For Dennis, after re-reading *Attuned to Alien Moonlight*

You have given me back my poetry.
As the BBC’s *Time Team* puts together
Roman mosaics lost under some English field,
so, with your trowel, pick and shovel,
and (most of all) careful final brushwork.
You bring me again (as I read) those possibilities
I had forgotten…Thank you for returning to me, as well,
their history and context, both of which I,
(being an ahistorical Iron Age survivor)
had no idea still slept there under the green grass.

—Bruce Dawe
To a Notable Literary Archaeologist
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The editors have pleasure in announcing the joint winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contributions to *Westerly* in 2010.

**JUDY JOHNSON**

For her poem
‘The Navigations of Rose de Freycinet’
*Westerly* 55:1, 2010

and

**MARCELLA POLAIN**

For her story
‘Sleep without Cameras’
*Westerly* 55:2, 2010
In February 2011 the Westerly Centre hosted a symposium, ‘Creative Writing and its Contexts’ to mark Professor Dennis Haskell’s (Winthrop Professor of English, UWA and former editor of *Westerly*) forthcoming retirement from his academic life and to celebrate the contribution he has made to West Australian and Australian literary culture through his teaching and scholarship, his own poetry and his mentoring of others. The work in this section of *Westerly* comes from some of those who spoke about an aspect of Dennis’s work at the symposium or (in the case of Bruce Dawe) who sent a poem honouring Dennis. The symposium programme was divided into four sections, ‘Australia and Asia’, ‘Creative Writing: Theory and Practice’, ‘Poetry and Poetics’ and ‘Australian Literary Culture’ to broadly reflect Dennis’s interests and the areas in which he has been most influential. Each of the essays that follow comes from one of those sections. Shirley Lim was the keynote speaker; her paper was not available for republication but she has sent us two new poems which are included here. Similarly, Geoff Page and Miriam Lo have contributed poems in place of the papers they presented.

We are delighted to be able to offer this reflection on Dennis and the interests that have animated his career as teacher, poet and scholar. Very
few in the communities of Australian and Asian writing, and especially those working at the interface between these two, have not been touched in some way by his work. Dennis remains an unreconstructed humanist in a field whose contemporary relevance coincided with the emergence of postcolonialism as the pre-eminent theory of globalised culture. His generosity speaks from older values and he holds onto the unfashionable idea that certain key elements of human experience, the very most intimate reaches in fact, are universal. Never one to slavishly follow fashion, with his trademark Lawrentian beard, and fondness for batik prints, we have all valued Dennis for his unswerving integrity. We hope that this is the beginning of a broader re-evaluation of his life and work, even as it continues into a no doubt productive retirement.
To a Notable Literary Archaeologist

For Dennis, after re-reading Attuned to Alien Moonlight

Bruce Dawe

You have given me back my poetry.
As the BBC’s *Time Team* puts together
Roman mosaics lost under some English field,
so, with your trowel, pick and shovel,
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As an Australian poet, and a writer about poetry, Dennis Haskell has never resiled from use of the Australian vernacular. In fact, he has used and extended the vernacular—past and present—to entertaining and illuminating effect. So it is not surprising to find Les Murray and Bruce Dawe among his favourite poets. That these two, together with Kenneth Slessor, are seen as major figures on the Australian literary landscape is due in no small measure to Dennis’s intelligent, readable assessments of their work. His own poetry reflects the pleasure he finds in the witty, inventive re-imagining of people and places, as in the opening stanzas of his poem ‘Sydney or the Bush’ (2006: 54–55):

I walked the wide streets of Billabigola seeking an ATM;  
I’d as well have searched for a whale in cola spouting hysterical phlegm, a cappuccino strip, boutiques or a sale of vertical rhyme, a kibbutz, a blitz, or a train arriving on time.
But only crows now stalk the old captain’s walk,  
the bowling greens are brown,  
the pavement’s splitting, and the train’s a bus  
that lurches from a distant town.

Here, the rhythmic and tonal variations are beautifully calibrated—from playful humour to pathos and back again. Characteristically, the poem expresses sentiment without sentimentality.

A sense of humour is one of the most necessary characteristics of the successful teacher, administrator, critic and creative writer, all those areas in which Dennis has excelled. In an essay titled ‘The Heroism of Comedy’ (1992: 107–119), Dennis Haskell asserts that ‘Comedy like death and golf, is a great leveller. In Australia it goes hand in hand with the tall poppy syndrome, which discourages a cult of heroism and encourages a down to earth humour’. He provides as collateral evidence a cartoon from Smith’s Weekly in 1939 showing a slouch-hatted soldier being reprimanded by a monocled officer. The caption reads:

One Digger (pulling up a lax Digger): ‘I say, my man! Do you know anything about saluting?’

To which the Digger replies: ‘Too right; what d’yer want to know?’

This larrikin humour appeals especially to someone like me who moved Eastwards, to the other side, to the UNSW campus of the Australian Defence Force Academy, to try to educate Army, Navy and Air Force officers as well as civilian students. But it has a broader appeal that expresses Dennis’s democratic instincts.

Poetry, indeed most creative writing, must also nail moments of wonder and plumb depths of feeling. In Dennis’s poetry, such moments emerge from a general tone of reasonableness. The point is made in the title poem of his fifth volume, Samuel Johnson in Marrickville (2001), which humanises Johnson, the great master of English literary learning and reason, ‘the great emissary of sensibleness’, by linking
him to the ordinary lives of suburban Sydney-siders. Staving off depression, and even madness, as Johnson did, involves both rational thought and an ability to connect with a childhood self. The poem suggests that even reason, the great avatar we traditionally invoke to justify our role in a university, has its limits. But there is something heroic in its pursuit. In commenting on Dennis Haskell’s most recent collection of new and selected poems, *Acts of Defiance* (2010), Canberra poet Geoff Page remarks that, along with the humour and satire in Dennis’s work is an essentially serious poetry in which elegies play an important part, with their ‘powerful sense of life’s fragility’ (2011: 26).

As we struggle to give the humanities an important role in contemporary university studies, we must offer both a skills education—literacy writ large, if you like—and ways of gaining self-knowledge and knowledge of others. A sub-theme of this is that a knowledge of literature, past and present, from both Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern traditions can contribute to these goals. Let me conclude with a poem that questions the place and value of the humanities in our lives in a way that perhaps only poetry—‘language under pressure’—is equipped to do. The poem’s title is ‘What Use are the Humanities?’ Its author is of course, Dennis Haskell. To me, this poem is a marvellous encapsulation of a skilled writer’s ability to inquire into mysteries beyond conventional understanding and rational thought and to graphically reveal both the deep uncertainties of our existence and our restless grasping after meaning. The poem’s arrival is at a moment of wonder in the midst of apparent ordinariness—and that may be the point of it all.

Sunday looms like a day at the beach,
the pleasures of more being than being conscious.
Imagine: to stand at the shore of Sunday
and gaze at wave upon
bending wave of days,
their curl and thump
and the splattering taste of salt
so perfectly repeated, so patterned
that their movement could seem
constant, absolute.

A physicist would walk along such a shore
Murmuring about gravity waves,
Those long elongations of air
that might exist
only in imagination, but
that might measure out
A time before time began

while we merely look forward to Sunday.
How we got here and why
put behind us. Hours spent
treading down the uncountable, fibrous sand
will pass like no time at all
into the urgencies of measurement,
cling to the sight of curling salt.
Yet on the packed granules of uncertainty
Sunday’s meaning shines, inconstant,
immeasurable, on the waving beach of ourselves
almost numb with light.
Works Cited


A hot September Wednesday I’d left
The back door to the bird-seeded
Tomato, crow-hollowed-figgy yard
Open, and of course some deft

And furry something must have zipped,
Drawn to the snug plenty, in.
That afternoon, plenty of rustlings
Among the plastics, papers, and clipped

Herbs drying. I figured immediately
We were sharing with some small beast
Our larder of lentils, basmati rice, chickpeas,
Lima and pigeon beans, blackeyed, kidney:

It must have thought it’d died and gone
To bean heaven, and no dint of clean
And search would flush it into the open.
Until a day later, barefooted and alone,
Moving to light the evening with the reading lamp,
My calloused sole on the Berber stepped
On a baby softness. Both leapt,
And I, nerves sinking, looked for what had jumped

Besides me, reminded of my own soft breast
Pressed hard between glass, its cowering
Crushed, and the small afrighted thing
The knife had taken out, but still living beast

Licking late at night the crumbs of chocolate.
It wasn’t until Friday vacuuming the carpet
I found the grey and white furry tuft
Under the chair where it had sought

Shelter from the giant shadow’s tread, safety
And the chocolate crumb its last memory.
Picasso

(At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, after lunch, September 2010)

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Falling asleep in a room full of Picassos,
Stomach filled with Ethiopian spices,
Stewed corn, lentils, and sour injera,
Achilles heels aching from the pressure
Of mass-produced sneakers, I acknowledge

I am in the presence of genius.
Evident in women’s flat images,
One iris bobbing above the other,
Breasts askew or unmatched, gnarly fingers
Like fat tube worms crawling over
Flapping open mouths.

How did he know
What I looked like?

Pablo, you’d fucked
So many beauties, and seen them slack-
Jawed, drooling after sleep or sex,
Or grinding teeth like engines,
Gears gnashing despite gorgeous
Bodies, spluttering motors
Broken, desirables who’d covered
Your canvasses with hardly a border
To waste. You’d revenged yourself on those
Ideals, thighs splayed, hair frayed. Beauty
Is ever the lover of art, and ever
Disappointed, if art is to imitate
Beauty. Which lives in distance, and dies
Lanced. Shaken to keep awake
Where you pitch the ugly as beauty’s art.
The roots of lyric poems, or what C. Day Lewis called the ‘lyric impulse’ (25) in his well-known study, include folk and liturgical song, the epic, the pastoral, the panegyric, and what is called ‘grave verse’ (Lerer 147). As we now gain a wider historic understanding of early poems, it is especially helpful to look to the development of grave verse, within the larger scope of lyric or ‘poetic will’ (Stewart 34), for the emergence of the lyric ‘I’ in English. This emergence has importance too that is far-reaching. Seth Lerer and a group of scholars have studied fragments and form, following the transitions from Anglo-Saxon and Old English verse to first person, post-Conquest poems (Lerer 128–132). The eleventh and twelfth centuries may seem like quite a distance from building an understanding of the poetry of Dennis Haskell, but they offer a particularly good vantage point for apprehending Haskell’s extraordinary vision. The beginning of my study, then, will take a moment to look at Lerer’s historical work on the early stirrings of the lyric ‘I’.

Originating in sites of the Norman Conquest, the poems Lerer examines present a ‘cultural obituary for the Anglo-Saxon landscape’
(135), a landscape that was physically being razed and developed simultaneously. In the English countryside, stone, for example, began to replace the familiar local timber structures. In the following example, William the Conqueror compels dislocation on local soil:

He had castles built
and poor men terribly oppressed.
The king was very severe,
and he took from his underlings many marks
of gold and hundreds of pounds of silver.
All this he took from the people,
and with great injustice...

(excerpt from ‘The Rime of King William,’
from *The Peterborough Chronicle* 1070–1154, cited by Lerer 134)

Not only concerned with displacement-in-place, this account is preoccupied, as Lerer points out, with an already ‘pervasive elegiac cast’ (133). The self-conscious experience of what might be called ‘pastness’ is integral; the very condition of ‘coming after’ ultimately will provoke, as Lerer argues, the lyric first person, as we have come to know it in English. From this period the lyric speaker begins to irrupt from the once familiar, but now alien, home and landscape:

Now your hall shall be built with the spade,
And you, wretch, shall be brought inside it;
Now all your garments shall be sought out,
Your house be swept and all the sweepings thrown out.

(cited by Lerer 143)

In the post-Conquest impulse of the early English lyric speaker, therefore, as Lerer points out, we hear not only the standard trope of grave, body and soul, but also evidence of a social life at work. In these lyrics of intrusion and dislocation at home—dislocation both from Old English writings and Anglo-Saxon landscapes— the lyric
‘I’ emerges from within the trope of the grave as a self-conscious state of retrospective loss. The familiar ‘hall’, ‘garments’, and ‘house’ are no longer familiar. The displacement of the recognisable body and now building materials includes dislocation of the language itself, as Lerer explains, including ‘an increasing use of end rhyme’ from Continental influences, interrupting old patterns of alliteration, and revealing even ‘occasional bursts of personal feeling’ (143).

Thus, from the margins of late twelfth-century theological writing, Lerer suggests that an emergent lyric ‘I’, experiencing alienation, tried to fashion an ‘architectural’ control for the disrupted English voice: ‘I have been neither whole nor happy,/nor a thriving man./There is not a man alive who does not advise me/to wait and be happy’ (128). In this ‘exile-in-place’, the first-person lyric, as such, draws its origins from a cry, an emerging ‘I’ whose very appearance originates in an act of self-review upon dislocation: a perspective that Lerer sees as a born ‘retrospection’ (154). We need to pause over the important idea of born retrospection. It means that upon arriving, the lyric ‘I’ is born, so to speak, from ‘backward-looking elegiacs’ (143).

These moments of emergence and birth of the English-language lyric speak in remarkable ways to Dennis Haskell’s collection of poems All the Time in the World. We see revealed in this work an elegist with an acute awareness of the condition of ‘coming after’, an awareness that lies directly along the continuum of the fundamental lyric impulse in first person. While I am not pointing to influence, of course, or the path of every poem, we can see in this volume especially how the historical archeology of lyric in Lerer and the scholars of grave verse is now opening new lines into Haskell’s own experiments and evolutions of lyric. We see how the lyric ‘I’, originating in born retrospection, remains attached to questions of land. For Haskell, though, ‘land’ is increasingly and modernly transposed to a verb and movement; it is now connected to the exile of human beings landing in the eternal world of timelessness, in which they are (brutally) out of place: ‘the beating and the battery/that the body was built for,/gravity’s brutal reward’ (‘After Hong Kong’). The
irony of the oxymoron (‘brutal reward’) is tied to the land (‘gravity’) and time; it is part of an urgent continuum in lyric evolution of post-Conquest poems founded in self-exile from conditions that are at once familiar and at the same time alien to the body. Haskell’s voice transforms this original impulse of the lyric ‘I’ to control the dislocated physical landscape into architecture of time. The exile-in-place of post-Conquest lyric has become in Haskell’s poems a matter of time. This lyric ‘I’ is now born the moment that it awakens and conceives its human body as perpetually ‘coming after’: alien, here, to the condition of time that is forever independent of human presence. The lyric first person (‘I’ and ‘We’) comes into itself only on retrospective regarding of its place as an exile in time: ‘...I want time to steal./We don’t belong to it now, and never will’ (‘The Last of England’ 36). Here, too, the human condition of the exile in time looms: ‘...No sign of people/busy at their lives. Only the nests/tilting and retilting in the shuddering/wind, like urgent scraps of Spring’ (‘In Churchill College Library’ 33).

As the Anglo-Saxon world was emptied of its familiar timber, its poetic ring structure, or its diction, so Haskell’s scenes in airports, on planes, even at home in Australia, are shorn of everything human, except for the speaker provoked by such exile into retrospective self-regard. Ghost-like Australia is a vision of this renewed lyric impulse: in ‘scenic Australian towns/...the streets are hysterically quiet; the scones are staling, the few shops failing,/and all the present is memory’ (‘Sydney or the Bush’ 54). In ‘Constancy’, we hear flat out how the speaker is dislocated into a time that is of no human kind: ‘it’s what Australians like to say about it—out of time/and stuck in a world of no human’s making’ (77). The ‘midnight streets’ of Canberra, for example, are also ‘frozen in time’ (‘Constancy’ 77); in the ‘sunburnt country’, the speaker speeds ‘past towns where absences had had to happen’ (‘In a Sunburnt Country’ 50). One cannot miss the focus on time, displacement, and birth, through the very exile within it (in the Australian descriptions of country, in the frozen streets of Canberra, in the towns with absences, or memory of ‘scenic Australian towns’).
The lyric impulse of being born from an act of retrospection (what Lerer calls the present and familiar place scripted by others, 152–3) extends globally, past Australian boundaries and back again. In old Netherlands ‘there are no clocks to tick time away/when a track is a line in God’s hand, the light tipping everyone’s fingers/where the days end, and return,/and nothing happens, forever’ (‘Two Landscapes’ 69); in ‘Sydney and the Bush’, ‘The Bank is gone, the church is dead, the only/things buzzing are flies/that flap and flop, too tired to fly/through country and western skies’ (55).

As in the earliest emergence of the lyric first person in history, Haskell’s speaker is born aware of exile. Again, though, this ‘I’ is primarily exiled into time; ‘landing’ or touching down, the speaker is aware of the existence of time without itself. This contemporary lyric first person continues to be carried into existence by the very desire, that is, to be able. Able leans etymologically, as we know, into holding, touching, recognizing (whether with words, with body, with any human gesture) what otherwise is absent. This moving word permeates Haskell’s awareness of coming-after: how can we be able, his poems ask, to exist and function in time (and that is far different from being capable or proficient). Using the trope of the inexpressible, he writes, ‘...Nothing/will be able until/the unsaid/becomes the unsayable’ (‘Still Life’ emphasis added 19).

In Haskell’s world, the ‘unsayable’ intrudes into the more rigid ‘unsaid’; it suggests the potential for each of us to find ways to be able to say or to act. This act of interruption is a lyric act of provocation: the ‘I’ interrupts its self-exile to momentarily take stock of its own afterlife: ‘...To be alive/is to be moving/away from where we are...’ (‘Constancy’ 77). As the speaker ‘I’ travels on a French landscape, dislocated by ‘every troisième word’, each one a ‘mystery’, he finds his unsayable experience interrupted by a moment of potential ‘meaning’ or existence; inside a layered pause of incomprehensibility lies his own provocation of presence of time on an ancient aimless landscape: ‘Part of an ancient tower/stands aimlessly in a field,/the stalks of powerlines, rich red/upturned soil, runnelled tiles/on
sharply pitched roofs’ (‘Understandings’ 26). Next to a sky that shifts every human utterance into nonhuman, nonnational temporality, the speaker’s words briefly shape born retrospection and the very theft of existence: ‘The small dark shapes of birds/flutter like syllables/in a sky now sun-struck/and every nation, because it is none.’ The ‘I’ is still the natural and perpetual latecomer to time, but one that momentarily pauses, taking near control, almost, of presence: ‘Eight-hundred-years-old, peaked-roof villages/rendered tiny by distance and time...stand beside the mythologised Rhine.../And on the river’s/slate surface, on a road/not a road, certainly not taken,/in a land that is not ours,/I could almost discern/something, like our names, writ in water,/and almost begin to read its meaning’ (‘Writ in Water’ 28–9).

This act of lyric ‘interruption’ brings forth carpe diem, or *seize the day*; but Haskell’s lyric, rather than shoring against our uncertain futures, already looks backward at the very moment of becoming—in the very act of appearing, the speaker is consciously aware of a past before the now: ‘How to seize something/as abstract as the day?/... and *already* the day/has her rattling in its grasp’ (‘Doubt and Trembling’ emphasis added 39–41). In Haskell’s poems, we neither seize the day nor time itself; time, he says, ‘is only a window’ that the ‘I’ is able to climb through in an act of interrupting timelessness, an act, say, of ‘touch’ (‘Constancy’ 77).

Where we are *able*, we touch, we say, we pick up a pen (‘like picking up stone’ he says)—we interrupt the absence of ourselves, we ‘remove’, as he says, the ‘presence of absence’ (‘Still Life, 2001’ 19), whether of our touch or words. This is not the same as seizing the day or exploiting language (even the unsaid). We make ourselves, instead, *able*; we make the unsaid more humanely unsayable by interrupting our own exile, touching our *dislocation* of time and place, born of our own retrospection and distance from ourselves.

The initial journey into the early English lyric ‘I’ and in particular the history of lyric that Lerer unearths help us to see both a fundamental lyric impulse in English as well as the developments
along the continuum of lyric evolution: between the ‘exile-in-place’ and Haskell’s ‘exile-in-time’. The two lyric ‘I’s’ go over the same ground, and the post-Conquest ‘I’, exiled on its own land, prepares us for Haskell’s journey of exile in time. For the earliest lyric ‘I’ or Haskell’s ‘I,’ the act of self-identification begins with a recognition not just of ‘losing’ or having lost, but at the moment we are born with the fierce self-consciousness of already looking back at ourselves. Each ‘I’ is an exile: ‘Life is a game in which/we are all given/the role of losers/ eventually’ (‘An Act of Defiance’ 97–8). Yet in the same moment that we are briefly exiled into the longer continuity of time, we can take hold; we are able, as Haskell says, to interrupt that eternal incompletion, ‘like a burglar’ (‘Ars Poetica’ 5) and land in time, also incompletely. In doing so, we touch the lyric ground of born retrospection with our fellow first-person travelers, ‘as though’ together, ‘we had/all the time in the world’ (‘An Act of Defiance’ 98).

Notes


Works Cited


An uncertain smile: humour in the poetry of Dennis Haskell

Chris Wortham

A *Certain Smile* was the name of a wonderfully fresh novel by a very youthful Françoise Sagan. More famous than the novel itself, in the popular culture of the time, was the film made from it. And in that film Johnny Mathis even more famously sang the title theme song ‘A certain smile’. The main problem with the song is the very certainty of the smile, which to our contemporary ear is full of excruciating clichés. I have chosen to allude to this song in my title partly because I can’t help holding it in great affection, despite what I should think about it critically, but more because it sums up to me the antithesis of what Dennis Haskell writes about. For a start, Dennis has declared eternal war upon the cliché, in his own work and that of others. What Dennis the poet writes is also hauntingly beautiful, and often with a smile, but it’s an uncertain smile and its attractiveness is in that very uncertainty.

Humour has long been part and parcel of Australian poetry, probably more distinctively so than that in the oeuvre of any other national poetry written in the English language. What I understand as humour also seems to be more prevalent in the male poets than in many of the distinguished female poets. It would be interesting
to speculate on possible reasons for the pervasiveness of masculine humour and also on apparent differences on gender lines. However, these thoughts will have to wait for another day. For the present moment I shall only go so far as to suggest a developmental process in humour as a characteristic attribute of Australian poetry. There is a discernible line from Banjo Paterson, through A. D. Hope, Bruce Dawe and Les Murray to Dennis Haskell but since there is no time to do it justice, so it is better not to do it at all. I simply ask you to accept that the work of Dennis Haskell is distinctive but also that it arises out of a recognisable tradition.

Four of my favourite Dennis Haskell poems will illustrate this contention. ‘Ars Poetica’ is the opening poem in the volume entitled *All the Time in the World* (2006), and it makes its intentions very clear from the first line: it is a declaration of open war on the cliché! All of us who ever learned touch typing started with tedious exercises, among which is the inane one that uses all of the letter keys: ‘The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.’ Refusing cliché and its attendant tedium, Dennis attacks his own keyboard in exasperation, but his mood doesn’t stay there. The poem begins: ‘The quick brown fox fucks the lazy metaphor/stressed that anything from the keyboard is absurd.’

This particular quick brown fox, reminiscent no doubt of Ted Hughes’s masterly poem ‘The Thought-Fox’, does not jump but alliteratively fucks up by becoming part of the lazy metaphor, or cliché, that the f-word has in itself become. Circling in on itself, language becomes ‘stressed’ and ‘depressed’, like the keys exercised in the very act of writing such banalities. ‘Even the keys are depressed. Hoarse and vexed/from thinking “Il n’y a pas de hors texte”’. Almost as overworked as ‘the quick brown fox’ is that oft-quoted and even more often misunderstood aphorism from the great theorist of language, Jacques Derrida, ‘Il n’y a pas de hors texte’, which itself becomes hoarse and vexed in being parroted yet again. All the scholarly argument about what Derrida actually meant by that phrase has only resulted in what is ‘hopeless incompleteness’.
The second section expands on the triteness of critical vocabulary, trotting out some of the words that are like to come out of any student’s keyboard in approaching any poem that the said student doesn’t really understand: ‘Inveigled, intrigued, liminal, disguised’ will all sound good in an essay! These are ‘words seductions of sound’: poetry thus prostituted becomes its own seducer, with sounds that sound good but don’t mean much.

However, with a wry humour that won’t laugh only at cliché or dodgy interpretation, the short final section takes the uncertain smile back to mock the efforts of the poet himself: he readily concedes that ‘writing is incomplete’. All the while, nevertheless, ‘meaning arrives’ mysteriously in those very inadequate words that have become broken shards in the using. In the end, the poem refutes Wittgenstein’s proposition that ‘whereof we cannot speak, we must remain silent’, and it does so by insisting that language is a shining torch and that writing is, after all, worthwhile. So a poem that began in negation concludes in affirmation, moving from exasperation to something approaching exultation. The ‘hologram torch of language’ has the power to reconstitute recognisable shape from scattered light, just as the laser does. In writing, in reading and in interpreting we are not wasting our time.

In a very different mood, ‘Still Life, 2001’ is concerned with the experience of air travel and the sense of being a world citizen as well as an Australian. ‘Still Life, 2001’ comes from the same volume as ‘Ars Poetica’, in a section of travel poems grouped under the heading of ‘Belongings’. The poems as a set reflect the internationalism of the modern world with reference to a number of countries in Europe and Asia.

For an academic a seat that is ‘paid-for’ (not, presumably, by oneself) and ‘comfortable’ and where there is champagne that ‘appears’ simply has to be in Business Class! But Dennis, though comfortable, is ‘stuck’, a prisoner to luxury. However, to be in a plane is to be suspended literally between two worlds, in a capsule that is deprived of such familiarising co-ordinates for human existence as
height above sea level and temperature: ‘11,800 metres’ and ‘–53°’ are meaningless and that ‘Bandung/lies below’ says nothing about the reality of that exotically beautiful and vibrant centre of Indonesian cultural life. The ‘snoring’ engines contribute to an illusion of stillness in a situation where reading about silence while travelling at great speed provides an ironic contextual commentary on our capacity for living our speculative thoughts in a bubble.

With a wry comparison, Haskell turns in the second part of the poem to draw in the paintings of empty jars and bottles so characteristic in the art of Giorgio Morandi. Those empty jars that ‘contained more than this whole plane’ bear out what Morandi once said paradoxically: ‘Nothing is more abstract than reality’. Haskell’s take on this paradox is that nothing is emptier of meaning than the elegant cabin of an aircraft full of the trappings of luxury. At a preliminary reading these two poems from All the Time in the World may seem to share a self-ironising boredom, but this attribute is in tension with an engaging zest for life, and that speaks more of energy than ennui.

And now for something completely different. Dennis, the academic sophisticate of many plane journeys and sojourns in far countries, is never ashamed to acknowledge his working-class origins. Unlike some, however, he is affectionate towards his past without falsifying, without being sentimentally reverent in his recollections of childhood. I am particularly drawn to a poem in his third volume, The Ghost Names Sing (1997), in remembrance of a small man, his vertically challenged uncle. Most of us, from Dennis Haskell to John Betjeman, have a funny uncle or aunt to remember, someone who was one of the tribe, without being one of those who conformed to an agreed family norm. This poem, simply entitled ‘In the 1950s’ recaptures treasured moments remembered from the life of a young child. Postwar childhood in the ‘forties and early ‘fifties, during the slow and hard economic recovery, could be a pretty drab affair. Dennis’s uncle encapsulates the possibility of exuberant difference in a dully conformist world.
For all its immediate charm, this poem resonates with the hopes and anxieties of a generation now long past. These are symbolised in two contrasting images of female presence. For one there’s ‘The sepia smile/of cheerful Deanna Durbin’: that’s the way film star photos appeared in those days and so much of those faded relics is captured in so few words. Beyond the visual encapsulation of nostalgia that in retrospect seems to have been past even in the moment of its presence, there’s the sometime meaning of Deanna Durbin herself. A great country-style singer, who had the potential in her voice to become an opera star, Deanna Durbin played many wholesome girl-next-door parts in her early movies. But her meaning for a generation tumbling into global catastrophe went way beyond that: though to some extent she was marketed as a typical Hollywood ‘product’ of the nineteen thirties and ‘forties, she came to symbolise much more than mere glitz. She had a purity of voice and a kind of beauty that spoke to many who desired and dreamed of a better world. One was Anne Frank, who had a photo of Deanna Durbin pasted on the wall of her bedroom hideout during the Nazi occupation, a fact strongly noted in the documentary film *Anne Frank Remembered* (released about a year before this poem was published). And in far away Russia the young Mstislav Rostropovich idolised Deanna Durbin too and claimed her as a source of inspiration for much of his own career as a musician.

Thus a seemingly slight reference in the poem speaks across the decades to us in two ways: it recaptures the glossy artifice of that post-war world of Hollywood stardom and also points to the ephemeral nature of fame in popular consciousness. Immediately before the recollection of Deanna Durbin, a reference to the short uncle’s ‘cool, steel, curving/ash tray, whose stem was a naked silver woman’ juxtaposes a very different masculine construction of female attractiveness. In these few lines Dennis compresses so much of the complexities and contradictions in sexual attitudes of the time.

In the second section of the poem Dennis recalls himself as the little tacker strapped to the back of his short uncle’s motorbike, roaring
around the block to rock him to sleep. The immediate transition to
‘When I had stiches in my head’ suggests a dangerous contiguity
between his uncle’s care and his unintended dangerousness. Pubs
in the day of Dennis’s short uncle were rough, tough and rather
unsavoury places: the fact that the uncle did not so much ‘split his
time’ but ‘spilt his time’ between church and pub reinforces the
duality we have already noticed in relation to Deanna Durbin and
the ash tray. There is much more one could say about this evocative
poem, but for me, much of its charm inheres in its gentle and
rather uncertain smile: the past is seen simultaneously through the
immediate experience of an innocent child and the more measured
gaze of adult retrospection.

My favourite Dennis Haskell poem, is ‘Whatever Happened’.
Unusually for Dennis it takes the form of a monologue given by a
fictive persona, not unlike T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock poem. It is an account
of the way in which some of us who have been on the planet a fairly
long time wake up suddenly to discover that we have been mugged by
time. Here, the poet, ‘young, fresh, energetic’ suddenly finds himself
‘surrounded by/flab, aching-boned, some/hair gone …’

The poem’s idea of death as ‘the flatfoot in charge’; that is, a
member of the constabulary who is bored and unconcerned by the
outraged victim’s account of his misfortune seems to derive from a
wry tweaking of the words of Hamlet, who in dying says to Horatio:

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
Thou livest…

In any event, Death warns of the futility of fighting back: ‘chasing
the bastard/would be like chasing/our own tales.’ Here, with
characteristic aphoristic adroitness, Dennis plays aptly on the word
‘tales’ or ‘tails’. As a scholar and a writer, and more particularly as a
poet, he has long considered the point and purpose of literature. And
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his overwhelming question is this: what is it that gives our lives a sense of identity and meaning but a succession of our ever-repeated narratives, going around in circles, like a dog chasing its tail? That question is asked with a tentative smile and perhaps the answer is its very uncertainty.

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9 a.m., the dew still fresh,  
it’s autumn at Kurnell,  
the slopes well-mown, the parkland trees

an eighteenth century scene almost  
as long white planes come slanting in  
from southwards and the east.

The skyline is refineries  
and cranes across the water.  
Two centuries and forty years

have slipped away since Cook.  
We glimpse his Journal here and there,  
sampled in the signage;

The Dharawal, too, will get their mention.  
I thought that they beckon’d to us,  
to come ashore, wrote Cook,

but in this we were mistaken,  
for as soon as we put the boat in  
they again came to oppose us,

upon which I fir’d a musquet  
between the 2.  
We hear another century’s syntax
stiffening the prose.

*They throw’d 2 darts at us;
this obliged me to fire a third shott.*

Walking on, we find (restored)
the *Small stream* that the journal speaks of,
*sufficient to Water the Ship;*

then watch the high container vessels
moving on the channel,
bulky as apartment blocks,

serenely over windless water.
Nothing comes to spoil the silence;
the planes make just the slightest sound,

tilting slowly down;
the ships make even less.
This Friday, at the end of autumn,

we have it to ourselves.
Surrounded by what seems to work,
this sprawled and intricate machine

that politics and public service
strive to keep well-oiled,
the morning here is neatly balanced,
a beautiful ambivalence, 
the what-was-gained, the what-was-lost. 
The wind for Cook was Southerly, 
the weather Clear. All empires fade, 
at last, beyond reproach. 
Across the bay and to the west, 
there is a hum we don’t quite hear. 
Back home, we google up the text to check it for ourselves. 

*I went myself in the Pinnace to sound and explore the Bay, in the doing of which I saw some of the Natives; but they all* (he is compelled to note) *fled at my Approach.*
My introduction to Dennis Haskell’s poems came by way of The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse edited by Peter Porter. I had bought the book in Malaysia prior to my one visit to Perth in 2006, thinking I ought to know something literary and contemporary about Australia. Haskell has two poems in the anthology: ‘No One Ever Found You’ and ‘One Clear Call’. ‘No One Ever Found You’ (190–191) tells of the poem’s speaker’s wife preparing the next meal, and ‘One Clear Call’ (191–192) concerns a phone call about a friend’s father’s death. More profoundly, the poems are about the experience of love and loss, respectively, and my reaction was to start writing poems in response to his. ‘One Clear Call’, for example, prompted me to write ‘Nineteen Years Later’ (Lola 10–11), a recollection of a deathbed scene, its epigraph taken from ‘Flowers’ (Ghost Names 43-44), another Haskell poem on death.

My attempt at writing poems in response to Haskell’s is neither new nor innovative. All writing depends on other writing, all poems are somehow connected to the other, but there are times when a poem seems to demand or insist on an answer and a poet will venture to write a poem in direct response to it, ones that may ‘answer, argue
with, update, elaborate on, mock, interrogate, pay tribute’ to the poem spoken to (Lucas). More than this, Haskell’s poems enable a connection which encourages the reader to closely participate in the experience of the ordinary and consequently in the discovery of the poetic. While many of his poems appeal to the intellect, I have connected more closely with those that are about the emotions. The poems of mine I refer to here serve only to highlight Haskell’s way with words, his poetic subject and craft.

A critical consensus exists regarding Haskell’s choice and range of subject—that his poems deal with the ordinary, or as he says, they are poems of ‘lived experience’ (‘In the Dean’s office’). The Singapore poet Aaron Lee describes Haskell’s *The Ghost Names Sing* as ‘on the surface a mosaic of experiences as diverse as domestic politics, family, social commentary, love, travel, and reminiscence’ (‘The Poetry Billboard’). Haskell’s poems do focus on such familiar things; there are also poems that revolve around writing. There are times when he chooses to reveal himself as Dennis Haskell, as in ‘Natural Piety’ (*Ghost Names* 74); in a poem about his son who is off to a bad taste party, ‘Chiliholism’ (*Ghost Names* 55); one about his misadventures with chili in Singapore, and in ‘Letter to Rhonda’ (*All the Time* 83) and ‘Reality’s Crow’ (*Ghost Names* 35–36), for and about his wife. At other times, he stays hidden, or as Kristen Lang says, he will ‘relinquish ownership of the experiences for the sake of the poem… Rather than nurturing a single way of speaking, Haskell adopts various shapes and tones and allows each poem its own evolution’ (‘the big idea’).

Reading Haskell’s poems I realized that his sense of the ordinary is not quite like mine. For one, his domestic love poems speak of tenderness and affection. Looking among my already-written poems for one that might parallel his, I came up with ‘Done’ (*Lola* 14–15), which Haskell describes as ‘a fierce, feminist protest, with religious imagery used to represent oppression’ (*Lola* xi). For another, as I said, as a non-Australian reader with little exposure to things Australian, I was interested—when I bought the Porter anthology—in anything that suggested or indicated national preoccupations. I was curious
about what Haskell had to say, directly or indirectly, about Australia, a subject well within his sense of the ordinary, notwithstanding that the relation between a poem and its historical context can be complicated, that a poem ‘refracts, transforms and reinvents its world’ (Ferguson et al).

A poem that at first seems not about Australia is ‘Globalisation’ (*All the Time* 52–53). Haskell begins by setting it ‘In the corridors of plush hotels’ and then points out details like the hotel walls, doors, the carpet on the floor, the air-conditioning, how much to stay in one and how you can demand service accordingly. He proposes that the qualities of ‘silence’, the ‘singularity/of being’, ‘sameness’ and ‘blandness’—summed up in the word ‘vacancy’—are consequences of globalisation. Then he states that ‘money’s anonymity’ and ‘muscle’ makes Australia tick and makes ‘everywhere a little room’. Inversely, he suggests that it has a hand in Australia being or becoming insular ‘as though the continent itself had come indoors’.

My initial reaction to this poem was that it was rather short on images, and that, well, that’s Australia, but those are not the effects of globalisation on a country with a perpetually troubled economy like the Philippines. In argument, I wrote ‘Globalization on a Budget’ (*Lola* 33–34). I set it ‘In the corridors of cheap hotels’, made the place as noisy and rundown as possible, and supplied it with many images, since in this rather uncomfortable situation, you’re bound to notice things. I borrowed Haskell’s use of the couplet, all his rhyming end words, and a few other words and phrases to indicate that the poem is written as a reply. Of these, I liked ‘as though the continent itself had come indoors’ because the Philippines is not a continent but an archipelago, so that’s absurd wishful thinking to me and my poem’s speaker. And I suppose that seeing the world from a continent is not quite the same as seeing it from a scatter of islands. I also played around with ‘everywhere is a little room’, where a little room is a tiny cramped space for those without money.

On more than one occasion, Haskell has remarked that he is ‘more concerned with creating a poetry that is central rather than marginal
to people’s lives’ (Haskell, ‘Introduction’), that ‘remains accessible to people, to anyone’ (‘In the Dean’s office’). He also once said that he is ‘little concerned with landscape’ (Haskell, ‘Introduction’) but where this has made an appearance, it is incidental. His poem ‘That World Whose Sanity We Know’ (All the Time 56–57) is about travel within Australia, in particular, flying above ‘sun-bright South Australian farms’ on the way to Adelaide. Not a bush landscape, true, but landscape nonetheless of ‘patterned trees’ bearing the message: ‘Jesus Lives’. Then Haskell is off thinking about God and the certainty of His existence in nature, the Bible, and the news. He mentions the poet Derek Mahon ‘who has hardly grasped what life is about’, which complements his way of thinking about life in general. He is skeptical about certainty in the world, describing it as ‘the atrophy of doubt’ and that which ‘carve(s) all surprise/out of our lives’. He also gives an existential twist to ‘the single I’ of the cricket pitch and ‘all lying-in-wait questions’ as the plane descends.

My poem ‘Final Approach to Manila’ (Lola 54–55) is also about flying and about the certainty of uncertainty in relation to volcanic terrain and ‘the state of the nation’, but its writing was instigated by Haskell’s suppositions about God and doubt, which might be familiar and even commonplace to Australians but can be problematic to Filipinos who take for granted God’s existence and plan. This poem took longest to write since borrowing the first word rather than the last from Haskell’s lines proved quite challenging.

John Kinsella says about The Ghost Names Sing that Haskell’s poems may seem ‘almost too available at first reading, but on further investigation the reader realises that the “I” is much more fluid than at first thought, that it is positioning itself against our prescribed reading and experiential practices; that there is a constant ironising at work, a self-mocking humour’ (251). This is evident in ‘On Hearing that an Apparently Prudent Friend has Left his Wife and Kids for a Younger Woman’ (All the Time 81). I found the poem’s title catchy because it is unusually long and it already announces the poem’s event. Then, the first line echoes W. H. Auden’s ‘About suffering, they were never
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wrong./The Old Masters…’ Since there are a few poems that take off from this line, I was curious about Haskell’s version, especially that his is ‘About sex’. One thing I like about the poem is the absence of bias as Haskell looks for answers to why we—‘the old masters’ and ‘the new’—do ‘pretty odd’ things because of lust, which we tend to confuse with love. Then, there are little surprises effected by enjambed lines and oxymorons, such as ‘or who’s since run off with who/is always, predictably, a surprise’ and ‘You’ll find/sex the child in us seriously at play’. And I like the poem’s noise and contorted rhythm that correspond to the poem’s persona’s struggle to come to grips with news of his friend’s imprudent behaviour. The final surprise is the last line, written in iambic pentameter, which works really well in sealing the poem’s argument: ‘An age which sees God improbable can pray/salvation lies in keen, ecstatic flesh, find/a kiss at the ready, able to betray/perhaps the heart, and certainly the mind.’

My poem ‘A Friend Falls in Love’ (Lola 38) borrows the word ‘friend’ from Haskell’s title and also expresses uncertainties about love and lust: ‘Perhaps this is faith, our likeness to God not undone/by suspicion or boredom with ourselves. Surely/there’s more to this body…’ But as it is the first poem I wrote in response to his, I was bent on simply giving the quatrains and end rhymes a try.

While, indeed, many of Haskell’s poems engage in self-questioning, make accusations and ironise, he has poems that do not expect or insist on dialogue. These poems are about the emotion and thus tend toward the personal and intimate. One such poem, ‘Counting the Days’ (All the Time 89), caught my attention because I find it difficult to turn an ordinary expression like ‘I miss you’ into a poem. I have no quarrel with the poem, since counting days — how ‘each day is a month,/each month a year’ in the absence of the beloved — is a situation we might all have experienced. I really like the sense of time progressing from the familiar to the less familiar, from the seemingly finite to the infinite, which correspondingly and increasingly intensifies the poem’s emotion. By the time Haskell makes his point that ‘there is no reality on the clock/of the heart’s grief’, he is focusing less on ‘the
seas of absence’ than that love is a ‘collapsing star,/that) spins in its black dwarf density of affection’.

My poem in response is really a tribute, since I don’t think anyone could have done better than Haskell. I wrote ‘I Could Say’, (Lola 41–42) as a kind of sequel to his narrative, making it about impossible love: ‘neither tide/nor climate nor sense can to the unknown/that is the heart’s grief assign/finiteness of meaning’. It is a palimpsest, evident in many details borrowed from his. This poem is memorable to me because of the line ‘we are love’s collision in that alternative universe’. When I sent the poem to Haskell, with the original line ‘we are stardust after love’s collision in that/alternative universe’, he commented: doesn’t that sound Disney?

Haskell says that his poems are ‘deeply concerned with human relationships’ and that in writing poems, he tries ‘to wed emotion with intellect, and to portray the discovery of the poetic, even the transcendental, in the ordinary’ (Haskell, ‘Introduction’). ‘After Chemo’ (Acts 133–134), a deeply personal poem, best illustrates this. The poem’s event is stated in the title, and it begins with the all-too-familiar effect of chemotherapy: ‘Your hair is falling’. Hair is the poem’s pivotal image. Haskell as the poem’s speaker describes his wife’s hair, how it falls, and that it is found ‘In each corner of each room’ especially in the bedroom. Diction, in particular the emotional value of key words and surrounding words—hair is compared to ‘thin rain’, ‘mizzle’, and ‘long, silent, lightening snow’, hair fall to ‘gossamer’ that ‘lifts away from you’ and ‘like an inkbrush/gifting new patterns to the floors’; line length that enables yet controls the poem’s movement—‘furring our mouths, our thickening thoughts,/our almost said words’; line breaks that tend to isolate yet unify thoughts—‘And our lives are fastened/by more shadows/than we cast’; the presence of the ellipsis in ‘these fine threads of you,/drifting away...’; ‘breath’ as the poem’s final word, all work to create tension in impending loss while seeking release in the expression and consolation of love: ‘we are as we are/together, alone, as you can see,/with elusive memories for company,/with your wisps of hair/disappearing as gently as breath’.
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My poem in response is ‘Kapok’, which is about the cotton tree, hair, and my memory of Perth, but is also a personal poem written in empathy with Haskell’s. I begin with ‘Your email message yesterday/is like kapok bursting from/its pod in late summer’, then to the message itself: ‘probable/as her hair grown back after chemo,/the return of your wife’s cancer.’ I go on to borrow words, phrases and lines from ‘After Chemo’ and from another poem ‘An Act of Defiance’ (All the Time 97–98), sparingly at first—‘I imagine her hair:/…/thick as waves/but petal to your touch, real/as the sun’s resumption on your fastened/lives or the afternoon’s wildflowers/at King Park where you two are/taking all the time in the world’, and then profusely—‘her hair/is furring your mouth, your thickening thoughts, your almost-said/words. The fine threads of herself/tangle in every room, every corner/inside you…’ I end in recognition of a shared emotion: ‘Grief makes you, dear moth,/write me who am virtual/yet real as rain/falling like slashes of invisible hair’.

I think it is true that writing is ‘less in reaction to a lived life than in reaction to the poet’s prior discoveries, or the discoveries of others’, as the American poet Louise Glück says (92). For me, it is this discovery or ‘insight’ or ‘truth’ (33–45) of the poetic that we respond to ultimately in a poem. ‘After Chemo’ is one of the most moving poems I have read, but more importantly for me it demonstrates Haskell’s great achievement: that authentic articulation in his poems of his approach to art, and his valuing of life.

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When I met Dennis, I was at the beginning of my PhD studies at UWA, in contemporary Japanese Literature. I’d been enrolled for at least a year at that time and was still ‘at the beginning’. My simple, readily containable topic had somehow morphed into a nightmarish beast. I had no idea how to bring it back to something manageable. My supervisor had decided to return to Japan. I may or may not have been to blame. I was casting around for another Japanese Literature specialist to get me back on the straight and narrow path, without much luck.

It was at this point that someone mentioned Dennis’ name. ‘Talk to him,’ they said. ‘He knows everything about Asia.’ I had never heard of this Dennis person, so I did a little background checking. What I found left me sceptical. There was Austlit, there was poetry, there was Irish Literature, something about Italy. Here and there were references to India, Southeast Asia, China. Asia, yes. But these places were not Japan. ‘Asia’, of course, was not ‘Asia’. It put me in mind of an employment advertisement I’d seen once in The West Australian, which called optimistically for an ‘Asian-speaking person’. But I was desperate. So I went to see Dennis, and he got me back on track. He
helped me construct a track. He knew a little about Japan and a lot about supervision.

Along the way I like to think he learnt a few things about Japan. But at the same time, he opened Asia up for me in a broader sense. He would say things like—ah, that’s interesting, Meg, because in India, there’s a similar world view, or well that’s very much like the Chinese tradition; do you think that comes originally from a Buddhist sensibility? And once I got past my frustration with all the extra reading these lines of enquiry were having me do, I grew interested. I realised that I’d been seeing Japan in isolation. Now there are some very salient historical and cultural reasons why you might do that, but for me it was more circumstantial. I’d studied Japanese at high school. I’d lived in Japan as an exchange student. Flew there, flew out. Came back and continued studying Japanese. Came to UWA and broadened my horizons beyond the language itself by picking up ‘Japanese Studies’, going back and forth to Japan a few times during the process. Direct flights. Closed experiences. Japan as a kind of island nation unto itself, context-free, geographically, culturally, historically disconnected from everything and everywhere. Somehow, Dennis contextualised Japan for me. He returned it to Asia. He drew it into the complex web of associations and interrelationships that make up that continent. And he drew me there along with it.

At some point during my studies, Dennis asked if I’d be interested in working as a research assistant on a project he was trying to ‘finish up’. I was a PhD student. I’d do anything for $24.15 an hour. So I began the task of sorting through a mountain of files Dennis handed me in a box labelled ‘South-east Asian anthology’. What a box that turned out to be! That project is where the title of this talk comes from. I chose it for two reasons. Firstly because even though I’ve been a lapsed academic for some years now, I remember one key element—that it’s important to always have a two-part title with a portentous colon in the middle. But secondly and more significantly I chose this title because it reflects some important things about the project, about our relationship to it, as Australians working on a project about Asia.
When I took the project on, it had the working title of ‘Paradigms of Identity: A Critical Anthology of Southeast Asian Literature’, with a colon and everything: we were well on our way. In simple terms, the goal was to include a sampling of poetry and fiction from each country in South-east Asia, with a critical commentary on the history and literature of the region to introduce each section. We aimed to produce a volume that, among other things, might be used in international schools and universities across the region.

As I started working my way through the box, I discovered something odd. Tim Winton. Joan London. Adam Aitken. Oh, yes, Dennis said. That’s part of what we’re doing—we’re making a claim for Australian literature to be seen as a Southeast Asian Literature. Whoa, I thought. I’ve only just got used to the idea that Japan is part of Asia and now you want to throw Australia in there as well? It’s a claim that’s still somewhat provocative, but which was more so when the project first began some fifteen years ago.

We were Australians, editing (Dennis quickly and deftly managed to move me from research assistant to co-editor) an anthology of literatures from other cultures, inserting ourselves into their midst. In doing so, we had lots of issues to contend with. Many of our struggles—both practical and theoretical—with the project have had to do with concerns about authenticity and authority to speak, with sensitivities and hedging about our own positioning. To address some of these very real concerns, in each region we sought to appoint a local editor, someone with whom we could collaborate, someone who could help us negotiate the local creative and, in some cases, political landscape, who could work with us on translation where necessary, on whose judgement we could rely. This was an easy decision in principle, but finding, retaining, and working effectively with the editors was another matter. Communications in places such as Laos, Cambodia and Burma posed logistical problems. In some regions, we had to balance the competing interests of different interest groups, political factions, work out how to represent the cultural and linguistic and diversity that was present, convince the literary
vanguard of certain nations that women writers most likely did exist somewhere amongst them, and other related challenges.

Somewhere along the way, we changed our title to ‘Islands of Words’. We told ourselves it was because it had more shelf appeal, was more likely to catch the eye of a publisher, a marketplace. That was probably true. But it was also true that the authoritative certainty implied by ‘Paradigms of Identity’ had come to seem a little ridiculous. There was no paradigm here, only shifting sand—editors disappearing, new nations being formed, old regimes crumbling, new orders emerging. At one point, I was taken to task by a correspondent for adding, in an informal email, an apostrophe in the name of the newly formed ‘Timor Leste’. Such things, I was told, are important. Good grief, I thought. What’s more important is that we track down some literature, find some writers in the midst of the political manoeuvring, negotiate our way carefully through the various factions so as to avoid repercussions for our local collaborators. Nomenclature seemed the least of our concerns, and yet it was real. Burma/Myanmar, East Timor/Timor Leste—oh and by the way does Southeast Asia really exist anyway? What does it mean to talk about ‘identity’ in a linguistically, socially and culturally diverse region bound together by geographical proximity and in contemporary times a kind of utilitarianism, a nod to political and economic expediency?

The project continues. We often talk about the need to chronicle our many editorial adventures. The latest official output from it was a paper Dennis delivered at a recent symposium, which he aptly entitled ‘A Jumble of Words’. This is where we have ended up in our travels across Southeast Asia—from paradigms to islands to jumbles, a movement away from certainty, from the initial conceptualisation of the project as a relatively simple one, to, in fact, the kind of amorphous beast I was in flight from when we first met. The difficulties we’ve had have something to say about the nature of the region, in all its complexity. But ultimately, the fact that the project simply refuses to roll over and die also says a lot about those relationships, I think, about an enduring faith in the importance of the arts in developing and sustaining them, and perhaps, too, something about Dennis himself.
We’ve had other journeys through Asia, Dennis and I—hosting a symposium on ‘Literature and Culture in the Asia Pacific Region’, co-editing a volume of essays from that symposium, *Beyond Good and Evil* (2005), developing and teaching a transnational course in Australian Literature for Chinese postgraduate students. And I hasten to add that Dennis was central to all these projects, along with others, while my role was often tangential.

And one day he said to me, you know, Meg, I think we should do something about Japan. Japan and Australia—a comparative study of contemporary literature. These are two countries, of course, with very different histories and cultures, and a violent opposition during World War II, and they are usually viewed in contrast with each other. But actually, Dennis said, I think they have a lot in common these days—they’re highly interactive in tourism and trade, both geographically located in Asia, with complex relations of the present to their histories; both are modern, affluent, technologised nations; both are island nations participating in an internationalised economy; both have ageing societies, falling birthrates and fast-changing conceptions of sexuality, family and gender roles; both deeply concerned with nation-building, with changing conceptions of national identity—the list went on and on. Dennis said why don’t we see what happens when we position Australia alongside Japan? Let’s call our project ‘From Yackandandah to Yokohama’.

But Dennis, I said, I thought Australia was in Southeast Asia?

The Asian/Australian work that Dennis and I have been involved in has had public outcomes—publications, symposia, academic courses and so on. But it’s also had important personal outcomes as well, at the level of the individual. I don’t know that I’ve ever met someone busier than Dennis, and I doubt that will change even in retirement. But he always has time for the personal. He’s as likely to be rushing off to a policy meeting as he is to be replying to an email from an Indian student someone suggested get in touch with him about Austlit, or taking a Chinese student on a drive to the beach, just because he thinks they should see it before they go home. These connections, this time taken, it seems to me, is as important as any of it.
Last year I was in Japan on an Asialink Literature Residency, working on a novel set in the World War II period. During my stay it was reported to me that an Australian Japanologist, learning of my work, had responded, ‘Why is she writing about the war? I thought we’d moved on from all that.’ As if the complicated history between our two nations had somehow now been settled, fixed in place. But these negotiations, of course, continue—in the production of academic papers, in political exchange, in a casual conversation with a Japanese war veteran on a Sendai railway platform. In literature, as the saying goes, we take the temperature of a culture and a history and its response to that history, which is ongoing and never static and I would argue that the moment it becomes fixed and decided upon—the moment we decide we have a paradigm and not a jumble—that’s when we know we have a problem.

And this has something to do with our jumbled island paradigms, with the changes we’ve seen in Southeast Asia through the lens of our anthology project—the circumstances of our editors, shifting political, social and economic climates and what they’ve meant for us in both practical and intellectual terms. These are large movements, visible to the contemporary eye. But what’s less visible is also important, perhaps more so. And that’s something literature is adept at taking the measure of. It’s what’s driven Dennis and me from Yackandandah to Yokohama and back again.

And thank you, Dennis, it’s been an excellent journey.

Last year I found myself in a Kyoto bar after a reading, along with some other poetry groupies, among them a drunk and disenchanted Japanese English teacher. He wanted my help.

I want to do my PhD, he said. I want to go to Australia. I want to study Asian and Australian Literature. I am very interested in indigenous literatures. And—he was quite drunk at this point—I also like Irish literature. I don’t have a good idea, but somehow I think I would like to do something.

I looked him in the eye. ‘Talk to Dennis Haskell,’ I said. ‘He knows everything.’
Without the woman at the kitchen sink, nothing is possible.

The Filipino maid with bare hands in the black marble-tiled condominium.
The Australian housewife in pink cotton-lined gloves in her suburban 4x2.
Over a tub of river water in a Mumbai slum.
Bent over a Blanco dishwasher in Berlin.
Even the male kitchen hand at the back of a Perth cafe.

Without the toilet-cleaning, clothes-washing, food-cooking, child-minding kitchen sink woman—nothing.

Not the exalted professor writing dense LANGUAGE poems,
Not the angry diatribe of an alienated neo-Beat, trying to resurrect Ginsberg,
Not the sensitive haiku of a lover contemplating loss,
Not the erudition of metaphor, not the surprise of simile,
Not even the closing jaws of a perfect couplet.

Only the exponential curve of dirty dishes, pile after unwashed pile.

What then of the Art of Poetry?

Begin with her.

She is your mother, your sister, your girlfriend, your wife. She is yourself.

Listen. The sluice of water over cups and glasses, the light thwack of plastic,
the thud of good china (for goodness sake, pick up a tea towel! Start drying).
Listen. She sings as she washes. Remember her song.
In commercial publishing terms, Australian poetry is failing to thrive. Poetry collections are not widely reviewed in Australian newspapers and even many literary periodicals only review a handful of poetry books every year. The poetry collections themselves, even those by well-known poets, are usually published by small presses and typically sell a few hundred copies. Literature Board subsidies—thank goodness for them—only make some poetry volumes barely viable.

Put simply, contemporary Australian poetry does not have many readers. What’s more, this situation has prevailed for decades and is no secret. The bigger commercial publishers pulled out of publishing volumes of poetry in the 1980s and ’90s and although some have published occasional poetry books since, this has usually reflected their investment in a writer of fiction or popular non-fiction who also happens to be a poet.

The ‘Best of’ poetry anthologies published by Black Inc. and University of Queensland Press have better sales figures than almost all volumes written by individual poets and they should be praised for putting serious and interesting contemporary poetry before the

Sometimes Difficult, Always Diverse: Aspects of contemporary Australian Poetry 2010–11

Paul Hetherington
general reader. I won’t be reviewing these ‘Best of’ anthologies—they haven’t been included among the volumes I’ve received and, in any case, I will mainly focus on full-length individual collections. The only problem with such anthologising is that poets in Australia—those fortunate enough to be anthologised—are becoming known by readers for a handful of poems rather than for their work as a whole. This suits some poets better than others.

The anthologising process tends to favour some writers’ styles while other writers—who are perhaps quieter of voice, less fashionable or less demonstrative—are more often passed over by anthology editors. This situation reminds me of two of China’s most famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu in what was arguably the country’s most significant period of cultural rebirth—the High T’ang. They were contemporaries and during their lifetime Li Bai was probably more famous than any other poet in the world. He has subsequently been one of the darlings of Chinese and Western anthologisers. Du Fu was largely ignored by contemporary taste makers. Today, on the basis of perhaps one-tenth of his total output, Du Fu is widely recognised as one of China’s greatest poets. So much for the vicissitudes of anthologising and literary fashion.

Given the issues I have sketched above, why are so many books of Australian poetry being published (this review will consider about 30 books, mainly from the second half of 2010 and the first half of 2011, and others were also published in this period)? I can think of no good answer unless it is that a minority of people believe that even in our globalised and materialist culture poetry amounts to a good deal more than sales returns—that it offers rewards that even ‘poetic’ works of fiction do not always offer. If this is true, it is despite the fact that a great deal of contemporary Australian poetry is relatively prosaic. Contemporary Australian poets have largely abandoned song—the basis of the ancient lyric tradition in countries as diverse as China and Greece—even more determinedly than their peers in the United Kingdom and America. The majority of Australian poets write poetry for the eye (or page) rather than the ear.
I suppose this is fair enough because we rarely sing poetry these
days—or not modern poetry at any rate. Even the superb Elizabethan
lyricists have largely fallen out of favour now that Shakespeare has
been recast by many critics (and film directors) as a proto-modernist
writer and as the pre-eminent Elizabethan (who last encountered Ben
Johnson or John Dowland outside of a university or concert hall?).
But, as has been observed before, the contemporary prevalence of
‘prosaic’ poetry is surely one reason why many people don’t buy
much of it. Once poetry becomes, at least to the untrained eye, largely
indistinguishable from prose—except that it is often more dense,
oblique and in shorter lines—why would a notional ‘general’ reader
prefer it to the latest novel?

If the books I am reviewing are any indication, contemporary
Australian poetry has qualities that are always going to be hard to
market. These include a persistent attentiveness to language and
thought and ways of making telling cross-cultural connections.
Poetry also speaks persistently of the past which, as these volumes
demonstrate, is not a foreign country after all, even if some poets mine
the experience of travelling to and from other countries in creating
their work. And poetry is capable of an extraordinary variousness.

Most contemporary Australian poetry suits people who wish to
work relatively hard at their reading and who enjoy encountering
various and sometimes wayward forms of inventiveness as they do
so. Poets from John Tranter to Emma Rooksby are trying things out;
making and remaking their poetic voices in fresh and refreshing
ways. The old-fashioned, rather masculine verities of Australian
poetry—once dominated by relatively few poets who competed for
meagre rewards—seems to be largely at an end (although the rewards
for poets have hardly improved).

The poem, ‘Shapes Within a Pattern’ which emphasises the impor-
tance of observation, nicely introduces Katherine Gallagher’s Carnival
Edge, a volume of new and selected poetry that draws on a four decades
of writing. Gallagher is not as well known in Australia as she might be
because of her long period of expatriation, mainly in London, but it is
gratifying to read a book of poetry that is straightforwardly and clearly written and which demands the same kind of careful attentiveness from readers that the poet has brought to the exercise of her craft.

Gallagher’s works are often personal—there are poems about children, lovers and family—and are nuanced and reflective. Her ‘Thinking of My Mother on the Anniversary of Her Death’ moves subtly from recollection to reflection and the poem leaves the reader with the following delicate and affectionate lines:

Over the cloudbank it’s candescent,
close. I dare her to keep up with me.

She shuffles answers
to fit my questions. We float,

almost sisters
in the glide of it.

Gallagher also writes a number of poems about travelling, and some about returning to Australia. Her work consistently conveys a sense of alert awareness even as it rarely claims more knowledge than the poet can demonstrate she has. If sometimes her poems finish with open endings and inconclusive statements my sense is that this is how the poet understands her world.

Another volume of new and selected poems is Acts of Defiance by Dennis Haskell. It includes a judicious selection from his total output and contains a brief introduction by Robert Gray. I have been reading Haskell’s work for years, off and on, and he is no traditional lyricist. Yet Haskell certainly cares about the rhythm of his lines and how his poems are shaped. He deploys the imagist techniques so prevalent in contemporary poetry but does not make word-pictures just for the sake of it. His occasionally edgy, searching poetry is at its best when it pursues the existential questions that trouble humanity at large.

A relatively early poem, ‘Visiting Friends at Henley’ is a meditation about death and how it disconcerts people’s ways of behaving and
being. ‘The Call’ transforms an occasion when the poet’s young son calls out in his sleep into a meditation on the presence of God—‘a word sunk deep in the blood.’ The poem’s final image of ‘His body... in my hands’ evokes for me that great Christian tradition of Pietà paintings and sculptures. Haskell’s poetic voice is informed by an abiding—if occasionally tentative—tenderness and compassion. His work eschews the rather hackneyed masculinity that was a significant part of, and is still a conservative presence in, Australian poetic culture.

In ‘Samuel Johnson in Marrickville’ Haskell’s colloquial tone and language conjures just a few spare facts of Johnson’s biography and juxtaposes them superbly with scenes of modern urban and suburban life. The poem mixes desire, an awareness of the tawdriness and meaninglessness of much of human activity and an enabling urge for knowledge and transcendence. These last qualities are implied rather than stated and give the poem an earthy and memorable grandeur. Haskell also writes tenderly of love and, like Gallagher, persuasively of travel. His poems about other places are an exploration of the liminal territory between being and becoming, and between knowing and uncertainty. If Haskell is a critic of much of modernity, including the crasser aspects of modernity’s preoccupation with money, he is also aware of himself as part of the modern zeitgeist, simultaneously involved and detached.

Robyn Rowland also recently published a volume of new and selected poetry, entitled Seasons of Doubt and Burning. In her poetry she often speaks about what has happened to her personally (the persona of many of these poems and their author is closely related), including her love affairs, her relationships with her parents, children and her friends. She also delves into large social and historical issues, including issues of social justice, and is not afraid to make poems about traumatic events such as the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. There is a diaristic quality to some of her writing—for example in the excerpts from Perverse Serenity, a ‘book-length narrative sequence’ that narrates a woman’s love relationships in Australia and
Ireland—that reminds me how well poetry has always spoken of the personal and the immediate.

Some poets use language more sparetly as they mature, but Rowland’s recent poems, which open this volume, tend to be lush and sensuous. A characteristic image is of apricots that are ‘sweet and hot on the tongue.’ Rowland’s preoccupations are often centred on the body and on her sensuous and sensual life, including poems that explicitly address desire and sexuality, along with sometimes difficult emotional experiences. Illness and crisis are also central to her work and, as a whole, this volume of poetry takes the reader on a complex and ardent journey with a poet who revels in the suggestive power of language. The laconic tonality of so much traditional Australian verse is challenged by Rowland’s expansiveness. She is a poet who asks her reader to be involved and to care.

John Tranter’s *Starlight: 150 Poems* follows closely on the heels of his award-winning *Urban Myths*. At the heart of the new volume is an extended sequence of poems, ‘Contre-Baudelaire’ that, in Tranter’s words ‘echo, respond to and sometimes argue with some poems from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal.*’ This is an intriguing one-sided dialogue—Baudelaire’s poems are not reproduced—during which Tranter produces some truly accomplished writing. He has always enjoyed working with a variety of forms and has often found starting-points for his poems in the work of others. The stimulus of working with Baudelaire’s example brings particular emotional complexities to his work. While these poems are characteristically assertive, they are also exploratory and questioning and Tranter’s characteristic control of form—especially of the poetic line—is much in evidence.

In the rest of the volume there is a poem that condenses T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’, a long series of poems entitled ‘Speaking French’ that use deliberate mistranslations of poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Mallarmé (again) as their points of departure, a poem that ‘eviscerate[s]’ then rewrites a poem of Ashbery’s, and a group of poems that respond to various movies. All of this work is inventive, sometimes droll and occasionally caustic.
Two volumes of collected and selected poems have been published by UWA Publishing: the *Collected Poems: Francis Webb* and *Selected Poems of Dorothy Hewett*. Webb is an important Australian poet and this is the first authoritative edition of his poetry. The editor, Toby Davidson, has aimed ‘to restore the Webb corpus to its correct sequential order, with each poem in its final form’ and the volume contains helpful notes and a selection of unfinished poems, as well as all of Webb’s best-known works. Reading Webb in this generously laid-out and well-produced volume is thrilling. I have always enjoyed his inventiveness and mastery of the poetic line and, if occasionally his textures are clotted, and if he can sometimes be garrulous, pursuing the rhythmic drive of his metre and the expansiveness of generous and multiplying stanzas, this is usually in the service of registering complex poetic textures. This volume demonstrates, if the demonstration was needed, that Webb is one of the most significant of Australia’s twentieth-century poets. Deeply troubled in his life, often sublime in his writing, unfashionable in many of his preoccupations, he makes poetry with a music like a sonorous church organ.

Dorothy Hewett is an iconic Western Australian writer whose poetry deserves to be encapsulated in a handy volume of *Selected Poems*. Hewett’s daughter, Kate Lilley has selected and eloquently introduced the volume and it gives a good sense of Hewett’s poetic oeuvre and preoccupations. Even though she is a writer who benefits from being read whole (so many of her preoccupations are articulated within and across her individual collections), this selection shows how successful many of her inimitably-voiced individual poems are. Hewett’s mythopoeic tendencies are on display, as is her capacity to make strong narratives out of contemporary events. UWA Publishing should be congratulated for bringing Webb and Hewett freshly to us.

Edwin Wilson has also published a *New Selected Poems: a collection of flowers*, which collects a generous amount of his poetry written since 1967. His is poetry with a strong interest in the botanical world, in history and in the worlds of art and literature. His poetry is generally direct and engaging, and often formalist. If it is sometimes
understated there are particular pleasures to be gained from joining him in his meditations upon the natural world.

Another volume that focuses on the natural world is *Lines for Birds* by Barry Hill and John Wolseley. This is a beautiful book, largely due to its generous size, its landscape format and its gorgeous production qualities—allowing the book to do justice to Wolseley’s illustrations. For the purposes of this review, these may be read as a kind of visual poetry, mixing a sureness of line with, at times, a delightfully and artfully improvised air to allow one to see again—to re-imagine—the birds he depicts. Barry Hill’s poems are partly an account of the project of travelling and making that culminated in this volume, and partly a series of observations and reflections about the birds he sees and their lives—and also a response to Wolseley’s art. Such writing suits his observant eye and often terse and suggestive phrase making.

One of the most underrated of Australia’s group of established poets is the Jesuit Peter Steele. This may partly be because much of his poetry comments on the Christian story. In recent years Steele has published two volumes of unusually fine ekphrastic poetry (responding to a wide variety of artworks) and an impressive volume of selected poems that was awarded the Philip Hodgins medal. This new volume, *The Gossip and the Wine*, is characteristically discursive in mode and a number of poems continue his interest in responding to works of art. His poems are eloquent and informed by a relaxed erudition. For those who are unfamiliar with Steele’s work and would like to explore a more studied form of poetic utterance than is currently in vogue, this relatively accessible volume—reflective and probing as it is—is an excellent place to start.

Western Australian poet Shane McCauley’s sixth book of poetry reminds me that strong poetry is being published by poets who are not necessarily as well known as they deserve to be. He is an unusual poet, combining an urge towards essaying with a liking for the pithy phrase. And there is a meditative vein at the heart of his work; a tendency to ruminate. Numerous poems show the influence of other cultures and religions including, for example, those of Japan, the
Sufis and the Mughal Empire. McCauley’s points of departure are often the writings of other poets or the paintings and music of artists and composers. Mallarmé features—as he does in John Tranter’s volume—and so do Picasso, Celan, Rumi, Bocherini, Pessoa and Kalidasa. But if his inspiration is drawn from numerous other works and periods of history, his poems are his own. He has the capacity to bring distant concerns up to date; to make poems out of past material that comment incisively on the contemporary world—and also to write convincing love poems.

Tatjana Lukic lived in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and the Czech Republic and established herself as a poet in the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s before moving to Australia as a refugee in 1992. Her book, _la, la, la_ (not, I suspect, the best possible title for this volume) contains a range of poems about dislocation and relocation. Lukic learnt English and began writing poetry in her adopted language—one result of which is this volume. Sadly, she died in 2008.

This book’s structure and content reflect her life in Europe (its first section is called ‘there’), her life in Australia (the second section is called ‘here’) and a group of more general poems (gathered under the title ‘anywhere’). The book is uneven but never uninteresting. Its early poems take one into a consideration of human injustice, repression and violence—and also into Lukic’s sense of her past. For example, the poem ‘1959’ conjures her mother and her own gestation and birth. Others invoke the consequences of the wars and violence that ravaged Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995. There is pathos in these poems and a sense of the futility of humanity’s predilection for conflict. If, for Lukic, poetry is a way of speaking about such weighty matters, it is also highly personal:

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i wish to tell about an ache in my chest
when i turn the pages of booklets of verse
about a nausea when I recall a rhyme
and how i heal this pain
(from ‘is this important’)
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It is a significant achievement to learn a second poetic language, let alone to write tellingly in that language. It is a pity that Lukic didn’t live long enough to have the opportunity to speak more about what her new country had brought her.

Rosanna Licari’s *An Absence of Saints* is largely about the past and family life. She takes the reader on a poetic journey to Europe, including to Istria and Tyrol, and a subsequent journey of migration to Australia. In broad terms the volume’s trajectory resembles Lukic’s *la, la, la* and it, too, explores the awfulness of warfare and the hopelessness of loss. The first half of the book is nearly all a reconstruction of past circumstances. These poems do not entirely avoid sentimentality but a number are moving and salutary. Like Anna Kerdijk Nicholson, Licari includes a few poems that reimagine Cook’s voyage to Australia, mainly focusing on Joseph Banks and botanising. The volume’s second half responds to the contemporary world. Licari’s work remembers and records what she knows and believes.

The act of remembering and delineating migratory journeys to Australia is also a hallmark of *Ashes in the Air* by Ali Alizadeh, a Tehran-born Australian. This is a collection of tersely-written, direct poetry that lets the reader into poetic versions of Alizadeh’s domestic and family life, and which also comments on culture, politics and society. The author is conscious of his status as a ‘Muslim immigrant’ (his phrase) and in one poem responds forcefully to this ‘nomenclature.’ Overall, Alizadeh persistently explores the significance of cultural, national and religious affiliations. Larger issues are often refracted through his personal experience and there is a sense throughout this volume that the poet is writing back to many of the people (and cultures) he has met or knows. Like so many of the poets being reviewed, he draws significant inspiration from a variety of international writers.

Caroline Caddy’s often long-lined, and frequently broken-lined poetry in *Burning Bright* indicates how much she is a poet of landscapes and places. She considers the south west of Western Australia that she has written about previously, along with other
places, particularly China. The rhythms of her work have always been plain-spoken (and often fractured), made into poetry by the condensing effects of the forms she uses—juxtaposing observation, reflection and image-making in sweeping patterns. She builds stories in and across her poems and registers, as she does so, connections with the natural and wild world. At times her poetry documents close encounters (‘Kittens’ is an example), when her poetry is intimate and connected to small things. At other times her subject is the world-at-large. It is this that interests me most about her writing—the sense her poetry conveys that everything connects.

Fremantle Press has published John Mateer’s collection of Australian poems published between 1989 and 2009. This is artfully constructed poetry of a controlled alienation and scepticism, often plainly written and plain speaking. It has an almost moralising tendency at times, and a willed dreaming about how humanity might be better than it is. Mateer is alert to the injustices of colonisation and, in the Australian context, is particularly aware of the injustices inflicted by Europeans on Australia’s Indigenous population. This is poetry that eschews almost all Romantic ideas and makes few lyrical gestures. Its settings are often urban and shifting; their imagery is frequently suggestive of violence and damage. Yet the poems are also genuinely reflective. Mateer is an articulate poet-commentator and annotator of cross-cultural issues and causes.

There have been many extended verse narratives and verse novels written by Australian poets in the last two decades, the most well-known of them being Dorothy Porter’s The Monkey’s Mask. Anna Kerdijk Nicholson’s Possession: Poems about the voyage of Lt James Cook in the Endeavour 1768–1771 travels imaginatively with James Cook on his voyage aboard the Endeavour, which brought him to Australia in 1770. This is an ambitious subject for a sequence of poems, not least because Cook made his own record of his journey in his Endeavour journal, now one of the great treasures of the National Library’s Manuscript Collection. It is a discontinuous
sequence, some of the poems set on Cook’s voyage, others located in the Kangaroo Valley (and even Andalucia) in the twenty-first century. This foregrounding of contemporary domestic life, including daily problems and accompanying metaphysical reflections, does not always sit easily with the evocation of the eighteenth century.

Kerdijk Nicholson’s episodic and often evocative sequence begins by foregrounding the ambition, violence and sexual activities of those who took part in Cook’s voyages, without ever really characterising these people as complex individuals. Along the way it examines questions about what anyone can claim, name, define or know, offering a critique of colonialism. The book even attempts to reclaim aspects of the worlds of the indigenous communities that Cook’s voyage, generally speaking, helped to weaken—bringing, as it did, venereal disease and social dislocation.

Philip Salom’s long-standing interest in exploring poetry’s narrative possibilities is confirmed by his new volume, *Keepers*. The setting for this work is a School of Arts peopled by academics, students and a variety of others, including a cleaner and print-room assistant who is central to the work’s narrative structure. As he proceeds, Salom makes various comments on literature and art and some of the issues attending to the creative process and mentions a variety of influential historical figures, such as Balzac, Artemisia Gentileschi and Francis Webb. This is knowing, often ironic and sharp-eyed writing that demonstrates Salom’s poetic versatility while drawing on a wide range of references. There are frequent moments of acute observation and good humour that help to leaven the volume’s more serious, sometimes satirical, purposes.

Grant Caldwell’s *Glass Clouds* contains a variety of poems that comment on modernity with considerable irony and wit. This is serious, sometimes mordant poetry that dares the reader to take it seriously. One of the recurrent ideas in this volume is how elusive much of experience (and perception) is, and how hard it is to find stable meanings. A poem entitled ‘essay on the determinate and language’ begins:
to say what you mean (when you’re not sure what you (mean when everything sounds so (trite how beautiful is an egg and (why

It is pleasing to follow the poet’s reasoning in this work—if that’s what it is—and the volume also contains political poems, an enjoyable sequence of haiku and works, such as ‘the politics of mist’, that take the reader into shifting and uncertain places: ‘when the statues fall/there is water in the air/everyone is wild with light.’

Susan Hampton’s *News of the Insect World* takes the idea of the life of insects (and other creatures) as a starting point for a series of poems that reflect broadly on modern society, patterns of human behaviour, and occasions of affection and intimacy. The poems are sometimes chatty, sometimes meditative, and they include many details of the natural world. ‘Springtails’ opens with a strong narrative impetus (‘As a boy, the entomologist/was given a magnifying glass/then binoculars then a microscope’) and is soon considering an electron microscope’s view of moth’s wings, that are ‘furry [and] an abstract painting.’ This linking of the small (and even the tiny) with the large, is one of Hampton’s recurrent strategies in this volume and it yields a variety of insights. The poems follow intricate pathways in the natural world into a broader consideration of that larger and idiosyncratic species, *Homo sapiens*.

Claire Potter’s *Swallow* has some of Hampton’s interest in the natural world but possesses a tonality all of its own. It combines a fastidious sensibility with a variety of sensuous, even earthy preoccupations, conjuring and anatomising a world of relationships, memory, encounters and observations. Potter dwells on the flow and forms of language, as if tracing its lineaments. In ‘Old Bee Farm’, for example, we read of ‘lids she opened and closed gentle as damaged shutters/thatched choirs of bees hung unwoken from sleep.’ At times, Potter’s is a poetry of indirection; at times it seems to constitute an elusive and searching narrative of loss, and at times it plays with
the sounds and connotations of language. A number of poems take their cues from the work of other writers—Robert Adamson, Charles Bukowski, Heinrich Heine and Francis Webb, among others. This book confirms that Australian poetry is becoming increasingly international as it finds new ways of being and speaking.

Ron Pretty has long been an important figure in Australian poetry because of his encouragement and mentoring of a wide range of poets, his work as an editor of anthologies and magazines and his activities as a book publisher and teacher. He is also, of course, a poet, and the poems in Postcards from the Centre explore international issues of warfare and injustice, offer social critiques and examine the import of history. His poetic methods are sometimes challenging. His ‘Bierkeller 1933’ reflects on the burning of books by the Nazis—especially those by Jewish authors—but also destabilises the reader’s sense of time and space as it takes us into the presence of both Hitler and Einstein, as if this Bierkeller has been created as a symbolic space through a trick of relativity. Perhaps this is the poem’s point: that the burning of books in 1933 is an analogue for our own age and that human beings continue to experience cultural destruction and neglect. Pretty is certainly conscious of the significance of the poetic traditions that enrich our culture and language, referring to a number of poets, including Yeats and Seferis.

He also makes personal poems, such as ‘Pulse’, which begins: ‘A night so still I can hear my pulse like/some distant machinery breathing.’ It is characteristic that Pretty steps back from himself in this poem in order to consider better what he knows. Many of his works seem both private in the force of their convictions and public in their address.

Other volumes of poetry deserve more attention than I can give them here. Angela Smith’s The Geometry of Flight is a collection of often short, personal, sometimes incisive poems that alludes to and draws inspiration from a variety of writers. The final section, ‘Night-side, a diary’ presents a series of poems about breast cancer, its treatment and its consequences. Earlier sections of the book
explore ideas of family, the past and intimate relationships. Cameron Lowe’s *Porch Music* is an enjoyable volume that explores some of the ways we know and name things. His poetic voice is lucid and appealingly intimate and nuanced. He is also observant, capable of giving appropriate weight to the smaller aspects of experience. He handles ideas deftly and his understated irony adds complexity to his work. Another book, *I Painted Unafraid* by Robyn Cadwaller, is nicely modulated and engaging.

Under its previous incarnation as Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle Press partly made its name through the numerous poets it published, helping to redefine Western Australian literary culture in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s. In recent years the diversity of their poetry list has markedly decreased (a small number of writers such as John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan, John Mateer and Caroline Caddy are regularly published). At times it has seemed that the Press has no longer actively pursued diversity in its poetry list. Why this happened will have to be the subject of a history of the Press at a later date. A new collection, *New Poets*, features the work of Emma Rooksby, Scott Patrick-Mitchell and J.P. Quinton, all of whom produce competent first collections. It is a pity that these writers are jammed together in the one volume (no doubt for reasons of cost).

Various chapbooks completed the pile of books that were sent to me for review. David McCooey’s chapbook, *Graphic* is a skilled, self-aware sequence responding, as he says, ‘sometimes obliquely, to various films by Stanley Kubrick’ (and it is also a kind of companion to Maria Takolander’s ‘Alien Signals: Poems after Stanley Kubrick’ published in 2009). Jamie King-Holden’s *Chemistry* is an inventive group of poems primarily about family life and the past. And Blue Tongue Press published satisfying chapbooks by Susan McMichael (*Green Hair*), Kaye Mill (*Heartscapes*) and Merle Goldsmith (*Pebbles on the Roof*).

Overall, there are many connections between all of these books, despite their diversity. Memory features strongly and many of the poets speak with and through the voices of other writers. Australian
poetry now carries with it a sense of looking forwards and outwards and is finding new models and images for itself. It will not make poets much money, or even bring them many readers, but it speaks in complex and convincing ways of who we are.

**Poetry received 2010–2011**

*Titles marks with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.*


poetry

Kit Kelen

comes from a shallow place
so easily missed
like marks passed over
for want of glasses
it’s never unexpected
till we see the wall is there
these men shaped like sledgehammers
with poetry on their backs
bashing head against brick
till the message is clear
After a Child’s Death

Adrian Caesar

In early winter, a day raw as grief,
he lounges, killing time with a useless book,
looking up sees through the long window
two children at play, older sister, younger brother,
helmeted they ride the skate board,
sometimes taking turns, others together,
the small boy crouched at her feet
staring up in wonder as they career
down the long path that leads to common ground.
She is tall and slender, twice her brother’s size.
Soon will come the quakes, the seismic shifts
that mean the end of girlhood. But not yet.
For now she’s only riding at the edge
of danger, basking safe in her brother’s
admiration, innocent of any adult gaze.

He goes back to his book, wishing the light
would fall, counting the hours until the first
drink which will be, he hopes, more anaesthetic
than the words that drag before his eyes,
until some intimation makes him look again,
and there caught in the frame, solitary,
he sees her waiting. As if there’s nothing else
to do she begins to dance, her white-shod feet
make moving angles, her body, as if it can’t
contain the life within, betrays a shiver,
like water falling she sashays, and her arms
join the rhythmic beat, while he, the only
audience, stands to watch more closely,
thinking to see the earphones that have inspired
this impromptu gambol. But there are none.
She stops as suddenly as she began.
Her brother re-appears; their play resumes.
He returns to his languid reading,
though what he sees aren’t words but this image
squirreled against the darkening night,
the cold and dreary days to come:
a young girl dancing to her own tune,
keeping time to an invisible music.
Love Letter

Rob Wallis

What he sees from the window
holds him transfixed
his body iced up enough
to suggest *rigor mortis*

unable to move
he still has the letter
glued to his hand
(an excuse of sorts
for not rushing outside)
in a room that threatens
a total eclipse
as if someone had
switched daylight off

the snake tossed into the air
like a comma of rope
the dog a mirage of fur
and teeth and snapping jaws
in the seconds it takes
to re-read the sentence
the one that renders all
other sentences invisible
the words inside the sentence
rearing up fangs bared
to deliver their venom

the snake has vanished leaving
the dog stretched out on the lawn
its legs twitching in the last
running thrusts of its death
Red-Capped Plover

*At Barwon Heads*

**Diane Fahey**

That one red-cap on the shore’s silver,
a smallness set against so much vastness,
stayed focal long after its quick flight
had defeated my eyes and it vanished
through a pinpoint high above the mouth,
marrying lightness with light.

Nearby, in nest-scrapes under the cliffs,
red-caps raise their young, ready to draw off
dogs or marauding birds by miming
a wounded wing. Although, in my field guide,
the map of Australia is dark with them,
in this place they’re threatened. I imagine
dots of space appearing, spreading over
that blackness—*here*, then *there*, and *there*...
rub my shaking hands together and breathe, leaving a fine mist hanging momentarily in the air before she softly fades away. She clings to other places though, like the windows of my car that have become opaque from the white, wintery sheen. It doesn’t snow here in Western Australia, but in the winter mornings the cold air lies across the land like a blanket, wrapping us all up in her presence. My hands twitch as I stick the keys in the ignition of my old Volvo. I miss twice before I get the keys in, spin them down and listen as the engine tries to turn over. In the distance, in time to the engine’s beat, I hear the song of the Magpie. If you live in the South West of Western Australia, you get used to waking up to the song of the magpie. Nyungar people call magpie *Kulbardi*, and they tell a story about him singing the sun up to shine on the earth—but it’s not my story to tell (Collard 7). In my language, that magpie we call him *kurrpanti*. I’m from the north, a vast granite country where the sun beats down endlessly, a land of rocky hills and plains, spinifex and sudden floods.

The engine finally clicks over and roars to life. Magpie stops singing and instead Crow, sitting on my letterbox, calls out: ‘*Warghhhhhhhh*.’ I wave a hand at Crow as I stick the car into reverse. I’m not familiar with
any Magpie stories from my way, but Crow or wangkurna as we know him, is filled with a cheeky wisdom in our stories. Both birds can be messengers, or heralds of things to come. As I pull out onto the road it occurs to me that perhaps they are seeing me off on the journey I am about to undertake. Magpie with his beautiful voice and Crow with his raucous one.

The stereo wakes too and the CD begins to play. But instead of my usual CD of Indigenous hip-hop I hear the twangy sound of a John Denver classic blare out of the speakers.

_Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong, West Virginia, Mountain Mama, take me home, country roads._

My sister, a Country and Western fan, must have left her CD in my car. I let the song play as I drive out in the early morning. It seems fitting, Magpie singing, Crow warbling, the engine drumming overlaid by the twangy sounds of Country and Western. I’ll be hitting the country roads today on the long drive from Fremantle to Albany. I’m doing research on colonial prisons in Western Australia that were used to lock up Aboriginal people in the old days. Though most are now crumbling ruins, the earth and stones of these places remain. These sites are usually perceived as empty of people and empty of meaning—a half seen, half remembered country. A lot of places are like this in Australia, a lot of people too. Half seen and half remembered, we serve as the disjunctive points where two realities overlap.

It’s a view where the passage of time has shorn the experience of the past from the present, leaving only a fading reminder of what was, an interesting snapshot for tourists. This is a perception every bit as colonial as the prison itself was. A methodology of disconnection predicated on a simple idea:

_If only we can forget_
_then one day_
_no one is left_
_responsible_
Only ruins are left, broken stone and rusted bars, signposts piercing through the blanket of the new overlaid upon the old. We survived though...so did the ruins. I gaze out my car window as the suburbs of Perth move swiftly through my vision.

I see houses, roads, traffic lights
But I perceive worlds colliding
layering inside one another

Meaning and experience are not isolated or contained relationships that fade easily into the march of time and progress. They are embedded in ngurra (Country), in the land and people, in the rocks and mortar of the prison ruins, in the sacred sites that lie underneath the skyscrapers, in the songlines that our freeways, highways and roads traverse, in the water we drink and the air we breathe. It’s easy to fall into the rhetoric of progress, where the sacred site is replaced by the skyscraper, the songline replaced by the freeway, where the old gives way to the new. But life is not circumscribed by absolute transitions.

One thing does not replace another
they continue to exist within the same frame
Distinct but not separate
the ruins of buildings and the ruins of men

It is important for me to visit ruins of colonial prisons rather than simply park myself in a colonial archive. The sites have a story to tell that I will not find in an administrative file. The experience of Aboriginal men in these places is not distant from me, walled away in a separate temporal frame. To accept this notion is to imprison these men in place and time, to position them across an unbridgeable chasm. The chasm though, is merely a matter of perception. In an Indigenous sense ‘the past is not another Country – it is our own’ (Dixon 15).

As I drive through Fremantle towards the highway that will take me to Albany I am aware of series of cycles turning in relation to
one another, of the heavy movement of chained men across the vast expanse of the West, of the movement of my family across time and space, and my own movement now intersecting with these travel lines. The rubber of my car tyres echoes the movement of colonial forms of transport. The boats used to bring Aboriginal people from the north to the south, the hooting of the trains, the footsteps of men force marched across ngurra (Country) chained by their ankles, wrists and necks. And underneath these footsteps the deeper, steady beat of the songlines filled with the voices of the old people singing up ngurra.

The songlines are the paths the Ancestors Beings walked when they created the world. Some of them spread out into the sea, into the coral, foam and salt and out to the islands that drift off the coast. It was out here on the seas that the strangers first arrived in cycles of exploration and destruction as seafarers from various European nations lost their ships and their lives upon our reefs.

A building stands perched high upon a hill behind me overlooking both the town and sea. It was the first public building in Western Australia, built in 1830. A prison, built in a circle—‘The Roundhouse’ they call it. Circles and shapes that fold back upon themselves are a feature of Aboriginal philosophy. But the circle the strangers bought with them was broken; fixed. Our circles move; one thing gives way to another, only to begin again.

The ‘Roundhouse’ is static
the circle is fixed
there is no end, no movement
only emptiness and disconnection

How strange must it have appeared to Nyungar people when it was first built? It did not take long for them to see the inside of it, as they became some of its earliest occupants. One of them was a man named Calyute who led a raid on a flour mill owned by Mr George Shenton. For this crime Calyute was ‘...taken to St Georges Terrace,
tied to a whipping post, and given 60 lashes with a knotted rope’ (Green 93). He was then held a hostage in the Roundhouse prison in order to enforce the good behaviour of the Murray River tribe. The historian Neville Green relates an interesting story here:

Throughout the long weeks of incarceration his friends never abandoned him. During the day they remained hidden in the bush beyond Fremantle, but soon after dark they came close to the walls of the Round House Prison and softly cooed the sharp whip-like call of the Australian bush, listening then for the answering call that assured them that Calyute was still alive (Green 93).

What was happening behind the walls? Was he still alive? It’s easy to imagine the uncertainty these proud Murray River men must have felt. Later that year, in 1834, James Stirling would lead a military action against Calyute and his people resulting in a massacre. The sound of horses running, guns firing, the movements of new relationships in space, intersecting, cutting, obscuring older ones.

Across time these relationships represent themselves in symbols that we consume without understanding their significance. ‘Stirling’ Highway is a main artery for traffic into Perth, and I drive this colonial highway every day to arrive at a colonial house where I work—Shenton House. George Shenton, the man who was attacked by Calyute on the raid on his mill, also had a house on the banks of the Swan River. This house is now part of the University of Western Australia and, in a great historical irony, houses the School of Indigenous Studies where I am employed.

Everyday I travel Stirling’s highway
and arrive at Shenton’s House
cycles of relationships overlapping and intersecting

These are travel lines built into physical structures that obscure the bigger story they connect to, where over time...
the highway is simply a highway
and the house is simply a house.

But the names mean something to me, as do the ghosts and the ideas they hold. My relatives came through the Roundhouse on their way to other places of confinement, as did many men from the north. A movement that connects me to the shadow I drive in, to the building on the hill, the broken circle, where once Calyute was interred.

The car pulls away from Fremantle and Perth. The Country begins to change.

I am heading to the outskirts of the old colony rather than staying in its centre. There is a web that can be traced along these highways and roads to places far from Perth, that connects back to the prisons here. As the Swan River Colony expanded prisons dotted the frontiers of territory occupied by colonists. A prison solely for Aboriginal men was opened on Rottnest Island, known to Nyungar peoples as Wadjemup, in 1838. This was soon followed by other prisons in the south-west, at Guildford (1841), Albany (1850) and York, Bunbury and Busselton (1879). During the 1870s the frontiers of settlement began to push into the north west of the state and four northern prisons were opened at Roebourne (1881), Derby (1887), Wyndham (1888) and Carnarvon (1890) (Thomas and Stewart 14).

While Wadjemup was the only prison solely for Aboriginal prisoners many other prisons contained what were called ‘native cells’ that were used to segregate Aboriginal people from other prisoners, and functioned as a prison within a prison. In this way Aboriginal prisoners were triply ensconced—trapped under colonial control, in the prison world, and in a special room in the prison world:

A world within
a world
within a world
I got no way back
Suddenly the car is much colder than it should be. I pull over to the side of the road to examine the small triangle part of my back window that was smashed last week. I had taped up the hole with piles of masking tape and cardboard but it must have blown off. There’s no way I can drive with this hole in the window—it’s bloody freezing already. I have some tape, but no cardboard. What I do have though is a car full of books, rough sketches, and notes hastily scrawled on torn edges of paper. Somewhere along the way my car became a moving library filled with my strange ideas, and texts on history and imprisonment. I rifle through my papers and haul out a hefty text, it’s a photocopy of a diary of a colonial policeman who patrolled the north and ‘subdued the natives’. I tape the pages up and fill the hole, hit the pedal and I’m off again roaring down the freeway. I go fast to see if my makeshift job will hold. Surprisingly it does.

Colonial history is *hardy*  
and good at keeping things *out*  

The diary that flutters, taped to my window, is an individual story. A lot of Australian history is like that, individual and disconnected. I’ve read and reread the diary of that policeman, but am always struck by his failure to appreciate the larger system he was a part of. The prisons in the north and the south of the state did not function in isolation from one another. They functioned together in a gulag-like network of prisons that isolated and contained Aboriginal resistance by channeling Aboriginal men away from centres of conflict. The travel lines converged on the Round House and from there, at the heart of the network, lay *Wadjemup*, where most Aboriginal offenders were transported.

From this coast they *came*  
To die upon our reefs  
And now  
upon these reefs  
It was *We*  
who were *exiled*
I have an old newspaper article I dug out years ago sitting in the box in the back of the car that was published in the *Herald* newspaper in 1875:

Rottnest...is called the ‘Black Man’s Grave’, and may not after all be such a delightful spot to pass an idle hour as one might fancy. It is indeed a place of painful memories...Of Rottnest we may say that we can see nothing and prove nothing...But, if we will be taught by the testimony of all past history, this much is certain—the most effective way to make men cruel is to place them in absolute authority over helpless prisoners hidden from public view (Joske, Jeffery and Hoffman 76).

The diary taped to the window flutters in time with my thoughts as the wind presses it in and out against the window frame. The noise irritates me for some strange reason, this diary of the man from the north, who was an active participant in this process of exile.

Did you *know*?
What would *become*
When *you* delivered them on the chain?
Roebourne to Wadjemup
*across* foam and salt
Or, was it...
Just another day at *work*?

My words echo in the car accusingly, my voice sounding odd, strained. I can feel the diary back there. Its eyes on the back of my neck as I drive.

*Flutter*  
*Flutter*  
*Flutter*
It moves in the window in time with the wind, saying the same thing over and over. Finally, I break free of the city and the bush stretches in front of me, out and away into the horizon.

I smile.

The feeling of heading out bush fills me as I speed down a road now lined with trees and scrub. My reverie is broken by the sound of the police diary moving angrily.

*FLUTTER!*  
*FLUTTER!*  
*FLUTTER!*

‘Shut up!’ I yell over my shoulder with a grin.  
‘You’re coming with me with whether you like it or not!’

**Welcome to Albany**

Most of the day has passed by the time I finally arrive in Albany. It’s a beautiful Country that reaches down to the saltwater on one side and stretches out to the majestic Stirling ranges on the other. Now that I am driving more slowly the police diary in the back only makes small sounds with the wind.

Subdued?  
*Out OF place?*

He patrolled the north this man, and I have brought him to the south as my reluctant companion. ‘Don’t worry mate, I won’t ask you to get out of the car,’ I say over my shoulder, laughing aloud at my own joke.

The diary is silent.
I don’t think he has much of a sense of humour.

The last time I was in Albany I stood up on a lookout at the top of a hill and gazed into the distance to witness a storm raging over the Stirling ranges. I think it would be hard for anyone who thinks of the land as inert to witness such a storm and remained unmoved. I am a stranger here in this saltwater place, my people are a freshwater mob belonging to the river, but I respect this Country, I see its power in the tempest of the storm and in the waves that make their slow way to the shore from the deep sea. It’s a profound place belonging to the Minang, a proud and strong people.

While most West Australians mark the beginning of colonisation in the West with the arrival of James Stirling in 1829, a military outpost had already been established in Albany in 1826 due to fear that the French might claim the west coast of Australia.

I had arrived to view part of this story—the old Albany gaol, a structure used to contain and control. The gaol was unusual in the sense that it had been well preserved and was still structurally sound. More than a crumbling ruin, the prison itself had survived. There is an interesting history down here. When you read through the prison and police files in the archives you see constant flare-ups of resistance throughout the south-west, resistance that in one form or another continues today. In particular York and Albany stand out as recurring sites of resistance. They had some wild fellas down here, strong and clever men and women who did not bow easily to colonial rule. Like Jack Mindun who had spent some time in the old Albany Gaol and was later sent to Wadjemup. He escaped from Rottnest and made it all the way back to Ongerup, where he remained until he passed on (Dempster 2).

Escape stories are common in the West. I have yet to come across a prison that held Aboriginal people in substantial numbers that did not include records of escapes. Some stories include mass breakouts. At Roebourne Gaol on Christmas Day 1901, forty four Aboriginal prisoners escaped and made their way to freedom. Other escape stories have sadder endings. The bones of two men were found out in the bush of Nullagine in January 1889, still bound together by chains.
around their necks (Special Report Book 363/1–5). It’s possible they were related to me, as Nullagine is a part of my Country. And if they were not related to me in life, then they are in death because their bones lie in the Country that birthed me. It’s a powerful image, the bones of two men still bound by the chain; a stark reminder of how profoundly traumatic the prison experience was for Aboriginal people and their desperation to escape it. Imprisonment was a punishment that had no parallel in Indigenous society—the very idea was alien.

Climb walls
break bars
flee chained into the desert night
swim from Wadjemup
See my Country again

It was starting to get dark now. The sun was setting over the beautiful ocean as my mind carried the image of men fleeing into the darkness, a night silence only broken by the sound of heavy breathing and the clinking of the chain. I breathed out, misting the air with my breath, and rubbed a hand on my chest trying to loosen up a tightness I felt lodged there. I made my way over to the local caravan park and pitched a tent.

That night I dreamed. I stood high in the sky looking down upon the West. I saw men from the north moving south on the chain. I saw a giant snake in the Pilbara watching the men and I knew it was related to some of them as kin. That it was a part of them and as they suffered it would suffer, that as these men suffered so would their Country and family and all the relationships they connected to. I could see nothing was contained or isolated but that the earth was covered by a vibrant web of law, language and relationships that moved and touched one another like old friends. But there were some things that did not move. I saw black boxes across the land, in a place of colour they stood out, greying the landscape around them. Where
they touched the web of life they frayed its edges, and I could see faint paths connecting the black boxes and I realised, they were lines of travel—the trauma lines of the marches of chained men that had left a scar.

I awoke clammy, tired and sweating in my tent, even though the morning chill had crept in. I heard Magpie singing outside and for a moment I didn’t know where I was, as I experienced a strange sense of *deja vu* with the previous morning. It was a pecking sound that had awoken me: the sound and the infamous Albany cold that penetrated my tent.

Tap. Tap
Tap. Tap. Tap.

I peered out of my tent and saw Crow tapping his beak on the diary taped to the car window. ‘Hey!’ I sang out. But Crow being Crow ignored me, quickly poking more holes in the diary as if he expected some juicy worm to suddenly appear from inside.

‘Shoo,’ I said waving my arm and scaring him off. The diary was in a sorry state now, there were small holes all over it. I put my eye up to one hole and could see straight through into the empty space behind it. ‘Sorry mate.’ I said touching the diary; he was a right mess now, this once proud story. But he was still holding up alright; hopefully he would still keep most of the cold out.

I wrapped myself up against the chill and made my way into town for some breakfast. The dream clung to my mind, more real than the bacon and eggs that I began to eat. I could still taste the dream and it left my morning tea tasting bland and watery. I drew out some paper and began to sketch, trying to make sense of it. After some time I realised I was looking at two sets of patterns laid over each other like designs on transparent paper. One pattern was the imprint of creation, the lines of movement that the Ancestor beings travelled when they created the world. As they travelled they engaged in actions at specific sites, creating the sacred places, and each sacred place is
connected along that line of movement. These are the movements and sites that form the pattern of creation—the web of life—it is the relationships of the universe writ upon Country. Laid on top of these were the black boxes, which I realised must be what prisons look like in the eyes of my old people. While the creation pattern functions as an interconnected web of relationships, the prisons appeared to have the opposite effect. They broke down relationships, they removed people from the context of Country and family and isolated them, to the degree that was possible, from the web of life. And the black boxes were connected to each other by the trails of trauma the men marched into the earth.

This was dangerous. If prisons were truly the black boxes of my dream, then they were far more insidious than a simple force of destruction. Creation and destruction are part of the pattern of creation, the Ancestors both created and destroyed, and in doing so laid down the fundamental basis of movement and change across the passage of cycles. However, prisons did not simply destroy, they attacked the way relationships connect, inhibiting the way one thing can relate to another, initiating a process of anti-life that damages the very fabric of creation. I reached into my bag and pulled out a well-worn book, one I have reread over the years, by a brilliant senior Aboriginal Law man from the Kimberley who has since passed on. I thumb my way over to one passage in particular:

We grow up with that spirit of caring and warmth of the sun, fire and love from our family. Those are the growth elements, the elements of Wandjina. Wandjina can’t walk in jails. When Aboriginies are cut off from that, they want to kill themselves. They just die then and go to Dulugun. There is only that one channel. And they are all coming back (Mowaljarlai 165).

I often find myself only capable of comprehending small pieces at a time, and it is only now, in light of my dream, that that particular passage makes sense to me.
Prisons hurt relationships
Hard to feel my Country
Death release
Find my way back

It was all a bit too much to think about this early in the morning. I sit back and empty my mind and try to enjoy my breakfast. Soon I would walk through town and down to the old Gaol that waited for me on the edge of the inland sea.

The Old Albany Gaol

I stand.
Watching
Out on the fringe
Waiting

In the north you never approach a sacred site without caution, even if you have permission to be there. And if you don’t have permission, you should never be there. A similar sense of caution applies to disturbed sites, places where people died or are buried, or sites where people suffered. They are not places to visit lightly. Prisons are disturbed sites by their fundamental nature. Suffering, in the sense of feeling and memory, are not trapped within the physical body. Country holds memory. The trauma of the old gaol remains vested in the physical structure of the gaol and the structure of the land.

Trauma does not evaporate over time
like water under heat
Trauma is damaged relationships
you heal relationships
by interaction in Country
Blaze Kwaymullina

There is also a distressing continuity here. A short drive from the old Albany gaol is the new Albany regional prison. A similar situation exists in Roebourne, where the old and the new stand in close proximity. In both Albany and Roebourne there are Aboriginal prisoners in the modern prisons who had ancestors locked up in the old colonial ones. A regime of incarceration stretching more than one hundred years.

These questions run through my mind as I wait. I’m waiting on a feeling. Giving time to whatever spirits reside in this place to take a look at me before I wander in. ‘Wargghhhhh.’ Crow is back perched on a tree, cocking his head to the side as he eyeballs me. I feel like its time to go in so I head to the front of the gaol and pass through the door, leaving one world and entering another. What feeling and memory is locked inside the walls of the prison in front of me? I pay a small fee to a volunteer who is manning the counter in the Foyer. I know they have a separate Aboriginal cell here and ask the volunteer if they have anything written up about it. They have pamphlets about various parts of the prison history but on the experience of Aboriginal prisoners the pamphlets are silent. I make my way towards the Aboriginal cell. To get to it I have to pass through the convict wing and I immediately get a terrible, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

*Sick*  
*sweat*  
*Get out!*

It feels hostile and I hurry through to the outer yard. In front of me is the Aboriginal cell. The cell has a second story, which was used to hold the mentally ill. Before I enter the cell I announce who I am so whoever’s in there knows. I step in anticipating the same feeling as the convict cell but instead there is nothing. It feels just like an empty cell. A slim ray of light is beading through a window high up on the wall. I look down and see a metal bar running the length of the
floor up against the back wall. It was common practice in colonial
times to chain Aboriginal prisoners even while they were inside a
cell. Strangely, a sense of peace comes over me as I stand there and I
feel welcomed. I interpret this as an acknowledgement that there are
spirits in here with me and it’s their way of saying ‘welcome brother,
we understand why you are here.’ I find my expectations overturned.
The words of a man imprisoned in a different time and space appear
in my mind and I whisper them into this silent space.

I am the interstellar wanderer!
They have tightly bound my body,
But my soul is beyond their power
(Solzhenitsyn 595)

The timber-framed cell has carvings scribed into the wood
with Aboriginal designs. They are perhaps the oldest example
of Aboriginal prison art in Australia. Perhaps, in the eyes of the
prison guards, and the passing tourists, the carved images are
assumed to be something prisoners did in order to pass the tedium
of incarceration. I see them in a different light, as clever and sub-
versive works. I fold my sketchbook out and look back at my
two patterns transposed on top of each other. Prisons oppose the
creation pattern because they inhibit the expression and connec-
tion between relationships. But the carvings etched on the walls
indicate that the effect is not total or absolute. The carvings are
works that subvert the prison environment, forging relationships
from the inside to the outside. By carving a Dreaming Ancestor,
or a story or a song into the space of the cell a person can breach
their containment. The idea brings to my mind a story a Nyungar
colleague of mine, who worked in prisons, once told me and
allowed me to write down.

I saw first hand prisoners who had been made to move away
from country and family and were incarcerated in some one
else’s country, miles from their homelands, within a tight, heavily guarded institution. The ‘soul sickness’ that developed was hard to shake, resulting in mental health issues whilst in prison, which continued once outside of it. I asked this prisoner, did he know why he was feeling this way, and his reply was ‘I’m heartsick for country, I can’t see the stars in the night sky. I know they’re not from my part of county, but maybe I will get better if I could see them.’ So I got him moved to another cell, where this could happen and within a few weeks, he got better (Mia).

Both the carvings and the vision of the stars provide interesting examples of the way relationships with Country can be maintained and forged in even the most hostile of environments. I expected to find trauma in this old gaol, and I have, but also intelligent and planned resistance, a methodical application of Aboriginal systems towards survival. On my way out of the Gaol I overheard a tourist saying to his wife: ‘If only these walls could speak.’ I remained silent as I walked by.

I walk out of the prison and wander down to a beach that overlooks the inland sea down from the old gaol. After a while an older Aboriginal guy spots me and walks over, I can tell by looking at him that he has had quite a hard life.

‘Hey there brother!’ he yells as he ambles up and takes a seat.

‘Hey brother.’ I reply shaking his outstretched hand.

‘You a Nyungar?’ he asks

‘Nah I’m from the Pilbara, Marble Bar way.’

‘A northerner eh? Too many northerners down here taking all the good jobs!’

‘Yeah well they say the same thing about you Nyungars taking all the mining jobs up north!’ I reply with a smile and he starts to chuckle.

‘Yeah well we’re all mixed up now aren’t we. Don’t know whether we’re coming or going. This is my country down here, all of this,’ he says waving his hand around.
‘Whatcha down this way young fella?’
‘I’m doing a bit of writing on how they used to lock up our mob in the old days, like at that old gaol up there.’
‘Oh so you educated then?’
‘Yeah’
‘Well they tried to educate me but it didn’t work.’ He says with a serious face.
‘How come?’ I reply as I notice a cheeky glint in his eye.
‘They said I was too blackwards!’ He says roaring with laughter. His laughter is infectious and I laugh as well.
‘They locked me up too you know. Took me away and put me in the home like a prisoner. I was locked up just like those fellas in the place up there in the old days,’ he says seriously switching topics suddenly, his gazing resting on the old gaol in the distance.
‘Makes me sick that place I don’t go near it.’ He says and we fall into silence. A lot of people walked by us as we sat there, taking great pains to walk a large circle around the seat before setting foot back on the path. Careful not to make eye contact with the two Aboriginal men sitting on the seat. I had grown a rather large beard so I guess I looked the part a bit more than I normally would. The old bloke yells out to one couple.
‘Don’t worry you fullas I’m not contagious!’
That only made them walk even faster. You had to laugh, it was all so ridiculous sometimes. We talked for a while longer then the old bloke shook my hand and left. It was only later that I realised I hadn’t even gotten his name.

Take me Home

I pack up my tent and my gear back at the caravan park. But before I head off I flip through two of the books I’ve been reading. One is *Prison Writings* by Leonard Peltier a Native American falsely imprisoned in the United States. The other is ‘Killing Time’ by Nyungar poet Graeme Dixon who spent many years locked up in one way or another. Both
are inspirational books. One passage by Leonard Peltier sticks out for me.

We don’t need more prisons. We need more compassion. That compassion is our own highest possibility...We need each other. Each of us is responsible for what happens on this earth. We are each absolutely essential, each totally irreplaceable (Peltier 208).

Graeme also talks about this connection between all of creation in his poetry:

...for without your humanity
to witness these marvels
the joke’s on us
because it’s our senses
that give the universe substance
and as each one of us
so dies
so does part of the vision
of all things splendour
and nothing more exists
in so called reality
but guard it carefully
because the Dreaming continues
far beyond those bars!
(Dixon 69)

When we lock people up and dehumanise them we lessen all of us. Not just human beings, but all of the pattern of creation. We unpluck the ties that bind the universe together. I haul myself into the car for the trip back, taking the longer route to give me time to think. Halfway along the road I feel the wind roaring back in through the car and I look over my shoulder to see the diary has gone. He lost his final purchase and was blown away. I wonder if he had simply had enough and just let go.
I don’t stop to tape something
different over the gap
I just let the wind blow in
I want to feel the cold
I want to feel alive

I get lost and it takes me a long time to get back home. By the time I get near Perth it’s dark, the moon is up in the sky and the streets are empty as I drive through the suburbs of Perth. I pull into my driveway and while Magpie is not there to greet me I see Crow, almost invisible in the darkness, lurking in the front yard. I get that warm feeling you get when you come home, and realise that’s part of what has been taken from people denied their home, denied their Country. Lenard Peltier once wrote ‘To those of us locked away in here, there’s nothing more important than being remembered’ (Peltier 208). We remember brother because what happened to you is a part of all of us. It’s written into creation, in the scar lines across the earth. And maybe, in that remembering and acknowledging, there is healing. For those that are locked up and can’t go home and for those that are lost and can’t find it any more, I put in my sister’s CD one last time and play the last few lines of John Denver’s song. If they physically cannot get home then maybe their spirits can follow the song and find their way back to that warm feeling, back to their home where their relatives wait to welcome them at the end of that old Country road.

Take me home, country roads
Take me home, now country roads
Take me home, now country roads.
Works Cited


Dixon, Graeme. 2003. *Holocaust Revisited—killing time*. Centre for Indigenous History and the Arts, School of Indigenous Studies, University of Western Australia.


The Night Keeper

Jonathan Hadwen

It was never late until my parents’ light went out, and the presence of the dark shuffled up the stairs, climbed the walls and hung from the ceiling.

The floors became heavy and their noise monstrous, ringing loneliness like an alarm throughout each room of the blackened house,

These nights cradled me in their darkness, put arms around the thing inside me that could not sleep, taught me to loath and love a world alone,

I worked each evening on the idea of one day being the master of light in my own house, but counted with each cautious step the distance between those slumbering, functioning minds and my own,

I heard the clocks strike me off as I waded from room to room, knowing this was my world, I was the thief who each night stole an entire house, knowing each morning I would have to give it back.
Cairn(s): Arcadian Nocturne

Matthew Hall

I

sometimes light
   stretched across a twisted frame
   of earth
comes into itself
   forms a mark
   of relevance
I want another witness
for which to see

II

sounds perpetual
where we drown in ourselves
   soot black mouths
   breath of tides
   I slip under
your words of consolation

III

alone
towards an axe of light
splitting the stone-black forest
   you have carried
   me
into a future which burns
like brass
The memory of earth

Annamaria Weldon

*We cannot list the victims’ names, we cannot call it a Massacre Site or even a Significant Aboriginal Site, the site is only allowed to be known as a Battle Site. www.pinjarramassacreresite.com*

1

The wetlands have watermarked her. Rivers fill her pen. Pinjarra’s lakes and creeks won’t stay asleep in their own beds. Her pages are soaked with run-off. She is an inlet where tides rise and fall, a blue eye drifted by clouds. The wild goes walkabout through her notebooks, scattering grain and spores along the margins. She hears trees shed bark, seed cases crack and split, tails slithering through sedges.

Fox and heron make her rooms thoroughfares. Claws scrape dry sand, paws scuffle leaf litter. She tracks small prints that vanish at the edge of soft and damp where savoury marsh samphire is spreading into the corners of poems.

2

In the morning now she wakes with the scent of river gums in her sheets. The ink stains on her pillows are rimmed with salt. Through her Bilya Maadjit flows transparent as rain,
cold and clear as the first day she entered it, turning her fluvial, insistent as blood but deeper than veins, inscribing her ochre mapping the history of pain.

Under eucalypt branches, the white threads of stamen stitch tannin water, but this Kambarang sunlight is leaded with shades and a silence like sleep leans on the green terrace where mia mias clustered before, the morning that those musket shots shattered.

3

She is earth from earth, feels the truth buried here. Holds her pen like a spade, to disturb the surface, shovels until nib hits bone and ground cries out this was a massacre.

Flooded gums have forested the red dirt on her desk. Their roots, webbed over its edge and anchored in air, hang in tangled skeins the way that hair comes loose when women weep hiding their eyes, covering the babies that cling to them as they crouch in hollows beneath the Murray’s banks where she sees them in the watery reflections of trees, their footholds eroded by time and grief, yet still alive in the memory of earth.

Background note: I was shown this place by Nyungar Bindjareb leader and cultural teacher George Walley who, in telling me its history, named the dwellings, the season and the river in his traditional language.