

60.2

New Writing from
Western Australia

Fiction

Poetry

Essays

Reviews

In this Issue

Rachel Robertson

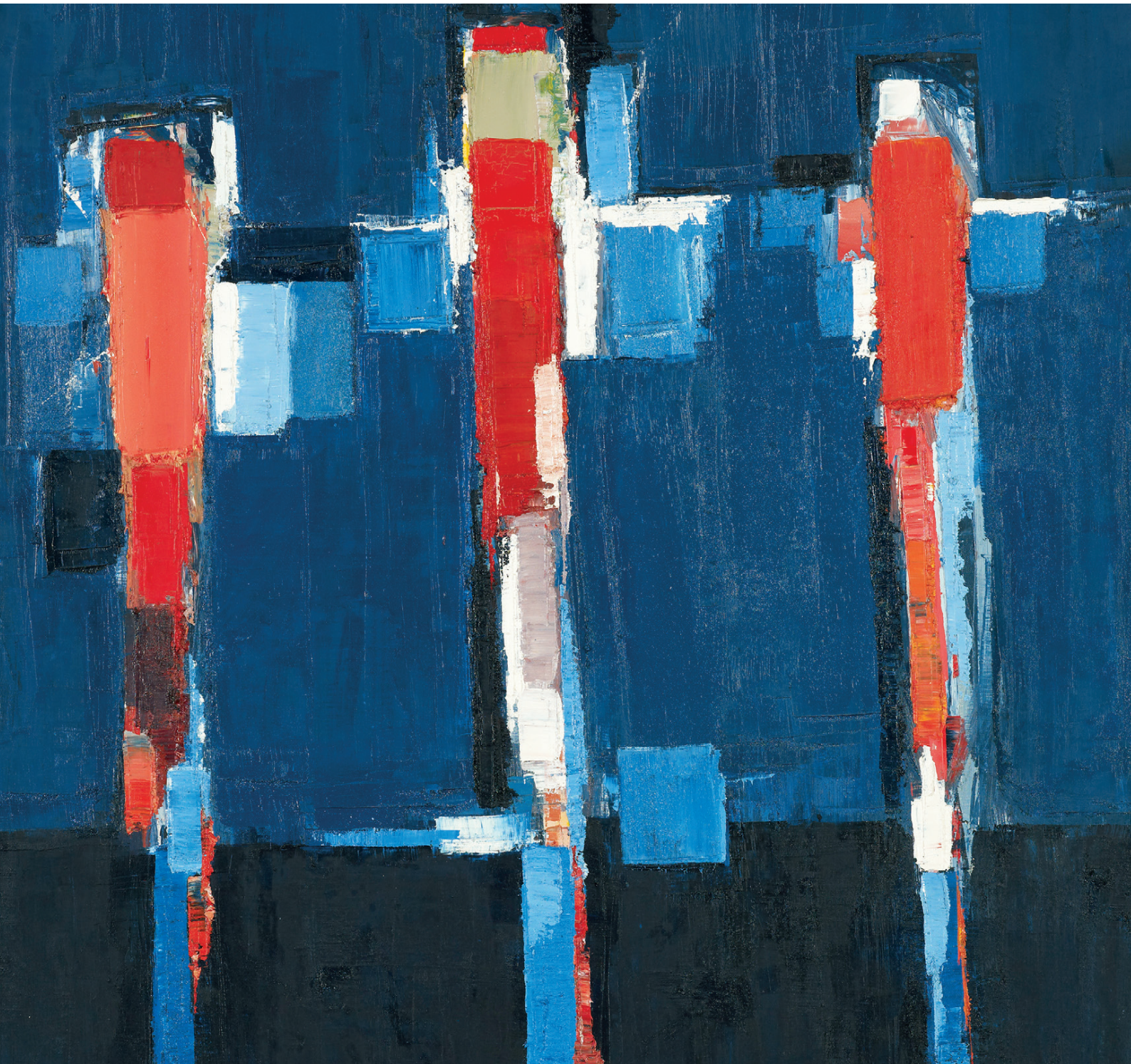
Elizabeth Smither

Jordie Albiston

Richard Nile &

Ffion Murphy

Westerly



'The Person from Poetry'

Richard James Allen

“...because no one else can hear the cacaphony,
and if you shut it out or pretend not to hear it,
the pounding will fade away as if it had never been.”

Westerly

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This issue marks a beginning. Many writers have commented on the need for receptivity in beginning a piece, the importance of a moment or an image, a sensation in guiding what follows. This issue likewise has emerged from its own moment—one marked not only by the uncertainty which currently surrounds funding in the arts but also by the strength and energy of the response this uncertainty has engendered, and the possibilities which follow.

Featured in this issue is the campaign ‘Word Matters’, a response to the cuts to funding that the arts have suffered nationwide this year. The campaign plays with concepts of value, asks what currency a poem might have in our world. In a recent interview with James Dryburgh, published in *Island* 141 (2015), Julian Burnside responded to a question about the importance of art by suggesting that our capacity as a society to remember the names and works of famous artists, writers and composers long after we have forgotten those of the politicians of the same era signals ‘a tacit acknowledgement that it’s contributions to culture which are of the most enduring value.’ (35) In the context of the discussion which has surrounded arts funding this year, the idea of value has continually been questioned.

There is a danger that in focusing on problems of funding as a conflict between the arts community and the national government, we might step towards forgetting that part of the power and beauty in art of any kind is in its reception as much as its production, its capacity to be shared across a society—in literature, the live circuit that exists between writer, reader and text. It is only in this dynamic existence within the world that art has the power to contribute to culture, to shape and even transform worlds. This is why ‘Word Matters’ as a campaign is attempting a creative response to the discussion of funding, calling for your involvement. It is in part an attempt to recognise that value in the arts demands it being shared.

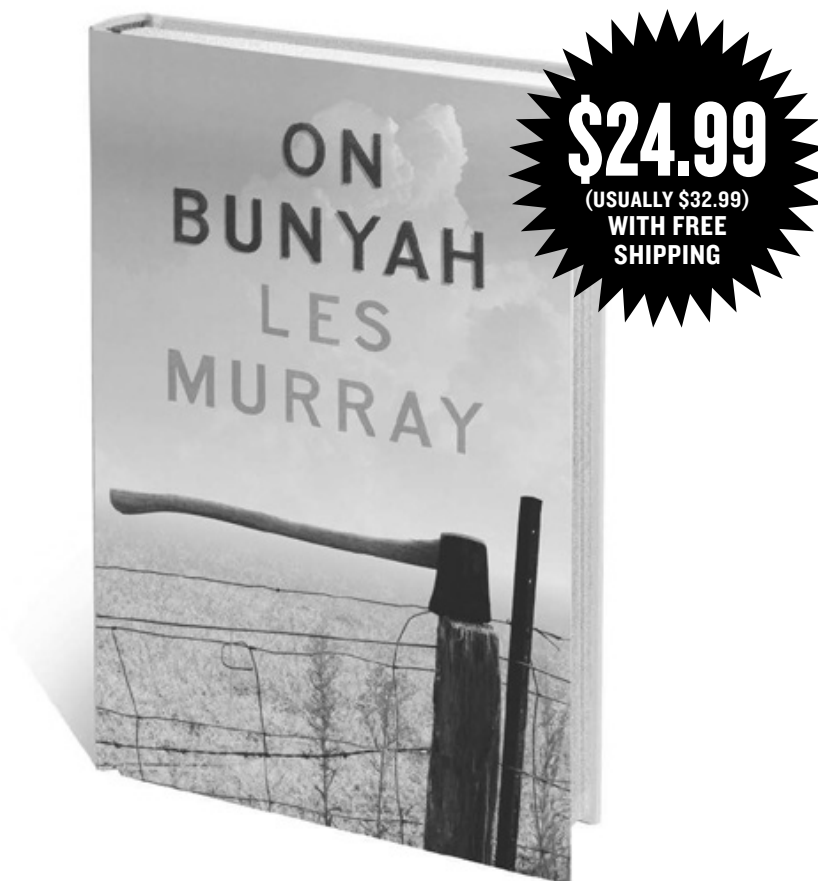
It is an enormous privilege to be working with *Westerly*, and with the people behind the magazine. This issue would not have happened without the assistance and insight of Lucy Dougan, the support of Paul Clifford, and the guidance of several members of the Westerly Centre, in particular Philip Mead, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, Dennis Haskell and Delys Bird. There are others to thank, as well—I am endlessly grateful for the tireless efforts of our external editors, Amanda Curtin and Cassandra Atherton, in their selection of prose and poetry; the expertise of our board of editorial consultants; the diligence of Keith Feltham in production and Becky Chilcott in design; and the support from the literary community of Western Australia more generally, which has made me feel so welcome. In this moment of beginning, the guiding sensation is one of great energy and excitement as to what the future might offer.

Together the pieces in this collection might be read as an exploration and celebration of what literature as an art form has the capacity to achieve. I hope that in the broken song of Alan Fyfe's 'Summer', the intimate moments of Rachel Robertson's 'Dancing', the sharp touch of absence in Caitlin Mailing's 'July 11th' or the playful lack of 'e' in Cameron Fuller's work you will feel what Richard James Allen finds in the act of writing itself: 'reverberations' to cut across 'the eternal battering hum of existence'...

Catherine Noske, editor, November 2015.

SPECIAL OFFER FOR *ON BUNYAH* BY LES MURRAY

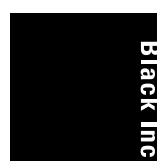
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The Person from Poetry

Richard James Allen

Richard James Allen's publications include *Fixing the Broken Nightingale* (Flying Island Books), *The Kamikaze Mind* (Brandl & Schlesinger) and *Thursday's Fictions* (Five Islands Press), shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. www.physicaltv.com.au

Samuel Taylor
Coleridge,
'Preface to *Kubla Khan*'

'At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock...'

J. M. Barrie,
Peter Pan

'Whenever a child says, "I don't believe in fairies", there's a little fairy somewhere that falls right down dead.'

And so the person from poetry comes calling again,
the one you thought had forgotten you,
left you with only the name of poet,
not the means. They knock at your door
and you hear their knocking, you feel their
knocking, you are their knocking.
And it's a bit like believing in fairies,
because no one else can hear the cacophony,
and if you shut it out or pretend not to hear it,
the pounding will fade away as if it had never been.
Somehow you feel certain that we all
hear this kind of hullabaloo, in one form or other,
but most of us don't know what to do with it,
and so never unbolt the door, never break the seal
on the parchment being handed to us,
never catch in the transpicuous bottle of an artwork
the thunderclaps of our imaginations,
whose reverberations instead fade back
into the eternal battering hum of existence.

Dancing

Rachel Robertson

Dr Rachel Robertson is a Lecturer at Curtin University and writer of creative non-fiction. Her memoir, *Reaching One Thousand* (Black Inc. 2012), was shortlisted for the National Biography Award in 2013. Her academic interests include life writing, ethics, motherhood studies, Australian literature and critical disability studies.

1

He hands me words like a bunch of flowers—finesse, equilibrium, divergence. They seem to scent the air with optimism. We talk into a topic, and through it. He is lyrical and philosophical; I am ironic and teasing. I take his words, though, hold them close.

We drink French wine with Thai food and his fingers itch to take notes as we talk. Then he sits at his computer and types away with his hands splayed in an odd position that must be from never learning to touch type.

Later, I find three pumpkin seeds scattered on the floor, slipped from his fingers like green confetti.

The next day he is gone.

2

My son's hands fascinate me with their long-fingered elegance, the way they flare around the knuckles. They are not my hands, nor his father's, but remind me of my sister sitting at the piano, pausing before she begins a slow movement from a Beethoven sonata.

3

Hands in my family are never still. There is always a thrumming or a drumming or a twisting or a stroking. Fingers fret thumbs, hands clasp one way then another, palms are run down the side of the body, forefingers twirl cowlicks in neck hair. It is like a mute orchestra, filling the air with movement in place of sound.

Sometimes I wonder what desperate messages our hands are telegraphing.

Hands in my family are simply decorated. The men shun jewellery; one or two modest rings are the pattern for women. The rings are usually silver with a single gem of a warm colour—pink or red or purple. Some of the women wear an engagement ring with small diamonds and some a wedding band. Always, it is kept plain.

When I wear green nail polish on Christmas Eve, eyebrows are raised.

4

Every morning, just after breakfast, our hands do a ritual dance. I lay out our equipment, slip the covers off the needles and syringe. He breaks the glass tops off the bottles of saline and powder. Smoothly, as if choreographed, my fingers glide, draw up the saline and release it into the powder, once, twice, again, drawing it up, changing the needle, handing it to him. Tap, tap, he clears the bubbles, holding it in front of the light, while I pick an area of my leg, swab it with a sterile wipe. The needle enters neatly, his hand steady as the sting hits me and I grimace. The cotton wool, some tape, the remnant glass goes into the bin, the needles in a jam jar for safe disposal. It takes us less than five minutes. I am pleased with our proficiency, as if this will help, will somehow magic up a baby.

The dance of the hands, fifteen years ago now—precursor to the boy with the beautiful fingers.

5

The man of the word-bouquet has a beard and thick body hair. I first noticed his arms when I sat next to him in a seminar and saw the march of hair down the ulna. If he had worn a long-sleeved shirt that day, we may never have become friends.

When there is no man in my life, the touch I miss most is my hands stroking the hair on a man's chest.

6

My son's father is a man of few words. He has a neat way of summing up a complex situation with a single phrase. He is never playful or profligate with words. He is a man grounded in his body, good with his hands. He is practical, not abstract.

My son and I, however, are both air-filled, impractical people. We are great talkers. Stories are my stock in trade: effect follows cause. My son's talk is

rhetoric, not story. He repeats himself and others, uses questions, circles round again and repeats it all the next time. There is a kind of looping art in his way of speaking, a logic that only he understands.

7

I read in *Scientific American* that nail-biting is heritable. All through my childhood, my parents and siblings nagged me to stop biting my nails. My mother painted them with a bitter substance that was supposed to teach me to stop the habit. I couldn't stop, though; I simply tried to do it in private. Nobody mentioned that my father also bit his nails. In adulthood, my habit waned but I continued to revert to nail-biting when stressed until I first moved in with the man of few words. This was the month after my father died; again, a coincidence never alluded to.

My son also bites his nails or chews his fingers, but more often, he will hold something in his hand and fiddle with it, tossing it in the air, swapping it from hand to hand and moving it around his fingers without cease. It may be the lid of a pen, a twisted paperclip, a small magnet, or a bottle top. Very rarely does he fiddle with the squeezable stress balls that are designed for just this purpose. The constant movement drives me crazy and I often find myself removing the object from his hands and placing it in the bin. Of course, five minutes later he has picked up some other object, so we both know my actions are pointless. We both know I must just let his fingers sing their mad percussive song.

8

Four women sit around a table in a café. We have finished our morning's work and we are now chatting about personal matters. I mention my age and the youngest woman is surprised:

'You look younger,' she says. I laugh and show her the back of my left hand.

'You see,' I say, taking her own hand and turning it over next to mine, 'that's how you tell a woman's age.' The other two women put their hands, palms down, into the centre of the table and there is a moment of silence. We register that we are each in a different decade of our life and that our hands tell of this more eloquently than anything else.

The youngest woman is pregnant and she looks shocked. It is as if she only just realises that she is about to step across a milestone and become someone newly-old, a version of her own mother perhaps.

9

Not long after my son was born, I started to stand by the kettle, hands around it as it began to heat. I couldn't work out why I was suddenly adopting this habit, which I recognised as something my mother also did. At first I thought it was because I was subconsciously copying my mother's behaviours. Then I realised it was because my hands were often cold, just as my mother's hands were in my childhood. I had reached the age when the circulation no longer works as well and I was up early in the cool mornings with the baby.

Occasionally, I catch myself repeating another of my mother's characteristic hand movements, where she lays her right hand across the left side of her neck, clasp the collar of her shirt. I remember her standing, staring out of the kitchen window for long periods of time, one hand at her neck, the other flat on the sill. We could call her name or even tug her skirt and she would seem unaware of our presence.

10

My son's hands are always warm. He still lets me sit next to him and clasp palms, my fingers interleaved with his. Sometimes there is a surprise package there—a small spring or a metal button. If I ask where he got it, he will reply, 'I just found it,' gesturing with his other hand like a magician conjuring flowers.

At heart, we are both optimists.

Sometimes you wake to know

Jo Langdon

Jo Langdon teaches literary studies at Deakin University, Geelong. She is the author of a chapbook of poetry, *Snowline* (Whitmore Press 2012), and her recently published writing includes work in *Cordite Poetry Review*, *The Australian Book Review*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *The Weekend Australian*.

the ache put in you by mountains
here and remembered—

such weight—each curve & peak
not of the body, nor

the bed and its ordinary sheets, hair
blue in shadows

thrown from planes of
ceiling, pillow, glass.

Outside, there are gulls. They are
lifting, lifting

high in the still
seeming air.

Summer

Alan Fyfe

Alan Fyfe has written journalism, poetry, prose, and essays. He is a winner of the Karl Popper Philosophy Prize and lives by a river, with his son, very far from you.

1

‘Where’s Alex?’

‘Left him with Mum.’

Drive out of Summer Waters housing estate at four. Still dark this early—Zarrah wants to leave before the streets are busy. Already hot in the car. There’s a mist of condensation on her hair and a sheen melting the thin layer of foundation from her face. Soon wipes at it; looks much better without makeup. Her skin isn’t flawless, but it’s perfect.

A camping trip isn’t standard first date procedure in other suburbs. But out here shaky caravans and camper trailers rule front gardens, some still half red with ancient northern dust. PVC pipes for fishing rods mounted on bull bars and roof racks on every station wagon. Asking Zarrah seemed too easy—like I’d won a prize I didn’t deserve.

Lived sexless and sober for two years while I worked. Early mornings on the truck delivering soft drinks and bulk lolly bags around Summer Waters. Unreasonable hours, bad pay, only job I could get. Everybody said there was a skills shortage, but I was short of skills. Met Zarrah on the round—five bottles of cola beer and three bulk bags of red raspberries to bribe little Alex. Back in the world of TV, news anchors were at the financials like crows on road kill. Shaun Elgin, sweaty and wrinkled and red-headed in a faded Nirvana shirt, sacked from the round the same day as me, said there was a crash in the nineties and probably every twenty or thirty years before that.

She was still single when I became the first victim of the Global Financial Crisis. Don’t know how—I’m a lucky guy, I guess. Two days of unemployment and I was so bored and restless that I found her door, knocked with sweaty knuckles and asked her to come away camping with me.

Working left no time for this—just deliver in the morning, sleep in the afternoon, pick up at night, watch movies, sleep again. Sometimes, before

dropping off, I'd abuse myself thinking about her. Now I'm redundant, she's in the passenger seat, and we're on our way to the salt flats. Fuel price has dropped enough to fill the tank. All the time we need. This recession could work out well for everyone.

Sun rises over the rest stop—gravel D carved out from the side of the road.

'Got any pot?'

Reach across her to the glove box to take my tin out. Accidentally brush her right breast with my forearm on the way back. Wonder why, in our twenties, we still blush and look away. But (thank god) she smiles and I cough in a vague, fake way that doesn't fool anyone. Pick up a used Coke can from the floor and make a depression in it with my thumbs then punch a little circle of holes with a pen—roadhouse pipe. Take crumbs from the edge of a fragrant bud in my tin, lay the crumbs on the improvised device, hand it to her with a plastic lighter. She burns the crumbs to vibrant embers—glowing cherries or dozens of staring red eyes. Smokes it all.

'You're a sweet guy, Ashley.'

At the salt flats we pile out two bags and the camping gear from the boot. She insists we search my messy car for all the stray lighters. Only an hour and a half into daylight and the sun is already like a scalpel. Once noon hits the roof, she knows all those little gas-filled cylinders will explode.

'Wouldn't leave a dog in there in this heat.'

2

Eat a cold breakfast then things get fairly boring. Zarrah's a bit shy and I run out of the story of my life after three minutes. Left school—no work. Watched movies for five years, played basketball, and went to four-dollar karate lessons at the primary school gym so I didn't get fat. Got a job delivering fizzy drink and lollies. Lost the job.

We smoke some more pot before lunch and read through a pile of Phantom comics I've brought, sitting cross-legged next to each other under a stand of paperbark trees. Our thighs are touching. Occasionally glance up at the side of her face—bowed forward, locked on the text. Strands of oak coloured hair escape her ponytail and crisscross her cheek. It's the best thing in the world—to look at someone who doesn't know they're being looked at. She sweats so much there's no makeup left.

Eventually she catches me looking and laughs.

'I hate Phantom comics,' she says. 'Lucky I'm fucked up.'

Start a fire as the sun sets even though it's still so hot we have to sit far enough away that we don't feel the heat. Zarrah pulls out a zip-lock bag with a thin line of dirty yellow crystals, like piss or champagne, along the bottom.

'Ever?'

'Never.'

I scratch around to find my roadhouse pipe, but she pulls a tiny glass tube from her bag. We smoke the crystals and everything makes sense.

Talking about a book.

Author's name?

I say, 'Mark Dee Saddy.'

She corrects me, 'Marquis De Sade.'

The fire

fire looks

that smoke

looks ugly

black

squalid

'That's a funny word.'

'Which?'

'Squalid.'

'Yeah, squalid is a funny word.'

Author's name?

She knows the book, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.

There's a word

'Libertine.'

'Funny word.'

'Don't forget.'

'Forget what?'

'To leave a note.'

'Why would I forget that?'

'He forgot.'

'Who?'

'Alex's dad.'

The thing I'm most worried about when I'm drunk, or stoned, or whatever I am now, is how I smile. I have teeth broken past the canines, just jagged stumps and lone molars. I'm afraid that if I smile all the way, I'll look like a monster; from moderately good-looking to some fucking pathetic *thing*.

Don't care that I blurt out a story that doesn't make sense, that I think a tree is moving, that I tell her I stole *Philosophy in the Boudoir* from the toilet of a plumbing supply store and that it's only the second book I've ever read—only that I don't smile with open lips or laugh too hard without covering my mouth. So I never get around to facing her to kiss.

3

Think about the distance between my hand and the sun. Don't know the distance, never learned, but I'm not such a dumbfuck that I don't know it's a long way. Lifetimes of distance travelling as fast as we can. Still, when I hold my hand up to it, I feel its direct heat on my skin, enough to cause me pain. When I put my hand down, the heat is different.

Sometimes a woman is so beautiful I can't look directly at her—have to sneak glances. A beautiful woman can be like the sun to me, but the distance to the sun is huge. Last night I looked at Zarrah how many times? Five minutes... ten minutes without turning away. Eye to eye. Close up. How much damage could that kind of exposure do?

4

Find her door the next afternoon. Front of the house is bare, no shade, facing east across a park with no trees, so that the white gloss paint on her front door has heated enough to sting my knuckles when I knock. Hear her shuffling inside as I try to make out the indistinct spray-can signatures on the concrete benches in the park. She answers the door to my turned back and says my name like a question.

'Ashley?'

Guides me inside, past a spray of plastic toys on the lounge room carpet—evidence of Alex, who's been sleeping through the afternoon. There's both of us with nothing to do on a weekday afternoon, but there's nothing obvious *to do*. Want to hold the top of her arm and kiss her where her neck meets her shoulder, but all I do is nod when she offers me a cup of tea. I take it white with sugar—the way everyone does.

Opposite ends of the kitchen table might as well be that distance—the years between my hand and the sun. Stare at the worn varnish on the tabletop so I don't have to look straight at her. Conversation is as twisted as the unreadable names on the concrete benches. Notice there's a faded picture scratched in pencil in the middle of the table—like a smiling sun with huge canines—under rings left by the bottoms of hot mugs and the cloudy residue of cheap surface cleaner. So intent on the picture that I don't notice her moving. Don't even know she's next to me until I feel her warm fingers on my face.

5

Early morning in her room—one hand on her face, one hand through the curtains feeling the window slowly heat up in first light. Zarrah's head is like a small stone on the middle of my chest, all her weight concentrated into that one spot dead still on my sternum. She's too young for the depth of lines at the corner of her eyes. Lower my hand towards the lines until I can feel that prickly energy you feel just before skin touches skin. We hear Alex waking up in the next room.

'People must think single mothers sleep in.'

Pushes herself off me. Watch her, still naked, as she opens the top drawer of her dresser and takes out her glass pipe and another little bag of crystals. Blue tinted this time—clearer, cleaner looking.

'Long day with a toddler.'

'Yeah, better than coffee.'

So, just a little. The smoke of this stuff isn't wet and herbal like pot—not rich and nutty like strong tobacco—it's a dry plastic taste. We both wake up hard.

'What now?'

'Let's gamble.'

6

In the back seat with Alex—Zarrah driving. He's bored and I'm peaking. Try to engage him; showing him toys and talking nonsense. Laughs when I squeeze a rubber duck, but seriously cracks up at the face I make after. Just making faces and he's laughing and laughing like he can't control it. Children his age are beautiful because they haven't learned anything.

7

The casino is open. The casino is always open. The casino has been open since it was opened. Walking between the rows of glowing machines feels like treading water. Carrying a pile of gold coins in my two hands; should have had enough money for a half hour or so, but she keeps winning. She's perched on the moulded stool, getting bigger as I get closer, eyes fixed on the kaleidoscope display. Close enough now to see her pupils. Something's missing. Something's wrong. So cool in here—can't be more than nineteen degrees—static temperature all day and there's not a clock in sight. When we walked in we saw the air lifting off the bitumen in visible sheets, playing on top of the car's metal roof like the tendrils of a jellyfish.

There's a word.

Dilated?

Making up stories, reading into her moves. She knows. She knew when we came in.

Glaring at her now, but she invests her whole attention in the bolts that hold the machine to the floor.

8

There's no talk left. It's all just noise now.

‘Poem’ for Donald Kerr
Gavin Yates

Gavin Yates’s poetry engages with literary Surrealism, the subject of his academic pursuits. His writing attempts to locate the juncture between dream and conscious experience. He has previously been published in *Make Your Mark* and *Verge*.

While on our palms
and knees, we chew pieces of the moon
the sky stained a darkening blue
with a rouge stroke, hammer-songs
obliterate the night where you shake out the sheet
of half-dead stars beaten to life.

Lay it out for us—an earth that is itching and ripe. Your eyes are locked:
mine too. A sigh is sent to sail through the night
and its breeze has all the fruit
falling.

This poem provides an alternative version of Donald Kerr’s ‘While on our palms...’ published in *Angry Penguins*, No. 1, 1941.

Evening Belinda Rule

Belinda Rule is a writer of poetry and fiction from Melbourne. At other times she has been a history academic and a university administrator.

Even now as the light falls and the cars
are tucked behind the letterboxes
and the sun strobes low between the paperbarks
and a dog bolts for joy across the grass, yellow
like photos of 1983 which is the last time anyone
even pretended to be happy,
even now is there not some driveway I could turn down
where someone is waiting for me.

Sunday Morning, Prevelly
Shane McCauley

Shane McCauley has recently had his eighth book of poetry, *Trickster*, published by Walleah Press. He conducts and greatly enjoys fortnightly poetry workshops for the OOTA Writers' Group at the Fremantle Arts Centre.

Even waves are less energetic today
almost in slow-motion
as they break tumble and wash
their sudsy flotsam to the shore

Vague traffic noises
and insistent minor twittering
from something nesting in the hedge

A crow voice between the pines

One thin line of cloud haloing
a turquoise horizon

A slight breeze beats listlessly
at the drying sheets
and sunlight falls like quoits
around our waiting bags

If only all departures
could be as perfect.

‘Word Matters’

‘Mining Tax’
Siobhan Hodge

‘Chapters thicken like burns
and we carry stanzas home
with 5pm fidelity.’

A Note on 'Word Matters'

Catherine Noske/
Rebekah-Jane Sheedy

Catherine Noske is the editor
of *Westerly*.

Rebekah-Jane Sheedy is an
intern with *Westerly*, from
Curtin University. She is
studying Professional Writing
and Editing.

My arms are so sore from carrying my goods that the sight of the checkout counter sends a wave of relief washing over me. The checkout girl, polite and smiling, begins to process my purchases and runs the items over the scanner before placing them in the thin plastic bags.

'Your transaction is to the value of \$24.95,' she informs me. 'So that will be three poems, please.'

I hand over the poems and in return receive a poetry excerpt on a small piece of white paper. Loose change. Placing it in my purse, I note that it should be enough to pay for parking tomorrow...

The daily presence of language and literature in our lives has not yet seen poetry adopted and valued as a currency, regardless of the worth we place upon it as a society. In reality, it is more common to disassociate literature from the economic; something which has become evident in the restructure of funding to the Australia Council, and the need it has occasioned to represent to our national government the sector of the economy which will be affected by the cuts proposed.

The actions taken by the group #FREETHEARTS, including a petition and a 'mass dance action across Australia' (<https://www.facebook.com/events/1614729782096956>) in May this year, sought to instigate a greater public awareness of the importance of cultural production. There is a playful edge to this form of protest which belies the intensity with which the cuts to the Australia Council have been discussed.

This form of public response can be connected to a wider movement towards arts and literary campaigns which are inclusive, thought-provoking and ultimately positive. From 2001 to 2012, Chilean arts collective Casagrande carried out a public performance in six cities, 'Bombing of Poems', which saw a helicopter dropping 100,000 poems printed on bookmarks in multiple languages. The cities chosen were

sites which had suffered from aerial bombing in the past. The poems thus offered a gesture of remembrance which recast the history of the bombing, the symbolically creative response offering possibilities for healing and positive discussion. (See <http://loscasagrande.org/rain-of-poems/>)

There are other examples, as well. Poet Agustina Woodgate spent a month sewing excerpts of poetry into op-shop clothing during the *O, Miami* poetry festival in 2011. The city of Grenoble in France have recently introduced 'Short Edition', dispensing machines for free short stories. These projects position poetry and writing as a form of social experience and exchange.

Word Matters is a creative campaign looking to participate in the vital discussions which have emerged around the cuts to arts funding in Australia this year. It aims to explore the ways in which Australians talk about and engage with art and literature. The campaign saw us commission a series of poems from local emerging writers, and print two-line excerpts of each selected onto business cards to be spread across the city of Perth and the nation. You should find one with this issue.

This is an explorative effort into questions of the value of the arts within our community. Playing with normative understandings of 'business', the Word Matters campaign challenges the assumption that business/the economy and the arts exist in opposition. But it is also an attempt to engage, to be playful and productive in response to a question which has held anxiety for many arts practitioners, as other campaigns have been before us.

In turning business cards into art, poetry becomes its own currency. It suggests in art and literature the same transformative power that society usually ascribes to money. It seeks to revive the value of the written word through changing the perception of its worth. As a result, the campaign also makes one final statement: that to us, literature does matter and its contributions to our world are of inestimable value.

The following three poems from SJ Finch and Siobhan Hodge are, we believe, beautiful and valuable offerings to this ongoing discussion surrounding the arts in our nation. We urge you to get involved, by following and responding to the campaign online—visit our Twitter feed, and reply or post your own poetic contribution to #westerlywordmatters.

**Good Luck Raising Your
Beautiful Baby Bee**
S J Finch

SJ Finch is a PhD candidate at Curtin University. He lives nomadically in a selfmade yurt (called 'Grr') traveling around local backyards, art centres and public spaces like a modern garden hermit. sjfinch.com

We were hungry so
between us we ate 100 bees a day.
We thought they were already dead.
Across the roof of our mouths
are tiny riddles posed by limbs
which perhaps used to breathe.

Pockets of pollen
burst on
our tongue.

Oh flower lovers. You kiss
me afterwards, and I mistake
your breath for a living wage.
It's all kind of connected though, right?

We self-pollinate
fear.

We thought it was desire.

From where does poetry come?
A field of suburban houses
like flowers. Places haunted
by insects. Freely,
out of the earth
like oil
like spit.

Bees are of the same millenia
as the plastic that encases honey,
as the dead
who scream to us
from still things.

Bees, they kiss the dead,
so we ask them about old relatives
and gone gods.

The bee mandible cannot make human sounds.
So, of course, we heard two different messages.

I heard money emerging from sepals,
like baby teeth.

And you got pregnant.

GOOD LUCK RAISING YOUR BEAUTIFUL BABY BEE
I scream, not really knowing what luck is,
but thinking
this is a good opportunity for us
to become.

Pay it Forward Siobhan Hodge

Siobhan Hodge has a PhD in English literature from the University of Western Australia. Her poetry and critical writing tend to focus on issues of translation and adaptation, the Greek poet Sappho, and a longstanding passion for horses.

This is all we can see, lines over lines
as far as the horizon will bear us.

Onward but not inwards, our centres are
more remote than ever, shuttered away

or fed through bars. You'll find I stand in line
as well as the next man, still waiting for

signature. Magnetic currency. Strip
and deliver all coined terms, deposits

with dropped hands. Circling the signs, we are
counting dry syllables without interest.

Call in the debts, block the boats: we've bloated
in the sun, ripe for remembrance. Come one

charge all: send your best offers and we'll rise
in counter-flow. Bodies wear voices still.

For whose pleasure are we to be birthed, turned
and boarded up behind sovereign borders?

No place to plant banks, treasuring children
before raising them to air slick with loss.

Let us speak and we will tell you where to
go. Legacy in terms we recognise,

starving between budgets, count the losses
before they crash—another mine to mourn.

Break the bars and bend the borders. Let us
write the stories we need to know in hand.

We wear maps, slip currency in our throats;
they needn't be cut to see their worth.

Mining Tax

Siobhan Hodge

Let's blame it on the times:
scattering before headlights

from mining trucks. Swaying tracks
arrest both lanes, dinosaur pads

wait for them to pass
before we can move on,

but the road is getting lean.

Buy a pen and I'll draw
where money is born:

hole in the ground, catheter
seep from sepsis, drips through every

layer. We stand on filter paper:
nothing gets through

that won't be discarded.

Chapters thicken like burns
and we carry stanzas home

with 5pm fidelity. Budget
for bliss. We'll laugh all the way

to something.

There isn't enough to strain
this season of sameness,

grilled up north out of sight,
but we're filtering the bigger picture

through stones and stubs and strikes.
You're out. There is life here, and it is wrapped

in plastic. A miracle of hauntings

and we have forgotten nothing.
The lines still run underground

and in rivers raw with split fish.
Taxation is no limit, poetry has no queue.

Dug up and dried out, we know
the solemnity of being bought,

but celebrate being paid for.



'Circling the signs, we are
counting dry syllables without interest.'

Siobhan Hodge,
'Pay It Forward'

@westerlymag
#westerlywordmatters

Westerly

'We were hungry so
between us we ate 100 bees a day'

@westerlymag
#westerlywordmatters

'Good Luck Raising Your Beautiful Baby Bee'
SJ Finch,

Westerly

'Chapters thicken like burns
and we carry stanzas home
with 5pm fidelity.'

Siobhan Hodge,
'Mining Tax'

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Westerly

Anxiety and Antigone:
 an introduction to Gig Ryan's
New and Selected Poems (2011)
 Corey Wakeling

Corey Wakeling is Lecturer in Drama at Kobe College, Japan. He has published articles, is co-editor of anthology *Outcrop: radical Australian poetry of land* (Black Rider Press 2013), and author of *Gargantuan Terrier, Buggy or Dinghy* (Vagabond 2012) and *Goad Omen* (Giramondo 2013).

Gig Ryan, 'Cracked
 Avenues: Antigone'
 (Ryan 2011: 178)

Thumbing a mobile, I turn from the choir

Gig Ryan, 'Rent Time'
 (Ryan 2014: n.p.)

The human face of capital
 like a previous unfinished longing, totally erodes.

Gig Ryan (1956—) in my view represents what might become of Australian poetry more so than what has come before, living uneasily in any given cultural, philosophical, or aesthetic tradition. This is work projected towards the future from within modern anxiety. Ryan has lived most of her life in Melbourne, but has also lived in Sydney. She belongs to a minority of living Australian poets published outside of Australia in book form by an active publisher.¹ The poetic interest of her work lies in its living simultaneously inside and outside the established ways we have of constructing history, especially literary history, along with the poetry's vivid construction of subjectivity in late modernity using the medium of transhistorical characters from the Western political imaginary, such as Antigone. Hence this work is also unsettled in a monocultural Australian national paradigm, selective with cultural history and legacy outside of the codes of tradition, and incredulous of patriarchy. This introduction to Gig Ryan's *New and Selected Poems* (2011) and broader work will bring contrary critical discourses into a syncretic theory of Ryan's ambiguous political imaginary using a discussion of anxiety and Antigone, in particular, to introduce and explain shifts in the oeuvre's consciousness of political subjectivity across six books and roughly thirty years of publication, from *The Division of Anger* (1980) to *Heroic Money* (2001), to poems from the present (2015), in general.

The shadow of irony

This body of work is famous for scathing irony conceived in clusters of oblique epigrams, dialogical repartee, and moral aporia. Much of present scholarship and criticism—albeit lean in the former and baffled in the latter—sees irony in particular as a forte of this poet, but also a means for aligning Ryan historically with those who have also been her friends or nearest contemporaries coming out of the 1960s new poetry which preceded her—John Tranter, Martin Johnston, Jennifer Maiden, John Forbes, Pam Brown, Laurie Duggan. Amongst these, it is the work of Martin Johnston's in particular, for its experimental thinking of antiquity, which might be usefully compared with Ryan's.

Irony has proven to be an effective mode through which to historicise a mutual and broader questioning of representation in poetry as an aesthetic vehicle of sentiment and voice, with preference instead for polysemy, multiple textual register, and play. The major historicisation of irony's significance to 1960s Australian poetry is the work of Livio and Patricia Dobrez, in the former's *Parnassus Mad Ward: Michael Dransfield and the New Australian Poetry* (1990) and the latter's *Michael Dransfield's Lives: A Sixties Biography* (1999). For both, irony is theorised as 'the Romantic subject ... [with] a banana peel in its path', '[a] by-product of the would-be transcendent subject's ordeal by containment' (Dobrez 1999: 20) in an age of neo-Romantic reconsideration of poetry's visionary possibility. For Livio Dobrez, even those of this putatively neo-Romanticist period who might not resemble anything like Romanticism's poet-self, like John Tranter, the rationale still holds regarding irony's dismantling of subjectivity. Dobrez asserts that Tranter takes the subject 'so seriously as to seek to bomb it into powder' (in Dobrez 1999: 21). In this sense irony is always a negation brought to bear on inheritance, fixed poetic subjectivity, intentionality, and the destination of artistic endeavour.

This view suffers the reinstatement of the poet as visionary apparently so central to poetic history that even if a poet were to completely disregard its shadow this would be to confirm the gravity of its absence. Theorised thus, irony is not at all a useful reference point for engaging the singularity of either 1960s influenced or post-1960s social poetic movements in the sense that it reduces many registers of textual performance to the one effect of apparently undermining representational or subjective sincerity and vision, or worse, to Michael Dransfield as relevant to all post-60s poets. Indeed, to be historically rigorous regarding Gig Ryan's classical influences, such a view of irony is faulty. Ryan's Sapphic and Homeric inheritance outweighs Romans such as Ovid since Ryan has

been a student of Ancient Greek, the dramatic irony of the tragedians Euripides and Sophocles is a direct reference point, which suggests an enquiry into mourning, catharsis and revolution more so than a 'banana peel' in the path of sincerity, not to mention that irony in the classics is rarely visionary, but rather social and political.

To follow Dobrez and Dobrez, however, the re-coordination of the terms of self-mythology is unquestionably significant to Australian poetry after the 1960s, among which Gig Ryan might be included.² Ryan is clearly not interested in one lyric voice or poetic authority, but a plurality of them within new syntactic modes. Even with a long view of irony and its disposal in the satirical verses of poets from Ovid to John Forbes, irony historicised in Australian poetry criticism sometimes reduces to a single meaning the complexities of form in work without the cues of intentionality and sentiment sought by critics, or reduces poets to a history with which they have uncertain relation. Beware this trap; such a reading suggests there is a joke on the reader, or a joke on the myth of the poet, where there may be none. Significantly, irony by Dobrez and Dobrez's historicisation attempts to fill in a gap in intentionality assumed in poetic subjectivity, meaning in their view Tranter's transformations of the subject constitute a kind of 'bomb[ing]'. In my view, what marks Tranter and Ryan's relation to the Romantic poet is rather their significant indifference to questions of visionariness and transcendence. The turn away from the folly of the culture wars regarding the status of Romanticism, as Martin Johnston did with his Greek poetic imaginary, and irony's political mobility across the local and the global, which suggests the influence of Catullus and Martial, as much as Sappho, illustrates Ryan's particular indifference to vision.

One needs neither Ryan's contemporaries or near-contemporaries, nor a classical history of poetic irony, nor a myth of the visionary poet in their absence, to appreciate her irony:

You cry until they go, yank happiness
back to life's clocked cell
vaguely listening to the sliding ocean's soft detergent foam.
(*'Green Target'*, Ryan 2011: 113)

That this poem from *Pure and Applied* (1998) comically views the realities of contemplating nature today and the poetic subject's incitement to 'yank happiness/back to life's clocked cell' and admire a polluted ocean goes without saying. Moreover, disbelieving the sincerity of voices in Ryan's poetry on grounds of irony will illuminate very little of her experimental investments in character and political history. What the recapitulation

of the irony argument in criticism does in the context of studying Ryan or other of her contemporaries who similarly question the aesthetics of the sincere is to suggest that they are insincere, unpoetic, disdainful of poetic ego, beauty, and sensibility, and ungrateful to poetic forebears. By contrast, what would it mean to take this subject as sincere, to theorise the subject forced to 'yank happiness/back to life's clocked cell' in the post-natural ecology of the present?

Ultimately, historicisation of Ryan's work based upon irony and the historical assumptions in Australian poetry upon which it is based would be to neglect the uniqueness of Ryan's academic history as a reader of Ancient Greek, her involvement in the Asian contexts of Chinese and Vietnamese poetry, her avowed affinities to iconoclastic poetries of Emma Lew and Vicki Viidikas, and the aforementioned rethinking of the classics that may also be found historically in the work of canonical Australian poets, such as Francis Webb and Peter Porter. In sum, the reader is recommended to consider irony not as a badge of association but as a register of Ryan's wit, the surface of a complex dismantling of the obvious.

This work's dual inside/outside relation to history and the work's own unsettling approach to questions of nation, culture, and aesthetics have proven a challenging lack of belonging for literary critics and historians, and even to reviewers. Of the eleven reviews that I am aware of, only four of the reviews of the *New and Selected* do not mention difficulty for readers or some other kind of adjectival proposition that reading Ryan requires uncustomary labour. However, what is mutually acknowledged by critics of Ryan more generally is her sharp consciousness of contemporary politics, and a recognizably experimental syntax. Working in tandem, it is these elements in particular that have proven confounding for those who might expect established markers for reading poetry in either camp, namely, in political writing or late modernist poetic practice. Ryan's work does not confess political allegiance clearly enough to belong to a tradition of the former. The work also does not utilise the procedural experimentation of American poets such as Lyn Hejinian. Ryan herself is quoted as admiring (Ryan 2014: n.p.), making comparison with contemporary language experimentation complex. This lack of formal resemblance has proven to complicate easy comprehension of Ryan's poetics.

Theorising a transhistorical investment in the interiority of the political subject provides an alternative way to approach these critical problems of literary history and irony. These problems suggest a poet for whom history and anachronism gives access to the real-time politics

of the modern subject in ironic times, who, '[t]humming a mobile' open-endedly 'turns from the choir' (Ryan 2011: 178), and gazes on '[t]he human face of capital' as it erodes (Ryan 2014: n.p.). Here, the reality of the ruin as it transforms into the very stage of contemporary politics becomes the conceptual concern of Ryan's work. Ozymandias meets the Arab Spring.

Transhistorical politics/poetics

Ryan's lack of belonging to one history or poetic mode is part of a transhistorical political sensibility which strives to imagine the interior life of political subjectivity across time and context. This is the key motivation for the constant redramatisation of figures from classical literature. Due to the ever-presence of involution, critique, and irresolution in Ryan's work, I would hesitate from saying that this political sensibility pursues in the poem what Alain Badiou in *Conditions* (2008) proposes, that the poem 'produces truths'. However, the poem in Ryan's work does have affinities with the Badiouian notion of the poem as an 'imperative in language' which 'presupposes and distributes [truths] according to their specific regime of separation from sense' (Badiou 47). In fact, critic Georgie Arnott has written that Ryan 'seems impatient with facts or notions of truth' (Arnott 37). But this 'separation' of truth from sense in Ryan's work does manifest an anxious poetic subject who incurs law and legislation as one for whom the gap between truth and sense is real.

The tension of history and its multiple political valencies is a tension which undergirds the various and lively debate between self, character, environment, and ideology that recurs throughout the Ryan oeuvre and is summarily displayed in Ryan's *New and Selected Poems*. For a poet, these are in the first instance linguistic contexts. Poetic history in particular helps us to trace the correspondence of history with practices of writing. Poetic historicisation of Ryan's work would show that it is relevant to the history of women's writing as a catalyst of late modernist poetic practices, to the postmodernism of an experimental and contested lyric voice in Language writing, but also, paradoxically, to canonical Australian poetry's rewritings of myth.³ These histories have contrary political histories underpinning them: for example, the legacy of politically-informed radical Australian women's writing, from Mary Gilmore and Dorothy Hewett, to Ryan's contemporary, Pam Brown, associates poorly with post-war Australian formalist poetries of Vincent Buckley or Peter Porter and their preference for universal, rather than political, subjects. Yet Ryan's work manages to be relevant to the different conversations going on in Australian writing.

Much of Ryan's transhistorical play takes place on a contemporary stage with classical actors. There is the mixing of urban Melbourne with Homer (e.g. from *Pure and Applied*, 'Achilleus to Odysseus', 108), of Valiants and Mitsubishis amid critiques of an absent Orpheus by Eurydice (from *Heroic Money*, 'Eurydice's Suburb' 133), of Erechtheion of Athens commingled with Australia's Moreton Bay trees, being obvious examples (from 'New Poems', 'Ascension' 190). Antigone in particular will illuminate the significance of the anachronous redramatization on contemporary stages these characters from antiquity: a poetics of the long-time of the political subject. Of this subject, in particular, Ryan strives to represent the interior life of those for whom belonging to the iniquities and legislations of the present is unbearable and becoming impossible.

The oeuvre from the perspective of the 'New Poems'

The psychodramas of the political subject have changed over time, but throughout the work there remains an investment in the disparity between public and private spheres. Ryan's recent work, collected as 'New Poems' in the *New and Selected*, condenses the various modes she has worked with in the past—dramatic monologue, free verse, Sapphic lyric, the sonnet, collage, and the epigram in a long history of satire, from Catullus to John Forbes. Like the private dramas of *The Division of Anger and Manners of an Astronaut* (1984) and the suburban operas of cruelty of *The Last Interior* (1986) and *Excavation* (1990) involving characters who say 'I' and 'you', the new poems too remain concerned with the feelings of arrest in contemporary time in which the reader is also implicated. Consider 'Southern Aurora', a poem from the 'New Poems' section, which given the title one would expect to observe visual marvels. Instead, the poem studies the arresting imagery of incongruity of contemporary life with a subject's interior one:

You have to unclip the world to think it
from cloyed screen or scream words haste
their loot and return to her/his sleep-out
sucking troth's lozenge
[...]
Time moves further away from you
Memory stifled the jonquils
and you're in a tube of dreams, swimming
(205)

This 'tube of dreams' is mesmerising, but also distant, disturbing, and as eternal as a lozenge; that is, not eternal at all. Ryan's interrogation of

anxiety lies in its lucidity as a sensibility, as much as a symptom of negative forces. Out of the 'cloyed screen' and the stifling effects of memory, the environment and subjective arrest of these conditions emerge in a poetry of immediacy and feeling. As entitled by Ryan's earlier book from 1986, *The Last Interior*, 'Southern Aurora' tellingly establishes a destination for the poet's psychic interrogations: a last interior. Let us think of the last interior in its double valency: it is at once a final unmapped destination of selfhood, and a final space yet unmapped in the state of things.

A longstanding concern of Ryan's work has been the pursuit of this last interior within a public realm, what has become by the twenty-first century an ever-more manipulated public space. Here, the world of the public is felt more and more conspicuously as an unbearable space of technological distraction and political surrealism—'Our clown Prime Minister jostles on the steps [...] holds his broken minister in a camera grip' ('Disinformation' 72). It is a state in which action is suspended: 'A tureen of alternative lives spills from the waiter's grasp//I chew a fife and play/and sovereigns weep' ('Aeneas' 199). Public Australian life here is clownish, 'sovereigns weep' and ministers are 'broken'. A last interior by contrast would be a space yet unwritten in law and politics as we know it, posthumous to its *commedia dell'arte*.

Ryan has developed here a poetics of transhistorical enquiry towards the last interior life of the political subject studied through an experimentation with archetypal figures of political radicalism from antiquity and by restaging them in the contemporary. In Ryan's most recent poems these critiques regard the ruins of the twenty-first century, such as 'the human face of capital' in 'Rent Time', resembling that of Shelley's Ozymandias. The critical observer of such affairs has not so much been politicised by the twenty-first century as crystallised in its fundamental subjective critique of political affairs. 'Southern Aurora' is a good example of how Ryan's work in the second decade of the twenty-first century has crystallised disparate practices into one polyvalent economy of language. Here are echoes of Ryan's *Manners of an Astronaut* and its cruelty of wit—'for my sore eyes, you,/massive claustrophobia, manners of an astronaut' ('Lines Written During a Period of Insanity' 35), the vocal iconoclasm of *The Last Interior*—'*She tries to change his sex/so she can love it*' (52), and the extended critical satires of public vacuousness and distraction in *Pure and Applied* and *Heroic Money*, developed as a poetic formation of a subject allergic to contemporary political affairs of the public.

Anxiety, or, the survival of thought in the cultural desert

Anxiety is the most obvious attribution one might give to the nebula of feeling mapped and provided a language by Gig Ryan. Not an anxious poetry in the ordinary sense but anxiety as a condition, its affective constitution can be studied as a synthesis of the phenomenological articulation of anxiety (*Angst*) as one's concern for one's 'potentiality-for-being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 235), with anxiety in the lyric mode, its sensitivity to delay, vacillation, and mourning. The oft-anthologised 'If I Had A Gun' from *The Division of Anger* makes a list poem of feminist angst directed towards a milieu of the casual deployment of violent patriarchy. But there is a more foundational, even open-ended phenomenology of *Angst* which by contrast drives later books *Pure and Applied* and *Heroic Money*, whose long time suggests a rethinking of the history of eulogy and mourning in the lyric. Ryan's first touchstone in developing a long-time angst is likely ancient Greek poet Sappho, whose erotic lexicon of feeling often contextualises love through political and historical relation, and mobilises the critical power of irony.

If angst is political but also sensuous, concerned for being in the world, expanding it in terms of anxiety would mark it as an undecided affective event. Anxiety is to say that conditions of my being in the world remain undecided, or unbearable as they are. '[Y]ou massive/claustrophobia', she writes in 'Lines During a Period of Insanity'—meaning anxiety for Ryan is a space of critical analysis, positioning the 'claustrophobia' of the self within the 'massive' uncertainty of the present. This is neither a representation of the author nor a characterisation of the voices of the poems of her oeuvre. In Ryan's work, anxiety is a condition that can be marked in affective terms with political implications.

Anxiety has a varied history in the work, is a major source of its humour and the launching pad of its critique. Anxiety begins in association with the unbearable romantic relations beset by foreclosures of life by drugs in the early work, inspiring a surprisingly comedic and acerbic voice, which becomes by the 1990s an expansion of the terms of lyric angst not in human relations as such but of a broader 'necropolitical' modernity wherein lives are not so much manipulated for their biopower as for their termination. The 'necropolitical' is a word Achille Mbembe uses to describe a modernity in which state manipulation of the way we die marks the modern state (see Mbembe 2003), and it resonates with Ryan's images of modernity: 'Medals press on your casket/Over winter, I swam through each brief dawn/polish the useless talent/in the carved water' from 'The swimmer retires', is one example of numerous (Ryan 2011: 182). The language that emerges from the affective site of anxiety is not only

powerfully critical, observing each ‘talent’ as ‘useless’, but full of sensory detail. Observe further lines of ‘The swimmer retires’:

All honours wash away
He falls through the mist of reporters
veered from a dream
—a jewelled car that magnets round a coast
(182)

Here, a critique of state ceremony recalling at once Ancient Greece and contemporary Australia is the setting for a broader investigation of the transmigration of a falling, semi-real swimmer-observer who is said to be ‘thankfully going’. This figure manages to escape the hard geometry of a state-organised space—note ‘ribbon’, ‘[t]he pool unsheathed from me [t]he lanes unlock’, ‘tallied seconds’, ‘each rubbed line’, ‘[h]e turns from the blue aisles’—and is said to be ‘[a] king a servant thankfully going’ (182). Less a retreat, anxiety appears to be a mode of propulsion towards a space beyond visibility on state-organised terms which here resembles the watery spirit worlds of death in classical literature. Anxiety here becomes a mode for the survival of thought in the cultural desert of the present in a state posthumous to the necropolitical.

Anxiety as a feeling is not inherently valuable or critical in this work, however. Ryan instead appears to be interested in the modes of escape, opposition, and insight it provides, along with the sensitivity of its registration of a given state of affairs. ‘Not ecstasy, but anxiety’ (117), a sonnet which first appeared *Pure and Applied*, cleverly observes how even anxiety turned to the very subject of anxiety still in a state of inaction might promise to heighten the role of critique:

Anxiety thrives on a high income
its complex childhood skiting its results
and now immune to hurt, instead insults
the legislation it has risen from.

Anxiety has here turned to the subject of anxiety itself. The lines ‘[a]nxiety ... insults/the legislation it has risen from’ demonstrate a process locatable across her work, what is a subjective open-endedness of critique. In this poem, anxiety is at first critiqued as an inactive, infantile, bourgeois thriving. But this ‘anxiety’ then develops a subject ‘immune to hurt’, who ‘insults/the legislation it has risen from’. The moral aporia here is crucial. Here, the subject is one who insults self and legislation at once, and undermines the very system which gives rise to selves like this, the one who is *anxious*, one who is able to criticise their own subjective

foundations. A paradoxical mobility is at once inevitable but necessary for responses to turn unbearable political immobility into emancipation. Ryan has developed a poetic crystallisation of political subjectivity that is not theatre, nor even a single character, yet it has its closest affinities with characterologies of Shakespeare's Hamlet or Sophocles' Antigone. These characters act within the very terms of anxiety, action which aligns neither with the good nor the evil, but rallying both interpretations to their limit.

Antigone

The political valency of anxiety is the potentiality of emancipation and its felt limit. If emancipation is to be a way of thinking and so avoid some kind of foreclosure—to be revolution rather than apocalypse—its political subject must anxiously retain a last psychic and spatial interiority. This is true of Sophocles' Antigone, whose interiority offers the only space for moral thought in Thebes outside of the contrary forces of state law and divine justice. Two poems in Ryan's work which explicitly adapt this from Greek classical drama are 'Ismene to Antigone' (165) from *Heroic Money* and 'Cracked Avenues', which is built of two sub-sections, 'Ismene' and 'Antigone', a new poem in the collection (177). Antigone, among Ryan's many women characters from the classics, like Eurydice, Iphigenia, and even Echo, is the clearest incarnation where redramatisation of a classical character is also an investigation of the political possibility of interiority. Consider the final lines of 'Ismene to Antigone', which cannot be pinned to one voice or place, and has no evident relationship to Sophocles' play, bar the poem's title:

The mountain shone with neon
above the stacked electric wires toning your street
but I grind into the work
that words might peel his heart
Remember how they fell who went before
(165)

The relation to Antigone here is by incarnation, not characterisation. The prevalence of catachresis along with the deferral of mourning indicated by the final line signals an incarnation of the language of Antigone. Antigone is a character responsible for a whole edifice of psychoanalytical and political analysis of subjectivity on the subject of kinship and freedom. Of the critical readings of Antigone, from Hegel to Lacan to Butler, Butler's is the most relevant to Ryan's rethinking of the character. Butler writes:

If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when [...] gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws (Butler 82)

Catachresis, a term from poetics for the misuse (or infelicitous) use of metaphor, is important to understand how emancipation from state legislation is possible from within its terms, since catachresis is to use a given language in ways that contradict its normal operations. If we are talking about opposing state law with justice, law being the representation of justice, then one is restricted to either draw from the world what is supposed to precede law, a transcendental proposition, otherwise opposition is to be conceived in terms of redeploying the terms of law catachrestically. It is this second option that Butler is thinking through, and which Ryan is also. For example, '[t]hat words might peel his heart' is a phrase mobilising the impossible correspondence of 'peeling' by 'words', working as an intensive but legible plea for the heart of a tyrant to unfold by the words of this indefinable subject.

The final line of 'Ismene to Antigone' is a cliff-hanger, and marks a space in which eulogy does not mourn, but transforms and implicates the subject open-endedly by an imperative to mourn: 'Remember how they fell who went before'. The space opened by Sophocles' Antigone's disruptive subjectivity is a space where one does not choose a new life but chooses 'between two deaths', the space in which psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously situates Antigone's radicalism, between real and symbolic death. Ryan's 'Antigone' is not set in Thebes, but in a menagerie of catachreses. Consider the other example, 'Cracked Avenues: Antigone', which mounts with examples of catachresis (177–78): 'cachet/of just and true', 'I hold your fake hand to my brow/to feel love turn on', 'bloss fugue', 'tide of boasts', 'past's porphyried gas', or the very cryptic, 'you, unmourned/who prepared bitterly', which is catachrestic since the unmourned dead cannot prepare to be mourned. This is the language of the last interior of Antigone, a language legible not in terms established by the gods who expect sacrifice for justice, nor the law, which is bound to execute the patriarchal state's decree. Ryan here elaborates this sovereign catachresis of a 'new field' of the political subject (Butler 82).

Conclusion

Gig Ryan's poetry provides a twenty-first century lens to the psychic and affective terrain of interiority in politically saturated times, interiority written in terms global and Australian, classical and contemporary. The contradictions of the present are clearly marked by a transhistorical approach, especially in works since *Heroic Money*: the public has never been better informed, and yet the public has never been more immobile. Anxiety and Antigone—Ryan has developed a poetics for a speculative space of interiority which might allow for new forms of critique and thought. More particularly, this interiority is studied as symptom and critique at once, vis-à-vis political events in law, legislation, and ethics in the Australian context and beyond. So, as Australian literary studies has acknowledged the ways in which contemporary political discussions of identity and critique are relevant to John Forbes, Lionel Fogarty and PiO, for example, and it might also attend to Gig Ryan, whose satire, transhistorical depth, experimentation, and wit on the subject of modern anxiety and subjectivity have a particular relevancy to twenty-first century politics' dramaturgy of the ruin.

A useful point of comparison for a poetics of political thought is Jennifer Maiden, whose last four books have mobilised a speculative fiction on otherwise similar subjects of law, international affairs, and ethics. In Maiden's case, it has meant devising a dramaturgy of encounter between unrelated characters of past and present politics and the thoughts that are given rise to by their speculative encounters, Julian Assange and Julia Gillard, for example, having starring roles. By contrast, Ryan's work studies the point of view of the observing political subject and the incursion of or subjection to shifts in the international politics of an unbearable contemporary world, the dynamics of thought and critique as felt and transformative sites pre-existing quick answers to problems of long time. Maiden's work is excursive, Ryan's incursive, Maiden's subject the characters of modernity, Ryan's the anonymous last interior of the political subject contextualised through a view of long time, in my view. Both are central voices in Australian poetry on a symptomatology of the political subject in late capitalism, expanding in very different directions how we might think the political subject.

Notes

- 1 Gig Ryan's *New and Selected*, first published by Giramondo, is also published in the United Kingdom by Bloodaxe under the title *Selected Poems*. See Ryan 2012. All citations were taken from the Giramondo edition unless otherwise stated. See Ryan 2011.

- 2 See Duncan Hose's 'Instruction for an Ideal Australian: John Forbes's Metaphysical Etiquette' for a rethinking of self-mythology in the work of John Forbes (Hose 2010). Hose also doubts that irony itself can come to terms with the form of Forbes's experiments with the subject; specifically, it cannot explain 'the torsional syntactic moves of [Forbes's] poems, in the bemusing process of the symbolically motivated intellect at work on itself' (Hose 10).
- 3 For non-genealogical or non-traditional histories of these trajectories which Ryan might be situated in, I recommend in particular Philip Mead's *Networked Language* (2008). Ann Vickery's *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* (2007) provides a framework for understanding the often-neglected contributions of women to Australia's cultural modernity and so those who preceded Ryan. A theory of modernism in this context in particular is comprehensively provided by Matt Hall's recent 'Defining nations: modernist literature in Australia and the Pacific Islands'. See Hall 2015.

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silicon
Jordie Albiston

Jordie Albiston has published nine poetry collections, and a handbook on poetic form. Two of her books have been adapted for music-theatre, both enjoying seasons at the Sydney Opera House. Jordie's work has won many awards, including the 2010 NSW Premier's Prize. She lives in Melbourne.

Si-c according to the OED pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis is an artificial word a case of antidisestablishmentarianism perhaps though it won Everett Smith the Puzzle Prize beating supercalifragilisticexpialidocious by a mile

dictionary trophy hi-tech hero renaissance bloke
outside the Exford Hotel corner of Russell & Little
Bourke Streets *the nexus of the cosmos!* we meet &
are sent to the moon that first kiss a killer I breathe
you in glass dust asbestos volcanic ash & will
never recover again years years years the tyranny
of numbers solid as Apollo diverse as the net you
here yet despite hitches-hiccups-pickles-stews my
stupid tears you refuse to dissolve stay stable en-
able me pack up a picnic take us both to the beach
show me sea urchin protozoan bones of the ocean
back home in Altona you still between my toes

Great Knot Charlotte Guest

Charlotte Guest is the Publishing Officer at UWA Publishing. She is particularly interested in contemporary Australian literature and the literary ecology of Western Australia.

Across Nairn Road
she lurches

on a cloudless
Tuesday—

a body full of organs
the weight of wanting—

between green light
and stationary cars.

Sigh-Co
Josephine Taylor

Josephine Taylor has published short fiction and essays. She is an Adjunct Lecturer in Writing and English at Edith Cowan University.

ONE. The Kitchen

His mother looked at him with eyes that wanted to escape and said, 'Play nicely now.' She was making a cake with orange-haired Sally. They were *having a break* together.

When he called his mother *June* she said, *You know, you are the only person in the world who can call me Mum.* Effie could only cry and suck then.

Little boys and girls said *Mum* and when cry-baby Jai scraped skin from his knee, he screamed *Mummy!* The red made tight bright dots. Dad liked *Junie* and, when he was most happy, *my June-bug*.

Let's find a happy medium, June said. *How about Ma?* But *Ma* was just silly. *Little bugger,* said Dad.

His mouth was juicy. An orange cake smell came from the kitchen and so did orange-haired Sally's small shout. She made the same noise 1, 2, 3, 4—he counted back without fingers—5 days ago. After the BAD THING. June and Sally had talked in the kitchen and he was the wall, flat and grey. The strange words and June's crying and orange-haired Sally's *sh, sh* sounded like they were trying to hide, too.

But I never did anything like this when I was a kid. Did you?

Orange-haired Sally said things back—about him, and not meaning to—but then June said *I don't know about that* in a squashed voice, like the carrots they mash for Effie's lunch.

TWO. Effie

Nice and *right* were different things. Effie did not know how to play right. She stomped her red legs and knocked over his cities. She put blocks in her mouth and made them slimy, like the rocks in his class fish-tank. The fish dodged when he dipped his hand in the water. They swam so fast he would not be able to put a rock on one, even if he tried his hardest.

The big blocks were Effie's, so he was a truck and pushed them to her end of the mat. Then he was a crane lifting the toy baskets into a wall.

'That's your side.'

Effie cried. Not the crying that got louder and louder until he wanted to put his hand over her mouth, but the crying with squeaks, like Snuffles used to make. Her nose wrinkled up and a bubble of snot came out and she reached towards him over the wall. Then her favourite song came on. *Bumpity bumpity bumpity bump...* Effie wobbled and fell. She jiggled on her fat bottom and waved her blocks in the air.

Once, Ms Longford put Snuffles and Sniffles on the grass with all the boys and girls in a circle around them. *Quiet, now*, she'd said. *Don't scare them*. They squeaked and made a rackety purr. Ms Longford said guinea pigs made those noises *when they explore* and *when they feel safe*. Snuffles smelled of grass. Her fur was warm when he pressed his nose into it. *I could eat you up!* June would blurt on Effie's tummy when she changed her nappy.

He put his small blocks on top of each other to make a blue tower, straight and tall. Now, another one next to it, big and red. Then one more big tower and a train station and a block train. June might look happy when she saw his block city.

'Up... down, round! Choo! Choo!' Effie shouted along with the tune. June called it *singing*, but it made his ears hurt and his head feel full. Like the glass jar jammed with marbles, *Guess how many?* at the Show. Her arm, where he pinched it, grew a mark. She opened her mouth and he pushed in the sandy sultana from his pocket and stopped her.

THREE. Sigh-Co

He told time from the clock in the kitchen. *What a smart guy*, Dad said. 3.09 or 3.10 or 3.11. Those were the times the big boy rode past. *Afternoon tea!* June had called and he took his orange to the shaky verandah. The orange was the sun, and it split the blue bowl of the sky when he threw it, as hard as he could, up, up, up, then down, down, down and *splat*, into the bike. Up, up, up, and down, down, down went the big boy, his mouth a big O. The big boy's face red and hot and the finger in circles around his ear and *Sigh-co!* out of that big O in a big yell.

'Sigh-co.' It made his mouth go flat and smooth, then round like a kiss. A hug showed someone you love them, but he did not like to hug. *Sigh* was what June did when she was *at the end of my rope* but still asking him to *Be a nice boy. Please!*

When the orange-sun and the big boy flew it was beautiful—a very hard word—and the big boy's *whack* into the paving was bold as a drum, but the

pictures kept playing and there was a too-muchness in him like after the cake at cry-baby Jai's party. *Icky*, June called it. *Have a lie-down till you feel better*.

'Si. Sie. Sigh. Sig-huh.' Words were like magic tricks, how they sounded and how they looked. Sometimes they hid what they were. Like at Jai's party. Different cloths and, *Hey, presto!* a bird where air had been. Boys and girls ran, and colours and laughing were lines round and round him. In the quiet bushes it prickled and smelled like mints. No-one would find Jai's new book there.

The flying boy and the hidden book were BAD but they were not the BAD THING. *Icky. Have a lie-down till you feel better*. But when he did, the BAD THING kept playing in him and it made him feel better and worse.

FOUR. Clever

'Horse. Cow... moo! Sheep—there.' Sometimes Effie played by herself but she wasn't as clever as him. *She's just a little one*, June said, and she looked and looked at Effie and smiled, even when Effie cried.

Ms Longford told him he was *very good* at spelling but Dad said that he was *top of the class*. *Pee see crap*, Dad said to his friends and June's friends. They laughed and drank from shiny glasses and their voices crashed over each other like big waves. Ms Longford had a sugar voice but got cross a lot. She looked at him sideways. June's other best friend Rose said he was *teroblee clever* when he put the seventeen pieces of the puzzle she had given him in the board, just like that. The words were stuck in her nose. *He is so quick!* Her mouth corners turned down and she smelled flowery, like the bathroom at the hotel June had called *posh*.

Would June be sad when she called 'Cake's ready'? Would her eyes be red and her cheeks white and her mouth smiling? He would make his towers go into the sky and she might do a real smile.

FIVE. Path

The orangey smell still came but the cake didn't. Effie was moving blocks with no sounds. She was playing right. When he went to the flat and grey wall he heard crying. They were talking about the BAD THING again.

'She said they were concerned about the other kids in the class. That he needs to see someone.' June's voice was soft and stretched. Was she at the end of her rope?

'That's good. You can find out what's going on with him.'

'Yes, I know, I know. But these things I read online—like behave-your-ul—' Lots of hard words ran away from him. 'God, Sal. Was he always like this? What if he's a sigh-co-path or something?'

This time *sigh-co* had the quick *path* on the end. June went to the *osteopath* and the *naturopath*. She wrote the two words down for him and he copied them into his special black MY JOURNAL, after *beautiful*. Now he had thirty-seven hard words.

Path meant *disease*, June said. *Like a flu that won't end*. It was not like the long path that took twenty-three giant steps from the verandah to the car. This was a short path with steps he couldn't count. *Sigh-co-path* must mean that he was very sick—at the end of his rope with a flu that won't end.

SIX. BAD THING

He didn't have long. Soon all the chairs and desks would be rattling and there would be talking and busyness and then home time.

He wanted to watch Snuffles hold her breath, like he did when they went to the beach. But her legs were fast and fish darted madly like ants around sugar. Hands and bodies banged and slipped and water went *splosh*. *Calm down*, he said, like June. *Calm down!* But Snuffles and the fish were wild. So he held Snuffles under the water till she was calm. An orange sail went *flip flap* in a shiny puddle on the floor and he counted 1, 2, 3, 4—it was not enough—5, 6, 7, and then Snuffles was still. She dripped like June's floppy mop. Drops flew over his desk when he shook her. But she was still and calm and beautiful.

Freckly Ruby Robinson screamed when she came in the door. There were cries and yells, then too many big people, and one of them took him to a room with blue walls and no chair. June cried when she put stinging stuff on the scratches. She yelled at Dad with words like *time* and *help* and they looked at him. He closed his eyes. It was not how June looked at Effie.

SEVEN. A World

He was a tiger and padded back to the mat. Effie was talking to wooden people. 'You go here. And you go... there.' He saw that her animals were in the right place, inside plastic fences. There was a little house and a tractor and flat blue blocks were a stream, just right. A block road went to a city with plastic shops and small towers and busy people. It was not big, like his, but it was whole. *Not hole in the cheese*, Ms Longford said. *Whole like a cake before you eat it*. Beautiful.

June liked it when he held Effie's hand. 'Come with me.' Her hand was yucky—all brown and sticky—but he grabbed it and pulled her to the kitchen.

'Mum, Mum—come and look! Effie has made a world.'

June and orange-haired Sally's heads were together and the cake was on the bench. Orange filled all the spaces in the room; they turned and looked at him.

Triple Mirrors

Carolyn Abbs

Carolyn Abbs is a Western Australian poet published in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *The Best Australian Poems 2014* and other journals. Her PhD is from Murdoch University.

After you died Nana, I went to your room,
it was dark like that place beneath the breakwater
where barnacles cling and children never dare hide

I opened a blind, a stuck window, breeze fanned
and fanned the room, light across your dressing-
table, triple mirrors. Amidst perfume bottles,

hairbrush, amber beads, your art deco box,
walnut with inlaid mother-of-pearl; guiltily
as if invading privacy, I lifted the lid,

postcards of seaside scenes, turquoise Quink,
stamps, shells, keys, coins, and with sand-like
grit beneath my nails, I heard an echo of the tide
a slow swish, swish...

I tried a jet-diamante comb in my hair, the mirrors
shimmered silver; as if through mist, your blue-
grey eyes came back, three times, to look at me,
waves swept and swept the shore...

the room so empty without you

Infant
Allison Campbell

Allison Campbell studies poetry at the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers where she also works as associate editor at the *Mississippi Review*.

I wish my grandmother as small as my new daughter. I pick her up and hold her. I take her out and people say, 'Oh, what a cute grandmother. She has so much hair!'

I change her and she changes. At night I write of what she has no mind for, the things I won't get to tell her later. She forgets her words and how to use a fork. She makes sounds and I adore her. I wish my grandmother as small as my new daughter and her amnesia normal, as it is. Strangers breathe in near her head and sigh. 'I love that grandma smell.'

She goes all gums. Mushes her lips when ready to sleep and makes watery percussion only grandmothers can make. She doesn't say anything after she farts, and that's okay. Everyone smiles. I wish my grandmother as small as my new daughter. When she's upset, I dance with her. I sing louder than, over the top of, her cries.

Interiors

Carol Millner

Carol Millner's short stories and poetry have appeared in a range of anthologies and journals. Carol is currently a PhD student at Curtin University and won the Joe O'Sullivan Writer's Prize, 2015.

The bath and basin were baby bottom pink, a wide strip of black tiling ran around the walls and the floor was piebald terrazzo.

'Liquorice Allsorts,' said Cath.

'Art Deco,' replied the real estate agent, an English woman called Jane.

'There's nothing wrong with it really—it's not as if anything important happens in a bathroom,' said Mark, turning the taps on and off and flushing the toilet.

So they bought it, a brick bungalow with a veranda and a Hill's Hoist—a permanent West Australian address.

When Cath heard the roller door on the garage go up and the click, click, click of bike gears she drew her shoulders together; Mark was home. The big kids would greet him before his bag hit the ground but after that, Cath knew, he would appear at the door of the pink bathroom in his cyclist's lycra.

She continued to sit on the low plastic stool from which she could supervise Olly in the water and rest her pregnant belly against the bath.

'The pink bathroom is our cocoon,' she said aloud making a rhyme for the two-year old.

'Hello,' said Mark, speaking to Olly behind her. 'Having a nice bath?'

'How was your day?' Cath asked.

'Okay,' he said and turned away from her to strip off and hang his cycling gear on the two chrome hooks he'd attached to the back of the door.

When he turned back, Cath was giving Olly's face a perfunctory wipe.

'Here—let me do that.'

'It's okay. I'm done,' said Cath, wringing out the face cloth and hanging it on the side of the bath. 'Aren't you going to Kalgoorlie tomorrow?'

‘We’ll talk later,’ Mark said and went out.

Cath coaxed Olly to pull out the plug and the throaty laugh of drain water filled the pink bathroom.

When their alarm went off on Wednesday, Mark didn’t move. He was flying up to Kalgoorlie later, as Project Engineer for his new company—away until Friday—the last three days before the baby’s due date. He knew he should go through to the kitchen to help cut lunches and breakfast the kids, but somehow Cath always seemed to have things done before he could start. Mark yawned and stretched; from where he lay he could see his favourite skis stacked, redundant, against the wall.

Cath dumped oats into a bowl, added water, salt, sultanas, selected High for four minutes and pressed Start. She cleaned her teeth, took her vitamins, drank some water, stirred the porridge, made the lunches, peeled Olly off her leg, gave Juliet and Sam their breakfast, strapped Olly into the high chair, fed and changed him, put him in the car, hassled Juliet and Sam to clean their teeth and put their shoes on, reminded them to pack their bags, got five-year-old Sam into the car, saw Juliet out the door, ran back inside to throw some clothes on herself, got in the car, went back to collect Juliet’s bag, got to the car again, quelled a brother versus sister stoush in the back seat, drove to school, stopped in the kiss and fly zone, dropped the kids off and drove home.

Mark’s taxi was parked in the drive when she got back so she said goodbye quickly and held Olly up on the veranda rail so that he could see Daddy wave as the taxi pulled away.

Cath drove slowly on the afternoon trip to school, braking gently to let a pair of magpies flap haphazardly across the road in front of her. Olly was snoozing in the back and odd flashes of television and security camera footage crossed the screen of the reversing camera. Mostly the camera collected upside-down television and interiors, the back room of the deli or the Lotto shop, but today, as she pulled in to the library car park, the camera displayed a snow covered mountain range. Cath shut off the engine and gathered up her books. She felt suddenly exposed—as if her internal landscape, her own private homesickness were on display.

‘Hello!’ said an English voice behind her. ‘How are you getting on in the house?’

‘Good,’ said Cath, striving to match Jane’s friendly tone. ‘Good. Mark’s away for a few days but we’re okay.’

‘When’s bubby due?’

‘Friday.’

‘Have you got family coming over?’

‘Nup.’

Jane’s glasses made her eyes look bigger than they were.

‘I’ll come over this evening and do the baths for you.’

Cath was about to refuse her but Jane was brusque.

‘I’ll be there at five,’ she said and posted *A Year in Provence* through the returns slot.

When Jane knocked on the door, Cath was serving up baked bean dinners at the bench, running Olly’s bath and supervising Juliet’s attempt at a Grecian Helmet—the floor was a mass of torn newspaper and a soggy papier-mâché balloon was balanced on the dining table.

‘I’ll go!’ shouted Sam, wiping his gluey hands on his shirt. Cath greeted Jane with relief and once the kids were in bed, encouraged her to stay for a hot drink.

Jane stood looking at the pictures Mark had hung beside the recycled Rimu bookcase while the younger woman went to make tea. Cath and Mark seemed happy in these photos—painting her parents’ batch, kayaking on the Milford Sound, tramping around Lake Minchin.

‘Our life before kids,’ said Cath, coming to stand beside her.

‘You’re not in this one,’ said Jane indicating an image of Mark on top of Mount Cook.

‘No. That was taken a week after I’d had Juliet. Mark’s always been more fanatical than me when it comes to bagging peaks.’

‘Did you ski?’ asked Jane, accepting a tea mug emblazoned with Coronet Peak. ‘I’ve always wanted to learn.’

‘It’ll end up on your bucket list.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Seriously. Let me give you a first lesson in exchange for all your help. Come on.’

Jane looked at her sideways but put down her mug.

‘No time like the present,’ said Cath, encouraging Jane to move her feet into the wedge position.

‘Like this?’

‘That’s it. Now bend your knees and lean forward... Yup. And then you swoosh off down the slope and hope to God you aren’t taken out by a snowboarder,’ said Cath, miming the likely collision with a laugh.

‘Look out. You’ll drop the baby,’ said Jane steadying Cath before sitting down herself. And then, as though apologising for her concern, ‘I used to be a midwife.’

‘I’m a nurse.’

New laughter ballooned out of them until Cath slopped tea across her pregnant belly and stopped to mop herself up.

‘Here,’ said Jane passing her a box of tissues.

‘Thanks,’ Cath patted at her T-shirt ineffectually. ‘Thanks for befriending a pregnant stranger.’

‘Mark’s away a lot, isn’t he?’

‘Strictly speaking, it’s not Fly-In-Fly-Out if that’s what you mean... but yeah.’

‘And when he’s home?’

‘It’s not *Country Calendar*.’

Jane looked puzzled.

‘You know—in it together boots and all, shoulder to shoulder, through all weathers... solid farming families... We’re not like that though everyone thinks we are.’

‘No-one can say what it’s like inside another person’s marriage.’

Cath was silent. She felt disloyal talking about Mark but since the move she had realised that it was the companionship of her woman friends that kept her going.

‘It’s good enough.’

Mark called while Cath was bathing Olly the following evening.

‘I’m not sleeping well,’ he said.

‘I bet you’re sleeping better than the fat lady who’s getting up three times to piss in the night.’

‘Yeah—well it’s not a competition.’

‘Better get some sleep before you come back here,’ said Cath.

‘Right. Can I speak with the kids?’

‘Sam! Juliet! It’s your father.’

As she lifted hot soup out of the microwave at lunchtime on Thursday, Cath tripped on a plastic stegosaurus and scalded her right hand. Pain arrived instantaneously and reduced her to perching on the side of the pink bathtub with her hand under the cold tap of the basin sobbing and shouting for her mother, who had died five months ago. Cath made so much noise that Olly came to stand beside her which only made Cath want to stop crying but she couldn’t. They just sat and Cath kept her hand under the running tap until the sun dropped low enough in the

west to come in on them through the frosted glass of the bathroom window.

‘Looks like you’ve been doing something stupid,’ joked Mark, as soon as his head appeared round the bathroom door on Friday evening.

‘Daddy,’ Olly squealed and splashed the water invitingly.

Mark stripped off and got in so that Cath was reminded of the way it was when their first baby arrived and Mark was around to be ‘Dad’.

‘You go,’ Mark said, as Cath hesitated in the doorway. ‘I’ll be fine.’

Cath went out to the kitchen where she tore at a head of Iceberg lettuce and hassled Juliet to get her Grecian helmet off the table.

‘Why have you changed from good to bad, Mum?’ asked Sam as she chivvied him to fetch the plates.

‘I’m just in a hurry.’

Cath summoned a smile, which became a grin as she recalled that Olly had peed in the bath before Mark came home and she’d been too tired to empty the bath and start again. Mark appeared in the kitchen, on his own.

‘Where’s Olly?’ asked Cath. She’d imagined they’d appear together, with Olly all towelled off and dressed in his pyjamas.

Mark had his head in the fridge and didn’t reply.

‘Did you get him out?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Mark?’

Silence but for the sound of Mark moving refrigerated items.

‘Is he still in the bath?’

Cath let the head of lettuce fall to the floor and left the room.

Olly was sitting by himself, chest deep in water. Forgetting to kneel or crouch to protect her back, she lifted Olly’s soft wet body directly up to her own dry chest and went through to sit, breathless, in the bedroom where she had to navigate a moraine of possessions to get to the bed—books, unsorted papers, two tramping packs, skis, down jackets, boots, poles, plastics, crampons, rope, ice axe... There’s no room for a new life here, she thought, until we get rid of all this snow stuff.

‘Phone for you!’ Juliet called and Cath picked it up by the bed.

‘Everything ok?’

Cath let out a gasping laugh and told Jane how she’d scalded her hand on Thursday; about the pain, and perching on the side of the pink bathtub with her hand under the cold tap. She told her how Olly had come to stand

beside her, how he started crying in sympathy, how she bought a burn dressing from the chemist, got one of the mums at school to put it on for her, how she was all right now. Now that Mark was home. She stopped talking when she heard herself lying but her brain kept running on: It's like some kind of weird slalom—I'm on skis, maybe on a snow sledge. I'm getting slower and heavier, more and more clumsy and Mark is just another obstacle to be got around... Just as I'm starting to relax there he is popping up again looking for attention while I'm trying to steer a sled full of kids and a pregnant belly round another bloody rock. Why is it when movies play in my head, it's always snowing? I'm living in Perth but dreaming Central Otago...

Eventually, Cath recalled that Jane was on the other end of the line.

'Sorry, I missed that—juggling Olly.'

'I just wanted to call, and wish you all the best.'

'Don't worry. Olly was a week late.'

'Full moon tonight,' Jane proffered a nursing joke. 'Call me if you need someone to mind the kids.'

At midnight on Friday Cath manoeuvred groggily out of bed and made her way to the bathroom, where the security screen had been transformed by the moonlight into a curtain of silver scales. Her pregnant shadow slipped across the bath tub and she sat down heavily on the toilet. When she stood up she had to pause for a moment to manage contractions and recalled Jane's joke about babies arriving faster on the full moon. She moved heavily towards the kitchen and called the Birth Centre.

'Do you have any back pain?' asked the midwife on duty.

'No.'

'You better come straight down. We'll be ready.'

Cath rang off and went about the house packing a bag but she had to stop and brace herself.

'Mark! Ma-ark!'

The sensation she'd had earlier, of needing to do an enormous crap, was the baby's head pushing down and Cath realised that she was in second stage labour. She knelt down pushing with her arms against the pink bathtub and reminded herself to breathe. Mark appeared in the doorway looking tired and disorientated.

'Can you line the bath with something?'

'Fuck off. You can't have the baby here.'

'Well, what do you suggest?' asked Cath, trying for sarcasm between contractions.

Shocked into practical compliance Mark called an ambulance, lined the bath with towels and helped Cath over the side where she immediately got down on all fours and pushed her bum up in the air.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to slow it down a bit.’

‘Jesus.’

Cath didn’t really hear Mark after that. Later, when Jane asked her, she said that he’d gone to mind the kids but she didn’t really know... All she knew at the time was the sound of her own breathing and her voice, which came back to her as though from a distance, moaning. Behind her closed eyelids she saw black and then colours—deep red and purple, giving way again to black and then, when she opened her eyes, the walls of the pink bathtub. There was nothing but pain and push and burn but in a far off part of Cath’s mind she could hear a voice hanging back from it all, urging her on.

‘Just push. Go on. It’s all going to be over in ten minutes...’

Cath couldn’t believe her luck after the other three births and a new excitement coursed through her so that when the baby girl slipped out into the hands of an ambulance medic she was laughing and crying all at once. She knew the old-school midwives likened a good birth experience to climbing a mountain but she’d never believed it. Yet, there she was holding her warm wet newborn and feeling as exhilarated as if she were standing on a snowy ridge with the wind in her face.

Jane came to visit them a few days later, armed with a roast chicken dinner and a fruitcake, which the kids started on immediately.

‘Where’s Mark?’

‘Kal,’ replied Cath, noticing herself use the local moniker.

‘Oh,’ said Jane.

Cath rolled her eyes and passed her the baby so that she could grab the ringing phone.

‘Hi Mark.’

She took the phone through to the bathroom and closed the door. ‘Is everything ok?’

‘Yeah.’ There was a pause in which they could hear each other breathing. ‘How would you feel if I went back for a week to do some skiing?’

‘To Queenstown? Now?’

Mark stayed quiet, letting her words wash over him.

‘Well, you’d miss out,’ Cath said flatly.

‘On what?’

‘On this, all of it, the kids, the new baby...’

‘But that’s your project. You don’t need me.’

‘Oh really.’ Later, Cath promised herself, she would go online and research separation and divorce in Australia but at that moment she looked down at the terrazzo floor and said on a held breath, ‘Just, don’t tell me...’

‘I’m in Auckland,’ Mark said. ‘I got a direct flight. I’ll be in Queenstown by tonight if it doesn’t snow—’

Cath cut him off and put the phone down beside the pink basin.

Genesis Revised

Bruce Dawe

Bruce Dawe is recognised as one of Australia's most popular poets, and his *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems* has been a best-selling collection for many years.

Suppose, we'll say, a snake, suitably dressed
and equipped with qualifications as a man,
were to be detected, finally
for what he was, those tell-tale scales
gleaming in a sudden patch of sunlight
—what would the authorities at Elysium High
decide upon? The full heel of the law
and what would follow: public obloquy
rebounding on a school which, previously,
the world at large had always taken to be
another reconstructed paradise? And how many
Adams, tempted like the first
to smother the transgression, would begin
enquiring if there *might* just be an opening
elsewhere to permit the snake to vanish
from what were else a model garden-plot,
enabling all to shake their sorry heads
if, as would seem likely, the same creature
should commit a similar offence at Terra High?

My Ghost

Rachael Petridis

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.

my ghost is here in my chest
 a spectral whirl dressed in sheer
on a roundabout
 of dream and breath

it coughs at night
 because once long ago
it smoked *Craven A* and *Rothmans*
 like the cool ads at the pictures
on Friday and Saturday nights

my ghost is not a wheeling ghoul
 an open mouth feeding
on cemetery headstones
 pillars of nightmare

but appears on birthdays
 soft as a mellow moon
cradles me in an orbit of love
 smooths the sheet of fear
as I sleep

my ghost is flesh and bone
 a faded cardigan meshed to its chest
a low voice calling
 I breathe in pearls of smoke
dreaming of my father

July 11th
Caitlin Maling

Caitlin Maling is a Western Australian poet whose first collection *Conversations I've Never Had* was published in 2015 by Fremantle Press. A second collection *Us Girls* is forthcoming.

People keep stopping their campers
to make the 100 metre walk to the beach.
They stand and look a while and turn back.
Some may take a photo but this is ordinary
coast, compared to the dunes, the rock deposits
just down the road. Also the wind is in
and it's hard to love this place when the sand
whips into your face and the dry stink of weed
overpowers the salt. All this I'm sure you know.
There's probably nothing new to tell you.
The tavern has changed hands again.
The grilled fish and chips went up by a dollar.
I wonder if you remember how it feels
to stand by coast and not need to look
or whether you only ever felt wind, salt, sand.
No harm in getting in your car
and not looking back.

A Kind of Coldness

Yang Xie (Chinese original)
Ouyang Yu (English translation)

Yang Xie, from Wenling, China, has published throughout China and worldwide in translation. His award-winning works include a collection of poetry, *Illegal Elements*, and a collection of short stories and novellas, *To the Jinma Building*.

Ouyang Yu is still living and writing, apart from translating. This is his first publication after 60.

In the morning, at the crossroads
I saw someone, in a glance
—she was quietly waiting for the lights to turn green
I didn't intend to reveal my own insincerity
By squeezing
A formalist smile
—I lowered my head and strode off
Rushing the red lights

In the evening, I got a call
From a voice that sounded ambiguous—
'I have known you all along and you ought to
At least acknowledge it—'

I heard something slip
Out of my own mouth before I
Slammed the phone—
'No, I don't want to know anyone
Anymore, not this winter...'

The Standardised Patient

Harriet McKnight

Harriet McKnight was shortlisted for the 2014 *Overland VU Short Story Prize* and the 2015 *ABR Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize*. She has been published in *The Suburban Review*, and is the deputy editor for *The Canary Press*.

My sister found me the job. Usually they only take drama students or out-of-work actors, but Emma works at the university and pulled a few strings. Bill had left a couple of months before and my nose was flaking around the edges from the constant use of tissues.

‘I can’t do it,’ I said.

‘Sure you can,’ she said. ‘You just have to act a little.’

‘I can’t act,’ I said.

‘Everyone can act.’

‘Look at me.’

‘They’ll make you play a patient with depression,’ she said. ‘You’ll be incredibly convincing.’

I was interviewed in a fake waiting room by the head of the program, Gordon. He had alopecia and a slight stutter on ‘w’ sounds, like a car revving up to a gear change.

‘So a little about w-what w-w-we do here,’ he said. ‘W-we call this a “standardised patient” program. Your job is to be a routine patient for our medical students to diagnose.’

The walls on either side of the room were about two metres apart. There was a reception desk behind a high bench. The plants in the corner were plastic and grey with dust. The chairs were padded and without armrests. It almost looked like a real doctor’s office. Gordon told me that the consultation room included a two-way mirror and that they’d be watching how things transpired.

‘But all you need to do is memorise the symptoms we give you and answer their questions,’ he said. ‘That w-w-way we can assess their bedside manner.’

‘Okay.’

‘Medicine is not just science,’ he said. ‘They need to practise relating to patients.’

'I'm their guinea pig.'

'Yes,' he said. 'And don't make it too easy for them.'

'No,' I said.

A month before, when I'd told Emma I was quitting nursing school, she didn't even change her facial expression. I hadn't so much quit; I'd stopped going until the weeks piled up and the choice had been made for me.

'I just can't make room for it in my head right now,' I said. 'Caring for other people is too hard when you're feeling shit yourself.'

'That makes sense,' she said.

'I'm just going to be kind to myself for a while. Take it easy.'

'Statistically, more dentists kill themselves than any other professional,' she said. 'So, you know, you could have chosen worse.'

I look young and they ask me to play a teenager often. My body never bloomed the way that other women's did, like they are flowers or fruit. I have bones that show and catch against doorknobs and benchtops. Pale skin with paint-splatter freckles, some large and dark. Emma says they could be moles and I should get them looked at.

'I spend my working week in a doctor's office,' I say.

'Not a *real* doctor's office. Melanoma kills more women between the ages of 15 and 35 than any other cancer.'

On my days off I go to K-mart and browse the 'teen' sections for clothes to wear. I have a favourite outfit—a lime green shirt with small silver skulls all over it, purple eye shadow, and those plastic woven chokers that sit tight in a barbed wire pattern around my throat. During the interviews I slouch my shoulders forwards and draw my forehead low like I'm trying to stare the world down. In the waiting room, I listen to Alanis Morissette through headphones and channel the age when the pain of being alive was sweet and intoxicating, and a riot of hormones left you screaming with lust for *feeling*. Emma says that I'm reacting to the current trauma of my adult life by reverting to a less complicated time of adolescence. I tell her I don't remember adolescence being uncomplicated and she says I know she's right. It's just I'd thought Bill and I were going pretty well, like we were one of those couples that everyone wants to be in. You can nest right into someone in five years, similar to one of those burrowing grubs. Bill said he didn't think we were right together.

'What does that mean?' I'd said.

'I don't think we work.' He'd been waving his hands around in the space between us like he was wafting away smoke.

‘Why?’

‘It’s just a feeling I have.’

As though I’d been asking if he thought *Black Swan* was going to win the ‘Best Picture’ Oscar or where the nearest water source was.

‘What does it mean?’ I asked Emma.

‘He’s a guy, isn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ I’d said.

‘Statistically speaking, more couples break up just before Christmas than any other time of year,’ she’d said.

‘What does *that* mean?’

‘That he’s an asshole. Forget him.’

When we were kids, Emma was the one I ran to if I split my knee open or banged something. She always had that instinct, the one that makes you calm in a crisis. I just fall apart. My mind fills up with white noise, like all the electronics are on and screaming. After Bill had been gone a few days, she’d found me at the bottom of my shower.

‘What are you doing?’ she’d said.

‘I’m having a shower.’

‘The same shower you were having three days ago?’

I’d liked the way the water slid hot across my legs and dripped into my eyes. The way it washed in everything that was on my hair and skin. I was trying to see how long I could keep them open without blinking.

‘I think you should get out,’ she’d said.

‘I don’t want to.’

She had sat on the tiles and rolled up her sleeve. We held hands in the water as the light changed outside and then she stood up and held open a towel. The next week she came to make sure I got dressed for my interview and drove me right to the door.

‘You got this,’ she’d said.

‘What if I don’t?’

‘You do.’

My day never begins before ten. The university’s brown corridors wind around like intestines but I’ve figured out the most direct routes. I pick up my symptom sheet and spend a few minutes going over it. Trying to feel the twinges and prickles of the real thing. They say that there is more we know about the ocean than we do our own brains. Sometimes I think I could imagine myself sick just sitting there. I wait in the waiting room until the door handle turns and some kid in a white jacket sticks out their head. Today’s student’s hands shake as he closes the door. He

keeps tugging at the lapels of his doctor's coat, flattening it. His collar underneath is pink and the reflection stains his cheeks. He motions for me to sit down.

'What can I do for you?' he says.

'My stomach is really sore,' I say.

'Just your stomach?'

'Yeah, really sore.'

He taps his pen against the desk in tense staccato. His nervousness rolls off him like small waves in a still bay.

'Any fever?'

I shrug exaggeratedly. 'I just don't feel good.' Gordon likes it when I play the difficult teen.

'Any vomiting?' the student says. 'Any back pain?'

'Jesus,' I say. 'My stomach is just really sore.'

'Are you sexually active?' he says. His gaze keeps darting to his own reflection in the long, two-way mirror on the left side of the room.

'Uh, no.'

'It's important you tell me the truth.'

'I am,' I say. 'My tummy hurts.'

'Have you had sex?'

'Dude, I'm fifteen.'

'I need to ask these questions. You are, aren't you?'

'No.'

'You won't get in trouble. Just tell me if you are.'

He grabs my forearm. For the first time he meets my eye and we sit there staring at each other. The corners of his mouth are twitching downwards and if I weren't so weirded out I would reach out and pat his hand.

'There's no need to touch the patient,' says a voice through a speaker in the roof.

The student's lip trembles and the shape of his fingers stay in pale ghosts on my skin when he lets go. He says, 'I really fucked that up.'

'I dunno.'

'You could've had chlamydia,' he says. 'Or Hep B. With those symptoms.'

'Constipation,' I say.

'Fuck.'

Later that night, I see him at the local. Emma and I go to Karaoke Tuesday to watch and drink. He's still wearing that pink button-up that makes his cheeks look like they're painted on.

'Who's this guy?' says Emma.

He's up on stage gripping the mic like it's going to fly out of his hand. Some Pearl Jam song starts. I never liked that band.

'Should've rethought the pink shirt,' Emma says.

'I think it's called salmon,' I say.

'This song sucks,' she says. 'Want a drink?'

When I turn back to the stage he's looking right at me and still singing.

Emma and I like to pretend we're judges on one of those TV singing competitions. We write our notes down on the napkins that sit on the table in a little wire holder. Emma is the mean judge, for sure. A middle-aged woman gets up to do her song. Emma pushes her napkin across the table to me. *Confucius says 'it takes longer to fix something than it does to break it.'*

'I don't think Confucius said that,' I say.

'I give her a minus fifty-five.'

'"Dancing Queen" is surprisingly hard to sing,' I say. 'All those high notes.'

'Keep it to the shower,' she says.

She's drawn a picture of a face with liquid gushing from the sides of its perfectly round head in curved streams.

'What is that supposed to be?' I say.

'My ears are broken,' she says. 'That's blood.'

'So harsh, Emma.'

'These broads are a dime a dozen,' she says. 'I'm looking for that x-factor.'

There is no way either one of us would get up on that stage.

He's sitting at the bar when we go to leave and I have to push past him to get to the door.

'Hey,' he says.

'Hi,' I say.

'I thought you were a teenager.'

'No, I just pretended to be one.'

'I thought you were,' he says.

'I'm actually a lot older.'

'Well, okay.'

Emma is standing by the door, looking at me intensely like she's trying to tell me something with her eyebrows.

'So you can drink, then?' he says.

'Yeah,' I say. 'Legally, at least.'

'You don't drink?'

'Oh, I just meant that yes, I can drink.'

'Can I buy you a drink, then?'

I hold up one finger at Emma and tilt my head towards him. She shrugs and walks out the door.

'Yeah,' I say. 'Yes.'

He asks me about my work and tells me about his studies. About two-thirds of the way through a beer, I contemplate taking him back to my place and wish I felt more empowered. What exactly does empowered feel like?

Outside, the night buzzes and I'm suddenly reluctant to open the front door, so we sit out on my verandah. The streetlights throw yellow light up the garden but we sit in inky darkness. When he kisses me it's like we're following Ikea instructions.

'I liked that top you were wearing earlier,' he says. 'With the skulls.'

'Thanks,' I say.

'This feels kind of wrong,' he says. 'Do you think it feels naughty?'

'Yeah.'

'You're so young,' he says.

There's a glitch in my head. But then I realise.

'How old did you say you were?' he says.

Twenty-nine, I think. 'Fifteen,' I say.

'So young,' he says into my neck. He slides his hand up under my bra and across my skin. His fingers grab at my flesh.

'Oh,' he says.

'What?'

'How long has that been there?'

'What?'

His fingers press into a point on my chest. Up near my armpit. They press down and then slide off again.

'You should get that checked out,' he says.

'What?'

'I mean, we haven't done that module yet and I can't diagnose you or anything but you should get it looked at.'

I put my fingers up to where his were and feel it sitting there just below my skin. It's small, like it's nothing at all.

'I'm going to take off,' he says.

The next morning I sit in the fake waiting room and try to focus on feeling like I have the flu. After he left, I lay in bed fingering the lump beneath my skin until it was bruised and tender, the seed in the centre of a lemon.

The waiting room is about the size of a walk-in closet. The toys in the box are never touched. I have to walk way down into the belly of the campus. There are no windows. The world could blow up while I was sitting here and I wouldn't even know.

The first student is young and pretty. I think, fuck off. Pretty enough to be an actress and smart enough to be a doctor. The world doesn't let women like that exist for long.

'How are you feeling today?' she says.

'My throat's sore,' I say. 'My skin feels hot but I'm really cold.'

'That sounds like a virus,' she says.

Fucking model-genius, I think.

In my break, I call Emma and she cries over the phone. Even though she's trying not to make any sound, I can hear the tears move her voice around in her mouth.

'You remember Auntie Jo?' I say.

'Yes,' she says.

'What if it's like that?'

'You don't know it is.'

'We couldn't use the toilet after she did, remember?'

'You don't know anything yet.'

She picks me up from the university after work. We sit in the car, in the parking lot, holding hands across the hand brake. Students stream past us like schools of fish. Like we are at the aquarium, watching them through the thick tank glass. Something ripples across their heads, sunlight or electricity.

'Do you think I should make a will?' I say.

'You don't have anything to leave anyone,' she says.

'Maybe I should, anyway.'

'You don't know anything yet.'

The air is shimmering with sound but inside the car it feels muted and distant.

'What did I do with all that time?' I say.

'What any of us did,' she says.

A few days later, we're sitting side by side in waiting room chairs. There is a receptionist behind the desk and a TV playing soap operas on the wall. A kid is on the floor, playing with the cars he's pulled out of the box in the corner. He sends one of them zooming across the carpet and into the opposite wall. It must be eight metres from one side of the room to the other. The walls are a light pink colour. The car crashes into the architrave

and tips onto its back, the wheels trying to grab traction on empty air. The kid squeals, his mum hisses. People are coughing, jiggling their legs, and tapping the plastic armrest. The reception phone is constantly ringing, television voices echo around the room. Everything is too loud. I'm not wearing my green shirt with the small silver skulls. I don't have a list of symptoms to memorise. I feel naked and unprepared. Emma flicks through a magazine with celebrity bodies plastered across its pages and makes disgusted noises but she won't put it down. The door opens and my name is called. We both stand and Emma gives me a long hug.

'You got this,' she says.

'What if I don't?' I say.

The Crow
Emily O'Grady

Emily O'Grady is a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology. She won the 2012 QUT Undergraduate Writing Prize, and the 2013 QUT Postgraduate Writing Prize.

I watch the crow collapse from the sky
and land on the lawn at our feet. Snapped neck
turned as though recoiling from the carnage
of a gruesome accident, stunned eye a clear
glass bead studying the bed of yellow bindies
that broke its fall. When the cat pounces
and paws it like a plaything, I think of that ancient
foam-filled crow we saw perched on the waxy
eucalyptus branch. Its brittle stitching hidden,
seam a private surgery scar. Stiff wings outstretched
as though paralysed in flight. Lacquered shrapnel beak
and its feathers worn dull from school children
being dared to stroke death with their pudgy hands.
So perhaps you think it's a rock or a dog chewed shoe
when you grab hold of the thicket of flap and bone
because it's not by pinching up a snapped leg
or the sleek tip of a liquorice wing
but by wrapping your palm around the goriness
of the dead thing
and flinging it straight toward the tangerine sky.

Cat night
Elizabeth Smither

Elizabeth Smither's latest poetry collections are: *The Blue Coat* (Auckland University Press, 2013) and *Ruby Duby Du* (Cold Hub Press, 2014). She also writes novels and short stories.

The cats are out by the letterboxes
at the ends of long driveways
waiting to see how the night will shape itself.

Black fur is fading into darkness.
Stripes into shadows on the paths.
Only the eyes are growing brighter.

No need to move yet. Let the heat
of the concrete paths rise through the paws
and haunches. Let desire creep out from the flowerbeds

and hedges. Let the street lights mark
the great promenade down which love will come
like black carriages on the Champs-Élysées.

Blaming the horse

Elizabeth Smither

Now the great saddle-shaped back
takes blame though it goes on chewing
the thinning grass near the fence.
Why did they bring it from Australia?

There it ran in a philanthropist's gift
to the city of Melbourne: smooth acres
designed for such massive pets
that galloped in herds of precedence.

Once when lightning spiked and spooked
the distant hills, the foreground city
I saw Alice—her name, her beauty—
lead her herd in some choreography

unknown to humans who complain
and always seek a willing target. May Alice
soon be brought an apple, a Royal Gala,
her back is broad to bear our blame.

The Names of Dead Horses

Luke Johnson

Luke Johnson's stories have been widely published, including his debut novella 'Ringbark' in *Going Down Swinging* (2015). He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology Sydney.

None of them moved. They might have bolted at the sound of the train braking and then hitting. Pushed through the fences and escaped into the surrounding mountains, even. But they didn't so much as flinch. They stood motionless and fearless as antique furniture. Dressers and wardrobes and grandfather clocks stowed away in a vacant mansion somewhere, with sheets thrown over the top of them for protection against the dust. The polished, muscled legs and walnut-veined necks protruding from beneath their big canvas sheet-coats were the only visible signs of the workmanship that'd gone into shaping them and bringing out their excellent patinas. They were racehorses, these. Trotters. Animals accustomed to the smack of leather and screech of steel, to the rigidity of human involvement and catastrophe of its machines.

Inside the train carriages it was a very different story. The emergency brakes sent them all moving. Forward-facing passengers sprung upright and into the laps of their rearward-facing companions like swimmers reacting to the sound of some horrible starting pistol. A young man returning from the amenities launched off the balls of his feet and into the laneway like a champion backstroker. Even those who managed to remain seated threw their arms and papers up into the air like excited grandstand supporters.

'We must have hit something,' an older woman told her husband. She was the first to speak in their carriage. She told him like it was a fact she'd confirmed merely by saying it aloud. And like he was the kind of idiot who needed to be told these sorts of things. Which is how it went in their marriage. For forty-five years it'd gone this way. Her the teller, him the idiot listener.

'It didn't feel like we hit anything,' the husband muttered in the most non-argumentative way he knew how. Both of them were holding onto the handrail still. Neither had been injured or tossed about too badly.

'They don't just put the brakes on like that for no reason, Neville,' she insisted.

'Maybe we *almost* hit something,' he said hopefully. 'They might have pulled us up in time.'

The woman scoffed. 'It didn't feel like they pulled us up in time.' She let go with one hand and pressed her cheek to the window in an attempt to see all the way to the head carriage.

It was a four-car train, with an upstairs and downstairs compartment in each car. Their downstairs compartment was quite empty. Besides them, there were three schoolboys sitting together, all of whom were laughing now and re-enacting the involuntary flight paths they'd taken a moment earlier. Toward the middle of the carriage a man wearing a suit but no tie was gathering and repacking the contents of his leather satchel.

'You know what I bet it was?' the older woman put to her husband, pulling her cheek back from the window and looking further up the mountain.

'No, what?' he asked.

She brought her index finger up in front of her face and tapped lightly on the glass. Her husband glanced past to see precisely what she was pointing at. Unlike her, he was still holding onto the rail with both hands, expecting perhaps for the train to start up again all of a sudden and stutter forward.

'I bet one of them got onto the track,' she whispered. 'I'll bet you that's what it was, alright.'

The husband considered the horses standing about in the paddock with their big heavy coats draped from the withers to the rump. He knew his wife well enough to understand that the discreet voice and restrained finger-tapping actions were indications of assuredness rather than self-doubt. She spoke in the same hushed tones when looking through the kitchen window at the neighbours showboating around in the front yard with their new caravan, or when she was expounding some other scandalous and libellous theory involving people she couldn't help comparing herself to.

'Just you wait,' she continued. 'I'll bet the driver comes on and tells us that we're going to have to sit here until they can get a forklift or something to move it out from under the train. Neville? Did you hear what I said?'

'Maybe,' her husband said. He'd stopped listening and begun counting the horses, giving each a nod of his head to indicate its place in a series of silent numbers that was already up to twelve. He might have been the owner of the horses, counting to himself like this, looking to determine whether one was missing. But of course he was not. He was not the

owner of much, in fact. As a younger man he'd been the owner of a panel-beating shop and an opinion and he was not even the owner of those anymore.

'*Maybe?* You're kidding me right, Neville? You don't go slamming the brakes on like that over nothing. *Maybe* we hit something, he says. *Ha!* I thought you were supposed to know a thing or two about collisions.'

'It didn't feel like we hit anything,' he paused the counting to explain his response.

His wife scoffed again. 'You think you're going to feel a thing like that all the way back here? Use your brain, Neville. Actually, you know what? I'd like to see what the owner has got to say for himself when he sees the kind of trouble he's caused. Letting one of his stupid animals get out onto the track like this. That's what I'd like to see. You don't just get away with a thing like this. Costs hundreds of thousands just to get one train up and running on time. God, read the newspapers if you think I'm exaggerating. Probably got more money than sense, this guy. Anyone who owns that many horses has got to have more money than sense, if you ask me.'

On the low side of the train line the gaping national park stretched out to the Pacific Ocean. For the horses in the paddock and the people on the train, the sun had disappeared behind the back of the mountains, leaving the air cold and damp. Out over the ocean, though, it was still high enough to be giving the water a bright, warm-looking swell, like corduroy rubbed against its grain.

Before retiring and moving to the south coast, Neville had spent his career working in a small country town out west, where there was never any shortage of kangaroo-damaged bonnets to be straightened out, smoothed in with pink epoxy filler, and repainted at a fee only slightly above cost. Occasionally, a more serious accident would occur on the major highway that fed into the town from the east, and a crumpled car would be towed into his yard so that he could determine whether it was worth repairing at all. If somebody had been killed in the accident, then the car would be towed or carried by flatbed truck to the enclosed storage yard at the back of Neville's shop. This yard was the property of the local council and was not to be accessed without direct permission from the police sergeant. The sergeant had given Neville a key to the yard's gate and would often phone to ask Neville if he wouldn't mind going across and unlocking it, so as to save the sergeant a trip. Usually it was to let some insurance assessment agent in, or some sunglasses-wearing relative of the person killed in the accident. Other times it was to chase out a group of schoolboys who'd been seen climbing the fence.

Neville found that he too had a curiosity for those vehicles that had facilitated a death. There was something that compelled him to stand peering through the windscreen, wondering whether the congealed blood on the upholstery wasn't keeping the spirit of the person sealed in. Or whether the angle of the steering wheel wasn't a sinister trap prepared by the ghost of the victim—something to catch him if he ever dared to open the door and sit down in the death seat. If he came upon a group of trespassing boys who'd done just that, as a way of better experiencing the car's haunting, he'd lean in through the window and ask them if they knew the name of the person whose seat they were sitting in. He'd tell them the name then, saying it aloud, as seriously and morosely as he could manage. In truth, it frightened him as much as the boys to announce the name of the dead person while hovering over the very place they'd died. But then, like the boys, it also excited him. He'd walk away feeling too afraid to look back and the boys would follow him closely, not wanting to be locked behind in the yard with a ghost whose name they now knew.

Not too many years before he retired from panel-beating, closed the shop and brought his wife to live where she'd always wanted to live, Neville was called up on a Thursday afternoon. Some kids, still in their school uniforms, had left their pushbikes at the gate and squeezed themselves underneath the fence. Probably hoping to get a look at the car that'd done the girl Brown in the day before. A year or so earlier, the fence along the front perimeter had been raised with two lines of barbed wire, and there hadn't been the need for Neville to go down there and chase away trespassers in quite a while. On this day, though, the town was in a state of hypersensitivity, and just the sound of the phone ringing in his workshop was enough to signal to Neville that the ghost of the dead girl was being disturbed.

The girl Brown, whose family was as well known as all the other families in the small township, had been struck by a four-wheel-drive vehicle while riding her horse along the roadside. Neville had learned all about it the day before during his lunch break. His wife had come down to the workshop specially. She'd explained to him the way the girl had been out early, riding her horse before school, when some out-of-towner had come up alongside her without being aware of the way a horse is prone to spooking from the rear. Listening to his wife talk about this business of spooking from the rear, Neville had found himself wondering why he'd never heard of it before. He'd asked his wife where she'd learned of it. Instead of answering, she went on to inform him that this out-of-towner was not an irresponsible teenager or impassive male, either, but a mother herself. For Neville's wife this was obviously the most impossible part of

the whole story. Much more impossible or unheard of than the spooking from the rear stuff. And like most of the women running around town that morning, she'd been at a total loss to explain what this mother could possibly have been thinking, coming up alongside a young girl on a horse like that. That the woman was from out of town seemed to be the only thing giving the situation any sort of comprehensibility.

After hanging up the phone and taking the key from the hook attached to the wall of his office, Neville went outside into the bright, sunlit yard. The blue metal aggregate crunched beneath his boots as he walked towards the closed-in lot next door. He couldn't yet see the group of kids who'd broken in to get a look at the car that'd killed their school friend the morning before, but their bikes were lying against their handlebars and pedals at the gate.

Handling the heavy brass padlock, Neville had the uncomfortable image of wrestling another man. It was almost enough to make him forget about the kids and go back to the car he'd been beating into shape before the sergeant had called. Peering in through the gate, though, and seeing the four or five boys and two girls crouched behind the beige-coloured four-wheel-drive, a strange sense of duty took over and Neville found himself unable to turn away.

It was grotesque to Neville to think that kids so young—thirteen, maybe fourteen—were being forced to face up to the responsibilities of death. Yet it was clear to him that this was exactly what was happening. The kids were not gathered there in morbid fascination, like the boys he'd chased out so many times before, but instead had been drawn in by the obligation of having known the girl before she died. Approaching the group, it occurred to Neville that the most frightening thing about death is the utter decency it evokes. The maturity and pragmatism it imposes upon those who, till such time as they are forced into direct contact, are prone to treating it so sacredly and so fearfully.

'Hey,' Neville said to the group of kids squatted in the dirt. They squinted up at him. One of them had been drawing circles in the dirt with a stick. 'The police says you kids can't be in here.'

One of the two girls smiled. 'Do you know what her name was?' she asked.

'Brown,' Neville answered. 'She was the girl Brown. I know her parents well enough.'

It was then Neville noticed the big swipe of blood and hair that started at the front passenger-side blinker and went almost as far back as the rear passenger-side door handle. It looked like carpet burn against the skin-coloured duco.

Smiling up at him still, the girl shook her head. 'Maggie Girl,' she said. Neville didn't know what this meant, but he nodded anyway. The girl, who was still smiling, could see he hadn't understood properly and she shook her head again. 'Her horse's name was Maggie Girl,' she explained. The words hit Neville very hard and very crudely then, like a man punching another man below the waist. 'And they had to put her down, too. After she saw what happened to Melissa and everything. Look,' the girl said, putting her hand up on the smear. 'The car didn't even hit Melissa. It hit her horse, Maggie Girl. And now both of them are dead.' The girl stopped smiling then and began crying.

Neville reached out and put his hand on the spot where Maggie Girl had come into first contact, the spot just behind the blinker. The streak was hard and gristly, baked on by the hot sun.

After Neville had touched it, the kids all took their turn, too. Then they left together, Neville holding his breath and tensing his stomach muscles as he padlocked the gate behind them.

Just as Neville's wife predicted, it was not long until the driver's voice came over the speakers to say something about why they'd stopped so suddenly and what was to happen next. The driver spoke with what sounded like a Scottish accent and didn't say anything about the horses. Just that the train would not be moving for quite some time. He asked that everybody remain seated. And said that anybody who'd been injured should make their way to the front carriage. He said he was very sorry then and repeated the part about injured passengers making their way to the front car while everyone else remained seated. This second time he said it, Neville recognised the accent for what it really was: the intonation of somebody trying not to cry. A grown man trying not to cry.

'God, you'd think it was Phar Lap,' Neville's wife quipped loudly enough for the three boys sitting in front of them to wonder who or what Phar Lap was. And then again, an hour later to the female police officer helping them disembark the train by the rear carriage.

'This way, please, ma'am,' was all the officer could say in return.

It wasn't until Neville and his wife had been led down the steep basalt bank, across a paddock, through an already opened gate, and up onto a bus with all the other passengers that a different police officer, a man this time, came aboard to inform them that it hadn't been a horse that'd caused the driver to apply the train's brakes with such vigour that the track beneath them had physically buckled, but rather two small girls. An eight-year-old and a ten-year-old. The pair had wandered down from their uncle's barn to play in the spillway, but for some reason had climbed

up onto the tracks instead. Both of them had been killed instantly, which, as Neville's wife took it upon herself to explain to the boys now sitting directly opposite them, was something to be thankful for at least. As the boys nodded their sensible young heads in agreement, each as unable and at a loss as Neville's wife to explain what the girls' uncle could possibly have been thinking, Neville closed his eyes and began re-counting the beautiful, motionless racehorses, whose names he hoped never to have to hear.

Zero Hour
Jodie Hollander

Jodie Hollander's debut collection *The Humane Society* was published by tall-lighthouse in 2012. She has been awarded a MacDowell Colony fellowship and is currently the guest editor for the fall issue *Poetry Quarterly*.

How do you pack up an entire life,
and fast—say you only have three months
or so the doctors tell you anyway,
what the hell are you supposed to do
about all the things in life you never got?
I'm not talking about the trip to Rome
or the great American novel you never wrote;
this is about that vague sense that things
were always on the verge of getting better.

Yet now that you're nearing the finish line
there's a backwards logic to it all:
all those years waiting for something,
but in the end finding there was nothing
except lying alone in a hospital bed;
you could throw in the towel and call for God—
or accept things exactly as they are, not
eating, not speaking or even really sleeping,
but lying there in a kind of terrible waiting
for your last working organ to finally quit.

**Wounded storyteller:
Revisiting Albert Facey's
fortunate life**

Ffion Murphy and
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Private AB Facey returned to Australia from Gallipoli in November 1915. No announcements accompanied his repatriation, though acknowledgement of wounded soldiers was standard procedure throughout the war. No family members gathered to greet him on his homecoming, though of three brothers serving at Gallipoli, he was the sole survivor: Roy Facey was blown up on 28 June and Joseph sustained multiple bayonet wounds on 14 September. The First World War had by November resulted in over 33,000 Australian casualties ('Australian toll' 7). Anzacs who lost their lives had been revered since the first news reports of the Landing in May, while those repatriated on account of physical wounding attracted sympathy and gratitude. But approbation was circumscribed, and we believe that Private Facey's low-key homecoming was due to his membership of a suspect category of returned soldiers referred to by medical histories as 'Special Invalids' (Butler 541).

Discharged from the army in June 1916, Albert Facey resumed civilian life and blended in as best he could over the next few years, like thousands of other returning servicemen. According to the Repatriation Department, by the 1920s he was leading a 'quiet' life as a soldier settler at Wickepin, where he had spent much of his childhood and youth.

Six decades later, Albert Facey became one of Australia's most recognised living Anzacs. This remarkable transformation was not due to belated official acknowledgement of his war service or of his suffering in the intervening years but to publication of his autobiography. Released to coincide with Anzac Day 1981, *A fortunate life* was quickly celebrated.

‘This plain, unembellished, utterly sincere and un-self-pitying account of the privations and hardships ... deserves its current acclaim,’ wrote critic Clement Semmler, ‘his war and Gallipoli experiences contain as moving an account as I have read—Robert Graves included—of the horrors of trench warfare and hand-to-hand fighting’ (‘The Way’ n.p.).

A fortunate life is a survivor account of the war and of childhood abuse in the pre-war years. Published initially by Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP) and then by Penguin, it was, in the view of leading literary critic Geoffrey Dutton, a ‘classic in Australian writing.’ This epithet was repeated by Nancy Keesing (‘Enduring Classic’ n.p.), Humphrey McQueen (‘Year’s Best’ n.p.), and various other reviewers. It won the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction as part of the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards, with the judges applauding Facey’s ‘excellent, simple, straightforward style, marked not only by his extraordinary memory, but his ability to describe scenes and characters with great precision’ (‘Life Story’ 3). When the book won the National Book Council Banjo Award for Non-Fiction soon after, the judges wrote of the author: ‘He taught himself to read and write. He has given us the best account of a working man’s life in the early 1900s that there is ... The writing is intensely simple ...’ (‘Awards’ 3–4).

Facey’s story is divided into ‘two lives, miles apart,’ with considerably greater focus on the ‘lonely, solitary’ years of childhood and youth. At the tipping point appears a girl from Bunbury, Evelyn Gibson, whose life connects with the author-protagonist’s while he is serving at Gallipoli. During a lull in the fighting, Facey receives Evelyn’s ‘comfort parcel’ addressed to a soldier at the front. The two meet by chance soon after his return, and marry in August 1916, spending the next six decades together. Evelyn died in 1976. The following year, Facey says he wants ‘to end this story,’ adding that the loss of his wife had been ‘a terrible shock’ (*Fortunate* 412).

Alice Day points out the ‘rich material’ this text offers ‘for studying the role of autobiography as a means of establishing control over one’s ageing and dying by reconstructing the events of the past.’ Facey’s work can indeed be considered a kind of ‘life review,’ which is ‘a looking-back process that has been set in motion by looking forward to death’ (64). Day’s reading of this text alongside interviews she conducted with elderly people who had, like Facey, survived two world wars and the Depression finds that, despite struggling through painful times, including the death of loved ones, the storytellers almost invariably concluded with ‘I’ve been fortunate,’ which is precisely how Facey ends his autobiography: ‘I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back’ (412). Reviews

of this kind, Day argues, give one's life meaning and legitimacy. Facey's life review resonated with a broad cross-generational readership, and continues to do so.

In an afterword published with *A fortunate life* since 1985, Jan Carter seeks to explain the book's reception by claiming that 'Every culture needs a pilgrim,' and Facey met that need, becoming 'Australia's pilgrim.' In similar fashion, John Hirst refers to Facey as 'our everyman' (*The World* xi), while Jane Gleeson-White claims the book is 'in many ways ... an Australian *Odysseus*' (124). Geordie Williamson, in his 2014 re-evaluation of *A fortunate life*, observes that Facey's tale has come to be read as 'universal,' an 'Everyman's progress through the peaks and troughs [*sic*] of a stormy century' (n.p.).

As Dan McAdams points out, construction of the self in autobiography requires individuals to draw upon available symbols, myths, genres, discourses and narratives. The writer is compelled to 'find some coherence in the self,' and will 'pick and choose and plagiarise selectively from the many stories and images they find in culture in order to formulate a narrative identity' (202). Various critics have argued that this is a key strategy of *A fortunate life* (Bliss, Carter); for example, Anna Johnston proposes that, in such cases as Facey's, the 'autobiographical subject is explicitly trying to fit their personal narrative into ... pre-existing narratives of national subjects' (76), while Joan Newman contends that Facey reworks 'anecdotes told to him by others' and tells them 'as if he, himself, were the protagonist' (6). Facey includes well-known bush stories—of being lost in the outback and rescued by Aborigines, of itinerant rural workers and battling small landholders—and staple yarns about venomous snakes, unpredictable dingoes, rogue boars and drunken pigs. These are suggestive of both the Australian and pioneer legends. Facey also adapts an oft-repeated tale about a soldier extinguishing the eternal flame in an Egyptian pyramid. He was clearly influenced by twentieth-century mythologies, including that of Gallipoli as the site of male sacrifice that birthed the nation, though an individual's relationship to dominant ideologies can be shifting and complex. *A fortunate life* was originally published with a frontispiece of 'A.B. Facey, 1914, aged twenty' in AIF uniform.¹ Subsequently, Penguin added a closing photo of 'A.B. Facey, 1981, aged eighty-seven.' This archetypal framing of innocent youth and sage author suggests both the importance of the Anzac legend to this story and the authority gained by lived experience.

Yet some critics have pointed to factual errors or departures from historical accounts. Conceding that some 'dates and other details' are wrong, Facey scholar John Hirst claims that *A fortunate life* is nonetheless

an 'excellent introduction to the social history' of the early part of the twentieth century (*The World* xi). He dismisses errors as 'minor matters,' noting that the manuscript went through several drafts before it could be published. 'In the final version,' Hirst states, 'Facey took a punt and sometimes got it wrong which made following his trail a little more difficult' (xii). In his 2007 entry for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Hirst states, rather more bluntly, that *A fortunate life* contains 'considerable artifice' (n.p.).

James Hurst finds substantial historical discrepancies in Facey's descriptions of Gallipoli battles, so that he questions whether the work is 'fact, fiction, or a combination of both, and if the latter, in what balance' (74). He wonders whether Facey's account of the Landing should be 'added to the history of that confused battle,' or taken as a 'summary of others' experiences' (75). Hurst is right to suggest that the outcome of such a question might also 'say a great deal about the veracity of the remainder of the book' (74–75), though he limits himself to comparing Facey's recollections of Gallipoli with other soldier accounts and the official history of D company of the 11th Battalion, to which Facey belonged. He finds Facey's descriptions inconsistent with the official history, 'including his part in the fighting on Silt Spur on 28 June and at Leanne's Trench in July and August 1915' (74). The history indicates only A and C Companies fought in these battles.

Hurst concludes that although Facey's reconstruction 'may be inaccurate,' or a compilation of others' accounts, this 'does not mean it is fictitious' (77). While Hurst's meticulous research failed to unearth any document or witness to corroborate Facey's testimony, he notes that errors and omissions in other sources can make validation difficult. He concludes that we will never have a single, indisputable account against which others can be checked for veracity and that questions will remain in Facey's case because there is 'undoubtedly a blurring between history and story-telling.' Hurst wishes to give Facey the benefit of the doubt, for if he did 'fight through those difficult days, it would do him a great disservice to imply otherwise' ('Mists' 88).

What is at stake when one questions the accuracy and authenticity of a much-loved autobiography about suffering and acceptance? Does highlighting invention or inaccuracy do Facey a disservice? How so? This seems uncomfortable territory for critics who nevertheless observe Facey's storytelling acumen. Williamson even praises his skills 'as a novelist' (n.p.). But Tim Rowse observes that 'detached curiosity about, rather than an eager sympathy for, the autobiographical subject' need not strip a text of its 'affect or authority' (in McCooey 25). This is

precisely David Rowlands' approach in 'An unfortunate lie?: A.B. Facey and the Gallipoli landing', which compares Turkish records and Facey's war service records with the autobiography and concludes that, while Facey's account contains significant inaccuracies, history teachers should not abandon the text but continue to use it when teaching the Great War, for it usefully illuminates the potential fallibility of witness accounts. We believe those attempting to read *A fortunate life* as social history should be apprised of departures from other accounts—including earlier and conflicting accounts by the author himself. This would assist in clarifying the historical record, but is also relevant to assessments of narrative impact, authorial motivation and reader complicity. Indeed, we might do Facey a disservice by *not* questioning the narrative's omissions, errors and fictions, for they may have something important to tell us.

Seeking to better understand the nature of Facey's storytelling, we have compared his published account with his digitised war service and recently released hardcopy repatriation records (War Service; Repatriation), and with three handwritten drafts and a typescript based on the third draft that was submitted to FACP by Facey's daughter Olive Ashby in 1979, providing the basis of the published version (Facey Drafts 1–4). We have also cross-checked the narrative against independent sources, such as newspapers, shipping and other war records. Notably, Facey's drafts vary in significant ways and frequently differ from the published work and other sources.

Facey could not have anticipated the cultural role his autobiography would come to perform. Even so, he clearly understood the major national myths on which his stories drew, including the special significance and status accorded to the 'original' Anzacs, deemed first among equals, who landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. Facey claims to have been part of the original Landing in each of his drafts and in the published version; however, his war service and repatriation records indicate that he went ashore with the third reinforcements 11th Battalion on 7 May.

Adding to the uncertainty, Facey's drafts offer substantially different accounts of his preparation for the Landing. In the first draft, he claims to have trained for a few weeks in Egypt before joining the main force at the Greek Island of Lemnos, where he spent another few weeks undertaking further exercises and sleeping on his ship at night, as was the routine.

In the second draft, he spends six weeks in a training camp at Cairo and another three at the main Mena Camp, from which he is taken at the last minute to join the invasion force on board 'troop ship No 32.' This number corresponds with the *HMAT Themistocles* (Jose 532) but that ship was, at the time, on its way to Australia (*Daily* 10).

Facey's story stabilises in drafts three and four and in the published version, where the name of the transport becomes the *Sussex*. However, the *Sussex*, a British ship, never served in the Mediterranean and was at the time in the Caribbean. It is possible that Facey may have confused the *Sussex* with the *HMAT Suffolk*, which was ship number 23 (Jose 532), unintentionally transposing the digits in the first draft to number 32, and this ship was indeed part of the invasion on 25 April. However, the *Suffolk* had already left for Lemnos by the time Facey arrived in Egypt in late March 1915. Although in the published version Facey says he left Fremantle in 'early February' (*Fortunate* 305), in fact he departed on board the *HMAT Itonus* on 22 February ('Embarkation'). The weight of evidence suggests that Facey created, through redrafting, a timeline and sequence of events to suit his preferred Gallipoli story. This preferred story may have been influenced by the 'Gallipoli myth,' including the special status accorded Anzac 'originals.'

To make this version work, other adjustments were necessary. For example, the date provided in *A fortunate life* for his mother's death is incorrect. Facey claims that Mary Downie (nee Carr and formerly Facey), died in September 1913, at which time Facey was working on a construction team completing the rail link between Wickepin and Merredin. He recalls being given leave by the Head Ganger to attend his mother's funeral and returning to work soon after to complete the job, which wrapped up in late October 1913. 'I had driven nearly every spike on one rail from Merredin to Wickepin,' Facey claims, 'a distance of one hundred and twenty miles' (285). This detail is verifiable; historical records show that the line was completed in late 1913.

However, Facey's mother was very much alive at this time. She died suddenly and unexpectedly twelve months later and was buried at Karrakatta Cemetery on Monday 7 September 1914 ('Funeral'). The *Wickepin Argus* reveals that the loss caused Facey to miss a football semi-final:

Both teams were represented by their full strength, the only absentee from Wickepin being Facey, who owing to the death of his mother which occurred during the week, was unable to play, much to the disappointment of his club mates who were greatly moved with sympathy for him in his sad bereavement. ('Football' 1)

Team lists published in the newspaper place Facey at Wickepin from at least June 1914.

By itself, Facey's faulty recollection, decades on, may seem of little import and might be understandable given that the maternal relationship was strained. But in fact there are significant implications, for by changing dates he could add to his panoply of jobs a colourful period as a successful boxer. Facey claims that after a couple of months playing football for Subiaco in the state's premier league, he left Western Australia in June 1914 to tour with the Mickey Flynn Boxing Troupe—travelling throughout South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. As a heavy-weight, he beats all-comers before war is announced and he returns home from Sydney on board the *HMS Moulton* to enlist.

Our research has found no reference to Albert Facey in the league lists for Subiaco and we have been unable to establish the existence of the Mickey Flynn boxing troupe, though Snowy Flynn was a well-known promoter on the Agricultural Show circuit at the time. There is no mention in Flynn's published promotional material of Albert Facey, a boxer from Western Australia, or of a heavy-weight matching Facey's description. This suggests that Facey was never a league footballer, or a touring heavy-weight champion. Furthermore, his name does not appear on the *Moulton*'s 1914 passenger manifest. In fact, by September 1914, the ship had cleared Australian waters by some three months and returned to Britain (Shipping 6).

It is significant that Facey's first handwritten draft makes no mention of an interstate boxing tour but situates Facey in mid-west station country during this period, as a shearer and rouseabout. The second draft claims that Facey undertook two tours with Flynn's troupe: to South Australia and Victoria in 1913 and to New South Wales and Queensland in 1914. Clearly Facey could not have been in different places at the same time. The shearing episode was dropped from subsequent versions and the boxing career was reduced to a single interstate tour in the second half of 1914. It appears Facey's revisions had several objectives: to confirm his physically robust pre-war body; to enhance the narrative's dramatic and picaresque elements; and to validate a story of 1914 enlistment. By changing significant dates and fictionalising, Facey was able to develop this preferred version of his life and the man he was before war cut short his promise.

In *A fortunate life*, Facey describes an incident that ends his Gallipoli service on 19 August. When on look-out duty a shell lobbed into his trench and exploded, killing his mate: 'Several bags filled with sand were blown on top of me—this hurt me badly inside and crushed my right leg ... then while moving to the tunnel to go through to the doctor, a bullet hit me in the shoulder' (348).

The first draft differs markedly from the published version. Here Facey indicates that in August his platoon had been relieved from action and ‘sent back to near Shrapnel Gully for a rest.’ During this time, he ‘became very ill.’ The draft asserts that Facey received treatment for a slight shoulder wound but that ‘Dr Brennan of our Battalion after a few days discovered my heart had been affected.’ This condition, not any serious wounding, requires Facey to be evacuated. He consequently ‘left Gallipoli on the 19th of August’ (Draft 1:104).

In this version, Facey says his heart problem was linked to a shelling incident that took place on 28 June: taking cover with his platoon in a dry watercourse, Facey explains he was ‘hurled with tons of Earth some 8 to 10 feet into the air.’ He was ‘stunned for about two hours,’ and as blood appeared in his mouth he thought he ‘must have some internal injury.’ His mates found no broken bones and towards nightfall he ‘felt better once again’ (Draft 1:100).

Abject experiences are consistent with trauma, which might explain why Facey claims to have sustained injuries in a shell explosion almost identical to that which killed his brother Roy on the same day, 28 June: ‘My Brother Roy ... was killed that day he was also blown up by a shell but was not as lucky as I’ (Draft 1:100). In a defining incident in *A fortunate life*, Facey tells of assisting with Roy’s burial and that of ‘fifteen of our mates’ on 28 June: ‘We put them in a grave side by side on the edge of a clearing we called Shell Green. Roy was in pieces when they found him. We put him together as best we could—I can remember carrying a leg—it was terrible’ (338–39). This graphic scene is not depicted in the first draft, though Facey refers briefly to Roy’s death and burial two days later: ‘All the men killed in this action were buried together in the one grave (my Brother included) on 30/6/15 at a place known as Shrapnel Green’ (Draft 1:100).

The later burial date is confirmed by the official records. Yet, there is doubt that Facey’s platoon was part of the action that killed his brother, as noted by Hurst. Even so, the men at Gallipoli knew death and putrefaction, and bodies were often buried where they fell. Facey describes being part of burial duties during a day-long armistice on 24 May: ‘First we had to cut the cord of the identification disks and record the details on a sheet of paper we were provided with. Some of the bodies were rotted so much that there were only bones and only part of the uniform left’ (334). The horror of such work, and then the loss of his brother, would have been ghastly enough for the twenty-year-old survivor who also feared for his own life, as we discuss below.

The repatriation record, released in 2012, does not support Facey’s story of severe wounding. Rather, it indicates that he began exhibiting

signs of 'Debility,' 'Nerves' and 'Strain' from 28 June, following his partial burial by sandbags when a section of his trench collapsed due to enemy shelling (Repatriation). Facey subsequently presented with 'frequent attacks of palpitation and giddiness,' was often 'short winded,' and had 'heart trouble' (Repatriation).

It is possible that Facey wished consciously or unconsciously for a more violent and visible somatic inscription in sympathy with his brother and many other dead or wounded, and also to differentiate himself from men who occupied the 'lower decks' of the ship, suffered very bad 'nerve sickness,' and 'couldn't help it' (349). Nerve cases were not permitted to stay at the Front, Facey writes in *A fortunate life*, 'because they would be very upsetting to the others, especially those who were inclined that way themselves' (350), a point confirmed by the official medical history (Butler 541).

After leaving Gallipoli, Facey tells us, he was taken to a hospital at Heliopolis and later moved to other hospitals and then a convalescent home, where he learned in September that a second brother, Joseph, had been bayoneted to death at Gallipoli. A few weeks later the medical board gave Facey a 'lengthy examination' and asked many questions: 'I was told that my wounds had healed but the board wasn't satisfied with my condition. I was still suffering faintness and internal pain, and vomiting blood—the cause of this had the doctors baffled' (354–55). Possibly Facey suffered not only war nerves but a hysterical conversion, whereby pathological memories translate into bodily pain and symptoms such as paralysis, limping, fainting and bleeding that appear to have no organic cause (Breuer & Freud; MacCurdy).

Returned to Western Australia and hospitalised, Facey says he 'felt as if there was something amiss deep down inside. I had had this feeling ever since I was wounded ... Many doctors and specialists examined me but none of them were sure what was wrong ... I was put through all sorts of tests' (357). Facey's original diagnosis was that he was suffering 'Debility' and 'Heart Trouble' and, in a medical report in February 1916, he complained of 'being nervous' (Repatriation). In *A fortunate life*, he describes medical treatments in Egypt and Australia that were painful, punishing even, and how he was instructed by doctors not to do anything that would 'excite' him (357–58).

Key questions arise: why does the medical account differ markedly from Facey's versions? Why do the early and later drafts give different reasons for his removal from Gallipoli? Facey's telling and re-telling of stories is, we believe, a key to understanding his writing. Carter notes that as well as telling stories to his family over decades, 'his work as a union official and local government member gave him opportunities to

express himself and to convince others' (415). But we believe there was an additional audience to convince—the army doctors and repatriation officials to whom he became accountable from the moment he left Gallipoli in August 1915 until his death in early 1982.

In *Anzac Memories*, Alastair Thomson explains that for many working-class ex-servicemen 'the battles of peacetime were as hard as any they had fought during the war' (123) and a key opponent was the Repatriation Department, which was responsible for assessing their eligibility for a war pension, with the level determined by the extent of incapacity. Eligibility and rate were regularly re-evaluated; better health could mean a lower pension or none at all. The pension was only payable to men with a war-caused disability, but this was hard to determine conclusively; there could be 'intangible damage,' some conditions might not manifest for years, and alleged inciting incidents might not have been reported at the time (284).

As noted, according to the first draft of the memoir Facey is hurled into the air by an explosion on 28 June. He recovers sufficiently by that evening to resume duty (Draft 1:98–100). Facey also reflects that he 'made a mistake' by not reporting the event: 'The result of the shell incident has been that my back has never ever been normal since since this was never reported to the Battalion doctor (another foolish mistake) on my part' [*sic*] (Draft 1:99–100). This may be a reference to his failed efforts in 1957 to convince the Repatriation Department that he had been physically wounded at Gallipoli. The examining doctor would have none of it and recorded, 'I can see no merit whatever in his claim,' before concluding that Facey's ailments were 'constitutional' (Repatriation).

Soldiers' repatriation files record the stories men told of their injuries and illnesses, as well as the responses of medical authorities. Medical examinations and decisions were 'framed by professional imperatives and attitudes,' according to Thomson (283), and the assessment of claims was often 'fraught with difficulties,' because medical judgements were subjective and contestable (285). A *fortunate life* implies Facey's weak heart and failing body forever binds him to Gallipoli and the Repatriation department. His first draft, more than the published version, makes explicit the contested status of his disability and the ongoing grief this caused him. But the pension was a vital source of financial security for six decades and finally, after he successfully applied for an increase in the rate, it allowed him to retire: 'It changed my life—I could now live on my pension and not have to worry about having to keep poultry and pigs to make my livelihood' (411).

Facey's storytelling performances, oral and written, over several decades may have had the effect of inscribing some stories as memory

events. Yet, as Judith Butler reminds, any story that is ‘compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity’ remains at ‘risk’ because of what it does not mention, ‘fails to repeat,’ or attempts to conceal (in Forbes 476). Facey notes the potency and longevity of particular memories. For example:

You would have to be in a charge to know how bad it is. You are expecting all the time to get hit and then there is the hand-to-hand fighting. The awful look on a man’s face after he has been bayoneted will, I am sure, haunt me for the rest of my life; I will never forget that awful look. I killed men too with rifle-fire ... but that was nothing like the bayonet. (326)

Changes in tense and shifts in point-of-view, between past and present, first and second person—and anticipation of eternal haunting—indicate a writer trying to take control of recurring memories by describing them, while his direct address to the reader conveys his desire for recognition and empathic understanding. It is notable that this passage is followed by his declaration that war amounted to being ‘scared stiff’ (326). However, he distances himself from its worst effects:

Fear can do terrible things to a man. There were a lot of nerve cases that came from Gallipoli, and sometimes a man would pack up under fire. A frightened man is a strange thing—you could grab him and pull him up and say, ‘Come on, you’re all right. Come on, you can shoot, go on, shoot’, and he would turn right around and be all right (if he didn’t run like hell). (327)

Facey openly declares his fear on many occasions; however, he never counts himself among the ‘nerve cases.’

Fear, as a recurring motif of this autobiography, sharply contrasts with the many images and declarations of Facey’s early life as a resilient child, one who would grow into a six-foot, well-built, physically robust and supremely athletic young man.² After his return from war, there is a distinct transformation: frequent illness and hospitalisation intersect a sequence of different jobs and fresh starts for the next six decades. The final section of the book, ‘Another life 1915–1976’—six decades compressed into 52 pages—is frequently marked by allusions to health crises and hospitalisation for indeterminate illnesses. Facey continues the theme of work but explains different jobs in the context of what he can physically manage given his war injuries.

Repatriation records provide additional evidence of Facey’s lifelong struggle to be acknowledged as a physically wounded returned soldier.

War neurosis was widespread during the First World War, accounting for 'as much as 40 percent of the casualties in the combat zone' (Showalter 321), and '80 per cent of the medical aftermath' (Thomson 305), but it was also typically regarded with suspicion, hostility or ambivalence due to its 'effeminate associations' with hysteria, cowardice or malingering, so that 'ordinary soldiers' exhibiting war neurosis were 'subjected to disciplinary treatment, such as isolation, restricted diet and public shaming' (Showalter 322).

It seems Facey revealed only as much as he felt he could confide—only what he deemed personally and publicly acceptable at the time—and that he wrote to create a myth he could live by. But if his writing was driven by recuperative as well as social, dramatic and testimonial impulses, we cannot assume it fulfilled its therapeutic potential. Facey's text contains shadow narratives that are curtailed or suppressed but not entirely effaced by his dominant narrative.³ Shadow narratives might emerge in 'opposition to their creator's likely plans,' but when recognised they potentially 'recast the dominant narrative, its issues and themes' (Reising 327). As Bart Ziino observes, there is never a 'simple tension between public myth and private truth but a complex, often difficult but mutually constitutive process' that can continue into old age (130). Although Facey might have aimed, like the returned soldiers interviewed by Thomson, 'to compose a safe and necessary personal coherence out of the unresolved, risky and painful pieces of past and present lives,' it appears his storytelling could not 'provide complete or satisfactory containment of threatening experiences from the past' (14).

Dennis Foster argues that conceiving of self-narrative as confession rather than expression 'allows us to see the pathos of simultaneous pursuit and evasion of meaning' (10). Readers become complicit in the life-writer's evasion as well as truth telling. Facey is deemed a working-class battler. Readers accept that he had a tough time and that he thought the Great War a terrible waste of life and 'all for nothing' (348). But we suggest that more attention be paid to Facey's other story, his illness story.

In 1980, a year before *A fortunate life* was published, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder was added to the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, though this was not without controversy. Since then, there has been another three decades of dedicated trauma research, much of it focussed specifically on violations of war and soldiers as victims, so that trauma is regarded less as individual proclivity, pathology, failing or dissent than as a 'symptom of history ... The traumatised ... carry an impossible history within them' (Caruth 5).

Thomson observes that ‘the stigma of mental illness has begun to lift across Australian society, and historians and veterans themselves now write more readily about “shattered Anzacs” who return from war both physically and mentally damaged’ (258). Facey’s shadow narrative can now be heard and valued, allowing his work to contribute to investigations of shame, silencing and war’s potentially life-long debilitating effects.

Notes

1. The date of the photo in the book (1914) does not correspond with Albert Facey’s war service record 1536, which indicates he enlisted on 4 January 1915; this date is now used in critical and biographical information. The caption should be corrected by the publisher.
2. For discussion of the valorised and corrupted body in Facey’s memoir, see Murphy & Nile.
3. Facey’s shadow narratives are a subject of our ongoing research.

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Karner Blue Butterfly

Marc Swan

Marc Swan lives in Portland, Maine. He has had poems published this year in *Chiron Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Ottawa Arts Review*, *The Binnacle* and *Straylight*, among others.

It's a small show in a grand old
brick synagogue converted to artist
studios—a photographer
is hosting a display
of eight beautifully rendered
montages of the Nabokov butterfly.
Endangered blue the artist calls it.
The intricate drawings
detail history, dimension,
environment, the birth and death
cycle of this small
member of the animal kingdom.
I ask of the process,
the lengthy research needed
to understand and create
these heady illustrations. Holding
a glass of inexpensive white wine,
the artist smiles and begins
to tell her story. First
she asks if I'm a Nabokov fan.
I've never had that thought.
*Not really, I say, but I'm someone
interested in learning.*
She walks and talks from one
to another linking the components
so precisely created. She tells me
of the history of the discovery,
quoting words Nabokov spoke
to describe this delicate species,

of the fires burned in certain
habitats to create ash
for the lupine to flourish—the staple
of the blue butterfly. She tells me
there are only a few places they thrive.
I'm drowning in an academic pool.
I find a convenient segue
and bid her a very nice *adieu*. On the way
out I speak with the photographer.
He tells me of his latest project
on Auschwitz. I'm ready to sink even
lower into an abyss when he explains
the photos are of trees. Trees born
of the dust and dirt of that place.
Trees bent, twisted with a tortured look,
he says, *and that is enough.*

First contact, Kakadu
Leichhardt's grasshopper
Virginia Jealous

Virginia Jealous's work includes travel journalism, essays and poetry. She's currently obsessed with the extraordinary life and work of poet Laurence Hope—aka Adela Florence (Violet) Nicolson—who died in Madras in 1904. Virginia is based in Denmark, Western Australia.

And then one wet season there
you were. Child of lightning,
improbable creature feeding, secreted

on red rock, blue sky articulating
brick-red-ink-blue limbs, clefted
close to January waterholes

where locals plunged and carried on
as if there was nothing extraordinary
about that Sunday afternoon, as if

it wasn't the first and last time
we would see you. Surrounded by a high-pitched
insect-churring in the scented aromatics

you were eating, voraciously, head tilted
above a shrug of denim shoulders. Intense
vibrato resonated. We felt as much

as saw your tensile antennae
sounding, sensing something out there
far beyond us, this improbable future.

Littoral Vanessa Kirkpatrick

Vanessa Kirkpatrick's first collection, *To Catch the Light*, won the inaugural John Knight Memorial Poetry Manuscript Prize (2013) and was commended for the Anne Elder Award (2013). She lives in the Blue Mountains.

A salty tang drifts
between the tall trunks
of spotted gums.

I can almost
hear the leaves fall
across our path.

They catch the light
more loudly
than what you are saying

through silence.
I don't know what loss
you are grieving

but your darkness
takes on the sharp
silver of leaves,

the grey edges
of waves
furthest out to sea.

I watch the foam
subside on sand,
imagine one thousand shells

abraded by each wash
until they shine and sing
their mother of pearl

resilience.

The Pea-pickers: An Introduction

Lucy Treep

In 2012, Lucy Treep completed her doctorate on framing of the space of home in Eve Langley's prose writing. With the support of the Friends of the Turnbull Library she is currently writing a biography of NZ author Maurice Shadbolt.

Eve Langley's first novel, *The Pea-pickers* (1942), has surprised and delighted readers since it was written. Douglas Stewart praised it as 'the most original contribution to Australian literature since Tom Collins wrote *Such is Life*' (31), and Norman Lindsay described it as 'a book that will live' (2). Before publication the manuscript shared the *Bulletin's* S. H. Prior Memorial Prize in 1940, with *The Battlers* by Kylie Tenant and the 'John Murtagh Macrossan lectures' by Malcolm Henry Ellis. On reading the manuscript Frank Dalby Davison wrote, 'It has the dew on it ... It contributes something fresh to Australian literature. It is rare. I think it will be cherished' (2). The predictions of Davison and his colleagues have proven to be accurate: twenty-first century readers still find this engaging novel 'fresh' and 'original', and enjoy the protagonist's theatrical flouting of social conventions. Langley skilfully weaves together many strands in her vibrant text, and perhaps most successful is the humour that frequently pervades the narrative. This humour is often at the expense of the narrator, though rapid shifts in perspective and the wit and vigour of her voice urge the reader to laugh with Steve at the same time as we laugh at her.

The Pea-pickers is best known for the decision of its female narrator to don male clothing and adopt a male persona based on a member of the Kelly gang, Steve Hart. Elizabeth McMahon observes that 'from the colonial period onward the transvestite is a recurrent figure in those rural and bush settings which function as metonyms of Australia, and onto which mythologies of distinctively Australian identities are so often invented' (1). In *The Pea-pickers*, the sisters' desire to cross-dress is aligned with personae adopted straight from the foundational literature and bush lore of Australia. This alignment situates Steve's demands to have her gender identity treated as fluid and unfixed directly alongside her rigid definitions of national identity; on the one hand, the contradictions and ironies of a female narrator with a male persona vividly assert the

potential of multiple viewpoints and truths in a way that still seems compelling today, while on the other, in the parallel narrative of national identity, other viewpoints are subordinated, mocked or erased.

Inevitably then, alongside Steve's transvestism, her racism and ethnocentrism are now aspects of *The Pea-pickers* for which the novel is notorious. Steve and her sister Blue work alongside itinerants of a number of ethnicities, and the novel's characters, a mix of new immigrants, other itinerants, and landowners are situated within a lovingly described Australian countryside. After a long day working in the fields, Steve walks across the hills in the evening:

I trod the hill of yellow grass; the land was veiled in the smoke of the still-burning bush-fire that was wallowing in red seas from some desolate shore to the end of its journey. Above the dry grass the blue smoke wandered, and in the mystical twilight I cried, 'O Patria Mia! Patria Mia!' and my naked brown feet kissed the dear earth of my Australia and my soul was pure with love of her. (169)

On the back cover of the 1958 publication of *The Pea-pickers*, Douglas Stewart of the *Bulletin* describes Langley's lyricism as 'a unique refreshment of our literature' and praises her 'love of Australian earth and Australian people and skill in painting them...' These days, Steve's declarations of connection with the land of Australia are perceived as appropriation of indigenous authenticity. The relationship that Steve has with the Australian landscape, and with the new immigrants that she meets, and the almost complete elision of the local Aboriginal community in *The Pea-pickers* illuminate the nationalistic narrative of the novel.

The Pea-pickers is famously based on Langley's experiences as a young woman when she and her sister dressed in male clothing and worked as field labourers in Gippsland, Victoria. Langley's biographer, Joy Thwaite, comments:

This was an enchanted period of Langley's life wherein the seasons of all the years merged into one magical 'Primavera' of infinite possibilities. In her memory, the summers of the years 1925–28 were fused... Youth, hope, a sense of adventure, a belief in her own talents and her ability to function independently as a man buoyed her up, spurred her on in her desire to travel Australia, to write majestic poetry and prose, to achieve fame as the definitive and inspired chronicler of Gippsland and its people. (38)

Langley's vivid recreation of rural 1920s Australia brims with allusions to the transformative possibilities of life. The novel starts with a sly nod to one of the best-known transformation stories of the western world, the 'fall' in the Garden of Eden. The first page opens with a newspaper clipping purportedly from the *Interstate Weekly*: 'And reports from Bairnsdale, in the Gippsland district, indicate that Mr Nils Desperandum, of Sarsfield, will have the largest crop of apples, this year, for miles around' (3). The punning name of the orchard owner with the good crop of apples, Mr Nils Desperandum, hints at an antipodean Eden. This metaphoric worry-free paradise attracts the attention of the sisters, and when they receive an offer of work from Mr Desperandum, their subsequent journey to Gippsland is charged with references to fairytales and other myths, contextualising their efforts at self-transformation within a pattern of metamorphosis. Allusions to death, gatekeepers, thresholds and the underworld of Greek mythology run through Steve's descriptions of her train ride to Gippsland. These allusions to the alternative realities of the mythical world seem particularly appropriate in a text where the unconventional dreams and fierce emotions of the narrator often create a dissonance between her and the surrounding world.

As Steve and her sister Blue board the train to Mr Desperandum's orchard they wear 'wide-legged trousers, silk shirts and sweaters' of 'gold and royal blue', and they stroke 'imaginary black whiskers' (15). In the time period that Langley has fictionalised conventions were rigidly adhered to, and the lives of women highly circumscribed. Decades later, Gippsland locals still remembered the time when Langley and her sister, having adopted male clothing, arrived seeking employment as itinerant field labourers. Thwaite cites Eb Coleman, who lived in Gippsland at the time:

When they first came to Metung they called them 'the Trouser Women'. They shocked the locals. Some people didn't have such a bright idea of them. They thought they were pretty common. Then they became popular because they were such good workers. They had to live pretty lean. (39)

Coleman remembers that the police 'were going to summons [the Langley sisters] for masquerading as men, but [the sisters] overcame that by wearing bangles' (Thwaite 39–40). In *The Pea-pickers*, in a sequence that describes the sisters slipping in and out of train carriages pursued by policemen who pop up in ways that are reminiscent of a Punch and Judy puppet show, Steve and Blue are repeatedly accused of 'masquerading as

boys'. In Langley's fictional recreation of the events that took place in the 1920s, the gold bangle that Blue wears causes confusion with regard to her gender, rather than confirming it as Coleman remembers.

Steve and Blue make no attempt to hide their womanly shapeliness, often appearing 'amply feminine in [their] masculine clothes' (*Pea-Pickers* 64). As they walk down the main street of one town the two women attract the attention of the hotel proprietor who calls out 'I say! Aren't those two ... girls?' (72), and as they walk the back streets of another town men and women 'cr[y] out to each other, wondering what [they are]' (66). While rarely turning from the interested speculation regularly aroused by the sisters' chosen attire, Steve and Blue are each other's most ardent and gratified spectators. Steve and Blue are happily, if wryly, aware that the shape of their womanly bodies is obvious through their masculine clothing. Comically, when the 'elderly proprietress' of a hotel in Cootamundra expresses surprise at the appearance of the two women, the sisters 'stare at each other sternly' and ask "'Did I look like a girl, then? Did my bosom appear large to you, old man?'" (71).

Though Steve insists on being referred to by her male pseudonym, and on being treated like a man, the sisters frequently wear 'half boy clothes, half girl clothes' (104). Steve describes an outing with Macca, a young man to whom she is attracted:

I put my arm around his waist as we walked awkwardly on the rough road. I was wearing trousers, too, like him, but with my usual touch of the ludicrous had added to the outfit a woman's blouse and a straw school hat of ridiculous droop.

A small dark girl, plump and faintly moustached, passed us with an amazed stare. (178)

The clothes and various adornments that the two sisters wear are in a collaborative relationship with the bodies they attire. The outfits that Steve, in particular, wears are part of a performance rather than a masquerade, expressive of the fluidity of her identity, which is made visible in the shifting distance between the expressions of Steve's clothes and of Steve's body underneath. The sexually ambiguous outfits deliberately chosen by Steve as a way of refusing conventional gender constructions articulate Steve's strong desire for a life of extended, if not infinite, possibilities.

These extended possibilities include the freedom to roam the countryside. When a sergeant in Springhurst asserts that Steve and her sister 'have no right to be getting around like this' (69) he is referring not just to their mode of dress but also to their unfettered movement through

Gippsland. Yet, Steve's restlessness is not just a show of defiance in the face of gender-based restrictions. Steve is a poet, in the Romantic mode, and thus driven to roam the landscape whilst passionately composing verse. From the very first lines of *The Pea-Pickers* Langley deftly encourages the reader to identify Steve, the narrator, as a poet, dwelling in poetic surroundings. That hot Australian morning on which Steve reads the news in the *Interstate Weekly*, she is sitting in 'the poet's corner' (3), as the space at her end of the table is called. Steve worships Keats and Wordsworth. She models her poetic outpourings on the Romantic verse that she loves, and as she wanders alone across the landscape, she emulates the well-known figure of the Romantic outsider-poet.

As a poet, Steve also admires Australian verse and she imagines herself within the tradition of the bush poet, another lonely figure in the Australian landscape. When planning their first journey into Gippsland, Steve and Blue describe it as a trip back in time to the days of the archetypal Australian bushmen: a golden past that they consider encapsulated by the writing of Henry Lawson. The sisters call out to one another as they prepare to leave:

'Wonder what we'll find up in Gippsland, Blue, eh? Old-timers... old music... strong horses and the memories of old days, I suppose'.

'But, Steve, it might be all changed now. We think we're going up into a district that's a mixture of Mia and Henry Lawson. But a new generation's come since then' ... Feverishly we made ready for Gippsland, that she might welcome us by turning back old times, and letting us see the days of which our mother had spoken. (13-14)

Their journey takes the two women to the site of overlapping origin stories; back to the time of Lawson, and that of the old-timers, and also to the childhood home-district of their mother, Mia, who looks 'like an old bushman' (8), and is 'Gippsland incarnate' (9).

Langley places Steve and her family within a number of well-known tropes of national identity. She repeatedly emphasises the strong connection Steve and Blue feel they have with the land. The house they live in with their mother Mia seems of the land rather than on it, slowly decaying into the ground, and surrounded by giant plum trees that hold 'the soil in their hands' (4). The family wallow in the sound of Aboriginal place-names:

At night we sat down and wrote out columns of Australian place-names, glorying in their ancient autochthonousness. English names, in Australia, we despised. 'Effete,' we said. 'Unimaginative. But... ah, Pinaroo... Wahgunyah... Eudarina... Tallygaroopna... Monaro... Tumbarumba... Bumberrah, and thousands of others! How fine they are!' (10)

As Steve says, she and Blue, 'being of coarse and fertile earth, were more sensitive to the etymon than to anything else in the world' (10). Strongly identifying Steve with the indigenous of Australia through her discussion of the beauty of the Aboriginal names, Langley cleverly links Steve's love of language with these names.

The complex manner in which Langley associates Steve and Blue with indigeneity is clear in the only episode in which Steve speaks with an Aboriginal man.

When the man appears near the sisters' hut one morning he agrees to sell Steve and Blue two boomerangs. In the ensuing conversation the Aborigine's speech is placed directly beside that of both Steve and Akbarah, a field worker purportedly from Afghanistan. Steve questions the Aborigine, who leans 'against the post-and-rail fence near the shed, and languidly, in a well-bred voice' offers to throw the boomerangs for them:

'What do you make [the boomerangs] from?'

'Oh, I find a wattle-tree that has a root shaped somewhat like a boomerang, and I work on it with a piece of glass or sharp tools until I fine it down,' said the aboriginal and, collecting his money, he strolled off into the bush.

Akbarah smiled at me. 'You have magnificent teeth, Akbarah. What do you clean them with?'

Akbarah mumbled, 'Might be get little bit bark from wattle-tree and rub on tooth'. (112-3)

In this dialogue both the Aborigine and Steve speak standard, even elegant, English in contrast to Akbarah who speaks a kind of pidgin English. In *The Pea-Pickers* this is the only time a non-Anglo-Saxon person speaks as the Aboriginal man does; usually the immigrant workers use the pidgin English often ascribed to indigenous people. Akbarah Khan and landowner Karta Singh frequently refer to Steve and Blue as 'you fella', and the faltering English of the Italian workers is ridiculed by Steve. The Aboriginal man has the nonchalant style of an Englishman of leisure and speaks in perfect English, and through careful presentation of speech

patterns Langley aligns Steve with him and her country. By constructing an opposition here between those who speak like Steve's beloved Keats, and those who don't, Langley overcomes the distinction she insists on elsewhere between those with Anglo-Saxon/white identities and all others. However, by asserting this ideological contradiction Langley obscures the fundamental similarity in the interests of Steve and Blue, and the 'new' immigrant workers with regards to the Aborigines of Australia; in one way or another they all desire to occupy the land once solely held by the Aborigine.

Yet, despite this construction of Australian identity through association with indigeneity, indigenous people are almost absent from *The Pea-pickers*. Langley effectively effaces the substantial presence of Aboriginal people working in the Gippsland fields at the time that she places Steve there. Bruce Pascoe comments that *The Pea-Pickers*:

...is set in the market gardens of East Gippsland and celebrates the Australian worker not in soft focus Empire glory but as it was, full of Italians, Germans and battling Australians. Dramatically different from how the *Bulletin* saw the iconic worker of the wide brown land... but [Langley] is colour blind. The pea, bean, maize, grape and fruit harvesters of that era were predominantly black. (209–10)

As Pascoe comments, 'today, talk among members of Aboriginal communities never proceeds far without mention of peas and beans, grapes and maize and the districts of Bruthen, Bairnsdale, Bega and Mildura' (209). Langley renders this highly visible community invisible. That Langley describes in great detail the multicultural nature of the market gardens within which Steve works makes her effacement of the Aboriginal community more profound. Pascoe observes:

The picking industry is dominated by Aboriginal families but [after one brief encounter between Steve and an Aboriginal man] Langley never mentions them again, preferring to concentrate on the Italians with whom she shares almost no language but does share the knowledge of European culture... (210)

Langley does evoke the 1920s community of Italian field workers in vivid detail, but the Italians are not portrayed simply as fellow labourers.

Steve and Blue often show genuine respect and affection towards the Italian men beside whom they work, and in their clumsy attempts at speaking Italian the sisters reveal an awareness of the difficulties of

learning another language. Yet any expressions of regard are overtly undermined by the frequent depictions of the Italian men as childlike, and (ironically in the context of the sister's cross-dressing) feminine. Both the Italians and Karta Singh and his friends are described using animal metaphors to enhance Steve's strong sense of superiority in their company. In these instances, the subversiveness of Steve's verbal acumen and wit is limited by her support of a status quo that mandates the exclusion of non-Anglo-Saxon Australians as aliens and outsiders. In *The Pea-pickers*, Langley depicts not so much an accurate picture of 1920s rural Australia, as an accurate image of common societal attitudes of that time. The novel works to consolidate most of these attitudes, while seeking to challenge prevalent gender constructions.

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Heron
for John Eaton
Anne Elvey

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By the built stone bank of the Swan
cafés sprawl across the latest agora—
old chairs and tables, trends in jars
or op shop cups, where nannas

read the leaves of kin, their extant
random species not yet endlings
of their kind. Greying wood and bent
metal scatter over the paving. One

angle to another, they have the tilt
of things moved on from, as the day
becomes a stroll, and the widening river
turns beside the slight hill and the stones

above. The artifice recalls the Nyoongar.
Apartments rise and at a bend an egret.
Across a bridge and further on a lawn,
playgrounds, a rowing on the water,

families and sun, and on the cut rock
edge, intent, a white-faced heron
waits. The light picks out a curve
of wing, the throat, the bill, the spines

of native grass politely placed, upon
the landscape of the mown, where the path
returns—by way of a sculpted niche—and
the itinerant sign is tucked into the stone.

Stitched
for the Grey-Fronted Honeyeater
Jane Frank

Jane Frank's work has recently appeared in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Writ*, and the Bimblebox Art Project. She teaches at Griffith University and has just completed a PhD examining the rise of the global Book Town Movement.

Holes are appearing.
Dropped stitches.
We can feel it.

We're cast here,
knitted into the mallee,
our colonies
in rhythm
with the spiderweb,
wattle, spinifex,
the last dusk light of the plains
always fires our yellow feathers:
we've kept faith with the earth,
needles clicking together,
turning.

On still nights
we fear for the land,
that the bargain
will unravel

though the sun,
endless ball of hope,
sends out its skeins
and, for now,
the nectar is still sweet.

'The memory of a storm': *The Wild Oats of Han* and the childhood of Katharine Susannah Prichard, 1887 to 1895
Nathan Hobby

Nathan Hobby won the T.A.G. Hungerford Award for his novel, *The Fur*, and is writing a biography of the early life of Katharine Susannah Prichard as a PhD candidate at UWA. He blogs at nathanhobby.wordpress.com.

Despite the significance of Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883–1969) as an Australian novelist, a comprehensive biography is yet to be written. The two book-length accounts of her life come from Prichard herself in *Child of the Hurricane* (1963) and her son, Ric Throssell, in *Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers* (1975). In narrating Prichard's childhood, both *Hurricane* and *Wild Weeds* draw heavily on an earlier work of Prichard's, *The Wild Oats of Han* (1928), ostensibly a children's novel. In his biography, Throssell writes of Prichard's childhood that '[t]here is little that I have been able to add to her own account of the time' (*Wild Weeds* x). Yet she left many clues and gaps in *Wild Oats* and *Hurricane*, the two works illuminating each other when compared and suggesting fresh lines of enquiry. Using recently digitised newspapers of the period to gain new insight, this biographical essay offers a fuller picture of Prichard's childhood from ages three to eleven, a key stage in her development. A better understanding of this period of her life could enrich future studies of her work by detailing formative influences, including a more comprehensive account of the shadow of her father's troubles, culminating in an auction she was to see as the beginning of her political awakening.

In the foreword to *Wild Oats*, Prichard states that she wrote it in 1908, although it was only first published in serial form in 1926. It has been largely overlooked by critics and the public, perhaps because it is too subtle for a children's novel, 'a book about childhood rather than a book for children' (Pownall 18). Prichard invites an autobiographical reading of the work in a way that further complicates its generic status, writing in the foreword:

The first thing children ask about a story is usually: "But is it true?" And this one, it can be said, is a truly, really story. Katharine Susannah would stake her breath on it. Just here

and there a few details stray from the strict path—Rosamund Mary's little songs, for instance. (n.p.)

There are some more significant details which 'stray' as well—from Han's grandmother dying after exerting herself helping the needy stricken by a flood to the political and moral lessons given to Han by Sam the woodcutter. Yet my research shows the possible historical basis of a number of incidents in *Wild Oats*.

Wild Oats is narrated in third person through the viewpoint character, Hannah Frances Barry, a fictionalised representation of Prichard.¹ Casting herself as a character in a story for children seems to have made it easier for Prichard to write about her life. Han's personality and perception of the world are conveyed vividly in *Wild Oats* using the techniques of characterisation Prichard had learned from writing fiction. In contrast, Prichard seemed to think formal autobiography should be composed of anecdotes and she fills *Hurricane* with them. Joy Hooton identifies eight forms of Australian women's life-writing developing in the late nineteenth century, including the autobiographical novel and children's texts, and *Wild Oats* has elements of both (22–50). While the conventions of fiction shape *Wild Oats*, it can also be approached as a form of autobiography and this essay will consider Han as a representation by Prichard of her childhood self.

As autobiography shaped into a children's novel, *Wild Oats* is an amalgam of childhood experiences, incidents from throughout Prichard's childhood added to her actual nineteen months in Launceston from 1893 to 1895. Prichard depicts her childhood as a painful gaining of conscience and responsibility. She begins with 'no conscience, any more than the birds or possums who lived in the great silver gum-trees' (1928, 1) but as a twelve year-old, 'the weight of the world' descends on her shoulders and she must go 'down into the great mysterious world they had talked so much of, to take her part in the joy and the labour and the sorrow of it' (214–15). This trajectory that she compresses into the Launceston years for *Wild Oats* stretched in life from her early childhood to the sacrifice of her university ambitions at the age of nineteen in order to help her family.

Katharine had just turned three when she left her birthplace of Levuka, Fiji and arrived in a booming Melbourne with her mother Edith and younger brothers Alan and Nigel in January 1887. For the next two and a half years, they lived without her father, newspaper editor Thomas Henry Prichard (1851–1907). His absence is unmentioned in her autobiography, but must have affected her, even if she forgot it in the jumble of her

earliest memories. As she came to awareness of the world, she was living in her grandparents' house, 'Clareville', in the suburb of Caulfield, the same house her mother had grown up in. Along with her grandparents, Simon and Susan Fraser, two unmarried aunts, Lil and Chris, were also living there, and many other relatives nearby.

In *Wild Oats*, her parents are backgrounded characters, 'absorbed in each other' (13). Her mother, Rosamund Mary in the novel, 'had never been required to consider domestic affairs' (13). In one interpretation, she is 'so lacking in motherly authority... that the child refuses to call her mother' (Hooton 120). It is Grandmother Sarahy, based on Susan, who keeps the household running. She 'dusted the mantelpieces, ordered the meals, mended, darned, made jam and the children's clothes, except when Rosamund Mary had what she called "twinges of conscience"' (*Wild Oats* 13). Katharine called Susan 'the first person I became really interested in, perhaps because she was interested in me' (*Hurricane* 25). Possibly, the implication is that her parents were not interested enough in her.

The era of her grandmother and the Victorian era were one. Melbourne and the rest of the empire was celebrating Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1887, with over 125,000 people converging on the Melbourne city-centre to witness its illumination (*Argus*, 28 June, 1887, 9). Katharine makes this comparison: 'As I remember her, Grandmother looked like the pictures of Queen Victoria. She wore her hair in silver wings over her forehead, and a little lisse cap on her head. Her dress was usually dull black silk, with a tight bodice and voluminous skirts' (*Hurricane* 24). Her grandmother and the queen were to die within months of each other in 1901 when Katharine was seventeen, entwining them further.

Han's grandfather is absent in *Wild Oats*, even though Katharine's grandfather, Simon Lovat Fraser Esq, was a significant presence in her early life. Despite the family's middle-class lifestyle, he was a fourth-class clerk (the entry level was fifth-class) made redundant in 1880 at the age of sixty-two during a downsizing of the department. 'An old curmudgeon' in her recollection, he liked to trip his grandchildren up with his hooked stick, but he also fried potatoes for Katharine when she woke hungry at dawn (*Hurricane* 21–24). Boycotting Katharine's aunts' weddings in December 1891 and January 1892 to go fishing, a newspaper story from 1865 records that he caused 'quite a commotion' by catching a 'monster' of a bream, said to be the largest ever taken in the Saltwater River at that early point in Melbourne's history (*Australasian*, 2 Dec 1865, 2).

After the queen's golden jubilee in 1887, the celebrations restarted in August 1888, as Melbourne, the flourishing 'younger sister' to Sydney,

took centre-stage for the centenary of colonisation (McQueen 2). In the Exhibition Building and the fourteen hectares of temporary annexes there were ten thousand exhibitors from thirty-eight colonies and nations, displaying both cultural works and wonders of industry and technology. The origin of the Australian colonies was commemorated with a life-sized tableau of Captain Cook's landing rather than Captain Phillip and the convicts. Illuminated by the marvel of electric light, the visitors could see thousands of art works from around the world, including artists such as Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts, and Arthur Streeton who would come to be known as the Heidelberg School (Dugan 4–9). Hailing the opening, an editorial in *The Argus* praised 'the progress of art and general culture' since the 1880 exhibition, claiming:

In a nation's history, intellectual and artistic culture comes last. First there is the stern necessity of manual work, then the adoption of every invention that renders labour more economical and more valuable, and in the end the production of a specific art and literature, and the cultivation of those things that conduce to the highest and most refined greatness of a people... [T]he nation must come to some maturity before it can develop an art or literature that is distinctively its own.
(2 Aug 1888, 7)

The Argus looked forward to the emergence of 'a poet who will draw his [sic] reflective words from the slow and winding rivers of a country whose physical characteristics are unique.' Although a writer of the wrong gender working in the wrong genre, three decades later Katharine was to make a strong case to be the one *The Argus* looked for in her distinctively Australian novels which, ironically, celebrate 'the stern necessity of manual work' and make literature out of labour.

The great exhibition ran until March 1889, with two million people passing through, four times the city's population. Katharine doesn't record visiting the exhibition, but she surely would have. We can imagine her as a five year-old brought into the busy grandeur on the train by her mother, excited and confused by the lavish display of the achievements of Australia and the world.

In 1887, when the rest of the family returned to Melbourne, Tom had moved to Suva, the new headquarters of *The Fiji Times*. In September, he came to Melbourne leading a delegation calling for the annexation of Fiji by Victoria (*Argus*, 28 Sep 1887, 5). When the mission was unsuccessful, it seems he decided to stay in Australia, but couldn't find a job in Melbourne.

In one of the gaps in the record between 1887 and 1889, he served briefly as editor of the local newspaper at St Arnaud, a gold mining town 250km west of Melbourne.² In May 1888 he took the position of editor at *The Daily Telegraph* in Launceston. Tom's tenure as editor lasted less than six months; by November, he had been replaced by an ambitious twenty-six year-old named William James McWilliams. The *Cyclopedia of Tasmania* records that Tom left due to 'ill health', which could have been the depression which plagued the rest of his life and eventually led to his suicide in 1907 (81).

Tom returned to Melbourne and 'found a house for us before he found a job', a small, rat-infested house in a 'dreary' suburb (*Hurricane* 29). By August 1889, he was editor of a suburban weekly paper, *The Sun*, and the new job allowed the family to move to a 'larger, more comfortable house' in the seaside suburb of Brighton (*Hurricane* 21). Tom was in his element at *The Sun*, composing the satirical column 'Madcap Rhymes' each week; Katharine recalls that old journalists later told her it was 'the liveliest, wittiest weekly published in Melbourne' (31).

However, things went wrong, as they often did for Tom and in about 1892 the new owners of *The Sun* turned it into 'a merely social weekly' and Tom was sacked, leaving him 'broken in health as a result of over-work and depressed by the failure of the paper' (31). Ironically, *The Sun* was eventually to end up in the hands of socialist journalist Henry Hyde Champion from 1897 to 1899, and become the sort of newspaper the adult Katharine would have approved of, if not for loyalty to her father.

Katharine still didn't know where babies came from when her younger sister, Beatrice, appeared at this time (31). In *Wild Oats* Katharine adds the memory of this family crisis to a later crisis in Launceston, with Han's mother telling her, 'We've no money... we don't know when father will get any more work to do. We haven't even a house to live in... and a little sister is coming to you soon... and there will be no home, no food—' (*Wild Oats* 212). Beatrice was born on 2 November 1892, sandwiched between two deaths in the family in six weeks—Harry Williams (Aunt Lil's new husband) and Simon Fraser (Katharine's grandfather).

In the midst of the hardships of this period, Tom published his first and only novel, *Retaliation: A Tale of Early Melbourne*, in May 1893.³ Why was the Sun Printing and Publishing Company publishing a novel by the man they had only recently sacked? Katharine sheds no light; despite devoting so much attention to her father in her autobiography, she is conspicuously silent about *Retaliation*.

Retaliation is a popular romance which periodically lives up to the promise of its subtitle by mentioning the streets and settlements of 'early

Melbourne'. While competent and representative, it is not especially memorable. The lofty chapter epigraphs from the likes of Shakespeare, Shelley, and Wordsworth suggest Tom had literary aspirations out of keeping with his talent and chosen genre. A mistreated orphan girl is turned out of her house by her stern guardian, only to be picked up and drugged by a scoundrel with evil designs. Jumping from the carriage just in time, she is rescued by a kind and wealthy widow, who takes her away to the Grampians and changes her identity. After a fire and a deathbed confession by a co-conspirator, the heroine finally has her revenge on the scoundrel (who cannot recognise her, so beautiful she has become) by making him fall in love with her, only to humiliatingly reject him—this being the 'retaliation'.

It would have been glamorous to nine year-old Katharine that her father had published a novel. Publishing novels would have seemed like something a person could do, something she could aspire to. Her silence about *Retaliation* as an adult suggests that she later recognised its shortcomings. As if to prove herself to her father after he was dead, her first three novels were also romances, all of them superior to *Retaliation*, but bearing a striking resemblance in their coincidence-driven plots of beautiful damsels under threat from scoundrels.

As Victoria suffered a banking crisis and a real-estate collapse, Tom finally found a new job in July 1893, back at *The Daily Telegraph* in Launceston—only this time, contrary to Katharine's memory, he was the associate-editor, under the oversight of his successor to the editor post, William James McWilliams, and the owner, James Brickhill. McWilliams was elected to state parliament that year; he would go on to a career in federal politics, becoming the first leader of the Federal Country Party (now the Nationals) (Neilson).

'After a dark and troubled time that was like the memory of a storm, Peter Barry had climbed the hill which rose from the sleepy old township of Launceston and had chosen the house built right at the top of the hill...' (*Wild Oats* 9). Peter's real-life counterpart, Tom, called that house 'Korovuna', even though he was only renting it (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 Aug 1894, 2). It seems he was intending to stay in Launceston. According to Katharine, the name means 'place of peace' in Fijian, but it actually means something more like 'beginning place' (*Hurricane* 43). He would later give the same name to the more permanent family home in Melbourne.

Tom and Edith were determined to establish themselves as pillars of the community. Tom was in a flurry of activity, involving himself in a myriad of committees and causes.⁴ He became president of the

Tasmanian branch of the Australian Institute of Journalists, an active organisation, and gave a speech on the aims of journalism. He was elected as a churchwarden to the new Anglican church in Trevallyn, St Oswald's, as well as offering his skills as a mimic at a church-building fundraiser. He was a member of the City and Suburbs Improvement Association, which put on a fancy dress ball to raise funds. He gave lectures on Fiji with lantern slides. He continued to write fiction, publishing Christmas stories in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1893 and 1894. Edith exhibited 'beautiful water-colour copies' at an art show, and belonged to the women's committee at St Oswald's. Katharine's feeling that 'children had come to them in the nature of accidents' may have been caused by her parents' constant activity (*Wild Oats* 13).

Early impressions would have counted in the town, and Tom and Edith wanted to appear better-off than they were. They hired a 'general' named Jessie to do the housework; Katharine mentions her only in passing in *Child of the Hurricane*, but she is a minor character in *Wild Oats*. Their later financial crisis, culminating in an auction of a long list of quality furniture, suggests they over-extended themselves borrowing money to set their house up and give the impression of middle-class solidity (*Launceston Examiner* 21 Feb 1895, 8).

They lived next door to Tom's brother, Frederick, and his family. Frederick had taken up a role as editor of the rival Launceston newspaper, *The Launceston Examiner* (Ferrall). Yet amongst all the uncles and aunties and cousins who receive seemingly random anecdotes in her autobiography, Katharine does not discuss him. Did she have no stories to tell about him? Was she envious of the comparative stability and success he enjoyed as the editor of the *Examiner* for nearly three decades? Or did the brothers fall out with each other?

The house on top of the hill was in the locality of Trevallyn, backing onto the bush around the scenic Cataract Gorge. 'The hills which rose in misty, timbered brakes and ledges behind her home, were Han's happy hunting-ground' (14). Katharine was enchanted by the trees, the flowers and the birds and the lizards, an enchantment which was to flow through her writing in the years which followed, and Han is the same: 'She scarcely knew the world of the real from the world of the unreal; both were blended in the crystal of her mind' (22).

Han's encounters with goannas in chapter four of *Wild Oats* symbolises much of her childhood world. Attempting to provoke goannas into spitting fire, Han and her brothers throw rocks at them, until, one day, 'Two sharp stones had hit the goanna and made gaping crimson wounds in his silver

side. Something human in his suffering, helplessness, mute and impotent anger, struck her' (25). She decides he is an enchanted prince and returns each day to feed him. However, 'instead of changing to a knight at arms, although his coat was of burnished mail like the coat of any *preux chevalier* in history or fairy tale' a goanna 'became the source of all Han's misfortunes, and the immediate cause of her going to school' (27). Soon after, she lashes out at a neighbourhood boy when he kills a goanna on the path in front of her. When his mother complains, she is punished for her stand against injustice, her family deciding it is time she is sent to school.

When Katharine came to revise *Wild Oats* forty years after its first publication, she did not make many changes, but she did feel the need to delete the phrase '*preux chevalier*' ('gallant knight'). In between the two editions, she had published *Child of the Hurricane*, where she writes of a love affair with an older man, a friend of her father's. Showing her around Sydney, he designates himself her *preux chevalier*, which she uses as his pseudonym (93-95, 143-145). They arrange to meet in Paris, about the time she was writing the first draft of *Wild Oats*. Her gallant knight 'become intensely self-centred as their affair went on; made her promise never to marry, on the threat that he would shoot himself if she broke her promise' (Throssell, *My Father's Son* 62). A reptile, a girl's delusion, a nickname, a loss of innocence—we read the scene differently after *Child of the Hurricane*.

On 17 November 1893, Fillis's Mammoth Circus and Menagerie, a South African troupe, arrived in Launceston for five days of shows. 'Tier upon tier' of 'delighted spectators' watched a lion, a tiger, five elephants, 'Lilliputian marvels', a woman shot from a cannon, and acrobats (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 Nov 1893, 2). In *Wild Oats*, Han

...was living in a world of enchantment, and could not think or talk of anything but the circus. At night, and in the morning, she could hear the wild beasts roaring in their cages. From the veranda of her home, the circus tents looked like a crop of mushrooms in the township, and at night, when they were lighted, they glowed a very elfin village. Music of the band drifted up over the town to The Hill (136).

She decides her great ambition in life is to be an acrobat, and she rehearses in her backyard, until she jumps from the tree before her watching family and falls hard to the ground. The visit of Fillis's Circus was the beginning of an ongoing fascination with the circus for Katharine, culminating in her 1930 novel *Haxby's Circus*.

In *Wild Oats*, the circus is paired with Han's brief attraction to another romantic vocation—the life of a missionary. She listens to Rev. Percy Peyton's stories of horror and martyrdom in 'darkest China' and decides she wants to 'convert the heathen from his blindness... I want to carry the light of the gospel to far Lao Tzu. I want to be noble. I want to be a martyr. I want to die by the sword of the Pig-Tailed Barbarian' (145).

In life, Rev. Joseph King, the London Missionary Society agent in Australasia, and Rev. T. Lord, a missionary from Madagascar, visited Launceston three months before the circus in August 1893. They spoke at church services and at an inter-denominational Sunday school meeting for children. Katharine was to reject Christianity from a young age, but perhaps she was momentarily taken by King's vision:

A true education, he said, was a slow and gradual process, so gently and by degrees was the dawning of Divine truth upon the minds of men.... To every land, the preacher urged, must the standard of Christianity be borne, every country invaded. His followers, animated by a noble spirit of conquest, must assail every position held by the enemy and rest not until the seal of the Creator had been impressed on every brow. (*Daily Telegraph*, 28 Aug 1893, 3)

To the adults, at least, he spoke of martyrdom—not death at the hands of 'pig-tailed barbarians,' but the more mundane death the previous year of the saintly Miss Lois Cox, a woman of twenty-seven who, according to her obituary, 'during her sojourn in the land of the rajahs...had an attack of fever, from which she never thoroughly recovered' (*Advertiser*, 12 Aug 1892, 6). King declared 'her career was intense while it lasted and her influence would not soon die' (*Launceston Examiner* 28 Aug 1893, 7). For a nine year-old girl working out her place in the world, the life of a missionary momentarily offered both adventure and a great cause. Even though the desire to be a missionary quickly left Katharine, the preacher's zeal and breadth of vision anticipates the communist gospel she was to embrace more than twenty years later.

Katharine was to look back on her early teachers as benignly inept. Before the Prichards left Melbourne, she had started attending a school 'run by a gentle spinster' in Brighton, and then a school run by her Aunt Lil (*Hurricane*, 29–30). By her own unreliable reckoning, she was the late age of eight years old when she started, but she had already learned to read and write and had French lessons with her grandmother. Katharine makes her first known appearance in print (besides a birth notice and passenger

lists) on 23 December 1893, as 'Katty Prichard', the most awarded student at Miss Littler's private school in Trevallyn (*Daily Telegraph*, 6). Despite the portrait of a rebellious Han who frequently runs away from school, in her first year at Miss Littler's school, she was voted by her fellow students 'Best Conduct' for the entire school. Katharine was always a polite rebel. She also won the reading award, the only award given to Class IV, and beat her two brothers (who came second and third) for best buttonhole-flower exhibit. Katharine remarks that the school

...was very much the same as the ones I had been to before, conducted by 'an amiable, not very young woman, who helped to support a widowed mother.' Good-natured people on The Hill took her teaching qualifications for granted. If the school was not all it should be, they were satisfied, as they said to each other, that 'it kept the children out of the way and out of mischief for the greater part of the day.'
(*Hurricane* 34)

If Miss Littler was so amiable, it seems strange that Katharine was to give the name 'Miss Whittler' to the mean-spirited landlady who becomes Han's nemesis in *Wild Oats*. But perhaps it's just a coincidence.

On 13 August 1894, Katharine makes a second newspaper appearance as 'Katie Prichard' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2). She was one of the organisers of a children's bazaar, held at her family's house to raise funds for the poor. She and her friends made crafts and toys, selling them for a penny each. The event raised over a pound and the journalist (probably Tom) holds it up as an example to the rest of the community. The charitable, community-spirited Prichard family living at Korovuna on top of the hill look so assured of their place in Launceston society in 1894, seemingly unaware they were about to tumble.

In her autobiography, Katharine claims the *Daily Telegraph* was 'on its last legs, and it was hoped Father would revive it', only for the paper to cease publication (106). In reality, the newspaper kept going without Tom right up to 1928. In late 1894, the owner, James Brickhill, was in financial trouble and the Christmas Day issue of the paper declared that it had been seized by new owners. Two weeks later, a Hobart newspaper declared that 'Mr. T. H. Prichard, editor-associate and 'Aramis' of the *Daily Telegraph* severs his connection to that paper today. The tomahawk has been pretty freely used in the various departments since the old management, and the old sub goes back to his chair.' (*Clipper*, 12 Jan 1895, 5) While the editor, McWilliams, stayed on under the new regime, Brickhill's demise was also Tom's.

Six months after the bazaar at the Prichards' house to raise money for the poor, almost everything they owned was auctioned onsite. The advertisement placed on behalf of Tom in *The Launceston Examiner* for an auction of 'the whole of his household furniture' is a comprehensive and sad list: 'comprising walnut sideboard (mirror back), mahogany telescope table, dining room suite, new Brussels carpet, oil paintings (superior), mahogany wardrobe, cedar chest drawers, bedsteads and bedding, commode, dressing tables, washstands, fenders, curtains, poles and rings, kitchen utensils, dresser, garden tools, and sundries' (21 Feb 1895, 8). Neither Edith's beloved piano nor the family's books are included, but everything else seems to be for sale as the family prepares to return to Melbourne.

In *Wild Oats*, the crisis awakens Han's sense of responsibility for her family, making her feel she must do something to help them, although she wonders just what a twelve year-old can do. She decides 'when she was grown up and if she learnt a great deal at school, she could help Rosamund Mary, Peter, the boys, and that little sister' (214). The crisis comes simultaneously with the death of Han's grandmother and the discovery she has a younger sister on the way. In this way, *Wild Oats* amalgamates the 1895 crisis with both earlier and later incidents in Katharine's life. As already mentioned, Katharine's grandmother, Susan Fraser, died in 1901. In 1902, Katharine won four subject prizes at South Melbourne College (the secondary school she attended after the family returned to Melbourne) and was expected to continue for another year to win an exhibition to university, but instead Katharine writes: 'My hopes were dashed to the ground. Mother was suffering from sciatica when I should have returned to school. She lay in bed for six months, and I had to stay at home, do everything for her and look after the housework. There was no possibility of winning an exhibition after that.' (*Hurricane*, 63) While her three close friends all went on to attain degrees, Katharine missed the opportunity. It was a sacrifice she was to feel keenly for the rest of her life.

When Katharine gave a testimony of her conversion to communism sixty years later, the auction stands out as a landmark, her awakening to injustice in the world. It adds another layer to her interpretation of the event. She and her brothers had been sent out to play in the bush all day. On their return, they 'saw the family furniture piled on carts driving along the road, and a red auctioneer's flag over the gate' (*Why I Am a Communist* 3). Her mother's grief stirred her to the realisation of 'some dark mysterious trouble' which she must prevent hurting her family (4). Katharine is only able to tie the auction of the family furniture to communism in a loose way, claiming 'editors in those days earned only

a small salary' and focusing on the period of hardship which followed (4). The tribulations of a family with bourgeois aspirations are not the orthodox trigger for revolutionary sentiment. Despite their hardships, the Prichards returned to Melbourne not in steerage but saloon class on 7 March 1895.

Compared to the plots fiction demands, lives are too repetitive. In writing about her life in the form of a children's novel, Katharine shaped the events of early 1895 into the decisive crisis of her childhood. In life, this crisis in the Prichard family was one of many, the circularity suggested by the 'memory of a storm' right at the start of *Wild Oats* as the family arrive in Launceston. The culmination was to come years later when Tom killed himself in 1907. Katharine lived her childhood with the memory of storms. Tom's difficulty finding work when he moved back to Australia from Fiji in 1887 was one; the loss of his job at *The Sun* in 1892 was another. This time, Katharine understood some of what was happening to her family and the knowledge was bitter. In her memory, leaving Launceston became an exile from paradise, cast out from a care-free existence playing in the bush and forced back to suburban Melbourne with a new sense of responsibility. *Wild Oats* is a 'truly, really' account of Katharine's childhood not just by some historical measures but also in conveying her personal mythology so well.

Notes

- 1 While living in Melbourne before and after Launceston, Katharine was next door to a cousin named Hannah Frances Davies (born 1882) (*Hurricane* 30).
- 2 One of the review clippings for Tom's novel *Retaliation* is from the *St Arnaud Times* and it mentions he is a 'former editor of this journal' (*Papers*, 1884–1899).
- 3 The book itself is undated and library catalogue records list its publication date as 1891, but the only reviews and advertisements occur in May and June 1893.
- 4 On the other hand, the Prichard family's public lives in Launceston are unusually well-documented, with Tom and his neighbouring brother representing a good proportion of the local media. Their activities were mainly recorded in the *Launceston Examiner* column 'Current Topics'.

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On The Wallaby Track

After the painting by

Frederick McCubbin

Siobhan Paget

Siobhan Paget is a graduating student from John Curtin College of the Arts and part-time ballet student. She is passionate about animal welfare, writing and the arts.

Eyes pull us apart. Others rush past. It used to hurt that they didn't care. Now I look forward to the few who ignore. I don't know who I am anymore. Whoever I thought I was, or pretending to be, has been deconstructed by thousands of critical eyes to a pile of shades, strokes and interpretations.

I risk a glance towards Michael, modelled after Michael Moriarty. Bitterly our false names match our false identities.

I used to believe if I found my true name, I'd be someone.

I was young, hopeful.

I was foolish.

His leg cramps, jaw tightens. I'm ashamed to be blessed to lie back, though my neck strains and small pricks form in my legs. The child on my lap is a dead weight. But the pain is familiar, welcome even.

I am born from two parts. The first: Annie Moriarty, from the real world, the Heavens.

My body. Hers.

My features. Hers.

My expression.

Hers.

I am not her.

She's my model, my Goddess. Not more.

The second is unknown to me.

I think of Annie often.

She grew old.

She is gone.

She was lucky.

My body is young, my mind is ancient, pickled and preserved. I'll never grow old and die and I'll never live and be free. Some are scared of Death. I would welcome him with open arms.

The gallery lock clicks, signalling the close of our performance. We break our awkward positions. The trees whisper. The kookaburra releases his long-held call. The smoke of the fire completes his journey upwards.

I sigh.

There's work to do.

Tending to every stroke of sap-green grass, every browning ochre leaf, every raw umber twig, every burnt sienna stone, ensuring it's perfect.

I watch Michael, knowing what is to come. His mouth opens.

'We can't.' I stop him.

He prods the fire angrily. It simmers the blood in his veins.

'We must. We can't sit here for eternity!' His voice rises.

'Please.'

Begging.

I shake my head and tug at overgrown and faded grass. Trapped in my 122 x 223.5 cm world. I search for something new to say. It's a lost cause and silence prevails.

Give us what you so neglected to provide. Take me to Heaven.

Tea is ready, my body aches, my rough, callused hands bleed. There is silence.

He remains unmoving. I fear for him and battle against sleep in my rigid vigil of worry.

Awake. *Routine.*

Check painting. *Routine.*

Settle into position. *Routine.*

Tilt head. *Routine.*

My life. *Routine.*

But something's wrong.

And I'm stuck watching, helplessly.

Trying to gain his attention I plead with my eyes. He ignores my gaze, refuses to explain. Maybe it's shame. Maybe he fears I'll change his mind.

But I already know what brews beneath his stony face.

Burning inside, anger and pain defeat worry and I'm left tending to the hurt of abandonment. We sit here, muscles aching, one ignoring, the other imploring, stuck in our little game. I take in every stroke, every detail, willing it to stick in my mind for eternity.

The lock clicks.

The painting does not breath.

We don't move.

Why, when, how?

The billy boils over, contents spitting. The wind picks up, urgent and screaming.

Still, I will this moment to last forever.

I wake. Smoke rises from dying embers. *When... at dawn.* The wind whispers and the kookaburra calls. *Why... to be free.* I check the landscape, before settling into position. *How...*

He found his name.

Killara was in Heaven.

Note: Killara is an Aboriginal boy's name meaning 'permanent, always the same'.

Halls Creek
Josephine Clarke

Josephine Clarke has had poetry and short stories published in *indigo*, *Cordite*, and *Review of Australian Fiction*. She helps run Voicebox, poetry readings at the Fremantle Fibonacci Centre.

there are two tides on this tarmac river

in the broad shade of the trees adults sit cross-legged
kids' voices call across the footy oval at the end of town

from the road house the smell of frying oil
the slap of plastic strips
diesel and hot air a road train pulls out

charcoal where last night they set fire to the old fence post
outside the butcher's shop

past the door of the IGA cleaning products
waft refrigerated promises

at the park, baggy-eyed tourists make their own cuppas—
a new hat from the Chemist

when the Op Shop opens at ten
grandmothers shuffle into the cool

shy toddlers eddy around the high-heeled shoes

Fireweed

Ann-Marie Blanchard

Ann-Marie Blanchard is from Lakesland, Australia, and currently pursuing her PhD in Fiction at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her work has appeared in *Sundog Lit*, *Bat City Review* and *Underneath: The University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize 2015*.

It was Jess's idea in the first place to do an insurance job on the house. Other than the smoke coming from the bathroom window, it didn't look like it was catching alight. In the station wagon parked in the front yard, the kids, Anita and Miranda, shared a seatbelt, both strapped on top of a box of toys. Jess sat beside me, in the passenger's seat, and blasted a cassette that I'd made her after we first slept together in the back of my wagon, that a mate, Kev, left to me after he threw himself off Bentley Bridge, and it was that song about tracking some untouched beach down and making a home on the shore under a Coolabah. The girls screamed from the backseat, 'What's a Coolabah, Papa,' and, being kids, once they started screaming they couldn't stop because the words got a hold on them, like a junkie with a good kit, but I couldn't tell them what it was, couldn't even say, 'It's a tree,' because the trail of smoke coming from the bathroom window was starting to curl, and a cluster of butterflies were caught up in it, wings droopy—intoxicated—and soon they would drop.

I looked over the fifty acres we thought would get us clean, back when we found out Jess was pregnant with our first girl, Miranda, and we were hooked on gear so bad we needed a saviour. Kev told us about a town a good eight-hour drive west of Sydney where property was going so cheap even junkies could afford it—turned out we were the exception. He didn't tell us the land would be sucked dry by the sun, cursed with weeds and infested with bugs the size of cow-shit. He didn't tell us the house would be a health hazard, asbestos coating the pipes. The walls. He just wanted us to get free.

'We need to go,' I said to Jess.

'Not yet,' she said, watching the butterflies.

'They're going to be coming for us, babe.'

'Who, Papa?' the girls screamed. Repeated.

Jess glanced at me, grinned wildly.

‘Nobody,’ I said.

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ Miranda said, always smarter than I wanted her to be.

Anita strained the seatbelt in her effort to touch my shoulder. ‘Where we going, Papa?’

‘To Pop’s,’ I lied, not ready to admit my real plan.

‘You don’t like Pop,’ she said.

‘Course I do.’

‘Mama doesn’t like Pop.’

‘Course she does.’

Anita giggled and flounced the tulle of her white dress.

‘Why’d you put Anita in that posh dress?’ Jess asked. A black line of smoke escaped from the attic window, its darkness harsh against the otherwise white cloud.

I turned the cassette up.

She turned it down. ‘Adam...’

‘It was the first thing I put my hands on when I dressed her.’

‘You better not think we’re getting her baptised.’

We’d had the same fight around the time I got my hours cut and arrived home with the dress wrapped in tissue paper.

Jess tore it open, ripped off the price tag. ‘You didn’t spend forty bucks on this, did you?’

‘There are times you’ve got to spend a bit.’

‘Why now?’

‘Because I want to get Nita baptised.’

She said I’d totally lost it, claimed I didn’t even believe in God, never mind in saints and virgins. And yeah, she was right, but I wanted to show my baby girl there was something to hope for. Miranda, on the other hand, was a lost cause. She’d lived through too many years of Jess and me locked up in our bedroom, trying to get clean, covered in sweat, our faces smeared in mucus, leaking shit, begging God for sleep, for gear. The kid was jaded, like me, and wore it in the sour shade of her hair, the dull sheen of her eyes, nails bitten down so low I couldn’t take her hand when she offered it to me. But Nita, she still had a chance to believe.

The kids whimpered at the no longer white cloud—a whirling tunnel of black dogs. I backed up to the dirt lane, putting an acre between the fire and my girls, pausing for what I thought would just be a second, to say goodbye to the home I had always hated, but found I could love as it burned to the ground.

‘Papa,’ Miranda said, between coughs. ‘Where’s my bunny?’

I glanced back and saw her eyes locked on me. I wasn't going to show my kid I was fucking terrified of that stare (the same one she'd been giving me since she was born—babies aren't blind, I'd go to my grave believing that), so I nodded, as if that was an answer to her missing toy.

'We can't leave without Nanda's bunny,' Jess said.

'What do you want me to do, run inside and get it?'

She shrugged. 'Yeah.'

I slammed the door, and remembered what it felt like to want to impress Jess, to convince her I could hook us up with any gear we wanted, and then when our bodies started to cry after too much of the good stuff, shooting her up with that last bit of horse and kissing every inch of her body till she believed we could get clean. But since we'd been clean, there was nothing to be bold about anymore, there were only dishes in the sink with crumbs that reminded me of meals that should've made me full but instead made me empty.

'Papa!' Anita screeched as I took my first step towards the house. 'Papa!'

I ignored my baby girl. Had to. Walked into the heat. The closer I got to the house, the more my skin turned to honeycomb. I wanted to stop but stopping meant turning back, so I focused on the screeching skin of my face and tried to practise acceptance, like I'd been taught at my meetings. Once I got near the steps of the house I was so baked I couldn't get hotter, so I forgot what I was scared of, believed that I really could get into that house, find that bunny, and bring it back to the little girl I'd been fucking up for years. My mind slowed. I never knew fire would sound so much like water.

'Adam...Ad—'

The doorknob punched my palm raw. Either I was screeching or the fire was, as Jess dragged me off the verandah, and we ran for it, across the paddock. If there was any air left, I couldn't find it. I had to get my girls out of there, but I was on my knees, and Jess was all over me with curses and fists. Chunks of burning debris exploded, and I covered what I could of my wife. A plank landed just a foot from where we lay. We reached for it with our toes, as if touching it would prove we'd really burned the fucker down. That's when I saw the melted sole of my shoe. Once again, I was alive. Jess took my wounded hand, kissed the remaining skin. I couldn't feel her lips. Couldn't feel the burn. But I could feel her elation injecting into my veins—what ones hadn't collapsed.

Jess loved me again that evening as we approached the waves, my hand wrapped in one of Nita's ducky-shirts, the burn pulsing like a generator.

I didn't even have to ask if I could get Anita baptised, I just drove us all to the ocean to find this woman named Grace, who wasn't any religion specifically but said she felt God most often in the mornings. I wanted to be focused on Anita, but seeing the beach filled my head up with Kev in a way that made me want to puke. Kev was all about water, so it wasn't a surprise that he killed himself by jumping off a bridge into the creek where we used to smoke bongs and swim when we were young punks missing school. I'd never hated a mate the way I hated Kev. He was richer than me, yet rougher than me. He bought everything we used back in high school and would push me hard to go on trips that had me weeping by the end of the weekend when I tried to piece my brain back together. At first I couldn't keep up with him, but soon enough I didn't want to face Monday to Friday—wanted my weeks to replicate the haze of my weekend—and once I got my hands on harder stuff, it was me who led Kev to the needle. When it killed him, I felt relief that one of us had got free before having to go through getting clean. We'd talked up kicking the gear, but what Kev never had to experience was once you got off the drugs, everything hurt worse than before you found out drugs could take that pain away. He got free, but I couldn't. I owed it to my girls to stay alive, to keep loving them, even if my love for them was in tatters.

Grace wore a dress that made her look like a witch, so if there was a God, I was sure he wouldn't like her, but she had big smiles that made the kids giggle, forget they no longer had a home. When she told us to take our clothes off, we didn't question. Naked but for her underwear, Jess scratched her skin like it was full of wood borers. I was pretty sure she was going to start screaming, demanding an explanation for why I'd followed her plan, but just when I thought she was going to get started on me, all the twitching calmed and she led me into the water.

The baptism couldn't go ahead till I paid Grace a fifty. I held Anita, her body so light I didn't need to use my busted hand. The rest of us were submerged, especially Miranda, who was only as tall as my hip and gulped back waves. When the prayers spilled out of Grace there were ones I'd heard and liked the sound of, and others that made no sense to me. The sun was setting. The water was fire. But everything was cool, especially the water that Grace scooped and poured over Anita, who clutched at me, laughing, kicking the breaking waves. When the ceremony was done I felt nothing, only a bit colder. If I was younger, not a father, not a husband, I might've driven away from the ocean and gone to find Kev, because in this version of my life he would be alive. We'd buy the hardest gear we could lay our hands on and stretch ourselves across the train tracks that led out of our hometown but were no longer

used by trains. I'd shoot up my medicine, and Kev, he'd talk all that smart talk, making me see the world for something different: a grain of sand that I—Adam—could swallow.

'How about me?' Miranda asked.

I looked down at the girl who was my perpetual reminder that I'd once been both brilliant and broken, all because of drugs, and I was no longer either.

She pushed her hair from her eyes, tried to see past all the water and sunlight. 'Is Grace going to ask Mother Nature to bless me?'

'This isn't a blessing,' I said. 'It's a baptism.'

'Can I have that, then?'

I was about to say it's only Anita who can be touched by God, but seeing the strength of her jaw, her determination to believe, I was silenced by the resilience of that little woman.

Jess seemed not to have heard Miranda's request. 'Where are we going to live now?' she said, startled to realise her plan had made us homeless.

'Miranda wants to know if she can get baptised.'

'And I want to know where we're going to live,' she said and started to cry. The only other time I'd seen her cry was when she first shot up heroin and nodded off, only to wake and tell me H felt like a deep orgasm, a sun inside you, a meal cooked by your grandmother.

We slept in the car, the girls on top of the records, Jess and me in the front. When I woke it was night and I had a hard-on and a bad taste in my mouth. There was a burn on the dashboard where Kev had driven the cigarette lighter and held it to show things look better when they're messed up. I wasn't sure I agreed, but I'd been so high I screamed like a girl and we both laughed so hard we spat. Looking at Jess in the moonlight, I saw she was getting old. I was already old. And since we weren't using anymore we'd probably grow really old, rather than die young, and have to find a new home that we could afford, maybe get some government housing, and I'd go on killing chickens for cash because there weren't too many other jobs open to recovered addicts, and my little girls would grow out of being little and they'd learn to put words to their disappointment and I'd lose my language to dementia, and the shittiest thing about it all is I'd know that words never could've made my girls believe I'd been a good man.

Anita shifted and said, 'Papa, can we go live in a washing machine?'

'That's stupid,' Miranda said. It seemed we were all awake. 'You won't be able to breathe when it fills up with water.'

'Of course she'll be able to breathe,' I said. 'Anita's a fish.'

Rather than correcting me, Miranda slipped her hand through the gap under the headrest, placing her palm on the back of my neck. The ocean was the boldest mass of water I'd ever seen, a relief of silver against the night sky, and the waves were coming in sets, touching the shore like friends reunited. I thanked Kev for the car that was our home, and wondered for a moment if he'd been baptised or if God didn't even care about water—fire—any other gateway to his kingdom.

spark
i.m. Greg Barnes
Stuart Barnes

Stuart Barnes' *The Staysails* (UQP 2016) won the 2015 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize. *Bend River Mountain*, a co-authored poetry anthology, is forthcoming from Regime Books. He is poetry editor of *Tincture Journal* and tweets as @StuartABarnes

'You'll never forget your first cigarette.'
Benson & Hedges. *When only the best*

will do. Nan's kitchen, extendable
laminex table, your favourite uncle,

Jers, patient as the cow you patted, milked
as a little tackler (that dark horse nipped

your fingers, drawing a bloody simper),
from the small black-and-white tele Richie

Benaud's ('*Whoa! Remarkable!*') simmering,
'Hurry up, cobber, spark the toxic thing',

shivering despite the five flannel sheets,
alarmed at four by nausea, the silence

of the vacant lot between Pop's pastel-
green house and a third cousin's, the cat's bell.

Market Day
Amy Crutchfield

Amy Crutchfield is a poet living in Melbourne. Her work has appeared in *foam:e*, *The Australian Poetry Journal* and *The Age*.

Dawn had just begun to pull upon
the thread of night.

I sensed first your warmth
and then your kiss, upon my hair.
Brother, I still feel it there.

Then a question, a refrain,
each market day since you were eight.
'*Habibti*, my sweet, tell me
what can I bring for you?'

I did not reply green apples, sweet almonds,
thin-skinned dates.
From sleep's embrace,
I mumbled, '*mafee*,' nothing,
and rolled away.

Could I have charged you
with finding something other
than what you sought that morning
in the crowded square?

I arose to the scent of Al-Farat,
life-giving river.
But by noon the window stood
still open and still empty,
admitting only the heat
of Rub'al Khali—the *empty quarter*—
into the room we once shared.

Rescuing Chang

Irma Gold

Irma Gold's short fiction has been widely published. Her debut collection *Two Steps Forward* (Affirm Press) won a number of awards. She is the author of three children's picture books, with a fourth, *Seree's Story* (Walker Books), on the way.

We met in the hostel lobby as if it was preordained. I was fumbling with some brochures, touristy stuff, trying to pretend I wasn't suddenly panicking about what I was doing in Chiang Mai by myself.

She was sitting on a chair that tilted alarmingly to one side, doing something on her phone.

'Forget all that shit,' she said without even looking up.

My fingers froze. Hearing another Australian voice was a shock.

'Night markets are on.' She looked up then. Her eyes were startlingly blue. The colour of a Sorrento sea. I felt homesick already.

'I'm going now, if you like.' She threw her phone into her bag.

'Thanks,' I said. 'That'd be great.' Not sure if it really would. 'I'm Hannah.'

'Deven,' she said. 'Parentals did the dirty over in Pommyland but they couldn't spell for shit. It's E-N.'

'Like the ham?'

'Don't go there.' The corner of her mouth twitched. 'But for the record that's also O-N.'

She was wearing a singlet and short shorts. I'd read that exposing shoulders and knees was rude. I was in long pants and a shirt. Sweat ran out the end of my sleeves, the veins in my hands bulged.

I walked into the twilight with Deven with an E-N. The streets were full of tuktuks and motorbikes. Kids sandwiched between parents, babies held in arms, not a helmet in sight. The air tasted of smoke, like a bushfire back home. Every second person was wearing a face-mask.

'Is it always like this?' I asked.

'Nah, just in March. They're burning all the plantations down to make this special fungus grow.' We passed a food cart, three kids sitting on the pavement. One of them waved at us. I waved back but Deven was too busy talking. 'The smoke gives the farmers cancer,' she was saying. 'But it earns them a truckload of cash. So, you know.'

I nodded, as if I did.

A monk in his saffron robes walked towards us. I raised my phone to capture his image but Deven pushed my hand down and grabbed it, pulling me across the road. I thought about the film of DEET and citronella coating every inch of my body, a cocktail of malarial paranoia, and hoped she couldn't smell it.

'You can't do that,' Deven said without rancour. 'They think it'll steal their soul. Women can't touch them either, not even their robe. And we have to get off the path for them.'

'Talk about sexist.'

She shrugged. 'Just the way it is.'

Up ahead bright coloured toys whizzed up into the sky and before I knew it we were among the mess of it all, a maze of stalls winding around us.

'I'm thirsty,' Deven said. 'We'll get drinking coconuts.'

She pointed at a pile of naked coconuts, their tops shaved into peaks.

'Song kho,' she said to an elderly woman with missing teeth, and I felt dizzy with admiration.

The woman hacked at the tops with a machete, stuck in pink straws.

'Eighty baht.'

I scrambled in my bag, all the bills looked the same, but Deven already had it covered and was sitting down at a communal plastic table.

'So what're you planning on doing while you're here?' she asked.

'I guess some temple hopping, ride an elephant.'

'You shouldn't,' she said, sucking on her straw.

I waited for her to say something else but she was looking at a woman serving grilled corn on sticks. She was wearing a T-shirt that said, The Devil Wears Ivory. I thought she might actually be a man, but it was hard to tell.

'Why not?' I asked eventually.

'They use bullhooks.'

'Oh,' I said, like I knew what that meant.

'They steal the babies from their mothers when they're small and torture them till they don't even know who the fuck they are. Then they're good for the tourists.'

She looked at me evenly. She had a tiny silver ring in her nose that blinked when she held her head at a certain angle and the lights caught it.

'I didn't know.'

'Most people don't,' she said. 'Travel over here and don't bother to find anything out. Don't want to know. Just want a photo with a fucking elephant.'

I guessed she was talking about me.

'You know the worst thing about Thailand?' she said, holding up her coconut. 'No fucking bins.'

I couldn't tell if she was being ironic.

I sucked up the last of the milk, trying not to make a slurping sound. I'd never much liked coconut but I was surprised by how good it was.

A young girl came and set up some kind of xylophone right beside us. She was wearing heavy make-up, false eyelashes, the most elaborate costume. She began playing, her movements deft, her face sullen. The look of tweens the world over being forced to do something against their will. I found a small note and tossed it into her case. She didn't acknowledge me.

'I'm starved,' Deven said, standing. She strode into the crowd and I leapt to my feet and hurried after her. The streets pulsed with people; I didn't want to lose her.

We landed in front of a trestle full of seafood. Octopus and squid, mostly.

'I'm vego,' I lied. My mother had warned me not to eat animals in Thailand if I wanted to go the distance without ending up in hospital.

Deven bought a paper box of little octopi. I bought something from a neighbouring vegetarian stall, fried because I figured it was the safest option. It came on a paper plate with a side of salad. We sat on a wall, part of the Old City. I knew that much from my guidebook. I wasn't sure about the salad. What if it had been washed in tap water? I pushed it about with my plastic fork. On the back of a leaf was a tiny green caterpillar. It was alive. I put the plate on the wall, a good distance away from me.

'So what do you do here?' I asked.

'I've been teaching up north.'

'What's that like?'

'All right. Good, I guess.' She licked juice from her fingers.

I didn't know what else to say. 'Bet they love your blonde hair.'

She grimaced. 'I get sick of the touching. Only solution is to go on holiday and get tanned. Then they don't want to. They say, 'What happened to your face? You're ugly.''

My mouth may have dropped open. She laughed, a horsey sound.

'They all want to be white. All the creams've got bleach in them.'

'Seriously?'

'The lady boys in my class have bleach baths. And cover themselves in talcum powder. Sometimes they come to school with blisters. From the bleach.'

'How many lady boys do you have?'

'Almost half the boys,' she said. 'It's totally normal.'

I leaned forward, wanting more, but she stood and threw over her shoulder, 'Let's go rescue some elephants.'

I actually felt my heart jolt inside my chest, but I followed her. It was as if I could do nothing else. We snaked through the crowds, down a side street crammed with motorbikes and into a tiny bar. We sat at stools, worn lanterns hanging above us.

‘Sa wat dee kha,’ she told the barman. ‘Song Chang kho.’

I looked around but I couldn’t see any elephants. I’d heard they were sometimes attractions at lavish parties but this didn’t look right.

‘Where are the elephants?’ I asked.

She laughed again, throwing her head back so that her neck bulged.

Two bottles of Chang beer were placed in front of us. She pointed at the green label. It had two elephants on it.

‘Oh,’ I said, feeling my cheeks flame.

‘So what about you?’ she said. ‘What do you do?’

I looked away and wondered about what to say. Lying seemed the best option. ‘Receptionist for a medical imaging company.’

‘Classy. I used to reception for a mud fetish club back in Brisvegas.’

‘A what?’

‘The girls wore these business type outfits and men came to watch them smear mud on themselves.’

‘That it?’

‘Yep. They didn’t get to touch the girls. And the girls didn’t wrestle or touch each other. Just dripped mud on their clothes.’

‘Weird.’

‘Whatever floats your boat, I guess.’

‘Actually, I lost my job.’ It was a relief to admit it. I hadn’t told anyone. My parents thought I’d quit in order to travel. They weren’t best pleased about that but it was better than the truth. ‘And I couldn’t stand the idea of looking for another crappy reception job. So I came here.’

Deven nodded, looked down the neck of her beer bottle. ‘I guess we’re all running, in a way,’ she said. ‘Us farang over here.’

We sat in silence for a bit, drinking. I was trying to think how I could ask her what it was that she was running from but then she tossed her hair and looked at me with those Sorrento eyes. ‘Whiteys,’ she said. We were so close, I could see the pores in her nose, the laugh lines around her eyes. ‘That’s what farang means. Though if you pronounce it wrong it means guava.’

‘At least we’re sweet either way,’ I said.

‘Sweet as,’ she smiled.

Deven ordered another couple of beers and this time I pulled out a thousand baht note, ready. I gripped it tightly, as if worried a thief would swipe it from my fingers, before realising it was only forty dollars. The

barman took my money with a small smile. He had a wispy moustache that curled over the edges of his lip. I fancied that he sucked on it.

I thought about how just a short time earlier I was stuttery, unsure. Now here I was in a Thai bar drinking Chang with the coolest Aussie chick I'd ever met, feeling more comfortable than I was back home.

'So how come you're in Chiang Mai now?' I asked, realising my omission.

Deven shrugged. 'I'm on my way home, really. Just don't seem quite able to leave.'

'Sick of teaching, then?'

'Yeah, the sex festival really pushed me over the edge.' She grinned.

'Sex festival?'

'Runs for a week. The kids get condom necklaces and show bags and spend their whole time watching cartoons of people proper going for it.'

'You're joking, right?'

'Wish I was.'

'Well, I suppose it's better than my sex ed,' I said. 'Teacher came in with a pad stuck to his head and made us shout penis and vagina over and over till we stopped giggling. That was it.'

For some reason I then launched into the story of how I lost my virginity, in all its awkward detail. I didn't know why I was telling her. Probably because I was already lightheaded on Chang. And because I wanted to make her laugh again.

She did.

She said, 'Let's play ten questions,' and then delivered them rapid-fire. 'How do you like your eggs? On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your orgasms? Who's the first person that made you cry? Favourite cartoon? If you could only have one, beauty or brains? Arctic igloo or Nepalese cave? G-string or boy leg? Spider or cockroach? Batman or Superman? Brad or Angelina?'

And so I told her about how I orgasmed like a guy (every time—that is, after that awful first) and how Nick Antonopoulos had stolen the purse my aunty gave me in the shape of a dog's head and cut off its tongue (I bawled) and how if my mother found a spider in the night she'd wake us all up and pack us into the car until morning when a neighbour could be called in (so cockroach). And it was Brad, of course (Deven said she'd take both).

Then it was my turn and I couldn't think of anything witty or clever enough. So Deven told me about Shaniqua. Another teacher at her school, also her lover. But she'd gone back to the States without a backward glance.

'Her skin was like chocolate. She tasted like chocolate,' Deven said.

We were on our third or fourth beer by then. I didn't argue.

'Have you ever slept with a woman?' she asked.

'No,' I said, feeling oddly ashamed at my lack of adventure.

'You should try it,' she said. 'Men don't have a fucking clue what they're doing.'

Based on experience, I couldn't completely agree. Some did, some didn't.

'C'mon,' she said then. 'Let's go.'

I didn't ask where, just followed her into the warm envelope of the night.

She spoke to a tuktuk driver in Thai. I listened to the lilt of it in an absent way.

We climbed in and sat pressed against one another; there wasn't much room.

I smiled at the driver and couldn't for the life of me remember the word for hello. 'Hello,' I said, and dipped my head.

'Good evening, Sir,' he said, and I tried not to smile. After all, he was doing better than I was.

'It's sa wat dee kha,' Deven said. 'For next time.'

The tuktuk zipped and wove through the traffic and I felt drowsily drunk and happy. It was like swimming underwater. Deven threw her arm around my shoulder and I grinned at her and she kissed me. I wasn't expecting that. I didn't kiss her back, but I didn't pull away, either.

'Tiger Temple,' she said, pointing at a billboard as if nothing had just happened. 'Don't ever go there. They drug them up. Even the babies. It's in the milk bottles.'

'All right,' I promised solemnly. 'I won't.'

And I waited for her to kiss me again. We sped on through the night, to where I didn't know, everything wide open and unknowable.

At Lunar New Year

Stephen Gilfedder

Stephen Gilfedder's verse has been published since 1970 in literary journals, newspapers and anthologies of new verse. He works as a communications consultant in Canberra.

The \$25 special banquet at the China Palace
Led us to hunting on the beach
Under the stars for the lost moon.
My daughter insisted the moon was lost.
Surely the New Year couldn't start
And what year was it anyway? she asked.
Horse, Snake, Dragon?
Her grandfather tremulously
Nominated Ox through the grip
Of his Parkinson's as we waited
For the clouds to release the reluctant
Sliver and let us walk again.
We were not even looking at the sky
When at last a sallow crescent appeared
Miraculously at our feet
Through a dissolving filigree of foam.

From the deck the coming change
Made a night of shadow play,
With distant thunder and lightning blooms
At the edges of the sea.
Trying to speak, the southerly
Off the point sucked away our words
And in the ozone light I fancied
I could string along again
With the old man in his prime
As he juggled beer cans and crays
Outside the co-op, quoting from Hiawatha.
Hearing my brother shout

To a returning trawler at the breakwater
Before he went to Phuoc Tuy to collect
The scar tissue he carries in his head.
Imagining the rice paper wonton
At the restaurant read his words
You lucky bastards, you've got it made.

**Some similes about similes
about similes**
Graeme Miles

Graeme Miles has published
two collections of poems:
Recurrence (JLP, 2012) and
Phosphorescence (FACP, 2006).
He lives in Hobart and lectures
in classics at the University
of Tasmania.

They're like the drawing of a character
whose actions you know in detail but whose face
you've never seen. They're like the resolution
pointing its puny finger hopelessly
at stronger habits. Some are like results
from machines detecting accidentally
what can't exist on any understanding
of the world. Or like the sewing machine
that met the umbrella during surgery
when the operator's shocked, dissociative.
They're the photos of sketches of once living skin.

Experience in E flat Cameron Fuller

Cameron Fuller has lived in Adelaide, Brisbane, Cairns, Canberra and Sydney. He now lives with his partner, twin daughters and an assortment of animals in Melbourne.

Th fling of bing in lov. It was th xprinc
h dsird most. H could not scap th mpty
spac in his lif. Ach wknd, in the hop of mting
somon, h would go out and fac his far of rjction.
Vn though thr was nvr sx or romanc, it was the silnc
of the hous that would amplify his lonely xistnc.
H blivd his lif was clich—a jigsaw with a missing
pic. Lik vrything ls, it flt incompl.

It was whn h wasn't looking that sh notid him.
Waiting for a bus on morning, sh askd for th tim.
On sing hr ys and smil, h flt his spin tingl.
Sh snsd lctricity as thy spok. But it wasn't until
th nxt morning at th bus stop that h could s
at last it was obvious nothing was missing.

Guadalupe Nettel's *The Body Where I Was Born*

Eva Bujalka

Eva Bujalka completed her creative writing PhD at Curtin University in 2015. She teaches at Curtin University, and has an upcoming story appearing in *Meanjin*.

Guadalupe Nettel, *The Body Where I Was Born*, Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2015, 208pp, \$24.99, ISBN: 9781742586830

I'll readily admit that I don't often have all that much time to read. A deficiency that I had once been ashamed of is now a fact of life. And I suspect that for many of you, even those of us who aspire to be writers or academics, this lack of time is frightening—this fear that we are not reading as much or as *well* as we should. The fear that we have become chronically disrupted, distracted people. But isn't disruption, itself, a literary and narrative device? (Laurence Sterne, in his cock and bull story of coitus interruptus, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, seemed to think so.) And so it was, with my own limited and patchy time—the half-hour of a bus trip into the city, the last thing that I did before I fell asleep—that I read Guadalupe Nettel's debut novel *The Body Where I Was Born*.

The Body Where I Was Born—a title that pays homage to the final lines from Allen Ginsberg's 'Song'—is told as a monologue from the narrator's position on a psychoanalyst's couch. We've seen this form of 'therapy novel' before, for example in Philip Roth's tale of sexual frustration, *Portnoy's Complaint*. But Nettel's work couldn't be further from Roth's. *The Body Where I Was Born* is, in many ways, an incisive and compulsively *told* coming of age story. Nettel doesn't simply recount the story of a Mexican woman who was born with a white birthmark that covers the cornea of her right eye. Instead, she tells of South America's recent, traumatic history and the dispossession of Chilean refugees under the Pinochet regime, through a story of the tearing apart of a family.

But what is truly captivating about Nettel's novel is the *way* that it is told. We know that old adage: that a writer ought to 'show' and not 'tell' their story. Perhaps it is the result of a work in translation that Nettel's novel is exclusively *told* from the unnamed narrator's point of view, that the narrator—and it is unclear just how much Nettel is drawing on her own autobiography—effectively tells her analyst, one Dr Sazlavski, and

therefore her reader, the story of her life (I also note, with some curiosity, that Szlavski never intervenes in Nettel's monologue.) But what stops Nettel's diegesis becoming too expositional is the way that she creates, perhaps by dint of the therapeutic model, a connected series of vignettes. While *The Body Where I Was Born* is told in a mostly linear fashion, there are often leaps in time and location. What is most intriguing about Nettel's work is that there is no obvious narrative arc. *The Body Where I Was Born* seems to possess no end-point or climax. Of course, there are climactic *moments*, but the book largely diverts from the action-climax-denouement structure.

The Body Where I Was Born is a novel for readers who seek a subtle and understated work that is at once devastating and uplifting—subtle and understated, through Nettel's literary and linguistic humbleness, devastating *and* uplifting, through her unflinching account of both South America's and her own family's struggle for liberation. This work comes highly recommended for fans of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, with both works interweaving the familial with the philosophical (or, in Nettel's case, the psychoanalytic), both forming a personalised conversation between narrator and reader, and both drawing from the devastating events in recent South American/Eastern European history. Distracted a reader as I am, Nettel's fragmented yet lucid prose is utterly engaging—a rare gem of a work that allowed me to occupy the short moments of my own life, that I open up to reading, with the moments of someone else's.

**Lucy Dougan's *The Guardians*
and Ali Cobby Eckermann's
*Inside my Mother***
Siobhan Hodge

Lucy Dougan, *The Guardians*, Artarmon NSW:
Giramondo Publishing Company, 2015, 76pp,
\$29.95, ISBN: 9781922146755

Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Inside my Mother*,
Artarmon NSW: Giramondo Publishing Company,
2015, 96pp, \$29.95, ISBN: 9781922146885

Lucy Dougan's *The Guardians* and Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Inside my Mother* share common ground in their exceptionally personal foci, as both poets examine the significance of familial links during formative life stages. Similarly, both poets have elected to use sharply engaging language, offering a fine balance between emotion and criticism.

Like in a previous collection, *On the Circumvesuviana*, Dougan explores enduring legacies through primarily familial settings. Loss and preservation are central anxieties, as well as a firm sense of emotional control. Connections with family members past and present, including pets, make for a varied tapestry in the collection. However, there are chiding reminders throughout the collection that the reader must not take anything for granted. 'The Forge' treads a delicate line between history and fabrication:

It's a story I cannot tell—
what kept me from redeeming
something fixed.
At night the women in these suburbs
unlock their doors
with keys fashioned
by the man at the kiosk,
they kick off their shoes
shiny and re-heeled.
They smile without quite knowing
how the man with the dark, dark hair
has eased his way into their smallest secret places,

snug in the palm, firm at the ankle.
And I chide myself gently
for not telling him the story of the book
I swapped for shoes
or why I had been away for so long. (22–23)

Proximity is not the same as permission, and familiarity is a tense idea in this poem. Dougan's speaker highlights not only a prevailing focus on gender-based issues, connected to and enhanced by several other pieces in the collection, but also the importance of controlling stories, memories, and identities. The means by which family memories are preserved and continued are also cycled for attention in later poems—paintings, crafts, stories, gravestones, among others—building rich and varied inner and outer lives.

Later Dougan's speaker moves between geographical locations, engaging with European languages and Ur-texts, lamenting departures and missed connections. The lingering undercurrent of closeness and connectivity remains, however, often in unexpected ways. 'The Ties My Sister Makes', dedicated to Elena, acknowledges the unseen traces of people left on items that circulate the globe. Even though Dougan's speaker operates as a marginal figure in many of the settings introduced, there is still a sense of strongly valid, if brief, connection. It is not the length of time spent in a place that is important, but the layers of meaning encoded in each experience. The collection quickly gains impulse, and the third section is a tense progression of transitions. A brush with cancer is frankly detailed in 'The Deer', 'Driving to the First' and 'Eve', linking thoughts of mortality with a smooth shift to focus on new generations. Familial bonds not only safeguard the speaker from uncertainty, but preserve her into the future.

It is this absence of safeguards that haunts Eckermann's collection. *Inside my Mother* is strongly focused on the importance of familial connections in sustaining and supporting life, but also the agony that can result should these be disrupted or destroyed. Eckermann's exploration is both visceral and confronting, shifting between directly personal engagements and general critiques, and continually highlighting the damage of forced removal. Atrocities against Indigenous Australians are solemnly articulated in tense, personal examinations, referring to a number of individual figures and their experiences. In the simple, repeating poem 'Lament', Eckermann emphasises the importance of continuing this assessment and acknowledgement, no matter the pain involved:

I can not stop
must sing my song

I can not stop
must sing my song

the old man chants
his boomerangs ring

I am the last speaker
of my mother tongue

I can not stop
must sing my song

my song must not
die before me (24)

The broken matriarchal link is a constant thorn in Eckermann's collection, acknowledged in the structural breakage in the later stanzas of 'Lament' and detailed explicitly in poems such as 'The Letter', 'Severance' and 'Ngingali'. Eckermann's celebration of maternal links is tempered by stark reflections on loss. Family scenes are frequently scarred by wrenching descriptions of abuse and addiction, confronting many facets of the issue of systemic disconnection. Eckermann's frank examinations, with her tersely emotive language and stark poetic structures, are accessible and stark all at once, demanding action.

Inside my Mother is a warning and an active engagement with personal memories as well as historical legacies. Eckermann reiterates the sanctity of inner life and stability, emphasising the importance of preservation and the heartbreaking nature of loss, as well as critiquing the colonial causes and on-going social, economic and political struggles. The collection's sensitive exploration of pain and suffering is constantly flanked by harder criticism, particularly in the poems 'I Tell You True' and 'The Promise'. This collection is not a passive reflection, but a sharply personal criticism of familial destruction and the on-going suffering that systemic racial abuse has generated.

Though ostensibly similar texts, both Dougan and Eckermann engage in very different angles when addressing the importance of family links. *The Guardians* is not only a sharp examination of the connections that build and sustain a person, but also the personal implications of legacy, and the dense yet terse emotions that can come with this. *Inside my Mother* grapples with another form of legacy, layering social criticism with a vivid and intensely emotive exploration of the personal as well as human costs involved.

**‘The other world where
things alter’: Review of
Philip Salom’s *Alterworld***
Amy Hilhorst

Amy Hilhorst is a PhD candidate
at the University of Western
Australia, researching
representations of psychosis
in Australian poetry.

Philip Salom, *Alterworld*, Glebe: Puncher and
Wattmann, 2015, 252pp, \$29.95,
ISBN: 9781922186669.

In an interview with Barbara Williams in 1988, Philip Salom said:

‘Experiences stay alive; we love to embellish, alter; we
offset this against our terrible tendencies to oppression and
savagery.’ (61)

Alterworld, which completes Salom’s trilogy of the same name, explores this human tendency to alter our experiences in the way we think and in the way we use language. Amongst *Sky Poems* (1987), *The Well Mouth* (2005), and *Alterworld* (2015) are thematic and linguistic resonances, as well as references to Salom’s broader oeuvre; for example, we meet again Mr Benchley from *The Projectionist* (1983). Many of the poems are powerfully timeless, and layering them in one volume highlights that though our world may have altered in the past thirty years, we are still grappling with familiar questions and concerns.

Whilst *Sky Poems* assumes the ethereal vantage point of heaven, and *The Well Mouth* comes from the point of view of purgatory, *Alterworld* is set on earth, describing a life that we might have. The muted, hallucinatory imagery can give the impression of seeing or hearing life from a submerged perspective, as if from underwater. An example is the monosyllabic, lethargic tones of ‘Seeing the Pataphor’:

‘at night in the wet that black bag lies flat
seeing the dark like a bat in the trees
the street lights are raining’ (173)

Recurring motifs include night, electronics, vehicles, engines, houses, birds and blood, and so Salom brings alive our twenty-first century society with a gothic, steampunk flavour. He represents a world deeply grounded in language, with meta-textual poems implying that words can be both nurturing and destructive. Indeed, the language is figured as the

material of mortal life: 'alternative words nibble from your palm like / friendly birds'; 'a sentence lies there / like a street he starts / out knowing and / reaches the end of lost'; 'Morning fog glints on my suit, smatterings of Garamond font'. (177, 179, 187) Poems such as 'Crows: at the Border, Things Increase' combine the transcendence of *Sky Poems* with the visceral rawness of *The Well Mouth*; Salom's stylistic fusion seems to hint that life is a hybrid of heavenly and hellish experiences.

Of course, it is not all serious; Salom resumes the satirical tone of his former collections, employing wit and sardonic humour in poems such as 'Creatures of the Alterworld'. My favourite is the more serious 'The Man with a Shattered World', a palimpsestic war poem in which Salom's line spacing, punctuation, and parallel, columned poems demonstrate his experience and ease with form. He also plays with the poetic mode in the cinematic scene-by-scene layout of 'At the Disused Drive-in Theatre'. *Alterworld* can be ideologically and linguistically dense, yet this is what makes it a rich and rewarding read. Though the collections comment on metaphysical concepts, they are undercut by a self-referential awareness of poetry's shortcomings. In fact, Salom ends the trilogy with an ironic ghazal that compares romantic misperceptions to the swelling and contractions of the universe. Though this might sound as if the collection takes itself seriously, acerbic observations and fresh similes mean that *Alterworld* recognises the limitations of poetry, language, and life. Our worlds, and our experiences, depend on how we alter them; as Salom writes in 'The City of Ist and Dost':

'The words of the poem are in front of you but
the poem is somewhere else.' (186)

Works cited:

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