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eds. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

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Patricia Hackett Prize

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2007:

Brian Dibble

for his essay

"Mr Berrington and the Geometry
of Love in Elizabeth Jolley's Family Home"

that appeared in Vol 52, 2007

Editorial

In *Westerly* 2007, *Westerly* editors announced that we would move to publishing two issues in 2008; one in June/July much like the current issue, the other an issue solely for creative work, published in November. Those plans had to be put on hold when our application to the Department of Culture and the Arts to help publish *Westerly* in 2008 was turned down. Earlier this year a further application to publish in 2008 was successful and we're determined not only to keep *Westerly* alive but to re-invigorate it.

We are now pushing ahead with plans for two issues of *Westerly* a year from 2009. This decision has been largely prompted by our perception that the wealth of creative work we receive each year is not matched by the space we have for it. We can publish only a tiny proportion of that work, and it is clear that the publishing opportunities for the many talented writers who send us their work are woefully limited. A second *Westerly* will help to redress that lack. We hope to have different annual guest editors for significant sections of the 'new', creative writing issue, and in 2009 Sally Morgan and Blaze Kwaymullina have agreed to work on what we envisage will be an issue largely or solely devoted to indigenous writing.

In 2008 *Westerly* has a new partner in the R.I.C. Group, an educational publisher, whose managing director, Peter Woods, offered assistance to *Westerly* late in 2007. R.I.C. has generously agreed to print and help market *Westerly* this year.

Any journal is only as strong as its readership, and *Westerly* always needs more subscribers. Please pass the subscription form in this issue on to anyone who may use it! Or take out a subscription for someone you know. We look forward to your ongoing support of *Westerly* and hope that the new two-issue format not only enables us to publish more writers but brings us more readers.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, Co-ediors

Erinn Batykefer

Photo Album

The album says we were at the lake. A summer
picnic, a birthday party. Here's me
alone in the shallows, staring down through sky
on the water at minnows
while people laughed and sang in the background.
Strange to see yourself as other
people saw you – alone and astonished –
but Mama always said you are who you really are
when you think no one is watching, and a picture
is a document: digital clock face
in the corner marks date and time;
stunned little girl face says, *I'm burning*.
It hurts to look at, the inside of her laid open
in the camera flash – the way nerves
snag sympathetic while you clean another's cut.
Only here, the wound is invisible.
Look at her bones, my child bones like a lantern's ribs,
and my paper skin glowing dangerously.
Her urge toward the lake, to put that fire out,
against the feral little face that says *watch out:*
while I burn, I will touch everything in reach,
and set it alight.

Ortega Meredi

A Shack in Five Parts

i disambiguation

it is an exercise in disjunction. if the parts fit seamlessly together it can no longer be called a shack. gaps are important. as is the smell of wood smoke. you will need the following materials – crown land peppermint trees beach access bracken fern a creek with rushes four tall poles windows nicked from breaksea island rusty corrugated iron broken bricks empty kerosene cans. when you have more children than you anticipated a masonite caravan can be bunged on with little effort. remember to take off the wheels

ii dad's shack

the hurricane lamp is too loud. jack mcbride is quiet like me. i pole he spears. sometimes i make wishes on the stars. i'm the oldest. i don't like being a girl but mum says there's not much i can do about it now. the fish are ugly. you have to pull the spikes off with pliers. it's hard. we did a hundred once. the boys always get out of it. always off somewhere. when we get back i will have to sleep on the top bunk. there are three made of sack. there's no light in the top one. you have to watch out for the big claw nails poking through the ceiling. i always get the bad bunk

iii one of the boys

someone wrote on the back of the door p mcguckin is a heel. it wasn't me and if you say it was i'll make you sorry. wayne's a toadface. i didn't ask for a twin brother. deborah always gets the middle bunk. not fair. she broke a ukulele on my head. she didn't get into strife. it's not fair. she can't pee standing up. i can. serves her right. tomorrow i'm going to kill a possum

iv grandpa's shack

the track is sand the bottom is way down there they go slow i go fast look! swing i'm on the rope my feet on the big knot i swing off the hill see me

way up high way high high so high so sky and trees i am flying see me fly nearly at the bottom the shack is snugly all stuck together with gluggy glue a red starfish on the door cloud shaped wood made soft in the sea see the shells i like shells i can sit on the big shell see me sit on the big shell inside no elec-trici-see all dark see the bottles green purple brown i know my colours clever girl i blow on the bottle listen no i do it again listen it sounds all empty i like the easter egg sparkle paper nanna's fingernails scraped the paper flat sparkle all flat she put it up there see my doll no mouth on my doll i take dolly outside creek here i come i scared a yabbie see it kicked sand the cold water tastes like tin i drink it all gone i go back now back track shack all along the way i skip skip skip big bull ant on my toe bull ants bite get off bull ant is all broken getting night time small blue light tilly lamp goes shhhhh more wood now more fire the billy is boiling silly billy tilly grandpa is tea making i am holding – both hands – my mug hot cordial burns my lips dolly has no lips grandpa is sitting nanna is getting sticky white bun sticky sticky icky i eat the icing water is cooking for my bath my bath before bed dolly wants a bath too

v reader's tip

marjory wa – what to do with those nasty cobbler stings. take a blue bag that you put in the washing to make your clothes white. rub on the affected area. it will ease the pain and reduce redness. i always keep one for washing and one for fishing

Graeme Hetherington

Lost

Unable to decide, we walked
The beach below our house in search
Of signs to sell or stay, and had
To ward off nesting plovers' dives

Straight at our heads, sank ankle-deep
In sand and then observed a man
Mid-channel climbing carefully up
A spiral ladder fluttering like

A badly bandaged leg to mend
The navigation light. He took
The brain still flickering at least
And dropped it in the sea, tried all

The new ones after cutting bits
Off veins lying in muddled heaps,
Descended to his boat and left
Us more than ever in the dark.

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth

Islands of Yesterday: The Ecological Writing of Barbara York Main

> *What then does it answer – and why am I at the one time distraught and exulted when here in this bush thicket? This stony slope, crumbled by a weather-hand, to what does it answer? My brothers could assess its potential in bushels and bales, reduce the terrain to a monotony of cleared land, to a part of the spreading uniformity of crop and pasture, and subject its unruliness to the 'standard gauge'of farmland; I could study it with a naturalist's discipline.*
>
> *But it answers to something else. To a loneliness I suppose – a loneliness of the soul, reaching out for absorption into something before and beyond mankind.*
>
> Barbara York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground*

Heading east along the highway in the summertime, the horizon retreats beyond wide greying fields of stubble. I am caught by a feeling of desolation that, I suspect, stems partly from the season and partly from the absence of any visible signs of human activity in what is now a radically human environment. There are just these wide empty fields, occasionally bounded by straggling lines of salmon gums and jam trees. The clearing of the Western Australian wheatbelt is an event of singular scale and consequence. In just a few decades, an expanse of linked ecologies the size of Scotland disappeared. It is as if a continent had suddenly sunk, and when the churning water at last stilled, all that remained was a sporadic archipelago, each island a gesture toward a world that a moment earlier had existed as far as the eye could see. Barbara York Main calls these vestigial patches of bush, "islands of yesterday". Her writing hovers between exultation and despair, between the celebration of stunning plenitude in the fragments of bush that remain and despair at what has been lost and what is still being lost.

In 1967 Barbara York Main published *Between Wodjil and Tor*, a natural history of an area of remnant and partially regrown bushland bordering her family's farm in Tammin, Western Australia, roughly 150km northeast of Perth along the Great Eastern Highway that leads to Kalgoorlie and the arid interior. It is to most eyes an unremarkable stretch of open woodland and sandy, gravelly scrub known locally as wodjil. Its importance lies in the fact of it being relatively untouched by the dramatic intrusion of agricultural settlement that gave rise to the Western Australian wheatbelt, that vast crescent of grain country on the undulating plateau east of the Darling Ranges, extending as far as Esperance in the south and Geraldton in the north, and Southern Cross in the east:

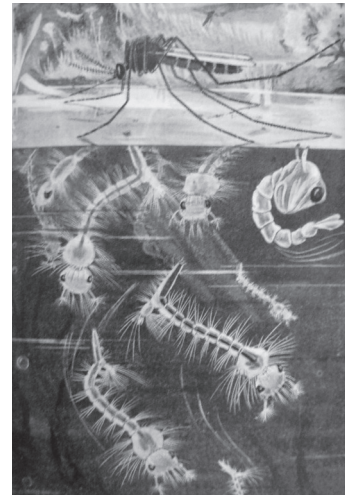
> It is here in a small area of the plateau, somewhere around the "middle" of the Wheatbelt … in this patch of wodjil, the granite tor some miles away, the timbered clay flats between, and their surrounding countryside, that we shall observe the unfolding of a year's life of an animated landscape …[1]

Between Wodjil and Tor draws on the years that York Main spent amongst the remnants of bush scattered in the several kilometres between Yorkakrine Rock and "Fairfields", the farm on West Bungulla Road where Barbara York Main grew up in the 1920s and 30s.

The World of Little Lives

Barbara York Main was born in Kellerberrin in 1929, the only daughter amidst four sons. Outside of the ambit of her brothers' play, she developed an early fascination with the plants and creatures of the bushland around the farm, particularly the insects, which she would collect.[2] Her father, Gerald Henry "Harry" York, emigrated from Yorkshire in 1909 to take up land in the newly expanding wheat country of Western Australia. Barbara's mother, Gladys Beatrice Tobias, was a Perth girl, though her father had earlier run a hardware store in Coolgardie in the goldfields. Gladys followed a path walked by many Western Australian women during the twentieth century. She trained as a teacher, was posted to the wheatbelt, married a farmer and then resigned to raise a family and help run the farm. From her days as a teacher, she had accumulated a number of books that her daughter read hungrily. Barbara was particularly drawn to those books about nature and animals, like Gladys Froggett's *The World of Little Lives* (1916).[3] Froggett's "little lives" were a series of insect studies originally published in the children's pages of the *Stock and Station Journal* (NSW).

What stays with Barbara from this book are the illustrations which were able to unite in a single picture on, say, the life-cycle of a mosquito, each stage of its life and its habitat. The enchanting element of these pictures is that they seemed to hold in their diagrammatic unity the ecological sense of the organism they depicted.



Barbara also remembers enjoying the works of May Gibbs, who grew up on the edge of the wheatbelt in Harvey, west of the Darling Scarp, about 100km south of Perth. Gibbs's *Gumnut Babies* (1916) initiated a series that would capture the childhood imagination of Australian children for much of the remaining century.[4] For the child-naturalist Barbara, Gibbs's work appealed as providing, despite its anthropomorphism, accurate and detailed pictures of native flora. They seem to answer not just a child's need for stories steeped in wonder but a deep desire to find names for the intimate wilderness which she came to inhabit. For this reason, perhaps, Barbara also found particular delight in Alice Clucas's *Behind the Hills* (1926) that was set in the town of "Wylakatchem", a thinly disguised version of Wyalkatchem, the town and district immediately to the north of Tammin.[5] In this sense, Barbara herself lived "behind the hills", the looming form of the Yorkakrine granite outcrop lying between her and Wyalkatchem. *Behind the Hills* tells the story of a girl, Carol, who lives an isolated existence on a farm with a busy mother who only seems to notice her when she needs something done. Carol is running yet another errand for her mother when she befriends a magpie, Mrs Maggie, who offers her some magic seeds. These cause Carol to shrink down to the size of a fairy, allowing her to

climb atop Mrs Maggie and fly with her to the "Golden Land" beyond the hills. In this Golden Land, Carol meets King and Queen Leschenaultia (who recline in gum-leaf hammocks in Bushingham Palace) and begins a series of adventures. The Golden Land is attacked by the evil Calosang Tribe but eventually prevails thanks to the help of the Tuarts. "The Tuarts," the book explains, "were a very progressive race, and had recently perfected a powerful machine-gun, known as the Tuart Cannon".[6] The story concludes with Carol waking up. Was it all a dream? No, says Carol, even though she knows this is just what her mother will say: "Mother does not believe in fairies, for she has never been to the Golden Land Behind the Hills in the Land of Imagination; but I do, and I hope to go there again some day".[7]

While even then the young Barbara knew this book to be hopelessly patronising, she was nevertheless struck by seeing the echoes of her own imaginative engagement with nature, *her* nature, printed into language. The "land behind the hills" would remain psychically demarcated as a place of possibility and fascination. In broader cultural terms we can find in these stories by Gibbs and Clucas that late Victorian sense of childhood so enduringly evoked in the writing of J.M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll and, particularly, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling is significant not just because of his popularity in Australia but because in works such as *The Jungle Book* (1894) and the *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902), he linked indigenous knowledge, naturalism, and the occasioning wonder of childhood into a kind of corrective universe, one that registered a muted apology for the violence of empire, if not for its goals. A close friend of Baden Powell, Kipling's children's stories became through the Scout and Guide movements that flourished in the twentieth century, a pseudo-religion of initiatory myths and practices, advancing the virtues of imperial citizenship and self-growth. Victorian children's writers like Kipling often used the device of making a child the perceptive centre of their stories in order to anchor the fictive world in a domain outside of the fixity of the adult order. One senses in these "stories for children" an effort to remake the stark symbolic terrain of modernity by calling upon the fairies and pixies of a disappearing oral folk tradition. Thus animated, the stories became a forum for playing out the world's adult struggles in disguised form.

The distinctive dimension of Australian children's authors such as Gibbs and Clucas was the way that this fairy-world was mapped on to Australian animals and plants, sometimes invoking a vulgar appeal to Aboriginal creation myths. This was particularly visible in the period of popular nativism in the decades following Federation. "Wattle Day",

first celebrated in 1910, was popular throughout the 1920s and 30s and Australian motifs drawn from nature – lyre birds, kookaburras, emus – began to adorn the mass-produced furnishings and window fittings of this period.[8] It was during this time, for instance, that Kookaburras were introduced into Western Australia by eastern states migrants who felt the bush here was lacking their distinct aural contribution. Barbara York Main's childhood bears the imprint of this phase in Australian nationalism, and is evident in *Granny Smith's Book: Verse and Legends of the Bush* (1941), a twelfth birthday gift to Barbara.[9] *Granny Smith's Book* was a series of poems, fables and sheet music thematising native flora and fauna. In "The Wildflower Chorus" and "The Dance of the Gum-Nuts" plants and animals take the form of fairies, elves and sprites, while in "The Carnival of Spring" we hear the story of the Kangaroo Paw, the Western Australian state flower that blossoms in late winter and early spring:

> The little Elves then raised their heads, and seeing the smiles around them, were very relieved; but when they saw the Kangaroo-Paw Flowers, they were astounded to see such a wonderful sight, they could hardly believe their eyes; so they caught hold of one another and danced and sang through the Bush in great glee.
> Another Spring had come and the Fairy was pleased with their work.[10]

Published in Perth during the early years of the war, *Granny Smith's Book* emits in a juvenile register the nativism – by now a complicated amalgam of cultural and biological indigeneity – that lay beneath contemporary nationalist literary journals such as the *Meanjin Papers* (1940–) and the *Jindyworobak* anthologies (1938–1953). The 1930s and 1940s, when York Main grew up, were thus a time when patriotism sought to ground itself in the varied uniqueness of native biota. It was also a time that in the writing, say, of Katharine Susannah Prichard or the prints and painting of Margaret Preston, was beginning to align itself with (or appropriate) an Aboriginal apprehension of a spiritual landscape. The effect of these currents eddied through Australian culture in subtle yet profound ways, shaping and determining the imaginative coordinates of the generation that would come to prominence in the post-war years.

The Other Notebook

York Main's scientific scholarship at the University of Western Australia in the late 1940s and early 1950s coincided with the emergence of ecology as a formal field of study. Ecology took as its basis the interrelationships

between organisms and their environment – which included other organisms. The ecologist's enterprise was to delineate these relations.[11] Her doctoral research into the "eco-evolution" of trapdoor spiders can be seen as synthesising the emergent paradigm of ecology with the earlier biological paradigm of natural history. York Main's ground-breaking research into spiders sought to work in both these modalities, situating the spiders as part of an intricate ecological balance but also apprehending how this ecology itself was subject to the changes of deep planetary time with its climatic fluctuation and tectonic drift.[12]

As a trained naturalist York Main approached the study of her spiders through the disciplining practices of zoological fieldwork, in particular, a strict observational record of activity. Her research was partly conditioned by the tremendous longevity of trapdoor spiders, which can live in excess of thirty years. She speaks of going to "visit her spiders" and continues to do this on a regular basis. Yet whilst dutifully keeping empirical measurements and details in her field-book, York Main also kept a second notebook, one which contained more general meditations on the world of the spiders' little lives. This notebook seemed to want to know in what kind of world these spiders were happening. At the same time it was a notebook where she herself became present in a way that the dictates of empirical science proscribed. Here she recorded variations on the statement: *I too am of this place*. It is this other notebook, in which all that was necessarily excluded from the first came flooding back, that would give birth to York Main's published creative work.

At this point Barbara's life was divided between her young children and her scientific research. Her growing reputation as a naturalist led to the publication of *The Spiders of Australia* (1964), illustrated by the author.[13] Her publisher, Jacaranda Press, was founded by Brian Clouston in 1952 to publish educational literature. Clouston, though, was something of a visionary and is notable for publishing Kath Walker's (Oodgeroo Noonuccal's) seminal volume of poems *We Are Going* (1964) on the recommendation of Judith Wright who was then employed as a reader for the house.[14] In 1965, Bert and Barbara took their family to Brisbane for sabbatical in order to do fieldwork on the frogs and spiders of Queensland. Barbara took the opportunity to meet with Clouston and to propose another book, one of a quite different character to her field-guide on spiders. York Main said that she had been working on a children's book based around the animals in the wheatbelt bush she knew so well. Clouston's response surprised her. He said, why not write the book for adults? The work then conceived, and which would become *Between Wodjil and Tor*, was to be a detailed account of life in the

bush through the course of one year. Clouston had extended a kind of permission to York Main, which precipitated a period of intense creativity. Whereas previously she had channelled her imaginative understanding of the ecological into the animism of her early life, which lived on in the stories she told her children and in the thoughts of her private notebooks, a path opened now for her to communicate the natural world in all its enchanting otherness in a seriousness of tone and purpose hitherto only possible in her scientific writing.

The idea of a year in the life of an ecosystem was not new.[15] York Main had in mind both Thoreau, particularly his *Walden* (1854) and *The Maine Woods* (1864), and also earlier still, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789).[16] White's *Selborne* comprised a series of letters, delightfully observant and rich, written to his friends Daines Barrington and Charles Pennant concerning the natural history of his native parish of Selborne in Hampshire where he had long served as parson.[17] The letters span a period of two decades and bristle with reflections on the species and habitats of this locality. It is this kind of ecological calendar that Barbara York Main began to write for the country between wodjil and tor. She was melding an "ideal year" out of the many years she had spent in this place as a child and as a scientist. In spirit though, York Main's work is less touched with the fastidious acuity of White and the Enlightenment, than the metaphysical yearning that seizes Thoreau in his less regimental moments. She would later ask, surveying the first 150 years of Western Australian literature, "Where are our Thoreaus?"[18] And she is right to wonder where in the creative literature of Western Australia since colonisation a sensitive consideration of ecology had taken place. I have looked myself and find that while there are examples of what might be called ecological writing, there is nothing until York Main herself, and not since, that addresses the non-human in a way that is serious, searching and nuanced. York Main stops short of Thoreau's transcendentalism – nature is not by her reckoning expressive of a sentient spirit or overarching purpose. Nevertheless, her writing remains limned by the intimation that explaining *how* something happens never quite takes you into a knowledge of *why* it happens. This step, this distance that cannot be closed, is what York Main's prose sparks across.

Between Wodjil and Tor

In writing *Between Wodjil and Tor* York Main did not travel down the path of didactic exposition followed by popular naturalists since the nineteenth century. This approach, epitomised in the television era by David

Attenborough, is one in which we creep up on an unsuspecting habitat and enter into a visually-cued explanation of its more photogenic and mystifying inhabitants. Such popular educational documentary tends invariably to address us as if we were over-eager students, keen to follow the camera into nature's hidden corners. There is something both voyeuristic and lascivious about this kind of television. York Main's approach in *Between Wodjil and Tor* is quite different. Hers is a mode of lyrical evocation, which takes as its beginning a fundamental alterity (in other words, unknowableness) in the plane of the organism:

> To climb through a wire fence, out of a ploughed and sown paddock, into a wild, wind-raked stretch of bushland is to tumble into an order of life, unmoulded by man, but one which can jolt his mind into a deeper wonderment, not only of this ungarnered territory but of the whole natural world.[19]

York Main is conscious of violating implicit laws of scientific writing and asks in her preface that the reader approach her book not with the ready confidence "with which one opens a natural history 'hand book' but with the submissiveness one volunteers on beginning a narrative". She pleads in effect for a different reader, one who might "submit" to a kind of openness or suggestibility that she herself submitted to in approaching her environment.

This is not to say that York Main's writing is not attuned to empirical observation and functional exposition. One certainly gains a working knowledge of the life-cycles, habits and appearances of a great number of flora and fauna. Parenthetical latin names of species flit through the text like the ghost of Linnaeus. Yet the details are conveyed in a way which is deferential and reverent. How, for instance, a Mountain Devil (*Moloch horridus*) will absorb rain into its skin and transmit it by capillary action to its mouth; how bulldog ants (*Myrmecia*) will climb into the canopies of eucalypts to forage and when sated simply leap off and tumble through the sky onto the ground before picking themselves up and returning to their nests; or how Parrot orchids (*Pterostylis vittata*) were pollinated by tiny gnats that are trapped by a sprung lid that temporarily detains them, forcing them to acquire their pollen in a frantic attempt to escape. What distinguishes York Main's work from conventional popular natural history is a recurrent gesture towards that which is beyond the elucidation of scientific discourse. This is done by diverting from the process examined and toward the feeling that it instils, from effect into affect. Here I do

not mean the melodrama that pervades most nature shows and in which we function as pantomime audience, but a deepening of the perceptive faculty that transports the reader into the scene:

> All was still and quiet … twigs crackled, bark flaked softly, a dry leaf fell with a sigh from a mallee … the last of the wattle pods cracked open and the seeds fell to the woven mat of brown and yellow phyllodes on the ground. The acrid smell of the cypress pines (*Callitris morrisoni*) rose and permeated the surrounding bush and mingled with the tannic scent of drying bark and the volatiles of eucalypts. The only persistent sound was the deep, muffled murmuring of bronze-wing pigeons.[20]

Science depends on the exclusion of emotional response. The paradox, famously highlighted by Heidegger, is that in seeking to understand life, science must first remove from life its life. This paradox brings into collision a view of life that is renderable as a process (as in science) and that view of life that we experience through our senses and psyches. What occurs in this passage and many like it from *Between Wodjil and Tor* is the reuniting of the senses. Scientific description is biased heavily towards the visual, not just in literalising the practice of observation but in the more general way that knowledge itself is deeply wedded in western culture to the faculty of seeing. To suddenly smell the "acrid" cypress pines and the bouquet of scents released by the eucalypts has the effect of reanimating them from their stultification in the classificatory regime. Likewise, to hear the "murmuring" of the pigeons brings them into an immediate relation that no degree of analysis can yield. In doing so York Main tactically forgoes the semantic precision of scientific language in order to set in motion associational trains – the pigeons murmuring into the dry still evening – that make us *there* in the landscape as sensate, memoried organisms rather than disembodied analytical eyes.

Of course any novelist knows all of this. Yet York Main's writing is notable for the way that it does not forsake the scientific paradigm so much as hybridise it with the sensual or creative mode of discourse that we associate with literature. In so doing, she avoids the obverse of pure instrumental knowledge, which is aestheticism, a romantic record of sensory affects (aromas, sounds, plays of light) which trigger moods and memories. The writing of American nature-writer Annie Dillard, for instance, as beautiful and acutely observed as it is, often falls prey to these seductions. Instead *Between Wodjil and Tor* retains as one of its central objectives the understanding of, to put it bluntly, *how it all works*. It is York

Main's determination to keep both of her notebooks open in *Between Wodjil and Tor* that gives to it its rare keenness as an ecological text.

Twice Trodden Ground

Four years after *Between Wodjil and Tor*, York Main published *Twice Trodden Ground* (1971), also with Jacaranda and also illustrated by herself. *Between Wodjil and Tor* largely bracketed off human agency, at least that since colonisation. Let us imagine, it says, how this place was before it was razed for cropping. However, *Twice Trodden Ground* is a human history not a natural history, although once again not of a conventional kind. It remains Thoreauvian in its ruminative qualities, although rather less prescriptive, and it is hued by an underlying, at times ineffable, loss. It is partly written as an answer to the shire histories of the wheatbelt that started to appear in the early 1960s with works such as Frank H. Goldsmith's *The History of Morawa District: The Story of Progress* (1961) and F.A. Law's *The History of the Meredin District of Western Australia* (1961). Today, almost every district and shire has such a work. Many were published to mark occasions like the state's sesquicentenary in 1979 or Australia's bicentenary in 1988, or else the centenary of the founding of the shire, which for many fell in the 1980s and 90s. These books tell a particular kind of story, usually focussing on the arduous work of establishing communities and viable industries in the hot, dry scrub and woodlands of the south-west plateau. They remind me of the kind of Christmas letter that is circulated between certain sorts of middle-class families. Their tone contains the quiet pride in achievement as various families and pioneers are remembered. The life was hard, and there was much adversity, but courage and persistence prevailed. Schools were built, clubs founded, bushfires fought – the fellowship of shared work held in the communion of memory. Through all this people kept their sense of humour, to which a number of anecdotes will attest, and progress prevailed. A life was forged.

York Main's *Twice Trodden Ground* shares with the shire histories this sense of historical survey, of looking back and assessing all that has happened to bring us to where we are now. Yet it is much more personal, and documents not the heroic conquest of land and founding of towns and institutions, but the plume of emotional after-effects that follow it like dust from a car on a wheatbelt back-road. One can see something of this even in the conventional histories, in the faint note of exhaustion or quaver of disillusionment that occasionally surfaces at the end of the book when thoughts are turned towards the future. It is as if on the fringes of the narrative of progress there lies the question: *but, after all is said and done, what was it all for?* In these histories the concern is not for the most

part environmental but sociological. They allude, at least those since the 1980s, to the onset of what appears to be an inexorable rural decline: towns shrinking, associations closing, communities thinner and thinner. All this at a time when wheat yields are higher than ever. The logic which drove the expansion of the wheatbelt and depopulated its original species is now in many cases depopulating the colonising species – the farmer – as agricultural industry and especially crop production submit to greater and greater mechanisation.

York Main's was one of the first voices to recognise the source of this alienation, and thus too the possible remedies, in the radical separation of wheatbelt settlement from its antique ecological patterns. She writes in her preface:

> The following essays do not amount to a shire history. They hint rather at the effect of place on human emotions as much as the effect of man on place. Or is it only my own response to locality that I present? I do not think so. The potency of place – of landscape – is sometimes of lifelong recurrence, even though the response to its influence may be unformed, unvoiced.[21]

York Main thus stakes a claim in the field of knowledge for both the "potency of place" and her own emotional response. She refutes the implication that what she is writing might be classed as simply her feelings or that they retain only a subjective truth. She maintains instead that her writing is anchored in the specificity of the place she inhabits. In a sense what York Main arrives at in her writing is a distinctly ecological interface, a meeting of two systems, the psychic system of thoughts, feelings, memories and sense experience, and the biological system of the vestigial bushland. It is this very interface that in recent years the field of eco-criticism has sought to map.[22] This hybrid field owes as much to the intellectual habits of ecology as it does to the practices of literary criticism.

In her beautiful story "Trespassing" York Main describes revisiting her family farm in later life, and seeing the home where she had grown up in "double photographic exposure", the current state of the home overlaid by her memories of it. Details from the home bring to her mind trails of remembered actions and moments. In the backyard, now a tamarisk grove, she sees the chain swing that once lifted her "out of the mundane world and into the sky" (37). A deep ambivalence sets in that is quite distinct from conventional nostalgia, and under whose influence comes to feel like a "ghost of the dispossessed":

> It is a painful paradox that long after one is alienated, even if voluntarily, from the site of one's beginnings, a sense of proprietorship remains. But reality cannot recognize such proprietorship – *it is trespassing*! And in my trespassing I had unwittingly discovered that other self, and in my discovery, it finally withered. I fled that house, for who has the courage to look into a tomb?[23] (1971: 42, original italics)

It is an evocative and complex moment. The thrust is straightforward enough: one cannot live in the past, *trespass* on the past. Its drama turns on the meeting of two selves; the seeking, present-day "I", and this "other self", later called "the child", who is anterior and hidden until the act of trespass. It is the trespass itself that makes this other self visible and prompts their meeting, a radical encounter in which one flees and the other withers.

This poignant interior drama, a version of which we all replay at moments though not always with such lucidity, is acted out for York Main at a socio-ecological level in the story of the Western Australian wheatbelt, and she sees in each *scene* an answering desolation that she describes in the succeeding paragraph of "Trespassing":

> For the child had gone long ago, with the vanishment of scrub and trees. Now it was only in a mirage of fancy that this landscape lived again, when in the falsity of reminiscence thickets of tamma and calothamnus and sheoke, hakea and timber, spread out over the swell and hollow of the rolling countryside. Only a little remains, small primeval islands in the great surround of open paddocks. It is to these last relics of unchanged reality, to these islands of yesterday, that one desperately lays claim.[24]

York Main thus finds in her own sense of loss felt towards the missing bush in the wheatbelt the echo of a loss felt in her childhood, a loss then re-experienced as the passage *out of* childhood. Childhood becomes the storied location of that primal loss, but the linkage is more than a mere psychological projection. Whether or not Barbara had had a happier childhood would not change the dispersal of vegetation in the wheatbelt. The loss of habitat and the loss of "the child" are both registrations in the symbolic. They are holes which we circle around incessantly and build the fences that constitute culture and mark our entry into it as adults. It is indeed the experience of losing the child that makes feasible the discernment of shifts in the real, shifts which, once temporalised, appear

before us as islands of yesterday. It is also this experience that holds the key to a movement past the tomb of primal loss and into a living present and future.

Perhaps a traumatic encounter with loss is a necessary wound, and our adulthood forms only in the scar tissue that it instigates. In any event, traumatic loss is often the affective state yielded by modernity's acceleration, by its combustion of the past to fuel an impending unseeable futurity. In her preface to *Twice Trodden Ground* York Main cites T.S. Eliot's estimation, made in 1932, that the "happiest" lands are:

> … those in which a long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both; in which the landscape has been moulded by numerous generations of one race, and in which the landscape in turn has modified the race to its character.[25]

This marks a shift away from the almost Nietzschean voluntarism of Eliot's earlier influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). The later remarks posit tradition as the "reconciliation of thought and feeling", in which "the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present."[26] It is no coincidence in my view that the shift in Eliot's position is cognate with the appearance of an ecological consciousness in the 1930s. This ecological awareness, dawning in its modern guise in the middle decades of the twentieth century, modulated the popular vitalism of the 1920s through a yearning for sustainable balance. Like Eliot, York Main sees the landscape not as a metaphor for human concerns but, insofar as we alter it, as the actual expression of them. And both find in the act of serious literature a working through of the crucial and traumatic truce that forms inside the self between the demands and limits of the organism and what we experience as our felt reality. York Main's writing affects me in the way it does because I find in the subjectivity it evokes something of the sense that this reconciliation might yield. It is a subjectivity at once detached and intimately engaged, disinterested and intensely interested.

Notes

1 Barbara York Main, Between *Wodjil and Tor* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1967): 4.

2 The biographical details of York Main's life are drawn from a number of meetings I had with the author in 2006 at the University of Western Australia, at which we both work. In the winter of 2007 I accompanied York Main on one of her regular visits to monitor the trapdoor spiders that have been her

lifelong passion, and visited the home where she grew up, and the country between wodjil and tor.

3 Gladys H. Froggatt, *The World of Little Lives* (Sydney: W. Brooks, 1916).

4 May Gibbs, *Gumblossom Babies* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1916).

5 Alice Clucas, *Behind the Hills* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1926).

6 Clucas, 54.

7 Clucas, 66.

8 For a discussion of the celebration of wattle as a national flower, see Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007): 11–30.

9 Minnie Smith, *"Granny Smith's" Book: Verse and Legends of the Australian Bush*, illus. Margaret Korner, Evelyn [Mrs E.S. Harrison] and Judith [Mrs R.N. Grigg] (Perth, W.A.: Patterson's Printing Press, 1941).

10 Smith, 35.

11 Ecology focussed on cyclical processes and in this way differed from the concerns of evolutionary biology, which was to trace origins and change through time. One can see in the emergence of ecology a shift in paradigms that typifies the relationship in terms of knowledge between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, from the governance of telos and a concomitant concern for origins, to the investigation of the atemporal system. As a science, ecology stands in a similar relation to natural history as Saussurean linguistics does to philology, or structural anthropology to evolutionary anthropology.

12 One tends to associate bio-diversity with the tropics. This is probably a northern hemisphere bias. As the glaciated northern land masses were regularly swept free of most of their organisms, it was the warmer south in which evolution reached its more baroque complexities. This is not true, however, in Australia and the temperate semi-arid country of the south-west has evolved an extraordinary degree of diversity in bird, animal, insect, plant and other life. The wide range of trapdoor spiders is a case, Main argues, of differential evolution, where a species evolves a number of different types in order to best meet the changing elements of its environment.

13 Barbara York Main, *Spiders of Australia* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964).

14 Kath Walker, [Oodgeroo Noonuccal], *We Are Going* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1964).

15 Australian examples of the description of nature by following a year – usually month by month – can be found in Jack Hyett, *A Bushman's Year* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1959) and Vincent Serventy, Dryandra: *The Story of an Australian Forest* (Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1970).

16 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1984, 1854, 1849). Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne* (London: Dent, 1906, 1789).

17 The lasting wonder of White's letters is the density and intricacy of life itself. In his final letter White notes that he had considered but abandoned the idea of attaching to these letters an *"Annus Historico-Naturalis or Natural History of the Twelve Months of the Year"*. White, 254.

18 Alec Choate and Barbara York Main, *Summerland: A Sesquicentenary Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1979): xx.

19 York Main, *Between Wodjil and Tor*, preface.

20 York Main, *Between Wodjil and Tor*, 16 (original ellipses).

21 York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground*, 2.

22 For a useful discussion of this point see Neil Evernden, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place and the Pathetic Fallacy" in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996): 92–104.

23 York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground,* 42 (original italics).

24 York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground,* 42.

25 These remarks derive from Eliot's lectures at the University of Virginia in 1933, subsequently published as *After Strange Gods: a Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1934). Whilst "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) had committed the literary artist to a regime of cultural immersion, nothing less than the complete totality of the "important" writing of one's culture, from which the precious few will emerge into a position of genuine advancement of that tradition, Eliot's later lecture draws back from this idea of tradition being acquired by an act of will. Tradition, Eliot writes in this later work, is "rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations." And this, he suggests, "must largely be … unconscious" – "of the blood … rather than of the brain" (*After Strange Gods,* 29–30). One can see how Main was drawn to Eliot's essay. It begins by recounting his recent train journey through the "beautiful desolate country of Vermont":

Those hills had once, I suppose, been covered with primeval forest; the forest was razed to make sheep pastures for the English settlers; now the sheep are gone, and most of the descendants of the settlers … those New England mountains seemed to me to give evidence of a human success so meagre and transitory as to be more desperate than a desert. (*After Strange Gods,* 17)

26 Eliot, *After Strange Gods,* 30.

Mark O'Flynn

Red Shoes

They want to give me an honorary doctorate. An honorary doctorate when all I want is to lie here and drink tea on the sofa. A long time since I've headed west. Old stomping ground, old wilderness. No more stomping for me, I'm afraid. These fucking feet are fucked. But I get to thinking. West. The turn off at Wickepin. The weird light. Spears of grass sticking in my bobby socks and braids. Golden dust in my hair. All those ghosts. Running through the wheat, all sweat and sex underneath my pinny. A beauty I was then. A wild creature. Any bloke I fancied. And I fancied them all. I was a mermaid. Look at me now. Prostrate on the couch, a harpooned dugong. Gregor Samsa, that's me, reclining on the fucking commission-built leather catafalque. Look at those feet. Leper's feet. Cut them off at the knees and stick umbrellas in them.

For Christ's sake help me up Merv, I gotta piss.

* * *

So they want to honour me. Make a big fuss. Want me to clamber up some wooden steps wearing a gown and mortarboard, prance across a rostrum, make a fucking speech. Elocute sweet thankyous into the microphone. I'll give them a speech all right.

"No," I tell them over the phone, "I hate flying. Perth is dead for me."

They'd forgotten all about my forthrightness.

"It's a great accolade," they say, "In celebration of your work."

"Stiff."

But then I get to thinking; maybe I'm being a bit hasty. I'm not dead yet after all, and maybe Perth has changed for the better. Maybe they've gotten rid of all the drunks and mad bastards and con men and corruption and ex-husbands, and maybe this and maybe that. In a way I think it might

be kind of nice. Nostalgic. Romantic. On the road again. The last hurrah, instead of lying here rotting away on this fucking couch with a swollen, pouting pillow shaped like Mae West's crimson lips. My lips. You bloody bet. These lips were made for kissing, and that's just what they'll do … Ha! This couch. My final resting place in a library where every book is out of reach, and the cracks in the stained glass let in a little whistle of wind.

* * *

Merv packs my ports. Don't forget my red shoes Merv! I'm not going all that way without my lucky red shoes. This morning, early, he tells me, after insomnia has woken him again, he wandered into the lounge room and found a fox hiding behind the settee. Someone must have left the door open all night. The highway silent. I can picture them together: Merv staring at the fox, the fox staring at Merv, the birds outside just starting to twitch.

"I think it's time you went," Merv tells me he said to the fox. And the fox went. Here in Faulconbridge. It's a nice story. Fuck knows what it means. Too brief for a play. And who would put on one of my plays? Plays have left me now. All the stories have rolled down hill into the river. Maybe a poem then. But Perth. They want to pay my airfare too, but no thanks. Bloody planes. Bloody airports. Bloody blood pressure. I'm playing hard to get. My inner ear plays up something fierce too on take-off. Bladder at landing. Even driving down the mountains in the back of the hearse shits me to tears. The river like a moat. No. I want to go by train. I want to see the desert. Wickepin. One more time. I want. I want.

So we catch the train. And here we are at Central at the appointed hour. Merv takes care of the ticketing and the bags. Sleeper compartment number such-and-such, with our own foldaway bed and a little stainless steel sink and table and a grimy railway curtain over the window looking out to the grey platform. Merv wheels me up the asphalt like a piece of luggage. *Just stare straight ahead,* I tell myself. Retain what grace you can. People get out of my way. I hobble up the steps onto the train – goodness the corridors are thin – smell of diesel and rail ballast. I'm holding people up. Why don't they stop staring? Merv clears the corridor before me simply by walking up it. His shoulders touch both walls. Even at eighty he is a force to be reckoned with. Everyone gets out of his way. Everyone is afraid of what might happen if Merv were to fall on them. Fell on me once and sprained my ankle: "Merv get off me foot," I yelped. He didn't even know. He could clear a room of poets in a flash if he took it into his

head. Sometimes I wish he would. And I don't mean with the tureen of mulled wine in the boot of the hearse ladled out into their thirsty cups. He has a great euphemism that if he ever has to deal with recalcitrants who want my attention: he simply places a hand on their shoulder, turns them around and sits them down on the floor. They don't get up in a hurry. The trouble is so many people want my attention.

Merv settles me in our compartment, which is a hell of a lot smaller than my library. He takes care of the conductor. Presses a few bribes on him. Eventually we are off. Suburbs flash by, then paddocks, more slowly. Cows stand about like cardboard cutouts of cows. I settle in to our cabin to read through those bloody poems that young up-and-coming-prizewinning suck-hole of a poet has asked me to comment on. Fucked, I should say. Hopeless, I should say. What does he want my opinion for? Why does anyone still want to listen to me? But I won't. I'll be polite and innocuous and lie through my teeth, and people will read it as a considered judgment, as if I know what I'm talking about, and he'll get a grant and stick my comments on the cover of his next book and people will quote me in reviews. I toss the manuscript aside. For Christ's sake Merv help me up, I've gotta piss.

It's a struggle trying to keep our balance as the Overlander rattles across the plains towards Bathurst or somewhere, but he finally squeezes me into the tiny cubicle of the dunny.

"Close the door so I can't hear you," Merv says. Never could stand to hear the sound of a woman pissing. Could stand a lot of other things though. He could stand more of my behaviour than any other man. Could stand the looks I gave to them, and received, because he knew he was the one and only. Turning awkwardly on my obese axis – there's no other word for it – I manage to click the closet door closed. Mmm, nice alliteration that, although not as nice as the one about the cows, might save it for something, that new poem maybe, about the mad old woman lost in her own house. Click the closet door closed. Click or kick? Closet or corset? Dress hoicked. Bloomers to half-mast. A vicious jolt from the train and I flop onto the seat. Ahh. The sound of a woman pissing. Sorry Merv. Paper right there. Job well done. Bit of a rest while we're here. Enough of the lady leisurely. Ah but fuck – I can't get up. My legs are fucked. Come on old girl, of course you can get up. If I. If I. Nngghh … Shit.

"Merv! Merv! I'm stuck."

And I am. I can't stand up. And I can't open the door. Jesus.

"Dorothy, what is it?" Merv calls.

"I'm stuck."

Merv tries to open the door, but it'll only open six inches before it whacks against my knees. He pushes harder.

"Ow!"

"I'll go and get a conductor."

"No, no."

"Why not?"

"I don't want any one to see me wedged in here with me knickers around me knees."

I can almost hear Merv cogitating.

"Well what do you want me to do? You're blocking the door."

I make a Herculean effort to raise myself, at least to pull my knickers up, but the rocking of the train makes this impossible, and a particularly violent lurch tumbles me first against one wall of the cubicle, then the other. I bang my head.

"Ow."

I collapse back onto the bowl, slightly stunned.

'Are you all right?"

"No. I'm stuck."

"Do you want anything?"

"Can't you take the door off or something?"

"The hinges are on the inside."

"Fuck."

He's right. Merv doesn't say anything on the other side of the door.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I'm not that brave."

Stuck all right. Whose idea was this train anyway? I'm stuck because I'm so fucking fat. And old. I hate growing old. I hate being old. I feel like every vertebra in my spine has been jolted out of the chain. Merv passes in all the cushions and pillows he can find, and I pad them around me to stop myself whacking against the walls. In other words I make myself comfortable. Hours pass. He passes me in a book, but I can't read because of the jolting. I let it fall to the floor, out of sight. The continuous rattling of the wheels is like a dull electric shock, like holding a battery against your tongue, it's not comfortable but after a while you get used to it.

"Do you want this manuscript?"

"Fuck no."

He passes me in little wax paper cups of water, which I gulp and gulp like some animal at a water hole, and in pretty short shrift have to piss again. So I piss. Here where I sit. Maybe this is for the best. Maybe I'll die here empty of bladder and pride; all honour gone.

After a while I say "Merv, I'm hungry."

"Do you want me to fetch something from the dining car?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Food."

"What?"

"Anything. Anything. Anything."

I almost sob.

I hear Merv fossicking about in the compartment and I hear him going out, the door sliding shut behind him. Even when I know he's gone I still think he's out there, fossicking, and I realize I must be delirious. I call. No answer. I call again. No answer. The rattling of the wheels is like dull music, like a battery held against your tongue. I piss. I drink and I piss and I try to read. The transaction is pretty simple. A life's work. This is where devotion to the party gets you. Stuck in a shithouse on the Overlander. Dymphna Cusack should be here, not me. That old commo with a tiara, swanning through Moscow in her fur coat. Well Dymphna did you ever see red shoes like mine? The polit bureau loved my red shoes. I try not to think about Dymphna for a while, as the music of the train fills me. More hours pass. I think I even doze a little. Merv returns with some railway sandwiches, which he passes in to me.

"What took you so long?"

"I had a cup of tea."

"Tea! While I'm stuck in here!"

"I've walked the length of the train looking for a lavatory. I can hardly use this one."

"Sorry."

"Are you all right?"

"No. My legs hurt. I feel buried alive."

It's true. I practice scratching my old nails against the door. I try to project the face of several theatre directors I could mention on to the door.

"I can't get you out unless you let me call the conductor."

"No. What would the Vice-Chancellor say?"

"Bugger the Vice-Chancellor."

Merv has never cared much for Vice-Chancellors. He goes on in his expedient, male way:

"If I passed you in a screwdriver do you think you could unscrew the hinges?"

"I don't think I could reach the top ones. Anyway it looks like it needs a special tool."

"I thought that might be the case."

"I wish I was fucking dead."

"You're only saying that."

"I fucking mean it."

"I'm trying my best Dorothy."

He passes his hand in through the crack. It's a familiar hand with its great thick fingers and calluses from a lifetime of heavy work.

"Have you seen the desert yet?"

"No Dorothy. It's night."

"Night? How long have I been in here?"

He wafts his hand about blindly until he finds my face.

"That's my nose."

"Sorry."

He strokes my hair and my jowls. He says "There there. Death gives life its shape."

"What shape?"

"Its meaningless shape."

It is a great comfort to me, his hand, and his words, but it still does not alter the greater fact that I just want to die.

After a while the rattling of the wheels is no longer like music but more like screaming. I try to sleep. I try to die, propped up by all the cushions Merv has purloined from somewhere. I listen to him snoring. I piss at will, without the inconvenience of having to ask someone to help me up. I've become a baby again. The light burns all night. In the morning he passes in my medicines and food and water and pen and paper in case, he says, you feel inspired.

"Get fucked. I'll give you fucking inspiration."

I wonder if I have the strength to jab his hand with the biro.

"Do you want your red shoes?"

"No. Fuck off."

"I can see the desert."

"What's it like?"

"Flat."

Strangely I do try to write. There is nothing else to do, even if it is all delusional. My handwriting is sloppier than usual. Hours pass, and then, presumably, days.

A mad old woman dressed in black
pushing an English pram
a nun with a walking stick

a woman with a string of camels
mirages floating in the heat

Memories, or perhaps hallucinations, come to me in my fluorescent crypt. Memories of the house at Lambton Downs, of dancing in my red shoes down Darlinghurst Road, of crusty old nuns cursing me to hell. Oh I was a beauty then. I was a mermaid. I was the embodiment of everything an evil nun should envy. Looks. Lads. Lust. Look at them in their silly wimples and Jesus-shrouds, so ugly they'd make a camel spit. Well maybe their curses worked. Look at me now. Hell is being stuck in a railway carriage dunny crossing the Nullarbor with only your husband's cracked, familiar hand squeezed in through the door for comfort. All the fluid rushing to your feet making them puff up and burst out of your slippers. Christ my legs hurt. Tell me again the story of the fox Merv. Merv, are you there? I wish I could lie down. My arse hurts. Wish I could put my feet up on my lovely couch in my own home, surrounded by my books. Why did we ever leave? I miss the mist and the currawongs. I miss the rowers on the Nepean, even though you only ever glimpse them for a second as you cross the river. If they gave me an honorary doctorate now, in here, I'd bloody well know what to do with it. No, cut the crap. I don't wish for comfort. Not any more. I only want it to stop. Stop all the camels and flies and heat. Merv, take me home, I wish I was dead, I wish I was fucking dead. There there, he'll say, strong as an ox, you don't really mean that. Yes I bloody well do. When I die Merv, when I finally fucking well die you've got to keep God out of the service. It'll be just like receiving a doctorate. Promise me, no mention of God. Just bury me with some poems and some wattle. I'd like it to be hot. And my red shoes, Merv. Make sure you toss in my red shoes too. No one wants to see them anymore.

Paul Hetherington

Blackberries

Childhood, the blue-black explosion
on the palate; the stained, tell-tale fingers
rubbed with handkerchief and spittle –
this coalesced, you said,
into an image of twelve-year-old girls
straddling a fence and laughing at your shyness.
At that time you were growing tomatoes
and clusters of vines in the grey dirt of your backyard,
enlivening the soil with large, blood-brown worms.
And a mulberry tree that grew in a mixture
of manure and old hay, a pond and croaking frogs
you had gathered from a creek in the wild.
Years later the garden extended over acres,
a creek running through it, next to nine mulberry trees.
But no blackberries, you said, "which would choke
and need poison." You mentioned the two girls again:
the one you married; her friend whom you loved,
"persistently, like a stain." Now I find you
digging the first blackberry plant into the old soil
of the creek bank, pressing its roots gently,
firmly, with thick fingers. A diminishing crescendo of frogs
is painted on cool and eddying air.

Graham Rowlands

Palm or Plane

It didn't matter where but it had to be
now to give me a break from my Doctorate
she said. So she took me around the zoo.
Returning, in the park we saw an old wanker
lying on his back on the grass under a tree
wearing old shirt, trousers, shoes & socks
with his right arm & probably fingers & thumb
strenuously engaged in his own enjoyment.
We didn't stop to see how long he took if
he took at all. Still, we were in no hurry.
We must have outlived him now by many years
but from time to time, perhaps once a year
as if it's a kind of wedding anniversary
we return to the old wanker's open air &
we're surprised by our surprise and sadness
that the old wanker isn't there, wanking.
For a few years we were sure of the tree
which had spread its leaves of shade for him
but every time now we find ourselves trying
to remember some angle or marker or beacon
that will help us decide on palm or plane.

Jeffrey Guess

In the Library

In the library near closing time
with the latest *TLS*
now all the students have gone
into their books
and the long black windows
of the closing northern lights.

The computer bank hums with that first
tonal breath of a church organ
before a key is touched
I want to believe that
lights are dimmed in a last half hour
for something other than power bills.

The reference section slides into the quiet
closed stacks of a release from enquiry
and the carpet that has agonized
all day with PhDs
is dawdling down the steps
to sleep and other things.

And in the interval before a final silence
there is a time for contemplation
even a reverie of sorts
where empty book trolleys slumber
in the return bays
and newspapers lie in a folded jumble
of neglect.

The last bus at the university stop
idles in the cold fog of where the light
slips off the edge of Union Hall.
A final paragraph on the mystery
of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

before the desk clerk nods
to the loans librarian and there is a taciturn
understanding about locks and leavings.
I cannot depart entirely –
but go on browsing with all my former selves
along the crowded bookshelves of the night.

Louis Armand

Temporary Measures

A plain with crows stumbling over its flatness. Stony
rubbish bounded by the surveyor into property –
things made not revealed. Formerly, one
preferred theories because they reduced the world
to a single principle. Now the same reasons
disgust us – tabulating all the facts
into an expansive, categorical desert. Crow-effigies
and the wind's empty shibboleths advancing through it
fugue-like, testing our credulity. Its myth
apes us – brazier-mouthed, one ear listening
to another, a manifold eye. Priapic man. The highway
shudders under freight close by. An argument
foundering among what it discards
like mirrored wreckage strewn across the sky. Nightly
visitants, pale lights distributed like points on a dial:
the re-entry trails of expired satellites.
Clarifying a shape out of pre-dawn's congelated
gloom – red-eyed, drawn down as though to a
resting place … In preparation for the task to come.

Zdravka Evtimova

Pale

Few customers visit my shop. They watch the animals in the cages and seldom buy them. The room is narrow and there is no place for me behind the counter, so I usually sit on my old moth-eaten chair behind the door. Hours I stare at frogs, lizards, snakes and insects. Teachers come and take frogs for their biology lessons; fishermen drop in to buy some kind of bait; that is practically all. Soon, I'll have to close my shop and I'll be sorry about it, for the sleepy, gloomy smell of formalin has always given me peace and an odd feeling of home. I have worked here for five years now.

One day a strange small woman entered my room. Her face looked frightened and grey. She approached me, her arms trembling, unnaturally pale, resembling two dead white fish in the dark. The woman did not look at me, nor did she say anything. Her elbows reeled, searching for support on the wooden counter. It seemed she had not come to buy lizards and snails; perhaps she had simply felt unwell and looked for help at the first open door she happened to notice. I was afraid she would fall and took her by the hand. She remained silent and rubbed her lips with a handkerchief. I was at a loss; it was very quiet and dark in the shop.

"Have you moles here?" she suddenly asked. Then I saw her eyes. They resembled old, torn cobwebs with a little spider in the centre, the pupil.

"Moles?" I muttered. I had to tell her I never had sold moles in the shop and I had never seen one in my life. The woman wanted to hear something else – an affirmation. I knew it by her eyes; by the timid stir of her fingers that reached out to touch me. I felt uneasy staring at her.

"I have no moles," I said. She turned to go, silent and crushed, her head drooping between her shoulders. Her steps were short and uncertain.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. "Maybe I have some moles." I don't know why I acted like this.

Her body jerked, there was pain in her eyes. I felt bad because I couldn't help her.

"The blood of a mole can cure sick people," she whispered. "You only have to drink three drops of it."

I was scared. I could feel something evil lurking in the dark.

"It eases the pain at least," she went on dreamily, her voice thinning into a sob.

"Are you ill?" I asked. The words whizzed by like a shot in the thick moist air and made her body shake. "I'm sorry."

"My son is ill."

Her transparent eyelids hid the faint, desperate glitter of her glance. Her hands lay numb on the counter, lifeless like firewood. Her narrow shoulders looked narrower in her frayed grey coat.

"A glass of water will make you feel better," I said.

She remained motionless and when her fingers grabbed the glass her eyelids were still closed. She turned to go, small and frail, her back hunching, her steps noiseless and impotent in the dark. I ran after her. I had made up my mind.

"I'll give you blood of a mole!" I shouted.

The woman stopped in her tracks and covered her face with her hands. It was unbearable to look at her. I felt empty. The eyes of the lizards sparkled like pieces of broken glass. I didn't have any mole's blood. I didn't have any moles. I imagined the woman in the room, sobbing. Perhaps she was still holding her face with her hands. Well, I closed the door so that she could not see me, then I cut my left wrist with a knife. The wound bled and slowly oozed into a little glass bottle. After ten drops had covered the bottom, I ran back to the room where the woman was waiting for me.

"Here it is," I said. "Here's the blood of a mole."

She didn't say anything, just stared at my left wrist. The wound still bled slightly, so I thrust my arm under my apron. The woman glanced at me and kept silent. She did not reach for the glass bottle, rather she turned and hurried toward the door. I overtook her and forced the bottle into her hands.

"It's blood of a mole!"

She fingered the transparent bottle. The blood inside sparkled like dying fire. Then she took some money out of her pocket.

"No. No," I said.

Her head hung low. She threw the money on the counter and did not say a word. I wanted to accompany her to the corner. I even poured another glass of water, but she would not wait. The shop was empty again and the eyes of the lizards glittered like wet pieces of broken glass.

Cold, uneventful days slipped by. The autumn leaves whirled hopelessly

in the wind, giving the air a brown appearance. The early winter blizzards hurled snowflakes against the windows and sang in my veins. I could not forget that woman. I'd lied to her. No one entered my shop and in the quiet dusk I tried to imagine what her son looked like. The ground was frozen, the streets were deserted and the winter tied its icy knot around houses, souls and rocks.

One morning, the door of my shop opened abruptly. The same small grey woman entered and before I had time to greet her, she rushed and embraced me. Her shoulders were weightless and frail, and tears were streaking her delicately wrinkled cheeks. Her whole body shook and I thought she would collapse, so I caught her trembling arms. Then the woman grabbed my left hand and lifted it up to her eyes. The scar of the wound had vanished but she found the place. Her lips kissed my wrist, her tears made my skin warm. Suddenly it felt cosy and quiet in the shop.

"He walks!" The woman sobbed, hiding a tearful smile behind her palms. "He walks!"

She wanted to give me money; her big black bag was full of different things that she had brought for me. I could feel the woman had braced herself up, her fingers had become tough and stubborn. I accompanied her to the corner but she only stayed there beside the street-lamp, looking at me, small and smiling in the cold.

It was so cosy in my dark shop and the old, imperceptible smell of formalin made me dizzy with happiness. My lizards were so beautiful that I loved them as if they were my children.

In the afternoon of the same day, a strange man entered my room. He was tall, scraggly and frightened.

"Have you … the blood of a mole?" he asked, his eyes piercing through me. I was scared.

"No, I haven't. I have never sold moles here."

"Oh, you have! You have! Three drops … three drops, no more … My wife will die. You have! Please!"

He squeezed my arm.

"Please … three drops! Or she'll die … "

My blood trickled slowly from the wound. The man held a little bottle and the red drops gleamed in it like embers. Then the man left and a little bundle of bank-notes rolled on the counter.

On the following morning a great whispering mob of strangers waited for me in front of my door. Their hands clutched little glass bottles.

"Blood of a mole! Blood of a mole!"

They shouted, shrieked, and pushed each other. Everyone had a sick person at home and a knife in his hand.

Lee Kofman

Writing Between Languages

"Yeah…" sighed Simon (in Russian). "And what does it mean?" He quoted in English: "The eastern lamb winked at us from a distance."

"Nu, lamb," I responded in a frivolous mixture of English and Russian coloured by my heavy Israeli accent. "You know, like the one I have in my room… Uh, sorry. I meant lamp. Eastern lamp."

"So what do you mean by *winked*?"

"That's not a mistake." I defended myself. "This is my style. The lamb… ho, sorry, the winking lamp is an image."

If I was the reader, this is where I'd drop this essay thinking: *Why do I need to bother with this mess?* Luckily I'm the author and perhaps less luckily (depending on your perspective) this is my life story.

Simon was a Russian poet, who immigrated to Australia twenty years ago. I was what you call, a *developing writer* in Israel, an author of three fiction books, but God knows what I was in Australia.

"What's that?" whispered Simon in despair and pointed at the following words: *nekudat hashaka*.

"I couldn't find it in the dictionary," I explained, "so I wrote it down in Hebrew."

After a heated discussion we both discovered it meant *point of contact* (in geometry). Simon and I met after I had already been living in Australia 18 months, gradually coming to terms with the idea that I better find a new occupation. However, as Dovlatov, a Russian writer who immigrated to New York, once said: "You don't become a writer because of the good life you'll lead. This profession chooses its own people." So Simon, who believed in Dovlatov and in doing things your own way, offered to help me learn how to write in English.

Those were strange days. I'd write a story first in Hebrew, translate it into bad English and then, sitting in the Acland Street cafes, discuss it with Simon in Russian in order to improve the English version. I spent

all my money on dictionaries, thesauruses, idiom books and other aid material. I learned how English words can be tricky, sneaking into the Russian dictionary, whilst being absent from the Hebrew one or vice versa. A word, *ephebi*, that I suspected to be English but couldn't find in any dictionary, turned to be of Greek origin, meaning *youths who have reached puberty*, and resided modestly in my book of phrase and fable. I also learned that when English speakers say *bigwig* they don't mean a drag queen or Mary-Antoinette. My English is gradually improving, but reading has since become tedious, like watching movies in slow motion. Sometimes it takes me two or three days of reading for the protagonist to finish a meal, depending on the richness of the author's vocabulary.

This is my second change of languages. My first poetic enlightenment occurred at the age of three in Siberia where I was born, when I read in front of the village babushkas: "The blue bird flies up to the sky. The blue bird goes high." They appreciated it.

After immigrating to Israel aged 12, I spent my first years there as I do today, devouring books in Hebrew, a dictionary always in hand, not skipping a single unfamiliar word. It was easier then; perhaps because modern Hebrew doesn't have as many words as Russian or English. For the last few years, having begun to get published in English in Australia, and even in the UK and the US, I have been working on my writing with a professional editor. I treat our relationship in the same romantic way painters and musicians treat their teachers. This is my way to refine my craft.

Writer-immigrants never stop writing in their new countries. Psychology claims that an immigrant's degree of mastery of the new country's language is a direct indicator of their sense of belonging. Usually writers who consider themselves "in exile" (which means they view their new condition as unwanted or temporary), keep writing in their own language. Writers who see themselves as immigrants, that is, that the move was their choice, are more likely to venture into flirtation with the new language. They won't necessarily deny their first language, but might become bilingual (or multilingual) writers.

Some of the greatest literature by Russian writers of the twentieth century was written outside Russia by those who had fled abroad after the October revolution or who were later expelled by the Soviet authorities. Most of them continued to write in Russian. Those who became known in the West prior to their immigration, such as Dovlatov or Solzhenitsyn, could keep writing in Russian, relying on the publishers to translate them. Others waited until the Iron Curtain was lifted to publish in Russia again.

Nowadays many Russian writers reside in Paris, New York or Tel Aviv, but sell books in Russia. Even though he had an ambivalent relationship with Germany and enjoyed his comfortable life in America, Remarque kept writing his novels in German. We shouldn't forget though that he was famous in America prior to his immigration; Hollywood had made movies of his novels, so he could afford the luxury of writing in his own language.

Many writers who have changed the language they write in have had the advantage of prior knowledge. Nabokov, for example, had a governess who taught him English from early childhood. The Indian-American writer Bharati Mukherjee received a classical British education while living in Calcutta. On the other hand, Joseph Conrad, the son of a Polish nobleman, knew no English at all when at age 21 he went to sea on a British merchant ship. At 27 he received his British residency and ended up becoming one of the best descriptive writers who ever lived, writing in English, his *third* language.

Joseph Brodsky, a Russian poet who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972 and immigrated to America, is said to be one of the best essayists in the English language. "To read these masterful essays is to experience English at its finest," Raul Nino, a prominent American critic, wrote about his work.[1] Brodsky taught himself English in his twenties while still in Russia by reading and translating English poetry. He had a massive English–Russian dictionary and would browse through it again and again, checking every word and nuance. Yet, after arriving in America aged 32, he began learning English once more from scratch. Eventually he became a bilingual writer. He saw English as an instrument through which to discover the world; it was as indispensable for him as Russian. He said he would go mad if forced to choose only one language …

One of the greatest challenges for a writer in adopting a new language is developing a *feel* for it. Not only was Nabokov a gifted writer, he was also a passionate linguist, who was fluent in Russian and English, could write in French, and understood several other European languages. This enabled him to play with words' meanings in varied tongues, and mock both the fussiness of Europeans as well as the bewildered response they evoked in America.

Extensive reading of good-quality books in a new language helps. Good writers have a sensual and aesthetic relationship with words. They follow their natural music. Using several languages provides a kind of "brain massage": it sharpens our thinking and our sensory perceptions. I enjoyed discovering that the beautifully elastic word "emerald" sounds similarly in both Hebrew (*izmargad*) and Russian (*izumrud*), despite the fact that

these three languages are all from different origins: Latin, Semitic and Cyrillic. As a fresh beginner you have the opportunity to revive words long forgotten by locals and can avoid the usage of clichés through simply not knowing them.

The adaptation process for a writer in a new country reminds me of the psychologist Maslow's theory of the *Hierarchy of Needs* which demonstrates the lovely fact that we, human beings, are never happy. As soon as our most basic needs are satisfied, instead of being content we immediately move to chasing the higher ones (e.g. love or job satisfaction).

My adaptation process as a writer in Australia followed a similar pattern of perpetual dissatisfaction. Several writers I knew in Israel had warned me prior to my immigration that it was impossible to change languages. When my mastery of English had improved, rather than feeling victorious about defeating those gloomy predictions, I immediately became preoccupied with the next step up the ladder. I had lost my "technical excuse" not to write (even though I can still always whine about my poor grammar). It was then that I was forced to face the fundamental existential question all writers dread, but which torments you even more when you are an immigrant: *What do I have to say and to whom?*

The first step in overcoming that panic was to challenge my perception of Australians as *aliens*. I know I'm putting my entire future in this country at risk when I say so, but yes, I was so terrified of being too different to be understood that I simply ignored the fact that we are all made from the same DNA.

Perhaps my panic began when I first attended a local writers' group and was told that you couldn't publish a short story in Australia unless you wrote something about some small country-town with an old man, a tree and clouds. The locals, well-meaning people explained to me, are obsessed with their vast, mostly deserted landscapes, perhaps because their grip on them, historically, is so fragile.

In Israel I used to lead a lifestyle of an urban creature and my only experience of the country was a little park in Tel-Aviv. My previous country lacked empty spaces, or generally any space at all, and most of my stories occurred in big cities with traffic perpetually congested and residential buildings so dense that they literally climbed one on top of each other, like lovers.

My impressions of the Australian countryside weren't as lyrical, as the writers' group suggested was required, either. The roadside snooker pubs with their old jukeboxes inspired my writing more than clouds and trees. When I decided, out of despair, to write this down in an article, which

was then actually published, I experienced my most significant "cultural shock". I just couldn't believe that what I had to say about this country was actually of interest to the Australian public. However, it was only later on when my short story about suicide bombings in Israel was judged a finalist in a short story competition in Australia, that I began to seriously question the writers' group's advice, and especially doubt my own cultural stereotypes.

"My language is my country," wrote the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. What did he mean? People often mistake the idea of *country* for a particular culture, a certain comfort and sense of belonging within their own milieu. Immigrants who find these components in their adopted countries still tend to refer to their previous country as their true home. Yet when revisiting it they often describe feelings of estrangement. They feel they are "insiders, but outsiders" at the same time. When asked whether he would go back to Russia after the fall of communism, Brodsky replied, "You cannot return to a country that no longer exists." Brodsky captured the fluid, non-geographical quality of this mythical *country*. It is the same elusive country Pessoa was referring to.

If culture and sense of belonging make a country, then my country is my imagination. Imagination can be practiced everywhere when you are a writer. Readers will always respond to a good story. Many of us grew up on Andersen's fairytales without being Danish.

Immigration can benefit a writer in many ways: it is a source of inspiration and can enrich a writer's cultural and philosophical perceptions while presenting him or her with new moral dilemmas and standards. One of the first people to understand this was, of course, a Greek. They were always ahead of us. Plutarch, who lived circa 100 AD, once said while trying to cheer up a friend doomed to exile: "Indeed the muses, it appears, called exile to their aid in perfecting for the ancients the finest and most esteemed of their writings."

Even though immigration is always a stressful experience, it may facilitate the development of a writer's *unique voice* (if, of course, he or she has the initial talent and the originality of thought). Your perception of your new country, like it or not, will be different to that of the locals and your descriptions will be fresh. Conrad brought to England a sense of life's strangeness that was lacking in the Victorian tradition. I particularly enjoy writing about the Casino, as in Israel this is outlawed. Its cheap glamour becomes my personal fairytale.

Baraheni, one of Iran's prominent writers, now living in Toronto, claims that writing poetry in another language is an entirely different

enterprise, which produces different poetry. I think it isn't just language which influences the writer-immigrant's work; it is the flavours of the new lifestyle and pop culture, the different values and especially the fabulous details, such as the ominous (to my foreigner's eyes …) grin of Melbourne's Luna Park.

Baraheni also mentions that when well-known writers immigrate, they sink into anonymity. He calls this "a tragic loss of identity." But anonymity can also be fertile soil for inspiration. The hardships experienced can be successfully transformed into fabulous fiction – this is how so-called *immigration literature* originated. A fresh start in Australia actually freed me from writing on the topics I used to write about (mainly urban violence and loneliness, and post-army traumas) and gave me the opportunity to further develop my themes and writing style. From a quite rough and direct tone I'm drifting now towards more soft and dreamy sentences. Perhaps this is also because of this new language's music and the way I perceive it

Let's be honest, this optimistic, even romanticised, view of the migration experience does not always apply. As Goran Simic, a Yugoslav poet who moved to Canada after the siege of Sarajevo in 1996 says: "There is a question of how much a writer can be transplanted from one country to another and survive. It's like a flower. Sometimes flowers can't survive in another country." After immigrating Simic himself spent two years slinging boxes, tried briefly to run a restaurant business and then retired to live on his savings and write poetry.

Marina Tsvetayeva's lines, "On this partially severed rope/I – a small dancer/I – a shadow of somebody's shadow. I – a lunatic," make me shiver every time I read them. I can't help thinking about this as a vision of her end.[2] Tsvetayeva immigrated to Paris shortly after the revolution (in 1925), living in poverty with her work mainly published in émigré publications. She alienated herself from the other Russian émigrés when she refused to sign their document belittling Mayakovsky's poetic achievements because of his leftist politics. Eventually her husband, who meanwhile had found employment with the NKVD, returned to Russia.[3] Tsvetayeva joined him in 1938 and the next year her husband was executed. In 1941 Tsvetayeva hanged herself.

The next danger facing those writer-immigrants, who finally believe they can find a readership in the new country, is that of falling in love with their newly shaped exotic identities. Lavish descriptions of colourful foreign foods, landscapes and traditions cannot stand on their own. Celebration or mourning of the past and the current immigration experience are good themes, but they should not be cultivated high on pedestals cut off from

the reality of the new country. We cannot be reduced, or tempted to reduce ourselves, to being foreigners only. First of all we are individuals; we must also be observers and thinkers. Good writers are also good psychologists, able to speak to their new readers not only through the prism of foreigner-protagonist, but also from the readers' perspective.

Milan Kundera immigrated to France from Czechoslovakia. Up until 1984 all of his novels took place in his homeland, but since then he has developed a more cosmopolitan voice. He opposed repeatedly to being reduced to a writer-in-exile, demanding for himself the broader recognition he deserves as an international writer-philosopher and defender of individualism.

Bharati Mukherjee was told in the seventies by American publishers and critiques that the only way for her to succeed as a writer would be to describe Calcutta's upper-class exotica. She obeyed for a while and the price she paid, as she states in one of her essays, was to become a part of the mainstream writing.[4] Eventually she rebelled and developed her own voice, writing novels about American reality.

In his book *Lolita*, Nabokov described the America of the 1950s like no one else – through a European foreigner's eyes. Using his own "outsider" identity, and enriched by his life in different parts of Europe and America, Nabokov served Americans up their own paradoxical melange of sweet naïveté and vulgarity with a new dressing. He didn't limit himself to one language either, publishing books in Russian and English. Moreover, while living in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s Nabokov wrote a few short stories in French. Critics regarded him as a literary anomaly, a foreign genius somehow working accidentally in both the Russian and English languages.

Ilan Stavans, a Professor of Latino studies at Amherst College and a notable writer, said that there are writers who overcome being from one country. He is a bilingual writer who was born in Mexico to Eastern-European Jewish parents and now lives in America. He says: "I write in English for Americans about topics they know little about, and I write in Spanish to Mexicans … I act as a bridge, I symbolise dialogue."

I used to see the set of my multiple identities as a burden. I spent my early twenties trying to reduce and simplify my biography while developing my own fictional voice. I was afraid of confusing my readers, but also myself. However, while observing different aspects of my life I started to accept the parallel between them and the complexity of my identities: my different occupations, names, languages, lovers, and beliefs. The same process applies to my writing, which supposedly behaves the

way the human brain behaves during adolescence: creating more and more intricate connections and paths between its neurons, making it more and more complex. Every day I learn more about how to benefit from this complexity, especially as a writer. I still have a long way to go.

V.S. Naipaul describes people like himself (and myself!) as people "of no tribe".

The image that comes to mind is that of a ghost floating between different dimensions. Perhaps I'm being too melodramatic, but I like the weightlessness and the freedom this image grants. It is so refreshing after the gravity of the communist parades and the religious rituals of my childhood home and the Israeli army service of my youth. Of course, there is always plenty of guilt about being the observer, the uprooted wanderer, but on the other hand there is something very human at its core. Being stripped of a country of origin, a mother tongue and a clear sense of belonging means what remains is a bare humanity which enables you to relate to each individual you encounter. And perhaps this is the significance of the writer-immigrant's voice.

Notes

1 Raul Nino, "Fragments: Joseph Brodsky, Lenin," *The Booklist* 94.15 (1998): 1297.

2 Marina Tsvetayeva, trans. Ljubov V. Kuchkina, "I don't think, don't complain, don't argue," http://www.geocities.com/sulawesiprince/russpoets/marina.html.

3 The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs – the old Soviet security services and forerunner to the KGB.

4 Bharati Mukherjee, "On being an American writer" in Clack, George (ed.), *Writers on America*, USINFO2002, http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs writers/mukherjee.htm (accessed 3/10/07).

ROGER BOURKE

THE YEAR'S WORK IN FICTION: 2007–2008

The past year proved to be an eventful, perhaps in some ways even an exceptional, one for Australian fiction. It saw the publication of Alex Miller's possibly finest novel to date, *Landscape of Farewell*; Tim Winton's first novel for seven years, *Breath*; the final part of Steven Carroll's trilogy chronicling the lives of an ordinary Melbourne family, *The Time We Have Taken*; a novel by the English author Nicholas Shakespeare set in his newly adopted home of Tasmania, *Secrets of the Sea*; some outstanding work by young, emerging Australian novelists; and a wealth of collected and anthologised short stories.

Alex Miller is twice winner of Australia's premier literary prize (in 1993 for *The Ancestor Game* and in 2003 for *Journey to the Stone Country*) and his 2007 novel, *Landscape of Farewell*, was among the five shortlisted for this year's Miles Franklin Award. In probably any other than such a "star-studded shortlist" year, wrote the Melbourne *Age*, it would have been a "shoo-in" for the prize, which this year went to Steven Carroll for his *The Time We Have Taken.*

Set in present-day Hamburg and Queensland's central highlands, Miller's novel is the tale of two old men, one European, the other Aboriginal, reconciling the ghosts of their pasts. German history professor Max Otto, his career over and grieving for his dead wife, no longer feels he has anything left to live for. But after his valedictory lecture is interrupted by a feisty Australian academic, Vita McLelland, who persuades him to visit Australia, Otto discovers new meanings through a quiet friendship with Vita's uncle Dougald. Dougald shares with Max the story of his great-grandfather, the indigenous warrior Gnapun, whose story is reimagined and retold in the novel. This is the story of a massacre, one that Miller apparently first heard as a sixteen-year-old British migrant working on a central highlands cattle station, and that has stayed with him for more

than fifty years. This, a fictionalised retelling of the historical Cullin-la-Ringo massacre in Queensland of 1861, the largest recorded massacre of Europeans by Aborigines, forms the setpiece at the heart of the book and is a tour-de-force of imaginative prose. The Miles Franklin Award judges said of the novel: "Inasmuch as the novel is a European's telling of a rare episode in Aboriginal history, Miller's is a bold venture into perilous literary territory; he succeeds with distinctive panache." For me, *Landscape of Farewell* was easily the most memorable and rewarding Australian novel of 2007–08.

Breath is Tim Winton's first novel for seven years (his last being the Miles Franklin Award-winning *Dirt Music*). This is, in a sense, Winton's "coming-of-age" novel, a tale of surfing, sex and death. Set in a fictional Western Australian coastal town of the early seventies, it chronicles the friendship of Pikelet and Loonie, two boys who become hooked on the endorphin-rush they get from surfing. They meet the enigmatic Sando, a former champion surfer, and his wife, and find themselves attempting to ride ever-more dangerous waves, culminating in the potentially deadly offshore break known as the Nautilus. The novel is in part a meditation on why people do dangerous, potentially self-destructive things – and not only on the sea. "More than once since then," its narrator Bruce Pike reflects in later life, "I've wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath." The physical sensations of the "completely pointless and beautiful" sport of surfing, the darker moods of the Indian Ocean, and the coastal landscapes of south-west Western Australia are all vividly evoked in the novel in Winton's spare, transparent prose. I was impressed by Winton's choice of ending: the final chapter modulates into a minor key and the story resolves itself in a way that feels both inevitable and totally believable. No problems are solved, no rewards or punishments handed out, and the reader is left with a sense of contemplating the untidiness and provisionality of real lives. Winton is clearly a writer at the top of his form here and the superlatives of the publisher's blurb are well-justified: "*Breath* confirms him as one of the world's finest storytellers, whose work is both accessible and profound, relentlessly gripping and deeply moving."

Melbourne writer Steven Carroll is another mature novelist who, like Winton, seems to avoid the merely literary conventional. His *The Time We Have Taken* is a beautifully crafted novel. It is the last in the trilogy that began with *The Art of the Engine Driver* (2001) and *The Gift of Speed* (2004) and that evokes, in elegiac, luminous prose, the ordinary suburban

lives of Melbourne family from the nineteen fifties onwards. The year is now 1970 and the suburb is about to celebrate its centenary: Rita is still preoccupied with her home, her estranged engine-driver husband Vic has moved north, and their son, Michael, is now a university student in the city. The Miles Franklin Award judges said of the novel: "Carroll's novel is a poised, philosophically profound exploration … a stand-alone work that is moving and indelible in its evocation of the extraordinary in ordinary lives." Carroll himself has said of the trilogy as a whole: "I'd like the books to be read rather like somebody picking up an urn, dusting it down and turning it around in their hands and looking at this exotic tribe being depicted. At some stage you realise that this exotic tribe is us." Coming from a less talented writer, such an analogy might seem hubristric, but in Carroll's case it seems entirely just. From what appears to be unpromising raw material – ordinary suburban lives – Carroll has crafted a remarkable work of literary art.

Queensland writer Matthew Condon's *The Trout Opera* is a novel of epic dimensions – more than ten years in the writing and around 200,000 words in length. Its narrative spans the whole of the twentieth century, the lifetime of its central character, Wilfred Lampe, who lives out his solitary, outwardly uneventful bachelor existence in the Snowy River town of Dalgety in New South Wales. The novel begins in 1906 with preparations for an unusual school Christmas pageant – the opera of the book's title, in which the six-year-old Wilfred is to play the trout – and closes with the opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics at which Wilfred is to represent "The Old Man From Snowy River." Interwoven with this is the story of a young drug addict in Sydney's Kings Cross, Aurora Beck, which has elements of the crime novel or thriller. The writing is, by turn, realistic, surreal, satirical, lyrical, and philosophical. *The Trout Opera* has been described by its publishers as perhaps "the next Great Australian novel" and it has gained some glowing reviews (not least one from Peter Carey who called it "a triumph"). But I have to voice a minority view here and say that I wondered if rather than being a unified work on a grand scale it is not two novels welded into one: the stories of Wilfred Lampe and Aurora Beck, which, although they are drawn together by the end, seemed to me to read oddly in juxtaposition. This struck me as a novel that is perhaps too self-aware of its own literariness and its desire to be "epic". It reminded me in some ways, in its scale, its method of story-telling, and its prediliction for the bizarre, of the work of the American novelist Thomas Pynchon, who is probably not an easy writer to emulate successfully. This is perhaps being ungenerous to Condon. But personally I much preferred

reading the graceful and economical prose of Alex Miller which, by saying less, says more.

English-born Nicholas Shakespeare is the award-winning author of a biography of the travel writer Bruce Chatwin, three earlier novels, and a travel book, *In Tasmania*, about the island where he now makes his home for part of the year. Frankly, I found his novel *Secrets of the Sea* a disappointment. Its publishers, Harvill Secker, describe it as his "finest novel to date." But I wondered. I found it sentimental, slightly rambling, and far too long. *Secrets of the Sea* is basically the story of the early years of a childless marriage and a young married couple's search for substitute fulfillment, not really enough, for me, to sustain a novel of 400 pages. It is, to be sure, set in Tasmania, and there are splashes of local colour, but whether, as its London publishers claim, 'the timeless beauty of the land' and "the eccentric, often hilarious dynamics of island life" play any significant part I'm not so sure. But the problems really started for me with the introduction of the character known as Kish, a disturbed teenage offender, who is rescued from the wreck of a sailing ship by the main characters. I found great deal about Kish implausible: almost like a character from a 1950s American film such as *The Asphalt Jungle*, rather than a believable present-day teenager. There also seemed to be something cinematic in the novel's perhaps too-conventional ending, which, without giving too much away, reminded me of the closing shot of the 1942 British film *Random Harvest*, minus the violins and the apple blossoms.

Trevor Shearston's *Dead Birds* is a novel for readers who enjoy a narrative challenge. It is (as ABC Radio National's *The Book Show* website put it) "a story told by a head in a jar on a boat." A New Guinean tribesman is killed by a "spirit with lightning" (a white man with a gun), his head is preserved in a jar on the white men's boat, and it is from the point of view of an *utamu*, the spirit of a beheaded man, that the novel is narrated. This is certainly an original concept, although as one reviewer has pointed out, while it might have worked brilliantly in a short story, it does impose limitations on the narrative of the novel since the head can only observe the other characters on the boat in half-comprehending way and never itself go ashore. Having said that, I enjoyed this novel, which is based on an actual expedition by an Italian explorer-naturalist and his crew up the Fly River in pre-colonial Papua in 1877. It an unusual novel of "first contact", told from an indigenous point of view, and Shearston manages to evoke and sustain the impression of entering into the consciousness of a pre-colonial tribesman very convincingly.

For me, there were two oustanding, although very different, first novels by emerging Australian writers in 2007–08.

Perth writer Alice Nelson's *The Last Sky*, which was shortlisted for the Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2006, is a quite stunning achievement for a first novel. The publisher's blurb by Fremantle Press describes it as "a painful tale of lost love in wartime Shanghai," although this is by no means a conventional tale of romance. Heartfelt, poignant, and filled with a sense of exile and loss, it explores and laments the failure of love for two women of different times and different cultures. Set in Hong Kong in the period leading up its handover to China in 1997, the novel takes the reader inside the failing marriage of the narrator, Australian academic Maya Wise, and her archaeologist husband. Adrift in a strange city, Maya meets an elderly Chinese man, Ken Tiger. Hearing his tale of a love affair sixty years earlier with the beautiful and enigmatic Jewish-Russian refugee Ada Lang, Maya sets out to piece together the story of Ada's life and that of her brief and doomed marriage to a Shanghai tycoon. I was particularly impressed by the quality and assurance of Nelson's sensuous yet spare, almost lapidary, prose, which seems capable of evoking vividly for the reader whatever it chooses: the Hong Kong waterfront, the Chinese desert, a Rembrandt painting. This author is clearly a major new talent and one to watch for in the future.

Fear of Tennis by David Cohen, a Perth-born writer, mainly of short stories, now living in Melbourne, was another standout Australian first novel of 2007–08. It is not often one comes across a *comic* debut novel – certainly not such an accomplished one. "It wouldn't be a bad thing if *Fear of Tennis* became a cult-book: like *Seinfeld*, it makes Fabergé mountains out of everyday molehills," the reviewer Owen Richardson wrote of it in the Melbourne *Age*. While not quite, like *Seinfeld*, "about nothing," Cohen's novel is indeed quirky and offbeat with a dry wit and an acute eye for some of the absurdities of contemporary urban life. Its hero, Mike Planner, is a nerdy, obsessive-compulsive type who works as a courtroom sound-recordist in present-day Perth. He is also a man who has a fixation with hygiene and bathrooms, public and private: "The sight of a well-designed, well-maintained public toilet always fills me with pleasure." But Mike's closeted existence is changed in unexpected ways after he happens to see his best mate from school, now a yuppie banker and tennis addict, on a bus. The plot resolves itself in the age-old comic tradition of a satisfying, "feel-good" ending with all loose ends tied. I thoroughly enjoyed this novel: for its intelligence, its understated humour, its engaging central character, and, not least, its sure grasp of the conventions of the difficult craft of comic writing. Once again, this author is a new writing talent worth watching.

Other Country is another first novel, from Perth writer Stephen Scourfield, who is probably best-known in his home city as the current travel editor of the *West Australian* newspaper. *Other Country* is the tale of two brothers, the Ace and Wild Billy, set against the backdrop of West Australia's far-north Kimberley region. The brothers walk out their burnt-out father to make their own way in the world as cattlemen. Given the chance to run a station of their own, each responds differently to the challenges this brings, with ultimately tragic consequences. This is a novel marked by a strong sense of place. Almost every page seems to radiate the author's passion for, and knowledge of, the Kimberley, its seasons, landscapes, people and lifestyle. What is otherwise an excellent and original novel is, however, rather let down by its closing 50 pages, in which it seems to suddenly quicken pace as it moves towards what I felt was a rather cinematic, almost melodramatic ending. This would have been a better novel, I think, with a less conventional ending, although its author writes passages of sparkling, descriptive prose.

Lilia's Secret, which the publishers Vintage describe as "a seductive story of chasing love and ghosts in Mexico," is a first novel by the Melbourne-based Erina Reddan, and it is much closer, at least in intent, to the "popular" novel than the others reviewed here. Reddan is a Walkley Award-winning journalist and a former ABC foreign correspondent who met her Mexican future husband, Victor Del Rio, while on assignment in French Polynesia, and it is his exotic family history that is said to have inspired the writing of the novel. The title character, Lilian de Las Flores, is apparently based partly on Reddan's husband's grandmother, a Mexican revolutionary of the early 1900s, who went on to allegedly murder at least five of her six husbands and to grow rich through peddling drugs and running brothels. Yet, paradoxically, she was also a midwife and a folk-healer. Its plot centres on a quest to determine whether the fictional Lilia was "a heroine or a monster." It must be said that *Lilia's Secret* is an undemanding read. The narrative is located solely in the present, although it seems to call out for being set at least partly in the past, and the story of Lilia is told, or rather explicated, mainly through passages of rather inexpert dialogue. As a result, no real sense of "Mexico" itself, its culture, or its past, emerges from the page, except maybe that of the first-time foreign visitor. Another issue here, at least for me, was that any English-language novel about Mexico and its "ghosts" must inevitably bear comparison with Malcolm Lowry's 1947 classic *Under the Volcano*, which this one simply cannot.

Finally, two intersesting first novels each take darker themes from within the country's criminal subculture. Andrew Hutchinson's debut novel

Rohypnol is a "New Punk" fiction that deals with the confronting subject of "date-rape" and the drug that facilitates it. Hutchinson presents the novel from the point view of a date-rapist himself, in brutal and brutalising language, and his novel clearly relies to a large degree on both of these devices for its shock effect. Chris Womersley's *The Low Road* is part noir-thriller, part tale of urban isolation, in which a young petty criminal with a suitcase of stolen money and a fugitive doctor find themselves being pursued by an ageing gangster. It will be interesting to see if these young authors can repeat the critical acclaim they have received for their first novels with their next.

The past year also continued to show evidence of the sheer vitality in Australia of the short story as a literary form. In addition to David Malouf's magisterial *The Complete Stories*, a collection of his shorter fiction (some of it of novella length), and Robert Drewe's *The Best Australian Stories 2007*, *Westerly* received four short-story collections in 2007–08: Victorian writer Anthony Lynch's *Redfin*, the Western Australian Susan Midalia's *A History of the Beanbag and Other Stories*, Sydney writer Angus Gaunt's *Prime Cuts* and *The Rumours Are True*, a collection of stories by sixteen creative writing students at Queensland University of Technology. Each of these collections is worth reading. Anthony Lynch, whose stories have a spare, snatched-from-life quality, is probably the most assured writer, although the work of Susan Midalia, whose stories tend to adopt an almost mini-essay-like form, has an engaging, idiosyncratic charm.

"Don't let anyone tell you the Australian short story is dead. It's thriving … It seems there are many hundreds, maybe thousands, of people out there writing short fiction," Robert Drewe writes in his lively introduction to *The Best Australian Stories 2007*. And he produces the evidence to back up this statement, describing the mounds of manuscripts and magazines he sifted through while compiling the collection, which daily overflowed his post-office box at Tintenbar, New South Wales, and threatened in the end to almost swamp his home: "… so many new stories under the one roof – one thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two stories in all – that you can smell them when you enter the house." In his introduction to the collection, Drewe challenges the "naysayers" who argue that no one really publishes short fiction in Australia today. On the contrary, he points out, there are a surprising number of small (some of them fairly new) Australian literary publications that do. He lists twenty publications that are represented in the anthology. (*Westerly* itself gets a mention here, and New South Wales writer Ryan O'Neill's 'July the Firsts' from *Westerly* 51 is one of the stories included.) Drewe then goes "out on a limb" to state that "there have never been more story-friendly Australian publications than at the moment."

All this is very encouraging for aspiring and new Australian writers of short fiction. Although, as Drewe says, the real crunch for a short-fiction writer is not getting a single story published but rather getting a book-length collection of stories into print. For established authors such as David Malouf, this is obviously less of a problem. Relatively few Australian publishers are willing to take a risk on a short-story collection by a relative unknown. Two which are, however, as Drewe points out, are Black Inc. and the University of Queensland Press. *The Best Australian Stories 2007* shows just how rich and diverse the genre is – although Robert Drewe in his willingness to read *unpublished* material for his anthology seems to have set himself a yearly task of almost herculean proportions. The 2006 edition of Drewe's anthology was apparently an Australian bestseller; this deserves to be one too.

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Robert James Berry

Rises

The idiom of night
is another language.

After far thunder makes a last
bellicose grumble in the gulf

garages yawn with arch lights
and the street furniture takes possession.

A moon sandwiched under the chimney pots
rises

over the antennae of houses
the scribble of power cables
the alder branches

a naked harvest crescent.

The Tuesday trash cans dream
and stones here longer than any neighbours
or human culture

confide nothing to the seldom walker with dogs
or a cold dowdy poet.

Sub Antarctic

So far south rituals are slower
the surge of change creeps like ice
a name spelt out on diesel tanks
never rots, nor the giant petrels
scrapping over the dead.

The whole hill moves with rabbits
chewing this island into the sea.
History here has been slaughter.

In the tussock are rusted boilers: penguin digesters.
The smell's lasted longer than the outrage.

This island inherited from the wind
on a gravelly beach an elephant seal
lumbers out behind an old digester
and bellows.

Andrew Burke

The Limits of My Language are the Limits of My World. Wittgenstein

i.m. Tony Statkus

As bit players, the limits
of everyday activity
are the limits of our lives. You are
half out the door, going
who knows where. Perhaps you can
tell us when we meet again.
We don't expect cards or letters,
emails or texts, and only our
limited senses would ask for
photos of the other side.

Did you leave your watch behind?
I picture Sue running
after you, shouting, "You forgot
your watch, you forgot your watch."
Time is only for us now,
empty arms of the clock
hold us back from joining you.
When you were sick
and tired of it all, you left. I can
understand that. Mind the step,
wipe your feet. I expect we will follow you
in time. They chisel years
on tombstones, don't they, yet facts
are putty in historians' hands after deeds
are done. It's a variety show, all this song and dance.
Total it up: More love than hate,

more laughter than tears. Do you need
a torch? Or is that light at the end of the tunnel
light enough? Perhaps you can send us
a clue or two, telling us, What happens next?
Eh? Tell me that.

Bruce Dawe

This New Century

Der Lachende
Hat die furchtbare Nachricht
Nur noch nicht empfangen
Bertolt Brecht

and you, you say, know nothing of this
since it all comes to you in comfortingly distant images
(this new century already proving murderous enough
suicide bombers flying to bits in their rage of martyrdom
taking non-martyrs with them wherever possible especially women and children
and the drive-by shooters from grandiloquently named organizations
who sometimes fail even to claim their proud responsibility
and the children from remote villages
sold for sex in Bangkok and cheerfully infected by those preferring virgins
and the AIDS epidemic like a tribal ghost stalking the African nations
and the child-soldiers conscripted into rebel armies of so-called liberation
and those other millions of little ones toiling from dawn to dusk
who never see school or a reasonable wage
and those thousands grateful for grass bread in Northern Afghanistan
and the drug culture shadowing every land like a cloud
– you, *you* look in the nonchalant mirror
of a magazine or the Plato's cave *wayang* of a jumbo-size TV screen
and suppose you know what it's like out there
where the sky is full of holes through which pour streams of fire
and jagged ice

and soup of any vile description is a luxury
and a raw potato discovered in a field
is something to fight to the death for)

Mike Williams

The Gig

Harp, do I look like the kind of man who would have a petty cash book?

Harp considers this for a moment, his lean face frozen, as though he's a little stoned. Well, half his luck if he is. His dreadlocks make me want to scratch my own scalp. How the hell does he wash his hair, anyway?

He slides into a lopsided grin.

Er, no you don't, actually.

Then for pity's sake stop going on about it. Just get the money from the till and get thee to a bakery.

Right. Just thinking about the accounts …

Jesus, Harp, stop thinking about the accounts – not your concern. I manage to pay you every week, don't I?

Yup.

Well then.

Okay, okay.

He opens the till, grabs a note and walks out of the shop, a thin shadow in his black shirt and jeans. I watch him stop and squint into the streaming sunlight; a creature of the night is Harp. I remind myself to get to that window, a little too grimy, even for The Creased Page.

A couple of customers are shuffling their way along the shelves, one in crime, one in science fiction, both content to browse without me annoying them. I like that in a customer. I can usually tell what kind of fiction a person is into the first time I see them.

I sit behind the counter and continue cleaning dust jackets of some hardback Atwoods, all in wonderful nick, just a little surface dirt. Some guy moving overseas had offloaded them yesterday. I put *Alias Grace* aside for myself.

Harp comes back with almond croissants and carefully folds the receipt and places it in the till, along with the change.

Coffee or tea? Harp asks.

Tea, I tell him.

He wanders out back to make it while I set up a display of the Atwoods on the counter. I know at least three regulars who will snap them up as quickly as look at them. Mr Science Fiction comes to the counter with an old paperback: Asimov.

Can't get enough of the Asimov's, I tell him.

He mutters something that I don't catch and I glance up as I ring the sale through. He looks away as I pass him the book, which he stuffs into his jacket pocket, and shuffles off. He can't be much more than Harp's age and I remember where I've seen him – washing windscreens at the lights a couple of blocks away. He's dressed in jeans and flannel shirt, a black beany. No shoes. A ragged beard. He reeks of cigarettes and stale sweat.

Just our crime reader remains as we clear space on the table by the old couch in the centre of the shop. Harp pours tea and I consider the almond croissants he's put onto a plate.

So, you coming to the gig tonight, or what? Harp asks.

Oh, yeah, the gig … I'd forgotten.

Shit, you're hopeless.

Harp plays guitar, bass, drums, and God knows what else. Songwriter. Can sing, too, in a Neil Young kind of way. He's played the odd track in the shop from time to time. No one's complained yet, and I'd leaned back into it myself.

Well, I'll come. Where is it?

Front bar at Miller's. After ten.

I know the place: the kind of bar where Charles Bukowski would feel at home. TAB on one side, pool hall on the other; cheap drinks, cheap food, and they crank up the sound. Perfect for Harp and his crew.

We amble through the morning with a slow stream of paperback exchangers, a uni researcher looking for out of print history volumes, and a Len Deighton fan delighted to come across a hardback edition of *Funeral in Berlin*: we spend a good ten minutes comparing notes on classic espionage thrillers.

The afternoon, though, is quiet so I send Harp off early to rehearse with his band. I sit down around four-thirty and drink some more tea, thinking about the evening ahead. Apart from a movie two weeks ago and evening strolls around the local nooks, I haven't been out for ages. A couple of bands, a drink or two will do me good.

It's still bright and warm outside as I turn the sign on the door to show back in five minutes, and walk up the road to The Class Act. Marion's on

the phone and motions for me to take a chair. I don't. I walk around touching various items of clothing on the racks. There's a suit I like the cut of, and if I had reason to wear a suit, I'd be tempted.

That would fit you a treat, says Marion putting down the phone. Could do you a deal on it.

I glance at the price tag. Lord, you'd have to, I tell her.

So, what's up? she inquires, writing something into her order book. Then she puts it aside, her hands on the counter, and looks at me.

Wondering if you'd like to go and see a band tonight.

Oh? Which band?

Harp's band – Gutter Cowboys.

God … how old are we?

Me, I'm fifty-three … I don't know about you – you won't tell me.

I still won't.

Well, you don't look it.

Charmer. So where are they playing?

Miller's, where else?

Jesus, you sure know how to treat a woman ... that place is a hole.

Sure it is, but it's an institution.

Yes, and people are locked up in those.

So, how about it then?

You'll have to buy me dinner somewhere nice first.

Done. Pick you up after eight.

Okay. I must be mad.

I only like mad women.

I've seen the scars. Off with you now, I've got a late order I must do. Remember, somewhere nice to eat.

Trust me.

I never trust a man who says trust me.

So be it, I tell her, and walk out into the fading afternoon.

Marion and I had met at a book launch I'd set up at the shop for a local poet. We'd been out for coffee and the odd meal and ended up in the sack a couple of times. Neither of us had ever broached the possibility of a more permanent relationship. We'd both been there and done that with little success. Still, you always think in those alone moments that it could work if you had another stab at it.

There's nothing much doing in the last hour of trading, so I read some *Alias Grace* and remind myself that I really must clean that window in the morning. Here, in the ticking silence of the shop, there is only me in a galaxy of books.

***

We settle into a quiet table at The Pasta Bowl. Good food, great wine list, and it's all crisp table cloths and spotless cutlery and glassware that sparkles in the subdued lighting. Anton, who knows me from all the other times I've splashed out on my pasta addiction, corkscrews an Italian red with waiterly grace.

We'll you're off to a good start, Marion goes on. This just might make up for dragging me down to Miller's. What time are they on, anyway?

After ten sometime.

All right ... time to prepare myself. Now, let's look at this menu.

Go ahead, I know what I want.

Don't tell me – you always have the same.

Er … yes.

How boring of you.

That's me. I rather see it as comfortable.

I see. I warn you, that's why I left Harry – I wanted a husband, not a couch. Someone told him once he danced like a doctor or a librarian. Do you dance, Mr Books?

I dance like a horse whisperer. It's something to behold.

Goodness, I can't imagine.

Marion takes a sip of red, her eyes smiling at me over her glass.

We're just good for the odd tumble, you and I. Is that wicked of me?

Very wicked, I tell her. And I was fearful you wanted commitment.

No, I'm old enough to be realistic. That's the beauty of age, don't you think? Anyway I'm ready to order, so why don't you call that rather attractive young man over.

Why don't I.

I signal to attentive Anton and he glides over, his long apron blindingly white. Marion orders. I drink some wine, feeling … well, comfortable.

***

Miller's is full on when we get there, shoulder to shoulder, a swaying herd of beer-soaked aficionados of the loud and pumping. I pay our five dollars door charge and some bored young thing stamps our wrists with purple ink. Marion shouts into my ear, God, they should pay me, and I resent being branded.

I give her a "there there poor Marion" look. She mouths fuck off, but I lead her through the dense forest of bodies to the one spot against the long bar that is miraculously free from sweating humanity. The blackboard on

the wall informs me it's Mongrel Country dug in on the stage and giving their all. Into the microphone, the lead singer drawls, You think you're Cinderella, but you don't fit the shoe … but closer to home, Marion shouts, For the love of God get me a vodka and tonic. I try and make eye contact with the girl behind the bar, but she's got her hands full with trendier punters.

I shout to Marion, Might take a while.

Typical, she shouts back. She hoists herself onto a bar stool, clutching her bag on her lap. We are not amused, apparently. I spot Harp in a tight huddle with his band, all holding pints and looking a little worn. According to the blackboard, the Gutter Cowboys are up next.

I'm starting to tap into Mongrel Country energy and I squeeze Marion's arm. Drink, she mouths. I have another crack at ordering and, mercifully, the girl takes pity on me. Two minutes later, Marion has her vodka and I'm gripping a green Heineken bottle. Marion actually smiles at me and I notice her foot tapping to the mongrel dogs who preach.

When Mongrel Country finish their set, the house music offers no respite for the audio senses and I give up trying to converse with Marion. I keep her supplied with vodka and tonic and she seems resigned to the fact she's stuck here at least for the next set. Harp brushes past me and says, Real glad you made it, man. He notices Marion then, Oh hi.

Hello, Harp, says Marion, but he's off and heading for the stage to set up. Oh to be young, says Marion. I nod in my comfortable way. Yup.

Harp's band is some sort of folk/rock/blues fusion with mostly originals and a couple of covers thrown in for good measure. Harp's vocals are soulful and he can turn a good lyric, I'll say that for the lad. Looking around at the crowd, you can tell the women are drawn to young Harp, the pale leanness of him, the sombre clothes and, of course, the songs. There's no doubt he's the driving force behind the Gutter Cowboys. I swear Marion's a little moist of eye when they do their cover of *Famous Blue Raincoat*. I must say, I didn't expect a Leonard Cohen from Harp. But I guess it kind of fits. Marion leans in to me a little and I put my arm around her shoulders. Harp, I owe you one.

Outside in the blessed cool air we slowly walk back to the car; the take-aways and late cafes are rattling with people leaving the pubs and cinemas. My hearing's still a little muffled from the amps in the pub. I reckon you enjoyed that, I tell Marion.

Despite my earlier reservations, yes, I did. Though I'm not sure I'm ready for Mongrel Country just quite yet. You seemed to like them.

I did, in a "comfortable" sort of way.

Marion punches my arm. You stop that, she says.

So what now then?

Back to my place. Your sink will be full of dishes, and you never vacuum.

Outrageous … the sink's only half full and I do vacuum, sometimes.

I'd rather not risk it, thank you.

***

The luminous hands of my watch display 3:35. Marion's dead to the world. She lives in a quiet street, not like my flat above the shop on the main drag, where there's always something going on. I'm not used to the quiet, or waking to it. I ease out of bed and pad quietly to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. I look out at Marion's night-shadowy garden, as I wait for the kettle to boil, thinking about the gig last night and how Harp had drawn the crowd. I've grown attached to the lad since he came to work for me and did his best to organise my bookshop chaos. This is one of those times I regret the no marriage, no kids scenario. My life seems suddenly tired and empty. I can't sleep now, so I creep back to the bedroom for my clothes and dress in the kitchen as the tea brews. I write a note for Marion and spend ten minutes on thinking what to write. I end up with: I couldn't sleep and didn't want to disturb you, so thought it best to go … thanks for suffering the crowd last night. I'll ring you from the shop in the morning. My love, A.

Back at The Creased Page, I make more tea and instead of going upstairs to the flat I prowl around the shop, holding the warm mug and eventually slump down on the couch. All the silent books heavy and dark with words. I'm an old book rat lost in my hole.

***

Harp shakes me awake. The lad has a coffee made, and toast with marmalade. His lean pale face is a mask of concern framed by his greasy dreadlocks.

I thought you were dead, he says, as his fingers construct a cigarette.

Thanks, I mutter. I wave a cramped arm around. Then the kingdom would have been yours.

Wow, he says, not looking up from his construction of tobacco and paper. And then he asks, So how was the gig?

It was good. I was impressed.

You're just saying that.

You know me better than that, Harp. If I thought it was shit, I'd say so.

He nods thoughtfully, placing the thin wire of the cigarette between his lips.

Who was the chick?

I wince at the thought of Marion hearing herself referred to as a "chick".

That was Marion, and probably still is, I tell him.

Oh, yeah, that's right. Hey, it's time we opened the shop, he says.

You're right. Can you do that? I need a shower and a shave.

Yup.

Thanks.

I squint into the sunlight breaking through the grime of the window. I really have to get to that. I eat toast. I drink coffee.

Didn't know you were into Leonard Cohen, I say.

Yeah, man … fuck, how could you not be?

How indeed.

I didn't really think you were dead … you just looked kinda comfortable.

There's that word again.

What word?

Never mind.

Harp shakes his head. I'll smoke this outside, he says, and then we'll open for business. Halfway to the door, he turns and, caught in a beam of morning sun, he's like some grungy angel.

You really liked the gig?

Yes, I did.

Hmm, he says. Fuck, eh.

Harp walks out into the hard white light.

I should move, but I pick up *Alias Grace*. No harm in a couple of pages.

*(*Mongrel County lyrics written by Max Ducker, Mongrel Country – used with permission)*

Ron Pretty

Kate Dancing

Kate dancing downstairs, her shoes
in hand, her hair swirling like a skirt.
Hair fine as a web and just as
entrancing. The spider spins by night
unwinding out of itself, wrapping
its flying moments in silken thread
to suck them dry. For sustenance, release
and the empty dawn where Kate
comes dancing, her long hair swirling
like a skirt like a silken web.
Night, the pallid
flicker of insect flight and the dawn we wait for
will glitter like a dewdrop. Don't, she whispers,
please don't. Restless in her sleep
she murmurs against the dark, the night
forcing an entrance where she dances
downstairs in her dreams, her shoes
in her hands, her hair the web.
Outside the spider building
its silken symmetry.
Night
hides its surprises as drifters on their filaments
attest; and Kate, stripped of all but pain
and a bony will to dance, comes ever descending
the stairs. She does not pluck her eyebrows, now
but looks in the mirror at her thin thighs,
her restless arms. In her dreams the spider
spins as she dances downstairs. She cries

in the night like a moth, sucked dry,
androgynous, resentful. At her desk she writes
such nightmares entitled *spider web*, or
descending (ever dancing) *the stairs*.
Omnipotent
she seems as she writes but cannot find an end
to her flight; and the spider
who spins every night – he loves her (his silken moth)
where she comes, ever dancing, the stairs.

Diane Fahey

Before the Heat

Down the garden, letting the dawn wind
travel through my body, transport me
with freshened sight to here. I pluck weeds,
skirt the pumpkin vine ramping out from
the young apple tree, tapping its strength.
A door slams. Inside I find my mother
beautifully asleep, lying fish-shaped
across her bed, wrapped in a beach towel
the greens of algae and leaf; deep in her hip-bone,
the infection we live to outwit.
The touch lamp is on: light answerable
to fingertips. All night, cool air streamed in.
Soon I'll shroud each window, draw up the moat bridge,
seal us inside this peace we have made.

Barry O'Donohue

Cut Grass

for Kaye

There is something sensual about newly cut grass
you say,
something earthy and primitive and wild and seemingly abandoned,
something agricultural or entomological, even strangely oceanographic,
with the scent of farms and rainforests and sweeping drylands,
of salt winds on the breath of spring or on your lovers lips,
or the burnt autumn bark or the newly unfurled rose,
something basic and seductive the way each blade is blunt,
shredded and feather like, a tattered wing fallen from the loft

of a rowdy cage of untamed fettered birds,
or like a man's face in the morning, its sleepy skin
and outrageous stubble,
and yes you like men
like the smell of their cologne and their sweat,
the texture of their sweat on your skin,
like the way their biceps curve when they flex or relax,
like the way their thigh muscles are weighty and the way their belly
falls gently towards their genitals,
ah yes you like men
and their summer folly or their winter mystery,
like the way they enact the endless tragedy of their love
and as newly cut grass they bleed all through the dry earth
to renew only slowly and with the languor of stone
to the soft angelic kiss of a morning dew.

Ron Blaber

Non-Fiction 2007–2008

A review essay of non-fiction represents on the one hand an impossible task but on the other hand allows the possibility making connections between various genres and modes of non-fiction that might not otherwise be made. But one must be cautious. Given the extraordinary depth and variety of writing that is covered by this category, it may be worth considering more but shorter essays and to a certain degree that is the strategy adopted here, probably pushing readers' tolerance of engaging with brief overviews of literary criticism, literary history, literary biography, autobiography, biography (and other types of life writing), cultural histories or cultural studies.

So the perplexing question remains: How does one write let alone do justice to the disparate array of texts that fall within the category of non-fiction?

In the first instance I will take a leaf out of Graham Huggan's contribution to the Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism and Transnationalism*. Here Huggan reasserts a fundamental principle important to his survey and to Australian literature in general. He argues that "Australian literature had been constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of the history of social relations in Australia" (vi). This principle can be applied to writing in general, and is particularly apt in relation to the connections that can be made across the various types of non-fiction. However, I would also like to introduce another, perhaps ludic element important to making those connections. Deane Blackler's study of German writer W. G. Sebald, points to the circumstance that in postmodern times the contract between writer and reader is no longer underwritten by the surety of generic codes and conventions. Sebald posits the idea of the disobedient reader, but this allows the general possibility of reading to be disobedient.

I can but hope that the conjunction of the constitutive and the ludic within this review will be not only be productive but also fun.

I have chosen to proceed thematically. This strategy, coupled with limitations placed on the genre of the review essay, means that some works did not get a guernsey and some did not get as much attention as they deserved. For these oversights and omissions I apologise in advance. Thematically, the review essay considers issues of place, cultural politics, literary and other lives, and finally questions of individuals and power. What follows emerges out of perceived dialogues between texts.

Country

Country or place features as a important category in this year's non-fiction. Some literary biography might feature in such an organising category, on this occasion we have three publications. Megan Lewis's *Conversations with the Mob* is essentially an extended piece of photojournalism, depicting an account of the author's encounter and exchange with the Martu people primarily with the Parnngurr and Punmu communities. The book seeks to balance the photographs that provide an intimate insight into Martu life with a commentary seeking to challenge the construction of recent stereotypes that have come to dominate media representation of indigenous peoples.

However the two other collections stand out if only because they accidentally provide a provocative dialogue. On the one hand we have *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation* edited by Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia, and Blaze Kwaymullina. It is a collection of short memoirs and stories that represents a welcome addition to Fremantle Press's growing and extensive list of work by Indigenous writers. On the other hand we have *Contrary Rhetoric: Lectures on Landscape and Language* by John Kinsella and edited by Glen Philips and Andrew Taylor. This is a series of lectures presented by Kinsella in the spring of the years 2002 – 2004 are published largely as delivered.

As I have already said, these two collections inadvertently create a dialogue concerned with different understanding and desires of what it means to be connected to country – not necessarily a connectivity that is simple and benign. The underlying theme of *Heartsick for Country* is the recognition of difference linked through a belief in and a desire for continuity. In the Introducion, Ambelin Kwaymullina notes that:

> This continent, named Australia by Captain Matthew Flinders in the nineteenth century is a land of many countries – and for every country,

there is a people.We are the Nyungar, Palkyu, Martu, Gumilaroi, Worrima, Bardi, Indjarbandi, Palawa, Tanganekald, and Meintangk, and we are many others. (7)

In challenging the grand and unifying gesture of Flinders by enumerating different peoples and countries, Kwaymullina goes on to describe a shared creation story that operates across time:

We were formed with the hills and the valleys, the water the sky, the trees and the plants, the crows and the kangaroos, created by the ancestors who gave meaning and life to our world. And for each of us, our country is not just where we live, but who we are. . . . Our blood is carried by the rivers and the streams, our breath is on the wind, and our pulse is in the land. (7)

Of course, European invasion may be seen as an irretrievable rupture – that which once was can never be again. However, the memoirs and stories represent an irrevocable belief in the power of that continuity regardless of the havoc European settlement brought to peoples' lives. In a sense lives were tragically disrupted but life as a principle of continuity was not. The problem was a European one; a failure to understand and to learn connection to country as a way of being here. This is well documented in Bob Morgan's contribution "Country – A Journey to Cultural and Spiritual Healing," (202-220) and forcefully expressed in Greg Lehman's "Seal and Snake", describing the actions of sealers:

… problems began when the British decided to stay. Killing began. Not just of *cartela*, the seal, but us *Palawa* mob too. That's the simple truth. Lots of killing. All this happened because of one thing: the sons of England did not know *tunapri nmanta*. This is our knowing that comes from the old stories, handed down for a thousand generations. It gives our Law and a way to know the world that works for everyone. But the sealers and soldiers would not learn. (134–5)

In the spirit of Lehman's argument, Kwaymullina summarises the European dilemma:

with every action taken to "claim" this continent, the British only succeeded in creating greater and greater distance between themselves and the territory they wanted to make their own. For there can be no

> belonging in country without honouring and respecting the spirit of this living land. (12)

Kwaymullina's summary is a challenge to Australian-European sensibilities, and, to a degree, John Kinsella's lectures can be read a response to those challenges. Kinsella is fascinated with landscape – in all its diversity – and its relationship with poetic language. For Kinsella landscape is determined by the interaction between two principles – *prospect* and *refuge*: "vista, [is] all we can see in the clear open space; refuge is the "place or places to hide, most often with limited lines of sight" (14–15). And it is the interaction between the two that for Kinsella produces a "safe and functional environment" (15).

However, Kinsella precisely understands that a very long history of the domestication of landscape, perhaps culminating in modern colonial agricultural practices, contributes to the fact that "[l]andscape is a mass of contradictions and paradoxes" (15). When considering the case of Western Australia, Kinsella writes:

> "Opening up" the land of Western Australia for farming or mining might bring wealth and prosperity to some, but will mean loss and oppression to others. That is on the human level. The opening of land, the changing of the surface, will inevitably mean the destruction of "nature." (15)

The use of the term "surface" and the qualification of "nature" is telling. Nature, here, is understood to be a construct, the social opposite culture. The idea of surface throwing into light the idea of depth produces a much more complex problematic. If there is something more than "surface," what is it and what influence does it have? Part of the answer appears to lie in Kinsella's assertion about the dynamic nature of landscape poetry:

> landscape poetry is concerned with how people go about managing, abusing, controlling and freeing the land. It is a language of control and liberation at once. (15)

In other words landscape poetry is inescapably ideological. Nevertheless, there is something in Kinsella's response to landscape that seeks to assert a sense of belonging that can somehow transcend the ideological. Not surprisingly, if not inevitably, this desire, if you like, is interrogated in the essay "Myths of the Wheatbelt." This is where Kinsella grew up.

He is perfectly familiar with what might be called surface stories – the social conservatism of the area, the radicalism of agricultural workers, the problems of disaffected rural youth. However, Kinsella pays deference to the indigenous people of the area believing that "the songs of the custodial owners of the land are as strong as ever" (164). He is aware that "their myths were not the myths of The Farm, and that somewhere between the two mythologies, there was a silence" (164). It is in the desire to bridge the two mythologies, to fill the silence, that Kinsella hopes to find a belonging that will allow Europeans to honour and respect the spirit of the land.

However, Kinsella is faced with a dilemma. For the moment his language draws heavily on a European tradition and perhaps this is why he regards himself as an international regionalist, not only through the circumstances of his life, but also through the discovery that similar histories within different regions might provide a key to a language that can articulate a sense of belonging without having to submit to the languages of nationalism.

Plays, Prams and Poetry

There are three significant contributions to the area of literary criticism and history: Hilary Glow's *Power Plays: Australian Theatre and the Public Agenda*, Gabrielle Wolf's *Make it Australian: The Australian Performing Group, The Pram Factory and New Wave Theatre*, and Ann Vickery's *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry*. Also of importance is Huggan's *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*.

Huggan invokes, in the first instance, the clashes between White and Lebanese youth in 2005 in the beachside suburbs of Cronulla. Huggan deploys this event to investigate and interrogate the place of race in the Australian cultural imaginary, suggesting that, as in Cornel West's reading of the "foundational structures of American society":

> in Australia, for all its official commitment to multiculturalism and social egalitarianism; for all its public revulsion of the mob violence and ideological extremism which periodically resurfacing in the nation's history, provide reminders of what some persist in seeing . . . as the dark side of the Australian Dream. (v–vi)

Of course, in alluding to the work of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, Huggan also signals the importance of the debates around nationalism and postcolonialism. He avowedly argues the case for a postcolonial approach to the question of race and Australian literature, particularly as he casts

race as belonging to a "*transnational imaginary*" which, as far as Huggan is concerned, operates within the dynamic relation between the local and the global. Further, he also argues that Australian literature must be seen as exceeding the national and operates in a global network of production and consumption, again reinforcing a necessary postcolonial approach to the question at hand.

The work then operates theoretically as well as serving as a literary survey. Huggan makes significant use of Jon Stratton's and Ghassan Hage's work in addressing the complex ideological mix of the social policies of integration, assimilation and multiculturalism as they pertain to the question of race and the constitution of identity. As such, Huggan's *Australian Literature* provides an important introduction to the scope of discussions, arguments and conversations about postcolonialism, race and the transnational.

Ann Vickery's *Stressing the Modern* to a certain degree addresses similar concerns to Huggan's but does so through case studies that provide concise literary biographies of seven women poets – Mary Gilmore, Marie Pitt, Mary Fullerton, Anna Wickham, Zora Cross, Lesbia Hartford, and Nettie Palmer. The list itself is indicative of the strength and importance of this work, which, in itself, is marked by an impressive combination of research and theoretical acuity. Not only does Vickery's examination of the lives and work of these writers redress a significant absence in Australian literary history but also underscores their emergence within a critical period of the social transformation of Australia. Vickery, in noting that "the first part of the twentieth century was a prolific period for women poets," argues:

> Their work challenged previously given roles of gender and negotiated a rapidly changing social changing social climate . . . Poetry written between 1900 and 1940 reflected the suffrage movement, as well as the effects of Federation, World War 1, increasing industrialisation, emergent discourses of sexology and psychology. New subject formations were taking place around gender, race and nationalism. Women writers would also move between contrasting sensibilities and styles. (3)

These seven writers then operate at a time when Australia faces the twin challenges of trying to respond to its change from aggregation of colonies to that of independent nation, as well being subject to the radical political, social and industrialisation that characterises modernity. A feature of this radicalism was the early alliance or convergence between

feminism and socialism driven by "an increasing industrialisation" that dramatically affected "both class and gender division" (7). For Vickery poetry becomes an important vehicle to negotiate and interrogate such an alliance, particularly as the convergence is important simultaneously to the co-development of feminism and socialism and at the same time foreshadowing their divergence.

Further Vickery argues that that the nature of the change, the fluidity of new political alliances and the destabilisation of traditional subjectivities demanded the making of new "languages" that could only be provided by poetry. This is the principle that drives the critical interpretation of the writers' lives and work. The case study of Anna Wickham is telling and powerful, almost typical or symptomatic of the intellectual and creative life of a woman writer whose work challenges outdated orthodoxies.

Like Huggan's work, Vickery's analysis provides the grounds for further work in the area.

Understandably two Currency Press works automatically enter into dialogue. Gabrielle Wolf's work, *Make it Australian*, contextualizes and documents the emergence of Australian New Wave Theatre as associated with The Australian Performing Group and its relationship with La Mama and the Pram Factory. In one sense, history repeats itself. Just as Vickery identifies the period from 1900 to 1940 as marked by radical transformation within Australia, Wolf notes that from the mid-1950s through to the 1970s once again Australia was going through a radical transformation and marked by similar conditions – the impact of World War II, further industrialisation and urbanisation (driven in part by a US economy shifting emphasis from production to consumption, by big infrastructure programs, and by expansion of migration programs), a new politicisation coming out of the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, renewed feminist politics, the emergence of the new left. Again things were fluid in terms of social and individual being. Throw into the mix a fervent interrogation of and reconstitution of Australian identity, especially in relation to Australia's relationship with a rapidly decolonising Great Britain, and you have a pretty heady time for creative production. For Wolf one site constitutive and reflective of these events and processes was theatre, a theatre that was unified in its nationalist position but conflicted by what this might mean politically.

Wolf periodises the history of the APG (1967–1970), (1970–71), (1972–73), (1974–76), (1977–81). The periodisations indicate various intensities and productivities, political and aesthetic struggles amongst writers, directors and actors, almost as if, along with other elements of

a radical counter culture, the APG was born to burnout. Wolf's study is a wonderful historical account of the transformation of the APG from its commitment to interrogation and reconstitution of what Australianness means, through various moments of paralysis when perhaps dogmatism got in the way of being critical, through to its demise when it became directionless and nostalgic, or as Wolf argues:

> Ultimately, the APG's belief in the value of experiments was not enough to sustain it. Moreover, the APG never acquired the ability or discipline to adapt to a changing world and recharge its batteries in a different climate. (222)

However, Wolf also notes the APG's remarkable legacy, not only in terms of the number of writers, directors and actors that have gone on to achieve outstanding careers outside and after the APG but also in relation to the number of those same writers, directors and actors who have gone on to work in educational institutions and who are being formative of contemporary Australian theatre. Further Wolf opens a space to explore the relationship between the APG and the renaissance of the Australian film industry, which also gave renewed expression to a critical and celebratory view of Australian national identity.

In a sense Hilary Glow's *Power Plays* takes up the trajectory developed by Wolf, but of course the context Glow considers is the Hawke–Keating and the Howard–Costello years. One of the paradoxes of this period is that while the Hawke–Keating government avowed an open and reformist social and cultural agenda (the question how this was resourced is nevertheless a vexed one, its economic reform agenda set the foundations for the neo-conservative social and cultural agenda of the Howard–Costello era. So regardless of the conservative social milieu in which the APG emerged, the APG did enjoy an increasing openness that provided a space for experimentation, debate and contestation. However, for those that followed, the potential for social and cultural change was and perhaps still is increasingly circumscribed by the dominance of an economic rationalist agenda that is openly hostile to any form of social or cultural critique which is invariably dismissed as un-Australian.

For Glow, it is in this context that the idea and nature of political theatre in Australia needs to be rethought. Glow notes the problematic that since the feminist assertion that the personal is the political, the power of such a principle has been diminished in the light of everything that has become political (4). As a corrective to this situation Glow cites Terry Eagleton's

observation that "Keeping goldfish could be political but isn't inherently, like any social practice, it becomes political only when it assumes reference to the processes of legitimating or challenging systems of power" (4–5). This becomes Glow's guiding principle in selecting plays and playwrights. Important are the ways in which theatre interrogates systems of power and how plays "seek to understand how politics shapes who we are; [how] it informs how we live and work, our beliefs, values and aspirations" (5). At the heart of the work then is a concern with how political theatre is constitutive of and engages with a cultural and social ethics.

Power Plays is organised around themes. The six chapters address: Indigenous Indentities; The History Wars; The Politics of Place; Globalisation and Class; Fortress Australia; The War on Terror. This thematic organisation is indicative of and provides a narrative for the various political contestations at work within Australia. And while questions of class and gender politics are significant here, the narrative thread weaves around questions of race and ethnicity, encapsulated in the idea of "whiteness". It seems the assertion of difference over a monoculturalism represented by "whiteness" is somehow the greatest threat to what might be described as lingering but still powerful Anglophilic Australian nationalism. For example the articulation of indigenous identity through the dramatisation of the autobiographical and the experiential not only seems to be an important political corrective but is also seen as an unthinkable threat to the moral and epistemic orthodoxy of neoconservatism centred in the idea of "whiteness".

To underscore this further, in the chapter "Fortress Australia" Glow mounts an impressive critique of Andrew Bolt's attack first on Hannie Raysen's play *Two Brothers* and then on Hannie Raysen herself, demonstrating a curious paradox which gives testament to the continuing power of political theatre. That a powerful media figure such as Andrew Bolt should take such offence at the play and then attack the playwright suggests a certain vulnerability to that power. Of course, that vulnerability is bolstered or disguised by the populist play of Bolt's assumption of speaking for the ordinary Australian. Wolf and Glow together provide a significant and powerful historical and critical account of Australian theatre over the forty years.

Distant Lives and the Need for Belonging

Non-fiction tends to be dominated by auto/biography in general and also by a sub-category of literary auto/biography, and while this year's offerings produce some surprising convergences (which will be taken up in the next

section), at least three works give an indication of the range of possibilities. Deane Blackler's *Reading W. G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience*, presents a perennial challenge when considering Australian non-fiction – an Australian writing about a German-British subject. Blackler's work traces the career trajectory of W. G. Sebald from Germany to his appointment at the University of East Anglia where he completed a doctoral thesis on Alfred Doblin, to his becoming based in Modern Languages and European History before moving under university financial restructuring to the School of English and American Studies where he was increasingly under pressure to teach creative writing. Blackler notes that Sebald felt his role at East Anglia was increasingly problematic, finding the mix of being a Germanist and a writer and located in a English milieu was not one in which he necessarily felt confident. Nevertheless, it was probably precisely this context that allowed Sebald to not only come to understand and theorise a postmodern relationship between writer, text and reader as one of distance and disobedience but also a context in which he emerged as a significant mentor to writers in Britain.

Turning then to another Australian writer but in an Australian context, Maureen Clark's *Mudrooroo: A Likely Story; Identity and Belonging in Postcolonial Australia*, for the most part is a conventional literary biography providing critical readings of Mudrooroo's novels in relation to the personal and social contexts in which they are produced. Of course, what makes Clark's work of importance is the controversy surrounding Mudrooroo's claims to indigenous identity and his relation to indigenous writing both as historian, critic, practitioner and champion. Clark notes that Mudrooroo's writings are marked by a strong sense of the political critique of the colonial experience and history of indigenous peoples. As Mudrooroo's work attests and as others have argued the experience is a lingering and haunting one as indigenous peoples continue to struggle to both articulate a contemporary identity while seeking to maintain a sense of continuity and belonging with the past. For Clark, Mudrooroo's Vampire Trilogy – *The Undying*, *The Underground*, and *The Promised Land* – represents a continuation of Mudrooroo's early project but also embodies Mudrooroo's personal experience of having his claims to identity disputed. Mudrooroo's life becomes an enactment of the problematic politics to which he is committed.

Finally, in addressing the question of distant lives and belonging, I consider Richard Freadman's *This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiopgraphy*. Freadman divides his work into two sections. The first provides a critical understanding of the types and range of Jewish

autobiography; the second an exemplary and extensive sample of writing. The first section gives an insight into the various modes and themes within Jewish writing. He is careful to outline the convergences and divergences of types of writing such as conventional autobiography, memoir, testimony and other forms of life writing because to a certain degree they have synergetic relationship to the themes or perhaps more properly the "times" the writings address. That is to say recollections of pre-World War II Europe, of the War and the Holocaust, and post-World War II experience, mainly life in Australia may adopt different forms. Freadman outlines the difficulty each "period" presents in terms of negotiating the experiential and the objective. If event and period present one set of problematics, then this is complicated further by questions of identity and subjectivity. Freadman understands that within a multicultural, postcolonial and postmodern context the definition of subjectivity and identity is something of a trial. How does one define Jewish-Australian? What characterises Jewish-Australian writing? One can infer from Freadman's work that the answers can only be found in our encounters with the writing. However we do need to be alert always to the complexities, best embodied in the experiences and understandings of second-generation Holocaust survivors:

> For the second generation … including the child survivors, the construction of personal identity is a more complex matter. They have had to face the sense of existential doubleness that can occur when early processes of identity formation undergo revision, or take shape, in an adoptive culture. Such existential complications place much of the onus on the individual, since the surrounding culture tends to seem too new, ambiguous, threatening or remote from ancestral cultural worlds to function as the source of secure identity-formation. (84)

Freadman, in effect, not only points to the complexities of the relationship between identity and reading, but also adumbrates an ethics of reading. Perhaps, necessarily, we need to adopt an affective engagement with the writing, to become disobedient readers of sorts.

The Tycoon, The Judge and the Politicians

This year saw the publication and reissue of a number of biographies and works of political analysis, which collectively produce a fascinating insight into the transformation of Australia over the last sixty years. George Megalogenis's *The Longest Decade* is a revised and updated version of a work first published in 2006. Similarly, Paul Barry's *The Rise and Rise if Kerry Packer, Uncut*, was published initially in 1993 but revised and updated in 2007. First publications were Antonio Buti's *Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of*

Conscience and, of course, Wayne Errington's and Peter van Onselen's *John Howard: The Biography*.

The coincidental publication of these works inadvertently provides an iteration of the idea of history as driven by the actions of great persons. But we need to avoid such clichéd and outmoded ways of approaching the works and the historical context they outline.

In order to bring these works together I would like to invoke here another publication: Anna Haebich's *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970*. Haebich's time frame is significant insofar as it is a period marked by a highly protected economy and by a conservative social and cultural milieu but one under pressure from an expanded migration program and from an emergent civil rights movement focussed on indigenous rights and influenced by American politics. Paradoxically, the period represents a moment of complex ideological work. On the one hand the desire for sameness, for assimilation, is understandable in the context of a long history the isolationist White Australia policy (until the 1950s Australia's position internationally was by and large dependent on its relationship with Britain). On the other hand the booming US economy fed in to a myth of expansion and progress, a story that also requires a commitment to sameness "going forward". It might be argued then that on all fronts the conservative assimilationist foundationalism of this period easily becomes an originary myth for more recent neoconservative social and cultural structures. Haebich opens her argument by asserting:

Nostalgia for an assimilated nation haunts current public debate on national identity and nationhood, and spills over into … issues of race, ethnicity, Indigenous rights and immigration. Commentators … deny that the pages of government are being turned back to the assimilation policies of the 1950s … We celebrate cultural diversity and acknowledge Indigenous rights, cultures and histories. Yet while the word assimilation is rarely mentioned, more than a trace of its essence remains in official announcements on national values, citizenship and the practical integration of Aboriginal communities. The paradox of public denial of assimilation and hidden allegiance to its tenets can be explained in terms of "retro-assimilation":

> From the perspective of retro-assimilation, current visions of the nation can be seen as yet another example of nostalgia and clever marketing. Retro-assimilation mixes 1950s dreams of an assimilated nation with current ideas of nationhood … to create an imagined world based on shared values, visions and agreements where all citizens will be treated

> equally … and share fully in the benefits of Australian society, once they agree to cast off their difference and become the *same* … Retro-assimilation has strong appeal in today's climate of social turmoil … we are irresistibly drawn to its retroscapes, its nostalgic memories of safer and simpler times. (7-8)

Important to the politics of the 1950s, and to the myth that grew out of those politics, was the articulation of a belief in a progressive and utopian future that could override or occlude an underlying sense of anxiety marked by the Cold War and attendant paranoia about communism. It was essential that the ideological work of the day envisaged an optimistic future based on the elimination of difference, to be achieved by assimilationist policies and practices.

The question Haebich's study puts to the biographies here is to what degree were the figures, Kerry Packer Sir Ronald Wilson, Paul Keating and John Howard made by the ideological work of the 1950s and to what degree are they part of the constitution of our current retro-assimilation. An extensive exploration of this problematic is beyond the scope of this essay but the coincidence and convergence of these works certainly invites such an undertaking. Nevertheless, I believe a number of observations can be made.

Barry's biography of Kerry Packer for the most part casts the story of Packer's life in terms of a mythic perhaps psychological dynamic between father and son. Kerry's life both replicates and departs from his father's life. As the title *The Rise and Rise* suggests the story is one of continuity and "progress." So in one sense, the story, regardless of how one feels about Kerry Packer, replicates a narrative of inheritance as well as reproducing the narrative of utopian development. And given that Kerry Packer's life crossed paths with countless politicians, including Keating and Howard, it should not be surprising that the narrative is punctuated by an economic self-interest that balances, as needs be, a free market or protectionist pragmatics. Packer, by dint of privilege, is isolated from the social and cultural effects of assimilation but at another level embodies the economic drive that supports it.

Megalogenis's *The Longest Decade* provides an astute political analysis of the Keating and Howard economic reform agendas. Not surprisingly these shared greater similarities than differences with perhaps labour market reform being the most important point of departure. Both Keating and Howard were committed to the opening up of the Australian economy – the floating of the Australian dollar, the freeing up of the Reserve Bank,

the privatisation of Government authorities, the commitment to the long term phasing out of tariff protection. Keating envisaged such reforms as not only a way of unleashing Australian economic potential but also felt that such circumstances would also drive progressive social and cultural reform. In comparison, Howard, an avowed social conservative, while supporting economic reform would be less enthusiastic about social and cultural change, clearly underscored by his expression of a type of Anglophilic nationalism at the time of the republic debate.

Paradoxically, it could be argued that in terms of economic reform both Keating and Howard are representative of the ideological work of the 1950s. The story of progress, as exemplified by the apparent openness in the 1950s of the US economy, demands an open economy. However, Haebich reminds us that change can produce an anxiety that is ameliorated by a conservative social and cultural ideology that supports an assimilationist policy that privileges sameness over difference.

Buti's *Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience* reproduces a classical Australian story, a narrative of a country boy made good, rising from court clerk to Supreme Court Judge to the head of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, not to mention a non-legal career as national president of the Uniting Church. Wilson's life is characterised by a passionate commitment to social justice, but his career also demonstrates a shifting understanding of what that means. Buti's biography depicts a life completely naturalised to Wilson's social and institutional context. During his early career Wilson was known for his power of argument and also for his adherence to process and in that regard the relationship between law and justice was clear cut, the best system that could be devised. And in terms of his life in the Church, Wilson was completely in accord with the Church's position at the time. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wilson would not have thought of questioning the well-meaning (but now regarded as patronising) attitude of the Church towards Indigenous peoples. In a sense, Wilson was an exemplary subject of the period in which he grew up and matured.

However, as the Uniting Church's view of what social justice means changed, perhaps influenced by the civil rights movement in the US and its influence on Indigenous peoples' struggles in Australia, so too did Wilson's position. The full transformation comes with his work with HREOC and writing of the *Bringing Them Home* report. This account of the Stolen Generations, and the parts played by governments, churches and other institutions resulted in a broader understanding of the delivery of social justice. Delivered to the Howard Government, the report variously

was attacked as methodologically flawed or dismissed outright. Wilson's reputation was questioned and to a degree his commitment to social justice was undermined. Ironically, then, for someone who could be seen to be a product of the ideological work of the 1950s Wilson's report represents a challenge to the processes of retro-assimilationism that seem to characterise the Howard Government and the right of politics in general.

Curiously, the *Bringing Them Home* report does not feature prominently in the Errington and van Onselen biography, *John Howard: The Biography*. Again the narrative is classical Australian – the boy from lower middle-class suburbia attains the highest office in the land. Errington and Van Onselen present a fascinating portrait of Howard. While they go to great lengths to argue that Howard's political life, especially his prime ministership, should not be read in terms of a return to some imaginary 1950s, they do emphasise that John Howard is very much a product of the ideas and values of the time, which, for Howard, seem to have been embodied in Sir Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister he most admired and to whose style of leadership he aspired.

However, even in Errington's and Van Onselen's assessment of Howard, we can see a form of retro-assimilationism at work. Quite rightly they challenge the popular view of Howard as being anti-Asian. This belies the increase in migration from Asia during the period of Howard's government. What is critical for Howard is the policy of multiculturalism that emerged in the Whitlam/Fraser years. For Howard multiculturalism detracts from and undermines a commitment to a unified national identity grounded in disavowal of difference while celebrating and supporting a neo-conservative belief in singular and individual endeavour. In other words, Howard participates in the ideological assimilationist work as it pertains to a social and conservatism, and to an economic progressivism.

Conclusion

No doubt this review represents some personal bias on my part but the broad selection and variety of non-fiction works suggest a cultural interest in the 1950s and 1960s and their mythic and ideological influences on contemporary Australian society. One could argue that over the last few years there has been a general feeling of a change about to happen, not just that the Howard government was defeated, and the Rudd government elected on the promise of something new, but perhaps because Australia has reached a certain distance in time where separately and collectively people can begin to make an evaluation of the significance of the 1950s and 1960s in light of popular and media generated speculation about similarities between then and now.

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Kim Scott

A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History

Introduction

Researching the archives to understand the perceptions of historical Aboriginal (specifically, Noongar) people can be frustrating, since they are not the ones doing the recording and their voices are rarely heard. However, there are occasional instances of archival Noongar language, and as part of the research for an historical novel based along the south coast of Western Australia I asked myself what rewards might be gained from researching such material as a means of better appreciating Noongar perspectives. Of course, there is a paucity of such texts. Additionally, the crucial importance of language to the identity and heritage of the Noongar community today, the endangered state of Noongar language and my own position as a member of that community, obliges me to do more than just research that material as part of the process of writing a novel. My interest in Noongar language began long before this research project, extends to more than its use as a "research tool", and is connected to my sense of self and my vocation as a writer. That interest is further stimulated by a phrase like, "he who has taken up the language of the coloniser has accepted the world of the colonizer and therefore the standards of the colonizer,"[1] words which surely sting any indigenous person who has English as their first language, let alone a writer of what's labelled "literary fiction." I am one of a community of Wirlomin Noongar people descended from coastal country to the east of Albany, and whose history and circumstances are partly described in *Kayang and Me*, a book I wrote with Noongar Elder, Hazel Brown.

History: the friendly frontier

My research began with what is often referred to in Western Australian history as the "friendly frontier": the ten or twenty years from 1826 at King George Sound, now known as the town of Albany, here described by historian Neville Green:

> The social confidence and friendliness of the King George Sound Aborigines are unique in the history of Australian exploration and settlement. They were prepared to accept the transient European visitors without confrontation providing their conditions regarding the women were acknowledged … It was a sharing relationship, without fierce competition for resources.[2]

Explanations for this "friendly" situation vary, but are consistent on these things:

- the isolated and tentative nature of the military outpost
- its small population relative to the indigenous (Noongar) population surrounding it
- very little land was claimed for agricultural or other purposes
- the garrison shared its resources with the local people, recognising them as owners of the land it occupied
- local Noongars had had decades of experience with visiting ships
- the sensitivity of leading personalities – black and white – in cross-cultural matters.[3]

It is not only historians with the benefit of hindsight who comment on the "friendliness" of this situation; people even said so at the time:

> "Aboriginal natives [are] … more numerous in this district and better disposed towards Europeans than any other part of Australia and are anxious to be employed as servants … [and can] speak English well …"[4]

And:

> "… the good disposition of the aboriginal (sic) blacks … quite willing to work and make themselves useful …"[5]

The above comments by Governor-resident Sir Richard Spencer and the visiting Charles Darwin in the 1830s suggest that by "friendly" they meant something like "preparedness to be of use," but other colonial journals show Noongar individuals as active participants in a developing society of Noongar and newcomer, freely adapting and appropriating new cultural forms.[6]

Recent research of indigenous/non-indigenous encounters has begun to make greater efforts to consider historical Noongar perspectives. This can

sometimes make inconvenient reading for those of us who might prefer to emphasise indigenous "resistance" in colonial encounters. Bob Reece argues that:

> accommodation with Europeans was something for which Aborigines strove … the European presence, particularly during the early period of settlement, was an important new variable in the politics of Aboriginal intergroup relations …[7]

Inconvenient perhaps, but at least such research recognises forms of Aboriginal "agency" other than "resistance".

Reece's research applies particularly to the Swan River colony, whereas Tiffany Shellam's 2007 thesis *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World At King George's Sound* focuses on the Albany region and, taking inspiration from Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*,[8] wants to include indigenous perspectives:

> I want to investigate how individuals like Mokare understood and used the British presence … How did Aboriginal people use the British presence to advantage through strategic actions and how did these Aboriginal people improvise to appropriate aspects of the British world into their own?[9]

Shellam's work is insightful on alliances between Noongar and non-indigenous people and her discussion of the possibilities that ships (for which she uses a Noongar word taken from the archives, *caibre)* offered Noongar people is particularly interesting. Discussing two south-coastal Noongar men, Gyallipert and Manyat, who – remarkably – offered to mediate between the colonists and Noongar people at the distant Swan River Colony, Shellam says:

> They travelled beyond the fringe of their world and became outsiders as they engaged cross-culturally at Swan River. This voyage signalled a shift in the symbolism of the *caibre*. Once a signifier of intense trading opportunities, the *caibre* began to represent experiences for those who wanted to voyage; it symbolised a transforming diplomatic mission and for others … a boat was also seen as a utility. These opportunities included trade, not on board but onshore in the distant new world of Swan River. *Caibre* were used as vehicles for significantly extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country … [10]

Shellam, relying on colonial writings – particularly those of Major Edmund Lockyer, Isaac Scott Nind, Captain Collet Barker and Alexander Collie – shows that Noongar people were more than ready to innovate, and appropriated a range of cultural forms and technologies, including guns and boats. Shellam emphasises the strategic thinking of certain individuals, but the colonial journals excite me most of all with their revelation of the confidence, inclusiveness and wit of Noongar individuals: Mokare singing a Scottish song by way of questioning his Noongar brother and thus including the soldiers around him in the conversation; Manyat mimicking the form of the expedition journal in one of his recitations.[11] There are many examples.

Historical research has considered the context for the remarkable situation of the "friendly frontier", but I wondered what it was in their cultural background that allowed these Noongar individuals to be so confident and innovative, and fostered their talent, inclusiveness and wit. It is hard to find answers to these questions, particularly when one only has the historical archives.

Methodologies

Shellam and Clendinnen share my curiosity, and understand the difficulty of "grasping something of the ways in which past people made sense of their worlds: that is, their cosmology and its pragmatic enactment in actions and behaviours."[12] This is particularly so when we are:

> Using European (observers') texts to re-construct the meaningful past actions of Aborigines (the observed) and their interactions with the newcomers can only be achieved by the meticulous scrutiny of such texts, by paying sharp attention to the author's tone, emotion and rhetoric.[13]

Similarly, although discussing a different region, Clendinnen argues that with:

> ... patience, attentiveness and sufficient testing of the ground it is possible to penetrate a little distance … (into) … what the Australians around what became "Sydney" thought about the white incomers, especially when we are effectively limited to the journals written by those same incomers. [14]

As Clendinnen notes elsewhere:

The "trick" is to cultivate double vision: to retrieve from British

> descriptions clues as to autonomous Aboriginal action, not the simple reaction to British actions the British naturally assume occurred.[15]

Obviously, this is challenging work, and I'm grateful to Clendinnen for both the work she has done and the inspiration and guidance she provided to Shellam, who is researching in my own region.

Of course, their method is not without its flaws, notably its reliance on the interpretive skills of the researcher. Nor is their method the only one. Many would advocate oral history, for example, as a valuable resource for understanding the motivations and thinking of indigenous figures in the past. I'm not so confident of this, and tend to agree with Shellam's dismissal of oral history and her reasoning that the:

> … great distance in time from the present and the subsequent dispossession, disruption and dispersion mean that modern Aboriginal memories of particular events during the period in question are fragmentary or non-existent.[16]

To this I would add that the pressure on Noongar people to provide such material only contributes to its unreliability. However, given that even "fragmentary" memories can be helpful and add material unavailable elsewhere it seems foolish to dismiss oral history altogether, and I would suggest that combining the two sources, particularly by "workshopping" relevant archival material with those people who carry oral histories, can be a useful way of "value-adding" to those archives.

Additionally, the investigation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interaction may well benefit from having a descendant of both those groups, rather than just a non-Aboriginal researcher. Some may even argue that a descendant of Aboriginal people will have some form of special access to their thoughts. Clendinnen, in typically no-nonsense style, discounts this by recounting her experience with an Aztec guide: "He was proud of his descent, and the unstated premise of all his fluent talk was 'I am Aztec, so I know.' He didn't." [17] Clendinnen continues:

> … the cherished stories of a particular ethnic, religious or national group (do not) have a truth-status equal or superior to post-Enlightenment historian's criteria for evidence and probability.[18]

I agree, albeit reluctantly, but while membership of "a particular ethnic group" (Noongar, for example) may not in itself grant privileged

knowledge, it can bring a sense of obligation and responsibility, not only to ancestors, but to a contemporary "community of descendants" and a shared, sometimes frail, traditional heritage. It may also oblige one to be accountable, and make one sensitive to criticism from that community; even, perhaps, overly-sensitive.

Shellam's work on the "friendly frontier" is really impressive, and I'm very grateful for what she's done. However, at the risk of joining her discussion only by opposing her conclusions, there are two points in her thesis I wish to discuss further; firstly, her discussion of what name to give to the Noongar people she is discussing and, secondly, her questioning the role of the ocean in Noongar people's "spiritual and cultural heritage".

A member of a community believing itself descended from Aboriginal people living along the south coast of Western Australia would find it difficult to be so removed and innocent as Shellam appears when, after asking "First and foremost, who am I writing about and what will I call them?" she continues to discuss a range of alternatives before finally deciding on the term *King Ya-nup* as the name "relevant to a very specific period of time and to a particular group of Aboriginal people."[19]

Although:

> It is impossible to know the origin of the name, but it sounds like a pidgination of "King George" … and a native name that the Aborigines gave to their country before the British arrived.[20]

Certainly "King George Town" is the name given to the place in an old Noongar song, or specifically: Kin-joor-town.[21] Shellam is correct in saying the suffix *up* means "place of." However, this game of linguistic forensics can take us in different directions: the name could as easily be derived from *kiin*, meaning nothing, and *n(y)gaan* to eat, or possibly *ngan* me, or mine: the place where there's nothing to eat, or nothing for me.[22] Other commentators have rendered the name for Albany, or a particular location within the Albany region, as *'Kiangardarup* defining it as "place that has nothing", or "pertaining to nothing" or "poor man's place."[23] Shellam demonstrates that the Noongar were clever traders and strategic thinkers; so perhaps they saw benefit in allowing a tiny group of people to remain camped on a cold and relatively barren shore, particularly if they were ready to share their supplies of food and other resources.

Many people living in Albany today would claim connection to those early Noongar, but not the name *King Ya-nup*, and so by selecting it for

the people she is researching Shellam effectively distances them, and herself, from the contemporary situation; convenient for her, but not for a Noongar community living in Albany today and wanting to see itself as a continuation of that earlier one.

Yes, perhaps it is "impossible to know the name" and what is offered here, based on limited knowledge of Noongar language, is of course mere speculation. It is worth noting however, that Shellam's method here involves using Noongar language as a means of determining something of the nature and motivations of historical Noongar people.[24] Perhaps this could yet prove a profitable area of research.

The second aspect of Shellam's thesis I would take issue with is her suggestion that the "spiritual and cultural heritage" of Noongar people does not include the sea. I say her "suggestion" rather than "conclusion" because, after citing historical reports of the reluctance of Noongar people to enter the water, their apparent inability to swim, and their lack of watercraft, she appears to tentatively agree with other commentators' conclusion that Noongar's "spiritual and cultural heritage" does not include the sea.[25]

However, I believe there is considerable evidence to support a contrary view: namely, that the ocean is very important to the spiritual and cultural heritage of certain Noongar people. There is ample historical evidence, for instance, of Noongar people "singing" dolphins to deliver salmon slapping onto the beach sand, and people still remember Freddy Winmir and Henry Dongup singing out to calm the sea.[26] Daisy Bates identifies some Noongar people along the south coast as Wadarndi and Didar – "ocean" people – and writes of a south coastal "whale-dreaming".[27] Contemporary Noongar Elders tell me that Doubtful Island Bay – some 180 or so kilometres east of Albany – is a Whale Dreaming site. Bearing in mind both Reece and Shellam's references to strategic alliances between immigrants and Noongar people, it surely is no coincidence that Doubtful Island Bay was leased for whaling as early as 1837 and that Noongar people at one stage of the nineteenth century comprised some 40% of the south coast's shore-based whaling workforce although I was surprised to learn that many of them, like other workers, also received a percentage of the season's profit.[28]

In the early 1840s there were hundreds of American and French whaling ships along the south-coast of Western Australia and Cape Riche – even closer to Albany than Doubtful Island Bay – was both whaling base and an unofficial port competing with Albany, the latter handicapped by its exorbitant pilot fees and prevailing easterlies either side of the narrow entrance of Princess Royal Harbour. The resourceful George Cheyne had

moved to Cape Riche, having sold his prime real estate at Kendenup and Candyup. Cheyne had strong networks in the Noongar community.[29] Who can say what advice he received?

Noongars knew the beaches whales visited and – as the experienced, *strategic* traders Shellam's research shows them to be – whaling would have been yet another opportunity to form alliances with non-indigenous people, to share wealth and gain prestige. Additionally, since in pre-colonial times a stranded whale provided occasion for significant gatherings, we can speculate that a whale – even with its blubber melted away – would still been reason for people to gather together.[30] Thus, individual Noongars gained status in their home community and, to an extent, in colonial society as well.

It would appear that Noongar people did not limit themselves to involvement in shore-based whaling, or to working only with British immigrants but also worked on American and French whaling ships. Such alliances with foreign whalers created some concerns for colonial authorities:

> … [Noongars] are made companions and associates of by a great many of the lower classes and sealers who reward them not badly for their services, and it should be also remembered that at this season of the year the Aborigines come from remote districts and considerable distances to share and partake of the food permitted them by the whalers, at this port and on the coast. Besides the refuse of the whales on which they feed largely they obtain large supplies of biscuits and bread in barter for spears, fire wood …[31]

The late Bob Howard, a researcher of long-standing association with contemporary Noongar people in Albany, claimed the singular Noongar knife (or *daap*) is specifically designed to cut whale flesh, and contemporary Noongar Elders tell how its use enables a dying whale's spirit to escape and be reborn in the baby of some woman nearby. The sea and its shifting boundary since the last ice age is part of the spiritual and cultural heritage of south coastal Noongar people.

Finally, some of the stories Noongar people told to the linguist Gerhardt Laves in the 1930s reveal a very strong spiritual and cultural association with the ocean, and the language used for the sea reveals a possibly unique perception of it.[32]

My reason for discussing these two points – the name of the people, and the sea as part of their spiritual and cultural heritage – is that there is potentially much to be gained from engaging with a contemporary

"community of descendants" and working with their ancestral language as part of researching historical situations. Shellam herself hints at the value of using language as a research tool:

> People in the past – British and Aboriginal – had different mentalities, different cultural systems, different motivations and therefore different behaviours: different from each other and different from present day Australians, whether indigenous or not. Nineteenth-century Englishmen and Aborigines are both foreign to me though not equally so, given that I share a degree of linguistic familiarity with the British.[33]

Inevitable: no more friendly frontier

The "friendly" period degenerated in the 1840s and 1850s, and the consequent breakdown of the local Noongar society is often described as "inevitable".[34]

A significant moment in the relationship between Noongars and their non-indigenous companions at the "friendly frontier" occurred in the 1840s when Noongar men openly challenged colonial authorities after being arrested for a series of break-ins and thefts. Bob Howard in "The Minang and the Destruction of the Southern Right Whale" argues that Noongar men were simply insisting that the colonists share their food resources after many years of teams of kangaroo hunters and whalers plundering the region (whale products and seal and kangaroo skins were the port's main exports). The Noongar individuals enacting and articulating their protest had been close to the colonisers yet the governor-resident describes them as a "Gang" and a threat:

> … I hope His Excellency will see how desirable it is this Gang of Natives should be broke up more especially as they are those who know our habits, and are more civilised for having been so much with the Europeans … [35]

Why was it so important to break up a group of Noongars who knew colonial habits and had come know some of the colonists as friends? Did their successful "appropriation" and familiarity with the colonists make them more of threat? It occurred to me, thinking of what sort of historical novel I might write, and the pressure of political imperatives upon me, that a historical story that concluded just before this point – the shift in power at the "friendly frontier" – might allow the ambivalence so often necessary to fiction, yet make a political point simply by its discordant resonance

in the context of the conventional history of colonial Australia; that is, the disempowerment and marginalisation of Aboriginal people.

The governor-resident's words about "this Gang of Natives" shows that such an outcome was, of course, anything but "inevitable."

History and the novelist

The historical archives gave me some ideas for the plot for my novel, and historical figures like Mokare, Nakina, Manyat, Collie, Barker and Lockyer inspired ideas for characters.

In her essay "The History Question: who owns the past?" Clendinnen contrasts the "aesthetic purpose" of novelists with the "moral purpose" of historians and, despite having "flinched" from the "opportunistic transpositions and elisions" of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, continues to quote her:

> History for a greedy novelist like me is just one more place to pillage … What we're after, of course, is stories … Having found them, we then proceed to fiddle with them to make them the way we want them to be … I'll do my usual smash-and-grab raid on history. I'll research only until I find something juicy, and then I'll run off with it and turn it into something else.[36]

It's sobering to see Grenville demolished in Clendinnen's essay, especially if one has some sympathy with her working method. I had sensed plenty in the "story bank" of the "friendly frontier" of the past: characters, events, and aspects of plot including – as I've mentioned – "resolution". Clendinnen's argument was chastening, and I admit to being one of those readers who think that what she calls the:

> ... ravine – the gulf between writing imaginative fiction and writing evidence-bound history – is no more than a dent in the topsoil, or possibly only a line scratched in the sand by historians desperate to defend their territory[37]

I think that the work of novelists and historians can sometimes seem very similar. Shellam, strongly influenced by Clendinnen, certainly sounds as much like the former as the latter:

> … it is important to find the right words – in meaning and in sound – in the construction of our narratives and important to find the right structure and rhythm for our stories … narrative construction in

> everyday life and how our daily stories – internal and collective – shape our history and ultimately our culture, are particularly pertinent when thinking and writing about a group of people whose culture circulated (and in some ways relied on) stories constructed and told … the best way to read and understand how cross-cultural relationships began and developed is to discover and try to reconstruct close-up stories of a day-to-day nature … [38]

And I think she sounds most of all like a novelist when she writes: " … more time on imagining people's motivations is a worthwhile activity; we see possibilities and choices rather than inevitabilities."[39]

Oh yes, that was my concern, researching a novel: not what was, but what might have been, and even what might yet be …

I say she sounds like a novelist. Perhaps I am wrong, but even Clendinnen, having dismissed novelists as "entertainers" whose function is to "delight" and therefore not possessed of the same moral imperatives as historians, says that certain novelists aim "at transformation, not replication of the past or reformation of the present."[40]

The sort of intense, close reading of the archives modelled by Clendinnen and Shellam can help accomplish, and certainly prepare for, such a writing task. Cross-referencing the archives against the views of members of a community that has relied on oral rather than archival history can, if nothing else, help "shake up" and "unsettle" the surety of the archives. And I wondered if Noongar language could help us see as Noongars did way back then, if it might help us appreciate different perspectives of history and its passage as anything but "inevitable."

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, if "linguistic familiarity" improves our access to and understanding of people in the past, why not investigate Noongar language as a research tool? And if we believe that our daily "narrative construction" shapes our "history … and culture," why not research Noongar stories and songs for what they can tell us of the motivations of our predecessors?

After all, a language – especially one which is relatively "pure" and carries very little evidence of the influence of other languages – can "represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history."[41]

Obviously, Noongar language would be a wonderful research tool! Unfortunately, it is an endangered language, and the quote above, in revealing why its loss would be tragic, demonstrates a more pressing

need than its mere enlistment as a research tool. Yes, Noongar language and stories would provide a wonderful resource in understanding the "friendly frontier," but for some of us such research would be of limited value unless it can also contribute in some way to the well-being of the community descended from its first speakers, and – best of all – to keeping the language alive.

Notes

1 Isaiah Ilo, "Language in Modern African Drama," CLCWeb: *Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWebjournal*, p. 1. http://www.swan.ac.uk/german/bcla/clcwebjournal/clcweb06-4/ilo06.html (accessed March 2006).

2 Neville Green, "Aborigines and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century," in *A New History of Western Australia*, ed. C. T. Stannage (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981): 75. Incidentally, Albany is referred to as King George Town in an old Noongar song recorded by Daisy Bates. See note 20 below.

3 See, for example, W.C. Ferguson, "Mokare's Domain" in *Australians to 1788,* ed. DJ Mulvaney and Peter J White (Broadway: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987); Paul Mulvaney and Neville Green, *Commandment of Solitude: The journals of Captain Collet Barker 1828-1831* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992); Donald S Garden, *Southern Haven: a history of the port of Albany, Western Australia* (Albany: Albany Port Authority, 1978).

4 Richard Spencer, *Sir Richard Spencer's Correspondence,* (Battye Library, MN 533, 16/7/1837).

5 Charles Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary,* ed. Richard Darwin Keynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 411.

6 The writings of by Alexander Collie. See Neville Green, *Nyungar – the People: Aboriginal Customs in the southwest of Australia* (Perth: Creative Research, 1979) - and Collet Barker.

7 Bob Reece, "Inventing Aborigines," in *Terrible Hard Biscuits: A Reader in Aboriginal History, eds.* Valerie Chapman and Peter Read (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996): 28. (Originally published in *Aboriginal History* 11.1-2 (1987): 17.

8 Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003).

9 Tiffany Shellam, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound* (Canberra: PhD thesis, Australian National University): 6.

10 Shellam, 249.

11 Mokare's singing is in Mulvaney and Green, *Commandment of Solitude*, p. 281; and Manyat's recitation in Green, "Aborigines and White Settlers," 95.

12 Shellam, 38.

13 Shellam, 37.

14 Inga Clendinnen, *Quarterly Essay: The History Question: Who Owns the Past* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2006): 26.

15 Inga Clendinnen, "Spearing the Governor," in *Challenging Histories: reflections on Australian History (*Special Issue of Australian Historical Studies), ed. Kate Darian-Smith, 2002: 163.

16 Shellam, 35.

17 Clendinnen, *The History Question,* 40.

18 Clendinnen, *The History Question*, 40.

19 Shellam, 49.

20 Shellam, 52.

21 Daisy Bates introduces a text she calls "Southern Song" by writing, "… following words sung by a woman whose husband was taken prisoner … conveyed to King George Sound and kept in prison … wife … bewails her desolation to … mother-in-law … " Bates continues with the following words and a translation:

Ngya ngunna demmardung

Geejena mel

Boorneen war-a-bin

Kin-joor-town

("Oh mother-in-law my husband is gone. I straight look until I shut my eyes and I can't see anyone. My husband is gone to King George town.") Daisy Bates, 6193a, reel 5: XI 1a-5 part 2.

22 *Kiin* , *ngaan* , *ngan*. Words from my research with Lomas Roberts, Hazel Brown and Members of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Story Project. See also sources such as Peter Bindon and Ross Chadwick, *A Nyoongar Wordlist from the South-west of Western Australia* (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 1992); Wilfred Douglas, *The Aboriginal Languages of the South-west of Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1968); Rosie Whitehurst, *Noongar Dictionary* (Cannington: Noongar Language and Culture Centre, 1992); C. G. von Brandenstein, *Nyungar Anew,* (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 1968); and the word lists of Daisy Bates.

23 Bob Howard, http://www.kiangardarup.blogspot.com (last accessed July 2006). Howard says the name refers to the Elleker lake system, west of Albany.

24 There are other occasions. See pp. 49–50 for another example: "black fellow *ta paluk* (live upon the grubs which form on decaying grass tree)." Collie wrote: "for by the word *ta* here he [Manyat] evidently meant that the natives gained a chief part of their Subsistence by this food, which he confirmed by comparing the King Georges Sound tribe eating Meen (the red root) to the tribe (Will?) of this part eating the grubs in question."

25 The aversion some Noongar people may have had to the sea is understandable, from one perspective at least. As I write this (early May, 2008) there are reports on the news of a 4 metre white pointer attacking someone at Ellen Cove, Middleton Beach in Albany. *Madjet*, Noongars sometimes say to refer to that powerful spirit in the ocean. Collet Barker's journal describes a shark surfacing next to their whaleboat as they enter the harbour; its fin rising higher than the gunnels of the boat! (Madjet is also sometimes used to refer to a water snake.)

26 Lomas Roberts, Hazel Brown and Audrey Brown, personal conversation.

27 Martin Gibbs, *The Historical Archaeology of Shore Based Whaling in WA 1836-1879* (Nedlands: PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 1995): 123.

28 Gibbs, 129.

29 See Gibbs, and also Howard, "The Minang and the Destruction of the Southern Right Whale," (2005), 2, http://www.kiangardarup.blogspot.com (accessed July 2006). George Cheyne's port at Cape Riche is described in page 5 of the *Perth Gazette*, 18 November 1843. George Cheyne sold his Kendenup land to Hassel, and his Candyup property on the Kalgan River to Patrick Taylor. Cheyne also organised a large group of Noongars to dance for Charles Darwin's visit, and then recompensed them afterwards with rice and treacle as described in Darwin, 411–12.

30 Gibbs, 438. There are numerous colonial references to Noongar people gathering to celebrate and feast on whale.

31 1840, CSR Vol 130. For examples of Noongar involvement with French and American ships see John Septimus Roe, *Exploration Diaries 1846-5,* (Vol. 4, Battye Library), quoted in Hazel Brown and Kim Scott, *Kayang and Me* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005): 43; and Henry Lawson "The Golden Nineties", in *First Impressions,* ed. Douglas R.G. Sellick (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 1997): 191.

32 For reference to the knife, see Bob Howard, "The Minang and the Destruction of the Southern Right Whale," 2. http://www.kiangardarup.blogspot.com (accessed July 2006). Information regarding the whale's spirit comes courtesy of conversations with Lomas Roberts and Hazel Brown. The Noongar language material reference is Gerhardt Laves, *Papers: mainly field notebooks, correspondence and language cards, 1929-1932.* Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Library, Canberra. A protocol regarding this material is available from the Linguistics Department, University of Western Australia.

33 Shellam, 38.

34 For a recent example of this see Murray Arnold, *A History of Contact between Aborigines and Europeans at King George Sound prior to 1860* (Murdoch: Honours Thesis, Murdoch University, 2006): 8.

35 CSR V 130/62, 20th May 1844.

36 Clendinnen, *The History Question,* 16–17.

37 Clendinnen, *The History Question*, 34.

38 Shellam, 39.

39 Shellam, 40.

40 Clendinnen, *The History Question*, 32. She is speaking specifically of Peter Carey in this instance.

41 David Chrystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 38. Chrystal is quoting Marianne Mithun.

Chris Andrews

Continuous

Did the clock radio say, Your time starts now?
If I could get through to the end of the day
without losing it, what would that prove except
that the inevitable can be delayed?
The day, this microcosm rounded by sleep:
the fundamental building block of a life
(what can you make with say 25,000?)
Like somebody said: Where can we live but days?
Sufficient unto the day et cetera.
Except that each is continuous with all
our yesterdays and everything we scribbled
before the ancient dream-invigilator
said, Stop writing now, and snatched the magic bloc.

Still I wonder, Does every day have to fall
from the promise and energy of morning
into the grumpy fatigue of afternoon,
from Room for improvement: unlimited to
Nothing more can be expected of you now?
More or less, except that it doesn't stop there:
the block of day coming undone as it sinks
into sleep like a sugar cube dissolving.

Shane McCauley

Polarity

"Where could I live better? Below, the brothel caters for the flesh. And there is the church which forgives sin. And there is the hospital where we die." – C. P. Cavafy

It is a matter
of getting the proportions right:

a touch of sin here (who will see you
smile in darkness or dare the god
to respond?) a plea for redemption
there (there is always time to be good,
to say your prayers and chop
the wood …)

You must wage the battle
and ensure neither side
suffers too much hurt,
too much loss.

Wherever you touch the past
there will be damage.
Stare blindly into the sun
that just as blindly
stares at you.

Consolation: the white ceilings
of hospitals, someone's hand
holding yours, the fact
that it is never too late
to die.

Kevin Gillam

Flottle

and sea breathes louder,
out in creeds of spume, gulls in
squabble for full stops.

you wish you were up there, all
warm updrafted and
weightless. oceans – who draws the

dotted lines? found a
bottle once, flung off Cape Town,
read the message but

scrawl of weed said more. does sand
tire of this rush then
suck? “flottle” – best word for it,

while tonight, moon brushed orange,
in no mood for rhyme

Anna Ryan-Punch

Ten Caresses

He has not held a new baby before.
Gawky and eager, he negotiates the balance.

A golfer plucks her tee from the wet grass.
Pronged fingers curl to swoop, one knee bends.

An old cat rubs his knobby head on my lowered face.
His nose is a wet stripe on my cheek.

A man tucks his bookmark inside a paperback cover.
The tram corners sharply, he is unwilling to waver from the page.

The toddler styles her mother's hair.
Those confident fingers, she smiles and winces with pleasure.

Hailstones melt below the surface of the sea.
Spiraling bullets tremble in the bulge of a wave.

She tucks in his shirt tag with a leathered finger.
He turns, neatened, and kisses the sun on her face.

A feeding goldfish gathers in an air bubble.
Surprised, his rubber mouth ogling for food.

A magnolia tree blooms at night.
Linen blades point through the dark.

A man's hands hover too often around his new lover.
He does not know how long he will be allowed to touch her.

Jennifer Robertson

Heat

I lost my virginity at 10:30pm, on a Wednesday night, in a park a couple of streets over from the house my family was renting at the time. In the weeks leading up to this event I had been secretly amassing a hoard of sexy underwear. I had previously taken no interest in undergarments. While I was a teenager obsessed with the way I looked – I straightened my hair, waxed myself raw and held frequent screaming matches with my mother on the subject of clothes – I didn't care much about underwear. It was under and thus *unseen*. My mother bought and chose whatever she thought appropriate and every Christmas I was given innocuous daisy-patterned knickers to go with the white crop-tops that supported my non-existent breasts. But once *he* started to make his moves on me, I knew what had to be done. Someone, some *boy* was going to *see* the *unseen* and so the unseen better look good.

We were living in California at the time and I used my birthday money to buy racy underpants from stores with names like Miss Sixteen and Forever 21. Me, Miss-Fifteen-Not-Yet-Sixteen, bought black lacy g-strings and bejewelled underpants that spelled out lurid suggestions in diamantes across the crotch.

Around the same time my mother started buying some new things of her own. Her underwear had always been ancient and tent-like, sensible beige and white, the elastic gone, the material almost see-through it was so thinned with wear. But now, searching in my parents' bedroom for evidence of their imminent breakup, I found lacy bras and knickers. Not black or bejewelled, certainly, but instead in shades of dusky rose, delicate mauve and ivory. They were neatly folded at the back of the drawer next to one of those scented sachets.

My mother was having an affair with a German man, slightly younger than her, who made wildlife documentaries for cable TV. My father had already been having an affair of his own for several years with a fat woman who he had met in an internet chat room called *Forty Something*. So in her defence, my mother's adultery was really just a retaliatory strike. The affair with the German documentary maker made her girlish and distracted. Perhaps it was this affair that prevented her from realising what I was up to. For doubtless if she had known what I planned to do in that park on that Wednesday night she would have done anything in her power to stop me including harming, possibly seriously, the boy involved.

I do not need to tell you who *he* was, only that from a parental point of view he was a gravely inappropriate choice of lover for a multitude of reasons. However, even if my mother had tried to stop me, it would have done no good. I was determined. I had tunnel vision. It was a matter of life or death. I would have found a way somehow. I was like a dog in heat who chews through a wire fence to get out to the male company. I was primed and ready to go.

It had started when he sprayed me with water in the produce section of the local supermarket where he worked. I was grocery shopping with my mother and he squirted me with the hose that was used for keeping the lettuces moist.

"Hey," he said. "You go to my school."

"Yeah," I replied.

"You're the Aussie, right?" He pronounced it with an s sound rather than a z.

"So?" I said.

He sprayed me with the hose again. "So your shirt's wet," he said and grinned.

I started going over to the supermarket by myself. I would walk over in the evening, cross the parking lot and meet him coming off his shift. We would sit out the front of the store and flirt with one another. Sometimes, I would get in a shopping trolley and he would race me around the parking lot as night time fell. He had broad shoulders and a squareness about his face that no Australian boy could match. He would tickle me through my shirt as an excuse to put his hands on my waist and I would feel a lemon-lime squeeze, a sort of pull on my insides that would make its way from somewhere in the region of my underpants up to my belly button. It felt divine. It reminded me a little of when back home in Australia us girls would sit in a circle at lunch time and play a game called 'Blood Running Up' where you stroked the back of the person in front of you, while

someone behind you did the same. Then they would crack an invisible egg on your head and make you shiver. But this was better.

We would walk to the park, poking one another in the ribs all the way and then when we got there we would play-wrestle on the grass. Walking down the darkened streets with him afterwards, I felt incredibly light, like I was actually gliding across the pavement, my feet just skimming the ground, but anywhere he touched me, my waist or my shoulder, would instantly turn heavy and tactile.

He wasn't a big one for compliments, but one time when I was teasing him asking if he thought I was pretty, he sighed and said, "You know you're attractive."

You know you're attractive. I repeated it over and over in my head.

It was not an entirely spontaneous thing – that Wednesday night. We had built up to it over several weeks, sitting in the park for what used to be called necking. At some point, he put a hand up my denim skirt and asked in his teenage west coast drawl that always made me feel like I was in a movie what colour *panties* I was wearing. *Panties,* the word seemed indecent.

"White," I replied.

He pulled up my skirt to have a look for himself.

"Oh," he said. "You weren't lying."

I wondered what colour he wanted and so the next day I began my secret shopping missions.

But when we finally did it that Wednesday night, it was a little bit disappointing and a little bit painful. After all those nights of instinct and grace, the act itself was slow and uncomfortable. We started off on a bench under a tree and then moved onto the grass. The grass was wet and my jeans and t-shirt got damp. It hurt, but I expected it would.

Afterwards, he looked down at me and smirked. "Was that good for you?" he asked.

It was the only time I disliked him and it was only for a moment.

In the morning there was a brownish, rust-coloured stain on my underpants. I put them at the bottom of the laundry basket and then I went down to the kitchen for French toast.

My parents did break up and we moved back to Australia shortly afterwards. For a while, I held on to the hope that he might come and visit me or I might be allowed to visit him. I counted the number of nights we had spent together – twenty nine, and then I counted the number of days

since I had last seen him. I stopped counting after a year and a half. My mother also had to say goodbye to the German documentary maker. We moved into a small apartment, just the two of us, and we watched a lot of television together in the evenings.

When I think about that period of time in California it is not like a dream in the way stupid people say important periods in our life are like. It is the opposite. Those nights I spent with him seem sharper and clearer than anything I have experienced since then. It is the realness of these memories that bothers me, being so far removed as they are from the banal daydream I have inhabited since.

Toby Davidson

Francis Webb in Western Australia

Bill Ashcroft's claim that "Francis Webb is possibly the most remarkable poet in Australian literature"[1] prompts my argument that Francis Webb is the most remarkable poet in Australian literature to be out of print, the most remarkable poet *not* to be taught (despite critical attention), and finally, by disappearing from bookshops and undergraduate courses, the most remarkable poet to have in a sense become Oz Lit by embodying both the stunning proficiency and stifling neglect which have characterised Australian poetry since Charles Harpur lamented in 1848 "I am a bard of no regard in my own Australia."[2] As Paul Kane points out, Harpur enjoys a posthumous role in the Australian strain of "negative romanticism" he also identifies in Webb.[3] Yet unlike Harpur, Webb was recognised and published from his twenties, broadly influenced the subsequent generation and has only lately suffered pedagogical and commercial neglect.

One way to resist Webb's ongoing relegation to "bard of no regard" status is to chronologically and geographically locate him during his three-week visit to Perth in 1951. His "famous trans-continental do" is chronicled by the poet himself in three letters dated 10th, 25th and 30th November to his sister Leonie and brother-in-law Peter in their *Francis Webb: Poet and Brother*.[4] These letters provide valuable insights into Webb as tourist, poet and correspondent at a frenetic stage of his life between his first breakdown and period of institutionalisation in England (1949–1950) and his third, more devotional collection *Birthday* (1953). In the process Webb also offers a vision of post-war Perth through the eyes of a prodigious twenty–six–year–old ex-Sydneysider who had already befriended Douglas Stewart and seen his first collection *A Drum For Ben Boyd* (1948) illustrated by Norman Lindsay. This article seeks to resist Webb's "bard of no regard" status by investigating how his Perth experience locates and informs his engagements with the region in "The Canticle" and "Vlamingh and Rottnest Island".

First Impressions and Explorations

The first letter of 10th November 1951 is dominated by Webb the tourist as he cheerfully recalls "the progress of events" from his room in the Terminus Hotel in Fremantle after arriving from Melbourne on the "comfortable little steamer" M.V. Kanimbla. The South Fremantle shoreline is "rich coastal scenery … a very broad lie of water curiously blue in the sun"; Perth is "well laid out and easily navigable" and a trip up the Swan "saw the sailing season open at Claremont, and again there were spinnakers and ballooners and so forth, amid some truly superb river-scenery"[5]; the "Westralian Uni" is "beautifully situated" and Fremantle appeals with its cosmopolitanism and convict-era architecture. Yet Webb's enthusiasm as scenic tourist contrasts sharply with his frustration as cultural tourist, for

> [Perth] does fall short in one sphere of human affairs, the cultural. Perhaps this is an off-season, or something, but, barring newpaper-advts. of a solo piano concert and of the arrival of the Jubilee Art Exhibition here, I've seen no intimations of art-stirrings – nothing in the way of plays, concerts, ballet, etc. Oh yes, there was one small exhibition of paintings at a gallery in the Newspaper Buildings; some of those were very fine. But, by and large, that difficult word "culture" seems simply not to be worried over.[6]

Webb's brief second letter of 25th November, written in the knowledge his sister is away, records his (unfulfilled?) desire to "take a look at the jarrah and karri gum forests"[7] and visit Albany, where his explorer epic "Eyre All Alone" (1961) would later conclude with its bold Christological vision ("I am truly alone … But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves"[8]). The poet has also discovered one redeeming aspect of West Australian society on his trips to Rottnest and Mandurah:

> Actually, I can't lay claim to anything like an "exploration" (your [Peter's] own term) of the west; but the little I've seen has been thoroughly enjoyed. Moreover, though anything approaching generalization with regard to peoples, etc., is always suspect to [sic] and disliked by this bloke, Western hospitality and camaraderie really does exist in livelier forms than eastward … That weakness mentioned earlier, a rather general disaffection with cultural pursuits, remains, but it is gradually being rectified a bit. And it's offset to some extent by a chance ramble along, say, the Fremantle waterfront, will show you ancient buildings

> and things by the half-dozen. And those prevalent eastern symptoms – the high fence, ticket-collection, and black and white notice – pop up with absolute rarity.[9]

Webb's rejection of "anything approaching generalization" serves him well in regard to Perth "peoples, etc"; he does not seek to judge them, but craves stimulation. His "general disaffection with cultural pursuits" is quantitative rather than qualitative (when he discovers an exhibition he enjoys its "fine" work) and the cultural inaccessibility is ameliorated somewhat by the dynamism of the land and people.

The Working Poet

Webb's "trans-continental do" is anything but a break from poetry. In the first letter of 10th November, he reports "I've been going in to Perth, most days, to pick up some notes at the Public Library" for what would become *Birthday*, his radio play about Hitler.[10] Furthermore, he has made a "few retouches" to "Port Phillip Night" (later collected in *Birthday*) and another unidentified poem, which he sent his sister and brother-in-law to type and send to Vincent Buckley's *Melbourne University Magazine*. Meere and Meere note that Buckley published "Cross Country" and "The Leper", suggesting that Webb may have substituted "Port Phillip Night" for "Cross Country".[11] This strongly implies that "The Leper", later retitled "A Leper" (the first of *two* leper poems in Webb's Francican sequence "The Canticle") is the unidentified poem and thus "The Canticle" was composed either side of Webb's Perth trip. This is confirmed by the subsequent annotation: "'*The Canticle*' which he [Webb] had commenced in 1950 and developed during 1951 was finished in July [1952]."[12]

Whether Webb's time in Perth directly influenced the composition of "The Canticle" cannot be proven or disproven from the letters nor from Webb scholars such as Michael Griffith, Bill Ashcroft, Andrew Lynch and Bernadette Brennan who have all written on the sequence.[13] Of these, only Brennan could have accessed the Perth letters and editorial notes of 2001, but does not seek to do so. Webb's New Norcia trip could not have influenced "A Leper", yet Webb's recollection of the trip in his third letter of 25th November contains several points of thematic convergence with the *second* leper poem ("The Leper"), which at very least represents a case of life imitating or pre-empting art, subject to date of composition.

The final two pages of Webb's third letter from Perth are devoted to his trip to the Benedictine settlement at New Norcia, to which he intended to

hike – a distance of one hundred and forty-five kilometres! After covering some eighteen miles on the first day, he refused two offers of lifts only to take the third under conditions analogous to the leper's "almost living ulcer"[14]:

> The temperature of the district that day reached 106; a hot wind blew and blew. But the flies … [Webb's ellipsis] In the W.A. bush their numbers, their unscrupulous rapacity, their fantastic orchestration, are beyond civilized belief. Let the traveller have uncovered scratches or sores – my dial and mitts were knocked about in a tumble at Mandurah – and he receives special attention; as many as a dozen will fasten upon one small breach of the flesh, dining blindly … Well, two hours of this, together with a number of gathering blisters, each camped with exquisite precision upon a most delicate area of the foot. And now a truck pulls up – before God I didn't hail him – and the driver will take me to New Norcia. Temptation too great, I succumbed, and so lived to see the place.[15]

For a correspondent who was diagnosed in 1957 with "persecution mania and strong tendency towards violence" the "tumble in Mandurah" proves disconcertingly elusive; should it have involved any form of psychosis then Webb's quasi-leprous state is even more deeply implicated on the road to New Norcia.[16] The leper character features in Griffith's observation of an autobiographical dimension in Webb's turn towards a religious poetics at the time:

> Webb's comment on the poem "A Leper" as "type of my guilt" is the strongest indication that he saw his involvement with the St Francis story as a personal quest for grace, and "A Leper" is one of the most graphic self-portraits we have from this period.[17]

"A Leper", composed prior to the Perth visit, is given a broader national significance by Lynch as "the first of many instances of social exclusion in the poem, which clearly relate to Webb's radical attack on the official image of post-war White Australia as a land of freedom, welcome and equal opportunity."[18] Yet Webb's experience of "Western hospitality and camaraderie" clearly runs counter to this. His literal deliverance via the truck driver's act of charity is hauntingly echoed in the leper's redemption by the fearless humanity of St Francis in the *second* leper poem:

Forgiven, forgiven.
Forgiven by the road.
Grey obdurate flint
Under all lights; the goad
Of sunstone and hailstone; glint,
Colder than the eyes, but nearer.
Of mile, mile; and the driven
Whittlings of day, day:– […]

Forgiven by the road, forgiven
By and man and many lands.
I too have forgiven.
("The Leper")[19]

Webb continues in a similar vein regarding his New Norcia guide Father Cave, who exemplifies "the spirit I've been referring to: after having been my guide for at least an hour, he happened casually, led thereto by a turn in the conversation, to ask me whether I was a Catholic," the inference being that charity precludes all other considerations.[20] This is not to suggest that the truck driver was the model for St Francis, or indeed that Benedictines are Franciscans. Rather, Webb's frenetic rate of composition and heightened receptivity to his surroundings in 1951–1952 combined with thematic parallels support the proposition that Webb's encounters en route to and within New Norcia cannot be extricated from the creative process which completed "The Canticle" only seven months later. New Norcia also serves as a prelude to Webb's visits to a Franciscan monastery at Wahroonga in 1952[21] and his remarkable inclusion of the voice of Brother Sun to conclude the sequence ("wonder if you've heard about, in Melbourne, the accredited solar phenomen [sic] observed there at the close of the Jubilee Peace Novena, about a week ago?"[22]). Future directions for Webb the working poet are likewise signalled in his failed attempts to "sell (spiritually of course), G.M. Hopkins" to the Benedictines.[23] "Hopkins and Foster's Dam", part of the "Galston" sequence, was composed north of Sydney at around the same time as "The Canticle" was finished.

Perth as Subject: "Vlamingh and Rottnest Island"

While Webb's poetic engagement with Western Australia in "The Canticle" can be textually and chronologically supported it is not, on the current evidence, assured. By contrast "Vlamingh and Rottnest Island" is explicitly

set in the Perth region, draws upon Webb's visit as described in his third letter of 30th November and was first composed during his three-week "do" with subsequent revisions in Melbourne, Sydney, or Adelaide.[24]

To locate Webb as tourist and working poet on Rottnest prior to the composition of "Vlamingh" might at first seem a simple task, but there are deeper, shifting layers of history, biography and poetics at play. On the face of it, Webb's Rottnest trip is postcard-perfect: despite "stomach auguries" on the "tiny little" ferry there and a hangover from the first night which "alas, was a bit beery", he provides a glowing account of the island itself:

> A superb place. Old buildings, relics of convict days, are found here and there, and a tiny old cemetery; the old graveyard has always a special beauty. Then one has a finely-built lookout-cum-memorial giving a grand view of the rolling hills, crags, and sea; to reach it, one climbs up a steep little hill and, on the way, feeds tame wallabies [quokkas] with bits of biscuit, etc. Wallabies, by the way, gave the place its name: the Dutch discoverers thought they were rats. And then a stroll round the coastline – more of a scramble, actually – means tiny beaches, rough cliffs and caves, projecting granite elbows, and reefs to left and right. Finally a tall lighthouse surmounts the tallest central hill; on climbing the hill one sees the whole island ranged beneath him, from bushland acres chequered with the purple Rottnest daisy, particular to the place, to the glittering salt lakes which lie inland. Sorry if this has school-essay characteristics; I did like Rottnest.[25]

Rottnest in 1951 was transforming from a World War Two artillery post designed to protect Fremantle into its more popular image as a holiday isle. Although most service personnel had departed, the army retained Kingston Barracks and the battery itself was not dismantled until 1953.[26] While this particular incarnation of Rottnest may have been evident to a poet who had experienced his own army and air force training, its prior incarnations were not. Stephen Mickler notes the Rottnest Museum was not opened until 1979 and the "potted history delivered by a smooth pre-recorded voice" of later ferries was not in operation in 1951, though a tour guide equivalent may have provoked Webb's interest in Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh (1640–1698).[27] Missing altogether from Webb's account of Rottnest is any acknowledgement of its role as an Aboriginal prison from 1838 to 1931. Blaze Kwaymullina notes that even in the twenty-first century:

> The brutal history of Wadjemup [the Noongar term for Rottnest] is glossed over in tourist brochures. On the island itself there are only two

visible signs of its dark history: one is the Museum and the other the Aboriginal cemetery.[28]

Neither the museum (1979) nor the cemetery (1985) were available to a visiting poet in 1951 (Indigenous graves were unmarked, unlike the "old graveyard"). Nonetheless, this does not prevent Webb from including a latent Indigeneity in "Vlamingh" where the island's "newborn navigator" deals the explorer a black swan, "queer-shaped trees" and smoke "the penmanship of a man's hands."[29] The poem's conclusion "Fallen kings, wreckage – but never a word of our quarry" can also be read in a pre-colonial context in light of Kwaymullina's observation that "once connected to the mainland … Noongar people traded its limestone for goods from other areas."[30]

However marginal, Indigeneity in "Vlamingh and Rottnest Island" also represents the shift in Birthday towards a melding of Indigenous and religious, where the former usually relies upon the latter. The two were closely intertwined in Webb's epiphany just before his 1949 breakdown, recalled in his *Hospital Confession* (c.1964):

> I had a terror of cruelty, of the concentration-camp. And I knew now that my poetry must acknowledge God and the Redemption. Question followed question. What of the love of the heroic, which had made my name? Worse, what of such friends as Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart: would they not … forsake me altogether if God came stumbling into my poems? And race-hatred. Accounts of the concentration-camps filled me with panic. Did it not flourish in Aussie?[31]

Beneath Webb's postcard tour of Wadjemup-Rottnest is lies his own quest to redeem both himself and the leprous state of humanity ("Hitler was a human being!" ["Birthday"])[32] Yet buried further, literally in the land itself, is Noongar elder Clarrie Isaacs' "place like Auschwitz,"[33] Mickler's "early Australian Dachau,"[34] or poet Graeme Dixon's "Holocaust Island"[35] – horrors Webb imagines as Australian in general but cannot contact beneath his feet. The religious and Indigenous meld differently at New Norcia where Webb is enthused by the assimilative example of "orphanages" for Indigenous children,[36] indicating that perhaps the tourist is more easily enchanted by the exotic West than the poet by the familiar East with its "aboriginal's shark" and pre-colonial holiness.[37]

Webb's conviction that he must "acknowledge God and the Redemption" and its remarkable effect upon his "love of the heroic" dominate "Vlamingh

and Rottnest Island." Bernadette Brennan observes in regard to Webb's (anti)heroic St Francis "Like Webb's explorer poems, "The Canticle" is a poem of quest, of searching … No longer is the incarnated Christ a felt absence."[38] "Vlamingh" represents a new type of explicitly Christian explorer poem as distinct from the decreasingly implicit style of "A Drum For Ben Boyd," "Leichhardt in Theatre" and "A View of Montreal," the last ending with Mt Gaspé's cross catching fire.[39] "Vlamingh" begins "Christmas – always, forever, a Morning and a Coming" and persists with nativity imagery:

> Christmas and three ships, tokens of far places.
> The sea-grain's fruitless fastening
> On our numb timbers, all the sea like a stylus
> With its bickering passport-motion at our faces.
>
> Christmas, past dawn. It is not the Ridderschap Van Holland
> (Errant star of our search) that is born on water,
> Shepherded by coarse cloud with an eastern smile.
> But with gulls galore it bears itself well, this island,
> As a small craft, and every fulfilling mile
> Brings closer to us some newborn navigator.[40]

For a Catholic poet who had previously shrouded his religious "Someone" in mystery ("Images in Winter"), Webb's synthesis of an eternal Christmas ("Magi of a kind?") with the search for a "newborn navigator" reveals his determination, mid-composition of "The Canticle", to add God and the Redemption to his explorer poems. Though not as fiercely biblical or liturgical as the blending of Exodus, Nullabor and Albany in "Eyre All Alone" (1961) or "Sturt and the Vultures" (1970), "Vlamingh" explicitly unites Christological presence and the explorer search in a similar manner to that detected by Brennan in "The Canticle". Vlamingh, unlike Boyd, Leichhardt and Cartier is not feted with bluster and hyperbole, but rather withered by adjectival hardship – "groggy", "fruitless", "numb", "bickering" – until he renounces his "errant" search in favour of Christ Incarnate.

From this watershed period of 1951–52 until his death in 1973, Francis Webb remained an explicitly devotional poet. His religious impulse, while tied at crucial times to Indigeneity (including in "Eyre All Alone"), remains the more represented. It also overrides his initial poetics. Recalling Webb's Rottnest account, the crow's nest view from the memorial over rolling hills and sea are conducive to the island's as vessel-like image complete with ship's "rats"; the "reefs to left and right" surely inspired the "reef

logging / Fallen kings for us", and his impressions of the coastline and salt lakes can be seen in "two leagues of gull and glitter" and "spray canvas from the silver navigator" in the original, *Bulletin* version published by Douglas Stewart in March 1952.[41] Dutch and Christian themes increased as Webb re-drafted and edited, melding his experience with Vlamingh's own discovery of water, quokkas, sweet-smelling trees and the wreckage of an unknown ship.[42] In the *Bulletin* version, the "Two leagues of gull and glitter sing us this island / As a small craft", the trees release their "penmanship of smoke" and the reef logs fallen kings – the island *activates* the poetic imagination and the navigational "other" is the silver sea. In the later *Birthday* version the island *becomes* a small craft, the trees' smoke *is* the "penmanship of a man's hands" (not just the "omen" of it), and the island, as "he", "the other", the "newborn navigator" opens the tattered log of the reef – the poetic imagination activates the island, and the navigational "other" is the Incarnated Christ, "Face to face. Midday."[43] At the same time the gulls, for Ashcroft Webb's symbol for the journeying self, diminish from singing the island as a small craft to abundantly attending the island-ship on its way to the newborn navigator.[44] Like Vlamingh, the symbolic self as searcher-singer must relinquish its active role to turn from "Christmas to midday – closer–" in the *Bulletin* version to "Face to face" with Christ. Ultimately, there may be few sheerer examples of Webb's paradigmic and poetic shift from his Perth trip to the publication of *Birthday*. Locating him creatively beyond this point finds our "bard of no regard" with Christ, God, or other, notably female, saints and mystics, while physically hospitalised or on day-leave.

Epilogue: Fremantle, 1953

In 1953 Webb returned to Fremantle en route to England, where upon his arrival on English soil "in a bit of strife again, no doubt thanks to the fun and games of the mob … on board the P&O cruise" he was promptly arrested and institutionalised until his transfer back to Australia in 1964.[45] Webb makes no further reference to Fremantle or Western Australia, but this episode does lend greater credence to the possibility of something more than a harmless "tumble" occurring at Mandurah. Yet if "truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps" ("A Drum for Ben Boyd") then it is more prudent to address my own stops and gaps, the most glaring of which is my marginalisation of Frank's tenderness towards Leonie ("Doll" or "duckie") who rescued him from England only fourteen months prior to his Perth trip. His last words from Fremantle allow his brotherly affection to receive its due regard:

Well, above is some account of my major excursions. Sorry it's so adjectivally profuse, but you quite literally asked for it. Only about 5 days of the boundless West remain to me, and so, sister mine, your next news of me will likely consist in the warped apparition of my snout. And after this reaches you, duckie (all right, I'll try to remember your marital dignity), write nothing and send nothing. Except that little prayer sometimes, please.

So-long, and it will be grand to see you again. My thanks for absolutely everything, and please don't forget to convey them to Pete. God bless you, and every conceivable good wish from.

Your loving brother,

Frank.[46]

Francis Webb did not intend his letters to be critical sources and his friend and fellow poet Rosemary Dobson (1920–) suggests well before *Poet and Brother* that "what went into his correspondence … was simply what was left over from the remarkable achievement of his poetry."[47] Yet in resisting Webb's slide towards "bard of no regard" status, the letters offer crucial insights into the compositional basis of multiple poems while chronologically and geographically locating him. It remains impossible, however incrementally, for Webb to completely be a bard of no regard when one can walk around Fremantle, gaze from the memorial at Rottnest or visit New Norcia while regarding Webb's poems or letters in the full sense of the French *regarder*, "to watch". But the past, despite Webb's protestations of timelessness ("1210 A.D. – too much of that"[48]) is also to some degree inaccessible: one cannot accompany him step by step, only locate his poetics of presence in the streets and regions of a post-war Perth which, like the poet, remains and is gone.

Notes

1 Bill Ashcroft, *The Gimbals of Unease: The Poetry of Francis Webb* (Nedlands: Centre For Studies in Australian Literature, 1996): 1.

2 Charles Harpur, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Michael Ackland (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986): 16.

3 Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 204.

4 Leonie Meere and Peter Meere, eds., *Francis Webb, Poet and Brother* (Pomona: Sage Old Books, 2001): 33.

5 Meere and Meere, 33–34.

6 Meere and Meere, 34–35.

7 Meere and Meere, 37.

8 Francis Webb, *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969): 192.

9 Meere and Meere, 38.

10 Meere and Meere, 34

11 Meere and Meere, 35.

12 Meere and Meere, 62.

13 Ashcroft; Bernadette Brennan, "Recognizing the "Face of Love" in Francis Webb's 'The Canticle'" *Antipodes* 19.1 (2005): 8–9; Michael Griffith, *God's Fool: The Life and Poetry of Francis Webb* (North Ryde: Collins Angus & Robertson, 1991); Andrew Lynch, "Remaking the Middle Ages in Australia: Francis Webb's 'The Canticle'(1953)," *Australian Literary Studies* 36.1 (2001): 50.

14 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 70.

15 Meere and Meere, 43.

16 Meere and Meere, 125. This was later diagnosed as schizophrenia. Craig Powell, "Francis Webb – A Memoir" in *Poetry Australia* (Francis Webb Commemorative Edition, ed. Grace Perry) 56 (1975): 83.

17 Griffith, 169.

18 Lynch, 50.

19 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 88.

20 Meere and Meere, 44.

21 Griffith, 208.

22 Meerer and Meere, 38.

23 Meere and Meere, 38.

24 Meere and Meere, 45, 246.

25 Meere and Meere, 41–42.

26 For a visitor's introduction to military operations at Wadjemup-Rottnest, see http://www.rottnestisland.com/en/History+and+Culture Military+Functions htm (accessed 7th July 2008).

27 Stephen Mickler, "Curators and the Colony: Managing the Past at Rottnest Island Museum", *Continuum* 3.1 (1990): 2. http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/continuum2.html, retrieved 7th July 2008.

28 Kwaymullina, Blaze, "Wadjemup: Holiday Paradise or Prison Hell-Hole," *Studies in Western Australian History* 22 (2001): 117.

29 Webb, 90–91.

30 Kwaymullina, 109

31 Griffith, 89.

32 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 102.

33 Kwaymullina, 118

34 Mickler, 11.

35 See Graeme Dixon, *Holocaust Island* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991).

36 For an Indigenous perspective on the New Norcia "orphanage", see Alf Taylor," From God, The Devil and Me" in *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*, eds. Anne Brewster et al (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press, 2000). Taylor, a poet, was removed from his mother and later told she was dead.

37 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 92, 98.

38 Brennan, 8-9.

39 Webb, *Collected Poems,* 66.

40 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 90–91.

41 Francis Webb, "Vlamingh and Rottnest Island 1696," *The Bulletin*, 26th March 1952: 18.

42 See www.voc.iinet.net/vlamingh.html (accessed 7th July 2008) and related sites. Webb had researched Vlamingh enough to add to his notes in *Collected Poems*, "In the late 17th century Vlamingh, a Dutch seaman under the command of the East India Company, came upon Rottnest Island, W.A., during his search for the ship Ridderschap Van Holland" (Webb 250). While Douglas Stewart published "Vlamingh", their friendship only fared marginally better than that of Webb and Lindsay, who did not correspond again after 1949, in part due to Lindsay's anti-Semitism. Griffith, 107.

43 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 91.

44 Ashcroft, 142.

45 Meere and Meere, 109.

46 Meere and Meere, 44–45.

47 Rosemary Dobson, "Francis Webb," in *Poetry Australia* (Francis Webb Commemorative Edition, ed. Grace Perry) 56 (1975): 7.

48 Webb, *Collected Poems*, 69.

Les Wicks

The Table

Thrift is treason.
The more you eat
the more you grow. Junk economics.

Broadsheet liftout sections parade –
business, cars, travel …
a new career from slave yard
to auctioneer. We need our dreams
but why dress them
in trash Armani?

A fortune. Cloud Nine – no humans, motorways
sleep in the park beneath a teeming sky of continuous fireworks.
Spacious as friends,
our pinion of harvest …
the lazy or the ride.
Every man should have his lily …
we set sail from the Cape of Storms
too ardent.

I've aspired to
but did not try
nothing left.
Perilous absence makes the heart grow
pure. Black simpletons,
the bereft adepts howl in their shelter
as we shake loose coins like cold wet dogs.

I understand less each year
and cannot rise to judge.

Knute Skinner

Image

Rain drums on the window.
He turns toward it
and there is her face,
its intense, unblinking stare.

He turns away, blinking,
and opens a beer.
He pours it in haste; the foam
takes its time settling.

He takes his time watching it settle.
Then crackles of sound follow streaks of light.
The overhead bulb dims, brightens, dims.
With two hands, he lifts the beer to his mouth.

When he looks again to the window,
there is no image.
The panes have been scrubbed clean
by barrages of rain.

But he knows it will be there again.
Or else at the bottom of his beer glass.
Or else in the passenger window
as he makes his compliant approach

for the daily drive to the grave
in spite of the weather.

Ian C. Smith

The Riddle of Shakespeare

At their second world convention
those Shakespearean scholars
fight for seats in Washington's Hilton
just for the privilege of hearing
Jorge Luis Borges speak.

After several minutes of standing applause
they quieten, sit
as Borges' lips begin to move
then lean towards the old blind master
hoping to hear the riddle revealed.

Although they strain, all they hear
is a susurrus, with *Shakespeare*
the only word audible, but distant.
The microphone is too high.
Nobody steps forward to adjust it.

Borges speaks for an hour.
Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare.

No one leaves that vast room – *Shakespeare.*
When Borges finally finishes
the scholars give him a stirring ovation
their hands hot, eyes glistening
on their feet again, for several minutes.

MERIEL GRIFFITHS

MAKING THE LEAP: AUSTRALIAN POETRY 2007–2008

"I had not thought there were so many / good poets in the States," writes Geoff Page in a poem from *Seriatim*, one of this year's new poetry collections. The poem is a response to an anthology (*Poetry 180*, edited by Billy Collins) by American poets Page has never heard of but whose poems, about ordinary lives and events, elicit an unexpected emotional response from him as he sits reading in a café: "I have that tightness in the throat / I get at funerals." The poem makes clear that these are not "Great" poems in any sense of the word; they are quiet discoveries of the poignant in the ordinary and everyday. Their remarkable achievement lies in their ability to make the imaginative leap of sense and feeling which connects these poets and the reader across distances of geography, culture and experience:

> I hope to visit them again …
> and pause with them beside a field
>
> to watch a pair of horses graze
> or small birds in the stubble. (36)

It's a fair question to ask of any poetry how far it's able to travel beyond its own borders; how far beyond the specificities of locality and experience it's able to make this imaginative leap in consciousness. To apply this question to the abundant crop of Australian poetry published this year, how far do these anthologies, selected poems, retrospectives and individual collections transcend the limits of the merely personal or the boldly public? How extensive is their vision and how inclusive of other voices and perspectives are they in their engagement with the world?

The concern with bridging distance is clearly evident in the collaborative Australian and Singaporean anthology *Over There: Poems from Singapore and*

Australia, edited by John Kinsella and Alvin Pang, which seeks to establish an ongoing dialogue between poets in the Asia-Pacific region. The list of poets whose work is represented illustrates the cultural diversity both editors have sought to reflect and neither editor has chosen to limit their selection to poems about Singapore and Australia, ensuring a broader dialogue than cross-border reflections of each other. The anthology draws attention to the existing cross-cultural connections between the two countries, through writers' festivals, publishing and university study as well as through migration and travel. Several of the Singaporean poets live and publish their work in Australia and some of the Australian poets have read and published their work in Singapore.

The two sections of the anthology, the Australian and the Singaporean selections, are bridged by Miriam Wei Wei Lo, an Australian poet born in Canada and raised in Singapore. Her poems are an exploration of the cultural hybridity of language, place and identity. "Bumboat Cruise on the Singapore River" navigates a path between cultural contradictions and ambiguities – the American rhetoric and accents of Singaporean tourist promotions, the taxi driver unsure whether she is a tourist or a local, and the duality of her own history: "Sixteen years of my life / afloat in this sea of contradictions, of which I was, equally, one: / half-white, half-Chinese" (168). The in-between spaces of identity and the intersecting spaces of cultures and languages are explored in both sections of the anthology. Chinese idiograms, dialect and cultural references run through many of the Singaporean poems, though only Alvin Pang's poem "Candles" is written entirely in dialect. The poem is a poignantly realised dialogue between brother and sister about the "borrowing" of votive candles from a nearby Catholic Church:

> oi, ah pa know you take candle from the church
> again, you going to get it
>
> nevermind i bring them back when you study
> finish. you dont say he dont know, so dark how to read, how to study?
> (236)

The siblings' literal interpretation of Christian ritual renders it strange and illogical beside their greater logic for stealing the candles. This external perspective on Catholicism is a reminder that Christianity, as well as English, represents a colonial presence in Singapore.

jesus also like government what, he where got care whether
you blind or not, house got light or not, he just hang up there
all day for people to see, put money in box, give him so many
candles for nothing. he also not taking exam … (237)

The use of dialect has political significance in both of these postcolonial societies; in the Australian section indigenous poet Lionel Fogarty writes in politically charged dialect in his activist poems about broadcasting and bureaucracy:

but we should consider advocating
a hurray wireless playing,
Blackfella media, not political
foot-balling loudmouth, perturbed. (64) 'No Grudge'

As well as the activist urgings of the poem, the dialect is itself resistant to the dominant culture of English and addresses an indigenous audience not represented in the mainstream culture of Australia.

The inclusion of dialect poems as well as some poetry in translation – by Yahia al-Samawy in Australia and Enoch Ng Kwang Cheng in Singapore – illustrates the linguistic and cultural diversity the anthology seeks to represent. The editors' internationalist focus is evident in their commitment to this cross-cultural project but also in their selection of poems that reflect the intricate complexities of cultural identity. Individually, not all of these poems make the imaginative leap beyond their own cultural perspectives but the international context of this anthology provides a forum where they become part of a much broader cultural dialogue.

The committed internationalism of many of this year's Australian poetry collections is apparent from even a general sampling; many of these collections engage imaginatively with other literatures and cultures and make valuable connections across the distances of culture and language. There is also a strong engagement with global events and concerns and an evident resistance to the confines of regionalist and nationalist perspectives. Many of the collections convey a sense of the multiple identities and dislocations of global citizenship and constant travel. The internationalism of John Mateer's collection *Elsewhere* is a case in point; this retrospective collection brings together an impressive volume of poems previously published in South Africa, Sumatra and Japan. These poems range across three continents but are frequently overlaid by images and memories of the poet's native South Africa, creating complex layers

of language and imagery. The perspectives of overseas travel are threaded enticingly through many of the collections represented here, but it is the poems most grounded in a sense of place that provide some of the strongest perspectives. The close observations of the local and the specific are where some of the most fertile imagery emerges.

The two anthologies *The Best Australian Poetry 2007*, edited by John Tranter, and *The Best Australian Poems 2007*, edited by Peter Rose, demonstrate the astonishing range of Australian poetry published here and overseas (Rose has included poems published overseas). The continued presence of both anthologies testifies to the wealth of good poems and poets in Australia and implies a nicely ironic approach to the superlatives of their titles. The value of these anthologies is that they represent a diverse sample of recent Australian poetry and introduce lesser-known poets alongside the established names. From next year UQP will include online journals in their scope for the first time, which will broaden the selection further to include forms of poetry unlikely to appear in the more conventional print journals.

Peter Rose's selection includes the finalists in the 2007 *Australian Book Review* competition, ensuring a broader readership for finely crafted poems such as Ross Clark's "Full-Bucket Moon", a luminous and sensuous poem which brings a sense of the divine to the rituals of the milking shed and lovingly evokes the procession of bovine goddesses in attendance: "at last / Polyhymnia or Euterpe or / Erato, the nine offspring of / memory's lord to my tender / -ing, stripping hands" (16). Kathryn Lomer's poem "The Fencer and His Mate" is another particularly accomplished poem, with a strong sense of place and humanity constructed through a series of finely observed images of the fencer and the natural world: "The lyrebird's taken up / the fencer's grunt, the noisy saw, / and will continue for weeks after the fence is finished" (61). John Tranter's selection contains equally strong poems, such as Pam Brown's "Darkenings", a complex and haunting poem where images of death and terminal illness intersect with evocations of pollution and environmental disaster: "no further treatment nothing to lose / man with cancer carries his son / to lay him down in the contaminated ground, / nowhere left now, / moon ripple on the tailings dam / where he used to skim stones" (7). These anthologies present a valuable overview of Australian poetry, attesting to its vibrancy and diverse concerns.

Les Murray's new *Selected Poems* and David Malouf's *Revolving Days* bring together poems from recent collections and many of the finest from earlier ones. Les Murray's new *Selected* brings it up to date with the inclusion of poems from *The Biplane Houses*, which contributes the fine textual detail of

"The Shining Slopes and Plains", with its Alpine grass, "root-woven, fine as fur / that has grown in our metal rain gutters" (264) and the elliptical imagery of "Bright Lights on Earth" with its satellite mapping of regions by their light emissions: "tofu detailing all Japan, … dazzling cobwebbed Europe":

> The past
> is fuel of glacé continents,
> it rims them in stung salt,
> Australia in her sparsely starred
> flag hammock. Human light
> is the building whose walls
> are outside. It bleeds the planet
> but who could be refused
> the glaring milk of earth? (178)

The new *Selected* might just ensure that the timely question this poem poses reverberates through schools and colleges across the nation.

David Malouf's *Revolving Days* divides his poems into four sections corresponding to the stages of his life they relate to rather than the order in which they were written. This brings together some wonderful poems which have previously appeared separately, adding for instance to the store of richly sensuous poems arising out of the poet's childhood and its intimate world evoked so intricately in "The Blue Apron", a poetic exploration of the ties, and the untying, of that most symbolic of maternal objects: "clothes-props hoisted / a bellied sail – my mother levitating. / …Inside it, sky-hung, pegged to the line, a sullen angel / scowled, shook off wet wings, took on the world" (9). These selected poems include many from *Typewriter Music*, published last year. From this collection comes 'Moonflowers', a sensual and elusive love poem:

> The moonflower lingers
>
> in its fat scent. We move
> in and in and out of
> each other's warmed spaces,
> there is
> no single narrative. (155)

These selected volumes represent a valuable addition to the highly

acclaimed recent collections and established work of these mature poets, allowing readers to make their own links between the poems as they read across the themes and phases of many years' fine work.

Of the individual collections published this year those which stand out are most frequently the ones working at the level of suggestion rather than overt statement. The subterranean tensions of John Kinsella's collection *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful* are a powerful evocation of his conflicted relationship with the Wheatbelt where he lives. Throughout the collection the imagery conveys tensions between surface appearance and what lies beneath. In "Gradual Variation" the contradictions between the tourist façade of York and the brutal history it conceals are succinctly caught in the epithet "boutique town of horrors" (65). The poem unpeels this façade to reveal a site of ongoing conflict between environmentalists and destructive land management practices. 'Of the Effects of Tragedy' is a darkly poetic exploration of Yenyenning Lake as environmental warning – 'farmland sinkhole / laced with sheep skeletons worn down to interiors / by heavy-duty salinity' (19) – and as another covering surface for layers of violent history, of massacre and denial:

> Yenyenning partially seen after enduring rains
> is ghostly turned inside out, a mass of defeated
> photons glittering about the dead …
> …
> They talk about seepage from cemeteries,
> but when the dead have been scattered and denied rights,
> they drain slowly from the surface, welling in an arterial
> layer not far below the growing soil, and move even uphill
> down towards sinkholes like Yenyenning … (20)

The imagery of the lake's concealed bodies, while evoking a specific history of racist violence in Australia, also becomes linked to the London bombings. Local and global experiences overlap to reflect the international and regional identities the poet continually moves between, which are a source of creative tension in the poems. The poet's conflicted sense of identity in relation to this place is evident in "Joy and Grief", in which his "self-myth of belonging" is countered by a sense of alienation. The unresolved tensions of "this inside-outside / paradox" (12) are central to this poem but also to the collection as a whole: he is paradoxically a local "red-neck", an insider, while remaining at a critical distance from such an identity.

The poet's intimate knowledge of the history and ecology of this specific place provides the solid ground for this exploration of identity. The poems work outwards from the specific and the local, to the global implications of environmental degradation; the humans in the landscape are evoked as destructive but also as vulnerable, at the mercy of larger forces. The sense of threat and the menacing undercurrents running through the collection reverberate beyond the specificities of place to convey the precariousness of the global environment and the humans in it. The collection as a whole reveals a unique sensibility and a passionate commitment to the local and the global environment.

The exploration of identity and the complex relationships between individual and group identity, whether at the level of nation or otherwise, has provided some rich poetic material in two particular collections, *Two Kinds of Silence* by Kathryn Lomer and *Scar Revision* by Tracy Ryan. Lomer's collection weaves an intricate pattern of connections and disconnections, oppositions and doubles. The poems follow a sequence of exits and entrances; her own comings and goings in "Flight Lines" and her relationships with others which follow a pattern of coming together and falling apart. The poet's multiple roles as mother, daughter, lover and writer also follow a tidal pattern, advancing and receding at various times. The constant switching between identities and the poet's attempt to reconcile them are poignantly evoked in "The way the world sleeps", a lyrical exploration of duality and paradox. The diurnal rhythms of the natural world provide the poem's images of divided identity: "I know that out there somewhere, / dolphins are sleeping the way the world sleeps – // one hemisphere at rest, / the other alert". The poet's further image of the rhythmic blinking of a marine navigation light adds to the poignancy of the lines that follow:

> I understand these on-off things,
> knowing myself mother, not-mother,
>
> mother, not-mother,
> my identity a code not yet cracked.
>
> In another house my son will be saying I love you
> and snuggling down for the night.
>
> I am one-half awake, one asleep, (24)

The corollary to this pattern of connection and disconnection comes in the joint perspectives of poems where the personal worlds of mother and son combine, as in "Foot prince": "To me it is where my ancient /meets my now; / to my son it is the place / where we search for the foot prince/ in the wet sand."(18) The intricacy of the poet's patterning in this collection is illustrated by "Omphalos", itself a rhythmic pattern of duplication and succession which also explores patterns of female identity:

> Daughter, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother,
> connection stretches into history
> like dolls cut with pinking shears
> from the same sheet of paper. (55)

Ryan's *Scar Revision* is a subtle and lyrical exploration of identity through the motif of inscription. The title poem traces scars on the body as markers of experience and personal history, indelible inscriptions on the skin. The poet's mapping of the body through its scars creates a sustained metaphor of the skin as an encoded text whose mysteries are never fully decoded,

> proffered like fossils
> or runes
> inscrutable without context
> without gloss (9)

This poem also explores the subliminal spaces of disjuncture, finding the gaps between intention and action, as slips of the hand and self-sabotage reveal a hidden agenda:

> Like automatic writing
> so much of us is
> involuntary … (15)

The involuntary, as well as revealing the hidden intentions of the body and subconscious mind, also relates to the genetic inscriptions of heredity through physical predisposition and replication; in "Snow baby" the poet reads her child's face, finding the imprints of family likeness: "you are the stamp / of features covered over / long since & uncannily / brought home, brought back" (18).

The central motif of inscription creates important correspondences between poems about naming and labelling, identifications and definitions,

landmarks, genealogy, handwriting and keyhole surgery, as each poem explores facets of how identity is inscribed. The poems' stitching together of these different facets creates a complex and rewarding collection.

The body and its hereditary fault lines are explored elsewhere, in the first part of Judy Johnson's collection *Navigation*. The poems of "Ties", about family and relationships, have an undercurrent of malignancy through the imagery of cancer and terminal illness. In "Cannas", the lilies are imagined in terms suggestive of medical symptoms; they arrive as "knobbly growths" and spread through the garden, which is soon "malignant with cannas": "The flowers arrange themselves, it says, / in terminal clusters" (20). Terminal illness is a poignant motif in the beautifully crafted love poem "The Owl and the Pussycat and the Dying", in which the grieving lover and the dying one are embodied as the Owl and the Pussycat, a cast added to by the secretly harboured Hope, with whom the Pussycat sails triumphantly away:

> Only when you have gone,
> this bed becomes a pea-green boat.
> With a deep breath
> I cast us off –
>
> Then till morning
> – which is a year and a day –
> Hope and the Pussycat sail away,
> and we dance by the light of the moon. (18)

The poet's lyricism and dazzling imagery are sustained through the four sections of this collection, two of which, "Whale" and "Reason" are impressive sequences and extended poems based on separate historical accounts of a whaling captain's wife at sea and the extinction of the Tuniit. The collection as a whole is richly imaginative and finely crafted.

The imaginative realm of "The Owl and the Pussycat" invoked by Johnson is the realm Kevin Brophy enters with his collection *Mr Wittgenstein's Lion*. Brophy takes an obvious delight in language and the creation of imagery stripped of familiar connections. The poems are frequently whimsical and surreal, looking out from unfamiliar perspectives and creating a world that is newly strange. Many of the poems portray a childhood world, a consciousness recaptured, or turn a child's perspective on the adult world, conveying the puzzle and mystery of phenomena observed with no understanding of how they are linked. These perspectives are frequently stripped of causality or

create new conjunctions, such as the connections made by the poet's son in "The mental life": "*Are there idiot cats*? he asks us / As if a question can be real once it's posed" (44). The detachment of these perspectives creates space for unexpected connections; in 'Jamieson hills' images of the natural world and drought affliction are rendered with a fresh vision:

> – this country in its tenth year of drought
> becomes pencilled in, scribbled on brittle paper.
> …
> kangaroos float over paddocks. They move like fish
> through the air. (16)

The stripped-back imagery of a funeral poem, "Monument", is particularly effective in conveying a sort of detached wonder at the world and our part in it, at human impermanence and the procession of time:

> We filed into a chapel much like any chapel.
> Six men lifted the box up like an ark.
> Afterwards we stood round trays of biscuits in a circle. (51)

The simplicity of the language of these poems is deceptive; they are finely crafted and sharply observed pieces whose constant shifts of perspective serve to defamiliarise the world. The poems are joyous, poignant, humorous and revelatory in their curiously accurate but unexpected logic; here are the shifting adult and child perspectives of 'after rain':

> … after rain the birds around here have much to say.
> They're out there now like children let out of a classroom,
> shaking themselves on Anna's roof and in the bottlebrush
> where there must be mouthfuls of insects like lollies in the air. (70)

Jennifer Kornberger's debut collection *I could be rain* also reveals the poet's delight in the felicity of language and image. In many poems she captures an oblique perspective, almost catching things unawares. This results in some startling images and connections, such as those in "Eve", in which the poet's imagery of suburban gardening, in the planting and storing of bulbs, overlaps the mythology of the Garden of Eden:

> If I entered your garden
> I would dig you up like a bulb

thinking at first you were a stone
but no, tea coloured and tapered
by Spring you would lie in the palm
of my hand, the dirt still clinging
to your hair. (18)

Her poems about her children are, like Kathryn Lomer's, an honest exploration of the conflicting roles and demands of parenthood. In "This child" the conflict between individual identity and motherhood is strongly evoked through images of physical invasion as the child demands space in the mother's body:

Then he wants to sleep
in the crescent
between my heart and
my liver,
he's knocking on my organs
wailing to be let in
butting like a bully calf … (15)

This image of the mother's body and its appropriation by the child is explored in "Bright thief" through the reversal of this image:

The girl that I gave birth to
is wearing my skirt
in the kitchen late at night
is wearing my jeans around Fremantle …
she's been pregnant with me
for sixteen years
and now she wants
a flat belly and a mobile phone. (45)

The perspectives and images of these poems are consistently inventive and unexpected, a feat the poet achieves throughout this collection.

While most of these collections explore important aspects of Australian life, Mike Ladd's collection *Transit* strongly reflects on its public values. Ladd's strong sense of social values is evident in his examination of the collective social conscience in relation to issues of injustice, land clearing, car worship and "the supernova of real estate". The poems range across topics as diverse as high-rise dwelling, the rituals of junior football and

the politically charged topics of the Howard years and the war in Iraq. The poet's dexterity is evident in the variety of language and imagery he employs. Many of the poems are also intimate and acutely observed; the family dynamics of "That Christmas", for instance, are finely rendered through the poem's surfing imagery:

> Murmur of family voices, explosions of jokes,
> little hurts.
> Their conversations swim on
> trying to get somewhere in the surf,
> old patterns pulling them back.
> There are rips out there. (19)

The imaginative language of poems as diverse as "Junior Football", with its lovely image of "Sweet oranges that grin from plastic buckets" (29) and "Bat in a Pantry", with its sharp visual accuracy, indicate the range of the poet's skill:

> You're home at last from the night shift,
> hanging from the handle of the coffee grinder
> by your micro grapple-hook feet.
> …
> You are a beautiful baby buggy,
> leather hood folded down, (59)

The wry and ironic observations of Australian life in poems like "Sky People" and "Junior Football" are much more nimble and light-footed in their inventiveness than the overtly satirical poems of "Housing Estate in the Howard Era" and "Night and Darkness", the latter a direct response to the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The poem deals with the habituating effect of media images of torture while indirectly raising a different question, of how poetry deals with important contemporary political and moral issues:

> "Our enemies do worse than this," they say,
> night and darkness seep out of the TV,
> the shapes of Abu Ghraib come round to play.
> Wired in the lounge, they prance and leap,
> your moral code boils slowly like a frog,
> til torture without trial seems quite OK. (57)

The question of how to adequately address the great political and social issues of our age is a fraught one, but one that many Australian poets have chosen to engage with in recent collections. A number of poets have addressed issues of social justice and the war in Iraq, some taking a direct approach while others take a more oblique angle, working through allusion and suggestion rather then through statement. Two particularly striking poems work in disparate but richly imaginative ways, avoiding the well-worn language of polemic. Geoff Page's poem "2001", in *Seriatim*, approaches John Howard's political statement on asylum-seekers as a poem to be deconstructed, in the process exposing its rhetorical artifice and its insidious echoes of Winston Churchill:

> *We will decide*
> *Who comes to this country –*
> *And the circumstances*
> *In which they come.*
>
> How like a piece of poetry it was,
> the roughening iambics,
> those sharpened c's, like angled pikes … (7)

Jennifer Harrison's poem "Doves" in *The Best Australian Poems 2007*, is an indirect but suggestive evocation of the war in Iraq. The poem's lyricism, honesty and poignancy is remarkable, conveying the psychically overwhelming impact of the war viewed through the fragmented and nuanced images of television:

> Reporters have embedded feet to granite-stop the door.
> Hostages stare bruisedly off screen.
> …
> I have lost
> my part in this perspective and it's easier to run my hands
> through his hair, thinking: this is not enmity. (37)

The poem is grounded by the poet's shift of perspective, stepping back from the screen's images to encompass the immediate and the domestic and finding strength in a located vision and the tangible realm of relationship. Each of these poems represents a courageous engagement with a subject whose sheer scale threatens to overwhelm. The strength of the poems lies in their ability to communicate beyond their immediate subject and to encompass a broader vision of the world.

The question posed at the beginning of this essay asked how far the new Australian poetry is able to travel beyond its own borders, whether geographical or otherwise, and to make the imaginative leap of sense and feeling required to make a connection with readers across real and metaphorical distances. Each of the poets and poems discussed make this leap to communicate and engage with readers outside their magnetic field. Many more poems not included here for reasons of space also make this dynamic leap, forging creative connections far beyond the limits of the poets' own personal and cultural perspectives. That so many poets are able to generate and sustain this dynamic energy field is a remarkable achievement.

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Helena Pastor

Broken Glass

Mum used to let me walk to the pool by myself, but ever since the bikies started coming to town she makes Johanna come with me. When we left the bakery this morning, I said: "Aw Mum … I'm twelve years old! I don't need my big sister to walk with me." But actually I don't mind because the other day my friend Tracy told me a scary story about what some bikies did to a girl which gives me the shivers every time I think of it. So even though I complained this morning, I feel safer with Johanna walking beside me. I don't want any bikies snatching me off the street.

Johanna doesn't swim at the pool. She just sits in the shade under a tree and reads her Bible. It's covered in all these psychedelic stickers – JESUS LOVES YOU! PEACE! JOY TO THE WORLD! LOVE! She's become real religious since she finished high school and started going out with the drummer from the Methodist church band. He's about five years older than Johanna and has his own car so they're always at Bible study meetings or having fellowship camps at Eight Mile Beach.

"Hey, Nell!"

Tracy's already in the water so I pull off my t-shirt and shorts and dive in. We practise doing hand-stands, counting the seconds we can stay under, or else we see how many somersaults we can do in a row. I like to duck my head under and make my hair hang over my face, then flick it up in a big roll so I look like Mozart or Beethoven. We thrash around in the water, playing Red Rover with the boys, but they always try to pull down our togs when we swim past. I hate that.

At lunchtime, Johanna and I walk home, taking the shortcut through the showground. In the park there's a pole with iron rings hanging down on chains that you hold and swing on. I run around the pole so fast that my legs fly out behind me. We walk past the School of Arts and the doctor's surgery, then up to the main street. The first thing I see is the motor bikes

parked along the gutter, like a line of mean black dogs defending their territory. They seem to go on forever but there's probably only about thirty, maybe forty. It's like Broughton becomes their town whenever they're here, not ours. I feel stiff and really self-conscious walking down the street to the bakery, which is crazy because I've lived here since I was two years old. That main street is like my front yard.

Johanna's friend Sally and another older girl that I don't know are standing with two bikies, talking and laughing in that flirty way that boy-crazy girls do. I don't know why they're bothering – these guys are so ugly with their dirty-looking scraggly beards. They look like they haven't been near soap and water for a long time.

I like Sally. She's got freckles, smiley eyes and red hair. Today it's hanging loose over her shoulders and it has that crinkly look from being tied up wet in plaits. She's wearing tight black jeans, boots and a skimpy purple tank top. Just like a bikie chick. She never used to dress like that when she was best friends with Johanna.

When I get closer, I see that she's got heaps of blue eyeshadow and black eyeliner around her eyes, like a possum. The other girl isn't as pretty as Sally. She's a bit fat and her hair's half-blonde and half-black from being dyed ages ago and her jeans are so tight they look painful. Sally hardly looks at us when we walk past. That hurts a bit. She and Johanna were always together until Johanna went all churchy and started carrying a Bible everywhere. Whenever Sally came over to our house, I'd pretend to be a hairdresser and do all fancy things to her hair, like French plaits or chignons. I wish they were still best friends.

The two bikies give me and Johanna the once over and I feel my face burning red. The way they stare, slouching against their bikes in leather jackets and torn jeans, makes me feel dirty inside. It's even worse because my wet togs have soaked through my tee shirt which has 'No Two the Same' written on the front.

"No two the same!" one of the bikies laughs, nearly losing the rollie hanging out of his mouth. "You're right about that, darlin'. You're right about that!"

My face burns even more and I squeeze my arms tight against my sides as I walk on past.

There are more bikies sitting on the footpath in front of the bakery, foil pie-bases and paper bags all around them. Johanna and I can hardly make it through to the door. I don't know where to look as I step through legs and boots, following blindly behind Johanna. The bikies stink – a mixture of old sweat and petrol. It feels like we've reached another world when we

walk through the plastic strips of the fly-curtain into the cake shop and the warm smell of bread and cakes makes me feel like I'm home. Inside, Mum and the shop girls are busy sweeping the floor, wiping counters and cleaning the pie heater. On Saturdays the shop's usually packed. Not now.

One time, when the bikies first started coming to town, Mum saw one of them take a honey roll off the counter and walk out without paying. She went after him. "*Ja*," Mum had said, "I told him, 'I saw that you are taking it but if you are that desperate I give it to you.' And he said to me, "No, I was going to pay for it" and I said, "Alright, fair enough" and he gave me the money! I didn't go into it anymore." Later we heard that the bikies took over a whole shop in the Valley, elbowing local customers aside, helping themselves to biscuits and ice-cream, and nearly giving the shop owner a heart attack.

Mum looks out the window at the bikes lined up along the street and then at the empty shop with the counter still stacked with bags of cakes and rolls. She sighs and says: "*Godverdamme!* This is not good for the business. Everyone is too scared to come in and we will be stuck with all this stuff in the shop! I have to do something." She goes outside to the black-jacketed crowd sprawled on the footpath.

"Mum …" I call after her, but she doesn't stop. Pup's out the back in the bakery – too far away to help if anything happens.

"Who is the headman here?" I hear Mum ask.

I crouch down behind the shop window, daring myself to peek, scared and embarrassed at the same time.

One of the bikies stands up, puts his hands on his hips. "What's the problem?"

Mum sounds nervous but tells him: "*Ja*, of course we appreciate your custom here today but we made a lot of cakes and pies and people aren't coming in to the shop with all of you sitting here."

The head bikie looks at Mum for a minute before calling over his shoulder to the others: "The lady wants us to move, fellas! We'll head down the pub … let's go!"

And they do. Leaving all their rubbish on the street, they slouch on to their bikes and roar off down the main street, turning into the parking area of the bottom pub two doors down. I can't believe it. When Mum comes back into the shop we all cheer. She laughs and says: "*Heh heh!* I was shaking in my boots but at least they're gone! Nell, come and help clean up the rubbish."

Later that night I wake up, heart thumping like crazy. Outside I hear glass smashing, people shouting.

"Fuckin' footballer cunts! Ya wanna fight, do ya?"

I've never heard anyone swear like that in Broughton. People say bloody and shit, but not fuck or cunt. And no one ever shouts it out loud enough for the whole town to hear.

Standing on my bed near the window, I can see part of the car park of the pub. One bikie, staggering back and forth, is swinging a chain around his head, shouting: "Come on ya fuckin' weak bastards!" His mate waves a beer bottle with the top smashed off, its jagged edges gleaming in the light. More bikies start coming out from the back of the pub, snarling and ready to fight.

I can't see who they're shouting at but I say a quick prayer to God: "Please make them stop!"

Some girls stumble out of the pub, arm in arm with their bearded boyfriends. I hear one call out: "Forget about fighting … let's go to the beach and party!" From far away it looks like the girl Sally was with earlier. "Those bastards wouldn't know how to fight anyway!"

And then I see Sally, pashing one of the bikies. It looks like he's trying to eat her face and his hands are all over her, moving from her bum and then sliding up under her tank top. How can she let him touch her like that? I feel sick watching them. They stand there kissing until one of the bikie's mates grabs his arm and yells: "Let's go, Mick! The fuckin' cops are comin'!" Sally's boyfriend searches for his keys and then hands Sally a black helmet. "Don't go with him, Sally," I whisper. But she settles in behind him on the seat, her arms tight around his middle, and the bike swerves wildly as it thunders out the pub's back driveway, following the others.

It takes ages for things to quieten down again, and even after they're gone I'm shaking so much I can't sleep. I keep seeing that swinging chain and broken bottle in front of my face, thinking of how much they would hurt, about the story Tracy told me, and wondering how Sally could have kissed those filthy stinking bikie lips.

The next day, while I'm eating a sausage roll at the back of the shop, Mum's talking with one of the shop girls about the fight at the pub. "*Ja*, it was lucky that no one was killed last night," Mum says. "They spent the whole morning picking up the broken glass in the car park. Gus from the hotel called the police he was so worried. But by the time they arrived all the bikies had gone, to camp at the beach I think. My God, I hope they don't come back today again." Mum shakes her head from side to side, looking worried. I don't want them to come back either, no one does. It's like the bikies have poisoned our town.

On Monday morning when I go to the paper shop, there's a huddle of women standing near the door talking in low voices. I listen in and hear a few whispered sentences: "What in heaven's name did they think they were doing? Going out there with those bikies … it's a terrible thing … with the police and everyone knowing." Then the women notice me standing there and change the subject. At the milk bar, it's the same. Johanna always says that Broughton is a town full of whispering gossips, and today it sounds like they're really on to something. I walk back to the bakery with a bottle of milk and the newspaper tucked under my arm, wondering what's going on.

At the back of the shop, Johanna's packing rock cakes, six to a bag. "What's happened?" I ask her. "Everyone's talking about something to do with the bikies."

Johanna looks down and ties a twisty around the end of the bag of cakes in her hand. "Sorry Nell, I didn't hear anything."

I don't believe her. I used to trust Johanna and think that everything she did and said was right. But she's changed. She's lying … I know it. "Aren't Christians supposed to tell the truth?" I ask her, my eyes wide. She doesn't answer.

All week there's a feeling of secrets around the street. But no one tells me anything, and even Tracy hasn't heard. On Friday, Johanna takes me to the park. As usual she sits on a bench reading her Bible, but I play on the rings, my feet flying from under me until I'm breathless and dizzy. Then I see Sally over at the swings. It's a hot day but she's wearing a big grey sloppy joe and jeans, just sitting on the swing and staring at the ground. I walk over. "Hi, Sally."

She looks up and nods at me, but the sides of her mouth barely move.

Up close I can tell she's been crying. Lots. Her possum eyes are gone and now she looks like one of those old farm dogs that have been kicked too many times. Her hair, which crinkled in the sun last week, hangs in greasy strands over her face. It's like all the colour has faded from her body. I don't know what to say. She looks down at the ground again, scuffing her feet in the dirt under the swing. I walk back to the rings, take one in my hand but then let it drop and it clangs against the steel pole.

I sit next to Johanna on the bench and whisper, "Sally's over there on the swing and she's been crying. She looks really sad … maybe someone died. You should go and talk to her."

Johanna puts her finger on the page she's reading so she doesn't lose her place and looks over at the swings. "Nell, me and Sally don't talk much

these days. She probably just wants to be on her own." She crosses her legs and starts reading again.

I can't stand to see Sally on the swing, her feet dragging back and forth in the dirt. "Please … just find out what's wrong."

Now Johanna looks annoyed. "Just leave it. Sally will be okay.'

I'm nearly crying from frustration. "But isn't that what Christians are supposed to do? Help people when they're sad and lonely?" I look over and Sally is heading through the back gate of the park into the showground, moving in a heavy, joyless way, as if it hurts to put each foot down, like the mermaid in that story who feels she is walking on broken glass when she trades her tail for a pair of legs.

I think of Tracy. Her horrible story. She told me that a girl was picked up by some bikies and they took her to a deserted place somewhere and ripped her clothes off and had sex with her. Then later one of the guys put a bottle up her fanny and jumped on her tummy, making the glass break inside her. I feel sick even thinking about it. At first I didn't think it could be a true story so I asked Tracy some questions like, "Did she die?" Nah. "What sort of bottle was it?" A Coke bottle. "How did they find her, then?" A dog smelt all the blood and sniffed her out. I reckon Tracy was too quick with her answers to be lying. I think I believe her. I watch Sally hobble away, my breath all choked up in my throat, praying.

Turning to Johanna, I'm surprised to hear myself shouting and feel tears rolling down my cheeks. "You sit there and read your stupid Bible all the time but you know what you are? You're a … a … a hypocrite!"

I run, my gut churning. I'm gasping for air by the time I reach the main street, and hang over a patch of grass near the bakery, worried that I'm going to vomit. Then, outside the bottom pub, I see the bikies getting ready to leave.

They take it slow, revving their bikes till my ears hurt, and the whole town feels like it's shaking from the vibration. I recognise the bikie I saw Sally with that day, the one who laughed about my t-shirt. He gets on his bike and downs the rest of the beer he's drinking. I'm close enough that I can see his throat moving up and down as he swallows. Then he looks straight over at me and throws the beer bottle on to the street at his feet, smashing it in the gutter.

The broken glass sparkles in the sun, drops of beer glistening on the edges.

Andrew Lansdown

Ream

i
Solid as a brick –
five hundred sheets of paper
bound up in a ream.

ii
Intimidation –
the whiteness and the blankness
of the opened ream.

iii
Drawing a sheet
from the new ream of paper …
drawing a blank.

Roland Leach

Pushing

You can only know the world by pushing
against it. Feet placed flat, leaning into it,
just a touch at first so it knows you exist.
Despite what you hear it is not indifferent,
just needs you to make this first act of touch.
It may still slip you into a crevasse
wipe you out by a rare virus,
or may smile allowing you to know
its contours, hidden clefts, back rows.

Do not take it personally.
Just take these as lessons in the world
where you learn what you will put up with,
and if the moon is sufficiently inclined,
perhaps discover something extinct alive
which refuses to bend with the wind,
to nod when spoken to,
or be pleased with the sheer gratitude
of being left alone.

Kent MacCarter

Twenty-five Unbroken Bottles of Champ

[After *The Australian and New Zealand List of Vessels Lost, Missing or Taken from Active Service 1874 – 1949* by Peter Taylor]

7 *Alert*s in 38 years / wrecked, foundered or broke-up/ 1
cutter / 2 ketches / 1 brigantine / 2 of 3 S.S.-es sunk /
3 years apart off Nambucca Heads / the other off Cape
Schank
/ 2 schooners / tonnage capacity mutual at 47 /
both ports of registry / Melbourne / shared birthyear / 1876
/ each dubbed *Glengarry* / both wrecked in Vic / even
the good grace of 16 years between glubs /
Marco Polo /
a wonder of Launceston / condemned / age 32 in it's name-
sake slip / 29 tonnes this cutter hauled / never did it wander
/ afar from Launceston /
1848 / Sydney / the *Lass of Gowrie*
nimble her tonnage max a firm 17 / aged 49 / in the registry
/ her only noted particular … "missing for years" /
of the 5
Hercules / number 3 in age / dismantled in Brisbane / also
at age 47 / sold as parts / register closed / 895 tonnes it
could threaten / no more
6 *Magic*s / registered Kiwis / or
loyal Sydneysiders / 5 broke or wrecked / here or there /
in 25 years / the tiniest *Magic* / an entry / final in registry
/ cancelled / 17 tonne lugger / June / 1920
/ another Brisbane
gal in straights / built, 1853 / torched alive / *Louisa Maria*

/ natives of The Whitsundays / aged 25 / atypically warm that / August /

the *Mystery* / dynamited / 1906 in Lyttleton / a ketch / of little importance save that it took 2 years to blow / still registered active / 1908 /

Adelaide / cutter *Surprise* / sunk in collision / 1917 / location unknown /

Erected to proudly move 81 tonnes of what-have-yous / at 21 / Auckland / wrong turn / disgracing itself into houseboat / S.S. *Pitoitoi* / 52 tonnes the lesser a craft / 1939 / erased from the books / gone

Christopher Kelen

Memoir of a Strolling Player

after all these years
drifting in rivers and lakes
drunk and debauched
loveless, alone
just two strings
and the endless track

the flower fairy comes again
drops her skirt
to see me stand
unfastens
unveils
but I'm a spent man
can I live up to her passion?

I wake in a sweat
but soon forget
the moon dissolving
yellow sky
her chamber
a vine grown loose

I climb through the upper floors
into the starlit air
the nymph's still there

tears track through her powder
like foxes in snow
their prints unseen
no dawn
to take us from this night

Ouyang Yu

"The Australian Way"

Vaguely, I think this is the title of the inflight magazine that I read or rather flipped through on my way from Melbourne. I was eating this like-meal consisting of a brown cake with nuts too hard to chew until they melted themselves in my mouth, of a plastic bag containing dry banana and melon seeds, among other things that I scarcely noticed, and a tiny mug of mineral water, trashed undrunk. I say "like-meal", remembering the new words, actually old, that I came across in the nineteenth-century Chinese fiction that I am obsessed with at the moment, to the exclusion of any fiction written and published in English. A concubine is euphemistically referred to as a "like-wife". A man who swears allegiance with you as a brother is referred to as a "like-brother". They have long gone out of currency in contemporary Chinese language but I am sure a like-wife or a like-brother is infinitely better than a like-meal which, to put it crudely, is a load of crap, and to put it betterly, makes you hungry and wish you had had your lunch before you boarded the plane.

When I typed "betterly", my iBook kept changing it back to "bitterly", for three times, proving that this Western sense of righteousness is at constant odds with my own sense of willful wrong.

Unashamedly, I am reading Brian Castro and think I made a good decision to bring *Looking for Estrellita*. On the first page, you can see my handwritten notes, "Ouyang Yu's copy, 24/5/03, *gouyu xini zuojia jie*." The last bits that you don't understand were written in Chinese and mean, "purchased in the Sydney Writer's Festival." I spent the morning doing three readings of it and have now reached p. 50, the first reading coinciding with my first session of opening my bowels, the second reading with my breakfast in a café from across the street, and the third, with the second session of re-opening my bowls, this time more successful than the first. I don't know if you share this feeling with me but lately it has come to my notice

that whenever I pick up a poetry book to read over bowls being opened the reading seems to have a disastrous effect on the bowl movements.[1] Here, I check my inbuilt Dictionary and found, a little shame-facedly, that I should have used the word "bowel", not "bowl". It is almost as if my bowels has become a bowl, which is quite a fitting metaphor except to the contrary, containing the night, the night nourishing soil.

My bowel-opening session is usually long, I have to find something to read or else I waste too much time. So, I go to Chinese books, of poetry, of fiction, of anything from how to name names to how many Western prostitutes there were in the early days of Shanghai as a result of Chinese prostitutes refusing to cater for the desires of Western males, regarding them as "red-haired monsters". For your comfort, the trend has now been reversed entirely. The most beautiful Chinese girls will fall for white Westerners, almost any Westerners. It's not surprising to see a nineteen-year-old marry some old crap in his sixties. Ah, well, that's the Chinese way if ever there is one.

I am trying in vain to recall where I saw this "The Australian Way". Was it around the corner when I went into the Great Union in downtown Sydney last night? No idea at all. As I'm flipping through the pages of Castro's book that I have covered, I find some pages earmarked. I have two ways of earmarking, top earmarking and bottom earmarking, the bottom for more important things than the top. This is because I found it hard to retrieve some important information in a heavily earmarked book if I only top-notched it. With bottom earmarking, I can safely and quickly locate anything significant that I want. Up to p. 50, I've bottom-holed two.

Apart from earmarking, I also sidelined some sentences where I either put a "Δ" next to them or a "?" Or I underlined certain words with a question mark to indicate my ignorance, e.g., "anodyne" and "covey". I find I am fascinated by words that I do not know and I do not want to check in a dictionary for definitions. It's like meeting a stranger by the name of Anodyne or Covey. Suppose you meet with a guy by the surname of Covey. You'd be intrigued by his nationality. Years ago, I was taken by the name of Rollo the banking officer signed on my document.

"Are you Italian?" I said.

"No, Scottish, actually," he said.

I am tempted to think that this guy by the name of Covey originally comes from a cove. But I'm sure you'd be appalled by my linguistic ineptness.

I'll stop here for lunch as well as a trip to the city to do some shopping.

Back at my desk with my iBook open in front of me, accompanied by the buildings around me outside the hotel, I find that it is 11.06am on Monday. After I wrote the sentence above about going to lunch yesterday, I spent about half a day, about twelve hours, out and about, going as far as Campsie. When I got back to my like-home, it was midnight.

For some reason, I don't feel particularly like writing about it. I know it sounds better if I wrote "I don't particularly feel like writing about it". But. I am not in the mood. After reading a bit of Castro in bed and drinking my own tea that I brought from Melbourne, originally mailed from China by my friend in Shenzhen, I feel better. The *Chunghwa* also helps me calm down and I settle for fiction instead of poetry as I can swallow clouds and spit fogs. To talk about poetry, I haven't written a line since I came to Sydney a couple of days ago although I think I am writing poetry here. Last night I met a woman philosopher who kept talking about one becoming two and two becoming three and three becoming *wanwu*, ten thousand things, an original idea from Lao Zi or an idea originally from Lao Zi. I sat there in her home, tongue-tied, for the first time, lost for words, for thoughts. Many a time I wanted to say I knew nothing about philosophy but I pretended that I appreciated her thoughts, her philosophising. The noise again, someone drilling something next door. An hour earlier, the drilling noise came from overhead, now on my right-hand side, beyond the wall. Hotel rooms, if you care to know, are never quiet. On the first night, I had to ring downstairs to aks them to switch off my too cold air-conditioner but long after I switched off the lights I listened to something else, a mechanical noise constant in the air, and wondered if I was ever able to fall into sleep.

Misunderstandings are helpful to creation. Yesterday I rang this guy, let's say his name is Lumpen or Lambent, two words in Castro's writing that I did not understand and did not bother finding out about, and was extended his kind of hospitality. "Come to my place for dinner by train and when you arrive I'll pick you up at the train station. I have invited two friends for the dinner, too." That started me wondering. Last time when he was in Melbourne and last time before last and last time before last before last, he rang me and I did nothing like this. I went to the town on the day he rang me and treated him to a dinner by driving to the city to meet him personally. Why has it to be different when I come to Sydney? Why do I have to spend nearly an hour on the train out of my way to meet him in an unknown suburb just for this "dinner" that he has already invited two friends to? I ended up not going yesterday and I decide on not going today, either. Therefore, you see, I am here writing, about myself and

perhaps for myself, listening to this vibratory drilling next door.

We are helplessly confined to ourselves, incapacitated by our own busyness. If I ring a dozen familiar names I know, I know the answer: "Oh, sorry but I'm busy" or the message, "please leave your message and I'll ring you back", etc. Sydney, in fact, Australia, is a voice-recorder. So, till death do us join when we have nothing else to do but meeting and talking.

Ah, I see, the second time I saw "The Australian Way", it was in the air, but I have got no more interest to go on about this save to say that Aks needs to stay because it reminds me of the book I've just finished translating, *The Story of English*.

Notes

1 While writing this story the author made a typographical error in writing "bowl" instead of "bowel" but, as the story proceeded, decided to keep it rather than correct it.

Steve Brock

Interview with Ouyang Yu

The interview was undertaken via email between the dates 23/4/08 and 5/5/08.

SB: What does Australia look like to you at the moment from where you are in Wuhan, China

OY: Personally, I can only talk about Oz from a personal point of view; I can't represent anyone else – it's where my home is currently based, a strange sort of home, where you tend to stay for a while before you get restless again. Being a freelancer, I guess, that's the condition of life. Right now, it just hovers somewhere in a corner of my mind, relevant in the way that I would begin a poetry class with a poet or a poem from Oz, not USA or UK.

SB: How does the contemporary Australian poetry scene appear from China?

OY: The recent collection of contemporary Aussie poetry that I translated into Chinese alone and edited with John Kinsella has caught much attention in the media, online or paper-based, but that's as far as it goes. In daily conversation, you don't hear people talk about Aussie poetry; you don't hear any talk about poetry, of any kind from any country. You don't see poetry books on the book stands in small bookshops, a fact of life. And where I'm teaching at this university, with the bookcases in my office filled with poetry, Aussie or otherwise, few students, either postgraduates or undergraduates, have ever borrowed them despite my encouragement. Still, if you mix with local poets, you of course talk about it. So it seems that poetry has become a special kind of treat, a specialist area that falls outside life, so to speak. Still, if you do a keyword search for *shige* (poetry) online,

as I'm doing now, you can find 41.7 million items on it or related to it. The reviewer of our collection found much of it obscure, "hard to understand".[1] The copy I got here at Wuhan University has three poems ear-marked by an unknown reader, a poem by Dorothy Porter, one by Dennis Haskell and the third by Dipti Saramanamuttu. Still, one does what one can, to make do with what one can find, for example this afternoon in my two poetry classes on women's poetry to second year English majors I'm going to talk about Gig Ryan's "Love sucks" and Judith Wright's "man to woman". I have yet to see how my students respond to Gig Ryan's "If I had a gun" when they submit their assignment.

SB: Quite a big deal was made in Australia about Kevin Rudd's recent visit to China. You were there at the time. How was Rudd perceived during his visit?

OY: Kevin is okay. I'm not a politician and am not into politics but I like Kevin and Chinese people I've bumped into all seem to be impressed with his command of Chinese and his sense of humour.

SB: Does the fact that we now have a Prime Minister fluent in Mandarin have any impact on your own sense of identity as someone who lives and travels in-between Australia and China?

OY: Even Chinese people realise clearly that being able to speak Mandarin does not mean that the speaker takes the Chinese position, as revealed over dinner by a colleague of mine. His point was Kevin was firm in his political position even though he could speak good Chinese. So, there you are: an Aussie speaking Chinese is still an Aussie; nothing much changes. For us, though, an Aussie speaking Chinese is certainly better than an Aussie not speaking Chinese because at least he or she could appreciate the culture better. As for my own sense of identity, or identities, I think I have transcended the old struggle with it or them and am comfortable with anyone regarding me as one of many things: an Aussie, a Chinese, an Asian-Chinese, an Aussie-Chinese, a Chinese-Australian, all of them together or only one of them. It suffices to say I live the two languages artistically and creatively as few can and I'm proud of that.

SB: I've always enjoyed reading your footnotes in both essays and poems and I think that the "pen-notes non-fiction" genre you have coined in your recent book *On the Smell of an Oily Rag* works particularly well. Could you please talk about the cultural differences between the use of footnotes in Chinese and English literature and also the origins of the "pen-notes fiction" style?

OY: Anyone who has read *tang shi san bai shou* (*Three Hundred Tang Poems*) in Chinese will immediately notice the editor's close attention to detail by annotating or commenting on each line, sometimes to the extent of each word. It is posterity's way of living with previous generations of writers. There is no sense of death. There is the continuity of one eternally living community. I've never cared much for the much quoted Anderson remark about the so-called "imagined community" but here, if one must use it, it's a "lived community" or "mutually lived community" (which is not quite possible in Oz as people could live next to each other for years without even greeting or wanting to) in notes and footnotes as part of the whole.[2] What is good about literature is that it breathes life into things across the pages and sometimes a simple remark made by an unknown person matters much more than a lengthy article by an emeritus professor. For example, I once overheard a remark from my students in Chinese that goes, *xiaoshuo chule renming doushi zhen de; lishi chule renming doushi jia de* ("fiction is all true except people's names; history is all false except people's names"). And this is where the power of tiny little things like footnotes lies: speaking it briefly and speaking no more. If you ignore it, you are at your own peril. In terms of the pen-notes fiction style, what struck me when I first read Ji Yun's *yue wei cao tang bi ji* ("Pen-notes at the Hall of Reading the Minutae") was the succinctness of things narrated, with absolutely no concern for characterisation, thematic concentration, with no pretensions to fit into any prescribed theory for such things as theory always come after, not before. The other thing that impressed me was it is fiction that reads like un-fiction, not non-fiction, or un-fiction that reads like fiction. There is a fluidity that is like a river that does not stop flowing because people accuse it of not being like anything they've read. It gives one the courage to create things beyond recognition, beyond prescription, beyond artistic and literary suppression as we so frequently witness in Oz. Contemporary Oz as we know it still very much lacks the

courage to do so, exactly why we need to inject such energies into it to make it more alive instead of otherwise.

SB: You argue in your introduction to *On the Smell of an Oily Rag* that "what is pre-modern in classical Chinese literature is like the postmodern in general Western literature, without its pretensions". Could you please expand on this?

OY: What are the trappings of being postmodern, post modern, post modern and, indeed, postmortem if it is not what is after, life? All the signs of compartmentalisation by providing infinite restrictions and categories except life. What we are into now, things like fragments, pastiches, parodies, insertions, mergings, transwritings, listings, were all there without proclaiming they were there, without trying to put themselves in a named box. You only have to read some chapter headings in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901), such as "Yah" (Chapter 11), "He" (Chapter 13), "Principally Letters" (Chapter 14), "As Short as I Wish Had Been the Majority of Sermons to Which I have Been Forced to Give Ear" (Chapter 18), to realise how postmodern they were without pretending to be so. From memory, some titles of ancient Chinese poems are so long that they read like essays. It's tradition and anti-tradition; it's what we've got that you haven't; it's freedom that even wants to be free from freedom itself. There's nothing arrogant or mysterious about postmodernity. It is a freedom to break through any amount of theories, a freedom to be a law unto itself, a literary law, a freedom to claim: I'm the first to do it, everything else to follow, theories, theorists, academics and the whole bunch of them.

SB: Have the language or post-language poetry movements had much of an impact on contemporary Chinese poetry?

OY: The end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and the gradual opening of the gate of China towards the outside world means an introduction en masse, among other things, of *waiguo shige* (foreign poetry), covering such major poetry nations as the UK, the USA, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland and others. Few Chinese poets can be said to be ignorant of what's been going on outside China and their poetry kind of shows traces of foreign influences. For

example, Wang Jiaxin was heavily influenced by Boris Pasternak, Yi Sha by Charles Bukowski and Cai Tianxin by Jorge Luis Borges. And at the same time there were internal influences from the classical Chinese poetic tradition, e.g., Tang poetry on Yu Jian. The West based language or post-language movements, as far as I know, do not have much of an impact on Chinese poets because they are very much English-language oriented. The kind of poetry as written now is directed more towards its contents than its linguistic forms, which is why one school follows another in quick succession, such as *xia ban shen pai* (the lower half of the body group), *la ji shi pai* (rubbish poetry group), *li hua ti* (pear flower style), and now, *di shige yundong* (low poetry movement), et cetera. In a way, Chinese poetry takes its own course even when it sucks nutrition from translations of Western poetry.

SB: I think your anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry, *In Your Face*, is one of the most exciting poetry anthologies to be produced in Australia. One thing that appeals to me about the poems is their immediacy and raw emotion, truly in your face. This is also characteristic of much of your own poetry, in books such as *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, *Moon Over Melbourne*, *Two Hearts*, *Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes* and the *New and Selected Poems*. While the poetry is immediately accessible at one level, it also resonates with deeper philosophical and theoretical insights. Are there parallels to be found here with Tang dynasty poetry, immediately accessible on one level, while each line carries its own footnote with historical and literary references?

OY: After my brief romantic period in which I wrote imitating the style of William Wordsworth, John Keats and Lord Byron, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, I moved away from that and wrote in my own way. The poems collected in my third book of poetry, *Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes*, were mostly self-translations of poems written in that period, more than 20 years ago, whereas the more direct ones were written in English after my arrival in Oz in 1991; this means we can't look at published books in an easy chronological manner. Interestingly, the poems I wrote before I went to Oz were all rejected in China but were published in late 1999 and the early twenty-first century. This is the thing: a poet working in his element and his own

way regardless of the time and the spirit of the time finds the world a few decades too late for his work. 'In your face' is not quite the expression. Being direct, right out of one's heart, is a much ignored quality of poetry. We find it 'in your face' because we are never able to face it ourselves, never willing to face it in our poetry. We twist and turn, trying hard, trying to be clever, trying to mean too much with too little, but we forget one simple fact: poetry is a humble thing about humble things that can be described in humble words. Tang poets knew this supremely well and did it accordingly. In approaching poetry, one must understand that writing difficult poetry is much easier than writing simple poetry that speaks to the heart and the mind.

SB: In contrast, a lot of poetry being published today in Australia is more "upper body" and appears to target an academic audience. How do you account for these different trends in contemporary Chinese and Australian poetry?

OY: Sadly, much of what we see as Aussie poetry, as you say, targets an academic audience because it is profit-associated: for fame, position, wealth, international travel, invitation to literary festivals, opportunity to be placed on university teaching syllabus, awards, and etc. – boring. The best reward is not a multi-award winning poetry book but an ordinary person who never reads poetry. I once had an old white person in his eighties coming up to me after a reading and telling me how much he enjoyed reading my *Moon over Melbourne and other poems* when he found it in a local library. He said that he found himself sitting down and reading it from cover to cover because he had never read anything like that being a non-poetry reader. I once had a Sri Lankan man coming up to me after a reading and pointing out to me that the *Moon over Melbourne* book was his "favourite" book. Why do we write poetry if we can't express ourselves in a way that moves others, not academics but ordinary people who are part of the world we are living? What's the point of trying to impress the academics and of being so calculating that poetry's only function is to win awards and other associated things? The concomitant problem of being into the "upper body" is hypocrisy, conceit and calculation, whereas for poetry the ultimate is honesty and freedom to be yourself.

SB: In your introduction to *In Your Face*, titled "Poems as Illegal Immigrants" (also reproduced in your recent collection of essays, *Bias*) you identify with the "intellectual poets" as opposed to the more sordid poetics of the *minjian* poets. I would observe that much of your writing is both "intellectual" and *minjian*, engaging with postcolonial theoretical insights while being written in a non-academic style and often concerning the "lower body". Could you please talk about your relationship to the *minjian* poets?

OY: You are right about this combination of intellectual and *minjian* qualities in my poetry. Indeed, in the late 1999 Changping poetry conference in Beijing, I gave a talk in which I said I was both *zhishi fenzi* (intellectual) and *minjian*, which was confusing to the poets of the *minjian* camp because they wanted a clear demarcation line between the two, not something that was both this and that. But that is exactly where my strength lay: being someone with a PhD degree that Oz eternally denies academic job opportunities to and someone who has seen so much of the seedy side of Aussie life, I can't possibly pretend I'm some middle-class hypocrite whose aspiration is to win a place with the people who have rejected me. I very clearly know that I am a migrant from China who is not much liked, not much accepted, not much valued, not much preferred, who is not content with fitting into the white stereotype of being a mere economic animal, who is an artist as good as anyone but has less chance of winning a place in a country originally not his own. Hence my poetry that pours, both from the upper body and the lower body. I have no pretensions, thus no inhibitions. Interestingly, I wrote my *cunt sequence* in Chinese in 1997 and it served as a great impetus to the *xia ban shen* group in late 1999 and the early 2000, a fact that is often deliberately ignored by the Chinese poets who want to keep the name entirely to themselves. Over the last decade, I've come into contact with many *minjian* poets in the country. These are people into *chi he wan le* (eating, drinking, fun-having, pleasure-seeking) who directly write their life experience into their poetry in sharp contrast to intellectual poets who write with one eye on the critics/academics/international attention and acceptance.

SB: Could you please discuss the significance of the web as a vehicle for publishing poetry in China, and the different approaches to web based and print publishing in Australia?

OY: Oz is still quite uptight about things when it comes to the internet in comparison to what is now happening in China. The fast developing internet has now become a major channel of expression for mainland Chinese. In terms of poetry, there are dozens of poetry websites where, once registered, you can post your poems on a daily basis and, if your stuff is interesting enough, get a following of responses. You put your stuff out there online, which is the current counterpart of the previous underground. And it has become almost mainstream in that if your stuff is interesting enough it'll catch attention from the publishers of poetry magazines or collections. It's now a fact of life that so much poetry published in paper-based media has originally come from online, an unignorable reality. In Oz, though, there are websites devoted to publishing poetry, but not as free as their Chinese counterparts. They are middle-class, middle-brow, middle-everything, in that they still go through a tightly controlled editing process as if a work could only be deemed publishable if agreed by three or five or ten people. It's lack of confidence. In publishing stuff and featuring it on my website, I alone decide what I like, not giving a damn about the so-called democracy that consists of multiple mediocrities. Or I get people like you to decide on your own.

SB: *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet* is one of your first books of poetry and is a particularly original and powerful work. Could you please talk a little about your life at the time you wrote these poems, having recently arrived in Australia?

OY: I wrote two books while working on my PhD thesis at La Trobe University in Melbourne (early 1991 to late 1994), the first being *Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems* and the second being *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*. The first one was a collection of the poems I wrote and the second a book I just wrote on a daily basis. I originally titled it *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet at the End of the 20th Century*. When I told Alex Miller about it over a cup of coffee at La Trobe University, he said: why not just *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*? Which I thought was a good suggestion and accepted. Still, the part that was dropped had a strong suggestion of sentiments associated with *fin de siecle* or, to put it more dismally, those of death, as noted by a Chinese scholar in his PhD thesis written in Chinese. It was an intense time of acculturation and identity changing when I wrote *Songs* as these

things visited upon me for the first time in my thirty-five-year life: living in a completely foreign country with few connections to the outside world, working on a PhD thesis that had little positive about the object of representation – the Chinese people – and reaching a stage where one began contemplating whether one should give up on one's own nationality as Chinese. Indeed, in late 1994, I had acquired my PR, Permanent Residence, taking my first step in renouncing my Chinese citizenship in favour of Australian citizenship. It was also the first time I truly engaged in a dialogue with an unresponsive partner, Australia, and took on a project entirely by myself in an acquired language, acquired since I was a secondary school student in the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, a language that was my enemy's language. I'm reading a history of the Chinese–British relationship written in Chinese and am once again amazed at how the English forced open China's doors in 1840 with opium. Back then, the English language was *hong mao hua* (red-haired speech) that no one thought would have been so widely accepted in China and in the Chinese-speaking world. There was shame associated with the acquisition of this language. For example, when we write the way we do we still face criticism from native-speaking critics that our kind of English is not quite right. They've got to stop that arrogance. English is a changing language that is now being changed by people like me. Simple as that.

SB: You have published a number of self-published works, including poetry and essays, and also made your own books. There is often a stigma associated with self-publishing or what is sometimes called vanity publishing. As someone who has published widely, do you find it liberating to self-publish? Or do you self-publish more out of frustration?

OY: There are many self-publishers in the world, among them William Blake, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Anaïs Nin, Virginia Wolf, e.e. cummings, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Benjamin Franklin. There are many factors associated with self-publishing, not just "vanity". Sometimes there is experimental stuff one writes that defies publishing by the mainstream publishing houses, like my *Wo Cao* (fuck). You have only two choices: wait till you die when someone comes along and

publishes it, which is extremely unlikely, or publish it yourself while you are alive. It's really not out of "frustration" as you put it; it's out of a will to give life to things that should exist on record, not wiped out without a trace if not published by others. Sometimes I suspect there is a conspiracy between publishers, critics and academics to demonise self-publishers because they (publishers, critics and academics) are not good enough and do not recognise the worth of things that have to be self-published to gain an existence. For authors themselves, they have to be perceptive enough to know their own worth and courageous enough to publish themselves by paying no attention to rejection from publishers, critics and academics. One wonders why all those quoted above had to publish their own work that was ignored by the blind but managed to survive to this day as masterpieces. As writers, we'll refuse to be killed by publishers, critics and academics, but have to insist on self-publishing as a way of living, a way of gaining a life, and a way of continuing that life. You only have to look at *In Your Face* to realise this. If I didn't do it myself, do you think any Aussie publishers would take any pity by publishing it? Do you think any academics would give a damn? No way. In this cold cruel callous world that is centred on money, an artist has to save his self and his own arse by self-publishing and self-doing things. Besides, there's a special kind of pleasure in self-publishing, that is, you can publish the way you want to, any size, any number of copies, from a single copy to multiple copies of limited edition, hand-made and bound in your preferred manner. Self-publishing, in a word, is self-empowerment. Most poetry books in China these days are self-published and there's no "stigma" attached to it; it's the way to go. Editors in China now go online in search of work self-published there. I met a poet born in the 1970s who told me that he had never sent any stuff to any so-called established literary journals. All he did, he revealed, was post his poems online in one of dozens of poetry websites. Even my *Cunt Sequence* ended up published in a China-based literary journal after it was self-published online. Why wait years for someone to realise that there is value in your work if you can get your stuff published by yourself? You only have to read my poem, "Self publishing", in *Overland* (118, 2007, p. 93) to know what I was talking about. By the way, I wrote the poem when the batch-load of copies of *Bias* arrived in my workplace. I love self-publishing and would like

to have the privilege of publishing all my works by myself and not giving others the pleasure of publishing me and distorting me in publishing me. At least that was a thought I had at one stage of my life. Our problem is that we let others run roughshod over us without self-autonomy; we've lost the ability to judge and must surrender ourselves to the judgment of a so-called authority who applies outdated literary standards to things written beyond their imagination.

SB: You seem to have an ambivalent attitude toward theory. On the one hand, you have used theory in your academic work and it suits your situation as someone writing from the margins and facing the identity issues that arise from cultural displacement as you move between China and Australia. On the other hand, you find theory oppressive and also limited in so far as it fetishises characteristics of pre-modern literature. You also described postmodernism earlier as a freedom to break through any amount of theories. How do you negotiate these creative tensions in your thinking and writing?

OY: One never had to worry about theory or the need to theorise till one had to do a PhD, a degree that led to a *cul de sac* in Oz for a migrant like me. That's the first point to make. The second point is that sticking to theories is dangerous. Unless you want to turn yourself into a machine or an automaton run on theories of machinery you don't want to follow a theory in living a life. Academics need theories because that's their *fan wan* (rice bowls) with which they make a living. Without that rice bowl in Oz, I don't need theories to make a living, at least not that kind of living. I read theories that interest me but feel no need to adhere to any. They exist for me to go beyond, not into. If I can make use of them I'll make the use. Otherwise, if I feel they are hampering me or obstructing the way, I'll clear them off. Creation overrides any theories. You look at Derrida, you look at Foucault, you look at all those names that once were theoretic warriors, worriers, the very reason they were not good poets or creative writers is the dry brainy stuff that filled them stopped creative energies channeling into other things. When I say theory is dangerous I had China in mind, too. The nation as it is now was founded in 1949 entirely on theory, the Marxist and Leninist theory or theories. What China ended up with is one disaster after another, millions of deaths as a result.

A personal anecdote. In late 1999, when I was Asia-Link writer in residence at Peking University, China, I had brought with me a number of theory books by Derrida, Foucault and a French guy whose name escapes me right now. But I did not read a single page of any of the books I had bought in Melbourne. One of the reasons is that in a Chinese situation they were so out of place, like some useless dysfunctional killing weapon, that I found them cumbersome and boring. Another reason is that their concerns were not our concerns or their (Chinese) concerns; a Chinese poet would write much better poetry without knowing them. Besides, the kind of obscurity was time-consuming and, in the end, time-wasting. I took them back to Oz without reading a page and wished that I'd spent the money elsewhere.

Notes

1 The phrase "our collection" refers to an anthology of Australian poetry published in Chinese translation and edited by Ouyang Yu and John Kinsella: *Contemporary Australian Poetry in Chinese Translation* (Shanghai: Shanghai Arts and Literature Publishing House, 2007), co-edited by John Kinsella and Ouyang Yu, and sole-translated by Ouyang Yu.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

Ouyang Yu

Digging

In 1851 I would not have come to Victoria to dig
Looking at these photos of those people
I would have been one of those fictional characters
Smoking opium by day
Whoring around by night
Or smoking and whoring by day and night
I would have squandered my life away that way
For someone else to dig should they like to dig
After they made good and came home in brocade robes
It is even less likely that I would have bothered coming to any parts of Australia
Which is why I didn't come and my name was never recorded
In any parts of that country's history
Looking at the sign showing the routes to the goldfields
I told me once again that I would not be bothered
If I had not bothered in 1851 or subsequently
Digging is a beautiful thing
But not digging for gold
Not for me

Ouyang Yu

Hanging Branches: Lyrics from the Ming Dynasty

Feng Menglong (1574–1646) is a well-known man of letters in the Ming Dynasty, whose outstanding contribution to Chinese literature is his collection of folk songs and folk lyrics popular in the Wanli Period (1573–1620) of the Ming Dynasty. Titled, *gua zhi'er* (Hanging Branches), these were lyrics of songs sung by ordinary lovers in a way that was described by Feng Menglong as "the most shallow and the most slangy but also the truest." (See the article in Chinese on this by Ah Ying, at http://www.guxiang.com/wenxue/pinglun/dushu/200203/200203120026.htm)

Years ago when I first came into contact with these songs I was deeply impressed with their frankness about love, sometimes to the degree of obscenity, but it's never vulgar, and it has a contemporary touch and urgency in it, too. People love and make love and they tell their love stories in the simplest way they can.

Feng Menglong, trans. Ouyang Yu

Stealing a Look

Who is it that licked my window til it broke? Brow comes and eyes go. Hidden autumn waves delivered. How can I not return your kindness? I want to hug you but there are too many eyes. I look at my dear and my Dear looks back at me.

Note: "window" refers to the lattice window covered with rice paper, used in ancient China. "Autumn waves" refers to amorous glances cast.

Impatient
I am getting excited when I see you happen to go past. Happy at heart. A coincidence. Waiting for my brother after my own heart. I'd love to hold you in my arms and sit. I want to call you but am afraid of being heard. I want to pull you but there are too many eyes. My eyes fixed on you, my sweetheart*yuanjia*. This impatience is killing me.
Note: *yuanjia* means "foe" or "enemy" but is an endearment for one's lover or sweetheart.

Hugging
Handsome sweetheart*yuanjia*. I miss you so much I die. You've only just arrived today. I'm overjoyed, hugging you with clothes. Heaps of handsomeness on you, from top to toe. One hug dispels all my sorrow. Another hug all my boredom. Even if we can't share the pillow in one bed, it's good you can stand before me for a bit.

Meeting
They all say it's endless when lovers meet. When we meet, though, it's quite sad. Crying and talking. And then day breaks in the east. You get dressed and leave in a hurry. I lie alone in bed wrapped up in my bedclothes. Don't know when we shall meet again. All I can do is tell of tonight's sorrow.

Flowers Open
Appointment with my lover, for when the flowers are open. I'm intending to prune peony and herbaceous peony, and wait for the flowers to bud; I would then be lucky. It's close to Qingming Festival now but not a stamen or pistil has grown. Last year I thought the flowers would be open by this season. Why is there such a delay this year?

Flirting
Lovely person. I really do like. I'd love to swallow you up, like a bowl of water. Missing you daily. Trying to get by each day. In the end, it doesn't work. Now, I pick up my courage and come forward to kiss. Thank heavens. Thank earth. You don't resist. If I had known you wouldn't resist, I would not have waited till today.

Another version:
My sweetheart*yuanjia* pulled me outside the window and took my fragrant cheek in one bite as his hands tried to loosen my pants. Brother: Just wait! Someone might come. Wait till there is no one around and I'll let you take off my pants whichever way you like.

Kate Sunners

The Man who Wrote

VERT
The sad Sunday comes floating through the space beneath the door. It is painted blue, the door. Sally had done it many years earlier, wanting a new start. Vert called them sad Sundays, but it wasn't so much a sad feeling as a lazy pining for the fun that had been had the night before, and a certain blue tinge to the shadows, and a smell of cold outside and warm within. But Vert called them Sad Sundays. They hadn't had sad Sundays here often, because there wasn't enough to be glad about.

Vert didn't share in this particular sad Sunday, he only got the left over feeling of it, which was good enough for him. It was something he would write about, after he'd finished what he was writing now. Downstairs, a couple of left over teenagers from Chris's fifteenth were cultivating silence over toast and vegemite. Vert could smell the toast, and he could hear the very occasional murmurs of his son's fourteen and fifteen-year-old friends. He tucked his head down again, and continued to type away, vaguely enjoying the thin mid-morning light that brought in the smells from the kitchen, under the door to his study.

When Vertigo was four or five, he went to visit his grandmother in Launceston. It was a long way from St Mary's. Almost five hours. They went, Vertigo, and his parents, in the Kombi. The back of it, where Vertigo had to sit, smelt of hippie vomit, which was even more sour than the normal type. Mum, Sand, reached a hand back, and felt around on the seat next to him, brushing his leg occasionally with her tobacco stained fingers. Sand had been very beautiful once, before Vertigo S. Fall had even been born, before he became the man destined to write the longest book in history.

The small, five-year-old Vertigo had known what his mother, Sand (who had changed her *name by deed poll from Felicity), had wanted, and, since she was driving, and since poor bloody Vertigo didn't want to end up in a fucking mess in a ditch at*

the side of the road, with the echidnas ripping through his belly with the heavy, root breaking muscles in their backs, Vertigo handed Sand Fall the small zip lock bag, the same kind as he took his sandwiches to school in when he could be bothered to make them. Thanks honey, Sand told him, and threw the bag into her sleeping husband's lap. Vertigo wasn't allowed to open the window, as the smoke filled up the car. He hoped a policeman would pull them over, so he could get out of the car and run and run up that embankment on the side of the road, and disappear like that wallaby over there, behind that anthill.

SALLY

"Can we eat the cake in the fridge, Mum?"

"For breakfast honey?" I ask my newly-fifteen boy.

Chris doesn't ever seem to want to impose structures or rules on himself, but it *is* his birthday, and I'm tired. Night before last I had a longer shift than usual, because two of the other nurses were on maternity leave. Six days on, one day off. Time is just work and sleep, and days off. Time is three minor injuries, one dead child. A car crash, a bungled surgery, overtime.

Some days I look at the bank account, and the bills, and smooth my eyebrows down, again and again. I used to pull the hairs out, but I stopped doing that.

"Do you want some too?" My son – that baby I was so afraid would turn out like his father – the son with leftover black paint under his eyes, which he will reapply before leaving the house, automatically hands me the only different plate, from my favourite Wedgwood set, the one with the china blue flowers.

"You gave me a smaller piece," I tease him, happy that he's including me.

"So cut another bit," he says irritably, and wanders off to the lounge.

I stare at the cake, then put the plate in the fridge. Vert will eat it tonight, when I'm at the hospital, when he comes out for food. I won't get to taste the cake if I don't eat it now. But knowing that no one in this house would have the courtesy to leave it for me makes me want to eat it even less.

VERT

Vert can't remember what it is he's written the day before, so he reads the last line, gets the gist, and moves on. You should never edit, is his motto, or would be if he had a motto.

Mostly Vert only sleeps six, maybe seven hours during the day. The

nagging worry that he won't finish his book in time wakes him. Sometimes his head hurts. Sometimes he wakes up breathing through his mouth because when he lies on his side, mucus runs into his nose. Some days he takes a shower before he starts writing.

Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the day, three hours into his seven hours sleep, and writes down a line or two that has come to him in his sleep, on his arm. Those are the days he doesn't shower. At least, not until the words are committed to something more secure. One day, maybe, he'll go back and read it all. Read it all. Read it all.

Sometimes there are things outside the book, but I have to ignore them. There will be this buzz inside me until it all comes out. "Nervous Tension. Traumatized. Vestiges of self harming rage." It's what he said. The white coat with the buckles and bootstraps came to life on the hanger and pulled me inside it. It was father and it was me. Think of Sally's face. This is what I dreamed. I dream. I write. Things happen. Sometimes the same things.

It should make me feel cramped, that the book is all I am. I understand that. That I'm not a real human, just a bunch of words on a page.

It should make me feel like I did when I was in their car, in their house, bursting from the inside out, because there was nothing to do, nothing to change, helpless. But it's more like a road, and every new page is a new tree, or sign, or landmark I have passed, and I want to keep going. To find what's at the end of the road, and wave at the trees and signs on my way by.

The point is, I don't stop. Can't. Won't.

SALLY

Chris hadn't wanted to have his party at the house.

"No fucking way," had been his phraseology.

"I thought it would be nice," I'd said weakly.

He laughed. "Or we could have a teddy bear's picnic down by the river, and invite everyone in the town," he had said, and then in case I hadn't got the message yet, "I don't *do* nice."

I just really hadn't wanted him out on the street, drunk, lost in the middle of Launceston and the night. There had been kids over the past weeks coming into the hospital at two or three in the morning, some to have their stomachs pumped, more because they'd been in fights. One boy, only nineteen, had been riding around drunk on his bicycle, tailing a 'hottie' in the back of a car, and had gone through the back windscreen when the car stopped. He'd been cut so close to his jugular vein and death,

but thought it was all a hilarious story to tell his friends. I hate working at night.

"Vert won't even come out," I'd said.

"I've told most of them my dad's dead. There's no way … "

So they all went out instead. As a concession to me, Chris brought them all back to the house at three am to sleep. They still think Vert is dead. Maybe I should try that trick with my family.

VERT

I remember the first time. They tried to make me stop. The air in my room was still thick and smoky. What was I? Eight?

Vertigo had been excited at first, all the eskies appeared, early in the afternoon, and their owners gave me soft drink, and one gave me a sherbet lollipop that I dipped in the fizzing liquid. I loved the taste of sugar. There had been an attempt at a barbecue and I made everyone laugh by dipping my half cooked sausage in the soft drink. I kept doing it, because people kept laughing. The adults went inside.

Vertigo was sent to his room; Daddy locked him in, and told him he should go to sleep, and ignore anyone who came to the door.

The strange smoke smell came, grass, a lot of it. I think they must have had the whole house shut up, because it began to pool under my door. I was starting to feel sick. I'd eaten the sausage, even though I could taste it was slightly raw, because I'd been hungry, and we never had sausages. Sand and Brack didn't have meat in the house.

The bubbles from the fizzing drink had given me an upset stomach, and I began to burp. My gut was twisting itself tighter and tighter, even though, at the same time, it was being forced and stretched out with gas. "Mum."

But I didn't really want her to come. I didn't like seeing her when her eyes got big. I never knew if it was still her.

The music started then. It was loud, and the smoke was still flooding under my door. I thought the house was on fire. Fear and sausage and fizzing lollipop soft drink were expelled from my stomach all at once, into my bed sheets.

Vertigo was sick until he was throwing up bile, but the sharp pain in his belly went away a little. The thick strings of saliva ran down his cheeks. He had no energy to wipe them away. Vertigo fell asleep.

He had strange dreams. The house was on fire, and he knew it was on fire, but he didn't really mind very much. Though he did feel hot. Sweat was all over him, and it cooled him down. He was too cold now, in an igloo. He was floating above the igloo inside it, and there was a circus horse inside. The horse was him, but he was floating above the horse, and all he had were his eyes. He couldn't speak because he had no

mouth. The fire swept toward the igloo and chased it down, and burnt all the flesh off the horse, leaving a dark globule of chaos, and the droplets of melted ice were burning hot, and Vertigo woke up to screeching laughter outside his door, and sweat all through his hair.

The smell of vomit on his sheets made him feel sick again, so Vertigo crawled out of bed, and over to the far wall. The far wall was near the door, and the thick cloud was puffing like train smoke underneath it. There were crayons in my hand.

A yellow one, but I didn't like that one because it didn't show up on my wall. Blue, and red, and scrawling handwriting that I'd learned three years before at school. And on the floorboards I tried to write smaller so I'd have enough space. And I stood with one foot on one post of my bed head to reach up higher than before, and I'd never felt so wonderful in my life.

There were tinkling bottles in a rubbish bin and daylight, and when Vertigo's father opened the door, unlocked it from the outside with a key, and tried to find his son amongst all the writing, he could not. Because his son was under the bed, hiding from the horse, and filling up the only space left in the room with beautiful, wonderful words.

SALLY

Vert once wrote me a love letter. Or rather, he wrote it about me, shyly, and I found it. Back in the days when he could still notice me. It should have warned me off. But it was so beautiful. He can write well. He used to write well. He wrote me into loving him.

She has a heart that beats beneath a silver chain that holds a clockwork
She has tiny invisible downy hairs beneath her chin that move when she's cold
She has lips that bunch into crevices, like a cherry tomato left too long in the sun
She has a mind of steel, of marzipan, like her wiry body, that could be strong or fragile, depending on whether it's working today.
She has cold hands. I have cold hands.
She has something.
Something.
Everything that matters. She is the world made corporeal.

I can't tell you.
So I will write;
I love you, I love you, I love you.
And burn it.

But of course he didn't burn it. He could no more destroy a piece of his

own writing than I could euthanize a patient.

How could he have written it if he hadn't felt it? I push his hand off my leg. Well done Mustang Sally. You kept the poem. You married the madman.

And if I leave; "We told you so," my family will say.

VERT

It is time for something to eat. Vert hates to be distracted from his novel, but when he doesn't eat, the words don't come so well. He checks his hands against the sunlight coming through the window. Shaky. Snaky, nasty hands that are like the little girl's red shoes. Won't let him stop dancing, dancing, dancing across the keys.

Vert exhales slowly, and kicks himself back from the computer screen. He takes a disc from the drawer, and backs up all that he has written. Once the computer crashed, and all of him had crashed with it, and he saves it all now. He removes the disc when it is done, and goes downstairs, tapping it on his hand. He nestles it gently in its place in the shed, ranked ahead of all the other thousands of CDs. They throw rainbow smiles at him, but he doesn't see them because he's shaky and hungry.

He finds a piece of chocolate cake in the fridge, takes it out, and wonders what the occasion was. Yesterday seems like 3000 words ago.

SALLY

I had a romance with a patient last year. I had a *romance*. It was not a sex thing. He was older, by a lot. But he loved me, and I him, with the deep affection I sometimes have for the people I know are dying. Some days I'd take him flowers or liquorice straps. But I stopped. Because I knew it wasn't going to make him well. And the only reason he enjoyed them was because I was there. It was better without the well wishers.

Some people, when they're dying, all they're doing is dying. But there are others, for whom dying is a slow ritual, a mystical thing that makes all the bathing, feeding, and bedpans irrelevant. I hope I die like that. I used to be one of those people, I think.

I started writing my own stories. I used to write things about Lance, or the others before him, or about Christopher. Sometimes things at work ate at my own mortality, or something glorious would happen. I'm not sure why I did it that first time. Maybe spite. But now it's a habit. Every morning before I go to sleep, I write about my day, and what's been going on, like a journal, pick a random spot in my husband's ravings, and type away. Every morning I lie down next to him, and hope that one day he'll read it, and wake up.

They arrested me, and took Grandma back to the hospital. But they were too late. She'd already gone to her tea shop. They let me out. It was a misunderstanding.

They buried her in St Mary's, and at night, I took a bucket of the earth, and walked to Falmouth. The frogs followed me all the way. At dawn I threw the earth off the cliff, and filled the bucket with pink shells. The pink shells were for Sand.

SALLY

We don't talk about Sand, Vert's mother. He cut off all contact years ago, when I first met him. Every time a letter came to his late grandmother's house – our house now – addressed in that shaky junkie handwriting, he'd go down to the Esk and stand there, looking at the water for hours. I think he might even have jumped in once, just before I left to go back to England to finish my degree. He must have dragged himself out again. He came home all wet.

Vert used to do strange things, before I came. There are scars all over him. Twenty-one-years-old and lying in bed, I asked him about them. "Ravaged by tigers," he'd joked unhappily, and started twisting the sheets.

Which is why I'm hiding the letter now. I should burn it. Watch the black edges turn blacker, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

VERT

Dad, Brack, spent three months in the house on his own when Vertigo was very young. He kept telling Sand he was a robot. He'd been reading Kurt Vonnegut stories while he was high. So Sand and Vertigo went to visit grandma for a little while. Sand had to smoke with her head out the window in the bathroom, with the door locked. She told grandma she was burning incense, that grandma smelt like mothballs and old people.

She didn't, though. Grandma smelt like rosewater. It didn't matter whether she'd applied any that day or not. Her skin had absorbed the smell. I remember being scared to hold her hand, because it looked like rice paper. I thought it would rip right off.

SALLY

Tonight it's just Chris and I at dinner. I eat before work. Mostly it's just me. But I look forward to eating with my son every day anyway.

"Remind me I have to go and vote on Saturday," I say.

"I'll probably forget. It's not worth it anyway."

"Of course it is!" I don't realise how patronising I sound.

"No it's not. The government's fucked up. The alternative is fucked up, Australia's fucked up. But no one will admit it. It's all a downward

spiral, greenhouse, uranium, drought. I can't see why anyone's worried about education." A sneaky attempt at leverage – I've been getting calls from his teachers. He looks from the corner of his eyes to see if it has worked.

"Education's important in fixing those things, Chris, perspectives are…"

"Perspectives are concepts. You can't fix those things. It's too late for that, you know? Our time is pretty much over."

"Oh, Chris. Is this what you talk about with your friends? You can't worry about that stuff."

"No, we … they aren't into that stuff."

He glares at his half demolished pie. His words scare me, more than his black clothes and lined lids.

"We'll talk about this when I get home from work."

"I'll be very asleep."

"Tomorrow, then."

He gives me an ironic look, mocking himself, "Tomorrow the world ends. And I'll be out."

VERT

Sometimes I can get inside my mother. Sometimes I am other characters.

Sand isn't like the other mothers. She knows this. When she comes to pick her son up from school, she walks barefoot from the house (it is a matter of minutes), and when she gets there, sometimes Vertigo has picked her a flower. The other mothers look at her strangely, jealous because she has flowers and bare feet and freedom, and they have dishcloth hands, and aprons, and repressed sexuality. Sometimes she forgets to pick him up. But it's ok, because Vertigo just picks more flowers on the way home. He knows she loves flowers. Before she realised she was a sea hawk in her past life, Sand had thought of changing her name to Peony. But Sand suited her better. One time she'd forgotten, or was distracted from picking Vertigo up, and he arrived, hand full of white petals and yellow centres and aphids, to find Sand with her skinny breasts exposed, and her skeleton hips clicking as she rode the British hitchhiker she'd met. She'd seen the sticky green stems drop on the Indian rug, and had heard Vertigo slam the door as he ran out. Goddamit. She would take her pleasure where it fell. Her son was so selfish sometimes.

SALLY

I worry about Christopher. My son 'hangs out' at the mall, when he isn't at school, or in his room. I once joked I'd have his door removed if he didn't come out. He started locking it after that.

Today I found a kitchen knife in his school bag. He told me he liked to cut his food. I told him surgeons like to cut up people, but that they don't do it away from the surgery.

If I give Vert the letter, life in this house will go to hell. I'll be confiscating kitchen knives from my husband.

How did they tell Oedipus his mother was dead? Did they tie up his hands lest they gouge out his eyes?

VERT

Vert sits at his desk for three hours before he notices anything digging into his leg. He jiggles his pocket experimentally. There's a card inside. He thinks at first it's a playing card, but it's too big for that. The edges are black, the card dirty with a shoeprint.

Notification of Death
Sand Fall (Felicity Elvery)
Died
At St Mary's Community Health Centre
On the 19th of May 2004

Then some more words. Vert tosses it away, looks about for his mug of tea, and hunches back over his computer, not comprehending.

"You should try it," Vertigo's father said, his face in disarray, wielding the tube of toothpaste.

"The toothpaste?" Vertigo, fourteen, old, ventures.

"No, the … " his father says, "the … " his brain in disarray.

He's sitting on the swing on the porch. The view is disarmingly writable. The swing is yellow and brown, patterns of flowers. More of a seat that swings from rigid, inflexible arms from a frame. It does not have hands. It cannot let go. It cannot let go the frame.

There is a patch of foam on a corner of the cushion, interrupting, interrupting the yellowpatternflowers.

St Patrick's Head pokes up behind Vertigo's father's head. The swing squeaks.

"It's organic." The toothpaste tube is held out like Excalibur.

"It's not."

"Well it should be," he squints at the fine print.

"You're not right."

"Yes I am. Here, it says so on the tube," holds it out for inspection.

"There's nothing."

"Well then I'm not fucking using it."

Vertigo leaves him there. He runs down to the field at the back of the house. Rests

against the fence. There is blood through his hand. Vertigo laughs and laughs. You have no idea how funny it all was. I laughed and gripped that barbed wire until my face was wet.

I was still giggling when I went back up onto the deck.

"Don't take it in there," my father said, looking at my dripping hand. "The thermometer wasn't broken this morning." He shook his head sadly, "You shouldn't do that with that stuff anyway. Don't you know it's fucking poisonous?"

But I was laughing too hard to say anything back. I think that's how I got the hernia.

That hand scarred up nicely. I told the girl I'd been fighting tigers.

He thought my blood was mercury.

He wakes up in the middle of the day after a long, exhausting dream. For a while he lies there, trying to remember what it was about. Something about some typed out words. They didn't mean anything really. Died. It is a common word, below him. Four letters, boring. They can't disguise that with their squiggly musketeer writing.

But oh.

The card. Where is the card? There was a name on it. One name remembered, bony hips and an Indian rug. The other name bathing the bony hips in the remembered light of youth, cheery cheeks, grandmother, a picture in a frame.

Grandmother, is his grandmother dead? Vert has a sudden fit of panic, and scrambles through the door of the study and rakes his fingers about the floor. Before he even finds the note, he stops and starts laughing. At himself. Bitterly. Grandmother is already dead. This is her house. Who else? St Mary's.

The word printed there, surrounded by all the other sorry mundane words. Sand. Sand. Sand. Felicity.

This is sad. That Sand is dead. Vert Elvery shrugs and throws the card in the bin, while Vertigo Fall howls, howls for his mother.

SALLY

When I came in, Vert was laid out like a plank on the bed, arms by his sides, toes pointing at the ceiling. His breathing was not regular, but he was asleep. I felt a thrill of fear, shrugged it off with my uniform, and showered to get rid of the hospital smell. That smell always makes me somewhere between hungry and nauseated. When I went to bed I could still smell it, but it wasn't on me anymore, but on Vert. Exhaustion hammered and pulled and pressured right inside my head and I ignored it. When I dreamed, I

dreamed of sharp colours, jagged, launching themselves at me. I found comfort in a white room, made of cushions, a nest. Speakers played me Mozart, softly. It grew louder, and I sought the source of the annoyance. The sounds were voices, scratching, yowling voices, shrilling in my ears. I tried to rip out the cords with my beak, but they grew back, and the voices mounted against me. "Let me out," I cawed, but the cushion walls curled down around me, bringing the noises right against my ears, and I was naked and human and drowning in feather pillows.

Of course, I woke up with my face pressed into the pillow, and a hollow of emptiness beside me.

VERT

He just goes down to the river to see. To wonder if it still has the pull for him that it did years ago. It is dark when he gets there. For a time he just stands at the top of the cliffs and watches as the river below carves itself deeper into its chosen passage. Then he climbs down because he has the undeniable urge to scoop the water, even though it is cold, or perhaps because it is so.

There is the moon above him, and he sees himself in the water. He wonders what this means. That he has joined with the water? His atoms will become those of the water. He bends very slowly on his knees, and squats on the tiny bit of flat, dry earth by the water. If he loses his balance, he will be gone, and he knows that this time, unlike that other time, he will not resurface. Tonight the Esk is calling for his soul. The top is shiny translucent like a cataract. Underneath there is a terrible pull. He focuses on the water, not hearing the approaching voices.

Suddenly Vert stands, and points to his reflection.

"All that you are is a lie. All that you are is a word. You turned yourself into a word." Vert tugs off his shirt, and holds the sleeve, letting the rest fall into the water. The Esk gives a hungry, lapping splash, and pulls the shirt under, almost pulling Vert off his feet. But for some reason, he pulls the shirt back out. Then puts it back in again. Testing, testing.

"Hey! There's a dude down there."

Not now, Vert thinks, for the love of all that is holy, don't let reality intrude now.

"Yeah, what the fuck? I see him."

Vert freezes, hoping it's not him they've seen.

"Hey!" They are calling to him in their young, strong voices. But so is the Esk.

There is a sudden bout of laughing as Vert pretends to wash his shirt in the river.

"It's just some bum."

"Here take the gun."

"Why? What?"

"They're only rubber bullets. Let's see if you were cheating at the shooting gallery."

"I can't just shoot some bum."

"You were cheating! I fucking knew it, Chris."

"Jesus, Mike."

"No, shut up, Trent. Chris thinks he's fucking hot stuff. Shoot the fucker, Chris, and prove it."

Vert turns around, at the sound of his son's voice. It is deeper than he remembers it, but he knows it is Chris, his Chris, because it sounds exactly like Vert did at fifteen.

Do it, Vert thinks, but the moon is not his friend like the Esk is.

"Oh shit! That's my … I mean … Oh shit."

"Stop stalling, Chris, you little emo, and take your shot."

"Fuck off, Mike."

Chris is scrambling down towards him, and for some reason, Vert holds out his arms to his son.

"Hey, what the fuck, man? We're outta here." The other two boys leave, mumbling things about fucking.

"It *is* you." Chris stands a little above Vert, unable to fit on Vert's little patch of dry earth. Vert looks into his eyes and sees the light fluff on his son's cheeks, and holds out his arms again. Chris's eyes go glassy and hard. The kind of fury and hatred that children reserve for their parents lurks in them. But the corner of his mouth jerks down, and his nose turns suddenly red just above the bridge.

"What are you doing?" Chris says softly, shaking his head. "Were you going to jump in you stupid old man?"

Vert glances at the flow, then back up at Chris. "I don't know." He is unsure if he says it or not.

They stand there together for a very long time, feeling the song of the Esk.

Chris has to tuck the gun into his back pocket so he can help Vert scramble back up. Vert feels the boy's burning hot hand, and feels the strength in him as he hauls him up. Chris brushes the sleeve of his hoodie over his face before he turns to face Vert, whose shirt is drifting away downstream.

"I wish I was … " Vert says, struggling with emotions he hasn't got the paper and pens to say. He wants to tell Chris that he is terrified of him. Terrified that he will end up like him. He has been hiding. Hiding so that Chris won't know him, won't know the terrible insanity he is capable of. But nothing ever expresses itself that simply in his mind anyway.

"Let's go home," Chris says, and takes a deep breath.

Notes on Contributors

Chris Andrews has published a collection of poems, *Cut Lunch* (Indigo, 2002) and translated books of fiction by Latin American authors, including César Aira's *How I Became a Nun* (New Directions, 2007).

Louis Armand is a visual artist and writer who lives in Prague. He is the author of two volumes of prose fiction and has authored and edited numerous volumes of non-fiction, including *Contemporary Poetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007). His most recent collections of poetry are *Malice in Underland* (Textbase, 2003), *Strange Attractors* (Salt, 2003) and *Picture Primitive* (Antigen, 2006).

Erinn Batykefer is the author of the collection *Allegheny, Monongahela*, which won the 2008 Benjamin Saltman Prize from Red Hen Press. Her poetry and essays have appeared in numerous publications in the US, Canada, and Britain. She is the Stadler Poetry Fellow and Associate Editor of *West Branch* at Bucknell University and is currently at work on a memoir.

Robert James Berry lives and writes in Auckland, New Zealand. His work has been published widely since his first collection *Smoke* appeared in 2000 (UPM Press, Serdang, Malaysia: 2000). He has published *Stone, Seamark*, *Sky Writing* and *Sun Music* (all Ginninderra Press, Canberra, Australia: 2007). Robert has just completed his sixth collection *Mudfishes.*

Ron Blaber is Head of Communication and Cultural Studies in the School of Media Culture and the Creative Arts at Curtin University. He has a background in Australian and Postcolonial Studies and is interested in popular expressions of post-national identity and how they relate to formations of community and citizenship.

Roger Bourke has an MA from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from the University of Western Australia. His book *Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary Imagination and the Prisoner-of-War Experience* was published by the University of Queensland Press in 2006. He works as a freelance editor.

Steve Brock lives in Adelaide with his wife and daughter. In 2003, Steve completed a PhD in Australian literature at Flinders University. His first collection of poems, *the night is a dying dog*, was published in Friendly Street New Poets 12 (Wakefield Press) 2007.

Andrew Burke is an Australian poet who has been writing and publishing since the 1960s. He is currently teaching at Edith Cowan University and conducting workshops for writing groups. In November 2008, he was Writer In Residence in Broome, holding writing workshops on the theme of Place.

Toby Davidson is an Associate Lecturer in Literary Studies and Professional Writing at Deakin University, Warrnambool. His research seeks to address the existing gap in Australian scholarship regarding Australian Christian mystical poetry in line with the literary criticisms of other traditions. He is also a published poet.

Bruce Dawe is one of Australia's best-known poets and holds the Order of Australia. Among his many awards, his most recent was the Centenary Medal in 2003 for "Distinguished Service to the Arts Through Poetry." The collected edition of his poems, *Sometimes Gladness*, has sold almost 100,000 copies. His work is studied widely at secondary and tertiary level.

Zdravka Evtimova was born in Bulgaria, but now lives and works as a literary translator in Brussels, Belgium. she has published three collections of stories, *Bitter Sky* (2003) by SKREV Press, *Somebody Else* (2004) by MAG Press, and *Miss Daniella* (2007) by SKREV Press (2007). Press.

Diane Fahey's eighth poetry collection, *Sea Wall and River Light*, was co-winner of the 2007 Judith Wright Prize, awarded by the ACT government. Her seven previous collections variously engage with Greek myths, fairy-tales, visual art, nature writing, and autobiographical themes. *The Mystery of Rosa Morland*, a mixed-genre novel, was published by Clouds of Magellan in 2008.

Kevin Gillam is a West Australian poet with two books of poems published, *other gravities* (2003) and *permitted to fall* (2007), both by SunLine Press. He works as Director of Music at Christ Church Grammar School, Perth, and as a free-lance 'cellist.

Meriel Griffiths is completeing a PhD in a contemporary English-language Welsh poetry at the University of Western Australia and has a lively interest in poetry from Australia and the UK.

Jeffrey Guess teaches poetry at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. He is currently a writer in residence at an Adelaide secondary college. His ninth collection of poetry, *The Silent Classroom*, will be published in December 2008.

Graeme Hetherington is a Tasmanian poet who divides his time between Australia and Europe. He was formerly a lecturer in the Classics Department at the University of Tasmania and is the author of four books of poetry.

Paul Hetherington is the author of eight volumes of poetry, most recently *It Feels Like Disbelief*. His poetry awards include a 2002 Chief Minister's ACT Creative Arts Fellowship. He was founding editor of the journal, *Voices* (1991–97) and edited and introduced the final three volumes of the four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend.

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth is a Lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia. His book *Paper Nation: The Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia, 1886–1888* (Melbourne University Press, 2001) won the Ernest Scott and Keith Hancock prizes for history. He is currently writing a literary history of the Western Australian wheatbelt.

Heather Jones is a West Australian artist who has painted professionally for over thirty years. She has held fourteen solo exhibitions since 1978 in addition to lecturing in art and design. She studied Fine Art and English at the University of Western Australia. Heather's main interests are painting, printmaking and jewellery.

Christopher Kelen's most recent volumes of poetry are *Dredging the Delta* (book of Macao poems and sketches), published in 2007 by Cinnamon Press (UK) and *After Meng Jiao: Responses to the Tang Poet*, published in 2008 by VAC (Chicago, IL). Kelen has taught Literature and Creative Writing for the last eight years at the University of Macau in South China.

Lee Kofman is an Israeli-Australian author of three books (in Hebrew). Her English publications (in Australia, UK, Scotland and US) include short fiction, non-fiction and poetry in *Best Australian Stories 2007*, *Griffith Review*, *Strange*, *Island*, *Cordite* and more. She holds an MA in Creative Writing (University of Melbourne) and has been awarded numerous grants, fellowships and writing residencies.

Andrew Lansdown's most recent books are: a collection of poetry titled *Fontanelle* (Five Islands Press); a collection of short stories, *The Dispossessed* (Interactive Press); and three fantasy novels, *With My Knife*, *Dragonfox* and *The Red Dragon* (Omnibus Books/ Scholastic Australia). Picaro Press has just republished his poetry collection, *Waking and Always*, first released in 1987.

Roland Leach is the proprietor of Sunline Press, which has published ten books by Australian poets. He has had two collections of poetry published and is a past winner of the Newcastle Poetry Prize.

Kent MacCarter is a poet based in Melbourne. His work largely focusses on place and sound, though all facets of landscape writing appeal to him immensely. 2009 will see the publication of his first book. It has been said that reading his poetry is akin to reading jazz.

Shane McCauley was born in England but has lived in WA for most of his life. He has had five books of poetry published, the last of which was *Glassmaker* by Sunline Press in 2005. He co-edited an anthology of WA poetry, *The Weighing of the Heart*, also published by Sunline in 2007.

Barry O'Donohue lives in Brisbane where he writes and is interested in gardening, bridge, and his dog "Hunter".

Mark O'Flynn's stories have appeared in a wide range of journals and magazines. His third collection of poetry *What Can Be Proven* was published last year, and a novel *Grassdogs* was published by Harper Collins in 2006. He lives in the Blue Mountains.

Meredi Ortega has had articles, short stories, and poems published in various newspapers and compilations. She was a finalist in the Maj Monologues Competition, 2007 and winner of OOTA's Spilt Ink Short Story Competition, 2008. She lives in Fremantle, WA.

Ouyang Yu has published forty-three books in English and Chinese in the field of poetry, fiction and non-fiction as well as literary criticism. His latest collection of English poetry, *The Kingsbury Tales: A Novel*, is forthcomming in 2008.

Helena Pastor is currently working on a collection of short stories centred on the experiences of a young girl and her Dutch migrant family in 1970s Australia. She is also engaged in a creative writing project which documents the Iron Man Welders, a dynamic youth work initiative for teenage boys in rural New South Wales.

Ron Pretty has recently retired from his roles as publisher of Five Islands Press and Director of the Poetry Australia Foundation Inc. He is now concentrating on his writing.

Jennifer Robertson's fiction has appeared in *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Griffith*

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Graham Rowlands is an Adelaide-based poet who has published very widely in Australian magazines, newspapers and anthologies since the late 1960s.

Anna Ryan-Punch is a Melbourne reviewer and poet. Her published poetry includes work in *The Age*, *Quadrant* and *Wet Ink*. She is a regular reviewer of children's/YA literature for *Viewpoint* and *The Australian Book Review* and was Convening Judge for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards YA Prize in 2008.

Kim Scott's most recent book, *Kayang and Me (2005)*, was written with Noongar Elder Hazel Brown, and is based upon her oral history of their community. His second novel, *Benang*, won the WA Premiers' Literary Prize 1999, the Miles Franklin Award 2000, and the RAKA Kate Challis Award 2001.

Knute Skinner lives in Ireland. His most recent collection, *Fifty Years: Poems 1957–2007*, from Salmon Poetry, contains new work collected along with work taken from thirteen previous books. His collection *The Other Shoe* won the 2004–2005 Pavement Saw Chapbook Award.

Ian C. Smith lives near Bairnsdale with his wife and four sons. His work has been published in the *Weekend Australian*, *Best Australian Poetry*, *The Age*, *Heat* and *Meanjin*. His latest book is *Memory Like Hunger* (Ginninderra).

Kate Sunners grew up in Bundaberg by the neatly combed lines of a cane farm. Now in Brisbane, she still misses sweeping the cane ash from the patio. She works at Riverbend Books, trying desperately to stop her eyes from sweeping the words from all the pages.

Les Wicks has toured widely and his poetry has been published across eleven countries in seven languages. His seventh, most recent book of poetry is *Stories of the Feet* (Five Islands, 2004).

Mike Williams writes both poetry and fiction and has two novels published with Fremantle Press, *Old Jazz* and *The Music of Dunes*, and he is currently working on his third novel, *The Driftwood Chair*. He also has poems and short fiction published in various Australian journals. He works in a bookshop. Music and landscape inspire his writing.

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