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Western Australia: Places, Books & Writing

SEPTEMBER, 1983 NUMBER 3

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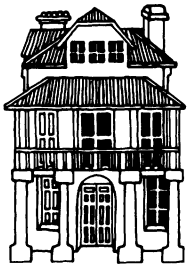

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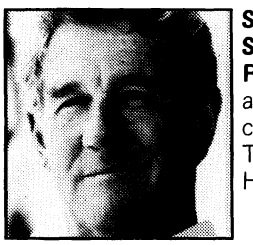

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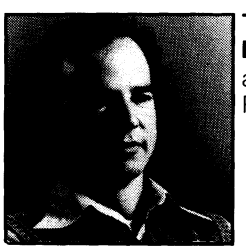

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WESTERLY

Vol. 28, No. 3, September 1983

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Cover: The Winparrku Serpents, by Kaapa Mbijana Djambidjimba. From Art of the Western Desert exhibition. Courtesy of Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Peter Stuyvesant Cultural Foundation.

GLYN PARRY

Gas Chamber

A strange place to start a war. Safe. Like an empty letterbox. And clean. No communion of groping root fingers to spread the gospel of decay. No soil to grow death in. Only a core of energy, wrapped in silence. And time. Particles of space grating in the mind. Mute defiance. Until the music starts.

Until the music starts, I'm free to do whatever I wish. Touch my wife. Hold my children. Ignore the faces pressed against the glass. Icons to the age. My acid peers. They should be in here with me, strapped to the shadows, recording the stone lion of eternity. Throw open the windows, and let them share my view.

Listen. There. That commotion behind me. Mandolin chords, upwards twisted to the light. Smack. Fire on the lungs. A private Buchenwald, flaming up and out of its frozen sleep. Creation rots on the jungle floor. Soon it will slit me open. Pour napalm into my wounds. I need a volunteer. Anyone. Someone to paddle through the sewers when I'm gone. In a dinghy. To rescue unwanted children from rats.

Tell God I'll miss Him. When the music becomes. Less aggressive. Drifts. Loses purpose on strands of air grown tired. In the sun. And thank them all for being here. To see. A cave-man come of age.

MARGARET HOUGHTON

Outside

At the end of the coarse green curtains was a gap. Through it daylight entered. It fell across the bed and covered my hands gradually. My hands became whiter and whiter.

Something moved. I sat perfectly still. Rigid. It moved across my hands and was gone. It moved again. Grey. Next time it disappeared without completely crossing my hands. Then it touched the side of my hand and vanished.

My eyes moved to the gap in the curtains. Light filtered through gently. Something beyond the gap moved. A shape. It touched the window and was gone. Again and again the shape appeared and vanished. Then it stayed, nodding back and forth against the glass. As it nodded so I felt my head move.

A shape. Not quite round. A word slowly entered my mind. "Leaf." Outside the window a leaf was nodding.

Vaguely a sprawling image formed in my memory. Something I had forgotten. Something I had not seen for a long time.

Outside that window was a tree.

Curtains being swished along on brass rings. Light came flooding in all at once. The tree outside. What was beneath it? Leaves being stamped into the ground. Wet. Soggy. Spilled blood.

Nodding. Nodding at the window. Haunted faces looking into an inside sanctuary.

"Outside today." My hands clasped the sides of the chair. I felt the vibration of the wheels along the smooth floor.

"There. The sun is warm now. You should open your eyes. See you soon."

The chair was still. Over the grey blanket covering my legs, the ground appeared. Green grass. A leaf lay still. Half green, half brown, slightly curled. The grass extended further. More leaves. Then a row of trees standing in front of a long building.

Ready to fall dead. Dead into the ready dug trench. As I shut my eyes, the shots and screams pierced the throbbing air.

The wheels vibrated hurriedly back along the smooth floor.

Sinking. Drifting. The covers tucked tight. Secure. No more grass, leaves, trees. No more.

The night light was on now.

"Never mind. We'll try again another day."

TERRY TREDREA

Crossing Manhattan

We are hurrying through Central Park, picking our way around joggers' spittle. A wad of travellers' cheques throbs under my left armpit. It's a frosty night; the air hisses through our nostrils. Someone jogs by, wearing only shorts and musical earphones. The Manhattan skyline looms above the treetops like a set of black teeth. In the City, we pass a shop advertising 'Hot. Kinky. Bizarre. All Male Review. Striptease—to the bone!'

We reach the famous New Wave Book & Coffee Shop. A notice outside says 'Art Sale—All canvases slashed!' They stock titles like 'A Taoist lesbian view of modern accounting procedures', and 'Become yourself and feel great'.

Downstairs is the fiction-reading. We go down thinking 'Wow, this is it! This is where it is all happening!' We order tea, waiting while the guy looks it up in his recipe book. I peep at the notice board: 'If you are a lesbian or gay guy with a drug abuse problem, then it's hard to be proud. Phone . . .' The guy arrives with two cups of a yellow liquid. He has green hair and black eyes. There is a hint of razor blade and safety pin about him.

'Thanks, mate.'

He stares at my mouth. 'Where you frum?'

'The Third World.'

'Run that by me again?'

'Australia.'

He holds out his palms. I inspect them: not too clean. He stumps away, annoyed. 'Sheet, man.'

'Roger's kinda tight,' someone says, leaning across. 'Yr sposed t' press the flesh.' Roger is prowling behind the counter, smouldering. 'He's really a pretty actualized person.'

'Oh.'

'It's this burg.'

'How's that?'

'People are guarded—they gotta be. They'll open up, once they know your angle. Just don't look outa line.'

'Even in here?'

'Sure. I wuz mugged three times.' He looks proud; a veteran. 'I hear a car backfire and I hit the dirt.'

'Why do you stay?'

'Why? Hell, this is the greatest place on earth! Ain't you heard?'

Roger oozes nearby, cool and mean-looking. 'Australia, huh?'

'Yep.'

'I hear it's a real jam place.'

'Is that good?'

'It's got space, right?'

'Yes.'

He points into the air, like a guided missile. 'Well space is where it's at.'

I wonder if I've missed something: right now in Australia, it's Saturday afternoon and even the flies are sweating. Down on the beach, Buddha will be sitting under a towelling hat, can in hand, the folds of his gut stacked on his knees. His sinewy brown wife lies inert beside him. On the radio, the cricket drools to itself. The children—little dads—stump around in sunglasses and towel hats, hands outstretched to catch the wind. Behind them, bird whistles ricochet through the trees like rifle fire.

Back at the fiction-reading, a man in check trousers and bow tie introduces the two famous writers. The woman is heavily made up, with a vinyl face; the man is a pixie. They are both gay, and announce that they have fallen in love. Their respective lovers leave in a huff. The fiction continues with some readings. After a few minutes, I begin to study the dandruff of the person in front of me. The surface of their head is like puff pastry.

We pad off along Manhattan's numbered streets, moving down the numbers like a countdown. Numbers, not names. Down the black and white streets, rainbows blaze until it's broad daylight. Negroes truck past like smouldering cats.

Getting into the restaurant is like passing a job interview. The maître d' checks our credentials, and ushers us into a room smothered in waiters. 'Wow,' I think, This must be where it's happening.'

The menu is like a taxation form. We decipher it and order. I study the bandstand. There are drums and microphones, and the chair is where He sits. 'He' is the famous Jewish film-maker. We've come to see him playing the clarinet. I suppose it's a bit like watching Gore Vidal eat spaghetti. I wonder if his chair has 'Director' on the back. In the front row is a table of dark-suited men and predatory-looking women. Probably media executives taking their husbands to dinner.

'Why doesn't the band play?'

'I guess they're waiting for us to warm up.'

We eat. Finally, a party of likely F.B.I. agents takes the stand. They begin playing Dixieland—which is a small price to play. But where is He? Everyone is craning to see. The clarinetist wears a large nose and glasses, but there the resemblance ends. I ask the waiter.

'No, he couldn't make it tonight.'

I destroy a napkin. It crumbles easily, littering the table like broken glass. I'm thinking of the thousands of miles we've come, of our massive bill.

A second shift of diners are milling in the foyer. They watch the entrance, bright-eyed with hope. 'Should we tell them?'

'Nah.'

Out on the street, snow steams on our faces. We trudge off through Glass City, the air ablaze. A small group pass us, swaddled in affluence. One of them drops 20c into my cap. Cars steal past, eyes low and searching. Outside the 'Drug King' emporium, a young guy with a cap over his ears stares at us in crazy fascination. I look back and notice he is following. Paranoia means never being alone. I go over the rules in my mind:

1. Know your territory and stay there.
2. Be alert to anyone who is out of place.
3. Clutch valuables close; be ready to fight for them if necessary. Better still, leave them home.

4. Avoid subways.
5. Don't look at strangers.

We pass a picture theatre. The queue stretches down a side street, then into an alley where the last couple is being mugged. In the distance is the constant wailing wind of a police siren. I look back; the young guy is still there. I think of something Roger said: 'Australia needs exploiting, right?'

'Maybe.'

'Listen, if you can *dream* it, you can do it.'

I wonder whose fantasy became Manhattan.

STEWART CAMERON

No: don't say a thing

What you are doesn't come to the surface
of sentences and days . . .
Fernando Pessoa

I

Evening infiltrated the street. It probed gently at the elbows of shops and buildings, nuzzling pink and nascent into every recess, softening the textures of air, bricks and bitumen. Greg sat under the eaves, awash in the ruddy glow evoked by vertical light. Warm air, full and substantial, courted a spontaneous buoyancy beneath the sea of surfaces.

An old man paddled unsteadily up the sloping footpath, leaning heavily on his gnarled and twisted walking stick. At first Greg assumed him to be drunk.

Cars gushed past in soft sprays of sound, sporadically, without urgency and without scarring the air. Greg watched the old man as he plodded closer and within a moment or two had become absorbed. The old man tottered forward for a few steps, then halted, swaying precariously and slouching over his stick—a shabby head of cropped grey hair, a leathered, deeply wrinkled face, the hands of someone who had laboured. He wore a grey waistcoat over his checked brown and beige flannel shirt which was completely unbuttoned disclosing a grubby white T-shirt. Baggy khaki trousers flapped about his legs. His scuffed grey boots were of worn leather tied with odd laces, one brown one black, that had evidently been snapped and retied many times.

When the old man had wobbled forward and stopped several times he came in line with Greg, sitting surveying the street from a small retaining wall at the mouth of a bank. He halted, looking down at the path intently as he had been from the moment Greg noticed him.

Muttering. Mumbling to himself. The buoyant air lightly buffetted his gravelly tones like a wasp in a heat haze. Muttering.

This seems to be the surface layer of a grim and complex calculation thought Greg as he looked on silently, unable to make anything distinct of the mumbling and unsure whether the old fellow was aware of his presence. But he had a suspicion. The shuffle had ended right in front of him, like the prelude to some discourse, some intercession.

There was time to imagine buildings as fluid ripples, lapping at the edges of the footpath. Very little was defined or certain.

II

An old man, halted in the street, like so many lonely people eager to talk to anyone if it meant that he could verbalize the endless interior monologue with which he marked his existence. An old man. Muttering. Mumbling.

III

After several torpid seconds he looked up, although still stooped over in the position for thoroughly scrutinizing paths, the head moving slowly, deliberately on its leathery lizard's neck. Greg was formulated in an instant, the eyes transfixing him so quickly and positively that he knew his suspicion to be correct.

Weren't the mumblings a prerequisite set of calculations? Weren't they necessary before one could commit such a swift and precise act with the eyes? It was almost ruthless.

A gulf split the street down which no cars dared to gush. Traces of gold glimmered in the warm folds of yellow air banked up around their bodies. Their hearts beat in adjacent space.

The mumbling ceased and the vibrant eyes skewered Greg in an indubitable rush of clarity. Energy surged, passing into Greg, honing his senses so that everything stung like needles of gelid rain. He could not say whether the old man had sown or surrendered the coruscating air. But the eyes were extraordinarily clear, emitting waves from a calm region suddenly perceptible within the confines of the street. It glimmered in the naked spots exposed by rippling surfaces. The eyes were untainted despite a lifetime of erosion that had eaten at the flesh and bones. Greg sucked in a breath, impulsively, yet controlled enough to keep it inaudible.

IV

The aura of streetlight receded when the old man spoke, assuming slightly less obvious hues. He had no teeth. A cyclist coasted down the hill, clicking smoothly in the absence of crickets.

"I missed one, you know. Yeah. I'm sure I missed one." The eyes sliced away from Greg, pouncing back on the footpath. Greg felt that his stomach had been slit, that somehow shame had led him to perform this unwilling *seppuku*, that his guts must spill in response. If he felt anguished he was also thrilled.

The old man shifted from one foot to the other and back again, rehearsing anew the movements of his unsteady, tottering dance. He resumed muttering to himself briefly, and, Greg fancied, in slightly more urgent tones.

Then the eyes pinioned again. It was as if Greg, adrift in the fragile interval, had been significantly revealed. The eyes flowed in irresistibly. Inessentials were hewn away without apparent malice from where they clustered about the core like crusty knuckles of barnacles. And this time, as they focused, there was a gentler quality—wry, good humoured and knowing—spilling from the eyes in rivulets which tracked the channels wrinkled in the face. Or perhaps Greg was becoming more receptive.

"Yeah, I missed one you know. Hell knows where it's gone to, but I missed it." Greg almost detected a smile, but the movement of facial features in response to deeper impulses is a tenuous thing and it dissipated at conception.

"I count 'em, you know. All of 'em. The lot." He jabbed his stick into one of the slabs beneath his feet. The path formed a random pattern, composed as it was of an unusual assortment of pale green, pink, off-white and grey slabs. He prodded the greenish-looking slab again: "Yeah, I count 'em, you see, but I've missed one." He shook his head as if to say—It is sad indeed to have come to this.

Two cars melted through each other in panes of glass across the street. An unobtrusive lack of definition suckled into the pink fibres of evening as moments stretched into lithe strands between them. There was a pliant silence in which Greg grasped the situation and discovered the equable curves of speech.

"Do you know how many there are?" Words lapped against the shimmering cliffs of shop windows as the old man's eyes widened and it seemed to Greg that

he was abandoned on an immense ocean. The whites were incredibly lucid, embracing, and there was no sign of tarnishing. Some things are hard to deny from a distance of four feet.

"No!"

V

The word streamed. It had never sounded more exclamatory yet less scornful in all Greg's memory.

"No!"

It stretched away, coiling down the street like a ribbon in the wind. It said—No, of course not. That would be a great task indeed, far beyond my limits. I am not capable of knowing that!

VI

Greg sat, wrapped in the resonance of ribbon. If he felt amused (amused that counting slabs in a footpath could assume such importance) he was also aware of his reverence for this situation. It impinged on any desire to laugh, distilled from multifarious possibilities to glisten like a splinter of stained glass.

Greg looked closely at the old man as he bowed his head and muttered briefly once again. He had already ascertained that he was not drunk. No, he wasn't drunk. No slurring, no smell, no glaze in the eyes. He was just very old, probably very lonely and paddling in the shallows of senility.

Another, thinner ribbon, coiled: "Well, I don't know where it's gone to. But I've missed it." He gathered the tendrils of speech about his shoulders in a wreath. "Never did that once, never missed things, not in the old country. But now I don't have money to go back. Living on a pension, broke all the time." The eyes stared but no longer saw—"Different when I was working, oh yes, I remember that. And my sons and daughters too. Different then." The principle of logical progression was exposed in all its barrenness. There was no need, here, under the eaves.

Greg was about to speak, to ask a question, but the old man raised what amounted to a warning finger and rolled his eyes. Now there was a scandalish smile, dislodged from the eyes and bouncing over the crevices of facial features. He had preserved his hold over this place.

"So? It's gone." A strange mixture of aloofness and deep concern. "Yeah, it all begins to go eventually. You know, I couldn't button up my shirt this morning, couldn't find the buttons. Took it off twice and there they were, but when I put it on again . . ." The stooped figure shifted its weight from foot to foot in a flurry of agitation.

Having his attention drawn to the flannel shirt Greg noticed that it was inside out. The label stuck out at the back of the neck like some device for a puppeteer. In fact, the old man looked as if he was wearing pyjamas; the baggy khaki trousers drooped low enough to divulge the elastic of underpants. Greg examined the options within reach.

The old fellow dropped his finger, shook his head two or three times and continued: "Yeah, it all begins to go. Gets so's there are some things you just can't say—and you can't tell people. It wouldn't be right . . ." It was no longer possible for Greg to doubt the vibrance in these eyes as they pinned and caressed, pinned and caressed. "No, you just can't say, wouldn't be right," came the voice.

They both smiled. The old man, gazing into his own, private distances, turned and shuffled away. Mumbling.

VII

A truck rolled down the street in rumbling corpulence, making windows shiver. Greg farted, accidentally, because his attention was elsewhere. The baggy man stopped, looked over his shoulder, smiled, then waded away muttering and shaking his head. Greg eased another, necessarily, but nothing was altered.

Buildings lapped at the edges of the footpath. Very little was defined or certain. . . .

JULIE LEWIS

I Sent a Letter to My Love

. . . I am told that no-one writes letters anymore. That it is an anachronism to put pen to paper. That the telephone does it so much quicker and overcomes the difficultes of time and distance.
Perhaps.
It is a dangerous game I am playing. I know it. Knowing seems to offer some kind of protection. Defuses the explosiveness of the situation in some way.
For instance.
Delusion of any kind offers unsuspected traps. Knowing makes one wary. And suspicious.
David is under some kind of incredible delusion. That everything is exactly as it seems. He sees everything in black and white. People are good or bad. Are honest men or thieves. Women are . . . I'm not quite sure how he sees women.
You, on the other hand, have no illusions. But are vulnerable nevertheless.

My mother said that when I was born she felt her capacity for love could be no further stretched. She learnt, so she said, with each subsequent child, that love is like elastic, or a pleated cloak, with infinite potential.
I am beginning to understand what she meant.
If I said that to David he would laugh, embarrassed, and talk about practical things. The weather. Pruning the roses. The price of scotch.
I prefer the written word. It offers opportunity for reflection. For the writer and the reader.

I am rehearsing at the moment. I'm due at the theatre in less than an hour. But of course you know that. I hope your foot mends soon. I am quite disoriented by your understudy.
David is on a field trip.

Increasingly I am losing the fine edge of distinction between myself and Laurelle. At times I am not sure just who I am. Is the real Gertrude the character on stage or the one who in between rehearsals dashes through an empty house? And having Gavin standing in as Michael (or is he standing in for you?) makes it so much worse. You say we play roles all the time. That each one has validity. But somewhere, surely, there must be some common ground between the person I was when I was with you on Friday, talking far too much, and the person who, half an hour ago was folding David's shirts and stacking them in the cupboard. And there must be some link between that woman and the one who will become

Laurelle with all her own quite significant complexities.
How soon will your foot be strong enough to walk upon?

It's strange how different we are, David and I. He, out there involved in the physical world of rock and earth. Me, with my world of fantasy and romance.
I have been re-reading Wuthering Heights.
My love for Linton, says Cathy, is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliffe is like the eternal rocks, a source of little visible delight, but necessary.
If we were speaking on the telephone I would never have said that. Or if I had, I'm sure there would have been a long pause. You would probably have said—Oh come on Gertie, don't get carried away—to cover a difficult moment. You may even have missed the point. This way, the saying is all that matters. Unless the words generate a new energy when you read them.
But I'm boring you, I'm sure.

I cannot get Friday out of my mind. I was stunned by the circumstances of our meeting. That we converged like that, from different directions at the very moment we had arranged to meet was quite uncanny. It was like picking up a conversation halted mid-sentence at an earlier time and carrying on without a break in sequence. No polite greetings, conventional murmurs. You swept me into the stream of your momentum. I can still feel your arm about my shoulders. Was I Laurelle or Gertrude? Were you Michael or Patrick? It didn't matter that we spent most of the afternoon going through our lines. Afterwards, sitting there on stools, drinking, looking at each other, who were we? Our real or fictive selves? I'm afraid I dredged up the past in what must have been a dreary way.
I've let it all go, you said. It's what happens now, at this moment, that matters. Not the past or the future.
How can you believe that, I said. We are what the past makes us.
We are our past.
You crackled with energy.
No, you said, not necessarily.
You didn't guess, at least I don't think you did, that after the third drink I lost my grip. I wanted to embrace you. To say—I understand what you are on about. But it was not the time. Nor the place. I let the moment slip. Instead I said, I must go now.
You bundled me into a taxi. Our hands gripped. We kissed. The taxi door shut. We waved.
And now your foot is encased in plaster. Your wife cares for you. And Gavin plays Michael.

Someone asked me on Sunday if I had a lover.
There's a lustre about you, he said. A sheen that glows.
How did he pick up the vibrations?
Of course I could answer no quite truthfully. In the popular sense you are not my lover. Nor, as yet, is Michael.
But then how does one define love?

There is something quite fundamental about geologists. They work with the origins of things. David provides the foundation upon which it is possible for me to function.
Is it enough simply to function, I suppose you will ask.
Perhaps function, then, is the wrong word. To indulge my whims might be a better way of putting it.

You can see how confused I am. Is Laurelle saying this? Or Gertrude?
We pursue our lives in peaceful co-existence, David and I. But there is always the possibility of war.

At the audition, I hoped desperately that you would get to play Michael. You had a stillness, an intensity, that seemed so right for the part. I wasn't sure whether I could handle Laurelle, with all her moods, her caprice.
David didn't have much to say when I told him I'd been cast in a new play. He doesn't like the stage.
It's not real, he says.
I'm sure he thinks there's something quite sinful about play-acting. He doesn't realise it's something we're all guilty of in one way or another.
Make-believe, it's all lies, he says. With a hint of wickedness thrown in.
Maybe he's right.
There is something of the harlot in every actor, don't you think? Simulating a role for others' pleasure.
And I think he believes all actors, men and women, lead sensational and decadent lives. He's afraid I may be contaminated.
Real life is often dull. Or if not dull, unbearable.

When I got home on Friday I tried to work. I put the script on the table. The overhead fan stirred the pages. The edges ruffled, flickered. The sheets lifted, hovered, floated to the floor. I wanted to bring order to their chaos. But was held back, not by reluctance, but inertia.

When I was a student, and a fundamentalist at heart, I argued passionately the case for pre-destination.
Shifting the blame, Gertrude, suggested the tutor.
Now I feel that nothing could be further from the truth than some pre-ordained plan. Every action, so it seems, is based on the whim of the moment.
David disagrees. Expediency, he says.
I wonder.

Yet, flying home from our season in Melbourne, I felt like God surveying the world.
Your God and your world, said David when I told him. Not necessarily definitive.

Through little gaps in the cloud there was a glimpse far, far below of the ordered grid of buildings, streets, parks. Then the patchwork of greens, browns and fawns of rural land. A river, ribbon thin, wound without movement. The picture was static as if captured on a film of memory.
When the clouds dispersed the whole panorama spread out. It was as remote as eyeing it from heaven. And empty of life and movement. There was no hint of the daily drama of human life. No tangible sign of the struggle. Only in those ordered squares was there any evidence of human endeavour. But of the conflicts, the passions, not a suggestion.
It was more than I could encompass. I pulled down the blind. Tried to sleep.
When we landed the world of the air was lost in noise, confusion and pointless energies.

Rehearsals are becoming increasingly fraught.
Rupert likes his players to be resourceful. He hates to have to waste his time with detail.

Three steps across the stage, hold, then exit left. He expects you to know. Instinctively. Gavin doesn't.
Yesterday I left the theatre in tears. Gavin sulked all the afternoon after Rupert had conducted his own little tantrum from the auditorium.
Of course David's right. It's a mad artificial world.
I would wither without it.
I have always tried to keep the different threads of my life apart. Now, more and more they tend to tangle. What was once a simple following through of a single strand, neatly knotted off, has become a vast complexity of interwoven threads. If one should break, I fear the whole fabric will unravel.

Sometimes I wonder why David puts up with me. Perhaps he gets some kind of satisfaction from my life on stage. Has his own fantasies, of which he is quite unaware. Is he, in his way challenged by the different woman I become when I play Laurelle or Hedda?

I asked a doctor friend how he regarded self-analysis. Or did I say attempt at self-discovery?
Anyway.
Infinitely dangerous, he said.
I lie. The adjective is mine. But the implication was there.
He preferred the simple solution to a person's problems—overactive thyroid, sluggish liver, hormonal imbalance—with the possibility of cure through medication.

Gavin asked me to have a drink with him after rehearsal yesterday.
He is quite extraordinarily beautiful.
There are, I have discovered, many kinds of betrayal.

You realise, of course, this letter will never be sent. It is, as I said, a dangerous game I am playing. I am not foolish enough to compromise myself in writing.
In fact, this letter will never be written.
It is enough that these thoughts surge through my head . . .

Tuesday.

Dear Patrick,

I do hope you will have recovered well before opening night. Your stand-in is causing me a real identity crisis.

In any case, whether you are playing or not, will you have supper with me after the show?

David is away.

Yours,

Gertrude.

MARGOT LUKE

Moving Around

She stands on the other side of my flywire door and says, "Hi, I'm Petra."

"Hullo," I say, reserved. She's no religious freak but could be consumer research. She's wearing jeans, frayed sneakers and a shirt with a couple of joky badges.

"You might get some letters addressed to me," she says. "Could you keep them and I'll come by on Saturday and pick them up."

"Why can't they be delivered where you live?"

"I'm sort of moving around, and I don't want them to go to mum's place."

The way she says mum makes me decide that it's something harmless—an unsuitable boy or perhaps a pregnancy test.

All the same. "I may not be in on Saturday," I say, making it clear that I'm not to be taken for granted.

"That's cool," she says. "Just leave anything under the doormat." Her smile radiates more gratitude than the whole thing is worth, and before I have time to regret that I didn't open the flywire door, she's gone. I hear a motor-bike sputter and then roar off confidently.

No letters arrive. She's very despondent. "It's a real bummer," she sighs. I soften. "Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah, great," she says and brightens up. She looks around the place, taking it all in. "You've made a lot of changes since the Gregorys left. Are you renting or buying?"

I'm not sure whether to tell her anything so private. People usually want to know things for a purpose. One grows suspicious.

"Is that a real oil-painting?"

"Yes."

"Is the painter famous?

"No."

"I like it anyway," she says. She sprawls in my bean-bag. "That's a fantastic ceiling," she observes. "But I like the one in the front room even better. Have you kept it as a bedroom?"

What was she doing in the Gregorys' bedroom? "No, it's a study now."

She looks impressed. Suddenly she becomes aware of the Vivaldi I turned down low when she came in. "Is that classical?"

"Yes."

"Far out," she says politely and accepts a black cup of coffee without sugar. "Have you got any Fleetwood Mac?"

"Who?"
"No, Fleetwood Mac."
We silently drink coffee, and pick up the conversation somewhere else.

She stands on the doorstep again, wearing something ethnic with lots of embroidery. Her hair is changed from pony-tail to a loose swirling curtain of silk.
"Just to tell you, there won't be any letters, but I met this fantastic guy and we are off to this huge rock festival. Anyway, I've brought you a thankyou present."
She comes in with a flat parcel done up in paper with musical notes all over it.
"But I haven't done anything . . . ."
"That's not the point, is it. Here—play a track of this."
"You mean now?"
"Of course. You'll really freak out!"
Guitar and pure-voiced yodel—part folk song, part significant wailing.
"That's Joni Mitchell," she says reverently, scrutinizing my face for reactions.
"I think I have to listen to it a few times by myself."
"It's yours," she says.
We drink coffee and she wolfs down some wholemeal cake.

She comes in to show me photos of the trip. There's a new fragrance about her that reminds me of Indian gift-shops. I can never tell the difference between incense and marijuana.
This is the bus they went in—painted with flowers and butterflies and graffiti. Here's the yellow tent they all shared. Here's the campsite. The lake. Lots of people went starkers all the time. Incredible characters. Unbelievable music. The cooking was really weird—everything went into one huge pot. No you can only see the smoke on this one. The flavour didn't matter—it was all organic. They smoked a lot of dope. Dropped a bit of acid.
"Not LSD," I say.
"Yes, but it was a bit scary. I think I'll stick to grass."
"That does seem safer," I agree helplessly.
"By the way, I brought back some seeds. Very superior strain from NSW. You wouldn't have a spot in your garden?"
"*No!*"
"Okay, just asking."

She comes in regularly now, bringing records, copies of Rolling Stone, and Lebanese cakes which she has just discovered. There have been numerous fantastic guys since Nimbin. I have lost count. One had a great build, another taught her hang-gliding, and another took her to the Garden Room at the Parmelia every night for a week.

The woman from two doors up knows Petra's family. "Very nice people, but how they can let her run wild like that . . . disgusting I call it. She's no better than a prostitute. Promiscuous they call it nowadays. Tart they *should* say . . ."
I can't begin to explain to her that it's not like that. Not just that times have changed. But Petra herself.
"No, of course I don't screw them all," says Petra. "Only the ones I really like."
She keeps moving. Sharing condemned houses, joining communes, sharing apartments. Now and then she moves in with her parents for a while.
"I'm back with the folks," she tells me. "It's all chinese take-aways and Bert Newton every night. It really craps me off. I wish I had a house like this."

She walks through the rooms one by one as though the place was a small private gallery, admiring, pausing, opening books, straightening pictures.

I tell her how long it took me to get a house.

"I haven't got that much time," she says, as though time nowadays is more valuable or in short supply, which it probably is.

"You'll have to find a short-cut then. How about marrying your Garden-room millionaire?"

"I said I want a house, not a prison."

"It doesn't *have* to be . . ."

I don't feel like arguing, and suddenly have to think of at least four of my friends, reasonably happy, who often speculate on the things they will do if Joe or Bill should suddenly be taken from them. Only it sounds less like a feared emergency and more like a daydream.

"Your lot," says Petra, "used to get married for the craziest reasons, didn't they?"

She makes me feel like the product of another century.

One married for the novelty, the security, the euphoria of infatuation. Sometimes it settled down into something workable, often it went stale and decayed almost immediately.

"And your lot," I retaliate, "never seem to find time for a relationship to mature. You're so busy trying out the next one."

"I'd rather have my lot," she says. "It seems to give you more of a chance."

She's been storing a great pile of records at my place, partly to educate me, partly for convenience, because she can play them on my stereo, when at home they're listening to Mantovani.

I have just begun to distinguish the voices of the sweetly melodic women singer-songwriters, when Petra's taste changes. She is seeing a new guy. His name is Paul. We now listen to gravelly ruffians. Tom Waits. Ian Dury. Low-life discord. I feel my room is subtly contaminated.

One Saturday morning she turns up in a jogging suit. "How do you like it?"

"Stunning. Have you taken up the healthy life?"

She grins. "Yeah. I go jogging down the nature-trails in Kings Park, and make a little tour of inspection of our plantations."

"*What*?"

"Paul waters them at night. He carries the water in the van. I just go in daylight to see everything's okay."

"You're mad! What happens if they catch you?"

"They won't."

And they don't, but they find the half-grown plants and burn them.

She doesn't say much about Paul. It's as though she saw all the others from the outside: their looks, their build, their histories, their possessions. It's different now. Paul is a new aspect of Petra. She is changing. She still comes for coffee-chats. She is sitting in my beanbag, but I can see her fading away. She has become an extension of Paul. "We think, we did this, we don't like . . . ."

Then she turns up with a big cardboard box to pack up her records.

"I've moved in with Paul sort of permanently," she says. "I'm helping him do up this fantastic house in Leederville. You must come and see us soon."

"Yes, that'll be lovely." I've never before talked suburban cliches to Petra and I want to yell at her, "come back, don't fade away like this."

"We're thinking of having a sort of house-warming, but I'll let you know about that."

"Oh. Right. I'll bring a plate."

She's not tuned in to ironies. "No worries—there'll be nosh laid on—Paul makes these really ace curries in a huge cauldron thing." She looks at the clock. "Shit," she says, "I'd better get my ass into gear. Paul is supposed to pick me up from here in five minutes."

Together we pack up the last of her records and drag the box outside.

Paul drives up in a battered ute and keeps the motor running while Petra and I heave the box aboard.

"See ya," we all say, and none of us mean it.

ADRIANA ELLIS

Filing Corro

'Do you think it's dying?' Sandra said.
Karen looked over. 'Dying? No, I don't think so.'
'I think it might be.'
'No, they do that all the time, lose their leaves like that.'
'Karen, Sandra, this is Anne,' Carleen interrupted. 'Kerry's replacement.'
Anne smiled at them. They both smiled briefly and turned back to the plant.
'As I was saying,' Karen continued. 'We've got one of those at home. The bottom leaves drop off as the top ones grow. Oh! Don't touch it!'
Sandra was wiggling the stem. A couple of leaves dropped into the pot.
'See what you've done. Leave it Sandy.'
'Now Anne, you can start opening these,' Carleen said, giving her a bundle of letters. 'Later on I'll get one of the girls to take you over to say a quick hello to the head of section, and perhaps introduce you to a few people. You can put your bag on the floor.'
Anne looked down at the bag she was clutching with both hands. 'Thank you.' She hurriedly put the bag down and began opening letters. When she had finished she looked around for Carleen.
'Don't worry about her,' Karen said. 'Teatime in a minute, five past ten.'
'Right,' Sandra nodded her frizzed blonde head. 'Don't bust a gut on the first day.'
A young girl bounced over to them. 'Oh look,' she squealed. 'The umbrella plant.'
'Yes, it's dying. We were talking about it before.'
'I don't think it's dying Sandra, I think it's alright.'
'They always die. That's why they bring in new plants every three weeks. There's no fresh air in here, the airconditioning doesn't suit them. They all die eventually.'
'Yeah but....'
'Don't touch it.'
As they watched, another leaf fell into the pot.
'What did I tell you? It's dying right before our eyes.'
'Ooh, there's the trolley.'

Anne sat watching. There was a crush around the teatrolley and a buzz of talk. She waited a couple of minutes, then went to get a cup of tea. There were biscuits too. She hesitated then took one. She crunched on the crumbly sugared biscuit, listening to the conversation. It was mostly about the weekend. Nobody asked her about her weekend. She drained the cup and took it back to put it on the trolley.

'Okay Karen,' Carleen said. 'Take her to do the rounds, then I'll give her some more corro. Anne, go with her.'

The faces were a blur. She couldn't remember the names, only the Head of Section's, Mr Blainey.
'Welcome to the Department,' he said absently, "I hope you enjoy it here.'
'He's alright,' Karen muttered as they walked away from his office. 'He's much better than some of the others.'
'Here's some more corro,' Carleen said when they got back. 'Let me know when you've finished, I'll find you something else.'
Anne sat down at the desk again. The desks were arranged in a small circle. Karen and Sandra sat at one. She sat at the next, and the empty one was piled with files. Carleen sat at what was obviously the head desk. Anne took a handful of letters and began opening them with a crisp flick of the paper knife. She took a surreptitious look at the clock when she'd finished. Twenty to twelve. The day yawned ahead of her.

* * * * * *

'What you have to do with the corro, is put it in the sortergraph in rough alphabetical, then take it out and lexi it, then count it into bundles of fifty. After that you can start taking the bundles and look for the files. You have to pull them out and just put them in a pile over there.'
Anne frowned. 'I'm sorry but I don't quite —'
'Here, I'll go through it with you,' Karen said.
Anne smiled, relieved, when she had grasped it.
'See? Nothing to it,' Karen said.

Anne took a bundle of corro and went to the A's. The files were a dingy brown cardboard, all dog-eared and torn. The top ones were just within reach. She had to bend down on her knees to get the bottom ones. She grimaced as she heard her knees creak. After she had been doing it a while she sat down instead. Her legs were starting to ache. At least the job will get me fit.
There were only her thoughts to fill the silence. The stacks seemed to absorb noise. Now and then she heard voices. Once someone banged a file on the other side of the stack. She jumped as she heard the thud against the wall. When there was a decent pile of files she took them over to the desk. A lot of people had gone home already. It was hard to tell how long she had been in there. The clock said quarter past five. She hesitated then picked up her bag and cardigan to go home.

On payday she lined up behind Karen. They sat down at their desks to check the money. Karen and Sandra were talking about their overtime. Anne sat calculating. After the rent there would be $75 left. She frowned. Somehow she thought there would be more. Of course $75 is enough to live on. She gave her characteristic shrug, putting the envelope in her bag. Of course you can live on $75 for one person. Just that it would be hard to save up for a car or something in the future. The guidance counsellor had said there was a future in the government, there were interesting clerical jobs. With your I.Q. you can study, get promotions. She smiled to herself as she went back into the stacks. For the entrance exam they could have tested me on the alphabet.

* * * * * *

'The conditions are good.'
'Yeah.'
'You got security in the government.'
'Yeah.'
'Good super.'
'Yeah.'
'The only thing, the work's so bloody boring.'
'Yeah.'
'I put in for the assistant F 3 position,' Anne said into the pause.
'You've got no chance,' Sandy said. 'You haven't been here long enough.'
'They told me when I started that it wouldn't take long before I could get a promotion.'
'The longest one here is a year and a half. The shortest one is about eight months. I reckon you got at least that long to wait,' Karen said.
'Oh. But that's what she said.'
"She was probably talking about clerks. It's not like that for us. The white lords have their staff ceilings to meet.'
'Look,' Sandy said, 'If you don't like doing that sortergraph business, me and Karen'll do it.'
Anne sat looking from one to the other. 'Well, I don't really mind . . .'
'Well, we'll do it.'
'I don't really care.' She gave a small shrug, picked up a bundle of corro and walked into the stacks. The soft dingy walls enclosed her. Rows and rows of files waiting. The silence was broken by the rustle of paper and soft footfalls as she dreamed the morning away. She made a list of things to buy for the flat. Then some new clothes. Maybe new shoes. A new dress. A going out dress, that would be nice.
'Anne! Anne!' The trolley's here.'

She picked up a pile of files and put them on the desk, then went to get a cup of tea. There was that dress in the boutique down the road. A burgundy crepe with a spray of diamonds on the shoulder. It'd be worn with black shoes and a black satin disco hat. The hat had a couple of diamonds on it too, and a trail of black netting. Now where would I wear it to? What kind of people would I meet wearing it? Obviously an older, more sophisticated man. A distinguished looking man who wears three piece suits and is involved in business in some way. The rattle of cups broke her train of thought. Sandra was taking them back. She sighed and got up again.

* * * * * *

They both stood up as she entered the office. The Personnel Officer was very young, not much older than herself. And wearing the sort of haircut that was advertised in Barber windows that nobody ever seemed to wear. She blinked as he introduced her to the Head of the Section. He was older and he had that look, as though he'd been in the Public Service for years. There was a Life Be In It poster behind him with a cartoon figure ready to kick the football over his head. She could imagine him on the side calling out 'Play the game boys.'
'Perhaps you could start by telling us a bit about yourself Miss Brigley, er Mrs Brigley,' the Head of Section began.
'Well I'm divorced. I went back to work —'
'Yes, I meant your work experience.'
'Yes. I, I have been working in the Registry office for five months and I'm interested in doing work that offers a bit more of a challenge —'

'What exactly do you do in Registry?' the Personnel Officer put in.
'I file most of the time. I put files away or I pull them out.'
They waited.
"I uh, I also put corro in lexi order and that is then put in the files. I do that too sometimes.'
'And previous to your marriage, what kind of work did you do then Mrs Brigley,' the Head of Section said kindly.
'I worked as a receptionist for an optician for five years.'
'Are you aware of the duties of the position you're applying for?'
She nodded. 'Reading the file and assessing the subject of inquiry,' she could feel her voice sinking as she said it. She hurried to the end: 'then forwarding it to the appropriate examiner.'

The Personnel Officer read the duties from a sheet on his desk. She started to cough. The Personnel Officer looked up. She felt like an ant that had strayed into his field of vision.
'You would be assessing for ninety percent of your day. Do you think you would want to do that?'
'Yes,' she lied. 'I'd like the job very much.'
'Well,' he said and looked at the Head of Section.
The Head of Section leaned forward. His mind had been elsewhere.
'I think that's all for now.'

She went back downstairs to the stacks. She felt strangely disturbed. Questions were attacking her. Uncertainties. Her mind was bubbling like a pot on the boil. Fortunately none of the girls saw her to ask how the interview went. She was afraid of what she might say, if someone asked her. She busied herself with the files, moving towards the centre of the stacks.

When she got home that night the first thing she did was to run the shower very hot. Methodically taking her clothes off, she hung them on the railing, then stepped into the shower. The water was warm and comforting. She covered her face with her hands and began to cry, short sharp gasping cries. Her tears were lost in the water. She pushed her hair back off her face, closing her eyes. The surface of her eyes were burniing. She knew she looked a sight, sniffing and dribbling under the shower. At least no one in the flats would hear her with all that water running. She turned the tap off, stepped out of the shower recess and reached for a towel.

The next day it was as if the interview had never happened. The stacks were waiting for her. She ate her lunch on the carpet next to XYZ. Not many people wanted these files, they were in the farthest corner. The names had a pleasant rhythm. Xantosa. Zywieckewski. Some Youngs. She began taking morning and afternoon tea there. Carleen didn't mind. At least I always know where Anne is, she said, giving a meaningful look to Sandy. Anne gave them both a gentle smile. She walked away from the harsh neon light.
Sometimes she would save up the files that were at the end, near the windows. She would let herself stand near the windows looking out for a few minutes at a time. People on the footpath had a lazy strolling kind of a walk in the middle of the afternoon. On a hot day it was a relief to move away from the windows. The middle of the stacks was always cool. Hours drifted by. She would wake up to find herself staring into space, a smile on her face. She didn't know how long she had been doing that. The thought, I love you, often came into her head but she didn't know who it belonged to. The clatter of the tea trolley always broke into the time.

Sometime later she received a memo from Personnel saying she had been unsuccessful in her application for the position of Officer for Assessment. She put it with the other scraps of paper she had collected. She had created a small mound she could burrow into. She sometimes dozed off during the day. However her hours were well in excess of a thirty-five hour week. She arrived early and left after everyone else. One of the cleaners complained that she could never get to clean that section of the stacks. Carleen defended her. I always know where she is and she's always on call. If everyone showed the same dedication to their work we'd have no trouble. The cleaner thought of her long teabreaks and left it at that. Eventually Anne had food brought in. It was too much of a wrench to leave. Night was when the stacks were most pleasant. She slept well there, better than at home. A deep calm came over her just before she slept. She no longer bothered to stand looking out the windows. The stacks were in some way the centre of the world. She hadn't yet decided how this was but she knew it to be a truth. There was a deep well of peace there, that was all she could say. A deep peace.

WENDY JENKINS

The Well

(from a work in progress)

Part One:

It was hard to tell when it first took hold, although it had always been there. A plugged up hole now, a stopped mouth, but stories about it. A boy, her father, dropping stones down the long throat of it... SSSSssssssss—tock. A bucket ringing off the sides. Cold black water coming up clear. The filling in of it slowly over time with rubbish and dirt and household junk after the scheme water came on. Layers like time-rings mounting to the top.

In the beginning her grandfather sinking the hole through limestone with a pick, axe and crowbar. Or so they said. So much myth now mixed in with the rest. Old Tim. A picture of him in somebody's album or shoebox, slightly out-of-focus, giving little away. The shot holds him square in the doorway of his house, cupping a pipe in a stranded hand as if he had broken off to smile though he hadn't quite. Rhonda's camera, Rhonda's frame: *Come on Dad, smile.*

They have him now, leaning into the house, anchored to solid stone, looking into this thing, a camera, shyly.

Now that it's definitely going to happen, Ric says,

'Do you want me to go in with you?'

'No.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

He is relieved but also disappointed. He doesn't want to go in there but he doesn't like the scenario without him. Lyn takes a last half puff on her cigarette.

'Keep the engine running,' she says.

He watches her slide out of the car, sort out her thongs, then half walk half run over the lawn towards the house. Something in the way she does this frightens him. He lights a cigarette still watching her. She hesitates at the door, then leans into the bell, her body behind it. The door opens, hangs, then swings wide to take her in. She is there in the open frame for an eyes flicker.

'Take it easy,' he said on the way in the car. All right?' He could see the way that she was. The words tinked around her head not touching her. His voice changed slightly then: 'Listen, take it easy, all right?'

She nodded and looked at him but her eyes weren't holding him properly.

I'm Lyn. She probably said it just like that, *I'm Lyn*, as soon as the door swung open.

Oh?

Colin's my father.

The woman, Rhonda, would have stared at her then. Her eyes—wide and probably pale—filled with something. Anger? Fear? She had seen none of her family for thirty years—her choice apparently as much as theirs. Now here was this person on the doorstep, smiling and saying I'm Lyn, hello, and Colin's my father, as if it could be that simple.

What do you want? He can hear the Aunt say it. *What do you want?*

Good question. What would she say. *I've come about the well*?

'It won't be worth the trouble if you do find it,' Colin told her. 'You'll only have to dig it out. God knows what you'll turn up. The Old Lady used to chuck everything down there.'

It wasn't said between them that that was part of the attraction. In her own mind it was the water she was after. The first summer in the house had been long and hot and the water bill was enormous.

The Old Lady used to chuck everything down there. So did her children. School books, bits of stolen fruit, a bloody shirt after a fight. The family goat once, lowered ceremoniously, a string attached to each stiff leg. Rhonda had solemnly overseen the slow descent. (We covered it with dirt, her uncle told her, and Rhonda made us stand there holding flowers while she said some rhyme thing she made up. We felt like real dills.)

'It'll be a waste of bloody time, I'm tellin' you now,' Colin continued. 'I was too young, I can't remember.'

'Come any way, Dad,' she said.

When he came, on his way to the afternoon shift, they paced over the ground together. Lyn was surprised how short he seemed, then remembered she was wearing boots.

Ric watched them from the kitchen window, their discomfort together a language he could read. Lyn made a quick palmed gesture that he also knew. She was using it now to designate about a third of the yard.

'Somewhere here we think. Could you tie it down any more than that?'

"No. No like I told you, I was only a little bloke when they covered it up... It was after that tree though, I'd bet on that. That used to be in the chook run and I'm sure it was further down.'

In the yard, in the sun, Colin was talking. Wanting now to offer something. 'Doug could've helped you. He would've known.'

Doug. A year ago, Colin stiff in a dark suit on a hard chair while the paid voice drummed out its load. In Lyn's car he had turned to her suddenly: 'Don't you ever let them talk shit like that about me. When I'm gone that's it, right. Bang. Up in smoke. You tell the rest of 'em. No shit like that.'

Unbelievably his pale eyes filled.

'Dad...'

'Just start the bloody car will you.'

At the back of the house Colin has decided he's said enough.

'Still can't see why you want to find the bloody thing. Or why you moved here in the first place.'

'Mr Haynes? He was me father. Call me Colin.'

All the eyes were on Ric, checking him out. One of the brothers, Michael, wasn't even bothering to look away occasionally. Jean, the mother, was watching him closely too, but she was better at it.

Ric took a glass of beer and smiled.

'Thanks Colin,' he said. The 'Colin' was louder than it needed to be. He was nervous. He had never really learned the language of families and these people were strange to him anyway. So was Lyn but he thought he could handle it. He had met her a few weeks before through work. She was a research geologist with a big company he had a contract with.

'Found any good rocks lately?' Michael asked her.

Ric looked at Lyn. She was smiling but her eyes were set, waiting for what Michael was going to say next. He only grinned.

'Like rocks yourself do you?' Gary asked Ric. He was the other brother.

'I can take them or leave them.'

'What do you do then?'

'Work you mean? Landscape designer.'

'Dirt digger like Lyn,' Gary said.

Michael laughed. 'That's handy. Hey Lyn, you can bring him some rocks and he can put them in peoples' gardens. After you've finished testing them of course.'

'Jesus,' Ric thought. Lyn was still smiling.

'Where's your daughter?' she asked Michael suddenly. He nodded, without looking, towards a chair. A little dark haired girl was hugging the curve of it, taking them in sideways.

Ric was really struck by her. When their eyes met he smiled and raised his eyebrows. She looked at him for a moment and then she frowned, slowly, deeply and with real conviction.

'I don't like you,' she said.

'Don't you,' Ric said. The pitch of his voice tried to make it a joke. It might have worked if he could have believed it himself and wiped the stupid grin off his face. You asked for that, he told himself, fuckwit, but it unnerved him completely just the same.

"She's at one of those stages where they won't wear people they don't like. You should've heard what she said to the bloke that come to fix the fridge.'

It was Michael who said this. Ric couldn't get the feel of these people at all.

'Landscape gardener, eh,' Colin said later. "What do you think of what we done out the front?'

'You don't have to answer that,' Lyn said.

'Uh, I didn't really take it in.' Ric congratulated himself with a sip of beer. He gave Lyn a look of solidarity but generalised quickly when his eyes met Jean's.

'Have you got a garden yourself?' she asked him.

'No. No, not at the moment.'

"Nor've we,' said Leonie, Michael's wife, 'unless you call six foot square of lawn a garden.'

'It's not that bad,' Michael said.

'Oh sorry, I tell a lie.' Leonie touched Ric on the arm. 'I forgot to mention the hibiscus bush.'

'Oh, turn it up,' Michael said. He closed shut then. This was more a return than a retreat.

Leonie took a sip from her drink and turned to Ric again.

'I'd move tomorrow if I could shift him.'

'Yeah?' Gary said. He ignored the subtle pressure his wife applied to his back. 'Where would you go?'

Leonie took a breath. 'Somewhere where my kids have got room to play. Somewhere where my neighbours speak english. Somewhere where I can park my own car in my own driveway.'

'I'd swap with you,' Gary said. 'At least you're close to Fremantle.'

Colin leaned forward in his chair. 'You know what's done it don't you?' he said to Ric.

Ric wasn't sure what this was about but he nodded anyway.

'All the Dings and Portuguese they let in, then all the bloody arty-crafties comin' down from the hills or where ever and forcing up the prices so my kids have to live in dumps, or so far out it doesn't matter. You know what I heard on the bus the other day? You wanna hear it?'

Ric nodded again.

'This woman gets on, scrappy clothes, you know. She had this kid with her. Cheeky little bugger 'e was too—kept standin' on me to look out the window. He's very interested in his environment, she said. Oh yeah, I said. Then she says You live around here? We've just bought a share in this lovely little cottage. *Cottage.* That's nice for you, I said. She didn't get the message though. Thick as a brick. She kept goin' on about what a great place Fremantle is, like she invented it, you know. In the end I said, Look sweetheart, I was born here.

Colin turned to Jean. 'You know where this 'cottage' was. One of those pokey little dumps on Silver Street. And you know what the silly bitch reckoned they paid for it?'

'Prices have gone up everywhere, Dad,' Lyn said.

'Yeah, maybe. But ten or fifteen years ago you couldn't have given those joints away except to the Dings, and now these people are walkin' over each other to get into them. You should've heard her. *Lovely* town, Lovely *community.* Oh really, I felt like saying. *Lovely* people. We could introduce her to a few couldn't we love. The genuine article. Bit of local colour. What about Two Bob Tucker —'Me name's Ro—Robert'—should send him around to Silver Street. She'd love him. What about Ol' Slipper Truscott.'

Colin paused to enjoy these arrivals on the cottage doorstep. 'Aaaaargh,' he said, 'make you laugh if it didn't make you cry.'

When he settled back in his seat his eyes fell on Ric.

'Where do your lot come from then?'

'My lot..? Actually,' Ric said, suddenly angry, made brave by the beer, 'Dalkeith mostly.'

Colin laughed. 'What do you think I'm gunna do Son,' he said. 'Shoot you?'

The first place Ric and Lynn lived in together was by the water. A beach house really. It wasn't close to town where they were now, but a bit further south. It occurred to Ric later that that too was home ground for Lyn—the whole fouled and broken lip of the Sound. That was where they'd kept their boat and gone swimming as kids, before the surf beaches got them in (Lyn's generation) and the pollution got too bad.

Before they found the house they looked at a succession of places—boxed-in duplexes, dinky little flats—and they then saw it. A jag really. They were driving past when Lyn spotted the sign.

They were taken right away by the maze of odd-shaped rooms and sleepouts with queer connections and passageways. When they came through the front door for the first time, Lyn turned to Ric.

"Like living in a honeycomb,' she said.

It was. You had to walk halfway around the house to cross between adjoining rooms. The cats, which appeared suddenly and seemed to come with the place, would bound from room to room using the windows—jump—thunk—jump. A single footfall mostly. It was amazing.

The layout of the house was strange only until you thought about it. Or rather, didn't think about it but let the natural logic work. They sat down at the kitchen table one night with a pad and pen and worked out how the structure

must have evolved. There had been three big original rooms and the rest had squared out around this hub, walls and partitions going up as the need demanded.

Lynn began to dream about breaking through walls and uncovering unexpected areas of space—whole wings thrown open and suites of doors. Sometimes, as she fell into a room, there would be people there. Strangers, but they turned and recognised her. Other times there was only furniture, old classic pieces, dark wood and velvet, waiting.

She got up one night half asleep.

'What are you doing,' Ric mumbled.

'Mmmn?'

'What are you doing?'

She came around slowly. She didn't know. Something to do with the walls.

The makeshift feeling was in the yard as well. Long grass came and went in season, throwing up bits of boat and tackle and rusted parts, and ancient cray-pots doing a slow unravel. There was a rightness about this that they both liked, though it was a professional joke against Ric.

The only threat to the feeling came when they had visitors, which wasn't often. They didn't really encourage them. At these times they would see the place through other peoples eyes—the disorder, the makeshiftness, how little they had 'done' with it.

The first time that Lyn's mother came, stepping carefully up the suspect back-steps into the whitish-yellow of the honeycomb, Ric's heart sank.

'Needs a bit of work,' he found himself saying. He looked quickly at Lyn.

"We like it,' she said.

Ric turns in the seat and looks at the Aunt's house. Nothing. But what was there to look for anyway, blood on the windows? He tells himself to relax—if she's been in there this long it must be all right.

To kill time he tries to interest himself in the garden: *What I would do if it was mine.* He resists this attempt to divert himself but is drawn in all the same. He lets it in slowly, stilling himself to feel it. The whole thing first—the balance and the controlling ideas, then all the levels of detail.

What he sees doesn't surprise him. He has his image of Rhonda. There's a real concern there, love even. You can nearly always pick that and he lets a fair bit go when it's there. Lovingly placed flamingos and gnomes, even the wrought iron terrazzo passions that Lyn calls *Fremantle neo Dago* are better than some of the stiff and flawless performances you see around. He has created a few of these himself, or rather, reproduced them. People handing him a *Women's Weekly* or a *Home and Garden.* We want that they would say and he would give it to them. It was their money.

Once or twice in his life he has changed his mind about people just by looking at their gardens. An image giving him suddenly what he hadn't yet grasped but should have done, and would have done eventually.

No *Home and Garden* for the Aunt. What comes through first is the odd balance—all low stuff and trees, no mid-range shrubs at all. (Like what you see down South with the first rains after a forest fire has ripped through—trees like masts on a flat green sea.) And an unusual lack of variation in leaf colour. All greens—dark greens and mid-greens, no compromise and practically nothing that flowers. Then suddenly, in one corner, a cluster of miniature rose bushes. Queer if you thought about it, though you probably wouldn't.

'Flair,' the old great uncle, Stewie, had told Ric once. 'She had flair.'

'Nerve you mean,' Colin said. 'Bloody nerve.'

Ric fiddled with the keys of the piano to control his interest. They almost never talked about Rhonda. There had been some kind of break years back. It was Gary, a baby when it must have happened, who told Ric the litany: Rhonda was hard, Rhonda was mad, the only thing Rhonda cared about was Rhonda.

'Flair,' Stewie insisted, mostly into his glass. He liked the word. 'An' I'll tell yuh somethin' else about 'er. She could really play the pianner. She played it beautiful.'

'Yeah,' Colin said. 'All hands and rings.'

'She was good.' Stewie slopped his beer mid-sentence in mild grief. She *was.*

He looked at Ric for support but Ric could only grin. He would have liked to be able to agree. He liked the old man. Stewie knew it. He motioned him in, saying conspiratorially, though Colin could hear of course:

'They came roun' to see Ol' Vera y' know, when Rhonda was a little girl. Please Mrs Haynes, they said, could we take Rhonda upter Perth. There was this big shot pommie pianner player over and they wanted Rhonda to play for 'im. Music teachers they were, unny kids 'emselves. Ol' Vee had 'em scared.'

The memory of the awe his sister inspired made Stewie laugh. '*We'll* take her Mrs Haynes, *we'll* look after 'er. Vee never gave 'em an answer then but Rhonda never went. We know she can play, Vee said. She's had lessons hasn't she. We don't need some pommie pianner player comin' over here to tell us that.'

Ric was gripped by a sudden, acute sadness. He had a vision of Rhonda, gifted, lonely, fierce eyed, playing brilliant music to the family cat.

'S'all right for you Stewie,' Colin said. 'You only came to visit.'

'You must know something,' Ric insisted. 'What happened between her and Colin?'

'I don't know. They never got on. He never talks about it.'

'Stewie does when he's had a few. You must've wondered. Didn't you ever try to find out?'

'Stewie bullshits. His memory's been shot for years now anyway.'

Lyn knew without knowing that she was blocking. The sensation only made her angrier. She wasn't really lying. She had never actively tried to find out. Something had stopped her. She felt again a tinge of the old feeling. A kind of dread. One of those black childhood terrors that ring the blood-bells deep inside, filling every vein with noise. Jesus. Jesus in a certain kind of picture. Jesus with long, soft, light-brown hair, white robes, blue sash, one hand lifted in such a blessing. She would close a book carefully on these pastel scenes, couldn't stand what it was that shone and lifted the half-gloss of the open page. And there was Rhonda. Rhonda. The name, the word. It meant witches and evil and casting out. The Father set hard against you. The time she saw *Snow White*, sitting in a blackened theatre with Gary, crushing their collective packet of potato chips, the face, the voice, above the poisoned apple, offering it up sweetly like a jewel, was Rhonda's.

'She shot through, I do know that.'

Lyn said this to the wall after a minute, raising her head from the glasses she was washing. 'Took off and left her husband and little boy, bang, note on the kitchen table.'

'Did she go with someone?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.'

'What did he do?'

'Who?'

'Her husband?'

'You're very interested all of a sudden.'

'Well it is interesting, don't you think?'

'I suppose so.'

Lyn went back to what she was doing. They both felt the silence as a pause.

'What'd he do?'

'Oh Christ, Ric, does it matter?'

He knew her rhythm now, waited for the swing back.

'He cracked up a bit. Apparently he was crazy about her. He came around one night drunk, crying and carrying on on the front verandah. Screaming things out. Michael told me. He can remember it a bit.'

'Did she ever come back to him?'

Lyn had finished stacking the glasses and turned around. 'I told you Ric, I don't know much about it.'

Thumps at the front door, breaking through sleep.

Come owd'ere y' bastard, y' fuckin' bastard. I'm gunna fix one of you lot tonight.'

'Oh hell.' Colin sat up in bed. 'It's Vic.'

'Don't go,' Jean said. 'Don't go out there Colin.' Her hand was tight on his arm.

A kick rattled the front lock. Then another one.

'Stop hidin' behind y' stuck up bloody wife and gid'owd'ere y' mongrel.'

'I have to,' Colin said.

He left her, thick and numb in the wreck of the bed, not quite believing that the thumps, grunts and obscene language happening on the verandah had anything to do with her.

Gary started to scream. Jean got out of bed and went to the cot in the other room. She held him tightly, feeling his fear as if it was hers. He was her child, this one.

Colin let himself into the house quietly and stood in the passage-way. When Jean snapped on the light he started, then tried to grin away the blood, shuffling, not quite sure what to do with his hands. His attempts to clean himself up had made it worse. His face was spotted and smeared like a slaughterman's, like something in a police exhibit.

This is my husband, bleeding in the passageway of our house. The father of my children.

'It's all right.' Colin tried a smile. 'It's all right love.' He touched the blood on his singlet. Most of it's his.'

That summer car smell, what is it. Hot upholstery, hot vinyl. Ric breathes it in and runs his hand along the top of the passenger seat, absorbing the heat like a lizard.

The first true sign that summer is coming, a warm car, heat around you as you climb in, rising to meet you, moving through your clothes, beading the winter skin above your lip. School holidays, long trips from the farm in the back of old Fords, haze on the road, dead goannas, legs sticking to the seat where your shorts stop, four fantas and two cokes no three fantas and three cokes, I'm gunna stop this car and throw you lot out, I spy with, counting the posts, grandparents coming out smiling: You got here, beach house, the beach.

Part of the hold that the honeycomb had was that slow holiday drift. They never settled into a fixed pattern of living there though they were there for a couple of years. They moved books, pictures, furniture, the material facts of their existence, through the satellite rooms of the central hub, setting up an enclave here, a corner there, then dissolving them. As the weather and their mood changed, so did their way of living in space.

It occurred to Ric once in a vague kind of way that their life together was like that too—rooms moved into, rooms abandoned, space to back off, space, their own corners. In the centre, sensed somehow more than understood, some kind of hub, an anchor. At the time it was all he wanted.

A holiday thing for him still, the sea. It lifts him every time, that turn at Cottesloe coming back from Perth when the land drops away and the sea is suddenly there.

He told Lyn once that that turn made the drive home from work bearable. She said she hardly noticed it: it didn't really register.

It was different for her he realised. She had always lived near water. She moved in that fact like the air around her.

Lyn drew the struggling fish into the field of the lamp and gripped it firmly below the gills. She eased out the hooks and tossed it forward on top of the others. It flipped and heaved for a while, diminishing, its universe rounded suddenly and shrunk to the sides of a bucket.

Outside the rim of this event, Lyn separated a mulie from the block that was thawing on newspaper at her feet. The iced body broke away clean and firm, chilling the ends of her fingers. She threaded it across the hooks that bit and dulled in the patchy lamp light.

When she had cast out again she settled back next to Ric.

'I'm impressed,' he said. He meant it.

'It's not as hard as it looks.'

'Isn't it? Then why does my bait keep falling off the hook?'

'You soften it up too much by buggering around with it. You have to approach it with authority.'

'Oh yeah.' Ric's head went back as he grinned. When he was still again he said, 'It's nice here.'

'Mmmn.'

After a moment Lyn said, 'This is where C. Y. O'Connor killed himself. Did you know?'

'Here? Really?'

'Yeah. He rode his horse around from Fremantle—it was a clean sweep then—and rode right out into the water and shot himself. He went deep so he'd drown if the bullet didn't kill him outright. That's the story anyway.'

The foresight of this watery death had impressed Lyn quite a bit.

'That was before the sheep,' she said.

'What?'

It had struck her as ironic and even disturbing that an Abbatoir, a slaughter-house should be built on the spot that C. Y. O'Connor took his life. A strange sort of anticipation. His blood in the water, and brains too probably, and then the sheep's. The sheep following the man of vision. Too late and in the wrong way—his genius just so much predictive offal scumming the tide.

'The sheep. The abbatoirs.'

'Oh.' Ric didn't pursue the connection. He pulled in his line and rebaited it, attempting authority but mashing the bait instead. He grinned at Lyn but her attention was somewhere else.

'How do you know it was here that he shot himself?'

'There was a documentary on T.V. last year. They re-enacted it.'

She had watched the death scene in a mild anger. A personal anger. At the loss of the man and for another reason. "I've been coming here all my life you know, and I never knew that. They don't teach you that stuff. The English Corn Laws, yes. The French Revolution.'

She turned to face him and smiled, ironic about her own vehemence, checking his reaction. The gaze held for a moment. Later that night they made love for the first time.

Lyn is at the door finally, nodding and backing out. She turns and runs across the lawn to the car. All Ric catches of the Aunt is a hand and shoulder.

The car door jolts shut.

'Well?' Ric hands her his cigarette.

'Behind the old laundry, about level with where that pile of tin was.'

'No, her. Rhonda. What was she like. Was she upset.'

'No. No .... not really. Stunned. She knew who I was as soon as she opened the door.'

She puts the cigarette down then and goes quiet. Ric fiddles with the adjustment of his seatbelt, waiting. It's catching up with her now, what she's just done, rolling over her in a wave.

'Shit,' she says. 'Shit.'

She presses a hand into her mouth, becomes aware of this thing in her face, her fist, and takes it away, losing it again below her throat. Ric leaves her for a moment, then leans over, cupping a hand over her knuckles. They are like this for several seconds. Then the pressure eases and Lyn sucks in air suddenly like she's come up from deep water.

'Fuck,' she says. 'She kept staring at me Ric. You should've seen her eyes. All she wanted to talk about was Dad.'

'Well ... that was natural.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

She takes another gulp of air and goes quiet again. Ric starts the car and they take the streets in silence. Then:

'She had some of the old photos. All lined up. She had the one of my grandfather out the back of the house. She said she took it.'

'Did she?'

'I shouldn't have gone in there.'

He lets that go. Can't lie for her.

'I think she's lonely Ric. She seems to be there all on her own.'

'That's probably her choice ... don't you think.'

'I don't know. I don't know.'

They had stood there finally, heavy with goodwill for each other, feeling a connection, unable to make it, the well patterning the only sense of meeting.

It is nearly dark when they get back to the house. Lyn walks straight around to the back and paces out some steps.

'Here,' she says, bouncing lightly on the spot. 'Here.'

She turns a slow circle like in a child's spinning game, her arms outstretched and her fingers wide. Her eyes are closed. This is a piece of private theatre. She is turning on herself. Then she stops and is facing Ric, smiling.

'Here,' she says. She laughs.

Ric walks over to her then and pulls her to him. The force in this surprises them both.

T. A. G. HUNGERFORD

Millie, Mollie and Mae

The night I met the three girls from Carnarvon I'd been on my holidays for the better part of a week. It was hell to have to leave the beach and go in to the studio.

I'd been surfing and sunbaking all day—only raced up to the flat at lunchtime for a tomato and a slice of polony and a swig of tea, then back to the beach again. I was a bit sunburned, although I'd covered myself with coconut oil. I was tired, too, from the surf. I'd rather have gone up to the pub, in my shorts, for a couple of beers, and then down to the surf for another swim. Instead, I had to climb into my grey melange slacks, coat-shirt-and-tie, and trek right in to Perth by bus.

"Be a scorcher in town, tonight!" the driver warned me as I boarded—as if I didn't know already.

There'd been a piccaninny sea-breeze during the day, but it would never have reached the city. Just about sundown, it had fallen back into the Indian Ocean, exhausted. Now the big red Santa Rosa plum was balanced nicely where the smoky blue of the sea met the smoky green of the sky: As I watched, it flattened a little on the underside and began to drop away into the deeps, creeping up on Africa. You almost expected it to sizzle and steam.

"Be a bloody scorcher tomorrow, too!" the driver phophesied, as we pulled away from the curb.

I was the only passenger going in. Everyone else was coming out. Shoals of cars were already arriving on the promenade, crammed with people already in their bathers. It would be one of those nights when the white beach would be crowded until late, trembling with the thud and hiss of the surf and the tinkle and strum of gramophones and the occasional portable wireless; and the people skylarking at the edge of the floodlights would glow phosphorescent like the fish in the black water further out.

I didn't relish the prospect of the night ahead of me, of pushing a mob of four-footed girls around the floor from eight until eleven. Although, of course, the five-bob came in handy: I had to put in at home as well as pay my way at the beach flat.

When I got up to the studio Mary was standing by the gramophone scoffing a sandwich and a cup of tea. A little Pommie woman who ran the greasy spoon over the road brought them up for nothing extra. Mary looked worked over—she'd probably had a couple of private lessons during the afternoon. They were the gilt on the gingerbread for anyone running a studio, but they could be tiring. Especially if the student happened to be some old codger with a breath like an

open garbage-can who didn't care what he did with his flat feet so long as he could trundle a couple of boobs around the floor for half-an-hour.

When Mary had finished the tea she began to run me through the slow-foxtrot step I was going to give the girls that night. I was only one step ahead of most of them, and I had to work the changes to keep it that way.

A lot of the girls—and the boys, too, although I didn't have much to do with them—made the classes the big social event of their week. For some of them, I think, it was the only contact with anyone outside work and home. *Gee! I been looking forward to class all day!* A chance to snuggle up against some bloke's chest for a few minutes, and dream of being belle of the ball.

"Double reverse spin tonight, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I'll never be able to do it!"

"Easy as falling off a log."

"How d'you think I'm going? *Really*?"

"You're a natural. OK, now—I'm going to reverse. Right foot back and *drag* that left heel . . ."

"That new piece in the blue dress!" The preliminaries over and into the dirt. "She's been going up to Ethel Philp's for *years*! They reckon . . ."

"OK—watch your heel turn." You had to head them off. "*Drag* your heel hard—you know? *That's* better! Gives you more balance for the turn." You knew that the minute you sat this one down she'd start magging to the one next to her, and by the time you'd worked along the bench to the girl from Ethel Philp's it would be what *I'd* said about her. You picked her up and it was like dancing with an ice-cube.

You had to get pretty thick-skinned. The girl from Ethel Philp's—or from Johnny Paranthoiene's or Sammy Gilkison's, or any of the dozen-or-so studios around town—usually had been dancing for years. She probably knew a lot more than I did—although that didn't necessarily make her any Isadora Duncan. They liked to take you by surprise. Just when you'd got into your spiel: *Oh—I had the cross chassis-and-lock a long time ago—up at Wrightson's*, and they'd stand there waiting for you to pull something out of the hat. I didn't often get taken by surprise, just the same. We had a free dancing period for a quarter of an hour before instruction began, and while you were piloting a few of the hopefuls around the floor you kept your eyes peeled for anyone who looked as if she might be a snag.

I had a couple of disasters, early on, when one or two of the pupils began to instruct *me*, but I'd worked out a simple routine to bring them back to the field. You'd just kick the hell out of them, mark up their nice Silvafrosted shoes, and then say something like: *Well . . . don't worry. You'll get the hang of it all of a sudden, one of these nights.* A few more stumbles and then, just before you sat her down, something for the other girls to hear—something she wouldn't be able to cotton on to in a hurry: *Watch that right hip—or maybe it's the way you swing your left ankle?*

It was a shit of a thing to do, and even while I was doing it I knew it might cost Mary a pupil. Anyone I pulled it on was quite likely to shoot off to some other studio and sit on the bench against *their* wall and tell the girls there about me: *That red-headed cow up at Mary Shaw's!* But when it was eighty in the water-bag and your tie was strangling you, and you were only half-way through the quickstep with the waltz and the slow foxtrot yet to come . . . and when you knew that even if you broke your leg every one of the dozen or so sitting along that bench like crows on a butcher's fence had to be danced with and jollied and bullshitted to: and that even while they sniggered and gossiped and sniped every

one of them had her eye on the clock like a gimlet to see you didn't give her a second less than you gave the one next to her . . .

While I was being run through the steps for the class by Mary, Leo and Bonny came in. They trained all through the summer, to be ready for the first competitions of the winter dancing season. They taught for Mary, and in return she coached them in very advanced stuff—it was the way the studios ran. They were the top pair at our studio, they'd won the previous winter's Tango Championship, and they'd been runners-up twice in the State championships. They had to be good, because they didn't have looks going for them. There's something about being tall and dark and good-looking when you're wearing tails—which most of us did when we were dancing in competitions, even if they weren't our own; tails went around like the common cold, between dancers in the same studio and between studios. There's a thing about tails fitting anyone, and I've proved it. For one competition I was in, before I got my own, I wore the suit of a little bloke about five-foot-three with broad shoulders and fair hair, and I'm nearly six-foot with red hair and shoulders like a sauce-bottle.

Leo and Bonny moved like machines—like a machine, in fact. They were small and mousy, but when they took to the floor you forgot all about that. I used to wonder if they really enjoyed it—you couldn't expect a clock to get a charge out of striking. But even if they didn't enjoy it, they made it look as if they did, and that was important. Every studio had a crowd of one-eyed followers who'd vote for the studio's representative even if they were a couple of two-headed cripples, but there were a lot of swingers who'd just go for looks and tip the balance this way or that in the popular vote. Everyone said that had no influence on the judges, but I hadn't been in the business long before I'd seen competitions when couples who'd done everything by the book had been rubbished by the judges simply because it stuck out like a dog's balls that they didn't please the crowd.

When Leo and Bonny came in they went straight to the record rack and picked up the practice-record—we called it that because when we were training we had to hold a record clamped between our pelvises, excepting for open variations. If we dropped it and broke it we were expected to replace it: technically, that is—we always picked some clapped-out old platter they'd worn down to the welt, and nobody really cared what happened to it.

I watched them take off, doing the slow foxtrot the same as Mary and me. They were concentrating on nothing but moving across the floor, corner to centre and centre to corner, round and round like those little carved figures on Swiss barometers. Springs in their heels, alright. After a while Leo piloted Bonny over to Mary and me, and danced along beside us for a while.

"You opening a boong's camp, Shaw?" Leo said. "Saw three gins as we came in. Down the bottom of the stairs."

Mary stopped, and we stood staring at him with our hands on each other's shoulders—the way we danced when it was for business rather than for pleasure.

"One of them asked if this was Mary Shaw's," Leo said.

"Spoke quite good English she did, too," Bonny said. "Like a lumper."

"One of them had a goanna by the tail," Leo said. He was that kind—always the humourist. "Probably got a bit of a fire going down in the lobby right now—cooking it for tea."

"Don't be so bloody silly," Mary said. She dropped her hands from my shoulders and walked over to the gram. She flipped the arm off the record, and *I'm In The Mood For Love* came to a stop. It had been the tune for that year's slow foxtrot competition. My partner had worn a blue taffeta dress with a shoulder-spray of pink camellias I'd shouted her for luck. It'd worked, because we'd won our heat. I'd gone around for days whistling the tune, in my head or out loud. Me, feathering beautifully down the Town Hall dance-floor, rise-and-fall, contra-body-move-

ment, hip-contact. *Keep smiling!* The lovely hailstone patter of clapping as we swayed into an open telemark and outside-spin in the middle. I swear I could see how good it looked, as if I'd been up in the balcony watching. We got arseoled in the next round, though, and my partner got herself another pilot. I was good to dance with, she said, apologetically, but I was poison with the judges.

"Only be a mo', Hungie," Mary said to me, as she passed me on the way to the door.

She had spectacular legs and bottom, and tiny feet, and her shoes and stockings were always impeccable, no matter how hardup she might be: which we all were, always, chronically, eternally, broke to the wide every Thursday. I watched her cross the floor. The insides of her knees just brushed as she walked, and it gave her a very sexy sort of movement.

"I bet she's gone down to nab those three for the class," Bonnie said.

"Blame her?" I said. "Three one-and-sixpences just about pays one of us."

"Jesus!" Leo said. "Can't you just see them standing in the doorway as the mob comes in?" He held out a hand, cringingly. "Gib'it chickpen', boss?"

Bonnie and I laughed. Even in his grey suit and white shirt and blue tie, neat as whiskey—he worked in one of the big stores, and he always dressed beautifully—he somehow managed to look just like one of the raggedy abos you saw begging up and down the line of carriages when your train stopped at some of the country sidings.

Although you wouldn't expect the three down in the lobby to be like that, I thought—and then realised I had no idea at all what to expect if Mary *were* to lug them up for their one-and-sixpences.

You didn't see many blacks around Perth—they were a bit of an oddity. About the only picture I had of them was from the arty sorts of photos they put on the front of writing-pads. Of some naked warrior posed on a rock with his spears placed strategically to hide his doo-dah, or white-toothed smiling gins picking blue water-lilies in some Northern Territory billabong, and no holts barred about what they disposed of above the water-line. And there was the cartoon boong, too. We'd been getting *Smith's Weekly* at home for as long as I could remember, and I'd been brought up on Stan Cross's splay-footed, splat-nosed black no-hopers and their stick-legged gins doing something stupid—like badly trained dogs—outside some wheat-cocky's bark hut.

"Pity we weren't still running the concerts," Bonny said. "They might come in handy—big corroboree number." She shook an imaginary spear above her head and stamped her foot on the floor. She was a perfect little soubrette type, dainty and pink-and-brown, with exquisite ankles.

"You be careful, Bon!" Leo said, grinning at her. "Skiddy-widdy!"

While they'd been rehearsing the last concert Bonnie had burst her halter-top and brought the house down. At the finale of one number she'd had to jump in the air with her arms stretched out in front of her, and wiggle her shoulders and bottom while she yelled: "*Skiddy-widdy way-y-y-y-oh*! and—boom! Or, I guess, boom-boom!

Since then I'd never been able to look at her and see her fully clothed. I'd had a spear-carrier part in that same show—me and another bloke from the studio. Blackened all over—where it showed anyway—in bright loin-cloths and turbans, our arms crossed on our chests with the fists under our biceps to make the most of them, between a couple of papier-mache palm-trees to make up the scenery: for a terrible little precocious four-year-old all permanent-waved and made up like one of the girls down Roe Street, who waggled her raffia skirt and sang *I Wouldn't Leave My Little Wooden Hut for You-oo-oo.*

The act didn't require much practise by the spear-carriers, and the main reason why I attended rehearsals at all was because I'd written the lyrics, and changes

might be required en route. For instance, one of my lines went: *Remember when Mother Eve met him, handsome Adam wore only a smile!* and the mothers of the girls in the number formed a deputation, bristling, and had the line cut. Until you've met a stage-mother, you've no idea of what a dragon can be like.

Rene, the girl who put the concerts on, taught every known sort of dancing—ballroom, classical, tap, stage-routine, national, you name it—and her pupils supplied the cast for her yearly revue at His Majesty's. She reckoned she was too hard-up to pay me for writing the lyrics, but she offered me ballroom lessons instead.

Overnight, almost, my life-style took a complete somersault.

I'd been going along every couple of weeks to the old-time dance in the Swan Street hall, in South Perth: now, suddenly, I was an out-every-night sort of stage-door Johnny, racing home from work, showering, jumping into my suit, wolfing my tea, dashing back to town, crawling home to bed often after midnight—never before the last ferry, in any case, sitting on that deserted jetty watching the enormous cockroaches clatter around like rattle-snakes. My mother had a great deal to say about it, of course: *using-the-house-like-a-hotel-look-at-you-wearing-yourself-out-never-see-any-of-your-old-friends-now-all-that-dancing-riffraff!* and so on.

Her grip was loosening on all of us, and I was the last. I guess she hated it. She'd still haul off and give me a clip under the ear when she thought I deserved it—until one evening when I was picking at the plates while she was dishing up tea, and worrying her to hurry because I wanted to get back to town, she lashed out at me—for the last time. I caught her hand just before it landed.

"Mum," I said. "*Don't you ever hit me in the face again!*"

I think it might have sunk in then that my most recent birthday had been my twenty-first. In any case, she didn't have to stay her hand for long. She was dead within two years, and I was wishing she was still around to belt me.

When Mary came back up the stairs she had the three black girls in tow, all right, but she was half-way across the floor before she realised they hadn't followed her in. They'd propped in the doorway, and were looking around the studio as if they suspected some sort of trap.

There was a big one and two small ones, and as Leo had said, they were really black. The only one you could really see was the big one in front—the other two stayed right behind her, peeping around her. She was right out of *Smith's Weekly*, almost blue-black with massive shoulders, box-shaped almost to her knees. Her legs were the regulation skinny gin sort, and from across the room, even, you could see that the salesman at Ezywalkin must have had a bit of bother fitting her with the black patent leather shoes she was wearing; probably would have wanted to sell her the box rather than the boots.

The three of them stood there in the doorway peering about them, and looking at them I remembered three kangaroos we'd surprised in a swamp down by Narrogin, one weekend: standing there with their backs against a quandong tree, their ears and noses twitching as they tried to identify the sounds and the smells we'd sent on ahead of us.

They took it all in as if they wanted to remember it forever. The wooden benches along the walls, with the few boys and girls who'd already wandered in staring back at them. The green cotton curtains at the windows, a few cheap wooden pot-stands with ferns on them, the cheap glass shades hanging from the ceiling above their own reflections in the shining floor. In the corner where Bonny and Leo and I stood, just the gramophone on a little second-hand table, our stack of records on one of the benches, Mary's desk with her appointment book and the phone. I wondered what they thought of it—I'd never been north of

Geraldton. Maybe the old Modern Studio, about which Mary was always saying: *I must do something about this dump when I get some dough!* looked like a palace to them. She realised they weren't right behind her, and turned round.

"Come on, girls!" She smiled and held out her hand toward them.

It occurred to me that it was the way you'd coax children, or dogs. "Come on, Mae! Bring the girls in!" Out of the corner of her mouth, without disturbing her smile, she said softly to us: "They reckon Dad used to know their father, in Derby." She lowered her voice even further. "White!"

It was mostly girls sitting on the benches along the walls—the boys usually stayed out on the landing until the music started, skylarking and telling dirty jokes in a cloud of cigarette smoke and Californian Poppy. The girls came straight in—they knew where to go, and went there, and sat down and began showing each other crochet patterns and pictures of evening dresses they'd cut out of magazines to have made up for the winter ball season—we were usually dragged into it, later on, for an opinion. *Like the diagonal ruffles across the front? That girl from Sammy's won the tango comp last year, she had them. Remember? Christ, yes, you'll knock 'em for a row in that, all right!* Some of them got up together and went over the steps they'd learned in last week's class, or tried out some variation they'd seen someone do, some time. It was the part of the evening I liked best, before it got roasting hot, when the tiniest breeze fluttered the curtains and the gramophone muttered to itself in our corner and the floor shone like red silk, and the studio was full of the scent of girls; that year everyone was wearing something called *Soir de Paris*, in a little dark-blue bottle, and you'd have thought you were waltzing through an orange grove.

The big one—Mae: she'd nodded and smiled when Mary called out to them—started across the floor toward us. The other two hesitated for a moment before they followed her—probably thought whatever happened they'd be safer close to her than standing by themselves in the doorway. Everyone stared at them, as if they'd just escaped from a zoo. I suppose it was understandable. It wasn't every night you saw three authentic blackgins at a dancing studio in Perth—even three blackgins in pretty coloured cotton frocks much the same as any ranged along the walls.

"Clean and tidy, anyway!" Bonny whispered to Leo, as if she'd expected them to be wearing Stan Cross flour-bags.

The big one—Mae—didn't show any of her white blood at all, that I could see. All lubra—all forehead and nostrils and lips. When she got closer to us she smiled—and not out of nervousness, either. You could see that. She had magnificent teeth, and for some reason when I saw them I thought of pomegranate seeds, even though they were so white. It must have been because of the pink gums and tongue you could see behind them.

The other two were different altogether. In their plain cotton frocks they were slender. Not skinny—young-girl shapely. They were pretty, too, their heart-shaped faces broad at the forehead and narrow at the chin. They didn't show any white blood, either. If they showed any cross at all it was in the high cheekbones some wily old Malay trader had left behind him somewhere on the northern coast a couple of hundred years ago. My father used to say the mixture of aboriginal and Malay blood up in Arnhem Land produced some of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen, and didn't my mother snort. All three of the girls had beautiful brown wavy hair, cut short, but the heads of the second two were so small and elegant I felt that if I were to place a palm against each ear and press inward I could crush their skulls like egg-shells. When they got close enough I could see their eyes were large and brown and soft, with the pink whites that look so terrible on us but so right on them.

I was prepared for all that—after all, they were blackgins. But I wasn't prepared for something you couldn't really see until they were close up to you—their long, dark, thick lashes, top and bottom. More sharply than before I was reminded of the Narrogin kangaroos. Just as it seemed they'd realised what was happening, and had inclined gently forward, the way they do, to bound off, we'd shot them.

I thought it strange that none of the three showed anything of their white blood. There was an opinion going around among us at the time that the sex of a child was decided by whose passion, the mother's or the father's, was in the ascendant at the time of conception—very scientific, our discussions were, right out of *Reader's Digest.* Maybe it was the same with looks, I thought. If it was, the girls' mother must have been in the driving seat every time the balloon went up. In any case, the father might have had a touch of the tarbrush, too. They reckoned you could never tell who, up north.

Mary introduced them, and when she said: *Millie, Mollie and Mae* I was afraid she'd burst out laughing. I didn't dare look at her—Bonny had three aunties called Lily, Millie and Tillie Hill, and we were always on about them.

"Are you holidaying in Perth?" Bonny asked. She directed the question at all of them, but it was the one called Mae who answered. "Few weeks." Her voice was deep and rough as chaffbags, but not coarse. It was the sort that would comfort children. "Dad won a packet at the picnic races, Christmas time. Reckoned we should see Perth before we died!"

She laughed, and it seemed to fill the whole studio. People sitting half-way along the walls on either side turned around and looked in our direction—those who weren't already staring at Millie, Mollie and Mae as if they were dressed-up platypuses, and straining to catch what we were talking about. Most of them smiled as if she had let them in on a bit of fun—I didn't know her for long, but the way she laughed was one thing that stuck in my memory. Her eyes nearly closed, her mouth wide open, her tongue lying like a bright pink oyster inside the shell of her perfect white bottom teeth.

"How did you come down?" Bonny asked. I don't know if she really was interested, or if she was just playing ladies. I'd been wondering about it myself —Carnarvon was a long way up the coast, and there was no train. And blackgins didn't usually travel by the coastal steamers.

"Boat—didn't you, Mae?" Mary said. "The old Koolinda?"

"Koolinda, all right," Mae nodded agreement. "Goin' back on it, too."

"Good trip?" Leo asked.

"Bonzer."

"Plenty of fun on board?' Leo persisted, about as subtle as a cock-eyed-bob. He winked slyly and swiftly at Bonny, and I knew what he was thinking about. I was too—how the three black girls got on with the white passengers, and if they got invited to the parties.

"Tucker was beaut," Mae said.

"What does your dad do?" Leo asked. "Apart from win dough at the races?"

"Looks after the mills on Howlong," Mae said. Neither of the other two made any attempt to butt into the conversation. In fact, until I got them into my class later on I thought maybe they didn't speak English too well: they spoke it all right, but seemed just not to bother. They stood there, half-hidden behind their big sister, still and watchful as if they were balanced to take off at the first hostile move. Like the kangaroos.

"Oh?" Leo said. He slipped another sideways wink at Bonny. "And how long is Howlong?"

The black girl paused a moment and flickered a glance around us. I got the feeling she knew Leo was having her on. I think I'd never disliked Leo more.

He was a good bloke in many ways, but he could be a regular shit if he wanted to.

"Just outside Carnarvon," Mae said, after that little wait. I suppose she was used to skating around smart alecs trying to take a rise out of her, and had decided to pretend to mistake the question. "Three weeks we'll be back there." She laughed again. "Got to get a job."

"What'll you do?" Bonny sounded af is she'd made a lightning survey of the possibilities and just couldn't believe there'd be any sort of job for this gin to do.

"Oh—somethin'." Mae shrugged. "Maybe work on Howlong, like Dad. Might cook at the convent. I dunno." She didn't seem very interested, and I remembered what one of the blokes at work had said, one lunch-time before we got around to the inevitable *met this sheila in the lounge at the Bedford* or *a mate of mine his missus was knockin' it off with the bloke that reads the meters* or *so on me day off I took her down Scarborough an' rooted her up one side of a sandhill an' down the other.* Somehow the talk had got around the aborigines and what to do about them, and one of the stereotypers reckoned: "Do this, do that. You don't know what you're talking about. I've worked with the hooers. They don't give a *stuff*. They don't *want* to do *anything!*"

Millie, Mollie and Mae came up to the studio for three weeks all told—three Tuesday nights and three Fridays. I don't know how much they enjoyed it—you really couldn't tell. I do know they didn't learn much. They just didn't seem able to take it in and remember it from one class to the next.

After the first night or two they seemed to get on well enough with the other girls, and the blokes danced with them a lot: maybe it was just the novelty. Mae was usually the centre of a lot of chatter and laughing, with Millie and Mollie hanging on to the edges, smiling shyly into their shoulders. I don't know what they talked about, but I think it was me, sometimes. I'd taken a few of the girls out from time to time, and once or twice when I looked up quickly from some pupil's feet I'd catch them staring at me the way they do when one of them has just said something and they're all thinking about it, and I felt pretty sure that whatever had been said had been said about me.

One night when I picked up one of our regulars she was still laughing her head off, and she wouldn't look at me.

"What's the joke?" I asked.

"Gawd!" she said. "That Mae! They don't half have themselves a time up there!"

On their last night at the studio—at the time, I didn't know it was their last night—I breezed through Millie and Mollie first. I'd really given up trying to teach them anything. I'd start off by saying: "Now ... remember what I showed you last night? The natural turn in the blues?"—about the simplest step in the world. The result was the same with both of them—as if I'd been speaking Chinese.

"Come on!" I'd say. "*You* remember! That step in the corner, back on your left foot, around with the right, bring your left up to it, close with your left, back with your right, sideways with your left?" I'd demonstrate, but it was plain they just didn't know what I was talking about, so after the third night I only went through the motions—shoved off onto the floor and piloted them around with as little trouble as possible.

Millie and Mollie moved well enough, and they were nice to hold. They fitted neatly under my chin, and they had a strange, musky smell to them—not at all unpleasant but strong, and so different from the breath of *Soir de Paris* wafting up from between the white girls' bubbies. Mae got particularly strong as the hot nights wore on, and the scent of her sweat was still on my hands when I got

home from class. I'd like to have heard what the boys had to say about it out on the landing at half-time.

I'd give Millie and Mollie as much time as I could, doing my best to avoid treading on their feet, and chatting them up and smiling encouragingly. They rarely said a word—just a shy smile, sometimes, or a bit of a giggle into their shoulders, eyes on the floor. I suppose they enjoyed it all—the music and the other girls, and dancing with the different blokes. I guess it *was* a million miles from what they'd been used to up Carnarvon.

Mae was different. She really enjoyed herself, and showed it. She learned a few things, and she talked a lot. It was she who told me each of them had had four years at the convent—their Dad had insisted on it. When I asked her what they'd been taught, she said: "Oh—cookin', cleanin', sewin', washin'—that sort."

"What about schoolwork?"

"A bit." She frowned the way she did when I was coaxing her into remembering what I'd given her on the previous class-night. "Sums an' spellin'," she said, eventually, but she kept on frowning as if she was trying to remember whether there had been anything else.

On their last night, when I'd worked my way along the bench to her, I'd just dropped a real bowel-burster.

"Aren't you in Leo's class?" I'd asked this one, as I picked her up. She'd been coming to Mary's for perhaps three or four nights, but she'd always been among Leo's girls—he took the advanced lot, and any Mary thought might make competition dancers. One night after class I'd heard him say: *Jesus—that blonde from Tommy Pratley's! Is* she *a bloody lemon!* I hadn't worried, because I didn't think I'd ever have to squeeze her. By the time I got her to standard, I'd be too old for the game.

"Like a change, occasionally," she said.

I reckoned I had her taped. Every studio in town had its own followers who wouldn't go anywhere else if they were paid to do it. But she was one of the floaters who moved around from one to another: had a quarrel with the girls here, fell out with a teacher there, got a crush on one somewhere else. I reckoned she'd been around since Christ played goalsneak for Gaza. She was a tall, cool, slim girl with nice blonde hair—on her head, anyway. She dressed a few rungs up the ladder from the rest, and I guess she thought she was a cut or two above them.

I found out she was certainly a cut or two above me the moment I picked her up for the usual couple of circuits to discover what she could do: that lovely, long, smooth stride, feet close together, beautiful heel-turns. And she really clamped on with the pelvis.

"OK," I said, after a while. "Double reverse spin."

It was a nice, showy step, good to demonstrate and good to teach. And the girls thought they were really hitting the big time when they were ready for it.

"Had it last year," she said. "Up at Wrightson's."

I felt my heart sink down to my patent leather dancing pumps. It was the most advanced step I knew, and it was a bugger of a spot to be in.

"Let's see it, just the same," I said.

She did it perfectly, of course, but I had my tactics.

You started in gently—a bit of a knock with the foot, a bodgy lead with the hips to throw them off. *You seem to hang back just that little bit behind the beat?* If you knew how to do it you could make it look dinkum, and before long they weren't so certain they were that year's new threat to Ginger Rogers. When I'd given this one the works, and sat her down again on the bench, I said so that the other girls would hear me: "Well ... keep at it. Rome wasn't built in a day, eh? Just concentrate on hitting that beat." I would have bet my next week's pay

envelope, unopened, that if she came back to Mary's again—which she probably wouldn't, now—she'd be back into Leo's class like a shot.

When I picked up Mae it was like walking out of a tough examination room into a pickup game of footie—good old fat, uncomplicated, laughing Mae, smelling like a nice curry, or something. I felt as if I'd known her forever ... and what's more, she remembered her steps. During the past couple of classes I'd bulldozed her through the quarter-turn, and had made it stick. It made progress around the floor a bit less monotonous if you could fit one in half-way along each wall, between the natural turns in the corners. Then, on the previous night, I'd got her onto the cross-chassis—it follows the quarter-turn as night follows day. If she'd remembered that all right, I was going to hit her with the lock—which follows the cross-chassis as naturally as the cross-chassis follows the quarter-turn. She'd really be able to dazzle the mob at Howlong, I thought—that's if there was anyone up there who could do it with her.

"OK, Mae," I said. I was still a bit high from my victory over the lemon from Tommy Pratley's. "I'm going to give you the cross-chassis and lock tonight. Big time!" I grinned at her. "First we'll just run through the cross-chassis, though." She stared at me as if she'd been poleaxed, and my spirits began to slide again. Maybe I'd reached her limits with the cross-chassis. "You know? I gave it to you last Tuesday?"

"Cross-chassis, Mr Hungerford?" The familiar furrows appeared in her black forehead, and my spirits fell still further.

I hadn't got into teaching ballroom because of any burning ambition to change the world. Actually, it was something of an accident. Mary had taken over the studio when Rene decided to try her luck in London, and she was absolutely skint by the time she'd forked out for the goodwill and the bits of furniture and the gram—which was going to pay Rene's fare. Several of us had volunteered to teach for Mary until she got on her feet, and I found I enjoyed it. I got interested in it, and took a couple of exams, and I reckon I was a good teacher. To have a pupil just blank out on me in something as simple as the cross-chassis bashed my ring in.

"Oh, Jesus, Mae!" I protested. "It was only a couple of *nights* ago!" I looked at her, waiting for some sign that she remembered. When I could see that she didn't. I said: "OK. Watch. After the quarter-turn ..." I raised my hands to shoulder level for balance and went into the girl's part. "Back on the *right*, side on the *left*, feet *together*—remember?" I could see it wasn't sinking in, so I said, "All right, then, we'll have a bit of a dance and it'll come back to you." As we moved off, I thought: *What the hell am I doing in here, farting around with these mugs, when I could be out on the beach?*

Mae must have known I was a bit shirty. She didn't say a word for a couple of rounds, and then, abruptly: "Seen your picture in the paper, Mr Hungerford." She took her hand from my shoulder and fished a bit of newspaper from the front of her dress. As she handed it to me I caught a whiff of that body-scent of hers. It was me, all right—between two women in evening dress, one of them an honest-to-god crinoline. Gigolo and friends.

The previous winter Johnny Paranthoiene had asked me to go to the Post Office Ball with the daughter of his only private lesson. Johnny's studio hadn't been going very long, and he was battling, and this bloke was practically his rent every week: he was some big wheel, a Director, in some government department, and naturally Johnny wanted to fit him.

"Why me?" I asked.

"She's a tall girl. And you've got tails—he stipulated tails."

I didn't want to be in it. We'd be going to the ball anyway—we went to just about every ball—and I couldn't see myself hob-nobbing with a lot of stuffed

shirts while the studio mob were living it up. But Johnny seemed to think that if the deal fell through there'd be no more private lessons, and he'd be scratching for the rent for his studio.

"All right," I said.

"He'll provide the ticket."

"Fair enough," I agreed. They were a quid each.

"And of course, there'll be a fee for you."

"Bloody hell, will there!"

I think my hair stood on end. I didn't mind taking a quid for an exhibition, because you worked for that, and damn hard. But a *paid partner*! It was bad enough to be accepting the tickets, without going the whole hog and accepting payment as well. A bloody *gigolo*! I'd seen one in *The Gay Divorcee*, playing fast and loose with Ginger Rogers. A black-haired, currant-eyed *Dago*, sleek and greasy, who made dough out of going around with women. *Never!*

I thought that I'd settled that point, but as it turned out I hadn't.

"They want you to go to tea at their place, one night before the ball," Johnny said.

"What the hell for?"

"To look you over ... meet you, sort of." I know poor Johnny wasn't enjoying it any more than I was. "You can't just ... meet them outside the Embassy."

The upshot was that I went to tea, met some nice people, had a slap-up meal, sat around afterward in a very posh lounge and knocked back a scotch or two, and left. Mr Director accompanied me to the front gate, and as I closed it behind me, he handed me an envelope.

"The tickets," he said. "And your fee."

I don't think I'd ever felt lower.

"Oh," I said. "I couldn't take that, thank you."

He just stood there, holding the envelope out toward me. He wasn't a Director for nothing—you could see he was used to chivvying the workers around.

"It was the deal with Mr Paranthoiene," he said. "It'd be a pity if it fell through. We like you, and Opal's looking forward to the ball."

Between him and Johnny and Opal—she was the daughter, and I couldn't imagine why he would have to be paying partners for her—I finished up taking the envelope. There was a guinea in it—that snobby figure which in our world indicated a really classy, professional transaction.

Just the same, I was to discover that the job was worth every penny of it, free meal thrown in. Opal and I were the only young people in the Director's party. Everyone else was practically over the hill—probably as old as forty or forty-five. None of the ladies could do anything but the circular waltz, and the wife of one of the Director's colleagues had on a genuine crinoline, wire hoop and all: it was like dancing with our old cocky's cage draped in gold satin. To make matters worse, the Director's loge was at floor level right beneath where our studio crowd were sitting, on the balcony. Every time I glanced up there would be a couple of my friends smiling down at me, elaborately mouthing silent messages of advice or condolence.

I had made up my mind that none of the tainted wage would remain with me, but I needn't have worried about that. After I'd bought Opal a shoulder-spray, and I'd shouted a few drinks, there was little enough of it left: but, as well ... girls you took home from balls always live in the most distant suburbs, and although we went home to Mount Hawthorn in the Director's car, I had to get a taxi from there back to South Perth. By the time I got home, well after two in the morning, I was well into my own resources.

"Where the hell did you get this?" I asked Mae, staring at the press photograph: taken only, I'm certain, because of the association with the Director.

"One of the girls told me when it was. I got a copy of the paper."

I didn't know what to say. I handed it back to her, and she folded it and stuffed it away where she'd got it from, into that warm, dusky little valley that just showed above the neckline of her cotton frock. After we'd done a few more rounds of the floor, she said: "Nice to go to a ball?"

"Beaut," I said. "But ... don't you have them in Carnarvon?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth I felt their place taken by my own foot.

"Sometimes," Mae said. "At the pub. New Year, race time. Everyone comes from the stations. None of us ever go, though."

There was nothing in the way she said it, none of the hostility you might have expected. *None of us.* It was as if she'd said: *In Carnarvon, Sunday comes after Saturday.* It was the way things were where she lived, and I don't suppose she could see any reason why they should change just to please her. She smiled, the point of her pink tongue running backward and forward along her white bottom teeth. "Last year I worked in the kitchen of the pub where it was held. It was bonzer!"

When the class was over and the last of the stragglers were clattering toward the door, I was sitting on the bench by the gram with Leo, staring at my feet. I was buggered. Mary had tidied up her desk and gone to the john, and Bonny had shot off before the last record was finished: reckoned she had to wash her hair before she went to bed. I didn't know Mae was there until I heard Leo say: "Hello, Mae. You want something?" As he spoke he leaned over to the gramophone and dropped the arm on the last record we'd had on—an old one of Rudy Vallee's resurrected. Just to make sure nobody went home anything but exhausted, Mary'd put on a Boston Two-step at the end. My shirt was still sticking to my back, and the little breeze from the window behind me was like a breath of heaven. I looked up, and there was Mae.

"Come to say hooroo," she said.

"Hooroo?" I echoed.

"Going back to Carnarvon tomorrow."

"To Carnarvon?" I was so tired I couldn't take it in. She'd seemed to have become one of the fixtures at the studio. "Tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Do something for me, Mr Hungerford?"

"What is it, Mae?"

She fished the piece of newspaper out of her front again, unfolded it and handed it to me. The photograph of me with Opal on one side of me and, on the other, the wife of the Director's colleague, crinoline and all. She handed it to me.

"Write your name on that? Write ... for Mae Murphy, from Mr. Hungerford?"

"All right, Mae. Glad to." I turned to Leo. He was staring at us questioningly. "Lend us your pen, Leo."

He got up to hand it to me, and looked over my shoulder at the picture. They'd all seen it before, of course, and I'd taken a shellacking about it.

"Cripes. Autographs, now!" *Betty Co-ed is loved by every college boy,* he hummed, in time with the gram. *But I'm the one who's loved by Betty Co-ed!* "You and Mister bloody Vallee!"

I signed the photograph and handed it back to Mae.

"Not with a 'Y', Mr Hungerford," she said, when she'd looked at it. "M-a-*e*."

I felt stupid, as if in a way I'd insulted her. I'd never known her name, properly.

"I'm sorry, Mae." I took the paper from her, botched the 'Y' into an 'E', and handed it back to her. She looked at it again before she folded it and stuck it down the front of her dress.

"Well . . . hooroo."

"Hooroo, Mae," I said. "I hope you . . ."

I really don't know what I hoped for her. That she'd remember the cross-chassis?

She turned around and walked across the shining floor, her heels clack-clacking on the bare wood. Millie and Mollie poked their heads around the door, grinning at her as she approached them. Millie waved to me, and they were gone.

"What the hell will she do in *Carnarvon*?" I said, to Leo.

"She'll be on the batter this time next year," Leo said. "They all are." He lifted the arm from the record. "Come on. We'll wait for Shaw out on the landing."

He took off toward the door, pulling the light cords as he went: funny—Mae stomped but he pussy-footed so you didn't hear a sound. I stood watching him for a moment as the studio got darker. *On the batter*, he'd reckoned. Mae, hanging around in the shadows outside one of the Carnarvon pubs, waiting for some stockman or commercial traveller up from Perth to come out and offer her a couple of bob to go around under the tank-stand. Maybe a bottle of bombo.

I lifted my hand to my face.

The strange, musky smell of her sweat was still on my fingers. It crept up into my nostrils like the smoke of burning gum trees.

This story is from the author's new publication, *Stories From Suburban Road*, to be published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in September.

TIM WINTON

Scission

1

It is four o'clock. He paces through ribbons of glass, stepping hard on his heels to feel it shift and snap. As he stares at the walls with their dainty pictures of women, he inserts a magazine, secures it in the weapon with the heel of his palm. He feels the rifle's dark weight and observes the plaited sinews locking in his forearms.

He sits on the piano stool and surveys the room. In one corner there is a vase of coloured feathers on a small table. They are peacock feathers and he notes carefully the fine spray of colours. The feathers ease up out of the mouth of the vase like soft words. Everywhere, inflated vinyl armchairs, animal rugs, knotted, baked pieces of clay.

Light filtering through the shattered window is soft. A breeze brings in the dry grass smell of late afternoon.

Also, there is another odour, though he is puzzled because it is also a quality of light. It is hers.

He lifts the lid of the piano gently because he is afraid of its dark smoothness. With his thumb he depresses the last key but one, and then, the last. It is like pushing white teeth. To him it makes the word:

A – MEN

and the last, lowest, darkest note trembles in the wood until his breath is gone. He sees his face, distorted in the polished wood. And smiles.

2

"McCulloch." He says his own name aloud. His voice is close in this room. He takes pride in his name; it is the brand-name of a chainsaw. He looks at his hands curled about the tube of gunmetal. There is no paint on these hands. They are soft. He once loved to roughen her flesh with his spirit-hardened callouses. He stirs at the thought.

McCulloch is a big man. His muscles have grown soft with the years and he must constantly will them into firming. This gives his face a taut, squinting appearance, as if pained or cramped in concentration.

In the bedroom the vast bed is unfamiliar. Posts, polished wood, eiderdown. He faces the mirror. The T-shirt is tight; the outline of his nipples shows through.

He holds the long barrel before him with a smile. There is no doubt about its weight and darkness and arm's length.

He keeps a careful eye on the space around his image in the glass. Nothing moves in the dimness.

3

Rosemary McCulloch lounges perfectly in the fortified sunlight by the pool. Her thoughts are far from the chunk-chunk of heavy camera shutters and the coohing of the photographer. She is possessed by the burning whiteness that envelops her.

Behind the film of her eyelids there is quivering white, and she follows it back to the smooth warmth that white has once been for her. The glare dances before her: clean, fresh brick pulsating in the streetful of salmon-pink and terracotta, bright, pale faces of the family just out from England (she remembers the woman's accent as she called for her child—"Murr-rraaay!"), and the modest chiffon of the bride arriving next door. At dusk the sound of other people's children. Everywhere yards barren with pale coastal sand and harassed-looking runners of buffalo grass.

Sweaty summer nights in white sheets, gazing out from under his pulsing biceps, listening to the gay tinkle of sprinklers.

4

A small woman moves through the empty cardboard boxes, and, after a moment's indecision, crosses the glass-strewn floor to the bookcase. She notes, despite herself, that it has not been dusted; her fingertips leave dark spaces in the film. She pulls books out, her finger coaxing back the tip of each spine. Herbert Kastle, Helen MacInnes—scruffy paperbacks that she drops into the nearest box. *Anna Karenina* she remembers and pulls the cardigan tighter about her as if to secure the memory of debate through the pickets of the fence. *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge* and *New Idea* joins the thrillers in the box. She handles the former as if it is hot to touch. Then she scoops out an armful of Simenons and reads the back covers once more and turns and says: "Remem . . ." and puts a hand to her mouth. Yes, always Maigret, she thinks.

For a few moments she is happy and strong, moving along the shelves, boxing books and discarding more issues of Bilbert Kann's *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge* with resolve. She breathes shallowly and contains the tremors. She scuffs aside the broken glass with a foot.

5

The weapon rears in the locked sinews.
The woman staggers, a red geyser issuing from an eye socket.
Then there is a roar like the heavens opening.

6

Soon after the Housing Commission opened up Playne Street there was an influx of young married couples and English migrants who found deposits for the sandy, treeless blocks, and waited and saw State houses built on them. Nobody noticed the similarities in design (there were only four styles) because designs were often reversed, as if copied in a mirror. Instead of the door of the terra-

cotta double-front opening on the left of the little cement porch, it opened on the right. Tile colours were sometimes changed.

The McCulloch house, however, was none of the four, and this set it apart. McCulloch, a signwriter, worked at home much of the time and this also held a certain prestige. His wife stayed at home; it was expected of her, but she, like most of the young wives on Playne Street, was happy with her new life in which she had a home that would one day have a garden and a greenhouse and a concrete driveway.

Next door, on the left, lived another young couple. The husband, Phillips, was a clerk with the government; his wife, Ruth Phillips, spent her housecleaning hours planning for her new home, nuggeting and polishing the jarrah floorboards each week. Rosemary McCulloch could be sometimes seen standing outside her white house brushing the spiderwebs from the asbestos eaves with a fluffy broom, whistling and singing. Her neighbour watched her through the pickets.

One afternoon, after the Phillipses had had their driveway bitumenized, Ruth Phillips, who was lashing the sandy verge with water to coax the buffalo grass, saw the McCullochs pull into their own concrete on McCulloch's motorcycle. Flinging dark hair from her eyes, Rosemary McCulloch met her neighbour on the kerb. They spoke shyly, asking girlish questions, laughing in little ragged shreds, often turning to point out things about the two houses, salmon pink and white.

Thereafter, the two spoke daily—often by the hour—through the fence. They shared cups of Robur tea in each other's kitchen and shopped together in the Phillips' Morris Minor. The two husbands spoke little. Sid Phillips thought conversation with McCulloch was like talking to a small boy; he found himself being patronizing and he tired quickly of talking cars and women. McCulloch spent hours after dark working on his motorcycle with his friends. He though that Phillips was a bore. Phillips tended to share this view, though his wife did not.

When the Beatles came to Australia, all of them went together; it was Rosemary's idea. For the Phillipses it was deafening and terrifying. For the McCullochs it was like being near the Queen or seeing the Pope. There was a poster of Paul McCartney in their hallway.

The rest of the people living on Playne Street noticed that numbers seven and nine had become close. People told stories of wife-swapping and other titillating atrocities, but there was no truth in those allegations.

Ruth Phillips had a baby, Rosemary McCulloch had a miscarriage, a long depression, and then shee too had a child.

Soon after, McCulloch almost got the contract for a concert tour of Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, but the promoters decided that they did not like the 'funny slant' he gave to all his letters. Other clients did not like the long shadows he painted into his signs, although most never complained. Many were afraid to offend him.

A woman, a year later, gave birth to a baby with no arms. She and her husband moved from the street. A Jugoslav woman moved in; she was no more popular.

On Sundays 'the kids' came to see McCulloch. They were his old friends from school; he still called them 'the kids'. Rosemary and Ruth, for a year or two, went on picnics on Sundays. Sid Phillips took up golf, despite his loathing it. McCulloch and 'the kids' lifted weights with a transistor bellowing, threw empties over the fence and tuned cars all day.

The Phillipses had another son, and so did the McCullochs. The Phillips' children were noisy, happy children. The McCulloch boys were quiet. Sullen, some said.

It sometimes occurred to Ruth Phillips that Rosemary was like a young sister. She thought of herself now as a woman, and could not help but feel as though Rosemary was still a girl. Rosemary had a worldly air about her—she knew more about sex than did Ruth—but her speech betrayed a schoolgirl's naivete. Because Rosemary was beautiful and Ruth plain (though her husband did not agree), Ruth Phillips thought of herself as a much older woman. In fact she was five years older.

The children did not play with each other. The Phillips' children were wary of the McCullochs and thought the boys were "a bit slow" because they did not speak much. The McCulloch boys did not have an opinion of the Phillipses.

For her twenty-second birthday, Ruth gave Rosemary a big hardcovered edition of *Anna Karenina* which cost a great deal and so seemed to her to be a good book. Rosemary read it slowly at first, then quickly towards the end, and when she had finished, lent it back to Ruth who struggled through the first half, left it for nine weeks, and finished it quickly on a holiday at Dunsborough. Neither of them understood everything in the big, unwieldly book, but the scenes and some of the dialogue became a secret between them. Phillips read *Time* and *National Geographic*, McCulloch read *Phantom* and *Man*.

Rosemary's mother died of cancer, very quickly. She was quiet and introverted, brooding for several months afterwards. The next year, McCulloch's father suicided, but nothing was ever said about it. The Phillipses, and the others in Playne Street were not told.

Soon after, a smartly-dressed man and woman went to all the doors in the street speaking to people about 'Spiritual Existence' and 'The Sin in What You Eat', selling or contracting subscriptions to or stuffing into letterboxes copies of a glossy magazine called *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge*, which some people browsed through as if it was a sales catalogue, and others read carefully for a few pages, then tossed into the rubbish as soon as Sin and Death and Eternal Life appeared in the columns.

Ruth and Rosemary never discussed this, though both read it through independently. Things had been uneasy between them for months. Phillips had sprayed a hose into McCulloch's carport at two o'clock in the morning a few months before. McCulloch had been tuning his motorcycle. This incident was not the sole reason for the unease, though. The McCullochs had been behaving 'differently' for some time. They were never seen outdoors from Friday night until Sunday morning. No lights were seen in the house. The children had become more sullen.

The Phillipses did not know that each week a new issue of *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge* appeared each Friday morning in the McCullochs' letterbox. The Phillipses puzzled about the strange weekend behaviour of their neighbours and were even more surprised when Rosemary McCulloch asked them to water their lawns and feed their cat for a week.

Rosemary McCulloch did not tell them that they were going to Sydney. Ruth did not ask, and Phillips would rather have not known.

While they were gone, the cat had kittens in the baby's cot. It rained in an unseasonal manner all week. The Phillips children went next door to feed the cats and look at the *Man* magazines in the loungeroom. It was an adventurous week for the children.

7

At the window, he sees a woman come off the street past the banks of letterboxes. She pauses at the foot of the stairs and looks up. Her face is lit in the afternoon sun. It is unfamiliar to him. Her face contracts as if in fear, her lips move, and she turns and walks briskly away.

McCulloch waits two minutes. He hears noises through the walls, other people cooking. As he leaves, he slowly tears a poster from the wall. Fragments of cheesecloth and flesh stare at him.

She is working late, he thinks.

He shifts the weight of the weapon from one arm to the other as he moves to the door.

8

He is thinking about her. It bubbles hot within. Crooked notes from her guitar; those first awkward tunes. "I am learning", her mouth says. "No, no", he is firm. His fingers knot blindly ... he sings along, stumbling. She smiles. Is it encouragement? Or ridicule? She is laughing!

His brother is a state cricketer!

Her fingers learn to caress the strings. They furrow delicately through dark-backed books that he hates and fears.

He hears the notes as they begin to link with each other, then a gentle strumming, a purring of strings and she is singing.

Please release me, let go,
For I don't love you anymore ...

The voice is cracked and horrible to him.

But his brother is a state cricketer! It warms him for a moment.

9

When the taxi stops outside the Agency she bounces across the pavement on her heels and decides that she will ring her sons tonight. Rosemary has not spoken with them for two weeks. She remembers her last conversation with Robbie. How can I explain it? she thinks. She has nothing to tell him, only a twinge of fear that is like pain. And sometimes a nauseous guilt she does not understand. Like steamy nights lying awake in the damp sheets, aching, afraid of the blackness that loomed above.

Her son's voice:

Why don't you live here anymore?

What's wrong with Dad?

I hate you.

Dad bought me a surfboard today. A six-foot-six Cordingley.

No, Simmy doesn't wanna talk.

Yer lying. He never hurt *us.*

Yes, the toothpaste thing was good. It didn't look like you.

No, I don't wanna talk to you anymore; you're tricking me.

10

The carved box in Ruth Phillips's unsteady hands is made of fragrant wood. She sits on a cardboard box and opens the lid. Inside, there is a tangle of pearls, beads, balls, bangles. They swim before her.

The pearls untangle themselves first. They are strange to her, their faces like the surface of the moon, mapped with miniscule marks that might be the landmarks of another world. She lays them aside.

She turns a bangle over in her hands. Its tarnished surface gleams dully; it seems to exude a smell of incense.

An ugly pair of clip-on earrings with jade settings. Why would someone keep these? she thinks. Oh, Lord, Rosie, she chuckles.

Amid the twisted, blackening chains crouches a red, shapeless stone like a clot of blood. She rolls it in her palms. Yes, had all the best, our Rosie, she thinks.

"The best, Rosie," she says aloud with a hardness in her voice.

11

The gushing roar continues as she spins, a perforated hand flung against the wall. Plaster falls like confetti.

12

McCulloch slowly weaves through the webbing of suburban streets, past his house that is rampant with trees, and joins the afternoon traffic on the clogged artery that leads to the city.

The engine of the Fairlane vibrates silently. He owes a large amount on this car that he will never pay.

He switches the radio on. The news is over; it is ten minutes after four.

He catches his eye in the big mirror and acknowledges it with a wink. He senses out of the corner of his eye his brown biceps on the sill of the door.

Tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree,
If you still want me,
If you still want me . . .

He switches the radio off.

". . . 'round the old oak tree," he sings brokenly.

13

His mind races:

So what's an E-type Jag? Stuff the bloody Jag! Had enough! Enough filth and greed and stupid talk. Feel this thing corner! Maybe Bilbert (you bastard!) was right . . . Oh, those days of doin' all the right things . . . the way it was supposed to happen . . . Yeah, that was better. But the kids, they still wanted to come over. Still gotta live, you know. And her bloody wingeing.

Stupid, rotten car. Knew it would bust the family up. So, what's it matter? She should know better. Oh, a hard, hard, hard heart. Rotten bitch.

It was that miserable little tit next door what did it in the beginning, asking all them stinking questions—ALL THAT TALK AND BOOKS!—looking through the fence, doin' filth in the baby's cot. Turned her black inside, she did. Ah, but she went to piss just lookin' at me. Never had it properly in her whole life. And Sidney-kidney-blidney. Agh!

Suddenly the big Fairlane feels heavy and wide and cumbersome in his hands. He grinds his palm into the centre of the wheel and the horn squeals.

14

There are more photographs to be taken. Rosemary McCulloch smiles the 'oh, you big man, you!' smile and leans on the dummy in the three-piece suite. Later in the afternoon her face will ache from the forced tightening of her lips. She will slick her teeth with Vaseline to keep her mouth from drying out. Her legs and veins will ache from standing.

Cameras chew film.

"C'mon, Rose," the photographer says smoothly, "this isn't the old 'I did it for Smirnoff' girl I used to know."

"No?" she says. "Where did you know her from?"

"C'mon, let's have some life, eh? You know what LIFE is, don't you? LIFE! Show them you have life, they want to buy you! They want to eat you!"

"Shit, Charlie, that's sick."

"Yeah," says the photographer, sheepishly.

"Anyhow, I don't taste good."

"No?" smiles the photographer, as if he knows something that he doesn't.

Rosemary tilts her head and catches the mannequin by the pink chin.

"C'mon, people, buy me, eat me."

"'Yes, yes," mutters Charlie, enthusiastically.

15

The phone rings. It has not yet been disconnected. It is the Executor. Ruth speaks to him for a while. No, he cannot come yet. She needs more time. No, nothing of value, really. Later in the afternoon, yes. She hangs up.

The boxes of cosmetics are open before her. She does not touch anything. Long, short, fat, thick, thin, plastic plain and ornate bottles and jars and cubes and tubes and cases, all swirling up a potent breath of foul, sweet odour.

The first time Ruth noticed Rosemary wearing cosmetics was when she needed it to cover lovebites and bruises. Why was it such a show of prowess, she thinks, to show me her big, bruised breasts in the privacy of her room? "This is what he does to me," she would say with her tongue on her lip.

Then, later, powder and make-up base to cover the welts.

Ruth Phillips remembers the times she ran into her own room, sobbing at the horrible things.

The last year, the plush colours and tones and textures she mastered and was made so deathly beautiful with to keep her on the billboards.

... Much later, no attempt at make-up. No viewing, only an embarrassed, screwed-down lid.

16

Corner from her mouth. Choir of thunder singing.

17

Monoxide fumes ascend in the slanting light. McCulloch fixes his stare on a long, high billboard towering over the intersection. Pedestrians flood across the road, choking the traffic. He sees the slit fabric of the dress and the dark recesses

of cleavage, bare, smooth skin of the small of the back—and satin, folds and folds of lascivious satin.

I DID IT FOR SMIRNOFF . . .

"And how many others," he says quietly to his speedometer.

18

During those bare, safe years, McCulloch was constantly torn between the security that Bilbert Kann gave them in delivering to them the Truth, and hatred of the man (he had filed a law-suit against him which was later withdrawn) for inflicting upon them the poverty and despair of his Knowledge.

To keep the Sabbath, the house was locked at dusk on Friday nights. They sat and slept and thought, and the children brooded and fought, and the McCullochs read from *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge*:

> *. . . For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a a blind man or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose or anything superfluous . . .*

and spoke words at the ceiling and the slick covers of the source of Truth, and cried and hated and hated and hated.

Meanwhile, the Phillips children called through the pickets to come and play, safe from answers, safe from playing with 'the horrible McCullochs' who were both 'twice as slow as their old man'.

McCulloch painted signs for the Knowledge Fellowship for a pittance and they gave him specifications, forbade him some images, compelled him to others. Some nights McCulloch sat in the semi-darkness of his workshop and slashed with the brushes at things for himself that he kept under padlock. He threw foreign substances onto the tin flats that he daubed—honey, chocolate, gelatine crystals, chunks of lipstick, petroleum jelly—things that sent the paints into chaos, running out of control, or coagulating stubbornly, or merely losing their colour. The paintings had a dark, uneven terrain, livid—even in twilight—whilst wet, but as colourless as dried blood when left to stand a while.

After painting, he would clean off, then go to the blackboard and check off the sins at random. The sins included gleanings from a multiplicity of sources, half-sentences, snippets from the *Koran*, the *Book of Mormon*, *The Himalayas of the Soul*, *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*, and many personal inspired insertions from Bilbert Kann himself. McCulloch comprehended the literal meanings of few of them, and did not for a second imagine the textual significance or origins of any.

Be thou to me as thy mother's back . . .

19

When Rosemary McCulloch had children it was a great disappointment to her; her sons were rough but close replicas of her husband, and, looking into their wooden, opaque faces, she wondered whether or not, in giving birth to them, she had done something wrong. They bit and whined and had the animal instincts of their father, and she pretended to be proud of them as she pretended to be proud of him. But she saw them under his spell, as if the very odours he gave off stunned them into a trance. As they did her.

And she was aware of an uncanny vacancy inside her.

She read to them from a *Pure Metaphysical Truth*. 'Recite thou in the name of thy Lord who created; created man from clots of blood: Recite thou!' It arrived each Friday from the other side of the continent, from across the desert. Monday they would have the cheque in the mail (THOU SHALT NOT STEAL!). She read from the Truth and was sometimes ashamed. 'Or are ye sure that He who is in Heaven will not send against you a stone-charged whirl-wind?' For herself? For not believing? For believing? 'Woe on that day to those charged with imposture!'

20

The wallhangings are mostly photographs by David Hamilton; furtive, voyeuristic, but tranquil. Their apparent innocence puzzles Ruth Phillips. She cannot tell if they are pornographic or beautiful. In one place on the wall there is only a corner, a triangle of paper held to the plaster by a pink dob of putty. She tries to peel it away, but it sticks to her hands; she cannot rid herself of it and she dirties her dress and leaves smudges on the wall. A feeling of nausea comes upon her.

On a table is a smaller photograph in a light frame. It is Rosemary; she is wearing the cheesecloth blouse and the sensuous pout, brightened by waxy sunlight, like the children in the Hamilton pieces. But this woman is thirty-four years old.

Ruth Phillips puts a hand to her face in confusion.

21

A furrow appears diagonal to the serrated edge of her spine as she slides down, facing, and defacing the discoloured wall.

Thunder has become numbness.

People pass in the street below. No-one moves in the corridors. Each shot has no time to cannon off into the distance of silence before it is overtaken by the next.

22

At 4.20 McCulloch parks the Fairlane carefully in the midst of the city. His heart moves at a set pace.

He has counted again the sins of the Smirnoff advertisement. He has found seven, though more will come to mind later.

This city has grown with the years since the Beatles came. He is unsure if this is a good thing or a bad thing; no-one has yet told him.

23

School has been out for an hour. Bag-swinging children dawdle along footpaths.

McCulloch is proud of his children; if they are in pain he feels it himself. Since babyhood they have played in his paint-tins, fingering the dried, gummy edges; they sprayed their pedal-cars before they could speak properly.

Now they are schoolboys.

McCulloch is only dimly aware of his sons. Robbie truants from school—all classes except Art where he buries himself in a mute world of colours and

viscous materials. Simmy, the younger boy, wants to be a weight-lifter. He is thin and asthmatic. McCulloch has encouraged him in his ambition, despite, or perhaps because of, the opposition from his wife.

Teachers worry about Robbie McCulloch's paintings. The distorted figures are unsettling; they are framed—all of them— by arch-like shadows, or the images are visible through foliage or lace curtains. The Art teachers say they are passionate and surrealistic; other teachers say 'Yes, but...'. Notes home are ignored. The headmaster, a weak little man, has 'gathered some information'. Yes, the boys are disturbed, he has been told by a teacher of Social Studies; their mother has left them only recently. The headmaster has some paintings in his office. He covers them with his academic gown in the corner.

24

Twice today Rosemary has thought of Ruth Phillips. She has not seen her for nine months. It is a year since she left her home. For a few months she dropped in to see Ruth when she knew there would be no-one at home next door, and they talked over cups of well-brewed tea. It was difficult to speak in the end; they were so different, and Rosemary was part of a new world.

"Not bad, eh?" she had said, pointing through the little kitchen window to the pink Jaguar poised in the driveway. "Not bad for a mother of two, my age," she said, half-congratulating herself, wanting, at least, confirmation from Ruth.

"Yes," said Ruth, uncertain, intimidated. "Yes, you've reached the top, alright." She said it into the collar of her dowdy gown.

The second time Rosemary went back they tried to talk about the past, but Rosemary was embracing what Ruth feared the most; the future.

The last visit, Rosemary was drunk. She slewed the Jaguar into the drive, crushing the heads of the roses growing along the edge.

"You've gotta help me, Ruthie," she said, "he's after me. I think he's gonna kill me."

"Calm down, Rosemary," Ruth said.

"He's got a gun." This was true; he had an American service weapon. A number of people living on Playne Street knew that he had it. He told people about it; it brought him a great deal of respect.

But Ruth Phillips was irritated.

"Go back to your flat," she almost spat the last word, "and get yourself a good sleep." She deplored drunkenness; it made people say things they didn't mean.

Rosemary decides that she will ring Ruth. She yearns for her soft, reassuring voice from the other world. She wishes she could tell Ruth some things. She's a good stick, she thinks. She is thinking of her voice.

Sometimes it occurs to her that she is older than Ruth. Despite herself, she longs for the days when they were both new brides and new friends. She wonders if those times were so good because she did not know certain things.

Rosmary's attention is distracted from her work. She is hearing her voice and Ruth's voice: *'...you've got a lovely shoulder to cry on, Ruth love,' pulling down her mini. 'You too, love,' Ruth says, dripping tears that smudge the polish of her floorboards.*

25

Ruth Phillips recognizes none of the furniture in the flat. As she slides it and stacks it by the door she is aware that it is incongruously out of character; Rosemary's taste was vastly different. She loved delicate, soft chairs with curves and cushions and dark, rich wood, not this strong, ugly vinyl with its stained, cheap wood and wipe-clean colours.

Ruth flops into one of the armchairs. The air whooshes out of it with a long sigh and her spirits ebb. This ugly, utilitarian stuff is the same as the furniture that Ruth Phillips has had in her own house since 1964. It is awful, she realizes. It is *me*.

26

An arm lifts as it is struck and the wall vibrates with gyrations and the endless thunder that wracks the building.

People are screaming, but their voices are smothered in the roar.

27

Office workers streaming out of shadowy buildings do not notice the dark, heavy automatic rifle that McCulloch is carrying by his side in the rush, even though it enters and leaves the vision of scores of them. It is twenty-five minutes past four and they are going home. McCulloch pushes against the surge and enters the sleek glass doors of the building. Inside, deep carpet muffles all movement, exuding, it seems to him, a narcotic breath which tempts him to lie down in it and go to sleep in its burgundy pile.

Young women, some of whom he recognizes from places he cannot recall, walk past him coming from the lift. One woman, a tall, black lithe creature, turns her head in surprise.

Weep ye that lie down with other tribes and with animals...

McCulloch walks towards the potted palms near the lift.

28

Billboards, plaques, all signs attract McCulloch's attention. He has been a signwriter since the age of sixteen. He was a signwriter when he was married. He is a signwriter now: it says so in the telephone directory below his name, though he has not had a client for almost eight months. No-one recommends him; he is lazy, they say, late, they say, and he does not always paint what he is asked.

The most recent thing he has painted is on the wall at home in Playne Street. It is a long piece of masonite with a white background and big, red, gothic letters. It says:

GOD IS LOVE

The staccato words puzzle him. He put them there to remind his children and himself. Beneath the bold, steady letters, thin, niggled pencil lines show through. Even though he had not thought of God or Love for some time, he had suddenly been seized by the idea after his wife left him. She left a note:

I do not love Bilbert Kann's God. I do not know him. I never knew him. I don't love you, either, though I know you only too well. I don't think I've ever loved you, really. I have spent my whole life pretending. No more pretending. I have finished pretending. I have. You can't even pretend. That's what you are like.

He crushed it in his fist and brought his hand down onto the laminex with some force. He went to work quickly, in fright, splashing on the primer.

29

The session is finished. Rosemary sits with some other girls in the studio drinking coffee, listening to their talk of cruises to Noumea and jobs on television quiz shows. Some of them even talk about getting married, though they are wary around Rosemary. They treat her with a respect for her position, the most enviable in the business at the moment, and resentment for her age and her sudden ascent.

Rosemary is in great demand. People want to see a woman who has had children, who has married and experienced life, who is both homely and glamorous, both close and distant, voluptuous in her ripeness.

As a new wife Rosemary was an object of interest, to herself, her husband, and her husband's friends. She lived an endless procession of Sunday afternoons when her husband 'had the kids over'. They drank beer and ogled her, McCulloch displaying her like a sleek new road-machine, fanning their heat, their stares and catcalls, coaxing them to stay longer, to come again. He knew they liked to come to his place. After all, they were his best mates. When they began to lose interest, when McCulloch began to mutter about the Meaning of Life and the Tithing of Time, he asked her, begged her, sometimes, to wear clothes that were more daring. He dressed her to look like Nancy Sinatra. They patted her and they were all great friends. She lived those beery afternoons because it gave her an outlet after the dreary Sabbath, and she enjoyed the attention it afforded her. Afterwards she was always left with an elusive nausea, as if she might throw up something that lurked deep inside her, and she took a sleeping tablet and dreamed till morning whereupon she rose with a clear head and not even a dim memory of what she had dreamt.

She listens to the girls' self-conscious talk.

Rosemary McCulloch is a model. She is the woman-model. She gives life to clothes, libido to car bonnets, meaning to vodka. She sets the pace for mothers and daughters who want to be like her. Many have never seen her; most will never meet her.

Her husband is haunted by her reproductions, and her sons have learnt to hate her.

30

The wardrobes are fragrant with the smell of Rosemary's perfumes and the odours of her body. Ruth Phillips recalls the smells from gardening and jogging together. They tried hard, then, to disguise and dispel their body odours. They tried roll-ons, spray-ons, dab-ons, and stick-ons. As she grew older, Ruth tired of trying, and she spent less time worrying about her appearance. Phillips had grown accustomed to her odour, and had said, once, that he even liked it, so she saw no need to bother.

Rosemary pursued deodorants; she could not afford to have a smell of her own. But she had one, nevertheless. Ruth recognizes and remembers it.

"Funny thing to think of," she says aloud.

She feels the soft fabrics of pullovers and cardigans, lingering over the older, less fashionable things that smell of dowdy innocence. Chenille brushes between her fingers. Old jeans, faded and parched, are difficult to fold into the box.

Ruth Phillips feels old.

31

The bullet that enters the chest sounds like an old football being kicked two doors away.

32

McCulloch is light-headed with the feeling of ascent. Lighted numbers pop and ping above his head. If he was alone in the lift he would jump to see if the floor would overtake him.

He is soaring.

The woman beside him is more alarmed by his breathing than by the stock of the weapon brushing against her thick hip.

33

On a summer evening McCulloch came home with a trunk full of costumes. He dressed up and pretended magic tricks for his boys who were thrilled at the colours, half-believing in his tricks. He pulled caps from false-walled boxes and knitting needles from handkerchiefs. His wife acted along with him, despite herself. She could see it was good for the children and for him. He had been upset of late, despairing at the admonitions they had received in the mail from Sydney. They had no money and their faith had weakened. Kann was calling them to the half-completed Opera House and they refused. McCulloch had night-mares.

She played along with the games. The boys made costumes. There were others in the trunk.

34

As she sips coffee in the hubub, Rosemary thinks also of her eldest son, Robbie. She cannot decide what she finally feels about him. She loves him; he is her own flesh and blood, like a piece cut from her, but she has never liked him. She is honest about this. So honest, in fact, that she once told Ruth Phillips whose face darkened with confusion and discomfort.

"Look, it's just the way it is," she said. "I can't explain it properly. You know what he's like."

"But he's your child," Ruth said, always grateful that Robbie McCulloch was not hers.

Robbie McCulloch has a 'speech problem'. He hardly spoke until his second year at school. He shows no affection. Sometimes he smiles at his father.

There were times when Rosemary believed that she had been cursed with such a son because of the manner in which he had been conceived. McCulloch copulated with her as if she was a carcase from an abattoir. At first she wept at the sounds

he made and the things he made her do when sex was something new to her, something frightening and exciting. But she soon learned the techniques of sex as he taught her: endurance, agility, and a certain measure of dramatic exaggeration. She loved to shock 'poor Ruthie Phillips' who understood little of sexual matters. Ruth sometimes introduced The Right Thing and God to their discussions about sex which she endured. But she knew less about God than she did about sex, and cared still less. She had a home to take care of and had little time for either. She also spoke of Love, but it was a puzzling subject.

35

Ruth Phillips, when she notices something odd about the underwear she is refolding, suddenly puts it down and sits on the floor. A cry escapes her. She sits, mute, for a few minutes until her mind clears. Then she gets up again and stuffs all the torn, soiled, alien garments into a box and runs to the bathroom to wash her hands and splash her face.

It leaves her with a light head and her stomach tolls.

36

He aims where it gives him most pleasure and the lower half quivers again. He is alone in the room with her and the choir in his ears.

37

There is no-one in the corridor down which he is stalking. He feels as though his feet are not even touching the ground, though his feet leave heavy prints in the pile. Photographs on the walls. Pieces of her float by. They shower him, spurring him so he glides faster.

38

In 1969 Mculloch's father committed suicide. He was a big man, like his son, who often spent hours, days even, contemplating, brooding about things that mattered to him but of which he never spoke. He was a cattle man who owned big land in the North. Regularly, he left the staff at the station homestead (his wife, an ex-barmaid from Boulder, had died some years before) and spent two or three days in the wilderness of bush. On his last day he drove out into the heartlands and shot himself. Birds and animals gradually robbed him of his flesh and he was identified, months later, by his yellow teeth. He was a lapsed Methodist. He grieved constantly over his son's becoming 'a half-Jehov-wit-Latter-Day-Saturday-Cultist', and he thought that worse even than the 'useless, ignorant nothing' his son had been before the cultists had knocked on his door. He had never ceased to grieve for his wife who had died suddenly of a stroke. Also, he was bored and scared. He felt bad things about his son, though he did not believe too strongly in omens because, even if lapsed, he was still a Methodist.

The station staff buried his shabby remains after the inquest, on the station, and he was bought along with the place when his son quickly sold it.

39

Pieces fly at him. He is flying. Into pieces.

40

Her second son, Simmy, is as much of a disappointment to Rosemary as Robbie. He has a prominent brow that divides above his nose like the swelling from a boxing blow. He speaks without difficulty but he is totally expressionless; his words are like the monosyllables of a plastic doll. His cheeks are bright, as if rouged; his teeth are sturdy and white, like his father's. When he uses barbells he wheezes, a clicking hiss deep in his chest. He will never lift weights properly.

Rosemary remembers the first words he spoke. The da-da-da-da-da was as accentless and unremitting as a heartbeat.

Simmy is a product of the 1965 Multiplication for the End. But there has been no End, thus far, and Simmy does not care.

During her second pregnancy, Rosemary often stood naked before the mirror to see the evidence of her swelling. She watched each day, minutely aware that she was becoming two people. She knew very little of either of them. Afterwards her flaccid torso revolted her. Her baby disappointed her, and the image of an unkempt, dumpy woman before her in the mirror added to her depression.

Her second son gained his name from a book Rosemary and her friend had read years ago: *Red Lights*, by Georges Simenon. He has never been told this. It is unlikely that he would understand or show interest.

She cannot help but see Neanderthal in him.

41

Stalks through the carpet . . .

42

Ruth opens the trunk with a gasp. Slowly, she draws out the top garment. In a few moments she understands what it is.

"*Spiderman*," she says, remembering her children's comics. It is sparking something in her memory; a stone striking metal. Snakeskin, long strips of it, comes out. It is smooth and evil-looking. A schoolcap. A pair of grey shorts like her sons wear; she shudders. She digs into the voluminous box. Moons: a magician's outfit. A horse's head, creased and rubbery, bares its teeth. Her hand touches something coarse. She pulls gingerly and what she pulls out she cannot identify for a few seconds until she comes to the head and the hands; it is an ape suit.

"Oh," she murmurs, half in recognition, half in fright. She is not angry yet, because she is not allowing herself the pain of understanding. Somewhere in her mind is a vivid memory she refuses to see.

She stands at the broken window watching traffic easing out of the city into the suburbs.

Spiderman, spiderman,
does whatever a spider can . . .

She remembers it from television, glad she is remembering that which is of limited importance. Ruth Phillips refuses to recall forty-five seconds of her life. It is this:

. . . She is looking through the pickets, idly. She sees a man dressed gaudily in red white and blue with knee-length boots and a cape. He has a helmet on his head. Stars cling to all his garments. On the concrete paving there is another figure sprawled, in bountiful skirts, with a hat and white wooden clogs like a

china doll. Above the squirming doll is the man with his shield brandished ... then there is nothing as the pickets recede.

" 'Captain America waves his mighty shield'," she says. She puts the winged helmet aside, gazes at the righteous pyramid the "A" makes, embossed on the brow. Her mind convulses, free of her. She sobs, remembering. He's polluted her, she thinks, it's in *her* now, she's tainted even now when she's dead. Can't she be free of him?

Ruth Phillips falls to the floor, wracked. Everywhere she smells sickness and she is hopeless, perfectly ineffectual. God, I've always been useless to her, useless to myself, she thinks through a falling curtain of tears. She remembers, irrational with guilt and hysteria, that she and her brothers pulled the limbs from dolls and inverted their puckers with a thumb inside their heads. They always reassembled them, later, though. But the thought ceases to comfort her.

" 'Waves his mighty bloody shield'," she sobs.

43

Four twenty-nine ...

44

A shoulder strap dematerializes as the flesh beneath it shatters into white pieces that quickly shade over.

Rosemary is in the burgundy carpet, broken face buried in its scent. Once, she might have imagined this roar to be the God of Bilbert Kann descending on the Opera House with his business associates. But it is an impotent roar of vacancy and vacuum, and, in any case, she does not hear it.

45

... and fifty-eight seconds.

46

At exactly four-thirty by the not-always-defective clock in the corridor (a joke shared by the models who work here; they often wish it was defective more often), McCulloch confronts the glass doors and watches them open obediently without his touching them. He feels as if he is expected and welcome. A hero's welcome, he thinks. The glass clicks together in frigid union behind.

47

Bilbert Kann left the United States of America after a scandal involving his advertising company and certain members of the Senate. He resurfaced in Australia soon afterwards to take part in the optimistic new growth of the early 1960s.

Many who knew him then described him as a prophetic businessman. He understood the nature of people. With this understanding he discovered and developed a marketable god which he promoted in a glossy magazine, *Pure Metaphysical Knowledge.* His god, as the market-culture demanded, was a low-profile, uninterfering one. People observed certain codes and legalities and Kann's god kept out of their way. No-one but Kann ever met this god. He had a blue-print for him in his safe, a patent, an artist's impression, and a volume of inspired

writings. Kann's disciples were grateful for a mediator; it spared them a great deal of effort and discomfort to have a go-between.

Kann aimed at the Lowest Common Denominator. He borrowed and patched until he came up with a vague but versatile image.

Since 63 A.D., he maintained, no True Religion had been preached. "God has revealed himself to me", he said on December 24, 1959. Ten years, fifteen years later, he had begun to believe it himself. It was a logical thing to happen.

In the first national issue of his magazine he gave ten or more commandments, and mated these with clipped phrases from fashionable and forgotten religious canons: the Pentateuch, The Koran, The Book of Mormon, and many others. He found that Australians were naturally legalistic and therefore eager to subscribe to the Worldwide Fellowship and pay tithes.

In a very few years, the Fellowship was truly worldwide. In 1971 when he had 500,000 subscribers in Australia alone, he predicted the End of the World within the year, and located the Divine Appearance at the yet incomplete Opera House in Sydney. Fifteen thousand people gathered, many of them staying in hotels operated by Kann's syndicate. The crowd included many entertained spectators. The sun rose and set. At length, the scoffing crowds went home or to the airport to fly home. As the hotdog stands were dismantled, Bilbert Kann and his son Macabee-Dowell told the press and television reporters that God had seen the leaden hearts of his people and rebuked Earth by postponing his Coming.

The next year Macabee-Dowell slipped the country with one of his father's wives and a considerable fortune and was publicly denounced. After two more false second comings and a tightening of monetary rules, subscriptions waned and many ex-disciples sought Legal Aid and Consumer Protection. Late in 1974, Kann shifted his assets to European Banks. In 1975 he moved to South Africa where his racial legalities were highly marketable. He was assassinated by black youths during a tour of an industrial township in the same year. In 1976 his son founded a syndicate of drive-in churches across the United States of America. He foresaw a great resurgence of profitable legalism in the country within years. He died of cancer in Utah during the presidency of Jimmy Carter in 1979.

48

Rosemary is thinking of soft light and the smell of burning incense. She is thinking of her lover. Her love is a woman who is mute. They have been in love for two months. Her lover sits on the edge of the bed, sometimes, and watches Rosemary perform. Rosemary sings and dances for her, mimes, reads poetry to her, nuzzles her, and lies in bed with her all Saturday, every weekend. This is the most secret thing in her life. Her husband does not know; he will never find out.

At times, in bed with her sleeping mute lover, Rosemary is bound by a weight of melancholy she does not understand. Other times, it is a prickling violence. She gazes out through the open window of her flat at the black awning of sky and feels its inky vastness descending upon her.

Her lover does not know she is a model. This is a novelty for Rosemary; she loves innocence at times. Her lover stays more nights now during the week. Rosemary is fascinated by her expressive face, the softness of her body, the absence of the brutality Rosemary fears and often feels within herself. She mimes with her lover; the woman is silent as a soft doll.

With some of her heart Rosemary wishes to tell Ruth Phillips about her new friend, but she can no longer tell anyone. And the secrecy is much of the thrill.

Suddenly, jerkily, she puts down her coffee cup and decides she *will* ring Ruth Phillips, and yes, she will tell her. It would only be . . . right . . . she thinks vaguely without conviction.

And tonight, she thinks, I'll be with my lover who makes no sound as we love.

49

GOD IS LOVE!

It shouts at him; he withholds the urge to run screaming. His biceps quake.

50

Ruth Phillips' sobbing rises to a steady moan as she uncovers the alien apparatus. She has never seen a dildo before, but she understands its intent; the straps with it upset her more. She finds oily jars and jellies and some pornographic photographs of women as well as dark, heavy leather garments thick with the concentrated stench of mildew and sweat. The floor is now carpeted with costumes and the odours overcome her. She is driven to her knees and she cries out.

"No! No! It's not true!" But she knows she is mocking herself. She nods, acknowledging something she does not understand. She realizes what she does not know. Have I ever met Rosie McCulloch? she asks herself. She spins inwardly. She is uncertain about who she has ever known.

She collapses in a heap with a photograph in her fist.

51

Clicks together, like a snip.

52

The last image in Rosemary's conscious existence is a rose enveloping the world with its cool, impenetrable petals. She is gone, but her twisted body is undeniably present, mutilated on the floor. Another eruption gives it a semblance of life, but the deception is momentary as the pelvis quivers. Her body is dead.

53

I swear by the declining day,
Verily, man's lot is cast amid destruction . . .

He shakes his head. The pink Jaguar knifes into him, long, glistening, sleek.

54

And before him is his wife Rosemary McCulloch of Smirnoff fame who passes the receptionist's desk and whose eyes recoil as their gazes meet. A sharp intake of her breath. McCulloch has the weapon before him. He brandishes it at her. She does not move. He takes careful aim and triggers its unalterable mechanism.

55

In the last seconds before entering the reception office, McCulloch has discarded all excuses. There is no thought of Sin or God or Truth in his mind. These are things he no longer needs, he feels. He can think of nothing but the pink Jaguar roaring, leaving and entering his vision with spurts of speed. He sees his wife in all poses in it. He sees the boys pawing it with sighs of wonder, looking into her face. He sees Rosemary in an aura of pink reflection. "Well, look what I got," she says sneering. He sees her packing. Things she has paid for. Most.

Scribbling in the jotter on the Laminex table. He sees himself. Smashing furniture against the white wall and Paul McCartney.

He could feel her behind as he ran out with the axe. Felt her breath teeming against his bare back as she clung onto him with her nails and teeth as he smashed the headlights and struck the long, pink nose and skittered windscreen glass and pierced the pouting rouged cheek of the fender and saw steam, and the car expired audibly. The removal men looked on with amusement.

The bloody Jag! he thinks. Aaaaah! It makes him shudder with sickness. Her solid-framed, immoveable, luxuriant reproductions beam from the walls and hound him. He flexes forward, aware again, of flight.

His sons hate him for the Jaguar.

He hears the rending of metal and he feels the unused muscles creaking within him. He flexes forward, aware again, of flight.

"God will—" he begins, but remembers he has no need of God and he surges on to do some kind of duty.

56

There are times when Rosemary McCulloch can look back on the hardest period of her life with a sort of longing. In the first years of Membership and Fellowship, she spent many hours locked away with her young children. At times they mimicked her; they listened to her stories. They acknowledged her presence when she shared her portion of food with them. They sat with her on the floor without furniture and listened, like her, to McCulloch's puzzled intonations from the Law. Perhaps they shared a stubbornness. They dozed while McCulloch called with staged enthusiasm and tried to feel his soul move. Perhaps, too, they felt his hate soaking all, but they were young.

When Rosemary feels these things she is usually alone in her flat and she is half drunk with vodka. It is poor consolation. Even Ruth Phillips seems a spectre to her. She looks for her strong, happy face in the faces of her mute lover, but none of her lover's masks will fit.

She knows she can never look back on these things for help. She feels the still resilient firmness of her body, feels her lover responding to it, and knows that she still lives. It is my future, she says to her mute lover who caresses her.

She leaves the room. No, I will not ring Ruthie, she muses. She won't even begin to understand. Anyway, it's all over between us. Come on, Rosie, don't be a baby. She is still undecided about a phonecall to the boys. She is waiting for a call from the insurance people to see if her car is worth salvaging.

The buzzer rings. The receptionist is in the toilet. She knows this, and to help, she goes to the desk for her.

57

The executor of the will is due in an hour and a half. Ruth Phillips has been crying. Now she is in control. She is thinking clearly. She steps outside and looks into the rear courtyard near the half-dozen parked cars of the other tenants. In the corner of the shaded yard is a blackened incinerator. She watches it for a few moments. A snake of smoke escapes it. Somebody is burning something already.

She walks through the boxes she has packed: books, jewellery, cosmetics, curtains, wallhangings, clothing, underwear, costumes and sexual tools. She has

stuffed all the upsetting things into one repugnant box. She hefts it to her waist and begins towards the door and steps. Before she reaches it, she stops and drops the box at her feet. It seems deceitful, somehow, to burn those things she does not like to remember. Now that she knows a great deal about her friend, Rosemary McCulloch, she is tempted to withdraw to the image she has held previously.

But in a surge of relief and honesty, and thinking of the children that she never liked, she takes the box to the door to fulfil what her mind will do in any case.

58

She sits, truly grieving, waiting for the executor to arrive for the inspection with his expertise and calculation. She takes up *Anna Karenina* from the box, aware of the smell of plastics burning, and realizes that she remembers nothing of it; not a thing.

Inside the cover is scrawled in pencil:

In a mirror
you can only see your front
and what's behind you.

She does not remember the inscription. It does not surprise her, though. The Book's musty odour is repulsive to her.

59

The receptionist runs blindly in from the toilet. There has been a long silence. The others are back in the studio, hiding, but she does not know this.

She screams when she sees the bloodied mess before her and she reels as McCulloch rises from his chair in fright.

The bullet hits the metal frame of a photograph and ricochets.

The receptionist falls as if the burgundy carpet has been pulled from beneath her. Blood issues from a small wound in her ankle. She screams. And screams. And screams.

McCulloch sits again; the thick barrel between his knees. He shifts in his seat and reaches for a fashion magazine.

60

There were ten shots. Police arrived at five o'clock. They pushed through the crowd and made an arrest and called an ambulance.

JULIE LEWIS

A Perception of the Past: York

Those early settlers who formed the nucleus of Western Australia's earliest inland town, York, had little leisure time or the means to fill it. What limited leisure they did have, appears to have been adequately filled with visits to each other's homes, church going and the occasional race meeting. Undoubtedly there were those who longed for the opportunity to listen to music and for the spare time to play those musical instruments they brought out with them along with furniture, farm implements, cattle, horses, seeds and servants (all of which helped to increase their land holding). But that came later. For most people there were other more pressing priorities at first. Some suffered, to be sure, from the paucity of cultural diversion. Henrietta Drake-Brockman in her novel *Younger Sons* captures something of this impoverishment in the novel's rather improbable opening chapters. The story begins with the transplantation of singer Lucretia from the hot-house atmosphere of European opera to the cultural aridity of the Avon Valley in Western Australia, where her husband, Charles Wentworth, one of the 'younger sons' has migrated to fulfil his property ambitions. There she endures for twenty-five years. When the visiting Captain Cato sings to her accompaniment on her 'piannerforty'

> 'That rich voice swept her from the austral cove of monotonous colonial existence to tossing seas of rhythm, of footlights, of flowers, laces, acclamation. . . . Australia, she thought with anger, had killed the music in her.'[1]

His voice stirs her dormant musical talents:

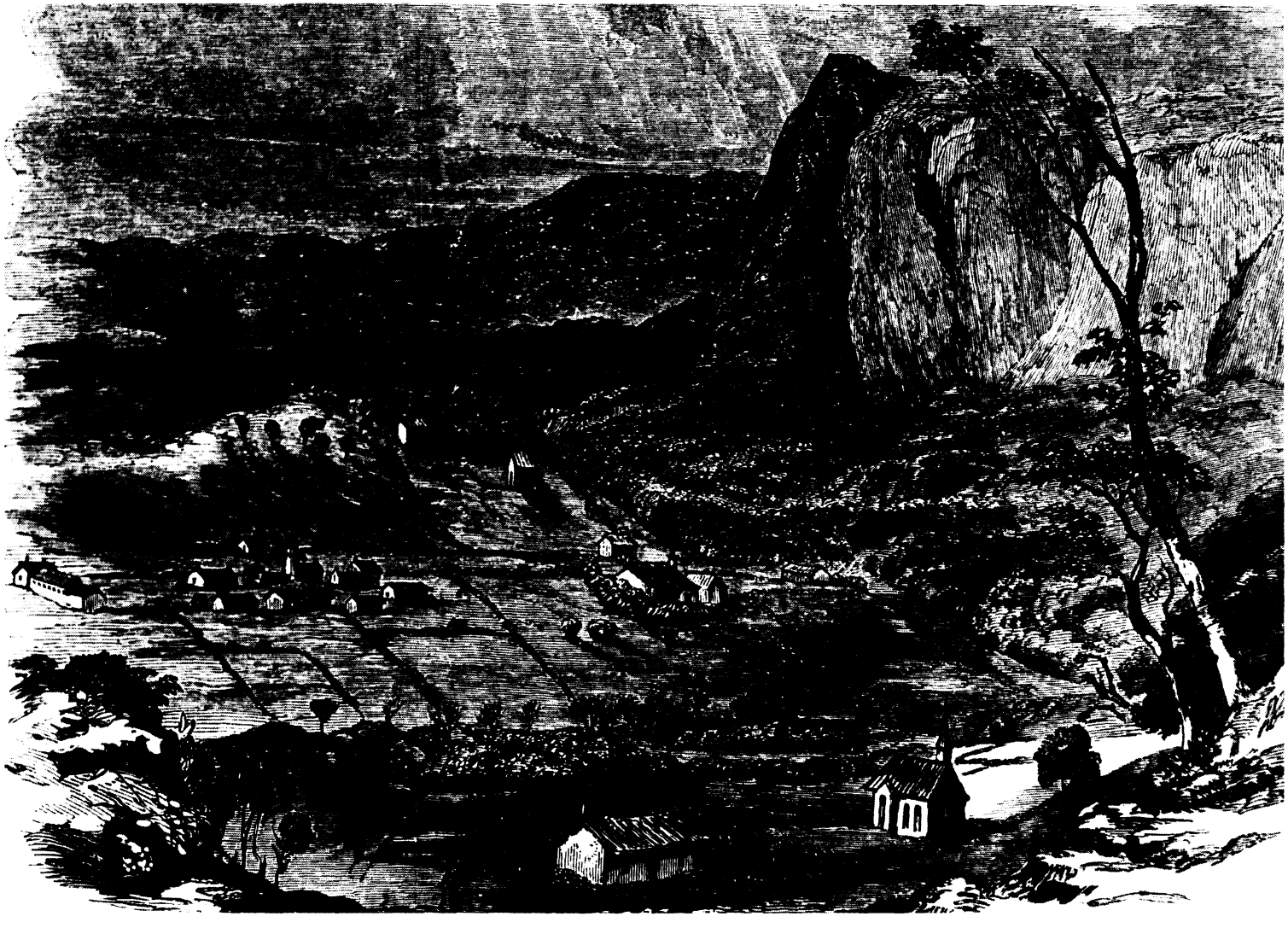
> 'Give me song!' her heart demanded. 'I cannot live longer without song. There is but a short time left and I am parched beyond endurance.'[2]

She runs away with him to die, a few weeks later at sea, of pneumonia. Charles returns to England.

Melodramatic perhaps, but a fictional attempt to illustrate the barren artistic life of the colony in those times.

Mrs Edward Millett, on the other hand, relies on fact when she meticulously records the day to day life in the parsonage at York where she and her husband lived between 1864 and 1869. Yet what she has to say confirms what Henrietta Drake-Brockman assumed 73 years later:

> '. . . nowhere are there fewer means of recreation and amusement . . .
> A country must have arrived at a certain stage of prosperity and wealth before any provision for public amusement can be made or a class of public entertainers can be expected to arise . . . Much therefore, as one would rejoice



A sketch of York as illustrated in an English newspaper in 1857.

to see concert-rooms ... there seems no hope of anything of the sort occurring, and things must remain as they are until the colony grows richer.'[3]

It was the lack of recreational facilities for working men, whose numbers had increased rapidly with the influx of ticket-of-leavers after the colony's decision to use convict labour, that Mrs Millett was lamenting, though her concern could have applied to other settlers equally. One might of course assume that the lack of 'public amusement' would have thrown the settlers back upon their own resources and that a strong and cohesive regionally based culture would emerge. But that didn't happen in any significant way for a long time.

Roads, bridges, houses and meeting places as well as the landscape itself played their part, not only in the agricultural and commercial development of the district, but affected the social and cultural life of its people as well. Labour, or lack of it, also had an effect.

Getting to York in the colony's early days, was a long and exhausting journey, not to be undertaken lightly, or for such frivolous reasons as to supply entertainment for the settlers. The route from Perth lay across the sandy coastal plain to the foothills of the Darling Range; travellers found it heavy going:

'We found ourselves upon another sandplain, across which lay the long and disheartening prospect of our road, stretching in a perfectly straight line of some two or three miles through every step of which the sand lay fetlock deep.'[4]

By 1868 the track had improved with

'... a good solid causeway fit for fast travelling ... The miles of sand ... have been bottomed with sections of great forest trees, the size and shape of which are best described by their ordinary name of "Governor Hampton's Cheeses".'[5]

The landmarks described by Walkinshaw Cowan some years earlier as he gazed westwards from the top of Greenmount Hill are familiar:

'Looking westwards Melville Water and Mount Eliza is quite distinct, with some of the houses in Perth, beyond we could distinguish Rottnest Island, nearly thirty miles distant. All between the boundless forest is stretched out, the trees diminished in the distance look like a plain of heather.'[6]

Then it was on eastward through unrelieved forest, with an overnight bivouac at the Lakes,

'... on whose edge stood the little inn which was to be the end of our day's journey. There were two or three fires blazing on the water's brink, showing where some teamsters had drawn up their wagons, and were passing the night out of doors; and a number of kangaroo dogs came barking out of the inn, announcing that we had finished the first thirty miles of our road to Barladong [York].'[7]

The road twisted and turned through ironstone country (mercifully easier underfoot than the sandy plains) until the hills folded back and the Avon Valley came into view. York lay ahead. One hundred and fifty years ago the journey took two days, now it can be accomplished in little more than an hour.

There is something special about York, situated as it is on the gentle western fringe of Western Australia's wheatbelt. It's not simply because it is the oldest inland town; it's something about the location, the buildings, the atmosphere, that attracts people today. Some wish to retire to a quiet rural environment or choose it as a weekend retreat; for others it is the natural centre of an agricultural district, to which they gravitate; and others live here because they always have or because their jobs require it.

The changes to the town itself in recent years have been subtle. The verandah posts came down for safety reasons after the Meckering earthquake in 1968, though there are moves to replace them. Colonial architecture is still firm beneath twentieth century cosmetics. Buildings in the main street, Avon Terrace, have been jazzed up with mission brown and cream or with tones of green, but the result is mostly tasteful and attracts the tourists, who, apart from the district's natural prosperity, are responsible for much of its income. 1950s fibro in the side streets is incongruous.

There is much to please the eye. The mellow stone of the court-house and post-office, built during those prosperous gold-rush years of the 1890s; the spacious homesteads on the hillsides beyond the town, built during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the restored cottages with their old-fashioned gardens (lavender, stock, rosemary and mignonette) which were once soldier pensioners' homes. One of the most charming of the early buildings is the Anglican rectory, its flemish bond brickwork patterned with charcoal headers. The building has wide-planked polished jarrah floors and Georgian windows and one might not be surprised to come across Jane Austen herself working away quietly in the corner of the book-lined study. The original kitchen still stands behind the present building which replaced the earlier black-boy thatched house of mud brick.

> 'The walls of the house were built of "pug", which simply means well-pounded mud, and has the disadvantage of refusing to adhere firmly to the frames of door and casements, so that the banging of either, in windy weather, is apt to bring large pieces of the material crumbling down, and the house never looks tidy... The ceilings, when there are any to these mud houses, are made of strong unbleached calico, and, on account of the ventilation it admits, a calico ceiling is much pleasanter than one of plaster in a warm climate. On rough nights, however, the wind that finds its way beneath the rafters keeps drawing up and down the cotton ceiling in sudden gusts...'[8]

Even today one sometimes unexpectedly comes upon the ruin of such a house:

> 'The bungalow hood of the old pug-brick homestead, in its long persistence, embodied everything of an earlier generation. The whole house stood now as a kind of relic, its very physical components even ... the clod-walls—reminders of a time when domestic shelter was still constructed of basic, and when possible indigenous material.'[9]

By way of contrast, Peter Cowan in his novel *Summer* describes a wheatbelt house of a much later period:

> 'The house had originally been built of iron, about two central stone rooms, but as necessity and energy had dictated, asbestos and weatherboard additions had been made until it sprawled lengthways along the slight rise of bare long-cleared land.'[10]

The river Avon ambles through the town. Once it effectively divided it.

> 'The only means the public have of getting across the river to church is by a raft made of casks lashed together and some planks thrown across.'[11]

The need for a bridge was also vital to the town's commerce;

> '... farm produce is transmitted at great risk, and often communication is cut off for weeks. The mail is stopped, and last winter the mail carrier was nearly lost.'[12]

Yet the slow process of negotiation between townsfolk, contractor and local council and protracted debate at council meetings delayed the building of a bridge for eleven years. Finally in the October 16, 1860 Government Gazette tenders were called for the building of not one, but two bridges over the Avon at York.[13]

The river not only kept people apart by making ready access difficult, but it indirectly brought them together, through tragedy. When Thomas and Eliza Brown's son, Vernon, was drowned in 1845 when the overhanging branch along which he was clambering after a bird's nest, snapped and he was plunged into the water, there was some small consolation in the support of friends in the district and further afield:

> 'If any consolation is to be derived from human effort we have been offered it from all the neighbourhood and distant parts of the colony, even strangers interesting themselves in our trial for the loss of a beloved child . . .'[14]

For many, like Eliza Brown, it was the landscape itself that revitalised spirits depressed by endless toil, personal loss, little social interchange and almost no cultural solace:

> 'It is now the Australian spring, the wild flowers tinge the bush . . . with their beautiful colours, pink, golden, blue and lilac. Mount Matilda is clad in pink being thickly carpeted with pink flowers . . . the mimosa with its amber blossom . . . flourish there in abundance.'[15]

Mrs Millett observes that

> 'Later in the rainy season the wattle was outvied by the acacia called the "raspberry jam', the flowers of which are of the brightest gold colour and grow in such abundant clusters that some of these trees seem better furnished with flowers than with leaves.'[16]

Barbara York Main's lyrical impression of the wheatbelt further east reaffirms the restorative power of the landscape today:

> 'All the scents of the soil and the bordering York gums and wattles, tussocks and grasses and tea trees gathered until tangible in their pungency, tangling and thickening in the fading afternoon light into long skeins winding across creek flats and shrouding the farmstead in cluster and timber.[17]

Peter Cowan, in *Summer*, gives a panoramic view as seen through the eyes of his photographer protagonist, Henry Simpson in the 1950s:

> 'The light came slowly, like a hardening of the sky, the colour striking upwards from the deep band above the horizon. The patches of scrub and timber showed without distinctness, dark about the lighter squares of the cleared land, the fallows like broken scars, and the pale colour of wheat. The tops of the scattered trees, the upper leaves, pale and moving in the cold early wind began to reflect the light, their dark, greyish colour lifting . . .
> On the other side of the rise it [the light] slanted at the long sloping expanse of corrugated iron roof of the wheat silos and the rounded bays of the sides. The iron gave back the light with a soft quality, without glare.'[18]

Shortage of labour meant shortage of leisure for landowners in the colony as they found themselves bearing the burden of manual labour to which they were quite unaccustomed, as Eliza Brown records:

> 'Mr Brown toils incessantly, it is one broken period of manual labour with him from early dawn to bed time.'[19]

Church going was one opportunity however for meeting and talking with one's neighbours:

> 'We are about four miles from York and attend service at church there . . . It adds to the pleasantness of our position that we are not cut off from social intercourse.'[20]

But anything of a truly cultural nature was only possible on the occasional visit to Perth. Thomas Brown on one such visit wrote to Eliza:

> 'I heard a very interesting lecture last night at the Court House by Dr. Barry on the Poets of the Present Century. I cannot help thinking how much Kenneth would have been benefitted by the recital of some of the poetry and the allusions and comparisons drawn by the lecturer.'[21]

The colony by the mid 1840s was in deep economic depression and while the gentlemen of York became more and more impoverished, the working men who had been unpaid for services when their masters were short of ready cash, were eventually paid in kind and were able to obtain land and become property owners themselves. A shift in the class structure had begun. But this burgeoning egalitarianism was set back by the arrival of convicts in 1850. Although on the one hand this cheap source of labour meant land owners were released from the burden of toil and found more time for rest and recuperation, it also meant that the opportunities for old and new landowners to mix sociably were less frequent:

> 'I used often to hear people express the opinion that what they had of late years gained in material comfort they had lost in sociability. One fact was especially dwelt upon as being a great change for the worse, namely that the loaded teams of wool and sandalwood were now usually put under the charge of ticket-of-leave men or expirees as drivers, whereas in former times each gentleman had been his own wagoner, and had, at the evening halt, joined with his fellow colonists in the merriment around the one huge camp fire, good feeling being thus promoted between persons whose birth was not always equal, although their occupations were similar.'[22]

Increased prosperity didn't necessarily mean increased opportunities for those with artistic leanings to develop and apply those talents. Walkinshaw Cowan in 1878 may have been speaking with wry irony or he may simply have been stating an accepted fact when he considered the future career of his youngest son, Lewis:

> 'He has evidently a great talent for music, plays the piano, the harmonium and organ a little, and is anxious to get a violin. He dances well, has a taste for drawing, and will probably enter the Survey Department.'[23]

Apparently with survival no longer the first priority, employment that brought in an assured income took precedence over artistic fulfilment, and it was almost a hundred years before that kind of thinking underwent any significant change. Nor did increased prosperity mean an accompanying refinement of taste. In fact the opposite may sometimes be the case as Peter Cowan illustrates in *Summer.* Money has brought an easy conviviality but has debauched and coarsened through a different kind of impoverishment—of the spirit—in spite of (one might suggest, because of) relative prosperity:

> 'From one of the parked cars a girl was laughing, the sound like hysteria. In the living room the accordian player stopped, and drinks were thrust at him ... 'I don't want a drink,' he said 'I want a rest.' Their voices rose, protesting. With the absence of the music it was as if some vital impulse had been lost, the silence like negation. By the kitchen table a man sang loudly, regardless of the lost accompaniment. Then the accordian began again, so that those talking had to shout, and the profanity rose as emphasis, the words rolling, repetitious, empty, yet in a curious determination as if somewhere behind them lay desperate meaning.'[24]

Yet, in contrast, in the same novel, there are those with a sensitivity, to the landscape and to each other, for whom music can be both healing and challenging:

> 'Later in the evening the radio brought them a Sibelius symphony, and for a time it was strongly attuned to the heat and the stillness, but then it denied them, pursuing its own intricate considerations as removed as private dreams.'[25]

In the late twentieth century people in general have more leisure time, even if in some cases it is enforced. Opportunities to participate, actively and passively, in all sorts of cultural activities are also more readily available and the kind of musical experience which would have been beyond the wildest dreams of York's

early settlers became a reality at York's first Winter Festival during the Foundation day weekend in June 1982. A second such festival took place during a similar weekend in 1983.

Whether the concept of such an event emerged because of a perceived need from within the community itself, or evolved, by chance, through the coming together of diverse imaginations, hardly matters. It has happened, if belatedly, and people are discovering the joys the early settlers were denied because of the very rigours of the lives they lived in those days.

One might hope perhaps, that the spirits of those early settlers hovered about the Avon Valley during the Festival and were able to experience the kind of musical revelation they had not been able to find in reality. And the latterday audience may have discovered that the Festival, as Barbara York Main suggests of a folk museum, was

> '... a symbol of a spiritual bond—between people and place, man and his landscape, past and future—while it presents the possibility of being able to mould that future out of the perceptions of the past.'[26]

NOTES

1. Henrietta Drake-Brockman, *Younger Sons*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 1937, p. 26.
2. ibid., p. 27.
3. Mrs Edward Millett, *An Australian Parsonage*, Edward Stanford, London, 1872, p. 360.
4. ibid., p. 40.
5. ibid., p. 163.
6. Peter Cowan, *A Colonial Experience: Swan River 1839–1888. From the Diary and Reports of Walkinshaw Cowan*, Perth, the author, 1978, pp. 15-16.
7. *An Australian Parsonage*, p. 47.
8. ibid., pp. 55-56.
9. Barbara York Main, *Twice Trodden Ground*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1971, p. 35.
10. Peter Cowan, *Summer*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1964, p. 56.
11. S. Howell, *The Building of a Bridge over the River Avon at York*, Battye Library, PR9795 F.C., p. 17.
12. ibid., p. 15.
13. ibid., p. 20.
14. Peter Cowan Ed., *A Faithful Picture*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1977, p. 56.
15. ibid., p. 38.
16. *An Australian Parsonage*, p. 155.
17. *Twice Trodden Ground*, p. 47.
18. *Summer*, p. 28.
19. *A Faithful Picture*, p. 22.
20. ibid., p. 23.
21. ibid., p. 124.
22. *An Australian Parsonage*, p. 121.
23. *A Colonial Experience*, p. 86.
24. *Summer*, p. 58.
25. ibid., p. 90.
26. *Twice Trodden Ground*, p. 91.

PETER COWAN

Broome—A Fiction

The persistence of place in Western Australian writing has been noted by a number of commentators, but one Western Australian place has been notably persistent in Australian writing.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman suggested that Broome, discounting Sydney, and possibly Melbourne, had more novels written about it than any other town in the Commonwealth. Recalling a number of books, she remarked:

> ... it is impossible to read these books without having impressed upon one that Broome is not 'just a place', and so to feel that, even should it never rise again to its past eminence in the pearling industry, it must remain an integral part of the Australian legend.[1]

Henrietta Drake-Brockman, returning to Broome in 1945, and seeing Darwin from the air, noted the town suggested the pattern of the future.

> The pattern of Darwin: the sweeping stream of the great road arteries from the south; the curves, angles and spurs of aerodrome after aerodrome where I saw giant craft lined up, arriving, taking off, as before I had seen only in cinema shots of overseas airfields; the immense hangars and repair shops that pronounce it the largest airport of the Southern Hemisphere; the streets of bungalow quarters—these form the pattern of the future.
>
> But in Broome I saw only the pattern of the past.[2]

The pearling town had suffered change, its one-time famous industry was gone, along the shore and at low tide there was evidence of war damage, and there was still evidence of wartime camps.

> And yet, the old cocotte, there clung still to Broome some indescribable quality of languor and romance not to be found at any other place I have visited in Australia.[3]

That sense of a quality of romance, and of the past, has been widely shared by writers, many of whom never knew the town at all, as Henrietta Drake-Brockman had.

Broome was a late arrival on the north west coast. Pearling had been a hazardous and often corrupt industry from the days of Shark Bay in the forties and fifties, to the large pearling fleets of Cossack in the seventies and eighties of the nineteenth century. The industry had been a source of difficulty to the government and Legislative Council who saw little of the kind of romance that came to be attached to pearling. The problems caused by the pearlers were realistic, un-

pleasant, and difficult to solve. Early attempts to establish satisfactory labour conditions had limited success, partly because of the peculiar conditions of the industry, its distance from administrative centres, and partly because of reluctance to restrict unduly the owners of pearling fleets and vessels. The industry relied heavily in the early stages on aboriginal labour, recruited in the main at Roebourne, and at times along the coast. The northern aborigines had little or no understanding of contracts binding them to the boats, or of monetary rewards. Wherever they were recruited, they might be dumped at the end of the season hundreds of miles from their starting point, to make their way back to their tribal areas. In passing through other tribal territories they faced great risk and could be killed. There were allegations that the aborigines were handcuffed and taken aboard to work for a season before they were virtually abandoned. And there was the inevitable question of the aboriginal women. This became perhaps the most controversial aspect of the industry to outsiders. The women were claimed to make the best divers, indeed it was stated the industry could not operate without them. No one realistically expected they would not become subject to sexual approach from masters and crew of the luggers—though the masters did not sail on the luggers if they could help it—but to what extent this occurred and was in fact a real problem became so embroidered by dispute and legend that the truth probably never emerged. On shore there was no doubt of the use and at times exploitation of aboriginal women, as also of Chinese and Malay women. But the plain fact, so distasteful to many outside the area, was that exploitation or force was not necessary. The aboriginal men in contact with the small early settlement were willing to barter their women to the pearlers, as they were to station owners, managers, and general hands. Again, the extent to which consent and coercion existed, and roused ill feeling and hatred among both communities, became enmeshed in legend—legend created by newspaper writers, official enquiries, missionaries, and certainly, later, by novelists.

For some fifty years of the nineteenth century the government of the colony never solved these problems. It held enquiries, debates, regulated working and living conditions, forbade the use of aboriginal women as divers, allowed the entry of Timorese, Javanese, Malays and Japanese as divers, in the days of federation warred about this by now highly mixed population and restrictions demanded under the White Australia policy. The north was simply too remote for easy solutions. Broome went its way.

So the kind of romance Henrietta Drake-Brockman claimed had time and space to flourish. Broome came late on the scene, declared a townsite in 1883. Shark Bay, isolated except by sea, with its reports of kidnapping of aborigines, prostitution of aboriginal women, racial strife and killing, raised hardly an interest in fiction. Nor, considering its importance, did Cossack. Broome, 'the old cocotte', had no rivals.

Before Broome attained its town status the earlier fields from Shark Bay to the unmarked inlets and bays beyond Nickol Bay had provided a rich source of anecdote and rumour, with a folklore of notable characters. While it was a background familiar to the colonists, very few had ever had first hand experience of such a life or of these places. Nor had the novelists who were drawn to that background. It was gone before most discovered it had ever existed.

H. Phelps Whitmarsh found his way to Broome by chance rather than choice, and turned his experiences into an apparently factual account of his travels, and an experiment in fiction. An adventurer who had been twice round the world as a seaman, he came from Adelaide to Geraldton by ship. His intention was to reach the Kimberley gold fields, in common with so many others that he did not believe he could get onto a ship from Adelaide. His account, *The World's Rough Hand*,[4] is free of actual dates, but suggests he was travelling about 1887

or 88. From Geraldton he shipped to Cossack and Roebourne, where, penniless, he lived on the beach until he found work. He was disillusioned by the Kimberley gold rush, doubting 'that it benefited any one'. He claimed to ship to Roebuck Bay as a temporary officer on a government boat making the yearly inspection of the pearling grounds.

While he gives a clear picture of the pearling fleets and the operation of pearling, he has little to say of Broome, though he bought a small lugger and set himself up as a pearler. None of the towns along the coast impressed him, nor the shore life of a pearler or trader. What drew his interest, indeed fascinated him, was the diver's strange other-world. His descriptions were simple, clear, he was one of the early writers to set down such experience, and he described also a number of the pearlers who were the originals of so many colourful fictional figures. It is difficult to imagine the feelings of members of the Legislative Council who had passed a measure insisting all those engaged in pearling be free of work on Sundays, when they read, as many must have, that their pious hopes had produced this reality:

> Although there was no religion of any kind among the pearlers, Sunday was always made a day of rest, or, I should more properly say, a holiday. On Sunday it was safer to anchor at some distance from, rather than among, the fleet, for not only was it a time of drunken revelry and fighting, but many of the divers passed the day firing with rifles and revolvers at floating targets, and a gin-crazed South Sea Islander or a Malay with either of these weapons is rather an erratic marksman. In the afternoon it was no uncommon thing to see a string of dinghies headed for the shore to witness the settlement of the various disputes which were sometimes ended with fists, and sometimes with knives.[5]

Whitmarsh saw the possibilities of his experiences as a basis for fiction. There was an obvious precedent in the kind of book for young readers which was proving so popular with English publishers. Whitmarsh turned his experience into *The Young Pearl Divers*,[6] a narrative of the journey of two boys and a young aboriginal companion from their father's station four hundred miles from 'Geralton' through the inland until they arrive at the ninety mile beach. Here, on an island close offshore, they find an abandoned lugger and become pearlers. At times the adventures with aboriginal tribes are reminiscent of De Rougemont, though Whitmarsh was evidently some time ahead of Grien in publication.[7] Grien in fact did have his castaway hover about the pearling coast, and repeat some of the stories about Broome and Cossack, notably the kidnapping of aboriginals for the pearling fleets, and their ill treatment.

Whitmarsh may have offered a somewhat standard narrative, but what he was interested to show was not standard fare at all, the world the divers knew under water.

> Scenes of startling grandeur met his astonished gaze. Now 'tis a field of waving flowers, tall and graceful and many coloured; now a cavern, its rocky entrance covered with velvety scarlet moss; now a clump of orchid shaped plants with blood-red veins, sheltering a shoal of tiny fish beneath their opalescent leaves. Farther, he crossed a patch of whitest sand, spangled with blue starfish; again he passes through a grove of swaying corallines, or mermaid fans, pink and white. He sees the lustrous orange tinted cowrie shell hiding within the bowl of a grass-green sponge cup—a living vase, and notes the vivid sponge growths, the purple lichens, the blushing anemones. At last, feeling tired, he seats himself in a yellow coral cup, lost in amazement at the glories of this ever summer sea.[8]

A world little known, which writers then and later found difficult to convey adequately; more difficult than the jungles of remote countries being revealed by nineteenth century explorers. As one of the boys told his companion:

> You can't imagine how beautiful it is. You must see it to understand. It's just like going to another world, everything is so different from what it is up here.[9]

Whitmarsh, if the descriptions of *The World's Rough Hand* are to be taken as his own experience, was one of the few writers to have a first hand knowledge of that early period of the pearlers which so drew the imagination of all those who were to follow him.

One who shared something of his knowledge, Henry Taunton, wrote a lively description of pearling and the northern ports in the eighties, in *Australind*,[10] a fuller picture than that of Whitmarsh, though it did not extend to Whitmarsh's understanding of the diving, nor, apparently, to a later essay in fiction.

Through the years that gave Broome what was seen as its particular identity, it was largely neglected by writers of fiction. From the time of its founding till the first world war Broome was perhaps too distant, or too raw for the niceties of Australian novelists. But there were two aspects to Broome. As a counterpart to its adventure, romance, and colour, it was a developing port and commercial centre, a town of banks, accountants, customs and shipping agents, insurance brokers, sail makers and auctioneers, pearl buyers, merchants for everything from diving gear to wine and spirits. There were hotels and billiard rooms. This aspect was acknowledged by historians, and by newspapers and journalists. By 1912 the town's respectable and conventional commercial buildings featured in photographic advertisements in the press, and in that year, the *Golden West*, giving a reduced coverage to the pearling industry in its annual publication could say:

> So much has been written in these and other newspaper columns of the Pearling Industry, the matter of its operation, the conditions of life, and the experiences of those engaged in it, that we will content ourselves this year with just outlining the industry as it is today and as it promises for the future.[11]

The publisher of the *Golden West*, R. Clarke Spear, contributed factual accounts of the town and the pearling industry, and as a short story writer offered occasional fictional pieces, under, it would seem, a variety of initials as pseudonyms, suggesting there were not many other contenders. These were strongly in the yarn tradition, groups of men talking, discussing adventure and strange events. Spear's *The Man From The Lacepedes*,[12] a yarn told in the smoking room of the *Minderoo*, in the 1910 issue, or *When Halley Came To Broome*,[13] an anecdote told on the verandah of a Broome hotel overlooking Roebuck Bay, were representative samples.

These were not distinctively of Broome, but the town and the pearling industry had become sufficiently well known through the work of journalists for them to seem so. There was by now a tendency for this kind of short fictional piece to become a stereotype: the name Broome, a wide bay, pearling luggers—the reflex had become conditioned. Despite its journalistic coverage, Broome never achieved an indigenous literature, as the goldfields, with their much larger population, were able to produce.

As a source, or even a setting, for longer fiction Broome proved intractable. Kate Weston approached it obliquely in a novel, *The Partners*, published in 1911.[14] Her attempt to establish an ambitious novel in the location of Broome and the north west coast beyond illustrated some of the difficulties. *The Partners* seems oddly uneasy both in time and place. In the context of Western Australian writing it is not so much ahead of its time as a freak example of how much might have been attempted, when nothing was. Yet in the context of the earlier women novelists of South Australia or Victoria, it was not out of place. It seemed, too,

as that writing often did, a late offshoot of the novels of nineteenth century England, rather unhappily strayed into an alien time and place.

Kate Weston set the novel partly in the south west of Western Australia, and on the north west coast beyond Broome. She may have been motivated less by Broome itself, though the town figures as a centre of activity and a base for some of the characters, than by the establishment of the Kalumburu Benedictine Mission at the Drysdale River in 1908,[15] and also by the discussion of land development in the north west. The novel offered two aspects which never quite coalesced, one a serious consideration of landscape, and of land settlement in the north, the other, an evident concern with the position of women in society, in marriage, the right of women to an independence, emotional and physical.

These elements were tied to a plot which made use of the violence and adventure of a pioneering, frontier society. This plot, while it probably provided some suspense for popular reading, prevented any real consideration of the serious issues the writer posed with her characters, and provided a series of highly contrived solutions to their real concerns. Kate Weston was unwilling to confront the issues she raised, retreating to situations, noble gestures, and high flown speech. It is not hard to suspect the shadow of George Eliot behind Kate Weston's heroine, Beatrice, an unlikely Dorothea with her Casaubon, Arnold, who tries to found a mission for the aborigines in unsettled country on the coast beyond Derby—this very much Kalumburu. It was a task summed up by Beatrice's real counterpart, the pearler, Watson, thwarted in his reward until the very end by a series of mischances even the most shameless of Victorian novelists would have blushed for, as an attempt by a man

> ... clinging with a fanatical tenacity, which will not acknowledge defeat, to a hare-brained, self imposed task, which he should never have undertaken.[16]

Arnold dies, as do those others who stand in the way of true love, and Beatrice gains Watson as a partner in a new venture which, to do Kate Weston justice, held a great deal more fire, imagination, and courage than anything Dorothea might have conceived. If Arnold is a weak man, cold, withdrawn, a theorist, Beatrice has a positive will, attempting to create her own role and position in a society heavily weighted against her. Though Kate Weston is unwilling to solve the issues she poses, as she knows they must be solved, by assertion and reason, she does state them. She would seem plainly aware of the growing movements for women's advancement in Australia and England, yet she ran the risk that the novel would be ready only for its adventures, for its endlessly contrived plot.

The book of necessity attempts a portrayal of the aborigines. They are never seen clearly, or with understanding, but rather as stage devices to provide violence and threat. They are often depicted, oddly perhaps given the missionary intent of the characters, as 'revolting', the women as 'repulsive featured'. Her view was certainly that of her time, and suggests no first hand knowledge. The aborigines were the 'red Indians' of romance writing, and she does in fact refer to one party as 'braves'.

Broome appeared sketchily, though accurately, as a male town, where coloured races predominated. Risk and adventure, with boredom, came easily to such a place. Arnold, the visionary, was too realistic to try his faith against it, preferring to take his chance with the aborigines.

The Partners may be easy to fault, but it had a dimension lacking in most novels which followed it. Later writers, looking at this background, were willing to settle for less. Often much less.

Whatever the years of the first world war meant to Broome, fiction writers showed no interest in recording them. West Australians, who might have been expected to think about this unrepentant outpost on their northern coast, with its

mix of races, and its closeness to Asia and centres of communication, and to a certain celebrated theatre of war, found little of interest.

Bruce Bennett[17] comments on the 'disappointing selection of short fiction' in *The Westralian Gift Book* of 1916. The *Gift Book* reflected the general poverty of prose fiction in Western Australia. One semi-fictional article did draw attention through its subject to the proximity of the northern ports to Asian centres and to the Philippines, *In Vindication Of A Noble Man*[18] by J. S. Ogilvie. R. Clarke Spear contributed *One Day In Broome*,[19] a journalistic account of Broome, its people, its stories and rumours, effected mainly through dialogue. Without too much heavy local colour and over-writing, in its brief space the piece offers more detail about the town than the fiction writers had attempted. The article was a forerunner of a flood of similar depictions in the nineteen thirties.

E. L. Grant Watson had been fascinated by the landscape of the interior since his experiences in Western Australia with the Radclyffe Brown expedition of 1910-11.[20] The expedition had taken him also to Dorre and Bernier Islands and the native hospitals there. These islands, the coastal landscape, and the sea, formed part of the background for his first two novels concerned with Western Australia. *The Mainland*, a sequel to *Where Bonds Are Loosed*,[21] is concerned partly with a background of pearling and of the northern ports. Grant Watson does not take his characters to Broome, which apparently he never saw. One of them says contempuously he is 'not from Broom or any other of them God-damned, fiddling little one-horse ports'. Watson does refer to the protracted dispute over the banning of Japanese and coloured labour, due to be imposed finally a year after the novel was published.

> 'The law is that no black or yellow man shall be employed on the mainland. But the ring of pearlers at Broome is so strong that an exception is made. They hire Japanese divers, and pay a good price.'[22]

He refers also to the power of the pearlers in control of the trade, and their recruiting of aboriginal labour, but it all amounts to no more than background he could have picked up from his own reading, or heard in Carnarvon. Where his experience was revealed was in his awareness of landscape, and his interest in the aborigines. In a depiction of the aborigines the fiction writers concerned with the north, and in particular with Broome, fell back on stereotypes. The aborigines were figures of romantic imagination, savagery and danger, or oppression. Though Grant Watson was to some extent still finding his way in a difficult field, his depiction had an understanding, and his concern for his white characters a depth which set him apart. Something of this interest, and of the power of landscape which he felt so deeply were suggested in his description of a corroboree, where he believed the

> conventional steps and gestures suggested automata sprung of a sudden from the earth to express some of its savage significance.[23]

He pursued what he saw as that significance through his later notable novels.

In 1924 H. E. Riemann published a collection of stories previously appearing in *The Lone Hand*, *Bulletin*, *Sydney Mail*, and the Perth *Western Mail*.[24] Down to the very title Riemann adopted the stereotypes of the yarn. The stories indeed had a kind of shorthand of cliche.

> Arthur Tregarton, capable manager of old 'Falcon' Seely's Nutarra Station, browned with nor'-western years, steeled with nor'-western hardships, sprang astride his horse and savagely dug his heels in.[25]

or

> They were rough Nor'-Western pioneers, browned with constant exposure to the sun and as wiry as the snake-wood of their environment.[26]

Offering predictable emotions and responses were noble bushmen, nobler clergymen, drunkards, publicans, Chinese cooks, wronged women, in stories loosely linked by place and the same characters. The stories attempted to set an atmosphere definitive of the whole north, places were not closely defined, and while the book was generally said to deal with Broome, might have been as much concerned with Carnarvon or Cossack. 'Peepingee', the main town, 'was peopled with filthy aboriginals, Malays, Manilamen, Koepangers, Chinese, and wasters.' Riemann intended a fairly general depiction, and his book may have been to some extent an influence on writers at the time.

The stories clearly demonstrated the bankruptcy of the yarn tradition, and the deliberate lack of vision of the magazines throughout Australia in their insistence on an outmoded form.

As a stamp of authenticity *Nor'-West o'North* offered a photographic frontispiece of a pearling lugger and its crew.

A contrast to the commonplace of Riemann's approach appeared in 1927 with a novel by Richard Dehan, *The Sower of the Wind*.[27] Dehan, the pseudonym of Clotilde Graves, had written a number of plays and novels, including the very successful *The Dop Doctor*,[28] set in South Africa. Her novels ranged widely in time and place, from contemporary depictions to historical romances. It was said that her brother, Colonel Graves, supplied her with the background and local colour for some of her novels, including *The Dop Doctor* and her novels of Broome. Her brother had worked as a shell opener on the pearling boats, and was credited with some fame as a raconteur, which may explain aspects of *The Sower of the Wind*, and the later *Dead Pearls*. Someone had suggested some vivid local colour to the author, which she used in odd but effective ways.

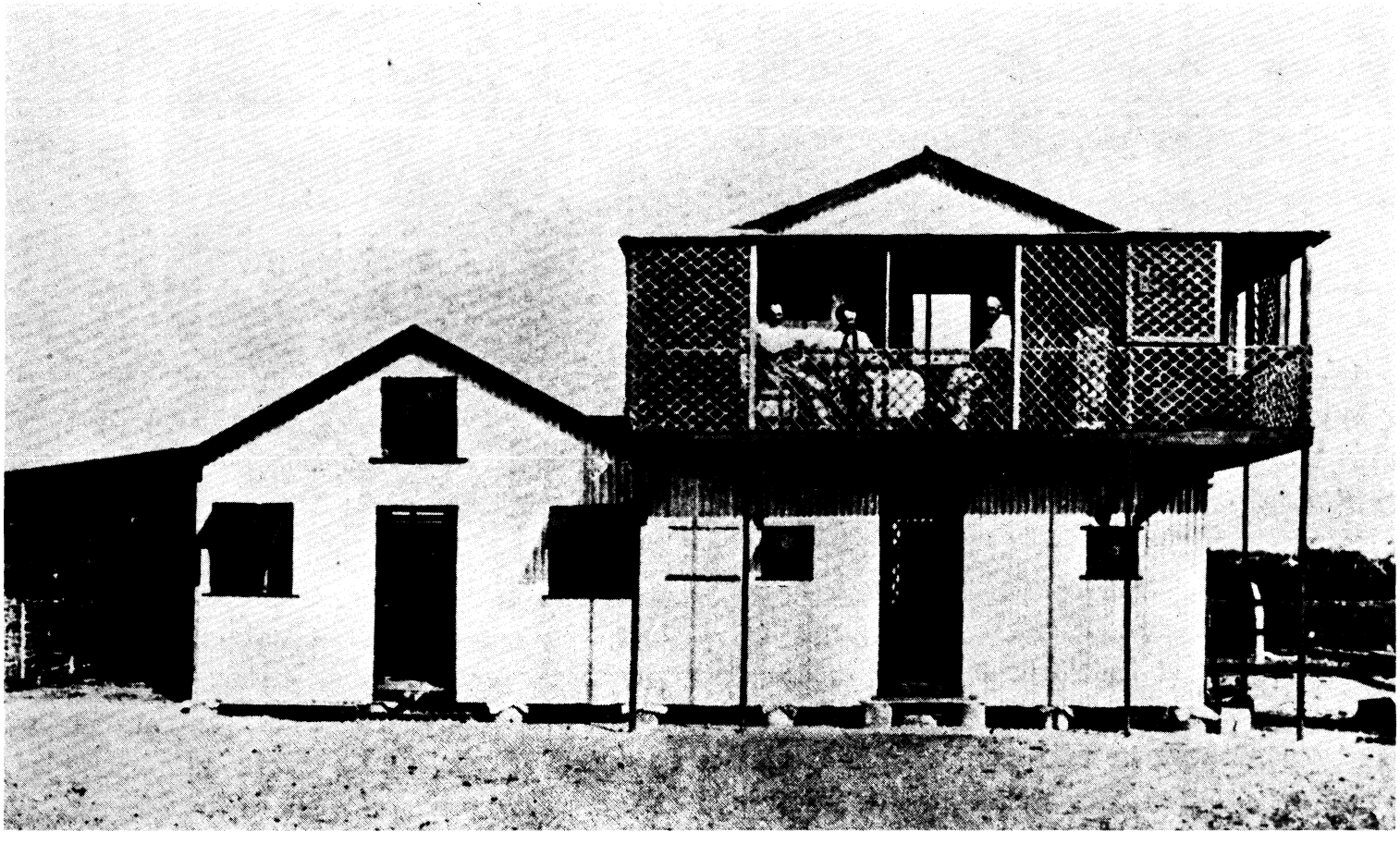
The Sower of the Wind drew two strands of narrative, one probable, one improbable, into a single dramatic climax, and did so with the help of some contrivance of event, such as Kate Weston had used, but shared with Weston's novel an ambitious intent.

Set in the early eighties, the first section of the narrative concerned Gaspar Barboas, who has made a fortune as a chiropractor and ex-chiropodist in London and then on the goldfields in Australia; a note of irony is never far from the narrative, though at times the reader may wonder if it is not absent when most needed. Barboas buys land from an early settler on the north coast, close to, or perhaps in, a somewhat camouflaged Broome. He becomes a merchant and pearl buyer, wanting to obtain land held by the Catholic Mission, which the priest, Father Paul, refuses to sell. While the aborigines live about the area he refuses to consider the idea. The aboriginal camps depend on a series of springs for water, which Barboas blocks by drilling. The springs fail, the aborigines lose the water they depend on, and their tribal lore is disrupted so that the site must be vacated.

The aborigines leave the site, but place a totem image outside Barboas' house, where he keeps his carefully protected pearls. The image is seen by Barboas and his assistants, and the townspeople, as a curse.

The second element of the narrative centres on a beautiful aboriginal girl adopted as a child by a white woman anthropologist. The anthropologist, famous, wealthy, leaves the girl a destiny to carry out the foundation of a rationalist aboriginal centre in the north. Its aim is to destroy the power of religion, and in the narrative is linked to the counter thrust of the Catholic mission and the tribal mythology of the aborigines. Carrie, the anthropologist, looked forward to a world freed from religion.

> She wanted to serve Humanity by toppling over the Churches and laying her axe to the root of Faith, wherever the upas grew ... Poor old world, how she pitied it, shackled with dogmas and creeds! She wanted to gather it up



Pearler's camp, Broome. Something like this must have been the original for the house of Gaspar Barboas, while a similar form without the upper storey, provided the camp in *Lovers And Luggers*. Illustrated in *The History of the North West of Australia*, edited by J. S. Battye. A book which, appearing in 1915, still contains more detail of the north than any other.

> in her arms and bear it home to the sheepfold! She yearned for a day ... when civilized men should cease to be thralls to Religion, and take to their bosoms the doctrine of Evolution ...[29]

So Carrie's adopted daughter, Safra, comes to Broome, and Barboas, who has imagined himself now beyond love, becomes infatuated with her. The relationship balances on the edge of unreality and melodrama, yet this seems quite deliberate. There is some complexity to the interplay of the characters, in contrast to the conventional emotions and responses of even a more serious narrative such as Kate Weston's. Safra is attracted to Barboas, but his materialism is too strong, he is slowly stripped of the esteem of his friends and those who work for him. His greed and ill will lead Safra to the attempt to establish the settlement in the interior, where she is killed. The curse of the aborigines on Barboas is fulfilled. He has reaped as he sowed.

All this could well have been the stuff of purest melodrama, a re-run of the cliches already established for this kind of writing. But the novel attempts more than the plot, more than adventure, excitement, strange places. The conflicting beliefs, christian, materialist, aboriginal lore, achieve a depth, if not altogether a reality. The concerns are with inner conflict rather than outer, though there is no shortage of violent events. The novel stands out, however, not so much for its concerns as for its expression of them. The writer approaches her task in what is perhaps the only way possible, by trying to reach the conflict of beliefs through the texture of the prose rather than through explication. Emotive, coloured, exaggerated, at times tumbling to its own cliches which are the reverse of the commonplace yarn stereotypes—yet the final conflict of the novel cannot be approached at all by a more restrained approach or by realist statement. And its excesses are redeemed by a sense of irony. Perhaps in the end if Dehan avoids the contrivances of conventional plotting which prolonged Kate Weston's novel, it is only to substitute some contrivances of religious belief. The effect is probably more convincing, even if the technique is the same.

As in Kate Weston's novel, the founding of Kalumburu seems to lie behind *The Sower of the Wind*, but there is as well the suggestion of a knowledge of aboriginal culture become more widespread through the work of writers like Spencer and Gillen, and there is more than a suspicion of Daisy Bates. With the local colour provided by Dehan's brother, the mix went closer to suggesting the strangeness, and the much sought romance of the setting than any other novel had done, or, with the exception of the writer's own later novel, any other was to do—though it could not have been attempted if the writer had not been clearly aware of experiments in style during the nineteen twenties which seemed to escape Australian writers.

The Sower of the Wind was followed a year later by another novel unusual in an Australian framework. Gurney Slade in *Lovers and Luggers*[30] openly exploited the remoteness of Broome, its reputation for romance and adventure. Like Dehan, he rejected the current weak realism of style and subject that had overcome Australian fiction, and offered a lightly satirical, flippant tone which enabled his novel to deal in many of the conventions of adventure, love, and heroism without taking them seriously. Yet it did, in the same tone, endorse some of them, however much they were underplayed.

Three years earlier Slade had written a 'story for boys' which he called *The Pearlers of Lorne*.[31] Lorne was yet another of the names under which Broome masqueraded. *The Pearlers of Lorne* was a pleasantly written, straightforward story with rather less high adventure and more humour than many such adventure books. It showed a boy in his final year at school in England being forced by family considerations to try the dominions, and finding a way to Broome. The story reveals a knowledge of Broome and of pearling to the extent likely to be

obvious to a visitor—which the boy is. Slade turns Broome into an English public school, with japes and darker deeds, decent chaps and rotters, but always with a feeling for humour. He knew what he was about, the book is in the inimitable tradition of the great days of *The Magnet* and *The Gem*, and perhaps Slade endorses the values so clearly set out. There are some striking examples of intolerance of the aborigines and stock attitudes of the time to them; attitudes which would indicate nothing had changed from the fiction of a quarter of a century earlier.

Lovers and Luggers in an odd way took this kind of thing up the scale, as it were. The story is deliberately flimsy. It begins in London, where Daubeny Carshott, a noted young violinist, meets Stella Raff, beautiful London socialite, in a rather wry scene outside Australia House. Carshott is forced to prove his love by going to Broome, after discussion of a figure of a diver in suit and helmet in the window of Australia House. At Broome he is to find a pearl by his own effort to bring to Stella.

The fragile framework is elaborated when Carshott discovers in Broome a well known painter, and a novelist, both like himself unusual visitors. The three men become suitors of a kind for the most eligible girl in town, Lorna Fenton. It is no great surprise that they discover the same London beauty has sent them all to the remote pearling port.

Carshott meets Captain Quid, an ex-naval man, buys a lugger, becomes an unlikely pearler, but does find a pearl, which he gives, in pity, to one of his rivals. There are some complications from a cyclone, a journey to London by Quid, and the arrival in Broome of Stella Raff.

None of this is taken seriously. The style is satirical, or perhaps flippant. It suggests very much its era, the kind of brittle sophistication that followed the world war. Slade never penetrates its surface, but he would seem never to intend to do so. For his purpose a reflection is sufficient, there are references to the songs, the personalities, the books and magazines of the period, and all this somehow attaches itself, uneasily, to that distant town of north west Australia which had a reality of its own far removed from any of it. And that reality, too, Slade does not attempt to penetrate.

The tone, and the attitudes, if always flippant, are often snobbish, schoolboyish, establishing under the throwaway exterior the values of 'decency', 'helping one's friend' (not quite nineties tradition) and a sort of inevitable 'doing the right thing'. But it was an unusual style and attitude to find in an Australian novel of the twenties. The writer obviously held the common belief that for a novel to succeed it must be published in England, and have strong interest for English readers. Quite ingeniously he manages this. To a later reader, of perhaps the present time, the whole novel, plot, tone, setting, dialogue, speaks inescapably of one of those entirely unbelievable thirties films where beautiful people did improbable, but always decent things in lavish or unusual surroundings.

So perhaps it was not surprising that *Lovers and Luggers* became a thirties film. Made in 1938 by Ken Hall for Cinesound, it featured Lloyd Hughes, Shirley Ann Richards, and Elaine Hamill and Ron Whelan. It was considered a film of some promise for the Australian film industry.[32]

Ironically, Broome remained elusive. The film was made partly at Thursday Island, partly in the studio. The luggers and the sea, much admired, were not of Broome but the islands. The camp on whose fourth step the characters in turn revealed themselves in confessional discussions was constructed in a studio. And considerably praised.

Clotilde Graves, as Richard Dehan, returned to Broome with two short stories in a collection called *The Man With The Mask* in 1931.[33] To the readers who had followed her novels, the eight stories of this collection may have seemed

consistent. They reflected also the world war, its horror, wounded men returning home—the preoccupations of the twenties show clearly enough. So do some of the fictional attitudes, a sentimentality, a tendency to melodrama, an endorsement of bravery, king and country, patriotism.

The Sower of the Wind had been successful in going quickly to two editions at least, and receiving critical praise. If there was evidence of some critics struggling to come to terms with her style—some preferred to ignore it—there was a recognition that here at least was a stylist. The short stories, as the novels, revealed her ability to adopt and experiment with style. The dust jacket of *The Man With The Mask* stated that an 'artist who generally uses a large canvas has here set herself to work on a series of miniatures'. The collection clearly showed she needed the large canvas, and had no facility with the miniature.

The Man Who Burned The Candle reintroduces Broome and Barboas, who makes an enemy of an empire builder-ex Boer War hero, who turns up in Broome, stops a riot by defeating the Japanese leader singlehanded and unarmed, and triumphs in a subsequent court case. He also triumphs over Barboas. The sense of compassion, the suggestion of real emotion, the feeling for social justice and racial fairness, distorted at times but present in *The Sower Of The Wind*, are suddenly lost. The story is an endorsement of the white man's supremacy, and the white man's burden, whatever that meant in Broome around nineteen hundred and three. Broome becomes a background for a Boys of the Bulldog Breed anecdote, which throws up suggestions of racial conflict, justice, white privilege, and completely evades the issues it raises.

Readers who felt some uneasiness at the style of *The Sower Of The Wind* can only have felt justified. It is as if a mask has gone from this, as well as the hero of the title story. The narrative is declaimed at the reader, exclamation marks appear everywhere, both subject and style have all the marks of the satires of just such portraits of heroic men in distant outposts. Yet the writer seems completely serious.

A Chronicle Of Pearly Town brought back the abandoned wells and tribal grounds, in a story which depended for success on its style. It is in fact compounded of weird dialect—Irish, Scots, Aboriginal pidgin, a dash of French, attempting always liveliness, which overlies trite devices of flashback explanation and explanations by the mile in the half-dialect, half conventional-literary style. Cliche litters both stories in a manner to equal Riemann. Broome becomes local colour. Poverty, the position of the aborigines, are suggested but turned aside by heavy humour and sentimentality.

Consciously or otherwise, the writer seems to be striving to cover an essential falsity of attitude in the two stories, and neither story would have suggested anything to look forward to in another novel set in Broome, with the same characters. But in 1932 Richard Dehan did return to Broome, to Gaspar Barboas, his pearls and his fortress-like house, his daughter in Europe, and to other characters from *The Sower Of The Wind.* The writer returned also to the two incidents which had been the subject of the short stories.

The plot of *Dead Pearls*[34] was basically simple. Barboas' daughter, Ellice, who was at the conclusion of the previous novel on her way to Broome, arrives, but in a very different fashion from the triumphant return to her father which he expected. Kidnapped by his business rivals, she is smuggled in, drugged, with some prostitutes to the brothel of Broome's famed courtesan Matepi-Madu, known also as Burning Honey, and some less complimentary terms. It is, however, as a courtesan of the East that Dehan sees her.

> She was yellow as honey, and lustrous as pearl, and fierce as the tiger-adder, which ophidian she resembled in her corselet of golden rings, like the rattan hoops bound with silk and brass that are worn by the Dyak women. And,

The Asiatic Quarter, Broome, variously described by so many writers, illustrated in *A Land Of Opportunities* by E. J. Stuart, 1923.

banded with jewels below the breasts, the rest of her childlike body was draped to the knee with a silk sarong of gorgeous, singing hues. And the ebony sweep of her satiny hair was crowned with a comb of diamond rays, and the throat that upheld her nymph-like face wore the pearls Barboas had observed—the single-string necklace of finely matched stones, under which depended one larger, pear-shaped, magnificent, threaded above a lump of spinel ruby, cracked and flawed, and coarsely carved into an obscene design.

As she swayed in her corselet of glittering rings, Barboas thought of a sea-snake. One of the yellow-striped, poisonous kind that infest the Pearly Sea, adding more risk to the danger-fraught life of the hunters of trochas and pearl-shell, hawksbill turtle and trepang, and deep-sea ebony.[35]

She is for a time the partner of Thioden, the hero of *The Man Who Burned The Candle.* He has met Barboas' daughter when Ellice was a nurse in South Africa during the war, and was nursed by her when he was wounded. Thioden is an elemental figure, mockingly sensual and direct, a business rival to Barboas who fears Thioden's love for his daughter. The narrative moves to an anticipated climax, through a series of confrontations between the central characters, each placed and set like stage scenes, carefully managed and directed, the dialogue given poise and dramatic intent. The author's experience as a playwright is clear in the major scenes, and evident in the movement of the whole novel.

The many descriptions of Broome are detailed, often highly coloured.

... long ere the *gunyahs* of poles and bark that the vanishing Aboriginal contentedly squats to windward of in seasons of rain or gale, had given place to beehive huts of mud-beplastered wattle, such as the African native builds to shelter him withal, and the palm-plank *dukans* of the Malayese who sold fowls, and fish, and garden-stuff were replaced by the shanties of Japanese, where exquisite things carved from blister-pearls, pearl shell, and hawksbill turtle, trocas and haliotis-shell, dugong-tusks, shark-teeth and ivory, deep-sea ebony, emu-eggs, and coral were offered for sale.[36]

Whether this kind of detail is accurate or not, the novel with its rich and ornate style is moving far from a concern with realism to become an allegory the religious intent of which has been developing from the previous novel.

Barboas is a man doomed, he offends against the gods, be they those of aboriginal mythology and lore or the Catholic Church. He is a man who cannot really hope, and is not saved. In the end the Church is not mocked.

Thioden is a pagan god, his final 'bonza-jag' becomes a pagan rite, a debauch that engulfs the streets and the beaches of Broome. Broome, a most pagan city, is visited by flood, fire, and plague.

And does this succeed? Almost. If this time the moral is too pointed, the plan has a boldness that compels interest, and the moral does not altogether shake loose from its frame. A more prosaic account must have been more accurate, but if the strangeness, the colour and sheer sense of difference which Broome seemed to exert was to be attempted, and if such a moral concept was to be attached to this place, then it would seem this rich, ornate, baroque prose was the only medium to effect these things.

It is a prose that over-reaches itself often enough, but is never afraid to take risks, as in the attempt to catch something of the aboriginal legends:

And she threw back her hair from her marvellous face, and said in her accents of sweetness—and the voice of the warbling magpie is harsh compared with Brannulu's voice... Do not Gur the grub, and the caterpillar Doroongul eat the root with the fruit and leafage? and Chirki the tree-snake, and the opossum Yarang, steal and devour the eggs from the nests, as well as the new-hatched birds? Do not Kakadu and Kookaburra and Ebai the

> little hawk-owl plunder the nests like the others, and eat the young ones of Chirki, and the new-littered babes of Yarang, and make meat in their turn for the eagle-hawk, the broad-pinioned, fierce-beaked Karawan?[37]

That is only a part of a long sequence, and how an anthropologist might view it is irrelevant. It becomes a part of a rich and evocative depiction, too rich and going too far, perhaps, but held often by humour and satire within a frame of narration that is built by the spoken voice of the author, directed by comment and asides.

Behind the whole narrative the implied social criticism also controls what might have become pure romance. The novel is dedicated to 'The Government of Western Australia', and it has a case to argue about the neglect of Catholic Mission schools, the neglect of education of the mixed-race and aboriginal children, the lack of hospital care and the general lack of what would now be termed welfare services for the poor and often grotesquely sick and suffering of Broome. It has an irony to point in its view of racial divisions and social privilege.

In the end the reader may wonder whether this has not been an excursion into the Arabian Nights rather than the realities of Broome, but, for better or worse, there was not to be another such technical and stylistic attempt to capture this place which so many believed held something unique in its Australian context.

The same year saw the publication of John Harcourt's *The Pearlers.* In style and attitude there could hardly have been two novels more unlike. Dehan's awareness of English and European experiments in style find a contrast in Harcourt's affinity with the American realists of the period. *The Pearlers* indicated he could not go as far as he probably wished, but reflected something of the honesty, the harsh edge, the questioning, which made American writing such a force during the decade; and which the rigid implied and explicit censorship of Australia almost entirely rejected.

Harcourt saw no romance at all in the Broome he depicted. His publishers called *The Pearlers* 'a novel unusual in theme and setting'. It was hardly either. Its distinction lay in its style, its attempted honesty of view. Tom Ronan mentions meeting Harcourt in Broome apparently in the mid twenties. The novel appears to be set about this period, and showed a detailed knowledge of the working routine of a pearling boat, from the viewpoint of one of the white shell openers who spent weeks of tedium and discomfort on the luggers during the season. His main character, Douglas Gale, reminds a young woman who sees pearling as an exciting adventure:

> There's nothing romantic about living on a pearling lugger. Lying in a sweat-soaked bunk for twenty-two hours a day; living like a pig; getting softer and softer till you're so soft that when you come ashore again you can't walk from one end of the town to the other without your ankles swelling ... there's nothing to do but lie in your bunks and read, or sit on the rail and fish. Opening shell only takes about two hours a day.No exercise. You can't even swim. The sharks see to that.[39]

Harcourt heads one chapter 'workaday', and the novel gives this kind of a picture of Broome, a town where pearling is now a difficult and often unprofitable business, most of the owners struggling to survive, becoming indebted to the store-keepers, while the banks refuse credit. Dishonesty is everywhere. The Japanese divers, admitted to the country under licence, prohibited by law from operating boats, have reached positions of considerable power, and the dummying of boats to them has become common. Though pearls, when found, belong to the owners of the luggers, no Japanese diver would willingly give up any pearl he brought up, if he had control of a boat. The only way an owner could expect pearls, as distinct from shell, was to employ a shell opener, almost always white, who

worked for a percentage. That was not fool proof, either. Harcourt stresses through Douglas Gale, forced to do his own shell opening, a dislike of the Japanese so strong as to become hate and fear. At sea the Japanese were in command.

> For the Japs knew the pearling grounds as no white man did, and unless the owner himself was on board the diver was master at sea. The yellow man was master, and in a thousand sly ways he kept the white man conscious of it. By a thousand subtle means he galled the white man's pride, revenging himself thus for the inferiority the white man had thrust upon him, assuaging thus the wounds to his own racial pride. And of all the discomforts shell-openers had to bear this was the most cruel, they became used to the stench of decaying shell-fish and of rotting rice in the bilge; to the cockroach hordes which crawled upon them while they slept and gnawed at the quicks of their nails till they bled; to the sour, mouldy smell of bedding which never dried in the salt, damp air. They became innured to the limitless enmity of the sea itself, but the open contempt of the Japanese was a suppurating sore, infusing their blood with malice[40].

The aborigines barter their women to the Japanese divers when the luggers put in to the creeks and bays outside the port, and there are aborigines working out meaningless sentences in the chain gang. The brothels and hotels have none of the excitement and glamour of Dehan's depiction, they are 'workaday', inevitable places, where racial violence might erupt, and the eastern quarter of the town lacks any hint of the exotic colour so much a part of *Dead Pearls.*

The characters are clearly and simply presented, victims of Broome, some wanting only to escape, all involved from boredom, and at times fear of a place that seems hostile and threatening, in petty infidelities with one another's partners. Harcourt's clear-eyed approach to his characters' intrigues, and to their boredom, is refreshing in thirties fiction in Australia, but they take on no dimensions. They are in fact restricted by the very clarity with which they are presented. Broome is a male dominated town, and the depiction of the characters very much a male-female oriented view, a 'women are different' attitude. While this could be claimed as accurate in its time, it becomes over-simplified. Gale, as he is about to make love to his wife's closest friend, reflects:

> ... there was no honour amongst women. They had different standards, a different creed... No, there was no honour at all amongst women.[41]

Vivien, Gale's wife, considering an affair with one of Gale's shell openers, hears:

> ... a tocsin summoning her forces to the age-old battle, the immemorial conflict between woman and man.[42]

And Hawley, one of the shell openers, always longing to return to England and to a social caste system he understood,

> came of stock which regarded women of its own class as sacred, sating its carnal appetites outside of wedlock only with women it deemed inferior, and though Hawley had shed most of the fetishes of his class in the course of his wanderings over the earth, this one still clung, like a dead fungus, impeding the tides of desire. The girl beside him was of his own class... But she was not fair game.[43]

But there is a psychological reality, and an accuracy of the social forms and formalities of the period, a determination to get rid of at least some of the restrictions on the depiction of human relationships that hamstrung the thirties writers.

LOVERS & LUGGERS

A TALE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

By GURNEY SLADE

The Pearlers came at the beginning of a decade involved in debate on what the Australian novel should be doing, in fact on just what was the Australian novel. There was a general uneasiness about overseas influence, a kind of defensiveness, oddly reminiscent of the nineties, though without the nineties' corresponding assertion. The Australian novel should somehow grow in isolation—indeed, the wholesale exclusion and banning of overseas work during the period virtually forced that fate upon it.

In *The West Australian*, in 1937, Norbar, whose critical articles had been a valuable feature of Western Australian journalism, attempted with some courage to review the position. In discussing how a number of Australian novels had contributed to Australian writing he offered a criterion for judgement.

> The standard chosen for this article is the extent they are influenced by the Australian environment . . . what Australia wants at present is a cultural tradition that is native to the soil, for generally speaking, a great national literature must be conditioned by national or racial experience. A book is Australian not from the fact that it is written in Australia, about Australia, or by an Australian, but because its characters and incidents arise and develop naturally from what the author knows of the people and scenes about him.[44]

This could include *The Pearlers*, which Norbar called 'a vivid rendering of some aspects of northern life', but he was less inclined to accept Harcourt's second novel, *Upsurge*, a frank account of the depression years in Western Australia. In this novel Norbar believed—and other critics agreed with him—that Harcourt had:

> . . . allowed a streak of misanthropy and a political theory to throw his observation slightly out of focus . . . in *Upsurge* at least, he is apt to transfer European interpretations to the Australian environment.[45]

Broome offered some safety in this kind of climate. It was clearly Australian, yet with its mixed population held un-Australian aspects against which current political and social views might have been aired. It reflected history, that other strong preoccupation of the thirties in Australia. The travel magazines discovered Broome, notably *Walkabout*. The town became slightly more accessible, but most of those who were lured by the articles and photographs of luggers, a beautiful sea, and the romance of pearls, and who managed to travel to Broome, probably saw the reality as Harcourt did, a place of some tedium. The greatest excitement was likely to be getting there. With Dehan, Slade, and Harcourt, Broome had found its three most interesting chroniclers who were to reflect it through the novel; most interesting in terms of style, and, if only because they had written of it first, content.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman had more than a visitors' acquaintance with Broome. She set her first novel, *Blue North*, 1934,[46] in Cossack and the pearling grounds being worked along the coast to King Sound and out to the Lacepede Islands. The novel was dedicated to F. W. Teesdale, the Member for Roebourne from 1917 to 1931. On her first journey to the northern towns and ports with her husband, a government official, just after her marriage, she met Teesdale in Cossack, and was fascinated by his stories of the earlier days of pearling and gold digging at Cossack. This first novel reflected that interest, and made use of the stories of the kidnapping of natives and their ill treatment on the luggers by some of the masters and owners which were part of the currency of the period in which she set the novel, 1876. *Blue North*, as a historical novel, did not go beyond its limited period, carefully set and with an accuracy that at times obtrudes. The deliberate concern for historical detail, from small household items to political opinions, tends to be too deliberate, and the whole develops very much in the tradition of the historical romance. John Fordyce decides to

leave his wife, sell up his property in Perth, buy a boat and sail for the pearling grounds of the north. In Cossack he meets a young girl, persecuted by those who use her as a drudge, rescues her, literally carrying her away on his lugger to various trials and disasters, but to eventual happiness, and to become, as a later novel reveals, among the founders of Broome. The novel never comes to grips with its characters, or the real implications of the worst features of the pearling grounds, tending to fall back on romantic cliches, and an acceptable diction and attitude. The author clearly does not feel it possible to use the realism of Harcourt, or to share his harsher view, even at the remove of a historical perspective. The novel uses extensive chapter headings in the style of Dehan, and the tradition of earlier historical novels, but shares nothing of the mock heroic, nor does the style itself bear any trace of the suggested irony. The convention seems oddly misplaced.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman was one of the writers of the thirties determined to enforce an awareness of Australia, and a belief that an Australian subject was worth presenting. Yet *Blue North* seems imposed on its setting, even while the background is meticulously researched and presented. It shows clearly the movement of the pearling fleets over the Western Grounds and into the area that was to see the establishment of Broome, at first as little more than a temporary support for the boats, and the writer was to return to this in her later fiction.

Robert Waldron, with *Pearl Shell*,[47] also in 1934, saw the possibilities of Broome as a background for a competently plotted thriller of naval intelligence opposing an organisation attempting a monopoly of shell buying, and a take over of luggers and businesses of pearlers operating out of Broome.

The novel uses a number of plot situations and devices that were becoming the stock in trade of the growing number of thriller writers. The novel's main interest lay in this aspect, it belonged to the early thirties Edgar Wallace era, and in fact mentioning Wallace, and illustrates just how sophisticated this type of novel has since become. Such stories never essentially needed characterisation, *Pearl Shell* produced a number of predictable types—'an old sea dog whose bark was worse than his bite', a 'slant eyed Celestial'—although the naval personnel taking various disguises to fit in with the life of Broome may have seemed an unusual angle to readers.

Waldron does not attempt to romanticise Broome, how much real knowledge he had of the town could hardly be determined from the novel. One of the intelligence men, using an interest in journalism as part of his cover, is asked:

> 'You intend writing an article on Broome?'
> 'Yes sir,' answered Bruce. 'I believe it is quite a romantic place.'
> 'H'm,' sneered the other. 'I can't see anything romantic about it. In my opinion, it's a hell of a place ... I don't think you'll find much to write about in Broome ... It's a dead hole.'[48]

The dialogue maintained a level of cliche, and the novel embalmed a number of thirties' attitudes, a view of women and education among them.

> They took their places at the table, just the two of them. Everything was faultlessly arranged. The spotless white linen, the shining cutlery and the dainty vase of freshly cut flowers all spoke of Joan. Her years at college had not been wasted. She was a perfect hostess and an excellent housekeeper.[49]

The whole novel takes place amongst 'clouds of tobacco smoke'. Pipes and cigarettes fume incessantly. There are all the marks of the thirties' films where the main talent of most actors lay in their ability to push cigarettes into their mouths while the dialogue was dubbed and people gazed stoically at one another through a haze provided by the tobacco companies—a practice which gives evi-

dence of being revived. The ending to the book was an almost pure piece of thirties cinematic melodrama. Waldron may have felt he was unfortunate that *Luggers and Lovers* was chosen by Cinesound ahead of *Pearl Shell.* Through it all Broome appeared, lightly, but it seemed factually sketched, when faster ships, airmails, and seaplanes had lessened its distance. Waldron also suggested its closeness to Singapore, where some of the action is set, something writers were noticing before it dawned on politicians.

Peter Hopegood, in 1935, published a sensitive autobiographical account of a season spent at Broome as a shell opener.[50] In many ways it was a counterpart to Harcourt's depiction, agreeing in the details of work, the life aboard a lugger, the relationship of the different races, in particular the sense of the authority of the Japanese divers over the shell openers, but it had the difference that Lecky, the name Hopegood used, wounded in the war, his health always precarious, saw everything with a sense of vividness and discovery.

> Everything is tropical, romantic, and, to my as yet unjaded eye, uncivilized almost as when the white man first trod these strands . . .[51]

He retains that sense of newness, of things 'romantic', until his health brought a sudden halt to work on the lugger. Perhaps, as he admitted, it was his awareness that he was not bound to Broome for a livelihood that enabled him to view things as he did. Shortly before leaving for Australia, in 1923, he saw a film,

> . . . called 'Australia's Wild West'. It was mostly concerned with the Broome pearling grounds and was romantic enough to revive my spirits considerably.[52]

This was evidently *Australia's Wild Nor'West*, a documentary film from the North-West Scientific Expedition, which set out from Broome by lugger to spend six months filming around the coast as far as Wyndham. It was produced apparently in 1920.[53]

Lecky's was a closely observed account, and he was aware of some of the fictional devices used by novelists, including the constant standby of pearl stealing.

> It was early apparent to me that considerable skill would be required to get away with a pearl in real 'thriller' story fashion, especially with a lynx-eyed shell-trimmer at one's elbow. Any sudden movement of the hand towards one's mouth, the only place of immediate concealment, would instantly arouse suspicions, and no opportunity to search one's effects would thereafter be neglected.[54]

And his description of the sea bed from the deck of the lugger suggested that perhaps not all accounts of the world the divers worked in had been written by those with a diver's experience.

> It was a never-ending delight to kneel in the scuppers on the shady side of the mainsail and peer down through the glass-clear water at the sea-floor, with its coral gardens alive with brilliant hued fishes, darting, questing leisurely, or hovering to browse. Beautiful anemones, vivid weeds and graceful sponges flourished in those marine gardens. Sea-snakes with flat or oar-blade tails undulated to the surface for air or dived again like five-foot lengths of zebra-marked ribbon. Others were covered with sultana spots like plum-duffs rolled out to pipe-thinness.[55]

He had a sharp appreciation of natural things which enabled him to record more fully than any other writer the richness and beauty of life that lay along the coast, in the sea, among the mangrove flats, and to be aware of the fierceness of its struggle for survival. He was the only writer, also, to consider the destruction so casually effected by man. Lecky had something of Grant Watson's

feeling for landscape, and for the aborigines. His account of Broome, though brief, makes an interesting comparison with the novelists' depictions.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman, with her second novel in 1936, returned to Broome, and to some of the characters of her previous book. *Sheba Lane*[56] was concerned with a much later Broome, like Waldron's novel, where there were air services, a greater emphasis on law and order, cars, radio, and something of a social hierarchy of the wives of government officials and pearlers. A less exciting town, portrayed accurately by the author who derided the kind of depiction Richard Dehan had offered. One of the characters of *Sheba Lane* remarks on a 'greyhead' who was 'brother of a famous lady novelist'.

> 'She came to light with one about pearling a bit ago... Steve reckons her brother gave her the truth about pearling. Well, anyhow, someone had a damned good imagination! It's clear *she* ain't never been within cooee of the nor'-west. Wot about an apricot, Mr Kent? If yer likes, yer can walk out an' pick one off the trees in the backyard! And I suppose yer don't happen ter carry yer pearls in a matchbox? Of course not; yer keeps them in a nice little glass case filled with water fresh from the sea, and emptied daily. And yer need ter be mighty careful not ter fall fer a binghi tart—they are even more beautiful than wot's her name—Cleopatra. And clever! ... My God! ... If they want to write a lot of bunkum, let 'em go to the moon, but not start on places they've never seen.[57]

So much for Gaspar Barboas and Safra. While the most naive reader must have suspected Dehan's exotic detail, Broome did in her novels achieve something of the excitement and romance Henrietta Drake-Brockman's young lady fresh from the south hoped to find and kept talking about—but which her creator was never able to make emerge.

Sheba Lane was intended to be a realistic depiction of Broome, and of people who found themselves confined within it, and it was a novel concerned with interpretation of character rather than adventure and action. Accuracy it may have had; a sense of romance it never achieved by description which fell unhappily between Dehan and Harcourt.

> ... Instantly the dead waves quivered, then danced; like a laugh the golden light rippled into the cold indifferent sky, into the heart of the sea, slanting down in visible shafts beneath the dancing waves. Like a golden wine it spilled over the drifting luggers, waking them, kissing to gay brilliance the small red flag shouting a brave challenge to the encircling blueness from the rigging of Horton's boat...[58]

Nor by June Goer—yes, the name was seen ironically—continually imagining Broome to be romantic, and finding it was not. The writer made an attempt to broaden the scope of this novel, and to tackle issues which the novel at the time was uneasy with. But she was herself clearly uneasy with these concerns. The novel aimed at a frankness, perhaps an honesty, but was continually defeated by the fact that the characters were unable to sustain her aims. By now Broome's fictional characters were beginning to form stereotypes—the young girl from the south, the crusty old master pearler or business man who was her father and whose delight she was, the exiled Englishman, the cunning divers, the honest young man making good—and they were all there in *Sheba Lane*, their thoughts, ideas, hopes endlessly described, but never at a level of honesty such as Harcourt revealed, or with the sense of a depth behind a facade which Dehan, by whatever overemphasis, was able to suggest. They were characters whose lack of complexity would have been better portrayed through action than introspection. Perhaps most obviously the writer's aims were destroyed by her style. It was too genteel, there was at times a kind of arch-gentility quite false, it was almost always descriptive

rather than dramatic, protecting itself behind a fence of exclamation marks. It was the style of light romance, and might have been successful as such if the writer had not quite obviously been trying to use it for a more serious purpose.

Sheba Lane proved a more acceptable novel than *The Pearlers* or *Dead Pearls*, the latter seeming oddly little known. *Sheba Lane* was plainly Australian, and the accurate depiction of place suggested it was about the concerns which the Australian novel should properly regard. And if it was decently reticent, if it ignored issues which Broome with its mixture of races and standards quite obviously posed, then that also seemed proper.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman contributed a story in the yarn tradition with the title of *Captain Cutter's Fairy* to the ambitious first issue of the local magazine *Jarrah Leaves*, 1933.[59] The magazine offered a comprehensive collection of Western Australian writers, including Hopegood. Henrietta Drake-Brockman was the only writer to consider Broome. In her historical novel *Younger Sons*, 1937,[60] there is a brief interlude in Broome, and her interest in the north and in history lead her to a novel and a history of the early Dutch landings on the Abrolhos.[61]

Broome continued to attract adventure story writers. Gurney Slade brought Captain Quid within the reach of younger readers with *Captain Quid* in 1937, and *Quid's Quest* in 1939,[62] though the first of these might very well have attracted an adult audience. *The Pearlers of Lorne* was re-issued in the same year. The Captain Quid books offered more detail of Broome than *Lovers and Luggers*, but Slade did not again attempt the style of that novel, though he retained a light, often satiric touch. *Quid's Quest* provided a map, notably blank, which sketched in the towns appearing in the story.

Eric Wood, in the same years, set an adventure novel in Broome, also ostensibly for young readers, *Under The Southern Cross*,[63] which drew on the now familiar details of pearling, but with a seaplane as important as the luggers for the story. If there was by now an established body of background material for stories about Broome, there was also a familiarity in the plots.

J. M. Downie in 1940 provided an adventure story based on Broome and yet another pearl king of the town, with a title that seemed to hold a note of prophecy, *The Yellow Raiders*.[64] But it was concerned with a villainous Chinaman, and did not foretell the raids that were by then so close from Japanese planes. Oddly, that aspect did not seem to occur to fiction writers, either as a possibility for a remote northern port, or when Broome had become one of the few Australian towns to suffer air attack during the war. Little was ever written, or indeed known, of the Japanese raids on the planes that had found a temporary shelter in Broome on March 2, 1942. That aspect of Broome, even long after, offered little, it seemed, for the novelist. Broome, the pearling port of an earlier time, was more fruitful.

The Yellow Raiders was a reminder of the fact that books for young readers had since early in the nineteenth century offered the most striking examples of racial prejudice. Their attitudes were often strident and obvious to a degree that would presumably alarm a writer contemplating older readers. It was entirely in keeping for one of the young heroes of *The Yellow Raiders* to reply, when asked if he could handle a gun:

> Yep, I've shot at most things in my time! ... From wild buffaloes, to hostile blacks.[65]

The 'blacks' are always hostile, an aboriginal face is seen as 'more like the face of a jungle beast than of a human being', the Japanese fare no better, being at best 'human wolves'. Some such books had been sponsored by the Religious Tract Society.

Perhaps it was the success of *Lovers and Luggers* that turned Katharine Susannah Prichard towards Broome. Henrietta Drake-Brockman suggests she saw

the 'latent possibilities of the setting for film production', and that Prichard 'was harassed once again by financial fears'.[66] After Slade, the possibilities were hardly latent, but Prichard's first novel had become one of the early Australian films, in 1916, and been remade by Ramond Longford in 1926.[67] *Moon of Desire*,[68] as a novel of Broome, may have seemed to her to offer the kind of setting film makers were using. Ironically, she was betrayed by Broome, the novel becoming one which seems to have embarrassed even Prichard's most inflexible admirers. Broome provided a setting of romance and colour as so many writers had demonstrated, and it was these qualities Prichard incorporated into the book. But she was hardly a romance writer, in the narrower or wider sense of the term, and the novel became contrived in its plotting, and enmeshed in a weight of realistic detail.

Prichard had visited Broome on the way to Singapore in 1929. This gave her a basis for observation, and for some of the facts about which she built the plot. Of all the novels of Broome, *Moon of Desire* gives the impression of having the most closely observed, the most factual, background, there is an abundance of detail of the landscape, while the town with its buildings, alley ways, shacks and camps, the luggers themselves, are described minutely. Much of this must have come from research as well as recalled observation, and there is indeed always a sense of those other novels built from the same setting.

Yet perhaps Broome deceived its visitor. The characters—familiar from earlier writers—do not fit easily into the detail of their surroundings. They become the types of South Sea fiction—or by now of Broome fiction, tied to a contrived and highly involved plot with echoes of many that had gone before in depicting the same place and the same people. She was little more at ease with the taboo subjects than Henrietta Drake-Brockman. At times it is hard to know what her characters have been up to so discreet, yet so flowery, is the prose. The second part of the book moves in setting to Singapore, which is even more minutely described, and might be valued for the depiction of a vanished society, but where the plot becomes even more melodramatic.

For any film director of the time it must have looked a formidable task, even to compact the plot of *Moon of Desire*. And the thirties were gone, a world war mocked the light improbabilities of films like *Lovers and Luggers*. The novel had missed its time, too late for the cinema of the thirties, too early for the more professional historical-romance novel that developed with the fifties.

For a writer with Prichard's social-realist attitudes to fiction and her political beliefs Broome might have offered scope for the kind of novel *Moon of Desire* seems at times trying to become. There was racial exploitation of every kind in a mix that made nonsense of facile judgement, social inequality, poverty, wealth, quick fortune and quick disaster, a general disregard of any future but expediency and strength. Prichard obviously saw this complex, but she resisted its exploration, though her heroine, the daughter of the town's Resident Magistrate, might have offered a vantage point. The curious mix which the town presented eluded her, she accepted its surface, but Broome remained elusive behind its obvious facade. The qualities for which Prichard was best known emerge more strongly in her depiction of Singapore, though here too effect is diminished by the unreality of characters and story.

The Broome Henrietta Drake-Brockman saw after the war may have suggested the past. But change had come to it. No one appeared to want to chronicle the port as a war-time centre, and it might have seemed its long interest to novelists was also now of the past. Yet in 1951 Arthur Upfield set one of his Napoleon Bonaparte novels in the town that had emerged from war.[69]

While Upfield's novels relied on place as part of an individual approach to detective fiction, his choice of Broome was curious. Broome provided the kind of

outback small town environment where his loner detective, Boney, showed up best, but the plot did not arise specifically from anything in Broome itself. The background could have been effective in any town not too big and with a degree of isolation.

Upfield provided a factual picture of a town which could certainly pass as Broome not long after the war, a Broome living on memories, with a population grown more suburban, and now a woman 'boss', one who controlled newspapers. It became also a town boasting a large boys' school with some five hundred pupils, 'drawing boys from as far distant as Perth as well as from a vast hinterland'.

This would make Broome's public college a school comparable in size with those of Perth, where in fact many students during those years had been sent because there were no such schools elsewhere.

To provide a headmaster whose compulsions led to the murder of three women, Upfield created his college at Broome. Dehan would have applauded the gesture. The novel moved on the quiet lines of Upfield's fiction, with a capable plot, and a lack of the clutter of police procedure into which many of the novels of the same form were degenerating. But Boney's relationship with his fellow policemen, with the townspeople, was as usual layered with a folksiness that pervaded Upfield's novels, and contributed to their popularity. The very real racial tension and attitudes of the era, and of the particular town in which he set the novel, were dismissed with the lightest hint.

The Widows of Broome made no intrinsic use of its setting, though it may have provided the first fictional glimpse of the town emerging into a new era.

There was a new era also for the novel. Colin Simpson, better known as a travel writer, a year after *The Widows of Broome* published a historical novel set around the Coral Sea, its action extending from Thursday Island to Broome. In his introduction Simpson remarked that his was a novel 'that does not disdain to have a plot and an unfashionably full measure of active drama'.

Come Away, Pearler[70] did have its measure of active drama. A story of the nineties, it made reference to actual people and events, and reflected the increased competence of the historical novel in Australia, perhaps also a kind of professionalism not apparent earlier. Simpson suggested the ideas, political theories, attitudes of the time, with a thorough and clear account of pearling. Broome appeared only towards the conclusion of the narrative, after the by now mandatory cyclone, and the ending was overwhelmingly suggestive of Dehan. What was there in Broome that induced these primitive religious passions?

Simpson turned away from contemporary Broome. Perhaps, from his dedication, 'For R.S.S.—in California—who makes films', he hoped for a film production. But while the novel had undoubted competence, was often vividly descriptive, it may have paid for its professionalism. Its careful and dispassionate reproduction of a time and place suggested not period but a modern diction and approach applied to the past. The earlier time remained itself elusive, untouched, overlaid by narrative.

Tom Ronan used his knowledge of Broome in two novels, the first, like Simpson's, a historical novel that did not disdain plot or active drama. *The Pearling Master*,[71] in 1958, a novel in the popular tradition of the Australian family chronicle, went back to the early years of the century, the narrative of a couple who built a business involved with Broome, though the novel takes in other parts of Australia and moves forward to the second world war. There were often detailed depictions of pearling and life in Broome, but the spread of the time period encouraged generalisation rather than detail, and a superficiality. Though it probably compacted more about Broome into one narrative than any of its predecessors, there remained the sense that the earlier novels had been there before. It might seem Ronan had left nothing to follow for the novel that would

turn back to an earlier Broome, though he found there a setting for a crime novel that drew on an actual incident. *Only A Short Walk*[72] in 1961 had more in common with the yarn tradition than the specialised form of detective fiction, and with its discursiveness was a contrast to the tighter control of Upfield's novels. Ronan used the setting more widely than Upfield, lessening the dramatic effect, but here too he must surely have had the last word. There could be no sense of discovery, nothing left to discover, in the town that had drawn so many writers by its strangeness and difference. Ronan, in his autobiography published in 1964, remarked of Broome:

> These days she is possibly the drabbest town on a rather uninspiring coastline, but I'm happy to recall that I knew and loved her in the days before her glory faded.[73]

Xavier Herbert, returning to Broome in its centenary year, saw a tourist town where roads and air travel had destroyed isolation, a town 'with a tremendous history', a town where people may 'live on their memories'. The novelists had always lived on those memories, to create a town more real than any lost reality.

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FAY ZWICKY

Rumours of Mortality: the Poet's Part

When poets start talking about the state of poetry, it's more than likely that they will be projecting some personal concerns with and attitudes towards their craft onto more generalized notions. For this reason, although I'd like to try and avoid talking poetics (which are general) rather than some poetry (which is particular), I'll probably find myself in the same subjective trap. Mortality's a big subject for a 30-minute talk, and I don't expect to do more than turn over a few stones on the path for a quick glimpse of the worm beneath.

Now when T. S. Eliot called poetry "a superior amusement", I don't for a moment believe him. If it is true that a culture gets the poets it nurtures (with all that the word "nurture" or lack of it implies), then Eliot is speaking as a transplanted American trying to beat the British at their own game of nonchalantly disclaiming professionalism. The poet who wrote the following passage from the *Four Quartets* is anything but superiorly amused:

> 'So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it.'

Language is seen as an adversary, something to be conquered, and not as a collaborative agent.

Eliot is deeply concerned with the diminishing resources and misuse of language. He is conscious of the 20th century's tendency to soil, commercialize, and deform words which once possessed genuine moral significance. And, along with most contemporary poets, would find it meretricious to solicit attention in words that have been cheapened and coarsened in the mouths of today's public men. When language is degraded in speech, then the basis in communal life for the practice of poetry is corroded, and the poet has to be more than usually vigilant. It isn't surprising that many modern poets shrug off responsibility for morals, native land, deity, or any of those once-comprehended abstractions, turning instead to the purifying aesthetic of the untainted fact. Or, rather than committing themselves to anachronisms, ringing prankish and sometimes reckless changes on well-

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Talk given at Perth Poetry Festival, February 27, 1983. Other participants were Cynthia McDonald, Peter Porter and John Tranter.

worn metaphors and similes, stripping away the falsity of reflexive sentimentality that tells the reader weakly what he already weakly knows. The most striking turnabout in my youthful reading was the discovery of the evening in Eliot's 'Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock' likened to a "patient aetherized upon a table". W. D. Snodgrass surprised me again in his 'April Inventory' with the following lines which I must have read in the late 50's:

'The pear-tree lets its petals drop
Like dandruff on a tabletop.'

Language was certainly being overhauled with an underlying seriousness of purpose at odds with the playfulness of its conceits.

So, if the phrase "superior amusement" doesn't seem to fit poetry's function, let's try another tack. Auden's comment that "poetry makes nothing happen" takes us in a different direction, with all that it implies about misplaced didacticism. And this, too, reflects a crucial point in Auden's own development as a poet when he moved from the sententious confines of political ideology to a more universalized humanism. Poetry may make nothing happen, but it may certainly reflect what is happening in words that approximate more or less closely to the truth. And, by "truth", I don't mean in its commonsensical usage of "an accurate report of what is". The truth about the whole of an experience is more than the sum total of several points of view which may be either deluded, limited, or both. The whole truth includes not only what is, but what has been, what might have been, what may be, and also what is not being.

Truth in my sense encloses the whole range of imaginative possibilities as well as those nameless assumptions and values by which a society survives. It is precisely because the whole truth is so complex and diverse that the imagination is a necessity. And this is the reason why poetry has, for so long, rested on the fictitious and the imaginative. So truth in poetry doesn't depend upon any one view of life, but is engaged with all views and all modes of awareness.

Furthermore, truth in literature reveals itself with not only what men are, but with what they "ought" to be. And I don't summon the word "ought" in its didactically ethical sense—there never was a Greek equivalent in Aristotle's time for the Judaeo-Christian injunction. It is meant in the sense of a representation of the full scale of human potentialities that the phrase "what men ought to be" conjures up. When literature concerns itself merely with what men are or have been, it is indistinguishable from history or journalism.

The truth, then, is not merely the way in which human beings behave and feel. Nor is it wholly contained in their conscious experience. In Milton and Racine, to take two extreme examples, there are characters who speak as no one has ever spoken in heaven or on earth. But they speak in such a way that may contain as many levels of truth as may be possible in any situation. 'Lycidas', Milton's transitional elegy for Edward King, is not given over to any precise remembering of facts about King himself. But this doesn't diminish the truth of Milton's vision of life and mortality which rises above a specific grief for his young friend.

The elegiac tradition yields many such examples of the transcendence of the self and its quivering sensibilities. As Flaubert said in one of his marvellous letters to his mistress, Louise Colet, "Passion does not make verses ... poetry is built upon a more settled foundation". (July 6, 1852). And the foundation of the elegiac line stretches back as far as Virgil, through Moschus's 'Lament for Adonis' in the 3rd century, through Spenser's 'Astrophel' commemorating Sir Philip Sidney, to Milton's lament for King, and into the 19th century with Shelley's for Keats, and, in America, Whitman's elegy for Lincoln. The tradition is continued into the 20th century with Yeats's memorial to Robert Gregory, Auden's tribute to Yeats, and so on. All presuppose some knowledge of the elegiac tradition—they allude to

it and draw strength from it. It remains something of an ageless autobiographical lament—a reflection of that moment when the mourner flexes and tenses his own resources against the inescapable blackmail of death. And for this nerves aren't enough: the poet needs muscles too. It's a mode of expression I'm going to look at in a bit more depth, for it's in this kind of remembrance that rumours of our own mortality persist. For the sake of our survival, we would do well to listen.

But to go back to Milton for a moment. The impact of modernity is perennial to every generation, and Milton was no more immune to it than any other poet has ever been. He was as opposed to the tyrannical overlords of the church as any anti-establishment rebel of today. He was very much a man of his time, held strong views on contemporary political situations in a period when the political order was undergoing revolution, and he was a member of the revolutionary party. He did not renounce his position as a man in order to take up a position as a poet. He did, however, expect to hold both positions. But not at one and the same time. He was conscious of a decorum that asked the poet to forego an inclination to preach, and he practised this awareness with rigour, and not without difficulty.

So, when he wrote to honour Edward King in 'Lycidas', we don't find him using the occasion of the young clergyman's death as an excuse for an attack on the degeneration of the clergy, or an opportunity to catalogue King's laundry. Instead, we have the richness and fullness of an animated imagination engaged in a speech that goes beyond the confines of the poet's individuality, a speech beyond the repressive entity of self.

A good many facts about anything or any one can never be consciously known when one is involved in the present moment. It is only through the focus of the imagination that relevant facts can be brought into poetry. Imaginative sympathy may help a poet get under the skin of his subject, but if there is no imaginative transmutation of that sympathy, it remains narrowed to what the poet himself knows—the limited fabric and texture of his own existence. The "I" may be speaking, but where is the listener? Most probably turned off and anaesthetized by the unstressed murmurs of the inward-turning self than which there is nothing more boring.

What so often occurs in modern poetry is that poets try to achieve truth by going in two opposed directions at once—the direction of known experience as well as the direction that attempts transcendence of that knowledge of experience. The ensuing tension produces, more often than not, a speech whose truth the listener may well doubt or even fail to comprehend at all. It produces utterance rather than speech, and a formal breakdown of communication is unavoidable.

This brings me to the inevitable question: "Who *is* the poet of today speaking to?" Is there an Other to whom the poet can speak? Is there really an audience of whose reality the poet can be sure? Unless such an audience can be called into existence, is there any likelihood of converting private "vision" into public "song"? How does the poet square the very notion of "song" with a culture that demands the subordination of the individual to impersonal forces and the cult of "objectivity"? The linguistic devices and gambits of intimacy are always to hand, but unless the presence of the listening Other can be invoked with certainty, then poems so fatally distanced sound hollow to the core—a stilted private code addressed to an audience of one.

Now, Walt Whitman was a poet very much concerned with defining the reality of his audience, perhaps more so than any other poet before him, and, in registering this concern in his poetry and prose, he reveals many aspects of the contemporary poet's quandary. It is surely just because Whitman's personal yearning to be heard and understood coincides with a more general problem of communication between man and man that he affects poets of today so deeply.

His loneliness becomes a symbol for the alienation of the contemporary writer speaking into the void. Creating his own public and his own themes, to write at all required of Whitman an act of faith, the faith that a real "You" existed out there. His 'Song of Myself' begins with the word "I" but ends with "You"—a presence believed in though never actually proven to exist. Significantly, this "You" is usually qualified by the phrase "whoever you are". The "I" may be elusive, but this "You" is even more so. While it suggests the almost indiscriminate embrace of all mankind, it also illustrates a puzzle that preoccupies the poet even more than the riddle of Self's existence.

'Song of Myself' is, then, a poem of faith. This doesn't mean that the poet discounts the real world: he insists on his attacthment to it—'My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite', he says. He protests 'I accept reality and I dare not question it'. And even if his faith sometimes falters, his passionate concern with his imaginary listener survives the occasional bout of doubt.

But what happens when the poet's sense of himself is tenuous and insecure to the point of disappearance? What happens if he can't even believe sufficiently in his own "I", a self which blurs and dissolves as he contemplates the mystery of his existence? What are the forms in which a poet's feelings and values may be objectified? What are his subjects, his themes, his myths, if these aren't supplied by the past or the present?

These are questions which troubled Whitman, and continue to trouble poets in our time. Once man becomes aware of himself as alone and subservient to the forces of nature and society, he's obliged to reach out and link himself with others in some form or other. That is, if he doesn't want to lapse into insanity. Man—of all ages and cultures—is faced with the issue of how to overcome his separateness, how to achieve union, how to simultaneously cling to and transcend the limits of his personality. The problem is intensified for the writer caught in the levelling winds of democracy whose norm is the repression of difference. Whitman was only too aware of the rot setting in to those ideals about human potential that democracy assumes when he wrote: 'Democracy has been so retarded and jeopardized ... that its first instincts are fain to clip, conform, bring in stragglers, and reduce everything to a dead level ... It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more thoroughly appointed body and then left with little or no soul.'

With this kind of handicap in mind, Whitman set about prescribing for the poetic health of the American democracy, and in doing so, emphasized the need for "great poems of death". Why death? The democracy of death is an old literary truism. Individualistic choice, the exclusiveness of the I-You relationship involving the discriminatory act of singling out a loved one—all this runs counter to the democratic levelling process of which death is such an effective agent. But the fact that kings and cobblers attain equality in the grave doesn't necessarily imply that they should not be differentiated in life for the well-being of the community. And nobody was more aware of this paradox than Whitman himself.

Whitman's democratic faith may have been originally located in that bounding American confidence in man's equality which was the stock-in-trade of almost every newspaper of his day. But he went further as a poet than as a journalist. He set himself to reveal spiritual equality as the ultimate human bond, positing the existence of a universal soul in which all mankind had an eqaul share. We utter the word "soul" with some difficulty today in relation to ourselves. It has always struck me as ironic that the last few decades of this century are willing to endow their second-class citizens with the possession of "soul", namely the blacks of the United States and English-speaking parties to the Third World. But, for ourselves, the white inheritors of so-called democracies, the poet breathes the word at his peril: to lay claim to such a thing has become the ultimate obscenity.

Whitman concentrated on identity—not as a role-definition such as might be indicated by his catalogues that include carpenters, contraltos, trappers, athletes or idiots—but identity from the perspective of the universal possession of soul. He brushed in the features that others did not so much fail to notice as fail to regard as expressive of a deeper human bond. He gave man an idea of what he might be, acknowledging his spiritual potential along with his corporeal reality.

In his poem, 'To Think of Time', he says:

> 'It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and father—it is to identify you,
> It is not that you should be undecided, but that you should be decided.'

And here, he is using "decide" in its root sense, meaning "to cut off", in order to shape his meaning. Man receives his identity by being cut off from an omnipresent immortality. He only takes on the shape of mortality for the brief span that is his lifetime. At the beginning of the poem, Whitman asks his listener:

> 'Have you guessed you yourself would not continue?
> Have you dreaded those earth-beetles?
> Have you fear'd the future would be nothing to you?'

In between, he consoles with an affirmation of human purpose and direction:

> 'Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form'd in you,
> You are henceforth secure, whatever comes or goes.'

And he concludes:

> 'I swear I think there is nothing but immortality! . . .
> And all preparation is for it—and identity is for it—and life and materials are altogether for it!'

The image that dominates this poem is of the earth—especially the American earth—which reveals itself in a powerful vision of death:

> 'Slow moving and black lines go ceaselessly over the earth.'

His vision of mortality is one of his most potent legacies to the contemporary poet.

This brings me to the second gift Whitman has to offer us—his honesty. His forthcomingness compels belief, and we never doubt the truthfulness of his enterprise, even when (and most particularly because) he is plagued by self-doubt. The notion of immortality isn't always that much of a security, and doesn't preclude fear. For example, in a remarkable poem called 'This Compost', he speaks of the earth whose beauties are celebrated often enough by poets, as one great prodigal heap of rotting matter. And even though physical beauty is hinted at in passing in lush images that include the "green-wash of the sea", "melons, grapes, peaches, plums" and so forth, the primary emphasis in the closing stanza is on the terrifying process of decay:

> 'Now I am terrified at the Earth! it is that calm and patient,
> It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
> It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseased corpses,
> It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
> It renews with such unwitting looks, its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
> It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.'

What is emphasized is the impersonality of the process. The earth becomes "harmless', agent of the frightening impersonality of a chemical procedure that converts death to life. In the face of so unavoidable and relentless a process, the poet's

response must point up the ways in which man is distinct from it. The difference lies in his capacity to love and his capacity to die.

It is Whitman's honesty in the face of that recognition that puts the modern poet in his debt. The faces that flare out from his crowds burn so brightly that, once glimpsed, will never again allow us to consider the crowd as a nebulous mass. In revealing this, Whitman shows us as much of our potential as of our actuality. He can only do this because he is himself willing to face the reality of his own emotions. It is certainly true that "mankind" cannot bear very much reality" as Eliot said in one of his poems. But, for me, the distinction between the good poet and the great poet lies in those qualities which are likely to help the reader to bear as well as to see.

I am convinced that a poet's honesty is linked with a concern with morality. Not morality as moralism that has emerged as overt didacticism and has been the undoing of many great writers, the most extreme example probably being Tolstoy. But a concern with the realities of moral being which involves being able to face not just the ecstasy of feelings but the terror also; not just the optimism of desires and aspirations but their fears and frustrations; or simply acknowledgement of failure to realize and act upon moral allegiances. The poet's morality doesn't consist in reinforcing virtue with charm or showing people how to conduct themselves. It consists in ability to face the deepest emotional and moral realities in his poems, to keep in balance those joyful and despairing conditions of existence that we are all heir to, and thus make it possible for his hearers to confront the total reality of their existence—physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual. That's what I understand by "helping to bear reality".

And when I speak of the realities of the poet's own emotions, I'm not referring to those poets who are so mystified and even repelled by life that they can't face it unless fitted out with artificially-assumed attitudes and postures, short cuts to achieving a sense of tangible existence. Such poets may have all the techniques at their disposal—every device of intimacy and aesthetic distance—yet the alert and sensitive reader will pick up the contrivance if poets stand aside watching themselves having "feelings", postulating what they want to feel, and what they think they ought to be feeling.

And this "ought to be feeling" can embrace not just the conventional pieties to which society pays lip-service, but also their opposite—those gestures of rejection, the lingering need to crush the bourgeoisie, those callous gestures of adolescence which are never resolved, even long after the original reasons for their coming into existence have disappeared. It may not be the poet's job to reinforce virtue, but neither is it obligatory to trample the flight of china ducks after the owner has gone.

Baudelaire, who in so many ways presents himself as either the first or prototypically "modern" poet of the china duck-trampling breed, states in poem after poem the opposition between his values as alienated artist and those of traditionally respectable society. His work crystallizes that intuitive recognition on the part of both the artist and the rest of the population that culture and sensibility—and thus the works by means of which they sustain their existence—do not have a place in the functioning of society.

It was Proust who suggested that an affection for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (which he called "pitiful and human poems") was not necessarily a sign of great sensibility. He intimates that they may have a special appeal to the heartless. Take, for example, the following prose poem with its almost cussedly unsentimental conviction that the poet has neither connection with nor allegiance to anything or anyone:

"Whom do you love most of all, enigmatic man, tell me? Your father, your mother, your brother, or your sister?"
"I have neither father, mother, brother, nor sister."
"Do you love your friends then?"
"You have just used a word whose meaning remains unknown to me to this very day."
"Do you love your country then?"
"I ignore the latitude in which it is situated."
"Then do you love Beauty?"
"I love her with my whole will; she is a goddess and immortal."
"Do you love gold?"
"I hate it as you hate God."
"Well, then, extraordinary stranger, what *do* you love?"
"I love the clouds . . . the clouds which pass . . . far away . . . far away . . . the marvellous clouds!"

It is not that one suspects the depth of Baudelaire's feelings, or the sentiments he attributes to his stranger which present us with the deepest negations of the modern poet. It is that one recognizes the weight he has placed on them, the ferocity of the pressure, the desperate elusiveness used as a tactic for concealment. Proust shows great perception when he says that Baudelaire seems to try *not* to feel the emotions he names.

In doing so, he marks a kind of cut-off point for the poet in this century from that very community which might once have taken his vocation as an artist seriously. He has no country, no community insofar as he is a poet. His greatest enemy is money because poetry doesn't earn him a living. It is natural, then, that he should emphasize his allegiance to Beauty—that is, to the practice of Art and the works which already exist. So, when Baudelaire's stranger tells his interrogator what he loves most of all is to look at the clouds, he is also informing us that the most the modern poet can do is to cultivate his own sensibility. And that sensibility is at home with life's transience, the shifting patterns of the clouds—not the once permanent fixtures of human co-operation that defined the well-being of society and its artists. If culture and sensibility have no organic function in the lives of human beings, then Baudelaire's work points up the increasing difficulty for the poet (whom culture and sensibility had made a poet in the first place) to write about the lives of those engaged in acquiring money or creating an industrialized society.

Does the poet, thus alienated, give up his act of faith that there is a listening Other? Must he discard the possibility of a "You whoever you are"? If he renounces all allegiances, how can he hope to accommodate all those imaginative possibilities I spoke of earlier, those possibilities which include the what has been, the what might have been, the what may be as well as the what is, of which the whole truth is composed?

In Jewish ritual, there is one constant prayer which is said every time Jews gather to pray, and that is the prayer for the dead called Kaddish. It is preceded by the following words: "One might almost say that this prayer is the guardian of the people by whom it is uttered; therein lies the warrant of its continuance. Can a people disappear and be annihilated so long as a child remembers its parents?" If we extend the implications of this to all mankind, then the poet who has the courage to remember has an important function. For it is through the act of memory that people survive—not by renouncing allegiances, but by retaining them, however painful. This is the reality that the great elegies help us to bear.

BOOKS

David King, editor, *Dreamworks: Strange New Stories*, Norstrilia Press, Melbourne, 1983. 198 pp. $12.95.
James Legasse, *The Same Old Story*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1982. 103 pp. $6.50.

Dreamworks is the most exciting collection of Australian short stories in years; possibly the most exciting thing since the publication of Peter Carey's *The Fat Man in History* collection in 1974.

The editor, Western Australian writer David King, has assembled twelve stories which explore, challenge, or invert our conventional notions of reality—and he has done an excellent job in making sure that no two stories approach their material in the same way. In Lucy Sussex's "The Parish and Mrs Brown" the challenge to reality comes through an exploration of psychology and states of consciousness, but in David J. Lake's "The Pure Light of the Void" the method is doggedly scientific. "Drowning in Fire", by Damien Broderick, uses a scientific speculation to offer a view of the reality perceived by a man who has God-like power, but in "What God Said to Me when He Lived Next Door" God Himself is shown to need the I-Ching just to get through the average working day.

Like a number of stories in this book, David King's "Mirror City" has affinities with fantasy and science fiction. The protagonist, Vico, has journeyed to another world "to obtain a rare literary work from the mirror city". Unlike the usual heroes of fantasy and sf, he encounters neither monsters nor maidens; he merely finds his book, reads his book, and leaves the mirror city. But *altered*, for as a result of the story our perception of man, city, and quest are subtly changed.

A similar magic is worked in Russell Blackford's "Crystal Soldier". But whereas King's story worked in terms of a *physical* quest, Blackford's character's quest is purely intellectual: the soldier Marchant must persuade the mystic poet-painter, Herron, to come under the aegis of the "organization" which Marchant represents. Once again, there is no "action" to the story, for poet and soldier fight only with words and philosophies, but as the verbal battle is waged the reader becomes aware that one man's triumphantly limited view of reality is about to succumb to the other man's insidiously embracing outlook. And Blackford renders this abrupt volte-face with an audacious sweep of melodramatic physical action, concluding with a scenario that owes much to the lurid fantasy of comic-books. (Blackford, whose first short story appeared in *Westerly*, is a new writer who will bear watching.)

Greg Egan (a Western Australian whose first novel, *An Unusual Angle*, will be published by Norstrilia Press later this year) takes an opposite tack to Blackford. In "Artifact" Egan deals with science, not philosophy, and it appears at first that his story is an example of traditional science fiction:

> The artifact consists of sixty-four small satellites orbiting a black hole, ingeniously arranged so that their relative positions remain unchanged. Ultraviolet lasers in each satellite are aimed at all the other satellites.... There are as yet no signs that the satellites are inhabited, but it is rather too early to tell.
>
> Why was it made?

A conventional sf writer would doggedly set about answering that question; Egan sets about looking at the psychology of the scientists who would seek the answers. If conventional sf touched upon the scientists' psychology *at all*, it would make very sure that it did not stand in the way of the answers; but Egan sees that psychology *is all*. He writes a story in which, ever so deftly, the riddling reality of the artifact is made to give way to the personal realities of the researchers. And so we have another new name to watch.

There are better-known writers in this collection as well. Fresh from the completion of his highly acclaimed science fiction trilogy, Melbourne novelist and critic George Turner explores the question of the nature of reality by taking up Lewis Carrol's phrase from *Through the Looking Glass*: "He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream too." Turner's "Feedback" concerns a scientific experiment designed to discover what occurred in "the first trillionth-trillionth of a nanosecond after creation". The story suggests that the universe can be seen as "a snake not only swallowing its own tail but digesting it

and putting on weight" (and the story makes plausible sense of this outrageous assertion).

"Land Deal" is by Gerald Murnane, author of the brilliantly original—indeed, unique—1982 short novel, *The Plains*. The story takes as its subject John Batman's purchase of 600,000 acres of land from the Aborigines, for which the original owners were paid with "blankets, knives, looking-glasses, beads, flour, etc.". In its form, the story is a collective monologue by the Aboriginal people:

> We certainly had no cause for complaint at that time. The men from overseas politely explained all the details of the contract before we signed it. Of course there were minor matters that we should have queried. But even our most experienced negotiators were distracted by the sight of the payment offered us.
>
> The strangers no doubt supposed that their goods were quite unfamiliar to us. They watched tolerantly while we dipped our hands into the bags of flour, draped ourselves in blankets, and tested the blades of knives against the nearest branches. And when they left we were still toying with our new possessions. But what we marvelled at most was not their novelty. We had recognized an almost miraculous correspondence between the strangers' steel and glass and wool and flour and those metals and mirrors and cloths and foodstuffs that we so often postulated, speculated about, or dreamed of.
>
> Is it surprising that a people who could use against stubborn wood and pliant grass and bloody flesh nothing more serviceable than stone—is it surprising that such a people should have become so familiar with the idea of metal?

Thus the concept of the "Dreaming" is given an unexpected twist—but it is a twist that holds a sobering prophecy for the future of the white land-takers:

> Some of us, remembering how after dreams of loss they had awakened with real tears in their eyes, hoped that we would somehow awake to be convinced of the genuineness of the steel in our hands and the wool round our shoulders. Others insisted that for as long as we handled such things we could be no more than characters in the vast dream that had settled over us—the dream that would never end until a race of men in a land unknown to us learned how much of their history was a dream that must one day end.

In a collection concerned with the nature of reality, the question of God must be canvassed, and this is done in the best story in this collection, Bruce Gillespie's "What God Said to Me When He Lived Next Door". The story's main concern is with the problem of *coping* with reality, but one can only cope with the reality that one perceives and there is always the dangerous temptation to simplify. The narrator succumbs to this temptation when he discusses The Bomb with God:

> "The Bomb," I said. "You're worried about the same things which worry everybody else?"
>
> "The Bomb—yes. And what the world would be like if the next war *never* starts. I don't like to think about such things. There are so many possibilities. There must be possibilities for . . . good." He chuckled. "Now I'm doing it! I want to stop the world's downhill roller-coaster ride, and I'm talking the same way as the people who started it."
>
> "But why not simply stop it?" I said. I was beginning to get annoyed, in the same way that I get annoyed with my mother when she says she should get her eyes tested, but never makes the appointment with the doctor. "I don't know what you'd do. Snap your fingers? Call up a gang of angels from heaven? Simply defuse the bombs?"
>
> "But how can I do that?" said God. "The world has its own logic. People do. I must work within my own rules, or give up altogether."

Serious issues, these—but they are raised in a story that is delightfully whimsical. By simply decreeing that God for a time "lived next door", Gillespie enables his suburban Everyman character to obtain answers to all the Big Questions straight from God Himself. Douglas Adams did this in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and came up with the answer "forty-two". But Gillespie's answer is less Goonish and more complicated: his "poor old, evolving, ageing God" regularly uses the I-Ching to contact Himself, and recommends it to all those mortals who are seeking answers. But can the story's central character—raised as a God-knowing, God-fearing soul—abandon God for the I-Ching just because God says so? Or, putting it another way, if we believe that there is a God and there are Answers and Solutions, what happens if they land in your lap?

And if *that* line of speculation is not enough to blow a few mental circuits, one need only turn to Kevin McKay's contribution to *Dreamworks*. The title of his story, "Life the Solitude", leads the reader to think of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But Marquez is a writer in our own reality, whereas McKay's story is set in a magpie-and-eucalyptus-infested South America (or is it a South-America-infested Australia?) and Marquez thinks Captain Cook discovered Australia whereas McKay shows how Torres opened up His Catholic Majesty's Colony of Austrialia. Moreover, it hardly seems appropriate to be thinking of Marquez when McKay's story—which is about useful little windmill men and a not-so-useful Frankensteinian giant Windmill Man—would obviously make us think of *Don Quixote*. In fact, if fictions are meant "to hold the mirror up to nature" it is not really useful to be thinking about other *fictions* at all. (Or is it? If the fictions faithfully mirror "nature", why then should they be seen as different from it? But if the fictions do not differ from it, why then introduce the notion of "mirroring" in the first place?)

Strangely enough, these are not idle or fruitless speculations; they flow naturally and instantly from Kevin McKay's story, they link with the concerns and motifs of most of the other stories in this marvellous book—and they relate to the concerns of James Legasse's *The Same Old Story*.

In his Introduction to *Dreamworks*, David King asserts that currently "the best speculative writing is coming from those writers who are critics themselves". He notes that most of the writers in *Dreamworks* "are either associated with universities or are established critics", and he declares that "such a critical ability is essential for the production of good writing". Such sweeping generalizations may be open to debate, but the case of James Legasse reinforces King's point.

Legasse is a critic (he is currently a lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia) and the eleven stories which form the discontinuous narrative of *The Same Old Story* are concerned with the nature of fictional reality. They explore the relationship between the writer and his fictions, testing the way in which the story itself is a means of creating reality (just as in, for example, George Turner's "Feedback", the author tests the assumption that our perceptions are merely a "feedback" that is determined by initial "input").

The Same Old Story is a *livre compose*. Alan Muller's cover painting is a portrait of the author, distinct and emphatic, and the flap of the dustjacket presents a photograph of the author (to pin down the reality of the cover painting). The conventional dustjacket blurb about the book's contents is replaced by a bald biographical summary of the writer's life, and it is at this point—the dustjacket—that the book really begins. A reader perusing the biographical blurb is assailed by nothing but "raw facts"—by an authorial skeleton stripped of meat and organs. Dates and places are noted; relationships and attitudes are glossed.

This, of course, is a deliberate ploy; the reader is being carefully set-up. Approaching the first story armed only with raw facts, the reader finds the story to be titled "All I Know" —a title that seems to promise *more* factuality —and the reader also finds that incidental details of time and place seem to fit the raw biographical facts. The reader is being duped into confusing "real" and fictive realities.

Having created this illusion, the author sets about dispelling it. The second-last page of "All I Know" is heavy with imagery of snow (layer upon layer of it) and this becomes a patterning motif that is carried through a number of stories, culminating in a story *called* "Snow". Does "real" life have such patterns to it? Perhaps it does—but Legasse builds layer upon layer of patterns, insisting upon the *shaping* of the fictions. And he thoroughly confounds the already-duped reader by creating a motif with the phrase "all I know", thereby turning the very hallmark of factuality into a sign of fictionality.

So gradually the true nature of the stories unfolds. The narrator's name turns out to be Joe, not Jim (though those names are so similar), and the narrator is sometimes spoken about in the third person, implying the presence, perhaps, of Joe's creator (the real Jim?). More obviously, the reader is confronted by passages which stress the fictional process:

> I want to get back home, but don't want to be in the house. I just can't face another evening in the country, snacking on sunflower seeds in the quicksand of a beanbag, another evening working on my fiction, another story about love but no love, choice but no choice, another story ending very realistically, very hurtfully.

If this is assumed to be true-to-life "confessional" fiction, the idea of "another evening . . . another story" seems out of place, as does the sense of conscious concern with realism and paradox.

The title story clarifies—but also richly complicates—these concerns. Presented as a series of family letters, the story begins with Joe's mother's reaction to reading one of his fictions:

> Dear Joe, Thank you for sending me a copy of your story though it upset me. I hope you didn't do it intentionally but you probably didn't knowing you. I was sorry to read it as your story and I am sure it was.

And so on. The duped reader as hurt and angry mother. Joe writes back to calm her fears—"Rest assured, the piece is fiction."—but the story itself has created realities of its own. Whether or not it was intentional and whether or not it is "true", the story has had its impact upon its readers, and the fact of this impact prompts angry leters to Joe from other sources, and it is not enough to answer some of these by saying that "the piece is fiction".

In his defensive letter to Mom, Joe outlines a view of fiction that seems to reflect the attitude of the book as a whole:

> I'd like to believe that the details, the tone, . . . that the techniques of the story suggest the events of a life and that they create the painful sense of waste. But: that life, described and defined, need not have been mine. I'm not saying that the feeling informing the story was one which was foreign to me.

As a raw statement this is not new or profound, but then it is meant to be nothing more than "the same old story". But seen for what it really is—not a "raw statement" at all, but a carefully shaped and phrased response by a particular character in a specific context—it becomes an eloquent and perceptive elucidation of the nature of fiction.

In the implications of their titles, *Dreamworks* and *The Same Old Story* could not be more distant. But in their rigorous exploration of the nature of their chosen realities, both collections represent exciting attempts by essentially "new" writers to address the issues that dominate contemporary fiction.

VAN IKIN

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

STEWART CAMERON—born in Scotland, his family emigrated to Australia when he was three years old. Has studied English and Philosophy in Canada under Rotary Youth Exchange Programme and is at present an English Honours Student at the University of W.A. *No: Don't Say a Thing* is his first published story.

ADRIANA ELLIS—born in Perth. Completed a three year Creative Writing course at Columbia University. Her stories have appeared in *Westerly* and Australian literary journals under the name of Moya Ellis.

MARGARET HOUGHTON—was born at Geraldton, W.A., attended University of W.A. and trained as a pre-school teacher. Has taken a degree course at WAIT. She is interested in writing children's stories and plays.

T. A. G. HUNGERFORD—well-known novelist and short story writer. His latest published work is a selection of stories, *Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox.* A new collection of stories is to be published shortly by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

VAN IKIN—born and educated in Sydney, he teaches in the English Department at the University of W.A. He edits *Science Fiction: a Review of Speculative Literature* and has published reviews and articles on Australian literature.

WENDY JENKINS—was born in Perth. Her poetry has appeared in *Westerly* and her book of poems *Out of Water Into Light* was published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in early 1979.

JULIE LEWIS—lives in Perth. She has written for radio and her stories have appeared in Australian magazines. She has been writer in schools at several West Australian high schools during 1981-82. Has published a biography *On Air*, and a collection of short stories *Double Exposure.*

MARGOT LUKE—teaches in the German Department at the University of W.A. Her stories have appeared in Western Australian anthologies, and drama criticism in the press and on radio.

GLYN PARRY—was born in England, has lived in Perth since 1971. He is at present studying at W.A.I.T.

TERENCE TREDREA—is a librarian in Perth. His poems and prose have appeared in literary magazines, and he won a prize for short fiction in the *Westerly* literary competition 1979.

TIM WINTON—was born in Perth and has studied creative writing at W.A.I.T. His stories have appeared in Australian literary journals, and he was joint winner of the 1981 Australian-Vogel Award. His novel, *An Open Swimmer* was published recently.

FAY ZWICKY—was born in Melbourne and educated at Melbourne University. She is lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia. Her critical articles have appeared in literary journals and her second book of poetry, *Kaddish and Other Poems*, has recently been published.

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