MIRROR MAN

Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

William Butler Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

We’ve just finished workshopping Len’s latest chapter and I’m bolloxed. Old Len has a problem with choosing. He also has a problem with wanting to be Leo Tolstoy, which is the main reason for his problem with choosing. It also explains why he hates his Da, who works on the docks and lacks a country estate for him to inherit and give back to the serfs. Lately, Len has started spending all his dough on pot – partly to spite his old man, but mostly because he’s way too busy with his novel to grow his own.

The story is set in a brothel near Parliament House called Purring Pussy. Politicians drop in, fall in love with the pros, try to rescue them and all. Len tells me the worlds of pellies and pros mirror each other. So it goes. This novel is a cancer, to tell the truth. Sub plots, like secondaries, are metastasising everywhere. Maybe shrapnel is a better metaphor – I can’t seem to choose.

Len can write, mind you. He knows how to do conflict – his characters do terrible things to each other, I swear! And their voices sound real, which is a miracle in itself, considering how everyone talks like a nineteenth century Russian hot-shot. Len’s thinking of writing out all the dialogue in Cyrillic Russian. He says it’s a question of verisimilitude. I’ve tried telling him it isn’t a question of verisimilitude, since his characters aren’t actually Russian hot-shots – they just sound like them – but he won’t listen. It’s very postmodern, whatever that means.

The devil is most definitely in the detail. Take the chapter about Ivan and Katya we just worked on. He’s the Minister for Sport and War and she’s the exotic African tigress he met in the Jungle Book Room at the Purring Pussy. They’re in love. Katya wants to elope to Tasmania to raise a family, and so
does Ivan, mainly to get away from his wife and what she'll do to his plums when she finds out what he does with whores. Old Katya can't have kids on account of the abortions, but maybe they'll adopt.

Katya has gone back to turning tricks to save a deposit for after the wedding; also to pay for the smack, which she's using to wean herself off her ice habit. She wants to be clean when she puts on her white dress. Love conquers all, as they say.

While douching after a throw with a punter, Katya gets a flashback from her past life as Vitya, a Russian naval Captain in the Russo-Japanese War. He's on the deck of the Russian flagship Tsesarevich, chewing the fat with old Admiral Oskar Victorovich and a bunch of officers with mutton chop whiskers. Some have interesting scars. For some reason, Katya's flashbacks are told through an omniscient narrator. I've told Len this doesn't work, on account of it being Vitya's point of view, but he won't listen. He says it's "magic realism." That's what he always says when I say it isn't working and he says "verisimilitude" and that doesn't work either. Anyway, we pan over the other ships in the fleet, say "hi" to the officers and a few of the swabbies. (Len tries to be egalitarian now and again - it's a Tolstoy thing.)

The Japanese fleet is spotted and battle stations are manned. While he's waiting for the fireworks to start, Vitya thinks about how little Prince Alexei's a bleeder and wonders if this is a sign that God's a little sore with old Mother Russia. Then there's this long expo on haemophilia - maybe it's a metaphor for Tsarist Russia or something.

The battle starts and the Yellow Sea turns into a red sea. Someone's decapitated head rolls across the deck and stops at Vitya's boots. He pukes all over the epaulettes of the Admiral, who isn't impressed, or anything else, on account of having a bullet hole in his neck and being dead. War is all Hell and all.

Now we're back in Katya's head. All that traumatic war stuff makes her so touchy she forgets about Kolya, her ten o'clock regular, and Ivan and the wedding, and goes out to score some ice. So it goes.

Who knows how it'll end with Ivan, Katya and Vitya - if it ends. There are eighty-seven girls on the menu at the Purring Pussy and 203 members in Parliament House. Who knows how many of them have past lives too. You do the maths. Len tries to keep me hungry by hinting there might be redemption in a few thousand pages, but I'm getting tired. I used to keep reminding him about "Chekhov's gun" - the rule that says if you bring a gun into your story, you've got to use it - but then I realised Len does use all his guns. It's just that there are millions of them. After each workshop, I feel like there's a world war thumping away in my head. If I had Chekhov's gun now, I'll use it, I swear - on Lenny for sure, probably on me.
This stuff about Len's novel isn't a cautionary tale, by the way. It isn't a study in “The Process” either. I just want you to suffer for Lenny's art like I do. Misery loves a friend.

Len's novel makes me think about Ernie Hemingway. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about old Ernie; how he used to say you had to learn how to live before you could learn how to write. I keep getting flashes of his brains freckles down the wall, after he'd gone and done himself in with that shotgun. I'm not sure this is the kind of living I'm after, to tell you the truth. Fact is, I'm having second thoughts about this writing degree I'm doing (if doing is the right word.) For three years now, I've been punching my keyboard and hoping this thing I call my voice will just turn up on the screen, nice and meek, but so far it hasn't. I think my voice has gone down the same black hole that swallows my socks.

My head feels like a sick bag and my knuckles are sore. I haven't been sleeping so swell just recently. I keep having this bastard dream where I'm riding a chariot and some slave guy behind me starts whispering something in Russian, making me crash. It's possible he's telling me that writing isn't good for me. Maybe I should forget about my voice and start worrying about my voices.

At half two this morning, typing away, I looked up at my mirror and saw this madman staring back at me. He made me think about mirrors and writing and what's the goddamn point. Practically everyone holds up a mirror to life now, when you think of it. Everyone's blogging and freeze-drying their phoney forgettablest on webcams. Even if they can't be stuffed, they've got reality telly to hold up the mirror for them.

I tried telling myself that an artist's mirror is special, like those crazy ones you find in fun parks, but we both know that's a ball of shite. There was nothing special about the git reflecting back at me this morning, remembering what he should have forgotten by now — how I used to watch Gretel and me in this mirror getting savage.

Old Gret was pretty hot — a dead ringer for Sylvia Plath. This morning, when it all came back to me, I sat there for ages, staring into the looking glass, watching Grets watching me watching her. Then I noticed it wasn't me she was throwing it in with but her new man, who turned into me again, slamming it home where the sun didn't shine. Then we made love and all (if there's a difference) only I decided I didn't really want to make love, just smell her hair and talk. When she started talking, though, I just wanted her to disappear, but she told me she already had. I told her I forgave her, but she said there was nothing to forgive, on account of me being the bastard. That's when I remembered she was in love with someone else and tried to smash in her face. I only smashed in my mirror and cut my fist, though, her having
already disappeared and all.

After that, I decided on a quiet toss between the sheets, but wrote another thousand words instead. I'm writing a novel, in case you're wondering. It's about this novelist who can't write a novel -- maybe you guessed that already.

Len and I head off to uni. The new guy, Professor Ichspelung, is giving a lecture at nine and we want to get there early; against our principles and all, but we want a good seat. When we arrive, the lecture hall is fizzing, probably on account of the haemorrhage the Professor caused on Tuesday. We hitch up with Frank and I scan the bays, looking less-than-hopefully for hotties smiling back. This guy in front, wearing Easton-Ellis shades, tells us lecky started Tuesday's lecture -- entitled "Natural Selection" -- by burning a heap of books in a forty-four gallon drum. I asked him what the lecture was like but he shrugs; no one heard it, on account of the fire alarms going off and everyone splitting. He says the Professor's been sacked for sure, but Frank says he's checked with the Faculty office and lecky's still taking this morning's show. Today it's "The Author is Dead. Long Live the Critic!"

Frank goes into his foetal curl. His eyes are bulging and he looks like a possum on fry. I tell him he needs some sleep but he starts giggling, like there's a private joke only he and the Gremlins in his head understand. He nibbles at the scabs where his nails used to be and coughs out this world-sorrowy hack that he's been working on. He's trying to be Franz Kafka, for sure. I'm still trying to figure how he gets his ears to jut out like that.

Siobhan is sitting five rows in front, talking to this Manga artist who spends half his life in the gym. He's wearing a Zorro mask, trying to be Thomas Pynchon. So first-year. I hate the way he's smarming up to Siobhan, like he's the cat's mrkrgnaor or something. Siobhan writes poems so bad they're almost avant garde, mostly about some five-eighth from one of the colleges, who dumped her in first year for a girl with sharper nipples. I'd like to sleep with Siobhan, to tell you the truth. Right now, Manga Man's making her melt, like a kewpie doll next to a heater. I want to kill Manga Man. I notice that Frank is wearing a kimono and now I want to kill him too. How am I going to meet girls with friends like him?

Frank may be a genius and all, but he's a sick cunt too. He blames his Da, who I gather was kind to him in his formative years. Frank says this has stunted his creativity. He also resents how the old man's cheques keep interfering with his attempts to slum for his art.

But Frank's obsession with his Da is nothing next to his obsession with "The Process." "The Process" is everything relating to writing that isn't actually writing. It's complicated. Take this idea he got from some story by that guy Borges. The story's narrator describes himself being forced at
gunpoint by villains to read a draft of the novel they’re all in. If you think it through, it’s pretty clever … every time he gets to the bit about reading his novel to the villains, he has to start all over, another layer in, like a picture of
a telly on telly.

Frank said Borges must have lost his pums, writing a story about this never-ending novel. Frank actually started to write it – three phone books’ worth. He’d still be writing it too, if one of our tutors hadn’t told him it might have a market. That made Frank a sell-out, so he tore it up.

Maybe you understand why I need new friends.

Since then, Frank has discovered something called “Crystalisation”, the brainchild of this Venezuelan guy, Polito Mininiquez, who dresses like a Samurai and goes on about “less is more.” Frank lent me his manifesto last month. I only skimmed it but I got the guts of it. “Crystalisation” is like taking a step across a room, then halving it over and over, getting closer to, but never reaching, the other side. By cutting your word count, old Polito says, you never reach the Perfect Story but you get pretty close. The Perfect Story, I guess, is when your word count gets down to nothing and your story disappears.

Right now, Frank is telling us how he’s cutting in half everything he’s ever written – that’s four million words, less two million, less one … Suddenly I remember why I don’t believe in nine o’clock lectures. (Am I the only one of us doing this to get laid?) I nudge Lenny and nod at Frank, hoping he’ll take a hint.

Professor Ichspeitung turns up with an eye candy assistant, wearing a lab coat that can’t quite hide her deadly jabs. She lugs this empty gurney onto the stage and leaves it next to a trolley where rows of shiny nasties are laid out. I’m wondering what the hell is going on. This isn’t Human Anatomy, it’s Critical Theory. Has leky got his faculties mixed up? He fiddles with his collar mike and clears his throat.

“The Author is dead. Long live the Critic!”

Frank and Len grin at me. Even Brett Easton Ellis has taken off his shades. Then Bruce walks onto the stage. Bruce is a model who works in the Fine Arts Building. He told me he does it to perv on the female models posing nude there. I know him because I used to hang out in the Fine Arts Building myself. I used to like perving on the female models too.

Bruce is completely starkers and looks like Michelangelo’s David, only with a bigger pipe. Some of the girls are groaning, but Eye Candy isn’t. She’s like a block of ice. She makes him swallow something from a beaker then points to the gurney, which Bruce lies down on top of. He doesn’t look well, to tell you the truth. Eye Candy straps him down and leky gives her this great ugly scimitar he’s picked up from the trolley. Bruce had gone a little greenish.
I feel for the guy – he’s normally very particular about his complexion. His spray tans are State of the Art. I hope he’s getting penalty rates for this.

“What a piece of work is man!” says Icky. “Let him be our metaphor for the Text. You may think Beauty is here for all to adore...”

He’s got this laser pointer roving over Bruce’s pipe. A few girls giggle but the rest of us are gobsmacked. Suddenly, Bruce goes loopers under the straps, banging up and down. I’m about to tell Icky to stop the show, only I notice Eye Candy smiling and I figure everything’s scripted. Icky starts up again:

“Yet this Beauty, fetching as it is, is only skin-deep, a shadow of our Artistic Form Divine. Our higher purpose, apprentices, is to penetrate the surface, to transcend the flesh by delving inside it, to find the Beauty within. But how? We have butchers’ hands. We need finesse. The Author can’t help us. He’s dead. He, his ego, all his drafts ... erased. Enter the Critic! He will be our surgeon. Finally, even he will disappear. Only the Text will endure!”

He prods old Bruce. I’m not sure about the enduring bit, to tell you the truth. But the whole malarky’s scripted anyway, isn’t it? Icky nods to Eye Candy, who carves into Bruce’s groin with her sword. Then she slices up to his neck, tears back the flaps and goes at the ribcage with some poultry shears, giving us our first squiz at Bruce’s tripe. Who would have thought the guy had so much in him? So it goes.

Eye Candy scoops out some loose blood with a soup ladle and doles it into a bucket. She’s pretty good at this, but Icky’s kidding himself if he thinks it’s finesse.

Next, she slits a V at the base of his neck and peels off his face, just like a latex mask. It’s like it all isn’t happening, which, of course, it isn’t. I hope it isn’t. I remember this line from some flick I saw once on telly, how nothing is really real till you see it on telly.

Eye Candy gets stuck at Bruce’s nose. She tugs and his mouth opens and then his tongue pokes out. It’s pretty awful and some of the girls squeal a bit and it’s worse when she gets creative with the cranial saw, but we soon get used to the idea of Bruce getting carved. It becomes a bit of a yawn, to tell you the truth.

Icky takes out Bruce’s insides himself. He scrapes bits of each organ into his jars, while waxing lyrical over Bruce’s tripe. I try to fast forward only I can’t, on account of it not being telly.

Bruce’s inner beauty piles up in the garbage bag next to Icky. When his chest hole’s empty, Icky gives the bag to Eye Candy, who shoves it under the ribs. Next, she packs a bunch of rags in the brain hole and pulls back the face. Finally, she starts sewing Bruce back together. I gotta say her stitching’s pretty rough. Scars are bad for models. I don’t think Bruce read the fine print in his contract.
After Eye Candy's wheeled Bruce away and Icky's left the stage, I notice Steve sitting in front of us. We chew the fat for a bit. He's looking pasty, on account of barely leaving his flat since October last year. That's when he found his girlfriend Suzie throwing it in with his best mate, Aiden, in his bedroom. He's writing a novel about it, working on it like there's no tomorrow, which for him there isn't, I guess, him being permanently stuck in the day he sprung Suzie with Aiden.

"Over that dose of the Finnegans, ould chum?" he asks.

"Pretty much."

I got a bit carried away back there, thinking I was James Joyce and talking like a plastic paddy and all.

"What's with the voice?"

I shrug, hoping it's the one that belongs to me.

"Touch of the deja vus about it, mate...." Before I can ask what he means, he spies a hottie in the back row smiling at Frank. I can't believe any girl, let alone a hottie, would smile at someone wearing a kimono and looking like Kafka. Frank gives her a sneer. Her cheeks burn and maybe there's a tear, but Frank doesn't care - he's not interested in girls that smile at him. He says happy endings stunt his creativity.

We head for the canteen, today being half-price steak and beers. The canteen is a bit of a candy store. All the guys go there to check out the talent, who go there to check out themselves in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. We take a back table to avoid the Jean Genet gang. Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of respect for poofs and all - me being an artist - but this lot always look like they're about to slip you a rusty trumpet.

Travis comes over and asks if he can sit with us, but Frank tells him to beat it. I notice old Trav is doing his poor little Oscar thing, wearing the green carnation and all. Trav is a bit of a Nigel-no-friends, to tell you the truth, on account of his being a Christian and a virgin and writing linear, none of which are kosher round here.

I feel for old Trav, though. He was in my short fiction class in second year. He wrote this savage piece about an eejit savant named Gustav, who could play the Minute Waltz in thirty-six seconds. He got pretty famous doing it, even played on the telly. Then the Guinness Book of Records people started ringing his mum, asking if he'd clocked thirty-five yet. That made her hungry for her fifteen minutes. She turned into an Ayatollah, putting on recitals for her friends, and making him practice till his fingers bled.

One day, old Gus meets this bird called Dimmy in his special needs class. She's soft as shit but nice; an eejit savant, just like him - her trick is memorising lesser-known statutes. So Gus gets the thunderbolt and decides to chat her up. He tries about a million times, only he can't, on account of not
knowing how. The only thing he knows is playing the Minute Waltz in thirty-six seconds.

So he starts workshopping how to serenade Dims, but it takes up all his time and the Minute Waltz suffers. His mum clocks him at thirty-nine and has a haemorrhage. Gus realises two roads are diverging in a wood and all. He understands he can't love Dims and play Chopin at the speed of light. He chooses Dims, naturally. But before he can chat her up, his mum reads about Dims in his diary and gets vengeful. She's already sore on account of the Guinness Book of Records people not returning her calls anymore. She sends poor Gus off to the nuthouse, but he smuggles in some piano wire and strings himself up.

At the funeral, Dims reads this poem declaring her love for Gus. Suddenly her mum understands why Dim's been all distracted and can't recite the *Lubricating Oil Refinery Limited Agreement Ratification Act* to her friends anymore. She gets vengeful and sends poor Dims to the nuthouse. So it goes.

Back to us. Naturally we’re talking about the lecture. Frank reckons Icky used smoke and mirrors, but I say it was all computer generated. Lenny declares either way it was a scam of form over substance. I wonder if Bruce is okay.

Suddenly, Siobhan rocks up with Manga Man. They seem pretty saucy. I never noticed before how much she looks like Sylvia Plath.

Franks starts his usual argument with Len, saying *how* you write is more important than *what* you write. He starts his old spiel about Leopold Bloom’s cat mrgnnaoing instead of meowing. Len says it’s bollocks. I tune out, more interested in the lovebirds queuing for their meals. Frank starts talking about something he just read about Art and life – how Great Art doesn’t imitate life, it *becomes* life. Len says it depends. Sometimes Great Art becomes life – a sonnet by Shakespeare, for one, is closer to True Love than throwing it in with your girlfriend, but the Bard’s a one-off. You can’t turn him into a general rule.

Feck the Bard, I think. That guy needed a good editor. Too many words. I reckon he had a problem with choosing.

Manga Man whispers something into Siobhan’s ear and they split. I guess half-price steaks are not on their menu. Siobhan’s name isn’t really Siobhan, by the way – it’s Gretel. So it goes.

I want to puke. Frank’s talking with his mouth open and his teeth are festy. I can see bits of meat in the gaps between his fangs (medium rare), which makes me think of Bruce getting carved, and Siobhan with Zorro right now, and Grets with her new man in my mirror. He isn’t really her new man, to tell you the truth, next month being October, making it a year since Greets sprung me with Aiden and disappeared.
I'm melted. It's not really working, is it? Rome wasn't built in a day and all, but a bit of it was. I'm not building anything here, just writing more of the stuff I should be writing less of. Maybe I should withdraw, hitch north and catch some sun. And old Len and Frank and Steve, and all the other voices, they ain't coming. Only I haven't got any dough. I've spent it all on pot and green carnations and Zorro masks and Easton Ellis shades (I stole the kimono from some drunk guy at a party). I could get a job, but it'd be easier just to hit me Da for a cheque.

Steve's glaring my way.

"The voice! I've nailed it: Holden Caulfield!"

He's right. Feck him, he's right. So much for a voice of me own.

"And there's still a shake o' the Finnegans!" He's talking about my leftover Oirish. He's right about that too, the shitehawk. My voices have broken out of their cages and started to eat each other.

Frank look sympathetic. He's knows this unrequited lust trip. He looks at me, eyes a-glinty. Maybe he's Crystallising the wisdom of countless wounds. He might tell me what I already know, what I need to hear anyhow - that stuff about letting go. He might know a way to numb the pain. He slaps my back and smiles.

"Write it down," he says.

"I already have," I say back. Suddenly I notice Len, pointing a shotgun at my head. Maybe it's the gun that Ernie stole from Chekhov.

"Soread it to us," says Len.

"I already have." The muscles at the end of his jaw are rippling and his trigger finger's twitching.

"So read it again," he insists.

It's the Borges thing all over! This has turned out to be a cautionary tale, after all. Let it be a lesson to us all: Don't mess with the Process. Lenny steadies his shooting arm, lines me up and smiles. Trav was right - each of us really do kill the thing we love.

I look in the mirrors all around us and see a guy staring back who looks a lot like me. Is it possible there really can be redemption in a modern tale? And not in a thousand pages either; I mean now! I get a sudden vision of this place without voices or mirrors and the juice flows into me plums. I say to old Len, nice and steady:

"Go ahead, Leonard, make my day!"

So then, God bless him, he does.
FRANZ KAFKA

Paranoia is the muse I trust.
In the mirror each morning

She shifts my mind from
The elotted hair and insect whispers

Of the ancient muses of night
To the cut surfaces of daylight.

I have always known that ink,
Black and slick as the glass

I watch myself in, could save me
From those who would think to lock

Upon the forbidden places of my soul –
Though vigilance, of course, is essential.

(A still lake, drownor of men,
Gifted me that mercury wisdom.)

The axe I keep by the fireplace
Is for me alone.

When I cut into my flesh
It slices open and seeps blood

Like something other than flesh,
And I know that I am not a man.

The relief is spiritual.
Sometimes I want you to see me
In this flat with its wooden table,
Religious as a box, and typewriter,

And I have to hide under the bed
From the compulsions of that

Indifferent and treacherous machine.
I would rather spit bile, but dear God,

How I long for you to see me
With these scraps I deny myself.

I need you to see how I love
My sister-mother-father like a carnivore

And how the moon is a cold mystery
I want desperately to foul.

**Jorge Luis Borges**

Narcissism is the outcome of blindness.
I find myself everywhere

In the thousand nights and
One night of my undercover life:

In the buildings of Stockholm,
Designed by detectives;

And among the deserted iconoclasts,
Defending the invisibility of Allah,

The impossibility of the universe.
(How is it, after all, that infinity

Even possesses a name?)
Atlases and compasses are of no use

To me, and yet I like to think on them:
Those books that contain the known world

Westerly v52
As if it were a fairytale; and those
Magical contraptions, rounded for hands,

That distinguish between the top
And bottom of the earth as if

It had never been arbitrary.
Made for the future and of the past,

Much like a clock or a man,
Compasses point to such paradoxes.

The wooden furniture and leather books
That surround me, inherited from fathers –

All dead at the sword – are as heavy
As the sphinx or eternity.

And yet memories of
A yellow rose glimpsed at sunset,

The sound of a guitar
Expanding the night,

The pitiless God in a tiger’s eye,
And the glint of a cachillero’s knife

Are the things I want to outlive me
With a backstreet violence

That appals and excites.
In here, my mother or my wife,

Secretaries of the invisible,
Move silkily like white cats.

I do not imagine their lives.
They type, I believe, what I tell them to.
Mr Stern

At half past six the headmaster of the high school clicks shut his office and unlocks himself.
The trees in the playground have dwindled to thin lead pencils, but the first planets,
erasterisked high, look sure of themselves.
Past empty classrooms the sound of his shoes snaps after him. I’m nothing but a fox-terrier,
sometimes he thinks, yapping at the world.
(His daughter is in Brisbane. Too far away for him to help.) His trousers shudder chalk into his skin — even though he no longer scratches
the dates of wars onto green boards which protest,
letting loose over his neck and his arms
cold flutters of pain. Over desks like a flock of wrens fighting a trap, the cry of the chalk flew.
Sometimes girls shut their eyes. And once,
a moony boy — Laurie Dickson —
couldn’t stop himself shivering.
Behind the toilets at lunchtime, two toughs
with Elvis cowlicks and muscles as hard as quinces
had almost pulped poor Laurie. Hitler and Mussolini,
Harry and Dave: were men always just a fist,
unclenched, away from being apes?

Rotary night. I’m late, Anthony Stern thinks.
I’ll have to pay a fine. (I’ll have to ring Suzie tonight.)
Behind him the corridors dive into darkness:
night accepts the desks and the lockers,
the walls hung with charts (the human body
sawn lengthwise, crosswise; the mind shaving out
words sometimes wise). The world he lives for
suddenly folds down its walls as limply as a tent,
a temporary camping place he walks from in a blaze
which too quickly dies. Father of two,
grandfather of three – down on his belly in the mud
in New Guinea, fighting and escaping the Japanese ...
His son-in-law came home whole from Vietnam.
(Laurie Dickson didn’t). But last night Tom
whirled like a grenade through the high-legged house
in Annerley. Helicopters hurricane the mango trees
while Suzie hid under the solid pine table,
pale as a peeled lychee when the last bomb dropped.

A headmaster’s nightmares are kinder. Mostly.
Budgets for biros. Exams. He fails, always –
and wakes up in kindergarten, slapped for lying.

“Sorry. Couldn’t wait,”
says the note from his wife under a magnet of a possum
on the fridge when he gets home. “I’ve gone off
to Curl Up ’n’ Dye.”

He calms his hands with crystal
and the sure fire of Scotch. Will she come home
poodle-pampered, revived – or like his face in the mirror
after he quivered away from that hairdresser last time,
a stranger ambushing his eyes? Rotary night. I’m late.
So the world turns – Why should it? Why does it? It turns me
inside out, thinks Anthony Stern, headmaster of the high school,
alone by the phone, ringing his daughter –

his head like the heavens between them
cold and blank as his voice scratches small
stars of comfort on that huge slate sky.
“TO LOVE THAT WELL”: POETRY AND AUTOPATHOGRAPHY

“Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry; and it seems unimaginable to aestheticise the disease.”

Susan Sontag

Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, from which this article takes its title, builds up an almost overpowering sense of ageing and approaching mortality through successive images of decay: those “bare ruined choirs” forsaken by the birds, and the last embers of life “glowing ... on the ashes ... of youth.” This wrings from the speaker that final emphatic couplet: “This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong / To love that well which thou must leave ere long.” Notwithstanding the unusual passion of its utterance, this affirmation of transient life against the encroachment of mortality is by no means unique. It has affiliations with the more conventional carpe diem theme of many other writers, (as well as countless painters from the medieval and renaissance periods). One thinks of Andrew Marvell’s famous exhortation in “To His Coy Mistress” not to delay the realisation of present pleasure while “times winged Chariot” can be heard behind them, “hurrying near”. A famous modern example is Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night.” In fact it could be argued that an awareness of mortality, while by no means always explicit, may be the motivation of most, if not all, poetry. While poets can deplore mortality’s inevitable approach, it also serves to render precious and compel them to celebrate what it will destroy.

As explicit themes, ageing, mortality in general, and death, often violent or sudden death, are found in much writing, most notably as a driver of plot, especially in drama (Shakespeare’s, obviously; but also that of many of his contemporaries such as Marlowe, Webster and Tourneur, as well as many of our own contemporaries), in movies, and in fiction. But in poetry mortality has less frequently occupied centre stage, lurking rather as a sub-theme or an effect of chiaroscuro, a shadow that accentuates the brightness and liveliness
of the rosebuds. Or, as in Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium,” it provokes an impetus within the “dying animal” to be gathered “into the artifice of eternity,” a very different response indeed from Shakespeare's.

Still, mortality figures in or underlies some twentieth-century poetry in English, especially among the Modernists and Late Modernists. One thinks of that talented and tormented generation of American poets that includes Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, at least four of whom took their own lives. What characterises much of the poetry of this generation is its unresolved restlessness, exemplified by its often knotty wrestling with language (as in Berryman and Lowell), its audacious parading in public of personal problems (which led it to be called, misleadingly, “confessional”), and its eschewal of the lyrical. Lowell's “Skunk Hour” could be considered a pivotal point of this period, with its central statement of radical displacement and estrangement echoing both Lucifer in Milton's Paradise Lost and Mephistopheles in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: “I myself am hell, / nobody's here.” In this Late Modernist phase, not only in literature but also in the visual arts and music, serenity (and its Romantic concomitant, Beauty) was unattainable, and consequently not part of a believable description of reality.

Nonetheless, in my opinion one of the most powerful and most moving poems written from within the grip of mental illness was written by the Australian Francis Webb while a patient in a mental hospital near Birmingham (UK). “A Death at Winsom Green” traces the final hours of another patient, and ends:

The wiry cricket moiling at his loom  
Depates a themeless project with dour night.  
The sick man raves beside me in his room:  
I sleep as a child, rouse up as a child might.  
I cannot pray; that fine lip prays for me  
With every gasp at breath; his burden grows  
Heavier as all earth lightens, and all sea.  
Time crouches, watching his face of snows.  
He is all life, thrown on the gaping bed,  
Blind, silent, in a trance, and shortly, dead.

(It is a tragedy that Webb's Collected Poems are no longer in print and available in Australia – another kind of death, you might say.) Taken in isolation, this stanza makes no reference to mental illness, but Winsom Green was, and still is, a hospital for the mentally unwell, and earlier stanzas of the poem make
this clear. What has been achieved in this final stanza, I suggest, is a kind of "green spell" (a phrase that occurs in the poem's first line) from the torment endured by the patients, as an all-encompassing empathy and compassion for the dying man for a moment transcends individual suffering and achieves a moment of acceptance and peace. Yet it is a poem of suffering, for all that, in which repose is achieved only in death, not in the daily business of living.

It is a cliche to say that someone with a mental illness is "mentally disturbed." Often that simply means that they do not think like we do, so there must be something wrong with them. But the cliche has deeper roots: it suggests a mental turbulence, an unrest such as Lowell articulates, an inability to find repose that most of us wish for and, in our happier moments, sometimes achieve. In truth, most of us are probably mentally "disturbed" most of the time: it is the state in which we engage with ideas and emotions, grapple with problems, and try to come to grips with the multifarious demands on our time and affects. What distinguishes us from those considered mentally ill -- and the dividing line is often not clear -- is the degree of turbulence and the inability of its being brought to some kind of quietude. This degree of turbulence is why a number of Emily Dickinson's poems, for example, and Sylvia Plath's, invoke death as a way of gaining peace. They are poems of longing, even of sexual longing, sometimes even of wish-fulfilment, as is Dickinson's:

Because I could not stop for death
He kindly stopped for me ... 8

Much has been written about this poetry stemming from mental unrest or illness, and it is not my intention to add to that debate. I mention it however because such poetry forms a marked contrast to my main focus of interest here: poetry written in response to a grave, life-threatening physical, rather than psychological, ailment. Of course such a physical threat to one's life has enormous psychological consequences, not only for the patient but also for those close to him or her. I know this from personal experience. But the outcome as given expression in the poetry is -- or can be -- radically different.

My focus therefore is on poetry that springs from that intensely personal sense of mortality that comes when the poet finds himself or herself in the grip of a life-threatening disease. For the present purpose, I will consider only poems written by poets who find themselves stricken by cancer, a kind of poetry to which Jeffrey Aronson has given the name autopathography.9

While it is true that enormous advances have been made in the treatment of various cancers over the last few years, particularly in the last five or six,
with more to come, in most people’s minds cancer is the insidious and silent killer, where the body’s own capacity to grow new cells and regenerate turns against itself in a process that too often ends in death. It is in progress before we are aware of it, a kind of growing death that is carried inside us even while we pride ourselves on our robust health. Yet when accomplished poets are confronted with this, their poetry seems at times to express a kind of liberation, even a kind of affirmation, that poetry of mental illness, because of its inherent turbulence, simply cannot. To oversimplify a little, in psychological illness the poet’s mental or psychological condition is the problem. But with poetry arising from cancer, the poet’s physical illness is the problem, and the psychological condition that at times arises from confronting it can become, by contrast, a kind of solution. Furthermore, while such poetry is inescapably personal – nothing can be more personal than staring at one’s own imminent death – I would argue that it has affinities, even if only by way of analogy, though I think it goes further than that, with the wider world of Australia’s history and what, if I may use the cliché, one might call its national psyche.

James McAuley was one of the perpetrators of the Ern Malley hoax in 1944, which was intended as an attack on what he considered the self-indulgence and formlessness of a (rather amateurish and clumsy) Australian attempt at modernism. McAuley was a traditionalist in many respects: in poetic form as much as in religious belief and ideology. As with Webb, much of his poetry betrays an obsession with guilt and worthlessness which borders on despair:

Only those joys that lie
Closest to despair
Are mine to hold on by
And keep me clear.\(^{10}\)

he writes in "Time out of Mind." And in a later poem, "Anonymous Message," hope seems to be no more indwelling than an article of clothing:

Believe O believe a native
Of the country of despair:
You must never give up hope
Even just as something to wear.\(^{11}\)

But a profound change of mood appears in a number of McAuley’s late poems, written when he knew that he was dying of cancer. The illness
is confronted directly: “There’s no relief or natural cure. / I drown in silence and endure / The thought of never getting better” he writes in “Convalescence.” But a poem that delicately details a Tasmanian pastoral scene (“At Rushy Lagoon”) ends with the affirmation that what surrounds him “… is a world of sense and use.” And “Plein Air” – the title itself suggests an openness to the world outside – expresses a quiet gratitude and a sense of integration with the wider, regenerative world of nature even as we are doomed to “go” from it:

Moss-rose with muddled centre, litmus-pink;
Pale cherry-flowers, open to the bee.
The cat rolls on the path and looks at me.
The world’s the same whatever I may think.

Bush-honey golden brown, white curds of cheese,
Black bread, red wine; we murmur thanks and go.
Reconciliation seems to flow
From the blue sky into the twinkling trees.

McAuley’s last collection of poetry, A World of Its Own, was published posthumously in 1977, and is a series of quiet celebrations of the landscape and seascape which surrounded him as he was dying. These poems lack the intellectual engagement and linguistic compression of his earliest poetry, and his entry in The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature judges that they “do little to enhance the reputation and prestige he gained from the more substantial earlier works.” With reference to neither God nor guilt, however, they are indeed a poetry of reconciliation.

Gwen Harwood (1920–1995) was a friend of McAuley, and like McAuley she too suffered from cancer. Harwood was an intensely intelligent poet, whose poetry ranges through high spirited verbal play, Wittgensteinian meditations and aphorisms, a series of “conversations” with dead friends, and reflections on the beautiful landscape of water and mountains of southern Tasmania where she lived, and where she loved to fish. In an essay on Harwood published in 1987 I argued against reading Harwood’s poetry as autobiography, tempting though it was to do so. (She had, after all, published a number of poems under four different pseudonyms.) Such caution, however, seems somewhat beside the point in Harwood’s later poetry, where a sardonic wit constructs a speaking voice every bit as conscious and critical of itself as we are of it. Here is the title poem from her 1988 volume, Bone Scan.
In the twinkling of an eye
in a moment, all is changed:
on a small radiant screen
(honeydew melon green)
are my scintillating bones.
Still in my flesh I see
the God who goes with me
glowing with radioactive
isotopes ...
Each glittering bone
assures me: you are known.

This, of course, is not that poetry of reconciliation that I am attempting to identify. Rather, it seems to hover between the awareness of mortality that Eliot ascribes to Webster who "saw the skull beneath the skin," and a wry sense that mortality will see through us all. As such, it is a good example of the mental and emotional gymnastics that is one characteristic of Harwood's autopathographic poetry. Another poem, "Night and Dreams," is a kind of conversation with Crab — who is both the crab she would eat in her childhood in Brisbane and catch while fishing late in her life in Tasmania, and the cancer eating her. The poem is immensely playful, gymnastic in the way it juggles with various manifestations of Crab, but ends on a very different note:

O my lost loves
Waking to hard-edge sunlit colours,
sharp birdsong, lamb-bleat, I recall
myself among the moonlit sheep

questioning — what? Why should I care
how long ago my death began?
Am I a ghost dreaming I'm human
with herbs to plant, a fence to mend?

Those day to day jobs of planting herbs, mending fences, are worthy distractions from musing on when her cancer first began. Yet typical of Harwood's rigorous mental acuity and her subtle irony is the ambiguity of those last few lines: Am I already willing to become a ghost dreaming, while I have daytime jobs to do before I die? Or, Am I already merely a ghost, dreaming of my past human life and its chores? The poem affirms life while balancing it on its inevitable negation.
Another poem called, again with Harwood’s self-critical irony, “Resurrection,” ends in this way:

Let me wake,
if I wake at all, on the threshold
of day in my father’s house
believing all riddles have answers
night gone my grandmother walking
head bowed over glittering pasture.21

The father in this poem is no God, as it may have been in McAuley’s poems, but the son of her grandmother. The key words are, of course, that conditional clause: “Let me wake, / if I wake at all …” What this poem articulates is a wish to be integrated with her past, her family, her land – and I would argue that it achieves it, a continuity of being that is not subject to Harwood’s frequent pyrotechnic irony because it encompasses it. The verbal pyrotechnics of late poems such as the earlier sections of this one and “Night Watch”22 are a psychological and verbal resistance to the kind of comprehensive acceptance and reconciliation I am trying to characterise. They are instances of her ‘battling’ against her illness and, in effect – given the nature of cancer – battling against herself. But the passage I have quoted marks a move beyond battle to acceptance – not of the illness, but of the mortal world that the illness has revealed. As Blake has said, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.”23 Harwood’s poem “Autumn Rain” ends in this way: “A day to think of death, / perhaps, or of children’s children / inheriting the earth.”24 And “Threshold,” a loving depiction of the area where she lived in Tasmania, concludes with this embrace of the natural world, and the purity and authenticity with which it alone can teach us to pray

... the plover and their young
are safe in feathery grasses
stirred by the seawind breathing
a prayer of peace and healing
in the pure, authentic speech
that earth alone can teach.25

Jennifer Rankin was born in 1941. In the first part of 1978 she discovered that she was suffering from breast cancer, and she died of it in December of the
next year. Not much of her output is explicitly about her illness, and Judith Rodriguez, in her long introduction to Rankin's *Collected Poems*, argues persuasively that her poetry's source was largely elsewhere:

> There would be no great wonder in Rankin's living in words through imagined treatment of cancer she had cause to suspect during checks on breast irregularities, but even that isn't what the poems are about.²⁶

Yet there is one poem, unfinished at the time of her death, that explicitly acknowledges her illness and is powerfully, if quietly, affirmative:

> Tonight I travel again
> at the edge of this land
> Ill for nearly two years now
> Yet, what is this illness
> that it can give such freshness to me
> This gift of vision
> that it can reshape a world
> So that tonight from the train
> I gaze at a land that seems to
> invite? ...

> Like a long-awaited love
> it lays itself out ...²⁷

And another, untitled, late poem beginning with the line "This is how it happens" describes a "healing of the spirit" in which "Mornings are given back / To be tasted again, to be moved amongst," and she can declare "I walk amongst my own body and it is filled with light."²⁸

Philip Hodgins was a much younger poet than the preceding three. He was born in 1959 and died of leukaemia at the age of thirty-six. He published seven books of poetry, and much of it deals with his illness. Many of these poems are hard to face, since they mercilessly confront us with the grotesqueness and suffering caused by both cancer and its treatment: the pain, the nausea, the indignity, the helplessness. In one poem, called "Cytotoxic Rigor", for example, he declares that:
A creature expands in your guts, in your being.
It squirms and it grabs. It has no meaning.
You vomit through surges of nausea and pain.
And when there's nothing left to vomit you vomit again.29

Another poem, “More Light, More Light” (reputed to be Goethe’s dying words) set in a hospital ward, acknowledges that “You’re moving fast and yet you’re going nowhere.”30

But several poems in his final book, Things Happen (1995), indicate a breadth of acceptance, even serenity, that goes far beyond clinical resignation. In one extraordinary poem called “The Precise Moment,” a “surgeon cuts a green apple in half,” while thinking of an operation he had performed earlier in the day on a cancer patient. “Did he get it all?” he wonders, as he closely observes the apple he’s now eating:

He notices a slight brown film already gathering
on the surfaces he has exposed – flesh rusting –
and imagines these pieces as they would be

if he’d left them sitting on this plate
for a day, a week, a month, a year:
how nothing in nature is ugly or wrong.31

Inevitable degeneration and decay, the poem suggests, are part of “nature,” no matter how regrettable it might seem. And “Home is Where the Hurt is” acknowledges that attempts to joke about death, to talk it down, as Harwood attempted to do in some of her poems, just do not work. There is no alternative to acceptance, hard and frightening as that might be. The poem ends on this note:

Now I'm living out the whole thing in my mind.
Not death itself, the overwhelming fact
of our existence, but that moment when we find
a link between our life and death, the final act.

Each connection is lived through, then undone.
Happy. Sad. Sacred. Scared. Every day a different one.32

That “link between our life and death” is, in fact, that complex mood, that comprehensive psychological state, that those four unadorned adjectives
characterise so well. This is a state of utter honesty, in which all the turbulent and conflicting emotions are held in a profound stasis.

Doris Brett is another poet who has written extensively about her own confrontation with cancer. In the Constellation of the Crab has the author’s comment printed on the back cover:

The cancer poems were my journal – I wrote them through my experience. Their essence has been the transformation of a life-threatening experience, with all its pain and terror, into something illuminating and transcending.

This, I think, comes close to describing what I am trying to characterise, but not quite close enough. This is the ending of Brett’s poem “After the Operation”:

And because there seems no other word, you say it again ‘miracle, miracle’ ... and your body purrs, hums and begins to heal.

Healing from cancer is a long and hazardous process, taking years. As Hodgins’ poetry shows, the journey towards healing – even if successful – is anything but pretty. The body does not feel like a cat, and it often smells sourly of drugs, “humming” in a way probably not intended by Brett. One can respond and empathise with the elation that she expresses in successfully emerging from surgery, but this poem seems to spring from hope and a determination to make sure that things will go well rather than from the kind of radical and deep-reaching realism I find in the other poets. Brett is too good a poet for her poems to fall into the common category of art therapy though, a practice discussed and dismissed in a wide-ranging article by Iain Bamforth in The Lancet in 2001. But they lack that quality of a freedom from both regret and desire that I find in the other poets discussed here.

The last poet to look at – very briefly – is Dorothy Porter. Porter was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2003. A short suite of poems titled “The Ninth Hour” is concerned, not so much with her illness, as with her reaction to it: “I have come to a river / where only pain / keeps its feet / I have come to a bridge / of dissolving bone” she admits (unpaginated). But the suite ends on a note reminiscent of Shakespeare’s declaration in Sonnet 65 that “in black ink my love may still shine bright”:
I am not here
silent and alone …
I stand my ground
in the undaunted spray
and company
of my own words.

And in a characteristically feisty poem, published in the August 2006 number of The Australian Book Review, she portrays herself in a “starched hospital gown” imagining that she can smell tigers (echo clearly of Blake.) And she declares

When I get my life back
When I am clear of here
I will go
like a blind blessed arrow
where I can wallow
in the elixir
of tiger.37

These six Australian poets, whose careers have spanned more than sixty years to date, have written much more diverse poetry than this discussion might suggest. I have chosen to concentrate only on one element, the autopathographic, in their work, poetry written with a profoundly personal and inescapable sense of the immanence — as well as the possible imminence — of their own death. Attitudes to cancer have changed since McAuley was first aware of his illness, and so has treatment. But the common element I hope to have identified in their poetry is that four of the poets openly acknowledged the inevitability of their mortality as an opportunity to widen their embrace of the world in which they live, whether it be the natural, landscape world, or that of intimate personal relationships. If they must leave it soon, then they also must love it well — all of it. As Inga Clendinnen writes at the end of her memoir Tiger’s Eye, concerned with her suffering from acute liver disease that could be remedied only by a liver transplant, “the clear prospect of death only makes living more engaging,” so that at the end of her ordeal she was “battered, possibly wiser, certainly wearier and, oddly, happier.”38

Death is not something we normally dwell on, nor should we. The poets I have discussed have had no alternative, because their death has been living

Westerly v.52
within them to the point where it cannot be any longer denied. So to conclude, I want to suggest that Australia also, within its history, has death, or more precisely several grave illnesses involving death on a grand scale, dwelling inside it.

European settlement of Australia and its subsequent success not only marginalised the indigenous inhabitants but, for almost two centuries, wiped their diminished existence, and their disinheritant, from our national conscience. To give a personal example, I grew up in a town in Western Victoria where I never saw an indigenous person, even though we had some knowledge that an “Aboriginal settlement” was out there, somewhere, not far away. We never visited it. Furthermore, European settlement and its inappropriate farming techniques destroyed much of Australia’s fragile environment and created a dying landscape, poisoned by salt. For many decades these traumas were buried from view as Australia rode on the sheep’s back and, more recently, became China’s quarry. But these deaths did not cease to exist. Like cancer, they continued to grow within the unawareness of a burgeoning Australian population, while we turned our attention elsewhere, either through ignorance or for less acceptable reasons. Ever-increasing areas of farmlands succumbed to salinity, and the unhappiness and cultural disaffiliation of many indigenous Australians still show little signs of diminishing, nor does their disproportionate incarceration and death rate. Only recently – in the last decade or so – have these buried traumas, together with an acknowledgement of our role in global warming, come to national consciousness. And the word I would stress here is consciousness. My model is obviously Freudian.

My contention is that the poets I have discussed provide something of a model for what should happen and, in fact, I believe is slowly happening, in Australia’s national consciousness. The amplitude of these poets’ response to their condition is the result of acknowledging and embracing all the facts, not just those that will give an illusory and temporary comfort or optimism. This means accepting all the complexity of the illness, hidden as it has been from our awareness. It means acknowledging the illness’s context: the personal relationships, and the social, economic, political and natural environment within which we all live and within which its consequences are being played out. And we need to face the fact that often, unknowingly, as with cancer, we have been its host and harbinger, unwittingly allowing it to develop. But our society is more self-aware now than twenty years ago, we have been diagnosed and shown where things are wrong. So finally, this acknowledgement must not be merely cerebral, a few changes to policy on the part of government or a handful of books, or articles such as this. It has to
be as deeply felt, as indwelling, within the nation as the morbidity itself. These poets have shown how it can be done. Only then can Australia, like Dorothy Porter, achieve the fullness of knowledge and understanding that will enable us to “wallow / in the elixir / of tiger”.

Note
This article was written before the publication of John Wiltshire’s excellent article “Pathography? Medical progress and medical experience from the point of view of the patient” in Southerly in 2006. Wiltshire’s article is primarily historical, and does not cover any of the writers I deal with, but I recommend it strongly to anyone interested in reading further in this area. Pathography, as its etymology indicates, means writing about illness. Aronson’s term Autopathography, which is the focus of the present essay, thus indicates writing about one’s own illness, as in autobiography.

Notes
12 McAuley, Collected Poems, 220.
13 McAuley, Collected Poems, 223.
14 McAuley, Collected Poems, 226.
18 Gwen Harwood, Bone Scan (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1988): 8.
20 Harwood, 33.
21 Harwood, 43.
22 Harwood, 9.
24 Harwood, 53.
25 Harwood, 47.
27 Rankin, Collected Poems, 238.
28 Rankin, 218.
30 Hodgins, 54.
31 Hodgins, 58.
32 Hodgins, 52.
33 Doris Brett, In the Constellation of the Crab (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1996).
34 Brett, 27.
CHARLES DARWIN & EMMA WEDGEWOOD: THREE POEMS

1. Darwin 1838

He has inside his head the first spark, a burning, that will set fires, worse than any Inquisitor's flames. At times he sees himself as a pyromaniac, lightning emanating from his fingertips, burning the City of God. He knows it and doesn't know it, unsure and wanting to keep God on his side, but behind this affable man, so courteous and agreeable, a man who almost wore a collar, is a secret. He imagines it as a white patch, petal-shaped, that has lodged in the right sphere of his brain, that greys sometimes to doubt, but always reappears. At the moment it has darkened and is dragging him down, doubling him over in stomach pains, but he never wishes it to leave him.

It sets him apart, it is a secret afterall, and he is keeping it to himself. There are the evenings at the Athenæum that he wouldn't give up: the soft sinking into leather, the port & cigars, the admiration of powerful men. But inside his head a light is dawning, like some God has decreed the beginning of a world, and he feels it descending to a common ancestor and further back still. For the moment he cannot speculate on it, his stomach pains erupt when he imagines the consequences. Still not established or married he knows this could so easily break him. He has within that white petal, that fire, something worse than any Dissenter has proposed and he has seen enough of them fall from the graces. He will take his time, never imagines himself a genius, but he has the patience of a born observer,
and has no peer. It is this gift, green and like the side of a mountain, 
that he intends to cling till the moment is right.

2. Darwin’s Proposal

“As for a wife, that most interesting specimen in the whole series of 
vertebrate animals. Providence only knows whether I shall ever capture one 
or be able to feed her if caught” (Darwin).

Getting close to thirty
he thought of marriage
and made a for and against column
on a blue scrap of paper.

There were shackles that he may not be able to bear: 
to travel where you will,
nights out and clever talk,
and of course the terrible expense 
and anxiety of children.

What was a man without wife & children:
your own blood that would live on
and be a second life as he called it,
a wife for companionship, a friend in old age,
an object to be beloved and played with,
much better than a dog, and imagine a nice warm home
with the fire aglow and a soft wife on the sofa,
the charms of music & female chit-chat,
all good for the health, unlike growing old alone,
a dribbling fool leaving only a set of old books,
yes he must marry and went and saw Emma Wedgwood.

3. Eternity

“I am the vine, ye are the branches ... If a man abide not in me, 
he is cast forth as a branch and is withered; and men gather them, and cast 
them into fire, and they are burned.”

Emma had sent her fiancée away to read 
the end of John, chapter thirteen,
of Christ telling the disciples of the place
he had prepared for the faithful.

She intends to be united with her dead sister,
imagines heaven with clear skies
and roses blooming all year round,
and wishes Charles to be there too
but since hearing an outline of his work
she has mourned the loss of his soul.
She fears the fires of hell for him
and knows there can be no eternity for them.

He thinks of fire & heat in geological terms,
and has seen it erupt at the end of the earth.
He doesn't fear it in the green country of Down.
As for vines & branches he has been working on his own,
humans appear at the far tip and it is the tracing back
to the vine that he has set his lifework.
It is this descent that seems like eternity.
PEASOUP

Fog is a cloud that has lost the will to fly.

Bill Bryson

After the downpour – a peasuoper.
Fog so thick it is like glaucoma. The spirits are said to be let loose in fog such as this.

I wanted to go to the centre of the oval where even the dark silhouette of the treeline disappears and you can imagine the world evaporated.

Out there I found a bunch of cricketers camouflaged in the mist waiting for their blindness to lift and the contest to resume. It felt distinctly odd meeting them like steamed ghosts, part cloud, part will’o’th’wisp standing with the drowned worms in the grass. Not sure if it assists the whole picture.
"SO YOU MAKE A SHADOW":  
AUSTRALIAN POETRY IN REVIEW 2006–2007

Forty-five volumes of poetry published in Australia over the last twelve months have been turning up at my place, in little gangs, or singly, every week for the last six months. And they have stayed, perched on my desk, defying me and my work schedule, prompting me to read them late at night, or first thing in the morning, to make room for them. Most are by individual authors, others are by couples, or in anthologies and “Best ofs.” It is astounding and wonderful that in this land of footy and telly and popular culture, forty-five poets (and many more I’m sure) have managed to write, publish and disseminate their work. Of course there is poetry about footy and telly and popular culture, but let’s face it, poetry writing and reading is not the main game.

I had, after all, invited them, or at least left the door ajar. This crowd (mob? congregation? enclave? flock?) of poets was welcome. Many seemed, after all, like old friends: Bruce Dawe’s Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954–2005, the latest Friendly Street volume, Les Murray’s Fredy Neptune: a Novel in Verse reissued after its first appearance nine years ago; the revered elder statesmen of poetry (yes, mainly men, 20 to 9 in the single-author volumes) – Geoff Page as anthologist and poet/novelist, Julian Croft in the lovely new John Leonard Press edition, Tom Shapcott’s spiky, terse and crafted poems, David Malouf’s Typewriter Music in a beautifully produced little hardback volume from UQP, and Dennis Haskell’s All the Time in the World, with its alphabetical romp “A Defence of Poetry” lauding

All Poetry’s perceptive, pointless pleasures
– In all the horror, a thin piece of light
Like a weightless parcel adrift on the doorstep. (13)

So for the thousandth time I asked myself, what is poetry? Who reads it today,
in Australia, and why? Does poetry, as Auden and now Malouf suggest, make “nothing happen?” Is it just “a weightless parcel adrift on the doorstep”? It is so much more than that, I insisted to myself. I was thinking of the conversation I’d had a few days before with a group of friends, when the topic had been Harry bloody Potter and the final episode. I don’t really mind Harry, or his popularity, but I had asked some friends, probably a little haughtily, whether with all their Harry reading late into the night they had any time for poetry. A glaze came over their collective eyes. It was caused, I imagined, partly by nostalgia for the experiences they’d had in the past of reading poetry; or was it partly guilt for not reading it “much” anymore, and partly preparation for fleeing from the perceived rigours and demands of poetry reading?

Then and there I realised again something about poetry: at its finest it is the richest, most probing literature possible. It is craft and meaning, it is intellectual, aesthetic, political, humorous, deeply moving, self-questioning, self-reflexive, steeped in memory, traditional and experimental. Yes, it does ask something of us. It is brief but not in the way of sound-bites and camera shots. Its brevity asks for our attention, our wrestling with meaning, our responses. Poetry is capable of opening up a thousand possibilities and counter possibilities in the human mind.

But still, why do poets do it? And Australian poets, far from the centre of cosmopolitan literary cultures (this isn’t cultural cringe, it’s reality), and two centuries out from Shelley’s legendary pronouncement that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. The motivations are multiple of course, but in reading through these volumes I want to investigate what they reveal as the main spurs to poetry writing and publishing in twenty-first century Australia, and to ask how – if – the culture is challenged and transformed by such writing. Does poetry make anything happen?

It seems to me that what we encounter, in the private and public impulses of contemporary Australian poetry, is an engagement with aesthetics and the craft; politics; metaphysics and ontology; and love, sex and the body. These impulses interweave, and in some of the truly fine poetry being written today in Australia we find several strands at work simultaneously. And always there is the pressure of unique, individual (though sometimes, rarely, collaborative) voices.

Aesthetics: craft, language, the medium

Australia boasts poetic crafters who have dazzled the world. Les Murray is recognised and lauded across Europe, in India and, more ambivalently, at
home. *Fredy Neptune*, a blockbuster combining story, character and a loose-boned plot with an idiosyncratic aesthetics, draws many admirers and perhaps just as many detractors. To call Murray’s language “Australian” is to set more than one dingo amongst the sheep. Suffice it to say that when Fredy leaves the farm “outside Dugong” and heads out for adventure into the early twentieth century pre-war world, the irreverent, humorous and demotic is set loose:

Soon after, the Kaiser came on board with crowds of heel-clickers. He wore a resentful snobby look, electric whiskers in his pink grandpa face, and a helmet like a finial off a terrace house. We’d to change our caps, he said, and put on fezes. We were now the Turkish Navy. Enver Pasha had a haemorrhoid look on him, at that part. (14)

Wearing its historic and cultural knowledge lightly, even jauntily, *Fredy Neptune* takes its aesthetics seriously and subtly, submerging it into the stream of narrative, the long, conversational lines spinning a yarn which is expansive enough to entertain, but which can deepen, almost imperceptibly, into horror. Two stanzas after Fredy’s disrespectful meeting with the pink grandpa Kaiser, he watches a group of Turkish women being entertained by unidentified foreign men:

Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it. The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance – then pouf! they were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames, whopping and shrieking. (15)

Aesthetics here is at the service of inquiry, through language, into personal and national identity, into gender, and into human ethics. The notion of cosmopolitanism is here being stretched and played with in multiple ways, as the German Australian proletarian *hochstapler* Fredy steps into the wide world. Many do not concur with, or even have nightmares about Murray’s ideology, as they see it, but the poet can write. His language is chock-a-block with the colloquialisms of place and time. The long prose-like lines are limber and rhythmically buoyant, embracing a cosmos of places – Dugong, Messina, Constantinople, the Dardanelles, the Russian Front, Shanghai, Cairo, Berlin, LA and Hollywood – and languages, as Fredy tells his story. In his “Afterword” Murray laughs, as he so often does, at “the lofty class-terminology of literary studies” as unable to cope with the poem’s “defiantly proletarian” language.
Nevertheless, in fatherly protective mode he worries that his book is “vulnerable to the control which jargon seeks to impose” (267). Ah, jargon. That most damning of words from a poet’s mouth. As a literary critic I would only reply by accepting the other invitation of Murray’s “Afterword,” to approach the poetry without the author “instructing people how to read it or interpret it” (267).

Thanks Les, for that freedom. Fredy Neptune is indeed “your brand-new myth,” and it adds to the potency and reach of Australian language in a multiple of ways, proudly drawing with it Murray’s “first language ... that of Australian rural workers and small farmers” into “unlicensed disobediences, fresh imageries, fresh turns of speech and thought” (269). But: give us a break, poet. Don’t make it a competition all the time between your authentic farm-speak and that “standard Bohemian high vernacular” which you say despises your language. Surely your own work is evidence that those two old war-horses have been mingling in each other’s paddocks for a while now. You are one of those who let them loose, giving each new vigour.

That cornucopia of randomness, multiple paths, languages and characters which is Murray’s verse novel stands in counterpoint to the aesthetics of David Malouf’s poetry in Typewriter Music. Most readers know Malouf as a fine novelist – a poetic novelist – rather than a poet. In these poems his language is distilled, prismatic, graceful. It probably qualifies in that category of “high culture” disparaged by Murray, for here we have a world of wine, music, visual beauty, nature as passionately Edenic: “Grace notes, promissory / glimpses. Could paradise / be a colour?” (2). This is a world where language is used to conjure up beauty from simplicity, “the crisp air a scent / of last month’s pears in straw, sheets folded on their laundry smell / of soap and sky...” (5). It’s a world you might want to inhabit, but know you can’t, except perhaps momentarily in these sensuous gem-like poems.

Brian Edwards is also a seasoned poet, fiction writer and literary critic. His knowledge of language and language games is evident, and in fact is the theme of many of his poems in The Escape Sonnets. After Malouf’s lovely “pears in straw,” we read Edwards’ witty and ontologically suggestive “Just Another Pear Tree Poem”:

How many languages does a pear tree speak?
Chetwynd’s Dictionary of Symbols goes from ‘pattern’
to ‘pearl’. Pear is pearl without the ‘I’.
What does it take to justify a place?
‘Apple’, you may be sure, is there,
enshrined in Christian iconography,
bedecked with deying.
But if, as the story goes, The Fall from grace, into knowledge, into language, holds offer of Redemption, what better fruit figure to signify a chance than a pear, almost pearl, yellow and green, smooth, shaped like a breast, like a body, a source? (104).

Edwards, a poet after all, throws his lot in with language, but with a wry gesture of hope towards what might be beyond language and signification – Redemption, grace, justification. It is hardly a manifesto, more a witty desire that language might be transcended, but not before it honours the pleasures of the material world – the pear, the breast, the body.

Christopher Kelen who lives and works in Macau deploys his language in the service of place and time, those material realities he seeks, haltingly, sometimes diffidently, to enter. The poetry of Dredging the Delta is supple and reflexive, fitted to the waterways and tidal movements of Macau and Hong Kong and beyond, to China. There is a reserved, observing wit to Kelen’s poems which are accompanied by his own anarchic but contained sketches. There is a double action to the poetry, the fittingness of observation of place, and “the unfitting of pieces”:

ashore I am
as stray shipping come
part of the wall, part of the paper
a doorway painted red
of birds raucous

streets end in harbour, mast, grimy moon

on all fours find me
dot to the day

the town comes apart
in my hands (“The World is a Wedding” 11).

A deconstructing aesthetics is at work here, a conjoining of the traditions of the lyric with a much more brooding, dirty eye. Language gets pared and precise in this aesthetic which does not want to simply lyricise:
this is the city of charcoal fume trapped
how many last breaths have been in this cause?

still they’re building
  I can’t think what could stop them

but while I have breath
I will witness. ("incense is the rice of the dead" 22)

The language here is almost Blakean: watching, noting, pared, judging, but unlike Blake never judgemental. Beneath the slim, cut lines there is a plangent, elegiac appeal to forces which might be moral, but which are in no hurry:

  the moral note which air holds high
  fixed stare

  there’s gridlock on a bridge of light

  too much colour
  too much rhythm to the sea,
  this grinding glare of day’s still middle
  sweat of the year’s

  and ambling centuries let slide... ("where the long beach was" 44)

Could this be considered political? There is an astuteness of judgement infusing the verse, but it is certainly not political poetry, if by that is meant a poetry which seeks primarily to awaken, even direct the reader to issues of injustice, the violence of history, and the need for change. Reading Kelen’s seductive, witty verse, one knows that humans bring about change, but that all effects will slide seaward, subject to “ambling centuries” and the processes and layerings of air and sea and time...

Politics and Poetry

Anita Heiss’s I’m not racist, but is most definitely political poetry. It is a volume to set your head spinning. Heiss, a Wiradjuri woman, writes poetry which is overt, in-your-face, uncompromising. Here, race politics are uppermost, akin to those of Murri poet and songman Lionel Fogarty, but less concerned with the politics of language. By this I mean that the genres and linguistic forms
of the poetry lack originality, even as they pack a punch because of their political stand.

You’re sorry! You’re sorry!! You’re sorry!!!

Well not half as fucken sorry
as I am
at having to listen to you
in my office
at writers festivals
at dinner parties
after lectures. (“Apologies” 1)

This is the opening poem of I’m not racist, but. There is humour built into the genre of diatribe which catches the ear with its paradoxes, its listings. The “you” being addressed is white Australia, obviously, and we better fucken listen. Well, yes, I’ll listen. But I wonder how widely or how well this sub-genre of poetry/abuse or shouting will be listened to? There is no doubt that such a stance comes from unbelievably gauche meetings between racial others, with white do-gooders unloading their “spiritual experiences / at Uluru,” never having had “the opportunity / to hug / a blackfella” (3). Yet to ask that question again: does poetry make anything happen? What will this poetry make happen? For whom?

Part 11 of Tom Shapcott’s The City of Empty Rooms is a suite of political poems which work through a slow-burning white heat anger about Australia’s political present. In poems such as “The Ballad of Razor Wire,” “Creative Writing Class,” “The Unwanted” and “Seven Refugee Poems,” Shapcott proves himself one of our more astute poetic critics – along with J. S. Harry, Jennifer Maiden and the late and much missed John Forbes – of current-day horrors. In the second of the refugee poems, “Illumination,” Shapcott’s precise, scouring voice states simply:

Tonight, on that TV coverage of abandoned refugees
Behind razor wire threatening the Xenophobia of Mr Howard
And the paperwork of Mr Ruddock
I saw the young man raise his left hand in despair.
‘Brother’, I thought, and my complacency burned
in the small illumination. (37)

This is poetry as protest, speaking from the position of so many Australians caught in the grip of political realities they cannot believe, or believe in.
While some may dismiss the stance as middle-class guilt or impotence, surely the poetry in its eloquence is making something happen, voicing a strong impulse for political change. A poetic How to vote card? An act of prayer; which can well be a prelude to many actions? Itself a truthful, passionate action.

Love, Sex and the Body

Another, very different kind of arena in which poetry makes things happen is that of the body, and sexuality, though this of course is also a political arena. Terry Jaensch and Cyril Wong have produced a hard-hitting collaborative volume entitled Excess Baggage and Claim. That Australian wizard of sexual confrontation, Christos Tsiolkas, applauds the volume saying “these poems are odes to longing and desire, sung at 4am from the back bar of an impossible city where the borders have yet to be created and have yet to be dismantled.”

The setting is never pinned down but is various sites in Singapore, the characters gay men enacting or failing to enact their fantasies, racial and sexual politics rumbling often ominously below the surface wit:

To keep my cock limp I recite poetry. In
this heat endless, availability and relative
safety it pays to sharpen one’s mind, if
not to stiffen one’s resolve then to let it lie –
knownly ...
(“Karaoke Booth 2” 29)

Now there’s something that poetry makes happen, or not happen. Quite a lot of the poetry in this volume is confrontational, placing before us not just the body, but the violence of desire, the longing and need of the characters. The final stanza of “Do you still dream of that night?” presents the image of a young boy, victim of incest, pincered bodily and emotionally by a father:

a man who insisted he loved him
again and again

till there was no choice but to feel it
surge from the center of him,
springing free like an animal out of a fire. (49)

The language is spare and dramatic. There is moral grief, but the focus of anger or disgust is not simply the father as perpetrator. There is also,
stunningly, some understanding offered toward the man “who insisted he loved him,” even as the child/man looks back, measuring with grief the effects.

In a very different mode, the exquisite Vertigo: a cantata by Melbourne poet Jordie Albiston is written in the form of a cantata with a series of aria and choruses, telling of lost love. In lesser hands it may have been yet another mournful and extended love poem. Here, the rhythmic power of the changing verse forms, from the longer, controlled iambic lines of the aria (“in which the formal song serves for extended soliloquy”) to the block like energies of the recitative (“in which the narrative voice alone takes the stage”) captures the reader:

Aria #7
forever forever and forever | I tongue the sounds
around my mouth as though saying were believing |

it was an enormous day | the old Lear sea intoned
in peaks its certainty of change | while you and I

placed arrhythmic repeats of all our faith in love
\|: forever :\|... (15)

The high moment of grief and loss is refigured in the different forms, the language probed and reprobed, to visceral effect; ways of representing the unimaginable loss of love are sought, backwards and forwards, through the different registers of self-pity, loveliness, self-deprecation, stoicism, and finally, a kind of peace, as the solitary singer gives way to the community of the chorus and the realisation that “there / were billions of us in // millions of queues,” all suffering, all needing healing, a reconnecting or life to the present:

... she raised
her hand! as though we

were one | and laid it
upon our brow | she

closed our eyes and in thousands of tongues

sung out the sole word
Now|(49)
Vertigo can be read at one sitting, and needs to be — a formal, dignified, trenchant year's experience of lost love articulated in a musicality of language which embodies but also transforms the pain and grief threatening to annihilate.

And now for something completely different, but still related to love, sex and the body, we have Geoff Page’s funny, irreverent, black-tinged Lawrie and Shirley: the final Cadenza (a movie in Verse). In clipped, bouncy rhyming lines we are introduced to the autumnal phase of two aging singles, slightly used, slightly needy, heat-seeking at the local dance club:

The ladies sometimes dance in pairs but men, it’s clear, are much preferred.

And so they halt their talk and smile and see that it was never chance …

as Lawrie, with his eyes, is asking I wonder if you’d like to dance?

4. EXTERIOR NIGHT. The carpark now … with soundtrack still from opening shot.

Lawrie’s arm around a waist suggests they’re headed for the cot. (5–6)

This is a love poem, a Canberra poem, a satiric look at late-life, suburban sex and love. Lawrie Wellcome’s choice of a woman this night, from among the widows and divorcees at the dance, is Shirley — “I’m in my seventies but, hey, I so far it seems to feel OK.” — who invites him home to her “snug retirement flat.” We meet the sons and daughters and grandchildren, wince at the bruised world of family life, wince again at the children’s condescension at their mother’s “playing around.” The poem is timely — a poem for baby-boomers perhaps — a biting, funny, groan-inducing romp through old-age and its sad, noble limits:

We had them both in bed forthwith but that would not be quite the style.

Better hear them through a window with Shirley’s Mantovani strings
than get too close and re-discover
the sheer mundanity of things –

the way their faces sag somewhat
with all the coarsenesses of age,

the way their necks are withering.
Young readers shouldn’t turn the page. (31–2)

One of the thrills in reading this very readable verse is in trying to catch the exact register, or rather the multiple registers in one short passage such as this. The inescapable withering of old age is blackly and clear-sightedly given to us, but so too is a certain dignity and beauty to the protagonists “moving to a different music / against the circle of the dance” (33). You care about these characters in this, their “final cadenza.”

Poetry with ghosts and angels

Which brings us to death, and related issues: metaphysics, ghosts and angels. Poetry has for so long been the medium of eulogy, epitaph, scripture, memory and loss. Australian mouths that have never uttered poetry are often surprised at finding themselves full of it at funerals, or quoting it in consolation letters. Aileen Kelly’s superb, almost rap-like rhythms in “All down darkness” offer a kind of anti-ritual, a hymn to death or dissolution:

Darkness rises
hub of the filament’s arc.
Here is unstoppable blood, the punctured wrists,
the gaped chestcavern.
Darkness. Strike it.
Darkness answer,
play the prophet.
It does not answer. (31)

Is it an “anti-ritual” or words for a very human, contemporary ritual? There is a terror in the voice here, but also an insistence on something being given, or given back, from the darkness. There is at once a gauging of darkness and its power to make us more than bow down, and a plucky human insistence that this must be answered for, that justice should always be sought even in the very jaws of violence and death. Easy sentiments in the wrong hands, but here they convince and strengthen in context.
In Kelly’s glorious ballad “Next field” the language sings with a beautiful poise and openness to the energies of being alive, even as “Fear climbs me / upwards from the soil / tendrils grope me.” This is a harvesting song of sorts: corn is cut, “fallen, bagged, carted,” and the poem broadens out into a contemplation on the brevity of life, a prayer rising up from the earthiness of human need:

Lift your feet woman.
Shake it, the dust
the shadow of crumbled chaff.
Take back the scattered stalks,
weave a Brighid cross
and pray her in, the healer
the singer and the crafter:
how we work the straw,
how it glows well within itself
a hearthlight. (95)

That’s the kind of poetry I would like to have written myself. Brokenness is a fact, in the dust and tiredness – “Lift your feet woman” – which ushers in prayer and hope. What the poetry makes happen here is prayer inextricable from daily labour and fear of mortality, but with no skerrick of self-pity. Rather, confidence in embodied and transcendent possibilities is evoked, a beauty which “glows well within itself / a hearthlight.” These poems do not represent the scope and richness of Aileen Kelly’s volume, *The Passion paintings (poems 1983–2006).* There is much much more to be enjoyed.

The wonderful poetry of Greek Australian Dimitris Tsaloumas is full of eulogies, though they are different to most. Though infused with memory, nostalgia, and the approach of death, they are also muscular and decisive. They weigh in strong hands a life-time of absence and of living far from home, but they also refigure — in masculine, sensuous lines — the glory of what was felt and savoured over a long life:

My nights forbid questioning,
please come before dark
and come clean. What is it makes you think of me across
the waste plains of time?

*the lilacose limbs
the chestnut fall of hair*
over the curving throat
the cross between the breasts
her laughter—all as it was

Yet if I let you in,
if I sing, it is but my due
to your stubborn absence. (“Come before Dark”)

Tsoulos’ 2007 volume, one of ten he has published, is entitled Helen of Troy and other poems. This particular poem may well be read as addressed to Helen, that apocalyptic beauty, but it can also be read as a paean to memory, to past love and pleasure, and perhaps most importantly to the sustaining powers of the poet. The male poet. After all, across the “waste plains of time” it is the aging poet and his poetry which have conjured up the wilfulness and desirability of she who remains stubbornly absent. You can hear her taunting laughter.

Tsoulos has a gift for hauntedness conjoined with earthy observation and humour. In “The unrepentant dead,” which is translated from the Greek, the speaker leaves the wake for his old dead neighbour and difficult friend, “lest he should say something to embarrass me.” Yet he doesn’t escape the taunts of his friend:

He spoke to me later though, towards midnight,
his voice as usual hoarse
through the side of his mouth.
“You feared that I might shame you”
he said, “as if we never shared together bread
and salt. (58)

How good for Australian readers to taste the wit of this ghostly exchange, to take in something of the Greek world of heavenly shades and earthly communities entangled with such edgy and humorous decorum. Old protestant bifurcations – of God and human, heaven and hell, afterwards and now, spirit and earth – simply melt away.

There is more self-consciousness and anxiety in the voice of Petra White’s poem “For Dorothy.” White dedicates the poem to her grandmother Dorothy Marchesi, 1908–2005.

Ninety-six and nearly dead of a snapped hip but they bob
in the shrinking pool of her vision, her seven children.
They peer into her as if into a plug-hole, grasp at her life where it trembles in her moth-eyes … (44)

White’s human and natural landscapes are keenly observed, not haunted exactly, but aware of the strangeness in the familiar, seeking it out, unthreading it: kangaroos “emerge in the dissolving light as if they carry / the Earth in their skins…their telepathic here now / group hesitation. As if something’s deciding / whether to let you in, or through…” (“Kangaroos” 33); the highway across the Nullabor, beside the Bight “sheer as the path of the whales / who sailed straight down from space to shape / the plains with their bodies, their starry vision // rolled in sand and crusted in salt.” (“Night-driving” 29). There is a transformatory effect in White’s exploration of place, but it’s an earthy magic, a feeding of the land with “As if … as if,” and being fed in return.

Something of the same earthed imaginary is at work in the very different poetry of Brendan Ryan’s A Paddock in his head. “Catholic daydreams” is spankingly realistic in its notation of a Catholic farm childhood:

The kitchens of large families
humming with Hail Marys
the wind, like a semaphore

tunnels down chimneys.
My father’s dairy farming fingers
slip down the beads

as if each bead was a grip
on the Joyful Mystery
of ten children …

To some ears this may be odd, this calm, almost prosaic conjoining of farm life in the paddocks, working with the cows in the dairy, the ordinariness of labouring to survive, with the ancient rituals of an imported religion. But the very acceptance of it, the way the learned rituals and the presence of the land both seep into the consciousness of the speaker, is what is fascinating:

Silences you enter
when the last run has just left the dairy.

Something stops you – wind and light shifting.
On the boundary fence, cypress trees darkening.
All around you ... (“Naringal Landscape” 63)

Ryan's is an earthy mysticism populated by farmers and farmers' wives and farmers' children: “Our photographs were out of focus / fringes, innocently crooked, / like cow shit on a farmer's elbow at Mass / we couldn't get away from / other farmers in hotel lounges” (“Tourist in My Home Town” 61). So, A Paddock in his head is as much about dreams of escape as it is the realisation that the dreams take you back, again and again: “He takes the paddock into the city / imagines the streets in knee-length rye grass, / a single eucalypt, over-arching the sky” (“A Paddock in His Head” 54).

Poetry, as the title of Mark Reid's volume suggests, is A difficult faith. Reid was not specifically referring to poetry in his title, or perhaps he was, after all. In his tight, pithy lyrics one finds a struggle to eschew the merely Romantic, a probing at the surface of things as the poet seeks more than what is visible to “the prostrate eye” (“A Difficult Faith” 12). There's something foreboding, often, in this search:

In the movement towards,  
the movement away,  
the tides of the body,  
an encrypted rhythm.

The citizen has a heart,  
raw & visceral ... (“Civil Sonnet” 57)

Reid's poetry is its own kind of encryption, a worrying over the loss of the self, a struggling to evoke the energy and drive of the body against time and impotence. This often creates a paradoxical motion:

You find squares of sunlight,  
the four panes of a sash window laid out on the tablecloth.

So you make a shadow;  
as if to confirm the body you reach with your hand  
& make a shadow. (“The Desire of Angels #2” 29)

And this is the way it is with poetry, as with human subjectivity: a continual seeking of the right word, the flawless signifier, a probing at the edges of the material world in order to catch angels. You might glimpse them – angels – in
the squares of sunlight; you reach out, needing to affirm what? Your own body's solidity, "the hand itself / imposed on light." This is a necessary imposition, a mortal blocking of the light, just as it is also a desire to share with angels this place "into which light streams / through clear defenceless glass" (29). Reid's is a brooding, uneasy art, open to epiphany, constructing it, but also measuring its constant retreat.

Australian poetry is flourishing in 2007. Its more experimental, postmodern language practitioners - Pam Brown, Ken Bolton, PIG, John Tianter - are not represented this year. It is a year for the consummate craft of the elders; for the terse and earthed metaphysics of many new voices; and for colloquial Australian wit. Some would vote with Dennis Haskell's "Ars Poetica" and its optimism about poetic writing as "the hologram torch of language, shining on our lives." But I prefer the humorous, unresolved tensions of the poem's first stanza, taking "incompleteness" to be what, thankfully, keeps the poets reaching beyond the world of words:

The quick brown fox fucks the lazy metaphor
stressed that anything from the keyboard is absurd.
Even the keys are depressed. Hoarse and vexed
from thinking "Il n'y a pas de hors texte,"
how can we cope with the world of words
without voting for its incompleteness? ("Ars Poetica" 5)

POETRY RECEIVED 2006–2007
Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.

Chakravarthy, Dr. T. Ashok. Serene Thoughts of Poetic Ripples. Hyderabad, 2006.
LIFE ON THE STAIRS

Had she known what was beyond the stairs, she would not have climbed, and chosen the backyard instead with morbid shadows, and a thin anxious Alsatian. At the top of the stairs, she knew her grandfather’s enemies had defeated him; his medals had discoloured behind the cage he kept them in. In the dark, his bedroom door braided a corona of light. Locked to ocean views, it held secrets her grandmother wouldn’t share. He was old and could die in his bed, so she never ventured beyond the third top stair. Mouldy with tobacco smells, she could hear the static of gunfire inside, loud barbaric men. Going down, her bullet spring cracked each board, as if warning her to socks and silence. In her grandparents’ house the curving staircase had little light. Panicky mice and spiders left when an electric brightness fluttered up the walls. Framed war photos had men in trenches stooped into their bones. Her grandfather said, “They’re the rats of Tobruk.” Their eyes glazed in the light and she was careful not to panic them from the walls. Children must be careful going up and down stairs in case they should fall, bump glass, or delicate objets d’art; children who cannot stop what is happening

on walls, shapes of men
urging an old man to steer
his room in the dark
A VERSION OF THE MUSE

"You should write a poem about this," she said as she pulled out a biro and plunked it down on the table.

"About that biro?" I asked her.
"You think I should write a poem about that biro?"

No, of course not this biro," she said, extracting sweets, tissues, a notebook, combs and a cluster of keys.
"It’s in here somewhere," she added.

"What’s in there?" I wanted to know. "Is it whatever it is you’ve decided is grist for my mill?"

"It’s not what’s in here," she said, turning her bag upside down and spilling out sundry wares hither and yon.

She rose from her seat and gave me a leveling look.
"Now see what you’ve made me do."

"What I made you do?" I said. I reached down from my chair to snag a lipstick tube that was rolling over the floorboards.
"It's this bag, it's this bag!" she answered, snatching the tube from my hand and shaking the bag in my face. "It's this bag you don't want to write about, but this bag is my life."