk, roll clunk  
my Grandmother's treadle  
for years we snuck into her deserted house  
and stroked the pedal into motion  
to remind us

I have soft things my Nana knitted  
for my baby days  
I remember my own children  
swathed in that yellow cream wool  
as if held in her hands

my mother made my clothes  
pedal pushers, hot pants, hipster flare  
new dresses at the start of each year  
a plot of brown paper drafting  
and pinking shears  
with her retelling what her father said  
when the fabric ran out  
before the cutting was done  
*know better next time dear*



at school I used oversews  
instead of hem stitch  
crumpled grubby samples  
started and ended with knots

all the time I was stitching with words  
selecting colour, fabric and thread  
weaving tails back through the work  
to make an invisible end.

*Fiona Britton is a creative writing PhD student at UWA. She has been published in journals both in Australia and overseas, and in Award Winning Australian Writing 2011.*

## The knives are whispering in the drawer

**Fiona Britton**

The knives are whispering in the drawer. See  
how far we've come, they say—we are  
murders planned and

not yet done; we are tomorrow's spilled blood. In the  
dark compartments, they sort themselves—parers,  
carvers, cleavers—and

draw lots to see who will dive from the cheeseboard  
to stab a naked foot; and who will hide, sly  
in the grimy eddies

at the bottom of the sink.

*Andrew Taylor is the author of more than fifteen books of poetry, the most recent being Collected Poems and The Unhaunting, short listed for the 2009 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. He is Professor Emeritus at Edith Cowan University.*

## The Hypergeum

### Andrew Taylor

Ever since a farmer almost fell into it  
five millennia later the stench  
of its mystery, the remains  
of thousands of bodies, its carved  
ceilings, how it delves deeper  
and scarier into darkness, the flicker  
of numberless years of smoky  
flames as this emptiness was scratched  
by animal horn and stone  
relentlessly from the light

You leave your camera  
your smartphone at the desk  
you also leave sunlight  
and what you thought was what you know

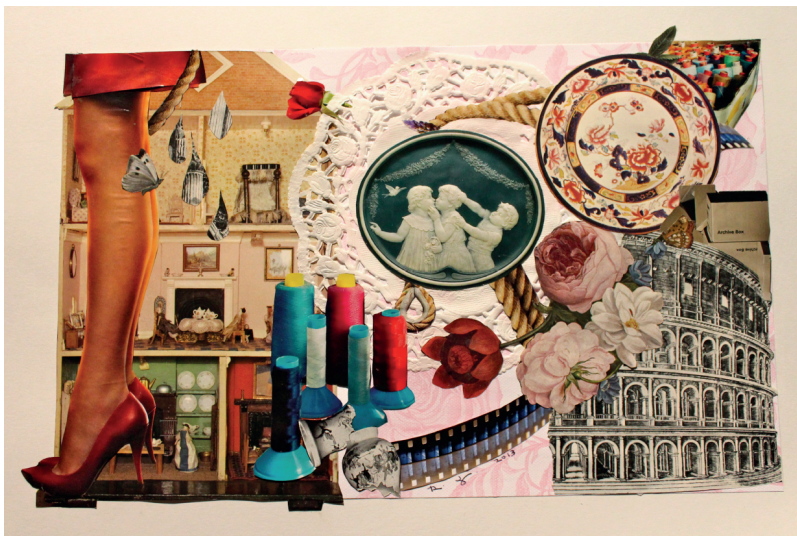
An hour later  
you blink at a world made  
for moments utterly  
unfamiliar, too bright, too clear  
too much in focus  
to be any more your own.  
Echoes of the Hypergeum  
worry your ears, your eyes  
as you search for the bus stop.

*Rozanna Lilley's memoir writing has been widely published and included in Best Australian Essays 2013. Her poetry has been published in The Age, and she was shortlisted for the Axel Clark Memorial Prize for Poetry in 2014.*

## Wedgwood

### Rozanna Lilley

The tea chests arrived history heavy  
my husband's maternal grandmother  
An inveterate collector her legendary unconventionalities  
preceded her prized crockery  
Much of it cracked or even boldly broken thick metal  
Threads suture slabs of china meadows of Victorian flowers bloomburst  
Beneath slug trails of yellowed glue she was an original



*Wedgewood.* Collage by Rozanna Lilley.

Before we met I didn't realise other mothers might count  
My rooms crowded with the dark spoils of maternal largesse  
A jarrah side-board a thickly varnished window-seat  
a correspondence school-desk

Nestled within the newspaper death unfurls the solid blue jasperware  
Silky silhouettes forcing neo-classical tears  
undeserving of these exquisite cameos

## Funny Face

### Rozanna Lilley

Serendipitously my sister entered me  
    in the Garden City pageant  
She said I was beautiful  
    and my mother, laughing, agreed  
A lemon top teamed with terry-towelling shorts—  
    what a doll!

A gaggle of girls spilled hopefully  
    across the makeshift stage  
Each questioned about their hobbies  
    and plans for world peace

Out front it's hard to breathe  
    serial pleasantries evacuate oxygen  
The looking glass audience  
    a milling mass  
    of expectant eyes

I have no answers      mute  
The Master of Ceremonies offers  
A consolation prize      whispers  
I could have won      if only

It's a pencil for writing  
    close-clutched I compose  
    my exit

*Alec Choate (1915–2010), a full-time poet for many years,  
published five books of poetry as well as much work in  
anthologies and journals. This poem, left unfinished, has been  
edited and reworked by Dennis Haskell.*

## Pyramid Climb

### Alec Choate

Our heavy army boots stumbled, baulked,  
as we climbed slowly, I and a mate on brief leave,  
grip after grip of ungloved, larrikin hands  
on the huge square stones full of sunfire  
of the stern Cheops Pyramid, thrust  
after thrust of patient shoulders, slouched hats,

wry, shaded smiles and frequent curses.  
People gazing below grew slowly smaller,  
dimming their cries that had quickened  
our effort, none of our regiment there  
but each time we looked down we waved.  
The more we rose the more we could see,

now palm groves, now small desert-fringed farms  
and beyond them Cairo's shining spires.  
All Egypt rising, visible and trembling  
beneath our blind groping army boots,  
until two mates who had shared  
blood laden battles only weeks before

needed proof they had climbed Cheops  
side by side, so we photographed each other  
standing tall, the world slanting away,

down, down, as if wanting to fall!  
I pondered old facts, old fictions  
that detailed the pyramids' making,

chose to believe in a shared rhythm of muscle,  
I claimed that even dust on our hands was dust  
that had whitened the builders' hands  
while they calmed the huge stones into place,  
and my mood insisted sweat, never tears  
lit the stubborn stones one after one.

If our minds created this theatre  
it smiled and breathed for no-one but us.  
The sun cooling, farewelling the summit  
we began our descent with threatened care  
for now we groped downwards,  
all Egypt awry beneath our questioning boots,

our faces held to the untroubled skies.  
Then at last we were down, drawing breath!  
But our eyes still shone upwards, searching  
we said, for the men still singing,  
still building perhaps, or calling us back.  
What could this climb mean at the time?

It proved youth gave me body trim,  
a daring eyes could nod to, and  
calmed our young minds for our tomorrow:  
El Alamein, the name still whispered  
quietly, even here. El Alamein called,  
sunlit, as cold as stone.



*Shane McCauley has published seven books of poetry, with an eighth, Trickster; forthcoming. He was awarded the Max Harris Poetry prize (2008), Poetry d'Amour prize (2014), and has recently been shortlisted for the ACU Literary Prize.*

## Isla Tiburina

### Shane McCauley

You cross the Tiber  
from the old quarter  
from the synagogue that is a cave  
in the growing dark  
from the waft of garlic and pork  
flavouring the air  
and into the hot oil of traffic—

it is Christmas  
and you walk on pavement  
without seeing it  
such is the press the enthusiasm  
of these crowds.

Left behind on the Isla Tiburina  
the old guard house dozes  
the stars flatter themselves  
in the cavorting river  
the ripples tumble out forever.

The seagulls settle bobbing  
prim as they crest their little waves.  
They have seen barbarians before.

*Sue Clennell has been placed twice in the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize and her poems are included in many anthologies, including Best Australian Poems 2011.*

Harriet Shelley

Sue Clennell

Ah fickle Percy, I float on the Serpentine  
like Shakespeare's Ophelia,  
my pulse whisper quiet.  
See, perhaps you taught me too much  
of the classics. Expected me to roll  
in them like a dog in fish carcasses.  
My blue parasol and hat ribbons showed  
a small, small mind, in your eyes.  
You looked elsewhere,  
took in a monster-maker like yourself.  
But I will be avenged.  
Water, and her ally, the wind,  
will take you too. And you know what?  
I never could stand your poetry.  
May your tomes always be remaindered!

*Dick Alderson lives near Fremantle and has  
been writing poetry since the 1990s. His  
first collection the astronomer's wife was  
published by Sunline Press (2014).*

## The Garden of Rodin

### Dick Alderson

what stays  
is not the dark eminences  
but the garden

and that only fleetingly—  
how the air sat  
amongst the trees

high and not quite transparent  
as if it were part of them

and yes, it was late Autumn  
and the trees were amending  
the sculptures  
with colour

## Instance of Beauty on Stock Road

Dick Alderson

as if painted on a cement slab  
its wings of Siena and amber  
in shockingly perfect symmetry

as if by assuming two dimensions  
it can needle censorious eyes  
with flat beauty.

Its summer over,  
it can float free

join the clear morning,  
the perfect rose  
the lonely constellation

this form of words.

*Veronica Lake is a high school literature teacher. She edits the student poetry journal Primo Lux, now in its eleventh year. In 2010 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship, to study Shakespeare. 'Stained Glass Saint' won third place in the Peter Cowan Writers Centre Patron's Prize, 2014.*

## Stained Glass Saint

(seen at the old Fremantle Asylum for Women)

### Veronica Lake

Sealed away without a trace  
by the window she contemplates  
each slow day drift out of sight.

Trapped forever in this place,  
whose secret rooms conceal the taint  
of barren woman, silence her right

to live, to speak, to state her case.  
Stone walls ensure she must wait,  
a ghost confined, such is her plight.

The world turns moves on apace  
all hope of freedom dim and faint  
caught out of time, there's no respite.

Diamond panes encase her face,  
enshrined she is a stained glass saint  
made luminous by morning sunlight.

*Murray Jennings has been a writer, radio broadcaster and trainer, and was Head of Broadcasting at the W.A. Academy of Performing Arts, ECU. His novel 'The Moondella Drive-In' was shortlisted for the 2012 T.A.G. Hungerford Award.*

## Motionless in Madrid

### Murray Jennings

For Shane McCauley

This is the space in time where there are no intentions  
no vague feelings that something must be done  
or has been forgotten.

This is whatever it is simply hanging motionless  
a Calder mobile in an airless gallery.

Even if I were to raise an eyebrow in surprise  
it would be enough to swing the thin wire  
through one degree or so.

The sculptor knew that.  
It's how he speaks to me.

*Josephine Clarke grew up on a farm near  
Pemberton, in Western Australia, has been a High  
School English teacher and is now a member of  
the OOTA Writers' Group in Fremantle.*

the old hay rake

## Josephine Clarke

goes off in my head like a Catherine wheel  
memories fly like hay dust  
my brother driving the Fergie  
watching ahead, looking back  
—clicking and clacking  
grasshoppers flare out before him—

while with elegant cartwheels  
the rake braids winter into rows  
for the baler to thump thump thump into bales  
tied up with twine it's a factory out there  
cordite and must

then turning the bales  
new world gleaners  
an eye out for snakes  
the ferment of sweetened rain ready for the gut of cows  
sisal blisters our finger-creases  
fine sparks of hay burn into the backs of our knees  
the crook of our elbows

that hay rake  
twirls in the wind now  
draws long strings

*Originally from NSW, Catherine Wright has spent six years living in Perth, inspired to write about WA's natural environment. She has won the Grenfell Henry Lawson Memorial Award and in 2013 was shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize.*

if

## Catherine Wright

if you were to write home and tell them of your news  
would you speak of how your heart broke with  
heat and cold and how the land called you back

to rest but you could not find the way and if you  
heard your words as song would they rise and  
rise then pitch to plum with shades of jade

and blush in each crest and fall and if you saw your  
words would they paint a heart of twist and turn  
and taut and tight with soft parts which you thought

were hard and off parts which you thought were on  
and if those you loved could map your tears would  
they come to you and wait no more for you to

ease back in their arms but know you as you need them to  
and bring you home for far is far and near is near and  
each road is paved more with dark than light

and if you were to write your news would you tell of  
how your son took ill and how his skin was pale  
and hair grew thin and would you speak of how our love



peeled bare and the world lay down and turned its face and  
would you say your smile dropped from its nest and your  
laugh's sweet bird fell mute for years caught in the net of

cold dark dreams and if you were true to who you are  
would you know that this was so or would the mask  
still bind and hide the lies and leave you blind

and if I were to take your hand would you look deep in  
my eyes as we flew through skies of dread or would  
you seek out the sun and draw us to the flame

and if wind broke our grip and took you from me  
to the sea would you look for me in foam and  
brine or would you pick up shells and smell the air

then stay to catch a fish or two to cook and eat  
for tea and give no thought at all to me and if  
you were but one not two and I tried to sing you

back to me would you hear me call you home to take  
the bins out to the road or would you think I called not  
to you but to the man of hope we both once knew

Andrew Lansdown is a widely published, award-winning writer who has published three novels, two short story collections, two children's poetry collections and eleven poetry collections.

## Missing

i.m. David

### Andrew Lansdown

The last time I wrote to my last brother  
I lacked the words, so I wrote the words  
of The Innocence Mission—wrote them as I recalled them,  
enhanced by the singer's melody and phrasing:

*And I can only say  
that I had hoped for you  
safety from fears and darkness.  
Are you feeling better than before?*

I got up from the tossing bed  
where the thoughts of him missing  
and the feelings of missing him  
would not let go my heart or leave my head  
and I wrote, *And I can only say ...*  
and I sent these words into cyberspace  
in the faint frail hope they might find him  
and in finding impart a form of grace.

But I could not send them singing  
and I could not send them straight—  
and besides it was far, far too late.  
In the innocence of despair he was on a mission  
to decimate despair—and how was I to know  
he had accomplished it already?

Oh, save for doubts, I am all unsteady—  
yet truly, brother, beyond all saying

*I can only say  
that I had hoped for you  
safety from fears and darkness! \**

I am sorry, sorry I did not send these words to you before,  
before you were feeling poorer than before.

And now I can only say: Since you have gone to stay  
with the sweet Man of Sorrows who is acquainted  
with all your grief, I'm glad you must be feeling better,  
better, little brother, than even your best before.  
But how can I find safety from the fears and darkness,  
the tears and starkness, you abandoned at my door?

\* From the song 'You Are the Light' by The Innocence Mission on the album *Birds of My Neighbourhood*.

*Jeff Guess has published ten collections of poetry, the most recent being Autumn in Cantabile (2011); written three textbooks on teaching poetry and edited nine poetry anthologies. 'War Cemetery' won first place in the Peter Cowan Writers Centre Patron's Prize, 2014.*

## War Cemetery

*Leading Aircraftsman Harry F. J. Guess*

*RAAF 8.12.98 Age 75*

*Garden of Remembrance—South Australia*

## Jeff Guess

Here amongst red petunias the ghost ship of my  
father's Lancaster touches down  
a final time, and all his wars are stilled in the  
green wet spring of lawn: particularly the last.

An ex-prisoner of the Ashford Private Clinic—  
all tubes and wires. And in the black and white  
evenings a gaunt reminder of old newsreels.  
Swathed in thin hospital cotton, his thin

emaciated shadow flickering on numb silent  
hospital walls as he stumbles towards me  
clutching at my arm. And are these my father's  
fingers? His huge workman's hands come down

to this? that held the stick so true—flying north  
flying north—looking behind me with morphine  
sunken eyes. I ask about the pain and watch  
his dry cracked lips reply. 'Time to get on with it'.

Flying somewhere past me now—easy  
with final coordinates; the logic of essential  
logarithms and navigation and an antidote  
to my banal and silly, already wilting questions.

My mother leans in on her stick to his new  
fresh glinting plaque. Somewhere amongst her  
souvenirs his last stubbed cigarette she kept—  
five decades past. His final smoky kiss.

Does she think of that now—the last of leave.  
A difficult time for both of them. Now flying back  
to this soft terminal landing here. A consummate  
quiet taxi up to the small brass cross

amongst a legion of memorials. My grief  
is unresolved and hers—so unrequited,  
as she stares and stares into the empty cabin  
of the morning for one who isn't coming home.

*Graham Kershaw is the author of novels, stories, essays and poetry. Originally from England, he now lives on Western Australia's south coast, where he practises as an architect and runs a small publishing project called Hallowell Press.*

## The Striker's Eye

for my father

### Graham Kershaw

He had the striker's eye, you see,  
creating chances out of absences,  
anticipating the awkward bounce,  
the ricochet, holding himself ready  
to go either way, shifting weight  
discreetly at the hip, fit to leap  
to far-fetched choreographies  
of kick-to-kick and spin,  
double curves and curlicues,  
out of the mud-struck deadlock  
richer men call reality.

He had the striker's eye  
for heart's other half, for creation,  
invasion, annexation, even glory,  
if only in that muddy, sly English way,  
making it look like dirty work,  
never ego, passion or play;  
sailing in, shooting early,  
sauntering away,  
through what suddenly seemed  
to have always been  
his territory.

Years later,  
lifting his chin under a foreign sun,  
he'd be a hopeful child again,  
blue depths restored to his watery eyes,  
as if blinded as a child  
and cured as a man.

*Christopher Konrad has poems and short stories published  
in numerous journals and online. He has received many  
awards for his writing and his recent book, Letters to Mark,  
was published by Regime Books.*

## Port Talbot (ad honorem Michael Sheen)

### Christopher Konrad

He made a film of the Passion  
On a Welsh beach. By day three,  
The crucifixion, there were fifteen thousand  
At Port Talbot. But, what got me,  
What really unnerved me  
Was the Ecce Homo scene. Jesus  
The Welsh actor is asked 'Are you King  
of this town?'        The tension builds  
The crowd is live        positively viral,  
A full-blown world epidemic.  
It is dark: there are cages, police,  
Blood-thick air. I don't know  
If there was a Jesus thing  
Ever        but I know my chest  
My skin this day        my threshold  
My caesura    the self-breach.  
This actor        this man  
Full stop on the film of time  
Stopped me—  
Left me at the abyss of breath  
Retreating to the roaring waves  
Of the wild Celtic Sea. They  
lifted him on that beach  
Pilate's armies charging by  
Dispersing them and they, dropping



Their weapons        becoming farmers  
Again: swords, shields into ploughshares.  
The stock markets have fallen  
Like sinking ships. Maybe it was the same  
Way back then. I don't know  
If there ever was a Jesus thing  
But I know there was this Welsh guy  
There, on a dark Leviathan sea.  
Ecce Homo, he cried  
I am        he said        here is Man:  
Strange creature from the Sea  
Extracted from dust        Über-Simian  
And suddenly I have religion.  
Suddenly I am on my knees  
Praying to an unbelievable  
Yet entirely convincing  
Welsh Christ who, like alpha  
And omega, tomorrow, will still be here  
Whom art has redeemed and who can bridge  
This chasm that is my mouth  
And, suddenly I am that bridge  
Broken    collapsed over those stones  
On a Port Talbot shore. 'Are you King  
of this town?' Port Talboteans scream  
I answer        I am

## Black Cockatoo

### Christopher Konrad

There's a stretch between Bailey Road and Mahogany Creek littered with the flotsam of shredded green honky nuts, scattered over a carnelian dust-carpet like crumbly knurls of left over apple pie. This sprawl of tell-tale gives them away: shadow-hooded black cockatoos. Early settlers thought that the Aboriginals called them karaks, the sound they made. Summer-screech, ululations that reach from deep within buried obsidian chest, filtered through a massive crest raised like a black Sydney Opera House. On this side of the highway, the red tails have made a nearby stretch of gums their vacation city. On the other, northern side of the asphalt ribbon, where I lived in younger days, I believed they only visited ahead of imminent winter rains. Only the white tails ever showed there. Norfolk fronds shredded and fresh Macadamias chiselled and cracked. Cockatoo myths and rumours scattered along bush trails. Signs surreptitiously left for us to read like avian tea leaves or witching bones. The cure for an illness, who to marry, who to kill, whence the weather. They are the dogs of the sky: Lords of inverted, other-earthly over-kingdoms watching from on high.

*Kevin Gillam is Director of Music at Christ Church Grammar School. He has published three books of poetry, other gravities and permitted to fall (Sunline Press) and 'songs sul G' in Two Poets (Fremantle Press).*

Thursday

Kevin Gillam

too many birds, yes,  
too many for logic,  
a squadron of black cockatoos,  
cries like can openers,  
sharp around the rim of sky.  
collective leading,  
a tag team of wakes.  
too many for a chorus of updrafts,  
too many for the thoughts  
of too few,  
too many for the sullen work of bridges.  
winged fiction, air-pocketed,  
scythed from page,  
sleek and paragraphed.  
too many for lighthouses,  
for regret,  
too many for ships or why.  
Thursday, etched on blue,  
residue of clouds.  
these birds, sly bells,  
too many for an abacus,  
for creeds or commandment,  
enough for belief

*Isabela Banzon currently heads the  
creative writing program at the University  
of the Philippines. Her next poetry book  
Maybe Something is forthcoming.*

## Zoo Sonnet

for Liam

### Isabela Banzon

You love the show: the way Alaska floats  
like ice blocks from a factory, its lake  
a see-through pool, green as a pine treeline,  
or blue, perhaps, as the sky can be in  
winter. We who know only two seasons,  
who have no word for *snow*, who never fly  
south, crowd around the arctic moment as  
though it might give us the slip, never to  
pass our way again. Once in Anchorage  
on a diverted flight home from New York,  
we marveled at the white and very tall  
bears, such majesty forever on hold  
behind the glass, which now frames the orphan  
in the backlight, asleep, away from home.

## Three Girls

### Isabela Banzon

When three college girls approached us  
on campus and asked what the happiest day  
was in our life, I couldn't think of a fast  
enough answer, distracted as I was  
by our interrupted conversation  
about your stolen letterbox, yanked out  
and spirited away like your front lawn  
rose bush. And I was thinking of three girls  
even younger, still in junior high school,  
climbing up one hill to the next one night,  
clownishly crossing a shaky bridge,  
gin or rum or something stronger than  
fruit juice in their guts, singing  
*Going Out of My Head*, out of beat,  
out of tune. Best friends for life then,

we were the good girls in the neighborhood  
brought up to be proper like our moms;  
and what took over our senses four decades ago  
lies rusted and wasting in the dark shed  
of memory like the YIELD sign we  
hysterically took turns at pole dancing  
and snatched. Now your letters, askew, scatter  
across the grass, connections such as ours

we've gone to great lengths to nurture  
or to repair gone to the dogs.  
To yield is neither giving in nor giving up  
at intersections. We have chosen  
to meet again though I asked only for peace,  
which to you is muted happiness.

*Paul Hetherington's latest collection of poetry  
Six Different Windows (UWAP) won the  
2014 Western Australian Premier's Book  
Awards for poetry.*

## Squirrel

### Paul Hetherington

Each hair in the brush  
is a thought in the squirrel;  
each brushstroke a bound  
into trees where nuts  
are stored for winter.  
Each deposit of paint  
is a month or long year  
when the squirrel has felt  
the rain on its nose;  
wind rattles leaves  
and the storehouse of being  
empties a little.  
The painting thinks  
with an animal's instinct;  
wakes at night  
with squirrel eyes;  
searches long vistas  
of grassland and forest,  
sniffs at air  
for what might arrive.

## London, Misbooked

### Lucy Dougan

Up and up the stairs, dragging my load  
to a narrow arrangement beneath leaded windows.  
First, case in front of the bed  
and then a kind of leap is what it took,  
all of it unreal as the miles just flown.  
Another leap off the end to the closet bathroom and  
I was getting to know the cramped proportions  
of old lives in this little eyrie.  
I lay sprawled on the bed  
like the pale skinned fraudster poet  
only I was no marvellous boy  
but reasonably along in life  
with a full head of strangely curled hair  
(perhaps our only likeness) after the drugs.  
And I didn't die  
but watched tele, something with Shirley Henderson in it,  
filled out the breakfast order,  
let the unaccustomed night fall on me.  
Near sleep I thought this is probably the maid's room  
but I didn't have to get up and do for anyone in the morning.  
The doves came down to see me,  
cooed their own flight histories  
into my jetlagged limbs,  
and if they were forgeries, too,  
a human ear could not tell.



*Barbara Temperton is an award-winning Western Australian writer. Her most recent poetry collection is Southern Edge (Fremantle Press 2009). Barbara was Westerly's poetry editorial advisor 2009–2011.*

I am no wolf

## Barbara Temperton

My mask is not lupine, more avian,  
the rash-wing on my face often mistaken  
for another affliction shadowing my family.  
This condition is quite benign, an indication  
of stress levels awry, a misdirected migration.  
I was silenced in strange country  
when I couldn't read the signs.  
I'm home now. I celebrate every drive  
down the main street and harbour view.  
I have returned from the hinterland where wolf spoor  
is hidden between rows of close-cut stubble.  
Only scarlet feathers fanned across my face  
tell what the flight has cost me.

Meredi Ortega's poems have appeared in Best Australian Science Writing 2014, Australian Love Poems, Cordite, The Disappearing, Westerly, and indigo. She won the Science Poetry Prize in 2013.

Tu Fu, there were gorges but I couldn't see  
any boat

## Meredi Ortega

ten years in the desert, wrote seven hundred words on communes  
in the People's Republic of China  
distance education  
how rain does not come from looking at the Temple of Heaven  
on the cover of *Asian Response*

xeriscaped my lungs with mulla mulla, took mauve breaths  
did not listen to cassettes from Perth, for a long time said Mayo  
part leader, part condiment  
wrote about steel and pig iron as though I could fuel a furnace  
with nesting tables, bread bin slats

*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*

could not get my fill of ore

not much of a time capsule, fourteen years and they graved it up  
ceremony on the car park nature strip  
all our names and faces humified like things to come  
someone asked for the tin back as though the years were still inside

tunnel under the railway, almost a wormhole  
same steel screech overhead, iron mountain moving  
two stroke dirt bike  
corrugated loop of *luv 4 eva*

*woz ere, slut, poofter, for a good time ring*



*John Kinsella has published over thirty books of poetry. Among his many awards are the 2013 Prime Minister's Literary Award for poetry. He is also a novelist, critic, essayist and editor.*

## Reintroduction

### John Kinsella

Atlantic winds are cutting Mizen Head,  
wheedling hollows and cracks in slate hills,  
altering vocal cords, shaping words.  
I have been struggling to identify a large  
bird of prey we saw in County Kerry  
a few weeks ago, as intense and bothering  
as a floater in the eye, it lured my sight  
from the road, from hairpin bends,  
sheep raddled with rival farmers' claims.  
It rose where rocks rise quickly from the sea  
to make mountains, and flew alone.  
Back home, wedge-tailed eagles command  
the valley, and are reference points  
for conflict of interest. Into their spirals  
and talons and beaks and wingspans  
are ascribed pro- and anti- attitudes  
to hunting rights in national parks  
and reserves, the dominance of mining  
companies and fly-in fly-out metabolism;  
to the planting of genetically modified crops,  
use of Roundup along roadsides,  
clearing of remnant bushland,  
and quid pro quo of human-induced  
climate change, on what *use* non-domesticated  
creatures are to the district's prosperity. The New

State of Nature. There are those who would  
shoot eagles out of the sky—‘killers  
of lambs’ who would ‘take human babies  
if they could’—and then those who make them  
symbol of all that is lost and what remains.  
Pathetic fallacy and even noble savagery  
are woven into these Symbolists’ arguments,  
which strive to articulate against the flow,  
just want eagles left to their own devices.  
The failure of arguments semiotically  
and philosophically is neither here nor there:  
no harm is meant to anyone or anything,  
and we’ve got to take the Symbolists at their word.  
At least they’re not poisoning or shooting  
as others do when they lampoon and deride  
‘protected species’ status as greenies’ jargon.  
What brings me to rhetoric in the lyric is a picture  
my mother sent this morning of a road-sign replete  
with shotgun-blast puncturing, photographed  
from behind (the sign itself is away from the sun—  
all we have is the cratering from a narrow  
spread of pellets that didn’t burst through  
but went close), a reflective silver-backing  
of the sun semi-perforated, an irruption  
of binary data that speaks a brutal code.  
In the blue sky behind and above, in the distance,  
a wedge-tailed eagle is angling away.  
Caught in the photo, or catching the photo;  
to spread its propaganda? Having its way?  
I transcribe ‘home’, ‘brutality’, ‘vulnerability’,  
‘threat’, ‘loss’, and even an absent signifier  
from this. I can feel the heat in the sign,  
the sky, the shot. Cooler up there where  
the eagle is, but closer to the sun. Here and now,

unable to identify the bird of prey we saw  
 in the rocky places of Kerry, I comb books  
 and discover white-tailed eagles  
 were reintroduced into that county  
 some years ago, that they once bred there  
 as late as the first years of the twentieth century,  
 victim of modernity and linguistics. Since  
 reintroduction, when many sheep farmers  
 protested vehemently, some eagles have been  
 poisoned. I write my famine ancestors. I write  
 their passage to the south-west of Australia.  
 They were Carlow and Wicklow people.  
 They may have seen vagrant white-tailed eagles  
 up there, in the mid-nineteenth century,  
 during the famine, but probably not.  
 Too inland, too high, too far, too rare.  
 They would have seen wedge-taileds, surely,  
 soon after their arrival in Nyungar country.  
 Foresters and farmers. My grandfather,  
 head state forester, was based at Gleneagle.  
 Eagles' aviatronics over 'his' forest, his 'realm'.  
 As a child, my father gave eagles names  
 to forget the names he'd been told. There are  
 no simple answers. Wing and hand, feather  
 and bone, rock and vegetation, the tangling  
 of speech and thought. The adoration  
 of raptors. Their demise and reintroduction.  
 Mum has labelled the photo 'sign with shots'.  
 She doesn't need to mention the eagle.  
 Barthes' *Mythologies* is on her shelves  
 and she is thrilled her grandson  
 is learning Irish. It is almost summer  
 there. Here, winter is closing in.

*Julie Watts is a WA writer and Play Therapist. She is a member of OOTA and has been published in various anthologies and journals. Julie's first collection of poetry, Honey & Hemlock, was published in 2013 by Sunline Press.*

## This Winter's Day

### Julie Watts

but for the still damp steps  
the rain is forgotten  
cumulus, thinned to cirrus

now wispy and fine as fish bones.  
The sun sits high on a blue map  
and the bees are a crowd

in the rosemary, they are easy-going  
and slow, wander the purple nibs  
drowsy with out-of-season heat.

The dog sleeps on a grill of driveway  
and the cat stretches out her full-furred length  
amongst the blood-warm weeds.

After days of rain, the grass is lime  
and luscious, borders studded with orange  
nasturtiums, their yellow bullseyes.

On the gutter, two strips of peeling  
paint have curled  
revealing brightness of blue primer.

From here, it looks like the cobalt  
wings of a Morpho butterfly  
just out of its chrysalis

waiting for its wings to dry.  
I net it with my eyes  
study its veined formations

its delicate intensity  
hold it like Venetian glass  
release it to a whim of wind

sighing up the guttering  
watch its edged wings prime  
for flight.

And though it was never more  
than a torn ear of paint  
on this mid-winter's morning

spring flashed iridescent  
in my hand.



*Alexis Lateef is a West Australian poet.  
She has a BA (English) from UWA and is  
currently studying to be a librarian. She is  
working on her first book of poetry*

## Sunflowers

### Alexis Lateef

You ask me how things are  
                    and I think of my sunflowers,  
their heads nodding in the wind.  
I planted the seeds in Winter,  
                    carelessly, not knowing  
if they would take root,  
other things on my mind.

And now, in Spring, they have leapt up.  
                    One day a green patch,  
the next, six sunflowers,  
young and shivering in their newness.  
                    ‘Yes,’ I say to you.  
‘My sunflowers are beautiful.’

I imagine this must have been  
how Van Gogh felt,  
                    in his studio in Arles,  
as he dipped his brush  
in ochre paint and began  
                    those first feverish strokes.

It was his ‘yellow phase’,  
a time of respite.

I wonder if he woke each morning  
and turned his face  
    towards the sunflowers on the table,  
breathing a little easier.

Every morning I pass  
my sunflowers and think of him,  
    sitting in front of his canvas,  
early morning sunlight stroking his hair  
as he moved his brush quickly,  
    painting and painting.

*Shey Marque was recently the Coordinator of  
the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre.  
Her poetry has been widely published. In 2013  
she won the Karen W Treanor Poetry Prize.*

a day breaks in two rocks

## Shey Marque

blue is the shipping beacon, the scythe moon  
in the sky, the exposed roots of yachts, the  
squeak of drying, the spinifex skipping. blue  
is monday morning. blue is the large bowel  
of beach, two buoys squatting, ropes around  
their necks, the ears on the sand, the crab holes  
winking. blue is monday morning. blue is  
the last spit of spring, the cray boats in arms,  
muscles clinging beneath, the padlocked gate  
propped open, the no-swimming sign. blue is  
monday morning. blue is the sanskrit sea,  
the echo of a father's voice, the pair of  
canvas shoes parked on the jetty, a kiss  
on the sea bed, two clouded eyes, police  
car light flashing. blue is monday morning.

*Bruce Dawe is one of Australia's most prolific and widely published poets. Among his many awards are the Australia Council Writers' Emeritus Award and the Centenary Medal, both in 2001, and the 1997 Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal.*

## Savouring Early Morning

### Bruce Dawe

Having moved and married into a convivial, generously  
friendly family: the phones frequently trilling,  
the subsequent laughter and chuckling ensuring,  
the commitments following, the visiting  
here/there, the family birthdays drawing  
them together, reaffirming  
kinship, fellowship, continuously topping  
up the glasses of extending memories, children glimmering  
like wavelets lit by the rising  
sun ... For the first time in my life I'm now living  
near the beach, and its murmuring  
presence is always there, the seagulls swooping  
like jocular memos re the sea's never-ending  
business. It's the quietest my life  
has ever been as I continue nursing  
the reams of peace on which time now is writing  
the rest of the story; gardening  
was at one time a satisfying  
indulgence involving sweat, dutifully tired muscles, etc., creating  
a semblance of human order out of  
larrikin wilfulness ... Now, reading, writing, teaching  
are my latter-day gardens, words offering  
their universal promise of re-growth, so that  
even the cordyline's leaves' shadows dancing  
beyond the early curtain's sunshine are saying,  
'Hey, we're here for you, waiting,  
as always .....

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

## Beach Light

### Rachael Petridis

light is pearl white   naked  
                  rolling in the wash of sea  
its song a hiss in the ear's shell  
                  the soft blue air falling  
to the gulls' piercing cry

sand is wind-whipped  
                  grains flurry   but who is he  
beneath an open book   cast adrift  
                  on oceans of sand  
on towers of cloud   dangling the skysail  
                  on a slow Sunday afternoon

somewhere an arm glistens  
                  silvering the brine  
pacing the lonely swell  
                  the advancing wave

liners glide the ocean's curling tongue  
                  by stealth   by moonlight  
and capture you  
                  between   horizons

*Alvin Pang is a poet, editor and writer based in Singapore. His recent publications include Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia (edited with John Kinsella), Tumasik: Contemporary Writing from Singapore, and When The Barbarians Arrive (Arc).*

## Notes Toward an Aubade

### Alvin Pang

Say morning bears heavy on the patient glass  
Say the eggs are dim, dawn has slowed the milk  
Say the baguette tastes of burnt coins, bent hooks  
A rent sloop in your hobbled mouth, horizon invisible

Say the quiet is kind, incandescent not aglare  
That absence illumines, finds declension  
Refer to calx, pumice, the past progressive  
Mark the window with its smear of ash

Tomorrow is an oyster in the creel of grief  
Hope lies on an axis between gravity and salt  
Count south, the compass must return from the sore  
What is likely to dance, do not think of it

Undone, the Virgin Mary craved a red balloon  
Describe the card game beside her brittle urn  
Sinew intact? So swing the good tongue low  
Here is the axe you'll find it sharp enough.

*Roland Leach has been Westerly's poetry editor for the last three years, is proprietor of Sunline Press and a widely published poet.*

## Small Detonations

### Roland Leach

i.m. Barrie Wells

There are hundreds of footprints, small detonations  
marking the weight of the human body,  
left in the soft sand after the weekend.  
They vary in depth from the curvature  
of foot, the speed that it touched surface.  
He jogged this beach for years, pressing  
his weight into soft sand, making a presence  
that came from a gravity that relentlessly  
keeps us at ground level. Nearer to the edge,  
where ocean meets land, where sand hardens,  
the prints disappear as if we have all  
become weightless, disappearing completely  
as we leave earth into an expanse of fluidity.

*Edwin Thumboo and Bruce Bennett started the biennial, ongoing symposia series on Literatures and Cultures of the Asia-Pacific, first held at UWA in 1982. His poetry has been very widely published and in 2013 he received a Sunthorn Phu Award (Thailand) for poetry.*

## Bruce

1941–2012

## Edwin Thumboo

When I heard, the day quietly dimmed.  
Light was not itself; nor the minutes.  
Then the tight binding I felt, loosened,  
As loss stirred memory, and memory  
Summoned again those together-times  
We fuelled with sober hopes, shared ideals,  
Thriving together.

It never occurred to us that you were Aussie,  
I Indian-Chinese, then two-thirds Singaporean,  
In progress. Our few differences were sharp  
But courteous, Thus instructive. They took us up  
The Beanstalk, soon after we met, you enroute  
Home, eyes re-thinking England, as I had done.  
Two ex-colonised.

Clearing debris, we sealed revisionist zeal  
For Liberation Lit., each his own, yet in strong  
Fraternity, for our little corners, yours far out  
West in that vast mineral island; mine Asia's  
Southern tip, Merlion-fed sea-slung smallness.  
Perth and Singapore in one time zone; two  
Cities with missions.



Visits later, at Fatty's in Albert St, we chatted  
Over steaming fish, chilli-laced crab, drunken  
Prawn, a stunning Margaret River white. Then  
A seminar rose, galvanised into themes, topics;  
A name, a region: Asia Pacific. We took it home.  
Then, in 82, an UWA launch, with peacocks in  
Gum trees. Your kampong.

You did much for Aus Lit. Your Porter study;  
That *Penguin History*; and *Westerly*, hosting  
Works from Asia, jump to mind. As was our habit,  
We talked, planned bearings, how synchronise  
A complementary destiny, well before APEC;  
Joined by Tiang Hong, Frankie, Lin Ken, Jack,  
In sundry places.

Your deep, wide gaze, humane and humanistic,  
Ample as that drive from Kukup to Penggarang,  
Or that late evening dash to York with Trish, I see  
Presiding over your friendly, balding grin. Know I  
Feel the call and force of friendship, lasting ease  
Born of trust; and how we hardly ever disagreed.  
We still talk; converse.

*Scott-Patrick Mitchell is an award winning performance poet. He has just wrapped up a guest editor spot at youth poetry blog The Travelling Poet and will be performing his second feature length performance poetry show, Tarot, at Perth's Fringeworld 2015.*

caladenia discoidea

(dancing spider orchid)

## Scott-Patrick Mitchell

deep sandy soiling  
makes for a deeper  
dancing

feet fall &  
umbra a shadow of  
side stepping that  
enables sole stop  
-ping pop locking  
grove-ments that  
jig the jointed limb  
& together bring  
spider as bee to  
change places in  
a unified dance  
routine called  
spring: as in up  
out of yourself

they prance &  
pollen fling even  
when it seems they

can't: human habit  
-ats don't mean a  
thing when there  
are blossoms to  
sing into existing

*Flora Smith's poetry had been published in journals and anthologies around Australia and she participated in the AP Café Poet programme in 2013.*

## The Burghers of Calais

### Flora Smith

I have seen these men, beaten and full of dread,  
stooped shoulders sketching their impending death.  
I have seen them in Paris and London, well-placed  
on the Embankments where people pause  
to wonder at such bravery, finger their ragged clothing  
and bare feet, read in sunken cheeks  
the toll of time and hunger.

Dressed in dreadful dignity, they still retain  
some minute part of power. Bonded by self-sacrifice,  
they can say: *Yes, it is a terrible thing we do  
giving up the keys of the city to our enemy  
but hopefully this way, more of you will survive  
today and in the twists and turns of your tomorrows,  
you may meet with better fate than this.*

Who could guess a pregnant English Queen  
fearful in the face of omens for her unborn child  
would beg her King to spare the lives of these six men?

It's on small hooks like these that history hangs.



## PERSONAL ESSAYS

*Marcella Polain's first novel , The Edge of the World  
has just been released in Armenia. Her poetry  
collection, Therapy like Fish: new and selected  
poems was short-listed for the Judith Wright Poetry  
Prize. She is currently completing another novel.*

## Micheline Aharonian Marcom and the *hamam* shoes

### Marcella Polain

Mardiros approached the large chair and hunched down in front of it. What happens after this story? he said ...

Agh. Don't worry, my son. This story will never have happened after it's finished.

And the rumours, where will they go?

... With the marchers—the Mesopotamian has space enough for everything.

You've thought of everything, sir.

Yes. We thought of you also.

And three apples fell from heaven, one for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the eavesdropper.

*Three Apples Fell from Heaven, 92*

Mike started it. It was 2002, I think, when he brought home a copy of Micheline Aharonian Marcom's first novel, *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2001), handed it to me in the kitchen. I was taken aback: I hadn't heard of it and I should have. A few years into a part-time PhD, I was struggling to write my own family's survival of the

Armenian Genocide. I had thought a lifetime of creative practice had prepared me for imagining myself into the Ottoman Empire, into my grandparents' blighted lives. But it hadn't. Nightmares meant I was insomniac; like so many in middle-life, I was struggling to cobble together enough work to help keep us afloat, raising teenage children, caring for my ageing mother, managing my own faltering health.

Over a decade on from that afternoon, I now know a PhD is always difficult, no matter the circumstances, and that it should be. Writing anything large and worthwhile is very hard work. However the practice of writing appears when casually observed, it is physical, embodied and exhausting. It should be life-changing, too, if we're lucky.

But when Mike handed me the novel of *Three Apples*, I didn't feel lucky. I felt anxious, suddenly stilled: what did my ignorance of this book say about what I was doing? I read the blurb: 'During World War I, over a million Armenians living in Turkey disappeared or were deported. To many, it is the first twentieth century example of genocide.' On the front cover, I read Maxine Hong Kingston's endorsement: 'Reading this, I can believe that writing can stop war.' Then, a quote from the *Guardian*: 'Marcom bears the weight of her own family history with extraordinary grace ...' A sudden heat rose in me. At that point, my research into Armenian Genocide third-generation survival stories in English had not turned up much. That, combined with Australia's general ignorance of the Genocide, had allowed me a dangerous hubris. I had begun to feel I was, perhaps, working on something truly unique, even more important than the intellectual journey it was, and the personal discovery it was also turning out to be. I had thought I was somehow special.

I flicked the book open to the first page and began to read: it was, as I had feared, beautifully written.

Mama says, Anaguil, my white dove, it's time to take the bread from the tonnir. Anaguil smiles, her stomach grumbling in anticipation of the fresh homemade bread they will eat with butter and mulberry jam ...

Then the girl Anaguil awakens. In her stomach there is a sensation like heavy and tarnished brass. Nevart is by her side sleeping soundly. The brief joy from the mulberry tree outside her old home in her old home's garden is an acridness in her mouth. There is today and the next day and the next, and there are chores to be done, she thinks. Anaguil turns over, pressing her body against her sister's; she wishes again for the world of sleep. She fears the world of dreams. But at least, perhaps, if she prays, and she does, Mama will come again. Mama will comfort her. Mama will smile.

Anaguil, my white dove, you hold my heart in your hands,  
Mama will say. (32)

I threw it across the room, shouted: 'What made you think I'd be happy to see this?'

I can't clearly recall whether I told Marcom this story when I met her in July 2013 in San Francisco. I remember being on the long flight across the Pacific, thinking about whether there might be a moment in which I would have to choose whether I wanted her to know this unflattering thing about me, and how she might receive it. Now I hope I did tell her in the hours we spent together. I think I did; my memory is she appeared to take it as the compliment it has always been.

Outside South Berkley Station, the day was bright, warm, blue-skied. Marcom had insisted she would collect me from there; it was too hard, she explained, to make the last leg of the journey to her house without a car. I live in a city built around the car, so I was unquestioning, grateful. Last time I had been in San Francisco, thirty years before, July had been cold, rainy. This time I waited in the sun. The handful of other commuters dispersed quickly. I studied the car park, the street. Cars passed. In many ways it was very much like the place I come from: sunny, clean, prosperous. Near to me a bicycle was loaded with bags of possessions and chained to a pole. For several minutes



I studied it: the bags that held someone's life weren't even full; their half-emptiness drew me back and back. By the bike's pedal, a piece of discarded orange was slowly drying in the sun.

It was hard to believe I was there. A small voice nagged: who flies to the other side of the world to interview a writer, anyway? But what it was really asking, I knew by then, was what kind of half-Armenian woman—third-generation Genocide survivor, whose grandmother was married off at fourteen; whose mother was the first girl in her line to ever attend school, who never heard her own mother laugh and who was born under a house and stateless until she, too, married—what girl descended of all that flies across the world to do anything? What kind of world allows me such privilege after inflicting so much suffering and deprivation on my forebears? What kind of world makes possible such privilege at all when terrible suffering elsewhere continues?

Marcom arrived, helped me with my bag. I got in. She had her sunglasses on; I couldn't see her eyes, but I would have recognised her anywhere—the striking structure of her Armenian face.

We chatted as we drove from the station into shaded, steeply inclined streets of lush gardens and large homes, beautifully kept. We pulled into the clean elegant lines of her driveway, climbed the steps to her door. Her home was as calm and uncluttered as if it had just emerged fully formed from a magazine. I couldn't stop looking at its lines, frames, surfaces. Bare, gleaming kitchen counters; shining sinks; surprising shelves and nooks in walls, each holding an object.

Something she said made me ask: 'Was the house like this when you bought it?'

'No,' she replied. 'I remodelled it.'

I told her again how beautiful it was, and I wondered to myself if she had missed another vocation.

Then, through the large back windows, an arresting view: stretching as far inland as I could see were gently declining hills, wild and arid, the land sloping away with low clumps and smudges of parched scrub over pale sand and stone. We were, it became suddenly clear,

perched on the ridgeline. As I stared through the back windows, I realised everything behind me, all we had just travelled through—the large shade trees, flowering shrubs, abundant lawns, and the city itself—had been carefully, determinedly, built over rugged and rising land, the mirror of that which lay before me: the high, tough, low rainfall land of inland California, meandering its wild way east to high desert. I stared, the window frame as mesmerising as any proscenium arch, and felt a bit giddy. I had unknowingly been taken to an edge, had passed naively through one California, believing it true, only to find another, deeper, California revealed as if in an aside, a California that had been there always. The timelessness and harshness of the scene through her window twisted at my heart. I said something. ‘Yes,’ Marcom replied, pausing beside me to look, ‘that’s where I walk.’ Of course, I thought. Anyone would. But it is so like the land around the Caucasus, eastern Turkey, Georgia, Armenia. That same stark beauty. Of course.

During the years of the Armenian Genocide (1915–18), Marcom told me, her grandmother escaped the region of Anatolia (now in Turkey) with her own parents for the safety of Lebanon. She married an Armenian there and so Marcom’s mother was born, grew up, and married ‘out’ in Beirut.<sup>1</sup> Marcom’s father is American, from Chicago; his parents, she elaborated, were ‘Southerners’ and ‘white’, although his mother was Jewish—this last said as an afterthought, although it later strikes me as latent, powerful, perhaps untapped. She referred to herself as white because ‘this is a country where you are defined by the colour of your skin; there’s a caste system like that’. But, she qualified, her Armenianness meant her whiteness ‘isn’t as simple’ as it appeared. Both Marcom and her sister were born in Saudi Arabia: her father found a job there before the family settled in Los Angeles, where she ‘grew up a normal American kid’. She spoke Armenian as a child, she told me, but has forgotten it.

On an otherwise clear surface in the living room was an extraordinary, exquisite pair of shoes, mother-of-pearl inlaid and with high wooden platform soles, the likes of which I had never seen.

‘My grandmother’s,’ Marcom explained. ‘They’re the shoes women wore in the *hamam*.<sup>2</sup> They’re the only thing she managed to take with her when she fled.’

Instinctively, I stepped back from them. We fell silent. I gazed at the shoes, stepped to one side, looked at them from that direction, stepped to the other, then in close again. I asked permission, traced a forefinger over them, remembered the *hamam* scene in *Three Apples*, the handful of family belongings the young Anaguil had with her and which, I now suddenly knew, was so much greater than the truth upon which the scene is based:

Anaguil thinks of what she saved. Eclectic items: Mama’s blue flowered scarf; Baba’s American pocket watch, his gold Waltham with the Roman numerals; a burgundy and cream kilim Nene Heripsime wove in the late winter evenings in front of the tonnir; the 1912 family photograph; the small carved Bible no bigger than her hand; and Mama’s wooden bath sandals, carved from oak, inlaid with mother-of-pearl.<sup>3</sup> (23)

So, I thought, this is the relic, the artefact, the evidence. Fleetinglly I tried to imagine my own grandmother’s feet—and those of all my young aunts before their brutal, early deaths—in the *hamam* in shoes like these. A wave of sadness—for them and also for me—prickled my skin. I hadn’t known about such shoes; there are so many things I still don’t know. Perhaps it was at that moment I began to realise Marcom has something terribly precious that I will never have. I lifted one shoe. It was even heavier than I thought it would be. I took a breath, smiled at her and exclaimed, ‘How could anyone walk in these?’

From a nook in the hallway, she carried in a wide bowl I had missed as we entered; she found it in Anatolia when she visited. Engraved all around its rim was Armenian script. We stared at it. I began to imagine its history: the home, the food, the family. Turkey is beautiful, she told me; its people hospitable; visiting it is wonderful and sad. She was not the first Armenian to say so: part of me also

longs to stand where my family stood, feel the same earth between my toes, breathe the same air. I would love to find the site of my grandfather's unmarked grave in a swamp in Alexandretta on the south-west coast (now Iskenderun). But I realise this is impossible. How, I asked her, will I walk there, knowing the bodies I stand on; talk to locals in cities, towns and villages as if many of them weren't living in stolen homes; eat, smile, brush my teeth, spend my money as if it were all in the past, as if it really had been a civil war?

Later, she watched me unpack my bag, spied the camera: 'You're not going to take photographs, are you?' Given the negotiations we had undertaken, I wasn't expecting this. I said I was hoping to. I set the camera on the tripod in the middle of the room, walked away from it, sat on another sofa. I said, 'If you don't want me to, that's fine.'

The camera lens pointed at her. She eyed it, said, 'Let's just see how it goes.'

No, she replied when I asked, she wouldn't let me see her writing room—but later she offered to take me there, down the stairs, past the laundry, to that snug, book-lined space overlooking her garden. I stood in the doorway. I knew this was a privilege; it didn't feel right to enter. No, I was not allowed to photograph it. I understood: it's too deep, too private, that space we must inhabit when we write. It must be protected.

Back upstairs, I asked: 'Have you been to Beirut?' Oh yes, she had visited many times as a child before its 'very long war'; she loved the city. She 'still has family there but most have left'. She referred to her family's 'double exile': firstly from Anatolia in the Genocide and then from Lebanon in the war. Because of that war, the regular family trips to Beirut to see her grandmother ceased. Negotiations to bring her grandmother to the USA began. They were slow. And her grandmother died two weeks before she was to come to live with Marcom's family in L.A, a blow she described as 'devastating, especially for my mother'.

We seemed to be circling. I asked her about her relationship with her family. She batted the question away, then thought for a

moment: 'I am very, very close to my mother [who now lives in a nearby state] ... I always have been ... We speak every day on the phone.' Her mother was once again centred when I raised the issue of Armenianness. After all, if we accept her description of herself as a 'normal American kid', how did that kid come to write a book—her first and the first of a trilogy—about her family's survival of the Armenian Genocide? What led a normal American kid to that?

Immediately, she identified the matriarchal lineage: her grandmother, her mother, herself. So this, it seemed, was key. She was relieved, she said, she didn't write the Genocide survival story in a conventional three-generational structure, implying that structure is too obvious. 'I never thought about the Genocide when I was younger ... I inherited from my mother a handful of sentences about it ... her mother [Marcom's grandmother] never stopped talking about it ... in the evenings they would get together with other Armenians and talk about it ... so my mother didn't want to talk about [it] ... She used to say, "Have fun" ... But she is the transmitter of whatever sense I have of being Armenian.'

In the ensuing pause I asked the obvious question: Then what did make her think about it? She pondered. In her mid-twenties, she speculated, three things happened: she had already begun to write (badly, she stressed); she was teaching a group of disadvantaged teenagers—whom she described as African-American, Latino, Asian—who never stopped talking about their identity, which made her seriously consider, it seems for the first time, her own; and she ran headlong into denialism.

Her then-husband, an American, had (with a weird serendipity, I can't help but think) lived in Turkey and spoke Turkish fluently. His Turkish friend visited and brought his wife, 'an extremely nice person'. Although, as Marcom said, she as yet knew no details of the Genocide, she knew what had happened to her family. And, she continued, pointing to herself, she also clearly understood 'these people [the visitors] were Turks and I was Armenian.' Over that dinner, the friend's wife mentioned her family came from Anatolia, to which Marcom replied that, coincidentally, her family also came from that

region, they were Armenian and had survived the Genocide. ‘What do you mean?’ the woman had countered. ‘There was no genocide. It was a civil war.’

As Marcom had been speaking, I had stood, retrieved the camera, and sat with it cradled in my lap. She had watched it and me and it and me, and then she was back in the flow of conversation and relaxed again. When I raised the camera, gazed at her through the lens, she didn’t seem to notice. I pressed the shutter. She heard it, delivered a sudden sharp look without breaking her sentence, her face wary. But she didn’t ask me to stop. I took another, lowered the camera. She regarded it, looked to me, as she continued: ‘This chasm opened between this woman and me. She was telling me these things never happened that I knew had happened, but I had no way of countering what she said because I didn’t know enough ... I felt extremely ashamed and extremely angry.’ She paused. ‘It was shocking.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Shocking.’

And I was struck by the echoes between this story and one of my formative experiences at precisely the same age—an experience that, over twenty years later, became a scene in my own Armenian Genocide novel, one that used the three-generational structure Marcom disparaged. My then-husband and I met our friend at a café for dinner; we were there to be introduced to her new boyfriend. He was pleasant, if quiet. Trying to move the conversation along, our friend told us her boyfriend was from Turkey. I looked at him again, looked away. He was asked about his country, and this young Turkish man became animated for the first time as he told us how wonderful the Republic was, how it had been transformed by its Father, Kemal Atatürk. I stared at my plate, my hands pushed my cutlery around, the food suddenly unappealing. My partner told him my family came from Turkey. There was a pause. I looked up; across the table, the young man was looking at me, suddenly interested. When I told him they were Armenian, his mouth fell open. I, too, had nothing else to say because, like Marcom, I didn’t know the details—the names, dates, locations, methods of their murders. Indeed, I had no scholarly or historical knowledge to

counter his version nor with which to contextualise my family's loss. I was rendered speechless by anger and shame, gutted by what he had said. I was acutely aware of the continuing of everyday sounds in the café around us, acutely aware of the parts of my body which felt suddenly as if they were not quite mine.

Watching Marcom in her living room telling me about her own close encounter with denialism, I wondered aloud how many other twenty-something third-generation Armenian Genocide survivors living in the Diaspora had had such an experience that shook their very foundations. I reminded her: the opening chapter in *Three Apples* is about the denial. 'I think that's why I wrote it that way,' she said. 'I was trying to enfold the denial in, not to just constantly beat up against it because that doesn't seem to work ... I wanted to bring it right in. I didn't know how else to contend with it.'

She had looked everywhere outside herself for a story to write, she said, and all the while the story had been right there alongside her. The character of Anaguil in *Three Apples*, the traumatised little girl in the *hamam*, is her grandmother's story: 'Everything that happens to Anaguil is based on everything I know about her, and her brothers and sister, and her mother and father.' She looked at me. I stared back and, in the pause, recalled:

Get the two bitches who brought the honey.

Anaguil snaps her head around and sees a flash of metal flying through the air, glittering like water pools.

Shud! Join the women, daughter.

Find the bitch infidels.

Shud!

Shud!

Anaguil moves quickly in her long black veil into the large group of women. The knife continues its trajectory, flying through the morning blue sky, brilliant. It strikes a wall on the far side of the courtyard and drops to the ground. Its handle cracks and breaks in two from the impact. Honey shines on the blade.

The young soldier with the scarred knuckles holds his right hand in the air. The blood drips down his palm.

I've sliced my fingers in two from their trickery.

There in the crowd of women Anaguil finds her mother staring intently at the stone floor of the courtyard. The other women close in around them. The guards begin pressing at the circle ... strike the women standing on the periphery; they beat them on their heads and backs, they slap their cheeks.

Where's the bitch and her infidel pup?

... for the Lord is for you.

Cut off their hands.

Slice off their tits.

Eh bitches, come out, come out.

Sshhtt. Sshhtt.

... do not bring us to this time of trial ...

Armenian infidel whore, you'll soon feel the glory of our nation between your legs. (103–4)

I nodded slowly.

Much later I realised that, in some part of me, I had begun to make a list. (Is it the same part that flung her book across the room more than a decade before, or is it another frightened self that, whatever else I might prefer to believe, clings to its ignorance like a talisman to protect from too much truth?) The list includes: her exquisite eye for design; her clear sense of who she is; the intense bond between her and her mother; her extended Armenian and American family nearby; her direct and intimate knowledge of her grandmother; the *hamam* shoes; the wild, dry hills where she walks; that astonishing debut novel, *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*, the independent feature film version to be released in time for the centenary of the Genocide in April 2015. This list flags things that separate us—two women writers of Armenian descent whose families survived the Armenian Genocide, whose mothers grew up in neighbouring Diaspora communities and married out, who themselves were born elsewhere, migrated to and



grew up in the English-speaking New World and who found the story for their first novels had been right alongside them all the time, who wrote into those novels every sentence they had inherited, sentences handed down from their grandmother through their mother, sentences that remain powerful evidence, as precious and heavy as the pair of *hamam* shoes that once belonged to the real Anaguil, that live on in skin and in everything behind, in our very cells:

She touches her collarbone, then its hollow, her skin is dry and smooth; She runs her second and index fingers into the groove of her hollowed collarboned space. Anaguil thinks of her birth and its obligations. She thinks of death not as if she wants to die, but as if her death were a trapped moth ... in the space of her back where her kidneys ache—the space inside where the moth flies and flutters ensnared by the skin. Constant. Constantly. She digs her fingers into her skin ... she wonders as she stares and bites and licks her fingertips ... Mama. Mama: I don't know if I can remember you in this skin and bone, collarbone, you gave me on the day of my birth ... She is writing a book of memory on her body and destroying it as she writes.

*Baba,<sup>4</sup> to see you again I would cut off my hand.  
I could laugh like our chatty nightingale. (52–53)*

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## Notes

- 1 To marry someone from outside your religious/ethnic community, uncommon practice for Armenians.
- 2 Turkish bath-house.
- 3 *Kilim* (a type of carpet); *nene* (grandmother); *tonnir* (wood-burning stove/heater).
- 4 Father

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'A pattern more complicated': breaking out of words in order to break into them

## Mags Webster

It's August 2013 and I'm sitting at a hotel window in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The soundtrack of urban Asia filters through the open shutters—scooters, motorcycles—drowsier and more rhythmic than would be possible in Denpasar, or Hanoi, or Manila. No shrill police whistles, no Tourettes of car horns. In this northern corner of Thailand everything seems gentler: even the language—a series of ripples—both on the ear and on the page.

I have nearly finished one of my holiday books. It's by nature writer Robert MacFarlane, and it's about the wild places of the British Isles, land of my origin. I have been reading about gabbro, horneblende, boulder clay, hearing the krek of ravens as MacFarlane leads me across limestone clints and grykes. I've been feeling the pebbledash of hail as we overnight on the northernmost peak of mainland Scotland. Each unfamiliar term I jot down in my notebook, adding them to my treasury, my word-hoard. Sinter. Caulk. Fletch. I turn the sound of them around in my mouth, consonants rolling like shingle. In time, they will add their texture to new writing and new poems of my own. Distanced from the place I was born, I seem to be learning afresh my mother tongue. If, as Roland Barthes suggests, language is a skin (73),

every few years I am aggregating layers, thickening a membrane of vocabulary; I am becoming weathered by words.

In this part of Asia, weathering is mostly about humidity. Sometimes I feel as though the voracious air is slowly digesting me. For the past two years I've been living in Hong Kong, a place I'm still trying to call home. In the city's canyons of concrete and glass I've felt like the ball on the playfield of a pinball machine, I've vibrated with a hectic and slippery energy. But in Chiang Mai over the past few days my pace has become less urgent, as if I have found a temporary antidote to all Hong Kong's velocity and ricochet. I find it easier to be still, to reclaim something of the person I used to be; and to acquaint myself with the person I've become.



I left Britain over a decade ago to live in Australia. When I arrived on the western edge of the continent for the very first time, it seemed like a homecoming. Growing up in England, I always had the strange sense of being homesick for a place where I had never lived. The Germans have a name for this—*sehnsucht*—difficult to translate but which expresses a type of bittersweet yearning after something that is unattainable, a loss keenly felt yet impossible to identify. But was I 'returning' to Australia as a prodigal or as a beloved child? Distance can be anaesthetic. While I was living in the northern hemisphere, Australia had been a state of mind, but now I was actually here it was a reality challenging to handle, because I did not know who I was in this new belonging.

So I set about learning the languages of a different world. Everything sounded like English, but while my speech was seasoned by fog and river drift, others talked (and wrote) in the accents of eucalypt and ocean. Even the wind spoke differently, in the metre of desert and heat, using sand as punctuation. I travelled north to the Kimberley and the Pilbara, places more immense than anything that was going on in my head, and the language changed and deepened. It

became the language of unsaying, in which words are not the units of meaning, where ‘what you do not know is the only thing you know’ (Eliot 201).

With language like this, feeling had to come before learning, and I started learning to feel through listening. Out in the remoteness, the landscape has a haptic quality, making contact (literally) through touch, but it’s a touch you feel with your soul as much as your body. There’s a sound that the land breathes out, that you can only hear through the soles of your feet, your muscles, your skin. It’s not about voice, it’s about the silence before voice, full of intent and power, holding the meaning before its release. I found something similar in the south, among the towering karri forests close to Pemberton. If I closed my eyes and inhaled the trees’ resinous breath, its distillation of sap and sunlight, it was like being in a church hung with thuribles, or a temple where incense sticks burned. I was tuned to the frequency of a slow growth, trees building themselves increment by increment, dedicating themselves to a single purpose. I heard the forest’s memory expanding, trunk by trunk, ring by ring, the almost imperceptible sound of tissue and bark pushing outward from each tree’s core.

What possible response could I give to this land? I did not have the words; even prayer would be inadequate. But being human, and incapable of holding back from communication, I decided that even if all I had to offer was silence, I wanted it to be the most meaningful silence I could make. ‘Nothingness has a name’, the twelfth century troubadour Aimeric de Peguilhan was supposed to have said, ‘and so, by the simple act of speaking the name, one enters into language and speaks about nothing’ (Agamben 72–73).

So I embarked on a personal *via negativa* into the richness and fullness of language, the spaces and symbols of writing, the silence and sound of speech. It was a journey that would take me into territory where borders were flexible, even chimerical. It was a journey that would allow me to break out of words in order to break into them.



To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
    You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
    You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
    You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
    You must go through the way in which you are not. (Eliot 201)

Denial and apophasis are the essence of *via negativa*, the pathway to an ultimate knowledge, a knowledge that may never be fully known, and is characterised by describing things in terms of what they are not. Poetry is its ideal expression, for poetry is a negotiation with the unknown, and poems are the trace elements of that negotiation. So much writing attempts to limn the shift and play of marginal zones, and poetry perhaps more than any other genre is concerned with articulating the interstices between perception and reality. In making a poem, the poet is constantly negotiating frontier country. Over a richness of mystery, poetry strings causeways of line and language. If a poem does its work properly, it enables its writer and its readers to navigate fragile and invisible borders between one state of being and another. How these borders will be mapped is entirely up to the individual, but with this process comes the sense that some new understanding of the human condition has been achieved. As Seamus Heaney observed, 'we go to poetry, we go to literature in general, to be forwarded within ourselves' (159).

So I wrote towards the silence, at first tentatively, then with a little more confidence. Each draft was a layering of words, like a tree's growth ring. I learned that just as growth rings accumulate as a retrospective of the seasons, poems only took shape after the fact of the thought. What I needed was to access them *before* the fact of the thought, when the words were still soft and wet and forming in pre-verbal darkness, when they were taking shape not just from thought and intimation, but from the intersection of those elements

with time. Slowly I took steps backwards, trying to unlearn, to be 'un' conscious.

By following 'the way of ignorance' (Eliot 201), I began to find my place in Australia, and to understand that the strange feeling of homecoming I had initially experienced was not an illusion; in fact, if anything this feeling grew stronger. I had been trying too hard to name it, to frame it in words. But I was only just beginning to understand that 'It's only in darkness you can see the light, only / from emptiness that things start to fill' (Wright 3). I recognised that Australia had inhabited my consciousness and unconsciousness for as long as I could remember: so was I finally reaching an understanding of my lifelong *sehnsucht*?



I was still in the process of finding out the answer when it became time to move to Hong Kong. The displacement to this city in the South China Sea was difficult, and I lost my footing on the pathway I had started in Australia. When I regained it, I found the topography had entirely changed, and the signposts on this journey had altered direction, pointing backwards to the land of my birth. The slight residue of Englishness around my new location should have made this transition easier, yet when I tried to 'listen' to Hong Kong in the way I had 'listened' in Australia, I heard nothing, despite the fact that the city vibrates with sound: every few metres a different language, the clatter of trams, footsteps, traffic, the clamour of commercial transaction. The rapid fire of Cantonese, the bunny-hop (to my ears) of Putonghua, languages constructed of tone and pitch. Everywhere else, the seething fizz of insects. I heard everything but the thing I was seeking—that breath before the land speaks—the silence that is full of meaning. Even in the beautiful green hills, which cover as much of these islands as the buildings, I could not tune into anything that made sense to me. I was unable to feel any sound. So by way of compensation, and homesick for Australia, my relationship with language intensified.

Living in Hong Kong, and travelling from country to country—Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos and Thailand—I discovered I wanted to cleave to my own native tongue and strip it down to a further level: to dialect, idiom, inflection. To the bone of the word. Perhaps I was responding to my sense of disruption by going deeper into what I had always known, to explore what US poet Michael Palmer calls ‘the mysteries of ordinary language’. My birth country gave me the only language I really know, but what a language: amalgam of Gaelic, French, Latin, Norse, German, Greek, Persian, the syllabic slabs of Celtic and Saxon, the filigree of Romance. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests that ‘poetic language takes place in such a way that its advent always already escapes both toward the future and toward the past. The place of poetry is therefore always a place of memory and repetition’ (Agamben 76). In English, I have more than a lifetime’s allowance of words, more than a millennium’s worth of meaning. In English, I also come closer to the idea of home.



It’s June 2014 and I am at my desk in Hong Kong. Thinking back to last August, I remember sitting at the window as the light faded in Chiang Mai and a battalion of red ants ceased their endless two-way march on the power cables outside. I remember wondering what the ensuing year—this year—would bring. In ‘Little Gidding’, Eliot writes ‘... last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice.’ (218)

Am I finding ‘another voice’? If I am, surely it will be hybrid. I am a citizen of two countries, living in a third. I am still negotiating where I really belong, still feeling the ache of *sehnsucht*. I realise that it takes moving away from somewhere to understand where one has come from, and perhaps where one needs to be. I know that even if I never live in Britain again, my identity is bound up in its language. If an experience of living alongside other cultures manifests in my writing, it will only be through the agency of English. Australia, focus

of my love-pain, my longing, aroused in me the desire to write. Asia's gift is the continuing revelation and reappraisal of my mother tongue.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment (Eliot 203)

How apt these lines are as an expression of how I feel, of the point I've reached in this journey. Language is my companion-traveller, my lodestone, my past and future home, and the pattern has indeed become more complicated. As it is with life, so it is with language and with poetry. The more I seek to simplify, the more depth and complexity I find.

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## Old Rags and Mojitos: A Varadero Notebook

### Robert Drewe

We're welcomed by larger than life statues of a golden mermaid, a Venus de Milo and a plump naked woman who's expressing breast milk into a pineapple. In a landscape of five-star hotels in the Cuban coastal town of Varadero, we're checking in to the oldest and seediest one, the Internacional, where Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner, the Mafia, and holidaying Caribbean dictators used to party.

The Internacional is down to three stars these days, and very lucky to have them. In the words of its advertising, the hotel is 'admittedly ageing'. Opened to loud fanfare and wild Batista-era carousing in 1950, it was the first beach resort hotel in Cuba.

Its foyer of over-stuffed '50s leather couches and gold-framed mirrors is painted in whirligig patterns of turquoise, pink, green and brown. Its overall decor is TV's *Mad Men* meets a Caribbean bordello. This is not unappealing to us atmosphere-seekers. The same goes for its raffish history and cheap tariff. These were its attractions.

Of the three elevators, only the service lift is working. This isn't so appealing. It's a long walk to our room along a mouldy, stained and sandy red carpet. Occasionally the carpet squelches underfoot

and here and there it half-covers holes in the cement floor through which you can glimpse the floor below. Bare pipes and exposed electric wires line the corridor. The sweet, stale smell of rum and the pungent, sinus-catching stench of cigars permeate the third floor.

Our room has a bullet hole in the window and the coverless, cavernous air-conditioner says thirty degrees but is more like thirteen; it sends a fierce but narrow wind gust directly onto the bed. The bed is king-size, with a rubber sheet on top of the mattress, two single-bed sheets and two thin, hard pillows. Nevertheless, the thought of Frank and Ava cavorting here in its more sumptuous days comes easily to mind. There are no curtains on the windows, which open on to a beautiful white beach and the sparkling Caribbean, as stunning as its publicity.

Presumably, Frank and Ava had room service. There isn't any now. After four weeks away, our dirty laundry presents a problem. Eventually the pleasant receptionist says she'll take it home and wash it there. She won't suggest any charge. Finally she says five dollars will do.

Varadero occupies a Cuban cultural warp: for capitalist countries it's an inexpensive beach resort, with its own airport offering easy access from Canada and Europe (not so easily, obviously, from the US). But with all services having to be paid for in dollars it's hardly possible for ordinary Cubans, so it's a place of minimal locals and many overweight, heavily-smoking Continentals in scanty beach-wear.

Once you've checked in to the Internacional, and paid upfront, all food and drinks are free, twenty-four hours a day, for the duration of your stay. You're encouraged to re-fill your thermos of mojitos, pina coladas or beer throughout the day. Unsurprisingly, drunken guests proliferate: raucous women and fat tattooed men—Canadians, Germans, English, Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians. (A waiter says the aggressive Russians are the least popular tourists.) Everyone smokes over their meals, and everywhere else, too. Naturally, because they're in Cuba, the men ostentatiously puff on Havana cigars.

On a typical balmy morning, two-thirds of the way along the lushly vegetated Peninsula de Hicacos, Internacional guests scurry seawards with their drink flasks to nab a plastic deckchair that isn't broken. More statues of mythical gods, goddesses and Mesoamerican heroes frown out across the sea towards America. Most are missing a nose or an arm or two.

Once territory has been established, and first drinks consumed, indolence strikes the holidaying Europeans. Their beach costumes and behaviour look strange to an Australian beachgoer's eyes. The men favour bulge-enhancing Lycra trunks and wife-beater vests that expose plump upper arms; the women, regardless of age and shape, bikinis. Middle-aged gays stroll and pose, baring shiny, shaved bodies in tight latex. Rather than submerge themselves and swim in this gorgeous Caribbean Ocean, most men and women stand motionlessly in the water, faces raised to catch the sun's rays, heads remaining dry, before wandering back to the beach to refill their drink flasks, apply more body oil, and fry in the sun.

A regular sight each noon is a melancholy, fiftyish, Eastern European man who wears a mankini, the bizarre genital-sling swimsuit that loops around the neck and owes its risible reputation to the *Borat* movie starring Sacha Baron Cohen. Thin and stoop-shouldered, his thinning hair highlighted with blond streaks, he arrives at the beach each day with a dark and muscular male walking several paces behind him.

This young man is a sullen chain-smoker who never enters the water and sits at a distance from the European man. Every so often, the mankini-wearer walks slowly into the sea, stands waist-deep for ten or so minutes and gazes forlornly at the horizon, then returns to the sand, rolls down the top of his mankini and lights a cigarette. Optimistically, he lights one for his companion, leans over, and puts his hand on the young man's knee. The Cuban takes the cigarette and shifts out of reach.

On the beach terrace, amplified salsa and son music begins at nine a.m. and plays until late at night. A cloud of greasy smoke, thick enough to coat the throat, wafts from the hotel's free

hamburger-and-chips bar and hangs over the terrace all day, mingling with the sweet grease of the Europeans' suntan lotions.

A Canadian family group of three generations is sitting alongside us. A fat and fortyish female member puts down her drink flask, hitches up her bikini bottoms and yells out to her family across the terrace, 'Oh no, I've got to pee again!' Ordering more drinks from a waiter, her relatives are pronouncing *gracias* as 'grassy arse', *por favor* as 'paw favour'.

In the main cafe, a dangerous-looking Central American woman with an Amy Winehouse hairstyle, and wearing an exposed gold bra and shimmering gold hot-pants, sits with her husband and two chubby children. Mama holds her knife like a weapon, and eats off it, sliding the blade slowly through her scarlet lips. The children slowly munch through mounds of pork and chips, and drink Coke (whose ubiquity in Cuba defies American sanctions by being bottled in Mexico). The hefty, hairy-armed husband (in a wife-beater singlet) is a faster eater, and lines up for his third helping.

Why not? The buffet is free, as much heavily fried food as you can eat, all day if you wish. But pork chunks with stubbly black pig hairs still intact might not appeal, or the thick, pale bacon chunks sliced vertically (also with hairs), the pale sliced pork sausage, the pale pork mince. Pork is very popular in Cuba. The little pale eggs seem a safer option.

Despite the free food at the Internacional, we soon choose to eat dinner downtown each night, usually at Restaurante Esquina, famous for its influence over the Buena Vista Social Club, where the popular meal is shredded beef brisket in a tomato sauce—*Ropa Viejo*—which translates, interestingly, as 'old rags'. However, with rice, beans and plantain chips, and a one-dollar bottle of Cristal beer, the old rags make an enjoyable meal, accompanied by the compulsory cafe band playing son, country music that blends African rhythm and Spanish melody, and interspersed with vintage sentimental American pop songs. Dining out in Cuba is cheap; it's constantly putting money in the musicians' bowls that mounts up.

In the Varadero restaurant strip of this bi-racial country it's unsettling to politically correct visitors to see two giant golliwogs waddling and skipping along the street, posing for tourists' photographs and shaking hands with diners. They're football-mascot sized caricatures of black Cubans: the grinning, fat-lipped, dopey-looking Sambo and bandana-wearing, massive-bottomed Mammy that you see comically represented in every Cuban souvenir shop alongside the countless flattering representations of (white) Che Guevara. Sambo and Mammy's prevalence in a country where 34 per cent of people identify as black or mulatto (the actual percentage is believed to be even higher) is one of the country's mysteries.

On our last night the restaurant service in Varadero dwindles—the waiters seem distracted—then comes to a halt. Cubans are crazy about baseball and an important local game is on TV. All the waiters and kitchen staff want to watch the game. As we deliberate over food choices, our waiter sighs and says sarcastically, 'Why don't you take the menu home?' We order old rags again, then head back to the hotel.

At the Internacional a strong wind has sprung up, the choppy sea snaps on the beach, the Caribbean is suddenly transformed and sand and spray blow against our window. Wind whistles through the bullet hole.

A small dance group of four girls and four boys in chipped heels and laddered tights are setting up on the sandy, slippery terrazzo slabs facing the beach. The girls smoke as they change costumes behind a canvas sign that flaps in the wind. It declares, in English, that the group is called *The Rhythm of the Night*.

They dance three numbers. In difficult conditions they do well. No one falters on the uneven terrace surface. They look skilful, cheerful, poised and ambitious, as if they're anticipating that there's an international impresario in this audience of rum-drunk Canadians and Russians who is eager to dress them in smarter costumes and sign them up for bigger engagements than the Hotel Internacional in Varadero.

Then, abruptly, they're stopped in their tracks and left standing: there's no music starting up for their next routine. Where's the DJ? He's vanished.

The young *Rhythm of the Night* dancers stand frozen in full pose, then gradually put their hands on their hips. Time passes. Still no music. No rhythm this night. They're mortified, and eventually they walk off to the shelter of their windblown canvas sign, heads held high.

Tomorrow we'll return on the bus to the beguiling atmosphere of beautiful Havana, to partake of the habits and haunts of José Martí, Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway. (Cuba reveres writers. As with Che, there's no getting away from José and Papa here.) Back to the Ambos Mundos, the Hotel Sevilla, El Floridita, Finca La Vigía. However, tonight at the Internacional we order yet another free mojito and optimistically try to check emails and call home. But there's no wi-fi, as advertised. The hotel computer is 'not working yet'. There is no surprise at this news. It never is.

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