Waking:
The return to consciousness was sudden. My eyes opened. I had no sense of an attached body. I could feel nothing, I was a mind. Seeing. Alive. Alert. Banks of instrumentation surrounded me. The room—high ceilinged—wide, stretched away into shadow. I was curious. I wanted to know if the surgery had been successful, if there had been complications. I was aware that the tube of the ventilator was resting in the corner of my mouth. The ventilator—which had been the thing I feared most; the inhibitor of speech, as if not to be able to speak was a sort of death—was there. I was conscious of it, but it didn’t panic me. I was surviving. A nurse, red-haired, with a soft brogue, spoke to me. Momentarily we stared at each other. What would she make of that look? Could she, with her experience in intensive care, gauge exactly how aware I was, how conscious I was?

The second time I woke the world had expanded. The nurse with the Irish accent smiled at me, said: I’m going to take the tube out. Family faces loomed, smiling. They were pleased with me. A familiar doctor in a long white coat said ‘...that will see you through’. I had prospects. I asked the red-haired nurse what the time was. Eleven o’clock, she said.
Day or night? I asked.
Day.
Day! But what day? A piece of time had been snipped out of my continuum. What had been done in my absence? Where had I been?

For two days, it seems, I had lingered in a dark realm, the body monitored by machines, the mysterious buoyancy of blood pressure failing to rise, the dancing cursor on the screen staying flat. No wonder!

Early in the morning of the first day, the surgeon had sawed through my sternum. My ribs had been forced apart. My protective cage breached. My left lung was deflated. Reaching in, he had taken my heart in his hand—my good heart, which had stood me in such faithful stead—and turned it over. He attached an apparatus to it, gripping one section and stopping its pulse, the muscular clench which is all we’ve really got to work with. Like a fist, clenching. That’s us—a muscle clenching, non-stop, from the womb to the grave. On the stilled surface of the heart he attached the vein stripped from my leg, a fine thread stitched with a microscopic needle. The end of an artery pumping into my chest wall was detached and sewn directly onto the surface of the heart. Then, I guess he began the mopping up. I can’t imagine the state of my chest cavity. Was there blood sloshing around? Clamps, swabs. All the paraphernalia we are familiar with now. How was my lung re-inflated? What happened to my ribs. Did they spring closed, when released? Having been wrenched open like the ribs on a shipwreck—sprawling, no longer functional—did they have to be forced back into place and wired shut to protect the heart and lungs? No longer open. Closed to all viewers, like a museum on the day you choose to visit. I am beginning to feel like that: an exhibit in a museum of survivors.

On the third day I was moved into the recovery ward with three other heart surgery patients. The third day is the turning point; the resurrection of hope. With the resurrection of hope comes awareness of the body, the drag of tubes, drains and wires emerging from one’s flesh, an iron weight of pain and injury stretching from under the
chin to the navel. How can the body survive such a cleaving wound? I don’t speak. There is no-one to speak to. Each of the four patients is silent, enveloped in a bewildered state of suspension while the body decides what it can bear. There is an occasional groan of pain. Fear is part of it in this ward, the High Dependency Unit. We depend on the nurse, her presence; someone is looking after us. We are somebody’s responsibility. We can’t do this alone.

If we stay too long here, it means we are not doing well. With increasing awareness we count the hours, the steps forward that mark our improvement. Still it is a shock when the physiotherapist says ‘we are going to get you up for a walk’. My body seems to weigh a ton. It is inconceivable that I am expected to walk. But I do. Along the corridor, the physiotherapist holding me up, my hospital gown loose around me, my hair in greasy threads around my face. It doesn’t matter. I am not myself, the self I am is missing. I am a cardio-thoracic unit in recovery. For all they know I look like this all the time: gaunt and sallow; my movements a slow stumble: a grotesque from outer suburbia. A grim desperation pushes me on. I must do what I am asked. I am a believer. I will be resurrected.

The nurses in this unit are confident and competent. They are the elite of nursing. They are proficient technocrats. They tinker and adjust their valves, coolly keeping you alive. The old days when they nonchalantly flicked a fingernail against the hypodermic syringe of morphine are passed; an anachronism. Nowadays it is the acronym we must understand: having a MI (myocardial infarction-heart attack) due to IDI (ischemic heart disease). If you survive the MI, you could be lucky and have a CABG (pronounced cabbage) I am an OPCAB (Off pump coronary artery bypass); it is an advantage over being placed on the heart-lung machine. The OCTUPUS tissue stabiliser makes this possible—the heart never missed a beat! The master surgeon sews a graft across the blocked artery 1.5 mm in diameter. He bypasses a second blockage in an artery 2 mm in diameter. His sewing is daring and heroic. Life hangs by the merest thread. The elite technocrats know so much, but they don’t know how I feel. They monitor and
Pat Jacobs

check and fill in charts. They know—from experience—where I am on the ratio of excellent, good, or fair recovery. They tick my boxes. On a scale of ten, they know exactly where my pain fits—but they don’t know how I feel, they don’t ask if I am intact. For all they know I could be heart-broken. Shattered—like my rib-cage. My defenses demolished. My secret heartaches exposed. Everything hurts. I have a recurring image, sharp and clear, of water pouring from my eyes. The water is a torrent. It sparkles, a crystal cascade. It is unstoppable. Necessary. Am I weeping?

Something can happen to the eyes when they are closed for too long. They dry up. The aqueous humour—evaporates? instead of being replaced every four hours. This liquid, essential to the efficient working of the eye, suddenly is no longer replenishing itself. If the aqueous humour is vanishing, what of the vitreous humour—the blood supply? With dry eyes, I dream of cascades of crystalline tears pouring from my eyes. All the tears I have never shed. It is a shock to understand that flesh is fragile; that ‘alive and well’ is intransitive. Life, the dancing cursor, has no real substance in this place. It can falter and stop any second. Sight depends on a few hit and miss events, like light hitting the right spot on the retina, adequate aqueous humour and so on; being able to imagine something. Then, of course, the brain takes a stab at it. Does everyone know that sight is subjective, that the perception of an object—an image—is an hypothesis, a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available data according to what you know. What you see is not always what you get. Ha Ha.

I hate this slap-dash approach to life and language. I want beauty, exactitude, clarity. I want meaning to be explicit. How can we deny the meaning of the words. If what happens becomes just a compilation of data, with all meaning suspended, nothing matters. Unspeakable things can happen.

I drag my leaden body up the corridor of the cardio-thoracic unit, trailing my tubes and wires and heart monitor, wanting to do everything right, pretending to be unconcerned, waiting for someone to say I am doing well, to say I’m looking much better, instead of
ignoring me. I feel the difference between us: the strong hurrying bodies of the nurses and my slow stumble. They are well and I am ill. There is such a distance. I have crossed over the border. I feel acutely the loss of belonging to the healthy. It is a danger zone, this space between, this borderland between two states: life, with its pulsing vibrant, changing panorama—and death, the shadowland, a perpetual winter of grey and white—like a Siberian landscape? A Russian knowing...

My first shower leaves me trembling with exhaustion. I am grievously wounded. I want nothing more than to be allowed to lie in bed, my apparatus of drips and tubes arranged around me. My torso is filled with pain. I note the colour dimension of pain. Clearly, acute pain is red—scarlet. Deep crimson, like blood I suppose. The book I took with me into theatre has been found and I go, quite easily and quickly, into the chill world of Denmark; a strange freezing world of snow and music. I lie, unmoving, casting vivid images on my retina, creating them from the words the author uses: The lute player, the purity of his music. Snow and ice—of immense depth and cold—which I have never experienced. Music and Silence. The title is the reason I have chosen this book. Music and silence will heal me, besides, the other book written by this author was called Restoration! I grab, occasionally, at meaningless portents. Maybe all this coldness will slow my heartbeat; the irregular pulse, the hair trigger response which gets me into trouble. The deep suspended animation of being on ice, the whiting out of snow. Different. So different to the heat and colour where I come from.

In the dragon-fly season the air is full of them, in a frenzy to fulfill their cycle. The dragon-fly season comes after the end of the wet season when the days are balmy and mild, fresh, after the punishing humidity of the monsoon. At night, heavy precipitation drenches everything. The temperature can drop to a chilling two or three degrees. The grass grows almost visibly, dense, green. Birds, in a
ceaseless noisy hurry, blanket lagoons and creeks. There is a plethora of life, frightening in its superabundance and intensity. There is so much life here that, inevitably, some of it will be wasted, churned into a kind of organic stew that, in turn, will feed the remainder. It is raw and harsh, but there is also a beauty that makes the heart ache with tenderness for such a place. The land is suffused with energy the way the body is suffused with blood when it is thriving.

Outside the sterile, silent cocoon of coronary care it is February—a heatwave. I am sealed off from it in this inner room with no windows, muted artificial light, electronic equipment. The nurse tells me the temperature is in the forties for the fourth day. Children are back at school. The nurse works quietly, concentrating, going from one to the other of her four patients. Two of the men are having problems, something is wrong. Anxiety ticks in my mind, but I turn back to Music and Silence: Denmark, the frozen country where I can feel no pain. The black tree trunks are a fine tracery on the white ground. Frederiksborg castle, so bleak; the cold malice in the story. I am transported into this alien frozen world—it passes the time.

A Russian intern brings his group of students to my bedside and discusses the procedure. He pokes the wound, with its profusion of wires and tubes, the wired-together bones, the sutured skin, looking for fluid, or infection. I can see that he is quite indifferent to how I feel. He hurts me, this Russian doctor, and doesn’t seem aware that he has caused me such distress. I am nothing to him but I am everything to me. This terrible indifference to inflicting pain causes me to lose something, a little of my confidence perhaps, a little of my faith... If my pain matters to no-one, who will notice if my recovery falters? For the first time I am afraid. I am in the high dependence ward, in the confined space with the muted light. The four patients face each other, two on either side with their array of monitoring machines. We can’t move. We are helpless. It’s a standoff. Who will inch over the cusp of recovery first and move on to the next stage?

Visitors come briefly into the room: close family members. They look alarmed, are wordless. What can they say? I will not—out of
stubbornness—ease their discomfort. I will not say ‘I am fine’, ‘it doesn’t hurt’ ‘I will be home soon’—‘don’t worry’. In the to-and-fro-ing of words, a denial is being manufactured and I refuse, this one time, to be a part of it; this dialogue that puts a safe distance between the wounded and the observer—the disease and the unease of the onlooker. A heartfelt response is somehow....not seemly, almost a transgression. We are a people who practice the art of ‘looking on’. We have a history of ‘looking on’. We have ‘looked on’ at unconscionable acts of cruelty. I think about SIEV-X, I think about the women and children, their journey—their hope of a better life—their drowning in a sea of indifference. I can’t get it out of my mind that we ‘looked on’; that we engaged in a dialogue that enabled us to feel nothing. Crossing the border cost them everything. They didn’t matter.

Cough! The nurse insists. There is fluid there. The bottom of your left lung has collapsed, she says. Cough! The pain takes my breath away. The two halves of my chest are wired together but I feel torn asunder.

The skin, smooth and intact, has been sliced through, its value and meaning compromised. It has held me in—until now. I had no sense of its beauty and fragility before this occasion. The youthful, lustrous sheath, with its intricate whorls and creases, has worn and frayed with age, but now, now, it has been ruthlessly cut and pushed aside. An extraordinary opening up has taken place. I am open to all possibilities. This boundary between the inner and outer world has, astonishingly, been severed, and in the severing, its wholeness, its innocence, has been forever lost. This skin will bear the marks; the outer signs and cicatrices of interior adjustments. Inwardly I have been re-arranged. Consciousness has been suspended, banished to a limbo, a deep sleep of terrifying solitude. Or, hurtled to a collective of consciousesses twittering with fright. Where was ‘I’? Who knew my fears and sensitivities? How could they be sure of recovering the right ‘I’?

The man across from me has developed asthma. His wife has been called. A nurse finishes her shift and leaves—abruptly. I can sense
her utter exhaustion. She cannot take another minute. She flees with relief. Who can blame her? I read the book, fingers steadying it on a pillow. The lute player freezing in his cellar below the king’s chamber, playing the delicate melodies the King loves, the sound finding its way up through the brass piping, like the tortuous plumbing of the heart’s circulation system. The story is strange, strange enough to hold my thoughts in check. But I do think, even so. I listen to the man in the next bed struggling for breath. I think of the women holding their children up from the water as long as they could, their garments trailing in the water. The moment when they knew they—and their children—would die. The man is coughing. The wife cries: do something! A doctor comes... Everyone is agitated. The evening nurse checks each patient, speaking a few words. She brings each of us a cup of tea and a sandwich. She is calm and soothing, not fazed by the crisis. Alone, she will steer us through the next few hours of the night. We are, I imagine, not patients but passengers on a cosmic flight held captive in this capsule by the gravity of the situation. Quite suddenly I want, desperately, to be out of here, at least to reach a destination. At ten o’clock, before she leaves, the nurse comes around. Speaking our name, she touches each one of us on the hand, or the forehead, and wishes us a good night. Does she know, has she any idea what her touch means to us? Our skin has been tormented. It craves tenderness. Our spirit is low. Her kindness heals us.

It is another day. We have no clock or radio to tell the time. This is not a recuperation ward. It is a survival ward; a place of trial. Tea is brought, and cold hard toast. The asthmatic patient is sleeping peacefully alongside me. Across the aisle, the two men stare back. There is a touch of hostility. It is a standoff. The morning nurse is brisk and efficient. She has a timetable and we have to fit it. Four people must be dragged to the shower and dragged back, trailing I.V. stands and drips, wires protruding from wounded chests. The shower process, in a room cluttered with equipment, is so painful and dehumanizing that I begin to shake, my body is rebelling. It is too much trauma. I feel de-personalised. I am not free. I understand as
never before the pain of those held against their will, the terrible loss of self hood, when our coverings are taken away and our vulnerable skin is exposed, our damaged bodies revealed. We have been taken across the border. This is no-man’s land.

There is a long window in the room. I can see sky, pierced by the campanile of the university. I have been transported to the coronary care ward. From my bed the rectangle of the window is like a large watercolour: the sky, a soft hazy blue, terracotta daub of roofs, a mid line of grey-green trees and in the foreground a dominating mist of lilac, blue, mauve, violet, overwhelming the eye. Jacarandas…I rest. My eyes drink in the colours of the landscape. I feel very weak and tired. I understand that I am presumed to be out of danger. I am happy and grateful to have been successfully resurrected—but I am filled with sorrow, my chest hurts with it. My heart aches. It is not fair that I should be resurrected, at great expense, and the women and children of SIEV-X were left to drift on the tide, It is said that during the night when a large number of people were still alive in the water, vessels came and shone lights on the people and then…went away, without attempting a rescue.

It is not inappropriate that the loss of the SIEV-X people is contiguous with my recovery. Their deaths demand recognition. Their wasted lives matter to me. I can’t accept my recovery without mourning the shame of their loss.

The Russian intern came back with his coterie of students. I had thought he was, perhaps, a hallucination, a portent from no-man’s land across the border, the shadowed Russian knowing…He was real enough. My look must have told him I would not tolerate being prodded. I feel very well thank you, I said politely, drawing the sheet to my chin.

It is not superficial, this opening up of the self; piercing the boundary which separates the inner and the outer world. Recovery is difficult and not always what one might expect. The wound has closed, but…I am not the same.
necessary

**Janet Jackson**

Its eyes are orange stones,  
staring nowhere and everywhere,  
hiding a mystery,  
a mind.

Every feather that lines its back,  
creates its wings, defines its tail  
is black: an ancient  
and sacred darkness.

Gripping the rim of the birdbath  
it stretches its Nick Cave neck  
and caws the old long notes  
that mark the morning.

Wanting water, willy-wagtails  
in prim little aprons flit,  
flutter, chitter,  
fly at it.

Balanced, silent, glaring,  
daggering its beak at them  
only when necessary, it continues  
to take its drink.
Sundays

Caitlin Maling

waiting
for my father
to be late home
from surfing
my mother
would cut the sky
to ribbons
each sunday
she would take
her sewing outside
and lay it on
the glass table
and with the kitchen scissors
tear silver
through the fabric
i would lie
under the table
and with
each precise injury
the cloth
bled sunlight
all over me
she was always
one of the
wise women
from the end of the world
picking apart
all she
created
she would never
turn her head
to see
if he had
come through the door
Introduced

Anthony Lynch

**Rats**

We swept away shit
gathered in corners
like wild rice.
Fed them greens
shaken from a box
to stop the 3am whittling
of joists behind walls.
The worst was the litter
with its half-dead.
I buried them one
by one in the neighbour’s paddock.
No matter how deep,
in the night
something dug them up.

**Canola**

There, suddenly perfect,
as if sprayed from a can.
More brilliant than a tub
of margarine, fitter than ever
since a pre-season
in the lab.
I love that blazing paddock, treeless, with a two-storey stuck in the middle, a kind of big mid-American import.

Sheep

Pleading with day, by night they chew through our sleep. Suckle, butt heads. Mount. Break, again, the pump at the trough. You once freed one from barbed wire and it hurtled blindly back into the fence. Sometimes we stare at each other, mutually unfathomable. Their trails have hoof-like logic, ramming the earth, but often the greenest grass is elsewhere. Philip K. Dick’s were electric. Here’s one lining the creek bed unplugged by a fox.

Lamas

Platypus of the paddock, kitted with necks borrowed from giraffes, their eyes do effortless 360s like a bird’s. The brown one you call
Pie Face for the whip of cream
on its chocolate head
watches, a faggot
of boxthorn shackled to its hind.
Sounds its one-note whinny
like a truck in reverse.

Foxes

In the middle
of a ploughed paddock
a cub in the sun
scratching, our dog
delirious on the chain. Later
you played shepherd
and spooked one stalking
the flock. More often
we see them flung
on the shoulder
of a newly widened road,
as if accessorising
progress.

Hares

Before dusk is their time,
vellum antennae making a run for it.
Their droppings collect
like carefully gathered seed,
the land sown with hollows.
Yesterday one lay
beside the house,
pupils alive with flies.
It had taken bait
and suddenly we understood
the thumping in the night.

**Bees**

Not the native kind,
they installed themselves between loft floor
and ceiling boards.
The backyard became a contest
and the burly man was sent for.
We had heard of gentle smokings,
like those of a peace pipe.
Instead, a cube of pyrethrum,
cans of home brand spray.
Believe me, he said,
it's best. Sobbing, you went to bed.
I made him tea with four sugars
until the fury died.
Later we swept bodies,
removed the strange cumulous
of hive. It was like something
from a sci-fi. White, alien,
beautiful.
Sanskrit

Susan Hawthorne

The language is perpendicular—
the roots elude her, the gerunds
are thick with meaning she slips

and falls crashing to the ground.
Picking herself up, she climbs
a conjugation, declines a declension

all the while, the endings are tangling.
Seven mountains she has crossed, each
one higher than the last. The participles

present not too much challenge, but
the passive is aggressive. Now and then
she has etymological epiphanies,

blinding insight and then finds
it was the wrong form, the wrong verb,
an unknown Vedic version.

She has taken to reading the dictionary
forwards, backwards, horizontally and
vertically, even then the sandhi—

internal and external—takes her on
another spin down the rock wall.
Falling is easy, she hopes she never lands.
From Stroke Poems

Aidan Coleman

Finger Exercises

My fingers rear up
corarily:
tarantula or papal blessing.

Like a statue
my hand unfreezes
slow.

Millimetres, days
and the drift of continents.

So I might learn to tie a shoelace,
button,
point,
be fluent with change.

Mirror

I forget to watch my face
while talking, picture it fitting my
better words.

Mirrors shock me back
to this:
the dinghy of lips
on a choppy ocean.
Late and slugged with fatigue,
I ice the down-side of a smile
up.

**Reading**

Like nervous dragonflies
the eyes
over the dangers of this page
A deep breath in...

Then mount
the wobbly
tightrope
bicycle of speech

**Victor Harbour**

I’m quiet at the centre
of the garrulous evening,
like contentment,
like envy.

Through the day, I talk
to my hand,
practice my sounds
in the empty house.
Dusk draws the water
closer, the tea-box houses
dull and rise to a
glittering heap.

The sea is the place
to take your losses:
how it connects
and the dead are there.

All night, the house fights
with itself.
My sleep fails
at every angle.

The pine outside
my window
has a thousand black
snowflake hands.

Midday, I jog the gum
of the surf, taste
blood, and stumble
under the weight of a body.
Australian literature of the Great War seems out of step with its counterparts from Britain and other engaged nations. Australian accounts, to the present, rely largely on a classical heroic tradition long abandoned by others, who prefer to express their disillusionment by rejecting romantic ‘glorious war’ notions and emphasising the sordid realities of conflict. However, the heroic features of most Anzac stories form only part of the distinctive Australian style. Recognisable Anzac tropes persist even in modern works that inevitably convey something of today’s attitudes to war in general, and to the Great War in particular. Diverging from a number of Anzac features described in this essay while also complying with others, Brenda Walker’s *The Wing of Night* (2005) represents a new direction in Australian Great War fiction, one which speaks cogently of the emotional as well as physical costs of war.

**Great War writing**

The Great War is often read as an admonitory exemplar of war’s horrors and futility. Those who experienced that war became disillusioned
with classical notions, and canonical\(^1\) Great War narratives by writers such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Erich Maria Remarque, Richard Aldington and Ford Madox Ford which are understood to stand witness to the meaninglessness of war.

In stark contrast to this, ‘Australians perpetuated man’s traditional fanfaronade about his military might’ (Gerster 14).\(^2\) Australian authors in the main present the war as justifiable and worthwhile, part of the continuous historical process upon which civilisation is built, and its proponents the Anzacs as heroic and selfless. Robin Gerster’s major study showed that traditional heroic narration is the major defining characteristic of this body of literature, but other differences exist. Richard Nile, for example, identifies the tropes of both dislocation and absence as characteristic of Australian Great War fiction (50–55). John Laird notes a handful of themes neglected by Australian authors but important to the canonical British writers (6). There are, however, further features which Australian authors address but treat differently from the canonical writers, such as attitudes to women, homo-sociality, conception of the home front, and the depiction of killing.

Modern interpretations of the Great War tend to consolidate rather than challenge the critically-perceived divide between Australian heroic and European disillusionment texts. Australian novels such as Jackie French’s *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008), Graeme Hague’s *And in the morning* (2002), and Peter Yeldham’s *Barbed Wire and Roses* (2008) by and large reprise the heroic Anzac. Aside from the complexity of Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995) and Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong* (1993), recent English novels such as William Brodrick’s *A Whispered Name* (2008), A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009), Ben Elton’s *The First Casualty* (2006), and Michael Morpurgo’s *Private Peaceful* (2003) are more attuned to the disillusionment perspective. Walker’s *Wing of Night* (2005), however, provides us with a thought-provoking alternative, even while retaining surprisingly many of the characteristic elements of traditional Anzac literature. An overview of the characteristics of
Anzac literature will assist in exploring how Walker both supersedes and harnesses them in *Wing of Night*.

**Distinctive Anzac features**

*Trench life*: In most Australian Great War fiction, trench existence is given less priority than in European novels. Australian soldiers spend much of their time outside the trench. Putting aside arguments over historical accuracy, the fictional men of the AIF participate in more raids, more out-of-the-line fatigues, and more behind-the-line revelry. They frequent estaminets and farmhouses, training camps and depots; they travel to Paris to view the sights; they go on leave to London or Scotland, visits uncomplicated by the presence of wives, parents, and (usually) sweethearts. There is less scope for trench-bound nightmares of rats, mud, corpses, rain, and ceaseless shellfire. This is not to say that instances of these do not occur, but the more interesting action happens beyond it. Trench events are extensively outnumbered by outside occurrences in Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* (1932), Frederic Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), and J.P. McKinney’s *Crucible* (1935).

*Killing*: Alfredo Bonadeo (1989) points out the numerous instances in Great War literature where men are compared with animals, and are victims like animals, as in Wilfred Owen’s *Anthem for Doomed Youth*: ‘What passing bells for these who die as cattle?’ These victim-animals occupy the shambles-trench, a place not only of death but also of the sophisticated, insular introspection so characteristic of disillusionment texts. Joanna Bourke notes that ‘readers of military history books might be excused for thinking that combatants found in war zones were really there to be killed, rather than to kill’ (2); so too might readers of the disillusionment canon.

Unlike their European counterparts, soldiers in Australian works leave the trenches not simply to be mown down but to fight: they are active agents of death as well as prey for enemies. Australian Great
War prose is more likely ‘to communicate the thrill, rather than the terror, of the fight’ (Gerster 12, original emphasis). In effect, canonical protagonists occupy the trench and contemplate the war and their likely deaths; Australians actively prosecute war. The disillusioned man of thought is opposed to the antipodean man of action.

Australian authors give their soldiers permission to kill publicly, and to admit pleasure in the task. For example the platoon in *Flesh in Armour* attack a German trench with no mercy or remorse:

> They were running towards the spot where one of the torpedoes had exploded. They were into the wire, cutting at it, tugging it and scrambling through its barbs...Skipton nearly fell on a man whose face, white with the fear of death, like the reflection of a full moon, he dashed aside with his knobkerry. Another, trying to climb the opposite wall of the trench, was stabbed by the sergeant and Bill Potter simultaneously. Albie Chomley shot another at the muzzle of his rifle. Charl Bentley and Frank Jeffreys pitched some bombs into a dug-out. Everything was now a welter...The rest of the Germans in the trench were being despatched. One, as he died, shot Bob Allison in the thigh. There were more dug-outs, deep... ‘Share that among you,’ yelled George Hecht, who, with Ikey with his bayonet ready alongside, held the bomb two seconds after the lever had sprung off before he pitched it down. (Mann 233–4)

There is little time for fear or quailing from the task, and no compunction. Enemy soldiers are ‘despatched’ in a workmanlike fashion, with no apparent pause or emotional confusion about their faces ‘white with the fear of death’. While some at least are noted as individuals, they are not necessarily seen as human. The Anzacs are competent, impassive workers, and killing is their task.

*Homoeroticism:* Santanu Das has studied the portrayal of male intimacy in Great War literature and concludes that despite the ravages of industrial battle, the war ‘restored tenderness to touch in male
relationships’ (2005, 4). The homoerotic implications of many British works have been well documented (see for example Paul Fussell’s Chapter 8, ‘Soldier boys: Mars and Eros’), but Das moves beyond this to consider the ways in which men at war fulfilled nurturing and caring roles more typically associated with the touch of women, especially the mother figure. The intimacy of these maternal acts intensified the emotional bonds between the men (Roper 6, 284), and ‘the image of soldiers mothering one another appears in a surprising number of soldiers’ novels of the Great War’ (Raitt and Tate 10). Of course intimate touch between males at war is not a new facet of war writing; there are the examples of Achilles binding the wounds of Patroclus, and the comfort of Hardy’s kisses to Nelson. Contemporary novels such as The Regeneration Trilogy, Elton’s The First Casualty and Susan Hill’s Strange Meeting deal specifically with homosexual relationships, as does Linda Newbery’s juvenile fiction The Shell House, while Canadian Tim Findley’s The Wars includes an instance of male rape. The war’s narrowed homo-social context invests the texts of other nations with an emotional intensity absent from the male-male relationships in Australian works. Australian authors, however homo-social their stories may be, eschew homoerotic and homosexual themes in Great War novels.

Das analyses many of homoerotic themes in British works, commenting that ‘eroticism is on the side of life, meaning and beauty’ (2002, 61) as opposed to the war’s context of death and decay. If this is the case, eroticism is a force for life which Australians devote exclusively to heterosexual relationships.

Nurturing: Although the exigencies of the Western Front trenches and the harsh conditions of Gallipoli and Mesopotamia required men to perform intimate and caring tasks for one another in the absence of any alternative, this is an aspect of the war experience which is rare in Australian works. The binding of wounds, the dying kiss, the steadying hand, and the comfort of sleeping close, are more likely to appear in the pages of British novels.
Australians convey a cruder, less sexually charged version of male tenderness, showing the rough-and-ready, bracing physicality of mateship in necessity: ‘they got up and grabbed at each other while the earth rocked’ (Mann 79); ‘they shared home news and parcels and shaving gear and rations’ (McKinney 64). Although Bain and Fairbairn ‘pooled their blankets’ for warmth, this is represented as a very uncomfortable situation, annoyingly preventing either man from turning easily in his sleep (McKinney 58), and not at all seductively homoerotic. If the war was for some Australian protagonists the best time of their lives, it was because of homo-social mateship, and not because of homoerotic, homosexual, or even platonic love for a special individual:

The one compensating aspect of life as then lived was the element of mateship...The platoon was prepared to sink all individual differences of moral outlook or mental equipment to vindicate [mateship’s] sacred rites...Thus, within their groups within groups, a vaguely satisfactory travesty of home-life was attained...[which] gave a sense of being an individual again, with decent, friendly, personal contacts. (McKinney 63–66)

Women and war: In the disillusionment works of Aldington and Ford, and the more recent modern-memory inspired novels such as those by Hill, Newbery, and Findley, women are not only ignorant or even malicious supporters of war (Raitt and Tate 2), but constitute a malevolent force every bit as destructive as war itself. Sometimes these female characters goad and torment their menfolk into enlisting. Sylvia Tietjens causes most of Christopher’s problems in the tetralogy Parade’s End (Ford 1924–1928); Sylvia Dilton, who selfishly uses Dominic Langton in When Blackbirds Sing, lives by ‘the code...“never be found out” ’ (Boyd 58). In Death of a Hero, Winterbourne’s life is rendered intolerable by the women closest to him: ‘poor old George got so fed up, he went off and joined the infantry, fell into
the first recruiting office he came to’ (Aldington 26), and Aldington spares none of them his bitter acrimony. George’s mother is ‘not only a sadist, but a necrophilous one’ (20) who found the news of his death ‘rather exciting and stimulating at first, especially erotically stimulating’ (17). George’s wife Elizabeth and mistress Fanny ‘both had that rather hard efficiency of the war and post-war female, veiling the ancient predatory and possessive instincts of the sex under a skilful smoke-barrage of Freudian and Havelock Ellis theories’, falsely claiming that no ‘primitive’ emotions such as jealousy ‘could inhabit [their] enlightened and rather flat bosoms’ (25–26). Such women are represented as cold and hard, while none displays the tenderness traditionally expected of her: those functions are better fulfilled by the male-male bonding in the trenches, where ‘soldiers…had perforce to love another soldier, there being no dogs about’ (Aldington 31).

Women in Australian Great War novels are notably scarce, even in those written by women: ‘the absence of women is everywhere in these texts’ (Coates 11). Although this absence can be read as more positive than the bitter portrayals provided by Ford and Aldington, feminist reviews see it as misogynistic, claiming that women writers followed the lead of their male counterparts in that they ‘sublimated their own needs and desires, absented themselves from the war narrative…and backed the Digger’s attack’ (Coates 6). Donna Coates disagrees with the proposal that only women writers, ‘unimpressed by male histrionics’ (Gerster 20), were likely to portray the Digger non-heroically; she finds that most Australian women writers, for example Mary Grant Bruce, privilege Anzac manhood above the war-related concerns and activities of women.

Coates is correct, here. The use of tradition or disillusionment is not gendered: most Australian writers prefer traditional tropes for writing the Great War. Another striking similarity between Australian male and female writers’ stories of the war is the representation of women either as absent (often due to the distance from significant women at home) or as feminine, supportive and tender. In *Crucible*, Fairbairn has afternoon tea with his fiancée’s friends at the nurses’
quarters in Abbéville, and reflects that ‘he had never before realised how distinctly Australian and capable and purposeful and womanly our girls were’ (McKinney 70). These women are very different from Aldington’s amoral predators.

The war at home: The home front in Australian Great War texts is neither the scene of disillusion about politics and strategy, nor the location of awkward and changing relationships. While there are few references to home in contemporary Australian narrative accounts, it is generally constructed as a separate entity, protected from the all-consuming contagion of the war. The Australian home front is so distant from the scene of battles that it has few connections to the daily lives of the men. It is imagined as stable, almost static, and always supportive. While disillusionment characters experience betrayals and misunderstandings which not only destroy their confidence in home but often send them hurrying back to the front, Australians can look sideways at the goings-on of the London crowd, secure in their alienation from it, but also themselves displaced. Fairbairn feels he is losing touch with home, even though his fiancée’s letters form ‘a mental footbridge’ (McKinney 33). He is changed, but home endures in its original state: Australia is untouched and unsullied, while London is an ‘overgrown, crowded antheap’ (85) where ‘it was hopeless trying to escape the war. It had London in thrall just as much as it had a section of front-line trench’ (81).

In more recent Australian Great War novels, home front life continues in an ideal fashion; few domestic disturbances trouble the diggers at the front. In *Boys of Blood and Bone* (Metzenthen 2003), Andy’s fiancée Cecilia is faced with the shocking discovery that another girl is pregnant to him, but this is far from the clichéd betrayal of the soldier’s girl with another man. There is no concupiscent corruption of the bush society in Patrick White’s *Tree of Man* (1984) during Stan Parker’s four-year absence at the war. While there is more home front complexity in both *The Blood Vote* (Lindsay 1985) and *Benton’s Conviction* (Page 1985), these novels deal more closely
with the conscription referenda and notions of just war than with the corruption of society engendered by the war.

Anzac features in Wing of Night: innovation and tradition

Brenda Walker’s The Wing of Night (2005) differs in important aspects from the overall characteristics of Australian Great War prose literature briefly considered. In some respects, Wing of Night fits more comfortably within the canonical disillusionment group; it lies outside the normative curve of Australian Great War prose, approaching more nearly the bitter but also elegiac texts of some Australian Great War poetry.

For example, while Walker’s featured characters are all residents of the bush, this bush is not a land of sunshine and wattle blossom. It is a remnant of the previous century, as grim and threatening as Barbara Baynton’s, as emotionally isolated and intense as Rodney Hall’s in the Yandilli trilogy (1988-1993); Chris Womersley’s outback town of Flint in Bereft (2010) is a similarly dark, dangerous location. In these works, the Australian homeland is threatening and perilous quite independently of the war, and its dangers are even less predictable, and therefore more terrifying, than those of the front.

Walker’s focus on the home front, where most of action of Wing of Night occurs, is also unusual for Australian Great War narratives. Women alone on bush properties (and these are the only women of interest to us here) are subject to constant threat of assault and rape; both during and after the war, rootless men prowl the bush in a frightening premonition of Great Depression days. By September 1915, women ‘are afraid of wandering swagmen, afraid of rape and robbery’ (41); by July 1921, there are ‘plenty of crazed men travelling the road just below [Elizabeth’s] farmhouse’ (169). It is as if all the men of Western Australia’s southwest have enlisted, while shiftless characters from other places have arrived to prey on lone women.

Class explicitly divides Walker’s characters in a way unusual for Australian novels, but reminiscent of the prejudices and divisions in Rebecca West’s Return of the Soldier (1918): ‘rich people were
allowed to be mad in ways not open to the poor’ (Walker 6); ‘the rich
did not lose fingers in farm machinery, they did not grow up paying
urgent attention, for hours and hours, to their own hands and the
hands of the people they loved’ (11–12); ‘the rich used surnames’
(124). Indeed, for middle-class Elizabeth to be introduced to chicken-
farming Bonnie ‘would be a breach of local custom. Men mixed
freely in the bush, but well-off women were less likely to meet poorer
women as equals’ (63).

As is the case in many canonical novels, the Great War plays
only a part in the characters’ tragic struggles; yet it does not recede
to become a part of life’s natural contingency as it does in Bruce’s
Billabong’s Daughter (1924), David Malouf’s The Great World (1999),
Peter McConnell’s A History of the Great War: a novel (2008) or White’s
The Tree of Man. All the women in Wing of Night are damaged prior
to the war both by the harshness of Western Australia and by life in
general: Elizabeth by her mother’s death when she was only eight,
and two shattering miscarriages (46, 61); Bonnie by her orphaned
upbringing, abusive marriage, and the suicide of her first husband
(64-68); Annie by the tragic death of her daughter who ‘took seven
days’ to die following an accidental scalding (103). These women
are then further damaged by the war: all three lose their men to it.
Elizabeth’s husband dies at Gallipoli (76); Annie’s husband, who
enlists following the persistent white feather campaign against him
(presumably perpetrated by the women of the district in the absence
of their male partners), dies in France (104); Joe Tully, Bonnie’s
sweetheart, is so emotionally damaged that he rationalises he cannot
return to her until he stands on an equal financial footing (136),
something that does not appear to have been an issue previously in
their relationship. Joe’s mother is also a damaged female character,
having ‘been mad, before and after the death of his father’ (34). She
dies early in her second marriage and Joe, a doctor’s son, suffers a
drop in social class which prevents his attending private school and
reduces him to labourer status, emphasising the importance of class
distinctions in this text.
It is Joe, so relentlessly beaten by the uncaring blows of fortune, who suffers most sorely; like the wren which ‘had seen its reflection and was trying to fly in through the glass to meet itself’ and ‘fell back exhausted’ (169), there is no safe home-coming for him. Unlike the traditional Australian hero described by Gerster (but like White’s alternative archetype Stan Parker, a decorated, competent and silent veteran), Joe does not ‘big-note’ himself or his war experience. In a scene reminiscent of the suicide of Bonnie’s husband, Joe hangs himself in a police cell while hallucinating about his unresolved but accidental murder of a Turkish prisoner. Meanwhile Elizabeth is waiting at the cottage hospital for him to take her and their son back to the farm, focussed on a future to which Joe cannot bring his past. Unusually for an Australian novel, there are few opportunities for redemption for any of these characters, and the war is more the final note in their tragedy than a large-scale historic event that temporarily interrupts their lives. It is not even certain that Elizabeth will raise Joe’s son well; it is Bonnie who holds him at the novel’s end.

But despite all this, *Wing of Night* does have similarities to the traditional Australian features previously described. For example, Joe Tully and Louis Zettler (the husband of Elizabeth) lie together for warmth one cold night on the Gallipoli peninsula. Although Joe remembers sleeping ‘close to another man…his arse in the other fellow’s lap’ he recalls vividly that it was ‘the cold that drove them to sleep tight up against one another’ (185). As with other Australian Great War narratives, there is an implicit rejection of the homoerotic in Walker’s work.

Although Joe can’t remember killing (apart from the accidental murder of the Turkish prisoner), he is sure he was as adept as any Australian commander could wish: ‘it was a funny thing. Joe couldn’t remember shooting anyone. He must have killed someone. If he’d shot wide for the whole war [Lt-Col] Brazier would have had a word or two to say to him’ (146). In keeping with the Australian style, it is not the memory of the death of any individual friend, or of being shelled, or blown into the air by high explosives, that provides
the final impetus for Joe’s suicide. It is the memory of killing the helpless prisoner. Joe is unlike the victim-protagonists of the canon to the degree that it is killing, not death or his own terror, that unhinges him.

There are further similarities with typical Anzac features in Walker’s representation of officer-man relationships. Consistent with the traditional Australian perspective, Walker presents the men’s immediate commander as humane and approachable, and the relationships between the men as explicitly egalitarian. This contrasts with the disillusionment view that the leadership was culpable and out of touch with the conditions of the fighting men.

Both Joe Tully and Louis Zettler are Light Horse troopers, dismounted for the campaign in the Dardanelles. The West Australians are commanded by a local man, Lieutenant-Colonel Brazier, ‘a steady old fellow who knew his men and his horses’ (11). Brazier argues constantly with Colonel ‘Bullant’ Antill, who ‘had been brought in from the east and put above Brazier and the first thing he did was complain about Brazier’s troops. The officers had their own little war, even before they left Australia’ (11). The ‘little war’ between Brazier and Antill is similar to a clash of cultures that occurs in other Great War narratives: here, between the divergent Australias of the west and east; in the canonical works, between the classes, the genders, and the generations; in many Australian accounts, between the Empire and Dominions.

On Gallipoli, Walker shows Brazier wishing to protect his men: he ‘imagined a whole city waiting cleanly in the ice. Not a filthy city like this encampment in the gunfire and the dirt. He thought of pathways and high windows. Spires. An empty city. He would like to take all his soldiers there’ (20). When Joe Tully asks whether the men are allowed to wear their greatcoats while waiting in the freezing pre-dawn hours to attack, Brazier has to refuse, and then becomes angry because he called Joe by the wrong name (thus failing the clichéd Australian expectation of officers and men being on first-name terms):
Who did the fellow think he was, calling for a coat, putting him [Brazier] in the wrong? He was already so far in the wrong. The man was likely to be dead under his command in the morning. ‘You’re Harry when I’m around,’ he said.

The soldier shrugged when he should have saluted.

Brazier was suddenly ashamed. ‘Have a drink,’ he said, handing over his own flask. (21)

The sharing of the flask reinstates the Australian norm of the relationship, which we see demonstrated when the men reciprocate Brazier’s egalitarian attitude:

Zettler was woken by the tramp of footsteps...Lieutenant-Colonel Brazier had just walked past him.

One of the men who were yarning climbed to his feet and reached into the small supply of firewood. He followed Brazier and offered him some branches. Wood was scarce.

‘Sir,’ said the soldier.

Brazier turned, his face white with cold. He took the branches and tucked them under his arm as if they were a baton and he on a parade ground. He could barely smile. He patted the back of the soldier’s hand. (28–29)

This passage shows characteristic Australian style not only in its egalitarian exchanges but also in the understated, unexplored tenderness and care exchanged between officers and men.

To sum up, this brief review shows how, by both discarding and reiterating many typical Anzac literary features, Walker’s novel claims new ground in Australian responses to the Great War. *Wing of Night* maintains resonant echoes of the traditional Australian style, even though the influence of the ethos and understandings of the twenty-first century can be seen in its rejection of the noble-sacrifice myth and its exploration of Joe’s inner emotional distress. Readers can be both reassured by recognition of the novel’s comforting provincial
continuity, and challenged by its testing of conventional Australian
tropes in a way which exposes the dismaying barrenness of emotional
life and the lack of reciprocal integrity in the bush. Walker uses the
Great War to explore the fractures in Australian society and the
hollowness of martial aspiration, while at the same time affirming
egalitarian ideals in both intimate relationships and wider society.
In transcending some of the more bombastic Anzac features while
reinterpreting others which we still recognise as positive, Wing of
Night invests the Australian Great War narrative with renewed life.

Notes

1 As the ‘disillusionment’ school of writing has become the more highly
regarded in critical terms, it is referred to as ‘canonical’, although it
describes an explicit break with literary traditions more usually called
‘canonical’. Thus the Great War canon is, somewhat counter-intuitively,
the anti-traditional school.
2 Most analyses generalise ‘Australian’ as a definable style and to a great
degree a unified perspective (just as some writers see the ‘woman’s’
perspective as a single voice). Although for purposes of brevity my
comments in this essay subscribe somewhat to this view, Australian
responses to the Great War speak with multiple voices and perspectives.
My analysis of the ‘Australian’ style refers most directly to mainstream
prose fiction.
3 That is unless we posit that the discomfort arose from the
unacknowledged physical attraction of sleeping so close together, a
reading not supported by the text, but perhaps extant between the lines.
4 This is unusual as most of the women portrayed in Australian Great War
novels are foreign.
5 The tropes of ‘civilian venality, official pompousness, and the attraction
of wives and sisters to [other men]’ (Hatherell 2007, 81) in the ‘corrupt,
concupiscent and complacent wartime city’ (85), so evident in canonical
novels of the Great War, appear much more markedly in Australian
novels of the Second World War.
6 Class difference is of central importance in West’s highly-regarded novel.
Chris Baldry’s wife Kitty and his cousin Jenny are reluctant to receive a
lower class visitor. Margaret is a woman ‘repulsively furred with neglect
and poverty’ (7). They ‘hated her as the rich hate the poor as insect things
that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home and
introduce ugliness to the light of day’ with her ‘wet, clear, patient gaze
… the gift of animals and those of peasant stock’ (10). But it is Margaret’s selfless love that saves Chris.

7 Bonnie’s first husband is similarly emotionally damaged by his accidental shooting of his little brother when he was ten.

8 See Christina Spittel 2007 for an exploration of redemption in Australian Great War novels.

9 Brazier and Anthill are historic figures whose disagreements were of noted proportions.

Works Cited


A Different Sea

Graham Kershaw

To dodge a black wave inside my head
I drove back later, to a different sea,
all teals and metallic blues and greens
racked on a hard black bed, silver foil floundering
in lines of brittle foam, under the pewter plate
of a shrouded sun, slicing through lighter surf
overhead, catching light from the sea itself,
it seemed, as if lightning were cracking off
the ocean’s jagged skin, kinetically.

Each bird had their own complaint—
indignant oystercatchers, surprised plovers,
grumpy gulls—as they scampered and started
and flew away, one by one. Company wasn’t expected
nor wanted, and yet I felt the slack of empty space
from dune to hill, and rock to ocean, and it came to me
that this was some kind of rendezvous, after all.
I had come to meet some absence
I could not live without.
strange teacher

Helen Gildfind

white wall, a grey signature of rub
your place for sleeping, stopped

white stubble snout, paw-propped, claws curled
buckled knuckles of knees, those

cruel masters, the whip and whip of slipping hip,
muscles shorn, a stilled life, silent

torn terrain of jag and jut, bone-joust cloaked in golden mane
bur-spun to matted ropes, soiled, oiled grey

crinkle-cut droop of jowl, black-sheen of lip up-thrust,
ferocious joke of canine

eaves of lash, gentle frames, dark glitter-glint of mind
swept under, choked in blue opacity, a breathless, depthless sea

salt-wet lips to stubbled cheek, hard bone of brow, cleaved slit of lid
I kiss you

rough pads of paw, our thousand paths, nose pressed deep
I breathe you

flesh with fur, flesh with face, flesh that stopped me eating flesh
I stroke you

strange teacher, my friend, unknowable creature
thank you
Boys Dying
Ross Donlon

We enjoyed dying almost as much as killing,
happy to see the finger pointed, thumb cocked,
his cold eyes saying you’d been shot
before he jerked his hand away
and went on with the game.

For we loved to die slow motion then,
pleasuring in the drawn out death,
staggering light bodied arms and legs
through the summer air, anemone boys
swept to sea with their final breath.

We were practiced in the ritual from movies:
the mouth must gape, then arch open
(like at the dentist), the neck stretches back ready
to snap, the eyes tilt skywards, the last gasp
like life’s first, or the rapid fire hint of future sex.

But even as we rolled and bucked the grass,
laughing as we mocked a dance of death,
we acted both the end of life and the signs
of resurrection. For we were counting up to ten
even as the killer left, then rose to kill him.
1. Babel

He never intended to give them words,  
knew the fecund rubbing of syllable  
on syllable led to riotous talk,  
and once spoken were stone temples,  
were ropes that held ramparts across rivers,  
were nails that joined planks, broke through waves.  
So when Nimrod erected his ziggurat  
built of burnt brick and cemented clay  
it seemed like a missile aimed at him.  
He sent down winds from a dozen lands,  
filled with mountain echoes, voices of birds  
and storms, the sounds of water on rock  
and let them fill their mouths till their words  
separated them, thick and stone as walls.

2. Gaza  2009

In the land of the first written word  
they are forging a new cuneiform. In this  
stony land, in empty houses, on walls,  
soldiers graffiti vigilante policy:  
    Arabs need 2 die!!  
    Make war not peace!  
    Gaza here we are!  
There are drawings, malevolent as prophecy:  
Soldiers pissing on toppled muezzin towers.
A gravestone: *Arabs 1948 - 2009.*

In this land of walls walls walls they intrude into the intimacy of rooms. Graffiti is not enough.
The shelling is not enough. Soldiers drop bags of scat. Leave their scent like great desert cats.

3. Kites

They are flying kites at Beit Lahiya. Children with kites, women in black burqas.
Attached to the sky. On the beach at Beit Lahiya where buildings expose their skeletons, the kites are coloured confetti, they are splashes of paint. Lifting with the wind, defying gravity. They are held by blood. Months ago there were only stray gunmen in alleys. People pleading for blood. You need wind to defy gravity. Things fall. It is a law of nature. Bombs fall. Missiles rise and fall. Buildings expose their skeletons. It is a law of nature. On a beach in Gaza with homemade kites children, women, men, make peace with the sky.
A List of all those Names

He leafed through to the middle pages of the diary, securely bound by little chains of silver hair. In his long candle-like fingers, Isaiah the old deacon was holding a quill which had dropped from the throat pouch of Tychon, a migrating pelican. The ‘disobedient’ priest-monk who had been exiled for centuries on account of his heresy (he had written a scandalous book for a religious: *On why my Embrace is not Governed by the Principles of Euclidean Geometry*), started to write with a trembling hand. On the one page he put down a list of all those names which he felt he had wronged and on the other he drew a list of all those names which he felt had wronged him. Not long afterwards the India ink started to run on both sides, freely mixing with the hot ash falling from his eyelids. Isaiah the old deacon contentedly brought the pages together, smudging the names until they were wholly indistinguishable one from the other.
This Unpardonable Effrontery

The novices were preparing for their first all-night vigil, the Feast of the Dormition, the ‘falling asleep’ of the Mother of God. They entered the ancient church, hewn from the side of the Mountain, with all of the required solemnity. All prostrated before the Virgin’s miraculous icon which was only just visible inside the thick cloud of sweet-scented smoke. The novices bowed the knee and inwardly supplicated for her intercessions, hoping she would recollect them in the winters and in the centuries ahead. All prostrated except for one, the beardless youth from Kiev, Isidore the Mute. When the abbot approached to chastise him for this unpardonable effrontery, he was stunned to find Isidore the Mute and the Virgin Mary absorbed in deep conversation. Then he all at once recalled his long-ago days as an acclaimed professor of modern logic and made back for the pew feigning to have heard nothing, but making sure to remember that this was something for the almanac.

The Bishop’s Mastery of the Game

The Bishop would pick us up and put us down with the prescience of a grandmaster, a Chigorin or Capablanca. And then, when it would suit his purposes—and that was often—he would even have us betray and sacrifice each other, that the pieces remaining on the board would configure precisely as he had planned. But at least Chigorin and the others would occasionally permit for their pawns to dream of reaching the other side. The Bishop’s mastery of the game, it must be said, especially the end-game, was unsurpassed. Occasionally, however, one of us would surprise him via en passant.

Pointing to the Headlines

‘What is it about glory,’ asked the young philosopher who had cornered the old man in a second-hand bookstore, ‘that can so corrupt
those who might desire it?’ The old man cast his longing eyes through to the two shelves buried at the back, under a conspicuous pile of box coals and torn banners. The two shelves were enigmatically labeled: *Improbable Biography*. After picking out one of the musty diaries, he bent down to tie the young philosopher’s left shoelace. ‘Do you recall the story of the Baptist and his reference to the sandals of the Messiah?’ The younger man said that indeed, he did recall the story. ‘Well?’ whispered the old man, ‘glory will only ever corrupt those who have not as yet discovered the way to pass it on.’ The young philosopher then looked across the aisle to the newspaper stand. The old man was pointing to the headlines: *Sic transit gloria mundi*, thus passes the glory of the world.

**The Yellowing Pages of the Almanac**

Every Sunday after the Divine Liturgy, Parthenius the Reader would visit Priscilla who was recently made a young widow. She would prepare a sumptuous feast of rare delicacies and miraculous aromas in the tradition of her Constantinopolitan grandmothers. And he in turn, would chant selections from the *Psalter* and the *Typica*. Then they would tenderly embrace, turn over the yellowing pages of the almanac, and weep at the passing of the seasons for it was not yet in the fullness of time. Parthenius the Reader would dust off the cherry soil and the scented incense from his overcoat and return to the cemetery. Priscilla, the recently made young widow, would tidy up and skip over onto the edges of paradise. Yet the gossips persisted in their scandalous talk: *fama nihil est celerius*, nothing is swifter than rumour.

**Holding Strong onto a Bundle of Star Charts**

Bald-headed Mustapha wore large coats neatly sewn and put together from discarded white potato sacks. This unusual attire was complemented by outsized spit polished white shoes, made
all the more fantastic by the absence of shoelaces. He also carried about a colourful standard stitched from Moroccan veils which he would wave on All Saints Day. Each night he would make for the Reno Café to help sweep the linoleum floors, pack the fresh milk into the refrigerator, and help take out the remains of the day. One such night he turned up with one of his legs missing. He was weeping and pointing to former constellations. ‘What’s wrong Mustapha?’ the little boy asked. There was no answer. Bald-headed Mustapha turned around and hopped away, holding strong onto a bundle of star charts.

The Old Man Paused for a Moment

‘Do you dream old man?’ asked the young boy. ‘Why? Are not old men supposed to dream?’ he responded. ‘What is it that you dream about?’ The old man paused for a moment to consider the young boy’s line of questioning. ‘I dream of the other side, and of mountains with golden peaks, and of celestial spheres, and of large fish that swallow me up.’ These all had to do with archetypes but it was not yet time for the young boy to fully comprehend. Pointing to the standard text on orienteering the old man started to write his long anticipated letter to Methuselah. He tickled the top of the young boy’s head making sure to leave behind two nightingales, ‘Hatavat Halom, may your dreams turn out good.’

Gethsemane’s One-Thousand and One Nights

The young boy caught the old man weeping in the garden, next to the discarded writing desk. His twig-like fingers, on which Monarch butterflies would often come to rest, were tightly cusped over his large eyes. He could hear him moaning and heaving with ‘sighs too deep for words.’ His long beard parted in the middle like a huge divide, the salty water dropping onto the earth from both ends. The old man it is true, did often weep the ancient prayer, but almost always in private and in the secrecy of his room. He had once confided to the
young boy that tears helped to clean the heart. It was where the great
battles of our journey would either be won or lost; it was there we
would discover our name. ‘Something like the story of Gethsemane?’
the young boy proudly asked. The old man was pleased at this early
discovery, but wept additional tears for such revelations would
come at a high cost. ‘Gethsemane’s one-thousand and one nights’, he
replied with one of those sighs too deep for words, ‘for deeper the
chalice greater the pouring of the light.’

Even Other More Difficult Questions

Cicero the unemployed theologian enjoyed playing saxophone; he
had a strong preference for the pitch of the alto. One day, however,
his next door neighbor Cleopatra the piano teacher, who had died
unexpectedly from an undisclosed illness, bequeathed to him her
magnificent Steinway. This generous gift confused the unemployed
theologian because Cleopatra was a declared atheist and did not
approve of his profession. Though, he did certainly recall, an unusual
exchange the year before. He asked her to speak to him of ‘sharps and
flats,’ and she embraced him and said that without ‘the staff what
would it all matter?’ That, of course, raised even other more difficult
questions. Cicero now practices day and night, training his ear into
the mysteries of inharmonicity and to the resonance of the light
between the keys. He especially takes pride when the left hand and
the right hand fall naturally onto the chords.

Strong Metaphorical Implications

Tabassum was nervously anticipating the arrival of the morning
mail. Soon he would know if Shazana had forgiven him, or if she
had otherwise accepted his conditions. He had asked her to write to
him, so he could put the epistle away and return to it years later as
was his custom. Otherwise, he would have to go through a series of
communications to clarify things, which ultimately, only distressed
him and helped no one. It was a large brown envelope; Shazana had made it secure and marked it ‘Urgent’. Tabassum applauded hard when he noticed a thick eyelash had been trapped under the sellotape. She must have been rubbing her eyes, he thought, and normally that was a good sign. From previous correspondence, Tabassum had discovered that this invariably indicated, ‘I forgive you my precious heart; your white shirts will be returned; and I agree that the crescent moon has strong metaphorical implications.’ Later on, they would both agree, that there are a multitude of ways to read a story.

_The Lily of the Valley on the Floor_

Martha drew breathtaking pictures on her walls. Though she knew that no one would see them, she continued nonetheless, to draw them with the precision of an iconographer. She predominantly illustrated flowers, especially _verbascum, scarlet pimpernel_, and the _sunflower_. Her favorite colors were cherry, bottle-green, midnight blue, and gold. Sometimes she would imagine that her drawings would come alive and she would be pleased. She would sing and skate about her room on her way to discovering that her nights were filled with grace, for it was enough that she alone knew and believed it in her heart. This was one of the ‘great mysteries,’ Vincent had benevolently told her several springs ago, when he too, was painting in his room. Then she would wake up, not knowing whether it was all a dream. Martha could never explain the _lily of the valley_ on the floor and the spectacular colour dripping beneath her door as the tropical rainstorms subsided on the outside.

_With a Wavering and Hesitant Voice_

Nestor the poet delivered his verse with a wavering and hesitant voice. He was terrified that the audience might snigger and guffaw, _Twitter_ his shortcomings to each other and then slander him to the world on _Facebook_. There was also his anxiety over the potential
misuse of those lifeless emoticons! But he had never claimed to be a poet. So why was Nestor here in the first place? It was not only because Judith the organizer of the event had invited him, quite accidentally. He had crashed into her front-yard one morning when practising on the cello. The truth is he was fond of speaking certain words aloud: autumn, mercy, perseverence, rhapsody, companion, hope, and angel. And then he desired to look into his listeners’ eyes to see if anyone had truly loved him. An old snowy-haired man in the back-row nodded his head in approval and acknowledged with a shaft of light. Nestor the poet rejoiced, he too, had been tutored in the lost art of wordless communication. The Creator, as it has often been supposed, speaks to us through many voices.

Watching Excitedly from the Sidelines

Constantia, the little girl with the spring daffodils and the new leather sandals (which her godmother had recently bought from Jeremiah the cobbler), was playing Persian hopscotch on the quiet street below. As she hopped from one square to another, flower gardens shot up from beneath her feet, and the despairing crowds in the balconies above cheered… grateful for another day of Rest and redemption. The meticulous pattern drawn on the ground had also not escaped the attention of an exiled Greek Platonist who had himself picked up a stone, to fling at Canis Majoris. Other young girls were watching excitedly from the sidelines, waiting for their turn to join in the game which they called Deliverance.

Interested in the Bright Paintings

It was like Bibi had said to him when they embraced and departed, ‘some days are awfully bad, some days are awfully good.’ Maximus the farsighted biographer, bumped into the young girl during a Sunday downpour one afternoon, outside a coffee-house in Berne. She suffered from muscular dystrophy, a disease which progressively
weakens the skeletal muscles. Maximus was interested in the collection of bright paintings that she was holding. They were copies he was informed, of Renoir’s Dance at le Moulin de la Galette. Bibi told him, that later in life the French Impressionist suffered from chronic rheumatism, and that eventually he had to paint with the brush tied to his fingers. Maximus the farsighted biographer was not entirely sure however, if the connection was meant for him or for the young girl herself. Then again, he did remember only recently having shared with his creative writing class, that ‘context’ comes from the Latin contextus which ordinarily means ‘connection’.

*The Beholder of the Voice*

Quadratus stood by the corner with his ear attentively stretched towards the direction of the voice. He could not immediately recognize whether this was a male or a female talking. Nor could he see whether this person was beautiful or plain, young or old. After making some instructive references to seeds and sap the voice continued. ‘Many have spoken on love and written poetry and composed music to explain its terrible and eternal mystery.’ The beholder of the voice suddenly collapsed onto the wet soil clutching at some fresh shoots. On that same spot, not long after, a large English elm appeared which gave shade and shelter to many. Quadratus would later note that elms are deciduous and shed their leaves annually. It was only then that he was able to understand that to providence, as well, there is a dark side to the moon. Then he smiled, recollecting the words of an old man he had once met in a second-hand bookstore, ‘...slowly we learn to walk, slowly we must prepare to die.’

*Keith the Wise Mathematician*

They were friends from the earliest days, Keith the wise mathematician and George the sharp-witted cartographer. Every now and then they would meet to embrace, and to exchange implausible
stories and angel feathers. On this day by the edge of the great pond, the wiry professor (who had specialized in mathematical modeling) was swinging a black sack over his right shoulder. ‘There is bread in there’, he leaned over to whisper to his stocky friend, ‘and it’s for the ducks.’ At that moment an inquiring young woman (a collector herself of tapestries and patterns) who had by chance heard the conversation informed the two friends from the earliest of days, that there had been no ducks in that place since before the floods. The two men shared in quiet laughter. Keith the wise mathematician bent down and scribbled some unintelligible formula on the water. And as if from nowhere, after the stirring of the waters, twenty-four ducks appeared brushing the wintry wet from their shimmering downs. The last of these, that is, the twenty-fourth, waddled proudly out of the great pond and pecked on the bare feet of the inquiring young woman. At that moment George the sharp-witted cartographer turned to Keith the wise mathematician and enquired of him, ‘Any news from Leunig?’

_The Peculiar Looking Hitch-Hiker_

Chrysogonus the young poet had driven hundreds of miles and was now satisfied to be heading home. He had successfully recited his fine poetry at a two-day symposium organized by a committee of refugee angels who had decided to remain on earth. As a reward for his time and effort and in lieu of monies they gave him a special gift—Wenders’ _Der Himmel über Berlin_. It was a favorite of the angels (they were especially delighted with Peter Falk’s cameo which would excite a fast and furious slamming of the feather). Chrysogonus noted a tousled middle-aged man by the side of the road thumbing for a ride. He was holding a small stretch of canvas and blowing on a large calla lily. At first the young poet (and understandably so) was reluctant to stop, ‘What if this tousled middle-aged man was a lunatic?’ Wiping away the rush of tears from his muddy face, the peculiar looking hitch-hiker thanked him and jumped into the back of the car. ‘Where
are you heading?’ the young poet asked. ‘From Genesis to Revelation’, the tousled middle-aged man replied. Many years later, Chrysogonus who had now taken to writing very short stories on the inside of his garments, took a peek into his rear-vision mirror. He reminisced on the peculiar looking hitch-hiker and on the strikingly inscribed word on the small stretch of canvas he had left behind: ITHIKA. And he wept for a long time at the uncanny likeness to their handwriting.

*Leo had begun to Sprout Wings*

The newly ordained deacon, Job, did not know how he could speak to the young man. Leo, who had recently competed in a half-marathon, was riding his motorcycle when he was hit by an inebriated driver. The time on the young man’s watch was trapped to that very instant of the collision: 11.37 PM. All things from that moment onwards would stand still. The doctors informed the newly ordained deacon, Job, that Leo had suffered a dreadful form of quadriplegia brought on by his traumatic injuries, resulting in *locked-in syndrome*. The deacon would visit the young man every other afternoon. They began to communicate by using a small letter board. Job would indicate the letters with his fingers and Leo would confirm the selection with eye blinks. Soon they were able to create innovative short-cuts and other clever ways to get through the alphabet. One evening Leo informed Job, who had himself suffered in other ways, that he could feel sharp pains about his shoulder-blades. Job lifted the young man carefully to examine him, for he had known of such pains. It was as the newly ordained deacon had precisely imagined. Though they were still stubs, Leo had begun to sprout wings. Soon he would be going to another place. Job asked Leo one final question, ‘Was there ever a time when you wished to die?’ Leo, who was now weeping *calla lilies* replied, ‘Yes, but each pain goes by another name, and I had not yet exhausted the definitions.’
The Loving Teacher, Sosthenes, who was Exceedingly Sad

The old man noticed the loving teacher, Sosthenes, who was exceedingly sad, alone and bowed in the corner of the olive grove. He was painting icons on the earth; the color was spilling from the tips of his fingers. He had known the teacher since before the arrival of the eleventh generation of the sacred kingfishers. ‘Why are you sad?’ enquired the old man of the loving teacher. The teacher, who taught his young apprentices voyage planning and the art of prayer, said that his most beloved pupil had broken his heart. The old man discreetly scattering the chapters from the younger man’s shoulders and back into the earth, embraced him tenderly speaking into his generously proportioned right ear, ‘Well done, you have finally taught the introverted one that he must take to the crossing.’ The loving teacher, Sosthenes, who was exceedingly sad, gave thanks for this prepared lesson in improvisation.
Letters

Christopher Konrad

The letter it brings its liquid calligraphy
its immediate pulp and striation
its hard stone dirt and priority

it brings several languages none of which I understand

letter box epistle self stamped belles lettres
letters from the orient Dear John letters from a swallow’s death

it bleeds a river from Conrad’s jungles was sent from an oasis
today a butterfly tomorrow a cyclone
washing down great red floods through Karijini

unopened it was sent eighteen years ago
scoured these walls with a kind of Mandarin
infiltrated my dreams like a little girl destined to die

it yielded its envelope on the altar to Janus secret
in its cipher of privation it speaks an ancient cuneiform
sends armies to their peril and lovers to their death
young men to the asylum—its seal doomed by

the conflagration of more moons than any lover could handle
it is replete with a grammar of blood glue
glyphed with approximations of strange punctuation someone
once deciphered as ‘return to sender’
and if I ask you Persephone
what drug your newest doctor has prescribed
you slide your eyes from the pharmacy bag
sitting crisp-innocent on the table beside
this morning's decaf, unlace
sunless fingers from a handle less white—
bone china no match for subterranean pallor

eyes fashionably shadowed
in heroin chic, no heroine you play it safe on
legal medications, dream of underworlds where
cold gods stalk the barren ground of each
synaptic cleft—strum on filigree webs spun
across endless tiny chasms where messengers
once turned somersaults on thought

abused, you disabuse my concept of autonomy
lips reddened on Hades' juice, pomegranate spills
its treasure, each seed a ruby leaking crimson life
remember Persephone days spent ransacking
the sounds caught in our body-warmth?
We trawled for love's bright metaphors
consumed heady strings of words professing
adoration, our courtesy's half-stifled laugh
but inside drunk on dream-delirium
I didn’t see the bars of your cage, underworld
of others’ needs and dominations, web of
white lines cloying nostrils, brain, breath
set you on a throne Persephone
sealed the sun in stone, no ray must touch your
cheek, heat dark blood congealing, trashed
on china-white and chalk

in this now-hour I imagine
your escape, not because your mother
rages, searing earth and crop as
lamentation, not because Hades’ eyelid
dews a single agate star, not for seasons,
cycles, rhythms’ ineluctable tug on
female bodies, not for money, love or
self-destruction: Persephone

you hold it all in shimmer-fire
cradle stony infants in your arms until
skin lights, softens, grey webs melt
across the café floor—you smile, pick up
your cup, and tell me your new name.
Watching a young kestrel learning to fly

Yann Toussaint

You’d outgrown your Robin Hood outfit by then but you may have still been wearing the green cap as we sat by the churchyard steps late one afternoon watching a young kestrel learning to fly.

It was the calls that had attracted our attention a plaintive keening on the wind, two specks in the sky and this bundle of feathers chick-chacking and equivocating on the stony ledge.

We watched it tumble from the steeple, bobbing on the ledge then half flying, half-falling to this new perch on the gutter’s edge blown like an autumn leaf russet and desperate.

Desperately you watched it and desperate it sat. Then it began to climb, trying to regain the nest it had lost but the pitch on the roof was too steep. It tried to use its wings—not as you or I might but crawling, wings out-stretched as a grounded bat might or as you said a pterodactyl might, or Archaeopteryx reaching forward with vestigial thumbs adorned with bastard feathers still in quick like unearned epaulets.
It crawled on the mossy slates and then slipped back. It fell further this time to a window ledge, where it sat perched above stained glass angels and chacked angrily. You watched it anxiously and turned to me your soft cheek and clear eyes and asked with that mix of worry and another emotion, that one I know too well, whether, if it fell, if it slipped off the edge of the sky and tumbled to our feet, if it was hurt and lost and needed a home could we take it in and keep it safe, forever?
They left the house at seven a.m. Alex sat in the Lancer’s passenger seat, legs buried in pillows and thermoses: Megan had commandeered the keys early and would not be argued with. ‘This is safer,’ she said, and the words lodged in his gut. As they got onto the Great Eastern Highway she put on one of his pub-rock CDs, which was a concession on the grandest scale. His girlfriend, a pop-ballad diehard, abhorred his Foo Fighters and Powderfinger. Reprieved from six hours of ‘Better Man’, Alex sank back in his seat. The music was too loud to talk.

He’d slept badly and at five-thirty had already been awake. In the grey light the ringing of the telephone hadn’t surprised him but instead seemed somehow inevitable, and he’d answered it with dread welling in his stomach. It was his stepmother, Gail: His father had woken with chest pains and was unconscious by the time she drove him into Emergency.

‘A heart attack,’ Alex had breathed, and felt Megan’s hand on his back.

The Mitsubishi passed the airport turn-off and headed into the trees and houses of the Perth Hills. The other traffic was excruciating.
Seven-thirty on a Saturday in September and all these idiots were merrily trundling along at five k’s under the limit. Where was everyone going, for Chrissakes?

Megan changed lanes. The houses began to thin out.

The previous night the two of them had fought over his refusal to go to after-work drinks with her colleagues. When she got home, her tongue loose with wine, she was shakily furious. ‘What do you think it’s like for me to sit there and for people to say, Is he coming? Is he coming? Some of them don’t even believe I have a boyfriend because they’ve never even seen you.’

‘I didn’t feel like it.’

‘You never feel like it. You never feel like it! You realise that relationships are about, about making sacrifices, about doing things for the other person sometimes?’

‘So next time you stay home with me.’

When she put her hands to her face and leant into her elbows he’d felt dulled and remote, as if he were watching it on a screen. He’d spent most of their relationship accompanying Megan to work functions and social engagements. He’d been happy to. But then she’d changed firms and the thought of learning all those names again had suddenly leech him of all energy, like the wall-slam of chronic fatigue. Watching her cry about it, he’d felt worse; worse because it didn’t spur him to action the way it should have. His girlfriend—usually such an embracer of challengers, a wielder of convincing argument, an avoider of weakness—had been sitting on the far corner of their bed with her shoulders hunched miserably, and it made him feel tired. Too tired to socialise. Too tired to comfort her.

Outside Irishtown they drew up behind a truck carrying a piece of mining equipment so huge it straddled three lanes, preventing overtaking. Alex leaned forward as if to counteract the Mitsubishi’s drop in speed.

Megan glanced at him and turned the music down. ‘All right?’

‘What’s that fucking thing doing?’

‘They’ll wave us around eventually.’
Her patience made resentment bloom in him. It was all right for her, comforted by the steering wheel in her hands, the sense of control. Earlier Alex had prickled to get going, to join the dots of purpose that had formed solid in his mind: Pack, shower, eat, leave. In the passenger seat his thoughts scrolled endlessly through this instantaneous to-do list while the final task remained incomplete: See his dad. He put his head in his hands.

Ten minutes later one of the beetly vehicles warning of the ‘Oversized Load Ahead’ zipped over to the wrong side of the road. An arm emerged, indicating they should overtake the truck. Megan did so, and when the Lancer had returned to the left Alex stretched back from his hunch, the flood of momentum that washed uselessly through him easing a little as they picked up speed. He turned up the volume on the stereo.

He couldn’t be surprised that his father had had a heart attack: The man was morbidly obese. Alex’s windpipe tightened whenever he visited and saw Noel filing handfuls of grease and cholesterol into his mouth as if it were a paper shredder. He ate like Elvis in his dying years and though it was hardly surprising his abused heart muscle had finally given in it was still sad, because unlike the King, Noel Warner really enjoyed life. Every bucket of hot chips, far from being a minor diversion from despair, Noel treated like the icing on the cake of existence. Cake itself made him giggle. He had such passion for living badly; the way he suckled cigars was almost obscene.

Waddling down Hannan Street, belly like a giant scoop of ice-cream, Alex’s father would beam at everyone he met. Noel loved Kalgoorlie for what he saw as its similarly robust unwholesomeness—prostitute-based fame, great gouges in the earth, reliance on freshwater from a three-hundred-mile-long pipe. Apart from breathing difficulties and leg pain, Noel didn’t have a care in the world. He had a roundtable of friends to play cards with, a good TV and the cushiest couch in Kal. He hugged often, providing waterbed comfort to the weak and downtrodden, and would write love letters on the back of old receipts and leave them in Gail’s handbag.
Alex couldn’t be like that. Cigars made his tongue into the burnt sole of a shoe, and heartfelt sentiment embarrassed him. He loved his father with a keenness he couldn’t help but think was inappropriate in a grown man: it was the kind of love Noel had for Gail and food and all humanity, except the larger, more plentiful Warner wore it better.

‘You want to stop in Kellerberrin?’

Alex snapped out of his vacant stare. There was nothing around but red dirt and sagging flora. ‘What?’

‘You want to stop in Kellerberrin?’

‘I don’t know, can’t we just keep moving? I’m not hungry.’

‘All right,’ Megan said slowly, ‘But we’re going to have to stop soon.’ Hands still on the wheel, she wiggled a thumb at the dashboard. ‘We forgot to fill up.’

Ten minutes later they pulled into the Kellerberrin servo and Megan got out. He leaned over. ‘Can we switch drivers?’

She shut the door.

There were two guys in a ute at the next bowser, and when Megan bent to fit the pump’s nozzle into the Lancer they both extended their necks to look. Tiredly, Alex watched them watch. Megan was gorgeous; he knew that. And yet after four years together her attractiveness was like a blind spot to him—he found it impossible to be objective, to qualify her appearance. As his girlfriend she had become ubiquitous to him; a given, like his mother or Gail. He was as inclined to ogle her as he would either of them.

He reflected that this was probably terrible.

It was one of the issues they skirted. Megan attacked from all sides but couldn’t risk a direct hit. ‘Why don’t you ever get jealous?’ she would say, or ‘Do you think I’d look good with short hair?’ Asking Are you still attracted to me? would incite a run for cover.

From the servo she brought back a bag of lollipops to sweeten her coffee-soured mouth and a Mars Bar for him, which was nice but he couldn’t eat it. The thought of his tongue negotiating the wodge of chocolatey goo, his saliva thickening to syrup, made him feel sick. ‘Thanks, good.’
‘You can eat it now.’
‘I’m not hungry, I said I wasn’t hungry.’
‘Keep your strength up,’ she said mildly, turning the key and putting the car in gear. When she glanced over he was still holding the chocolate in a fist. ‘Are you okay?’
‘I just want to get going.’
‘Slow and steady,’ Megan said, her voice stressed with good cheer. ‘Your dad wouldn’t want us to have an accident, would he.’
‘Yeah, okay.’ Their wellbeing on the long drive inland was always one of Noel’s greatest concerns. He hated car travel, with his heft causing claustrophobia and the ghost of a lost brother who rolled on the way down from Broome.

Megan drew up behind a road train and sank back into its slipstream. Out the window the grass was dry and stuck up to the sun. Every so often there was a collapsed shed or burned-out car. Passing Doodlakine Alex felt a kind of despair, as if he were stuck in the middle of nowhere. He was. He wound his window up and craned forward in the seat again, eyes fixed on the signs advising ME – 40, ME – 30, ME – 20.

‘You’re going to ruin that.’
He looked down. He had been squeezing the Mars Bar so tightly it drooped. Ahead the road train farted smog. ‘Can you go around that truck, please? I feel like I’m going to jump out of my skin.’
‘Okay, hang on.’ After a few seconds of ducking and checking Megan shoved the Lancer into fourth and swung right. Alex looked out the window to see what company the truck was from but its carriages were painted an obstinate black. Sighing hugely, Megan steered back to the left. ‘Jesus, I hate doing that.’

‘Thanks.’
Eyes on the road, she reached out to pat his thigh. ‘I know it’s stressful, but there’s nothing you can do but sit tight. Why don’t you try and sleep?’

He would have welcomed oblivion but knew it was impossible; his mind was leaping around like a frog. ‘I can’t.’
She retracted her hand. ‘Okay.’

They drove through Merredin without stopping, passing the railway station. The structure was long and had the frozen grandness of old buildings that exist only to house evidence of their former glory. The first summer they were together Alex had driven Megan to Kalgoorlie to meet his father, stopping at the Railway Museum on the way out of some misguided notion that she would be interested. Of course he was showing off—Megan had never driven to Kal before, so Alex felt like the trip was a gift he could give her—and, in his excitement, had considered everything interesting. Luckily Megan had reciprocated, looking at every exhibit and asking questions and buying a fridge magnet as a souvenir. Later, in the car, they had kissed with the excited intensity and vague disbelief that comes with meeting someone who likes you back.

His father had loved her on sight. ‘She’s a lovely girl, a lovely girl,’ he insisted over a beer at the Exchange. Given that Megan was the kind of woman parents instantly loved—sweet, intelligent, goal-oriented—and Noel’s default position was adoration, it was hardly a surprise; still, Alex had been relieved. He knew his dad considered a good woman to be the saviour of every mis-stepping man and once his only child had this anchor to steady him, Noel could sleep better.

During their goodbyes at the end of the trip Noel had wrapped wobbly arms around Megan and swayed with her. ‘You are that boy’s best thing,’ he crooned. ‘Don’t give up, eh?’

Megan had flared red and said nothing on the way back until they stopped for fuel at Southern Cross. Alex got out and she wound down the window. ‘Your dad’s great, isn’t he?’ she said thoughtfully, and then put it back up and went to sleep.

The grey pipeline from Mundaring stretched alongside their car, first to the north, then ducking under the road to the opposite side for a while before returning. Beyond the orange-flecked bonnet the sun hung low in the midmorning sky, crowded by clouds. Alex hoped it would rain.
They passed through Southern Cross and plunged onward to Coolgardie. The Warner family called this the dead stretch, the excruciating repetition of stooped colourless shrubs and nothingness. Passing a mound of blood and fur mashed into the roadside Alex reached out to where Megan’s hand rested on the gearstick and covered it with his own. Their little fingers tightened together.

Maybe he should have proposed at some point. Like lots of couples they had started getting nudges and inquiries after a couple of years together, but Alex had always ignored them. They were too young, he’d dismissed; only twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Megan never brought it up with him and managed to weave gracefully out of the discussion every time someone else did. She had never seemed the type of girl to be worried about that kind of thing; she was interested in her career, in winning deals and socialising aggressively. A woman who wanted to get married wouldn’t be spending her Friday nights networking with the partners at her new firm. Would she?

Alex didn’t know. They had never really talked about it. It was entirely possible that Megan wanted an engagement but wouldn’t humiliate herself by asking for one.

He looked across to where she sat behind the wheel, eyes fixed on the unfurling road, lollipop stuck out the corner of her mouth. He didn’t know what he thought about getting married, either. It felt contrived, somehow. Meeting Megan when they both worked at Woolies and then later bumping into her at a party and kissing her and then dates and sex and sleeping over and eventually moving in together had all happened easily, as if in cruise-control. When it came to getting married he felt like they’d run out of fuel. Why should they dress up and sign something and eat cake as the next step? Because they loved each other? The connection seemed flimsy.

Megan gave his finger a squeeze. ‘What did Gail actually say?’

Alex had to haul himself out of the sucking quicksand of his thoughts. ‘About what?’

‘The heart attack.’

‘Oh.’ He looked out the window again. ‘I don’t know.’
‘How bad was it?’
He knew what she was asking, but he couldn’t answer. ‘He’s in hospital.’
‘Yes, but…’ She said nothing for a moment. On either side of the road the trees were dead, victims of bushfire the year before. ‘I’m sorry about last night.’
‘What?’
‘You don’t have to come out with us if you don’t want to. I shouldn’t have got shitty with you about it. It doesn’t matter.’
Alex went itchy with sweat. He stared out the window at the mass of black sticks, aware that she was glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, waiting. Her apology made him feel the opposite of relieved: If it really was okay for him to stay home while she went out with her friends, then that meant something else was wrong between them. Something that made her curl over and cry while he watched, exhausted.

He felt as if his grip was slipping on something he was supposed to hang on to. ‘You don’t have to say sorry just because my dad’s sick.’
‘But I am sorry.’
‘Don’t,’ he said, voice tightly balanced. ‘Don’t.’
Megan’s hand moved underneath his and he let go, surprised, as she shifted down through the gears. ‘What are you doing?’
‘I’m just going to pull over for a bit,’ she said evenly.

The wheels bit up red gravel as she braked gently, stopping alongside an ash-coloured trunk. They were dead in the middle of where the fire had been the previous January, and all around them was dark with burnt vegetation. On the opposite side of the road stood three crosses for the truck drivers who had turned back into the blaze. The highway stretched out forever in either direction and yet theirs was the only vehicle in sight. There was no one else for ages.

Alex felt as hollowed as one of his dad’s meringues. He wondered what Megan was going to do. She wasn’t the kind of person who pulled over for idle leg-twiddling breaks, especially not when they were speeding pointedly towards a prone body in hospital. But then,
she wasn’t the kind of person to sob tipsily over having to go out alone. She wasn’t the kind of person who gave up.

You’re that boy’s best thing.

For a second he wondered if he should propose right now. These kinds of situations, they were supposed to make you confront your own mortality, to crystallise what you want out of life. He would get down on a knee in the dirt and tell her he loved her, that he’d always loved her, and Megan, crying happily this time, would pledge to work shorter hours. And they would get to the hospital and Noel would be sitting up eating fruit salad and grinning grey teeth at them.

No. He’d already reduced this once proactive girl to someone who tiptoed. He had bloated her with the empty calories of his love.

Megan got out of the car and walked around to the front. Feet squared in the dust, she placed two hands on the bonnet and stared down at it. From inside the car Alex watched her arched shoulders rise and fall with measured breaths. He wondered if his father, overflowing a hospital bed, was breathing the same way, or if he wasn’t. His poor ruined heart.
Coup de Grâce

Bob Morrow

My first shot took one galah
from those tearing at the haystack.
Slow, stuttering fall,
wings scrabbled at the air,
trailing wisps of pink and grey and
shrieks of terrified companions.

That shot justified the trust of parents,
proved my fitness for responsibility—
and showed my younger cousin city kids could shoot.
I strolled with him to inspect the corpse.
The bird lay in a patch of barley grass,
alive.

I slipped another bullet in the breech,
but in my cousin’s world
such waste was scorned.
He handed me a rust-scabbed bar,
prised from the dirt.
You don’t need the gun. Take this.

I had no choice. He’d tell.
The bird watched, unmoving,
understanding and reproach
in the still black pellet of its eye.
I closed my eyes and struck,
fear behind the blow.
Sacha

David Buchanan

This is no reprieve
it is a field
a bed
a boat lying on sea grass
looking up to a diffuse sun
a squint against rain
a lip gently bitten after that kiss
a neck arced to heaven.
If it is a no-man’s-land
then I have given up
like the man on September 16, 1916
who walked out amid the shells the bullets
the concussion of detonation
to move against the terror
and name the unspoken
slouched across a shoulder
unreached yet loved
as a cross.
The headline in the January 2010 Fairfax papers suggested that 2010 would be ‘The Year of Reading Dangerously’, describing the literary offerings for the period as representing nothing less than ‘an outbreak in crime.’ It is certainly worth noting that 2010 was the year that, for the first time, a crime writer won the Miles Franklin Award. Some of Australia’s best loved writers have written crime—I’m thinking of Brenda Walker, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Randolph Stowe, Andrew McGahan and others—but Peter Temple was the first nominal crime writer to have received the award, on this occasion for his 2009 title *Truth*, having been shortlisted a couple of years previously for his bestselling *The Broken Shore*.

However, while the Fairfax article intended to suggest that 2010 was a year when a larger than normal number of crime titles was to be released, as far as I can tell this proved not to be the case. In other words, far from it being a matter of crime fiction working its way into more literary terrain, replacing a previously literary readership, Australian fiction in 2010 by and large moved in quite the opposite direction—that is, a large number of ostensibly literary titles published in 2010 used crime fiction conventions to enhance a more literary
mode of storytelling. A quick glance at the Miles Franklin longlist for 2010 publications reveals the success of this particular strategy. Of the nine titles longlisted, only Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*, Roger McDonald’s *When Colts Ran* and Melina Marchetta’s *The Piper’s Son* do not use either a particular crime or a central mystery as its framing device, its means of framing a deeper exploration of place, or of culture, or of the psychology of a particular character (the other six titles being Chris Womersley’s *Bereft*, Jon Bauer’s *Rocks in the Belly*, Kirsten Tranter’s *The Legacy*, Honey Brown’s *The Good Daughter*, Patrick Holland’s *The Mary Smokes Boys* and Stephen Orr’s *Time’s Long Ruin*).

Of the novels mentioned above, the standout work of fiction published in 2010 for me was Kim Scott’s fourth title, *That Deadman Dance*, which has already garnered a swag of prizes and glowing reviews. In Scott’s *Benang*—*From the Heart*, which made him the first Indigenous writer to win the Miles Franklin in 2000, he signalled a willingness to use the historical record as a means by which to interrogate both government policy and its effects upon his own family history. *That Deadman Dance* is also a work thoroughly grounded in historical research, but one that is yet transformed and enriched by means of a binary optic that suggests, on the one hand, the reading of Country as a living, nurturing presence, and on the other as a site of struggle, exile and gradual adaptation. *That Deadman Dance* is a great example of the blending of fact and fiction for a particular purpose, and is something more artful and poignant as a result. Set in the earliest moments of contact between whites and Noongars around what has become contemporary Albany, the tragedy of what ultimately became of traditional culture in that area is used as a device that gently frames (the unsaid speaks throughout) the exploration of the human side of what has become known as the ‘friendly frontier.’ The novel is structured so as to essentially provide a voice to each of the participants, on both sides of what was to become a great cultural divide, although what Scott makes clear is that initially this divide wasn’t (and therefore isn’t) unbridgeable. The pleasure of reading Scott’s beautiful prose, the richness of his characterisation and
effortless flowing between voices and dialects and ways of reading the country are only some of the pleasures of this novel.

One of the other tangible results of the publication of That Deadman Dance is the fact that, as far as this reader is concerned, history is the richer as a result (perhaps because I’m a Western Australian, as I was reading this novel I was continually thinking that this was the book that I have been longing to read about this place for most of my life.) That Deadman Dance, and particularly its central character Bobby Wabalanginy give voice to not only what was, but also to what might have been—serving not only as a reminder that history is always a matter of individual people, and the choices they make, but also the hard truth that the very openness and generosity of the original inhabitants of the area, something that enabled at one point a genuine possibility for intercultural understanding, particularly as it relates to the nature of understanding Country, was lost (although not irrevocably) precisely because to a large extent the learning and resulting cultural adaption only went one way. As Scott has indicated in recent interviews and at the Guwanyi Aboriginal Writer’s Festival in NSW in March, the novel deliberately aims to suggest a counter-narrative to ‘the dominant yarn of the story of defeat’, thereby holding out the possibility of hope, principally because the ‘story’ is not over, as it’s ‘a long yarn.’ This is a generous perspective, and one that not only reflects the survival of the kind of openness and generosity that can only come from a position of strength, but also responds directly, or serves as a challenge to the non-Indigenous perspective described by Mary Gilmore that suggests that we, who ‘had not wit to read’ might, even at this late stage, begin to see more clearly.

Chris Womersley’s first novel The Low Road (Scribe 2008) won best first crime novel in the Ned Kelly awards for that year, and the generic markers of moody atmospherics and structural unity can be equally felt in his award winning second novel, Bereft (but also in his fine short story included in Black Inc’s Best Australian Stories 2010 collection). The novel is the first of many published in 2010 that are set in a marginal rural space, despoiled and purgatorial that
yet positions its characters on the margins of the marginal, from where the narrow social life of the towns might be seen in a clearer light. This contrasting of the natural world with civic corruption is of course commonly a trope of Romanticism, and yet the contemporary Australian vision appears devastatingly anti-romantic, complicated by a metaphorical blindness and consequent distance from the land whose potential spiritual or psychological nourishment is only ever apprehended in glimpses that suggest, but never deliver the yearned for deeper apprehension (much like Wordsworth’s plaintive cry of ‘will no one tell me what she sings?’ in his ballad *The Solitary Reaper*). Indeed, *Bereft* uses the device of a young female character ‘gone native’ as a means of drawing the badly damaged central character out of his psychological isolation, and Patrick Holland’s *The Mary Smokes Boys* contains the character of young mother Irene Finnain, an Irish speaker who has the most unmediated connection to the land (the device of a younger female companion who serves to draw the older protagonist towards a greater understanding of himself/herself is also reprised in Natasha Lester’s well-received *What is Left Over, After*, and Jeremy Chambers’ *The Vintage and the Gleaning*).

*Bereft* begins with a prologue where sixteen-year-old Quinn Walker’s beloved sister goes missing during a memorably fierce storm. Soon after, Quinn is discovered by his father and uncle in a disused shed by the town weir, bloody knife in his hand, his sister raped and dead before them. Quinn flees his father’s wrath, and the bewilderment and anger of the townsfolk of Flint, where is referred to thereafter as ‘the murderer’. Some few years later he is a newly demobbed soldier returning from the Western Front. Quinn has been gassed, his lungs have been ruined and his hearing is damaged. His scarred face resembles ‘a slur of porridge.’ Quinn hides out in the hills above his parent’s farm, observing his father’s comings and goings before he decides it is safe to visit his mother. He desires to convince her of his innocence, but it is some time before he can convince her, in her influenza delirium, that he is real. His visits to his dying mother and his retreats to the hillside to escape the still
murderous vengeance of his father describe both the structure of the novel from then on, and the push and pull of his desire to be absolved by the only one who loves him, and his competing need for solitude, for anonymity, merely one of millions of men on the post-war roads, searching for a place to belong. Both Quinn’s needs are coloured by concealment and ambivalence. He cannot tell his mother the whole truth, for fear that in her weakened state it will destroy her, and he cannot find solace in the ‘dun-coloured and exhausted’ landscape. So profound is Quinn’s damage that he even comes to envy the blind and deaf soldiers he has encountered for their utter isolation. The mechanised nature of modern warfare is absolute. In the meeting of metal and flesh, it is flesh that is defaced, humanness that is banished. This truth metaphorically inflects his vision of men disfigured by injuries so horrific that their faces are replaced by ‘masks of tin on which were moulded and painted those features which had been blasted off’, and his vision of country, where a ‘glimpse of dirt road lay like a fuse through the elms.’ At one point Quinn lays his ear to the earth, and listens: ‘beneath him the dense meat of the turning earth…he imagined fires down there, the screech of metal, those goblins and devils with their peculiar industry.’

The vision is gothic, a human and physical landscape characterised by the recent desertion of God, of a grasping at intangibles, understandings just out of reach, but present in the landscape. Quinn believes he has been charged with protecting the spirit of his murdered sister. He camps in the bush, and observes, and listens, but the natural world is not immediately inviting, rather reflecting his own sense of dislocation, recalling the ‘weird melancholy’ of Marcus Clarke. ‘Even the native trees looked to have grown not from this country but, rather, to have been thrust—unwilling, straining skyward—into the soil from which they now attempted to writhe free...And overhead, always, that sheer, blade-sharp sky.’ Womersley’s prose is gently formal, reflecting the language of the period, peppered with descriptions such as that of hawks circling overhead ‘like dark, watchful stars disentangled from their orbits’, and the domestic image of Quinn’s sister playing
knucklebones, ‘a sound through the house like rodents’ (Womersley consistently deploys aural images to great effect). His microscopic sensitivity enables Quinn to listen so intently, in his wariness, that ‘[a]t night, when the house and surrounding bush were still, he heard the whiskers growing through his cheeks with the sound of countless nails being prised from wood.’

It is only when Quinn meets Sadie Fox, a runaway from the town that he becomes emboldened enough to seek revenge upon his sister’s murderer. Sadie Fox, ‘the angel of death’, becomes to Quinn’s vulnerable mind the sister that he has returned to protect, although it is she who does the protecting. She steals food from the town to sustain them, but she also shows Quinn another way of entering the mystery of Country. She takes him to the ‘cave of hands’, where she divines their future in the entrails of a lamb, she makes small propitiations in the form of delicate locks of hair, tinsel and nails, through ornaments ‘beautiful and pathetic, a tiny thing made sacred by a girl.’ A magical tone, a wonderment begins to pervade the sensibility, such that by the end of the novel, despite the openness of the conclusion, we suspect that Quinn too, like Marcus Clarke before him, has become somewhat more accustomed to his inevitable fate, that ‘beauty of loneliness’ that explains both his disappearance from the story, but also his continued status as legend, as a ghost who stalks the outskirts of the town, the subject of nursery rhymes and warnings to children, a man outside the ken of ordinary folk.

Angela Meyer, in her ever-popular blog *Literary Minded* has suggested reading Womersley’s *Bereft* and Patrick Holland’s *The Mary Smokes Boys* in complement, and while I didn’t have this opportunity it is something I’d recommend. Patrick Holland’s second novel *The Mary Smokes Boys* (his first was the award winning *The Long Road of the Junkmailer* [UQP 2006]) begins with its main character, ten-year-old Grey North watching fireworks flame into the night sky, the sights of children his own age enjoying rides at an exhibition fairground seen from his position behind a hospital window, having just found out that his mother has died giving birth to his new sister, Irene.
This opposition between the carnival festivity on the other side of the window and Grey’s sombre mood is deliberate, and metaphorically suggests the social position that he and his family occupy in the town of Mary Smokes—just an hour away from the lights of Brisbane but another world entirely, ‘a town surrounded by blowing fields…a broad corridor of flatland before the Great Dividing Range before immense inland plains…The wide and empty country in which the world was uninterested.’

Grey’s father William is a manual labourer, and a drinker. When they retire to their home in Mary Smokes it is upon Grey’s shoulders that the task of raising his sister primarily falls. While Grey’s mother was alive, he had remained close by her, the object of his adoration and love. His mother had married badly, the result of a teenage pregnancy of which Grey is the fruit. Just like the young female character in Womersley’s *Bereft*, Grey’s mother Irene Finnain is linked closely to the land, whose spirit or essential nature she seems to perceive because of her Catholic piety and the Irish language that she speaks, but which Grey never bothers to learn (indeed, Grey’s best friend Eccleston, a ‘half-caste’ Aborigine is similarly bereft due to the loss of his mother’s language, as it relates to the mystic connection to country that he senses, but does not entirely apprehend in the way that his ancestors did). After Grey’s mother’s death, however, Grey becomes one of the town’s Lost Boys, taking to the night with his friends to walk, and drink, and observe. Although the novel is set just outside of sub-tropical Brisbane, because much of it takes place at night, the atmosphere is by turns haunting and menacing, the style at once spare but lyrical, especially when describing the Lost Boys and their muted conversations over a campfire at night, with the land a powerful presence. Much time is spent simply sitting and watching the changes that come over the land, a reminder of the static nature of their lives as they recapitulate the mistakes of their forebears, carrying within them the unspoken burden of a grief and guilt for things they have not done. The boys and Grey’s sister Irene in particular are beautifully drawn, with humour and great pathos. In the absence of
adult models the Lost Boys and Irene draw their strength and lore from the land that they traverse, and the waters that pass through. The bonds between the youthful characters are intense and loyal to a vision of friendship that endures despite the passing of years and the mobile nature of the limited employment available to them. But even as they leave and return, and age and love and gradually lose hope, always there is the Mary Smokes Creek, in flood or broken into pools, and their reprising of the rituals of their lost childhood, the sense that their simply observed rituals of watching beside the creek at night confers upon them a sense of identity, and belonging:

At Mary Smokes Creek...The water’s violence had grown quiet, stored like the violence of a candle flame...Slabs of granite and basalt were settled in the bed and the water purled around them, though in time of heavy flood you heard the rocks grinding, the water turning them over...And all this, that they barely comprehended themselves, was the boys’ secret at this hour of the night. No-one else in the universe was watching these waters. The boys and god were alone. Grey imagined they were the water's keepers.

*The Mary Smokes Boys* works patiently towards its dramatic and violent conclusion, the result of a crime that Grey and his friend Eccleston have committed, albeit with the best of intentions.

This patience is something that is also characterised by Jeremy Chambers’ very promising first novel, *The Vintage and the Gleaning*. The novel’s narrator, Smithy, has given up a lifetime of drinking as a result of his ruined guts (we suspect it might be terminal.) Once a ‘gun shearer’, a bloke who’s worked and played hard all his life, noted for his strength and work ethic, Smithy now labours in a vineyard somewhere in North-East Victoria.

The novel is structured as a kind of diary, relating in its early stages Smithy’s day-by-day labours down the rows of vines, then the sessions in the pub afterwards. It is significant that the shortest
chapter in the book falls on a Saturday, a day of rest. Without his job, it seems, Smithy ceases to exist. The men that he works alongside consist of different generations, but what binds them is drinking. It is also what has ruined Smithy’s life, has made it pass without his noticing, leaving him with plenty of regrets.

The first half of the novel builds quietly to establish the character of both the man and the town that he inhabits, in particular what lies beneath the sun-bitten streets. The language of the men is stilted, inarticulate, drawing out every moment of communication, helping to pass the time, although the novel doesn’t suffer for it. Chalmers, like his characters, weighs each phrase and action with a significance that threatens not to hold, but then does. Even the silence is loaded, and the cadences of the men’s voices are authentic in this regard. Like Womersley’s *Bereft*, cycles of repeated action are refracted through subtle accretions of detail, minor changes in key—a funeral, a dream, Smithy’s walks to the pub down the train track behind his house, the odd jobs he does for ‘Boss’s wife.’

Smithy is a great character, but in the early parts of the novel he is barely a man of words. It is in the pub that Smithy’s sobriety properly reflects his new perspective on things. The tone is *Wake in Fright*, but Smithy’s eye is in—he is not an outsider:

> The smell of beer is everywhere and it brings memories to me, shapeless, formless memories, all soaked in the smell and the smoke and the noise around me and they are the forgotten memories of a lifetime…and there are men who talk and there are men who are silent and those who talk do not know what they are saying and those who are silent do not listen, but drink for the very silence, for the silence of their souls. And I was such a man.

> Half-way through the novel Charlotte appears on Smithy’s doorstep, not knowing who else to turn to. Her abusive husband Brett is due to be released from prison the next day. Smithy takes responsibility for her, a daughter of the landed gentry who’s chosen badly, and been
disowned as a result. Charlotte’s arrival into his life, and the resulting violent infantilism wrought upon the town by Brett and his friends ultimately draws out the best in Smithy. Brett has murdered before, and gotten away with it. In the small town, everybody knows this, but nobody wants to talk about it, except Charlotte, and then only to Smithy. Charlotte is self-pitying and defensive, but in her voice and ultimately in her actions, Smithy sees a parallel with his own wasted life, its beauty and sadness, its tragedies defined by its inevitabilities.

But it is Smithy’s memories that really set him free. In one of the finest passages of writing I’ve come across in an Australian debut novel, Smithy casts his mind back to his time as an orphan in an Aboriginal Mission settlement in long elegiac sentences of rare power, drawing out the strange beauty and mystery and terrible sadness of the images of his childhood, even as Charlotte embarks upon a long self-serving monologue designed to justify her love for an abusive husband. By the novel’s end Smithy has returned to his job on the rows, the cycle of actions are repeated, but his time the repetition is made significant, poignant in light of recent events.

Another very successful debut novel is Stephen Daisley’s award-winning *Traitor*. The main character, and the Traitor in question, is a naive young man from rural New Zealand serving in the trenches of Gallipoli. His first experience of life outside the theatre of war, where he achieves some distinction, is when he meets a Turkish doctor, who is treating an Australian soldier on a Gallipoli ridge, during a battle. David isn’t sure what to do. Shoot the Turk? Help him? A naval shell makes the decision for him, and the explosion sends them both to the same military hospital.

Mahmoud is a worldly man, a doctor who has trained in London. He is also a Sufi. He befriends David, and there begins a relationship characterised by gentle teasing, and encouragement. David has never met anyone like Mahmoud, and in his war-brutalised condition he is vulnerable to the kind of sensitivity that makes of Mahmoud’s epigrams and gentle coaxing and inextinguishable humour a kind of rational alternative to the crude obviousness that otherwise defines
his military life. With Mahmoud, nothing is as it seems, and so begins a fragile balancing act—a friendship characterised by David’s love, essentially a desire for the kind of grace that Mahmoud embodies.

David’s crime is that he helps Mahmoud to escape, although the two don’t get very far. They are shortly after separated, never to meet again. David is sent to the Western Front to act as a stretcher-bearer, as punishment, where again his bravery and compassion amidst the stupid carnage distinguishes him from his peers. Back in New Zealand, David receives a final letter from Mahmoud’s wife, telling him that Mahmoud has been sacrificed at the altar of Kemal Ataturk’s desire to secularise and democratise his new republic. The novel jumps forward to where David, now the ‘old man’, forty odd years having passed, still carries the haunting beauty of Mahmoud’s ambiguous teachings inside him, and in his rural isolation, discovers that his words begin to make perfect sense (although he must work to make them understandable—he looks for clues, answers in the natural world around him.) There is a numinous quality to much of the prose that describes his life here as a shepherd, the visceral realities of life on the land aside, he is marked as an outcast, a recluse, and yet is strangely at peace with the physical and emotional landscape that he traverses, the reverential words of Mahmoud colouring his perceptions of the life that remains to him, the barest sense that it is an illusion, a trial, and a blessing.

Michael Meehan’s <i>Below the Styx</i> is a psychological exploration of a murder committed by the central character, Martin Frobisher. At the novel’s inception Frobisher is being held in a Melbourne remand centre, looking at a life sentence. Having been called ‘a louse’ by his wife, who had been going through his private writings stuffed in a black garbage bag, he belts her over the head with an epergne, ‘a large, unwieldy object designed to suspend delicacies—usually fruit—above the table.’ Martin is as surprised as anybody that he has committed his crime, and the moment of the criminal act is returned to time and again, as befits the meditations of a man in prison for murder, and is used as a structural device by which he is able (from
the arc, of the swing) to spin out a whole series of threads upon which unspools the main core of the narrative.

Frobisher is an editor at a publishing house, a ‘courteous and self-effacing man’ who because of his crime has been largely abandoned by his friends and colleagues. With nothing much to do in prison he is drawn to the writings of Marcus Clarke, and with the help of a research assistant, Petra, he begins to trawl through Clarke’s entire oeuvre, looking for clues as to the man’s essential nature, beneath the mythmaking and logorrhoea that has created for Clarke a viable public persona, while leaving few clues as to what he was really like (even in his letters he was, it seems, he was always ‘in character.’)

The book is as much about language, and storytelling, as anything else. Frobisher is reluctant to talk about himself, especially to others, and what he gives us instead are stories from his childhood, stories from his life as a younger man, and stories about his married life. Frobisher’s stories, as Clarke’s stories before him, serve to characterise, of course, but also very cleverly lead the reader towards an examination of the ways in which language frames identity, or in Frobisher and Clarke’s case, can be used as a strategy to conceal an essential hollowness at the heart of character, a kind of vacant selfhood, chameleon in nature and eternally elusive. Frobisher is ‘utterly superficial’, an actor in his own play, a character in his own novel, that has taken a tragic turn (although the tone of Below the Styx is wonderfully absurd), to the extent that he realises that without the permanent record which his story will become, that he has essentially never existed in any authentic fashion, an authenticity that is itself called into question. Ultimately, it is in Frobisher’s textual analyses of Clarke’s stories and letters that he comes to understand, and appreciate Clarke’s struggle for recognition, ultimately forgiving him his evasions and cynical accommodations with the hack-writing made necessary for him to survive. In effect, Clarke has succeeded where Frobisher has failed—Clarke has survived in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the fickle memory of our culture. It is only Frobisher’s enduring prison
sentence that paradoxically frees him to recognise that (sentenced, to spend time within himself), double place where he is both ‘more in touch here, without phone, diary, or appointments, than I have ever been’, representing both a place of absence and yet of creating, a place where out of the essential absence of himself he is yet free to tell the story of himself, truthful or otherwise, to whoever will listen.

Different again in tone, but nonetheless absorbing, Stephen Orr’s *Time’s Long Ruin* examines the improbable and troubling disappearance of three young children from a crowded Adelaide beach, in 1960 (linked very closely the disappearance of the three Beaumont children in Adelaide, in 1966). The tagline on the front cover reads ‘*what happens when children disappear?*’ and in every sense, Orr’s novel is a fictional exploration that seeks an answer to this question, rather than an answer for who committed the crime. The novel is narrated by Henry Page, who still lives in the same suburban house that he grew up in, some fifty years after the three Riley children’s disappearance (Janice, Anna and Gavin were his next door neighbours and best friends). Henry’s father is a detective, and even before the children disappear, Orr goes to great lengths to detail the way such mysteries serve to enthral a city’s inhabitants, when Henry’s father and Bill Riley discuss obsessively the earlier mystery surrounding the identity of a man found dead on another suburban beach.

The slow pace of the novel’s first half, prior to the Riley children’s disappearance allows the reader to spend a great deal of time getting to know them, which is important in a novel that is never going to achieve any real resolution, where the purpose is rather to look at the previously idyllic Croyden through new eyes. Henry is an awkward character who reveres his father, even when he’s beaten by him, and yet is chary of his mother, an unsympathetic and resentful woman who abandons them at one point, and who he discovers has written on the back of a picture of the three of them—*Holy Trinity, 1948. The father, the wife and the crippled son* (his mother’s fears that she’d give birth to a ‘cripple’ having been realised). Henry’s father, however, is lovingly portrayed, both as the long-suffering husband
of an inexplicably withdrawn wife, and the figure of neighbourhood respect that comes with his office as detective. There are other colourful characters who live on the Croyden streets, representative of the times, certainly, the New Australians amidst the slightly wary Anglo-Australians, but it is never clear whether or not Henry now looks back at this earlier life as a period of innocence, or of general denial, given that at one time he is molested by the local doctor, and the fact that the Riley children disappear so easily from such a public place. The children are never found, in fiction as in real life, and it is Henry who is left behind at the novel’s end, the last survivor of the old community since irrevocably changed, haunted and alone and still bearing witness to the damage done to a life, to a family and a neighbourhood.

Jon Bauer’s debut novel *Rocks in the Belly* has been widely acclaimed, and endorsed by the likes of J. M. Coetzee, David Malouf and M. J. Hyland. The story is narrated by a character that is never named, in a city that is never named (you might say that the real setting is childhood). The narrator is an eight-year-old child made jealous by the arrival in his family of an older foster child, Robert, who is charismatic in a way that the narrator is not. Robert comes from more difficult circumstances but he is not the selfish and ungenerous child that the narrator has become, nor does he display the sociopathic tendencies that the narrator carries into adulthood, when he returns home from a career as a prison guard in Canada to care for his dying mother. The power of this novel lies in the alternating voices of the eight-year-old boy and the man that he has become, in the lack of distance (it’s all scene and no summary, which lends the narrative an immediacy and focus) and the deft juxtaposition of humour and a sometimes startling inappropriateness, as the narrator’s manipulations and self-deceptions begin to retreat before the obviousness of the grief he has caused his mother. As his mother fades towards death and loses her physical and psychological dominion over him, he is able to be tender towards her, recognising that while the emotional distance he has always felt from others is now, with the loss of the
only person who might love him, absolute—he is ultimately able to take responsibility for his life, and, in the final flux of past, present and future—his actions—both the feelings that engendered them and the deeper feelings that lie concealed.

The other standout novel of 2010 for me was Fiona McGregor’s *Indelible Ink*, indeed one of my favourite novels of recent years (Kirsten Tranter’s *The Legacy* having been discussed in last year’s review essay). The novel largely shifts its focus between Mosman and Surry Hills, reflecting the orbit of the novel’s central character, Marie King, who is a woman in her late fifties becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a life spent catering to the needs of others. One of the real achievements of this novel is that McGregor is able to invest initially unsympathetic characters with a deal of empathy. From the first chapter with its omniscient view of Marie and her three children; Hugh, Leon and Blanche, we are drawn into a world of wealth and privilege complicated by dissatisfaction and anxiety that yet never feels churlish—McGregor never judges her characters. Marie’s North Shore home is a haven of sorts, but in the larger picture and framed by her increasing peregrinations Marie comes to recognise ‘the cellular structure of society, like a hive, cheek by jowl the wealthy lawyer, the tattoo artist, the housing commission Aborigine.’ Marie is becoming increasingly unwell, and the plan is to sell her beloved house, which to Marie and her children means severing themselves from a sanctuary more emotional than material, particularly for her son Hugh, for whom ‘Mum is the house...Everything he had first learnt about the world, his primary sensations and obstacle courses were in that house and to lose it was to lose the very foundations of his life.’ *Indelible Ink* is an intensely contemporary novel, exploring to great effect the current urban anxieties and feelings of helplessness associated with environmental decline and climate change in particular (indeed, in my opinion the novel is vastly superior to Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* which explores similar terrain).

It is mid-summer, and the city is in drought. The hardness that we associate with the drought-stricken interior has entered the heart
of the city, but the city’s inhabitants do not draw from it any sense of character, rather blame others in their helplessness. ‘Forty-six degrees. Each day hotter than the day before, the heat moving stealthily into every corner of the house.’ Trees are dying. The economy is suffering. Water has become a precious resource. But what power the characters of Indelible Ink have over this sense of terminal decline can only be expressed though minor adaptations and acts of consumer choice, although this of course does not satisfy their anxieties. When Marie remarks upon the beauty of her best friend Susan’s new car, a ‘fawn Peugeot convertible’, she is met with the following response—‘It runs on biofuels. Or it’s supposed to. That’s why we got it. And two months later we find out that we’re responsible for food riots in Bangladesh or wherever. Fabulous, isn’t it.’ Marie has always been an avid consumer too, but she is able to articulate this consumption as a response to satisfying a deeper sense of guilt, the sense that her wealth, particularly as it relates to her ownership of a prime piece of real estate, is not ‘rightful’, such that ‘the sadness of losing it also contained relief.’

The real momentum of the novel consists in Marie’s gradual sloughing off of her attachments to the material, and the subsequent movement towards an interiority defined by her increasing distance from the disapproval of her wealthy peers and her children. The defining moment occurs when a drunken Marie enters a tattoo parlour on a whim, and marks herself with indelible ink. The transformation is immediate, although the reasons for her increasing attachment to the tattoos that subsequently adorn her body are made apparent only later in the novel. Initially, the experience is painful, but strangely pleasant, pathetic in its desperation, perhaps, but immediately empowering. By undergoing the rituals of marking her body Marie feels she has finally ‘planted a flag in her own country.’ Physically unwell, anticipating the grief she will feel when her house is sold from beneath her, Marie returns time and again to the company of Rhys, her tattooist, who understands Marie’s need. ‘The heat brought the tattoos up like braille. The dips and swirls disappeared then
rose up again, fresh enough to scale slightly, ancient enough that they seemed to have always been there. This language of welts was strangely familiar, as though the needles hadn’t so much inserted ink as stripped the veneer from an underlying design.’ Marie’s tattoos become increasingly elaborate, drawing her towards understandings lost in the passage of her life, wedded to a successful advertising man and a milieu characterised by boredom and avoidance of unpleasant truth. When Marie recalls witnessing the slaughter of animals as a child, the significance of her tattoos and the intimations of her physical decline become apparent: ‘[i]t wasn’t how a little girl was supposed to feel. Animals were being murdered, but their pain to Marie was subservient to a bigger force, beyond Win and herself: it was the force of human appetite stretching back though infinity.’ With the diagnosis of a terminal illness the novel changes key and the voices of the children come to predominate. They gather round Marie and their Mosman home, having ‘not seen each other this often since they were children.’ Their mother’s dying cuts through their self-absorption but the tone is unsentimental, calling forth the larger themes of regret and loss and love in a manner that characterises Marie’s final act as one of betrayal, certainly, but also as an act of clarity, of inevitable and courageous honesty.

Gail Jones’ *Five Bells* is also a brilliant evocation of contemporary Sydney, although the tone is vastly different, more akin to Slessor’s elegy to his lost friend (the poem from which the novel, of course, draws its name). Jones’ language too is poetic and beguiling, and the structure is ambitious for such a short novel. Four characters converge on Circular Quay at roughly the same time. The day is luminous and the Quay is crowded (in the words of one of the characters, James, the effect is ‘cinematic’), although the atmosphere is festive. Jones uses the aesthetic reading of the regular landmarks to both characterise and distinguish her characters. Ellie, for example, a young woman from rural Western Australia, sees the Sydney Opera house for the first time up close: ‘It was moon-white and seemed to hold within it a great, serious stillness. The fan of its chambers leant together,
inclining to the water. An unfolding thing, shutters, a sequence of sorts...she was filled with corny delight and ordinary elation.' James, a depressed young man from the same country town as Ellie, sees the Opera House rather as 'White teeth...Its maws opened to the sky in a perpetual devouring.' Pei Xing, a Chinese émigré and survivor of the Cultural Revolution, inflects the Opera House (as with many things, always beautifully) with her own cultural perspective: 'There it was, jade white, lifting above the water. She never tired of seeing this form...The shapes rested, like porcelain bowls, stacked one upon the other, fragile, tipped, in an unexpected harmony.' And finally, Catherine, a young Irish woman also seeing the Opera House for the first time describes it thus: '...nestling before her, its folded forms stretching upwards, its petal life extending. The peaked shapes might have derived from a bowl of white roses, from the moment when they’re tired and leaning, just about to subside. Blown, that strange term, a bowl of blown roses.' It is Catherine’s reading of the Opera House that leads to the first play of what becomes Jones central method—images suggesting emotions which in turn suggest memories, as each of her characters draw upon the contrast between the vividness of the scene before them and the trauma that has brought them to Sydney. The ‘fifth’ bell of the novel is a young child gone missing from the Quay whilst amongst them, and whose absence serves ultimately to bring them together. While this device deliberately calls attention to the larger themes explored in the novel, those of loss and the exigencies of fate in particular (I’m not sure that I would call the effect of this technical employment slight, as much as convenient, or circumstantial) the effect of the rising emotional tempo yet works much like a musical score, and indeed captures, as presumably intended, the powerful emotional resonance of the culmination of Slessor’s own poem.

The following are novels that are hard to categorise, except to say that they have what Les Murray calls Sprawl: Gregory Day’s *The Grand Hotel*, Wayne Ashton’s *Equator*, David Musgrave’s *Glissando* and Roger McDonald’s *When Colts Ran*. A particular kind of Sprawl,
it might be said, in the face of another of Les Murray’s assertions that ‘failure was the first rhyme for Australia.’

Gregory Day’s third novel, *The Grand Hotel* explores in some detail the turning of a coastal property into a locals’ pub, the eponymously named Grand. The characters are all lovable rogues and the hotel itself, with its Dadaist speaking toilet and inventive means of clearing out unwanted visitors, is also a significant character. The novel is by turns garrulous and wonderfully absurd, good natured and inventive, even as it describes the construction of a creative space for the locals of Mangowak, free from the creeping encroachment of touristic development.

Wayne Ashton’s *Equator* is an altogether odder although equally free-spirited affair. This is a novel utterly without restraint, and is the more pleasurable because of it. Using repetition as a linking device, and a loopy enthusiasm as its means of maintaining velocity, the novel yet has at its core a serious and melancholy heart, and might best be described as an anti-realist experiment in memory and consciousness that addresses climate change from aslant. Humans are called ‘inheritors’ and are by and large simultaneously self-aware but ignorant of themselves, mere pawns in a Manichean struggle between the ‘boxes’, the artfully made opposed to those industrially manufactured. The boxes rant and rave, often sounding like characters from an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, anarchic and energetic, by turns moralistic and amoral, chopping syntax and expressing cosmological ‘flux’, returning time and again to the phrase ‘memory is like water’, with the whole functioning as a loving elegy to the ocean.

David Musgrave’s *Glissando* is something entirely different again, although it too mines a fervent absurdist strain not often associated with rural narratives. Working both with and subverting Patrick White’s *Voss* (the thinly disguised writer and his partner even make an appearance towards the end of the novel), the novel is a wickedly clever parody that uses a pastiche of letters, erudite observations of historical events and literary allusions alongside the framing device of the hunt by shadowy figures for a lost promissory note. *Glissando’s*
characters are by turns grotesque and humorous, such that the novel has at times the tenor of a satirical fable, with a central character reminiscent of Voltaire’s Candide, although it certainly cannot be said of Musgrave’s Australia that it is the best of all possible worlds (although, while the arts have a currency in the world of Glissando lacking in our own, human nature, such as it is, provides both the continuity and generative comedy).

Finally, Roger McDonald’s *When Colts Ran*, both critically lauded and highly accomplished, reprises a familiar Australian fictional landscape, but in a manner that is both cartographic and ‘epic’ as it has been described elsewhere. While the author has called *When Colts Ran* a novel ‘about the broad stream of life, structured around seventy years in the life of a drunk’, it is also an interesting exploration, inflected with nostalgia, of the nature of character through the generations, in the sense that the novel’s earliest characters are products of the traditional outback and war school—they have character in the traditional meaning of the word—but are ultimately supplanted by those who essentially lack character (one young thug accidentally shoots a man, out of boredom, for example). A tone of meanness creeps into the town that they inhabit, where the eponymous Colts, now an old man, takes in a young woman, who, like Charlotte in Chalmers’ *The Vintage and the Gleaning* is escaping a no-hoper partner, but whom, also like Charlotte, soon returns to that partner. The changes are subtly wrought, but significant enough such that by the end of the novel Colts seems utterly adrift in the modern world, the way of life that defined his generation having disappeared forever. But whereas Musgrave consciously and deliciously inverts the traditional Australian focus upon war and the working of the land as a source of national identity, and replaces it with the warring of artistic ‘visionaries’, McDonald works deliberately with the exaggerated but familiar. The landscape of the novel traverses the interior from west to east, but is everywhere peopled by stories in abundance. Indeed, ‘the Isabel’ where the latter part of the novel is set fairly bulges at the seams with stories of characters past and present.
While exactly the kind of unremarkable rural area that a visitor might pass through without a second glance, what McDonald makes visible is the layer upon layer of living history that all such places contain, and for which he clearly has great affection. Even with a couple of pages to go the stories keep coming, the characters continue to sing the song of themselves, albeit with an increasing desperation. Their bodies are old and broken but their spirits are keen, such that when Colts returns to his mother’s grave to finally make his peace, we are aware that this ending is merely provisional, sensing that these characters and their superseded lives, much like Martin Frobisher in Meehan’s *Below the Styx*, are similarly pleading to survive in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the inscribed memory of our culture, our timeless fictional present.

**Notes**


**Fiction received 2010–2011**

*Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.*


Money Street

Peter Bibby

It is winter and the leaves have turned
But not fallen from the tall Plane trees
For they must wait for something more than cold
To bring their bronze and golden glory down:
The gusting winds of Autumn did not come,
The nests are dry for there has been no rain
To weight the canopies with sodden freight
And send them tumbling in a slow cascade
From weakened stems, a dry year’s mortgage deeds
Discharged for passing feet and tyres to trash.
Like some assembled crowd in puzzlement
Behind a barrier, the brown ghost cloud of leaves
Murmurs over the street of many changes,
What’s the project holdup? Where’s the rain?
Bower Birds
[for Jane Hammond]

Mark O’Flynn

In the autumn-bones of cankered crab-apples
beyond the cold constraints of windows
they sit. A gang of satin bower-birds whirring
their ratchets, as the slick, oily male
parades his midnight gloss. All the blue pegs
have vanished from the line and the blue garrottes
about the necks of discarded milk containers;
all gone to serve a powerful vanity,
for he must be the best blue stud around
judging by the half-a-dozen olive
green females compiling his harem. Unless
they are the juvenile males making up the gang
and he their mentor, a tyrant of seduction.
Let’s face it, you are no ornithologist.
The bower itself cannot be found
even though you’ve searched the gully
leaving little blue bits and pieces
about the place like talismans;
such charity, such easy altruism.
Pleased are you when such offerings disappear,
knowing the persuasive power of blue to delude
and allure. You see the birds from the windows
and wonder why you are so greatly favoured
to have them inhabiting this tiny corner of your world.
The black beads of their faeces hang
on the washing like caviar; their trill
a Geiger counter’s chuckling.

Why?
for beneath the apple tree lies
the children’s empty wading pool,
obsolete now, blue as a new bruise,
the pluvial music tapping on plastic.
A carved shell of immaculate beauty
like the Fatima sun dancing in the sky.
All the females aloft on knuckled
branches where the only leaves left
betray the topographic maps of their veins.
The pool too full of rain and rotting leaves.
The male flings them violently about,
but it’s beyond him to lift this giant
blue symbol of his prowess, this whopper,
and wing it back to the boudoir. So, ever
alert, he brings his entourage here
where they perch in awe, as miners
at gold.
You might be tempted to anthropomorphize,
(to endow their purring amazement
with some philanderer’s randy strut.
After all it’s not how big one’s big blue
wading pool is).
But you don’t. Instead you offer blue
trinkets, (you brothel keeper you), raw
design for the bower’s frail architecture.
Perth Poinsettia
*Euphorbia pulcherrima*

Helen Hagemann

I count seven florets in the centre
of each leaf which would not be visible
except for the open spread of red
that could catapult them like the season’s
pop of Bon Bons. The poinsettias
are fireworks to the eye, an explosion
on New Year’s eve, the first red twirl
of a Catherine wheel. It’s Christmas
in a backyard thirty years ago,
the red combustion of our lives
*with none of the prescience of
oncoming dreams.* No matter.
The future means change. The house
in the evening held only
by the wind’s disturbance.
A bitterness inside, while outside
the poinsettia is a ruby star.
Each flower driven upward
in its small nature. Perhaps, this is all it can
do before winter’s change, to sway there,
a Frida Kahlo *objet d’art,*
vibrant and dazzling
in the moon’s eclectic shine.
There had been a cool change after five days of heat, and I took Paul into the front yard to let him play in the fresh air. He saw something odd, and pointed to a glitter in the gutter. He pulled at my hand and we went over to look. It was a trickle of water that ran all the way down the street. Paul looked at me with wide eyes.

The southerly breeze lifted my hair off my still-sweaty neck, but it was weak. It would barely penetrate the house if we opened up the windows and doors. I remembered the cool changes of my childhood: dramatic affairs, with charcoal clouds, writhing trees and the wind saturated with the smell of rain. My brothers and I would run out into the downpour as the clouds finally burst with, it seemed, as much relief as we felt. Thunder accompanied it, and the whole world was changed.

I looked up at the blank flat sky. Paul poked the water with a stick. Then he put his hand in the water and made a handprint with it on the hot concrete, and squatted there watching it disappear as piece by piece it dried away.

My son has never seen rain.
I thought no more of the water until the next day. When Paul and I went out the front door, he ran straight to the gutter and stamped in it, so that water splashed up his legs, and he laughed.

I took his hand and we walked up the street to find the source. We walked six blocks and could see no sign, just the same trickle running down the gutter, slightly wider than yesterday. But Paul was hungry, so we turned back.

Paul talked about the water that night until he went to sleep, and the next day he ran out to find the trickle had become a small, gently flowing stream. He stood in it up to his knees. It eddied around the tyres of parked cars. It was clear water except for the leaves and sticks it had picked up in the gutter. I put my hands into it, for the novelty. It was cool and—I touched my finger to my tongue—fresh.

We lingered on the nature strip next to the stream all day, and by evening there were a couple of dozen people gathered along the street looking at it. A few paper boats sailed down it, launched by children upstream. I helped Paul thread together his own two leaves and a twig to make a sailboat. It capsized immediately, but carried on out of sight.

The next day the stream shallowly covered half the tarmac. A few groups spread picnics on the dusty nature strip by it. Older children and teenagers leapt into it to splash around, but by afternoon they were forced to get out as the stream thickened, and started to carry objects—wooden planks, garden chairs, plant pots. No-one could tell where they were coming from. The shouting and laughter died down and the crowds thinned; the residents of the street went back into their houses and closed their front doors.

The next day there were other streams on other streets, and ours now covered the entire road and lapped against the footpath. Cars that were still parked there had their engines and half their doors underwater.

Some of our neighbours shut up their houses and buried themselves indoors; others filled trolleys and wheelbarrows with
their possessions and made an escape on foot. Paul and I watched from our front step without talking. From time to time I went inside and moved things around—gathering underwear and photo albums, moving things to higher shelves—but without any clear plan in mind. I kept expecting that, at any moment, someone from the police or the government would come and tell us what to do, but no-one came. So we stayed on the front step and waited.

We were still there when we started to see stranger things being washed down the river. There was a dollhouse, sitting atop the river like a houseboat. Next, a Persian carpet and a whole school of books. A reef of brightly coloured sari silk. The objects became more and more extraordinary, and then came the animals: a drowned sheep, the carcass of a peacock, a live monkey clinging to a floating tree branch. Paul started to wail, and I took him inside.

I turned on the TV, expecting universal coverage of this and perhaps other calamities, but instead, and to Paul’s great relief, I found cartoons. I left him in front of them and went to the front window to watch.

There were no sounds now except the rushing of the water. No traffic moved on any streets nearby; the trams and the trains had stopped running. The water lapped through our front fence now, pushing the soil out of my barren flower beds. Three cats jumped the fence from next door, ran across the yard, and disappeared over the next fence. It was too late to escape, or do anything but wait for help, so I lay down on my bed and listened to the water running.

It had not rained for four years. The water in the river outside did not come from the sky.

I woke with Paul scrambling onto the bed, diving onto my shoulder. I could feel him trembling. It was evening now, and the water had reached the house. The entire garden was submerged, and I could only see the spear-tops of our picket fence. I couldn’t see a single person anywhere, though for all I knew they were still shut up in their houses, like us. But, I thought, perhaps they had escaped to somewhere safe.
I slowly walked back to the living room. It was news time, though I doubted there would be any signal. I switched on the TV and there was a picture: on every channel, still cartoons.

We sat on the couch together, and Paul snuggled in against my side. I could see that he was ok if I was ok. As long as I was not worried, he was content to sit with me and watch a cross-dressing bunny dupe a duck. Cartoon logic—wherein a cat puts his face through a bird’s drawing, and the bird rubs out his features with an eraser—that evening, had a comforting rightness to it. Both of us, eventually, were stunned into sleep.

At first it was a pleasant sensation: the house seemed to move with the rhythm of sleep. Then there was a great thump and shudder, and we were jolted physically so that Paul fell off the couch. I picked him up and held him as light from the window moved across the room.

We went to the window. Paul laughed first, then started to cry, a gasping, open-mouthed cry. It was the position of the sun that undid me: still low in the sky, staring at me through this south-facing window.

The other house, that we had collided with, was already several metres from us, and moving away fast. I thought I could see people standing at its window, though it was perhaps only a reflection of us. I could see several other houses on the water, but far fewer than there should have been in my suburb.

There was no way of telling how deep the water was now—there was no landscape, only the flat water and the houses that perched atop it as easily as seabirds, with utterly un-house-like buoyancy.

I stared for a long time, while Paul sat at my feet, sniffing, and then gradually becoming bored. I forgot he was there.

I saw bits and pieces of the flotsam of our former lives—a floating electricity pole, a children’s slide, some café tables, but there was less of it as the hours passed. The house was definitely moving—carried along by a strong current, but to no apparent end. The river had surely now mixed with the sea. I wondered if there was any land left anywhere.
Finally I left the window and went back to the TV, although of course it no longer worked. The electricity was gone. I walked back to the window, my legs unsteady.

‘I’m hungry,’ Paul’s plaintive voice came from the kitchen doorway. Automatically I went and made him a ham sandwich, smearing a thick layer of his beloved pickle onto the bread with no regard for where the next jar of pickle might come from. This crossed my mind as I squished the top layer of bread down and cut the sandwich diagonally. Then I remembered that we had an unopened jar in the pantry, and I was relieved.

Paul was sitting on the floor in the lounge room looking at a book. I noticed that he had thrown up in a corner. I put the plate with his sandwich in front of him and lay down on the carpet, curling myself around him like a serpent.

We slept more, and woke when the light was going. Both of us moved sluggishly, pale and queasy from the sensation of our house moving under us. But we each ate half of the sandwich that had sat on the floor while we slept.

I stood and began to move towards the front of the house, then stopped. Something else was different. It was a smell. I couldn’t identify it, though it was familiar.

I called Paul to me and we stood together at the closed front door. I looked at him, and his returning look told me we had nothing left to lose.

So I opened the door. The sea—that was all you could call it—was dead calm, and we no longer seemed to be moving. Our front steps were still there, and the water only came halfway up them; it would not enter the house. But ours was the only house in sight. Everything else had drifted far away from us.

Suddenly I realised that the light was dim not only because it was evening. The sky was grey. Clouds, heavy and gravid, clung to the underside of it, seeming so low, so close. And I realised what the strange and familiar smell was.

I watched Paul’s face as he watched the drops fall on the water. And then there was a sound, like horses galloping across the sky.
Ever since their publication Murray Bail’s first books, Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories (1975) and Homesickness (1980), have posed major interpretative problems and defied neat classification. Readers immediately recognised that these works marked a radical break with the Australian realist tradition, and were soon enrolling the author among the ranks of postmodernist experimenters, noting the reliance of his work on the fragment, innovative narrative strategies and the absurd.1 Bail also acknowledged these affinities, and professed an interest in writers such as Tournier, Roussel, Borges, Marquez, Calvino, Grass and Bernhard, as well as Kafka and Patrick White, but this left many questions concerning his approach and subject matter still unanswered.

A different, largely unexplored area of potential influence was his obvious preoccupation with the visual arts, especially painting. The seriousness of this interest is attested to by him having served on the council of the National Gallery of Australia from 1976 to 1981, and by specialist publications on such resolutely independent, antipodean modernists as Ian Fairweather, Colin McCahon and Sidney Nolan. Commentators, uncertain of the relationship between these two

‘Matisse is jammed with confidence’: Painting and creative inspiration in the early writings of Murray Bail

Michael Ackland
sources of inspiration, have treated them as distinct entities, a tendency epitomised by the most recent survey of Bail’s output. Repeatedly it emphasises his ‘postmodernist narrative techniques’, coupled with satire, and treats art as an enriching addendum:

Bail’s experience as an art critic for the Australian National Gallery in Canberra has enabled him to enrich his postmodern narratives by the visual imagery and intertextual allusions to painting through which he builds up his postmodern vision of the world. As the title of his first collection...implies, he incorporates visual imagery in his narratives. (Kušnír 348)

As evidence, ‘The Drover’s Wife’ is adduced—a work that turns on its speaker’s self-revelatory response to an iconic canvas by Russell Drysdale. In narrative terms, however, this is one of the least experimental of Bail’s early stories, and so the adduced ‘intertextuality’, like other commentary, leaves unexplored putatively deeper links between his own creative project and his fascination with painting—evident in diverse references which pepper his early fiction, as well as in his decision to work concurrently on Homesickness and a monograph on the painter, Ian Fairweather. To Bail these were arguably not discrete but cognate tasks, for as he confessed: ‘Certain aspects of modern art have altered my thinking, my ways of seeing, and so my writing efforts’ (L45).2 How he arrived at this position, and what it might actually have meant for his work, is the subject of the following paper.

Bail’s engagement with art predates his literary efforts, and was intense as well as unusually thorough. His seminal encounter with painting came allegedly when, as a teenager in Adelaide, he stood spellbound before Drysdale’s Woman in a Landscape—‘I’ll never forget it’ (C42). But whereas a similarly defining moment in ‘The Drover’s Wife’ renders the viewer self-obsessed and focused on domestic events, in Bail’s case it helped trigger an abiding concern with art, as well as attendance at art school. How wide-ranging,
indeed encyclopaedic, this interest became is attested to in extracts from his London diaries of 1970-74, first published as Longhand: A Writer’s Notebook (1989). In this slim volume, presumably selected and edited to show an embryonic authorial mind at work, the attention and thought devoted to the visual arts are particularly striking. Though Flaubert, Proust and Tournier, as well as Goethe and Thomas Mann, rate important entries, it is not just the gallery-goer but the diarist’s pen that engages with a seemingly endless list of painters, from the Italian High Renaissance through to the radically experimental movements of the twentieth century:

Picasso’s Weeping Woman (Tate): an accusation against the disintegrating face. And vice versa. So the viewer keeps going backwards and forwards.

The silence and serenity offered by Rothko and Nicholson only a few paces away is not all that reassuring. (L26).³

Though reportedly ‘ogling art’ (L26) to the point of making a spectacle of himself, Bail’s is a highly informed, reflective response from a man who had adopted painterly ways of viewing everyday life. He is equally alert to the emotionally disturbing undertow of Rothko’s planes of primary colour, or the visual algebra of analytical Cubism, which features also in his fiction. Comments on early modernist masters, such as Cézanne, van Gogh and Matisse, are prominent as well, and reveal a broad acquaintance with their correspondence, notebooks and revolutionary programs. And their ways of seeing apparently were colouring his own, for, quoting Panofsky, he has to warn himself against regarding humans as ‘nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes, which constitute my world of vision’ (L8). Other entries show how inter-related he found the problems posed by painting and writing. A door slammed in his face, for instance, triggered an illusory epiphany, as well as evidence of what he was seeking: ‘I am confronted with the grain and texture
of wood, and bits of paint, a few inches away’ (L5). For a moment this seemed an encounter with the authentic, with ‘what is “real”’, and the threshold to a ‘new meaning of art—it should possess such a compelling force’ (L5). Both the quest for new artistic meaning and its ‘compelling’ embodiment would exert a strong influence on his short fiction.

In brief, Bail as a writer would be concerned not merely with ‘incorporat[ing] visual imagery in his narratives’, in the sense of describing or alluding to a particular canvas, but arguably with tackling similar problems to those confronted by artists. They could afford either practical lessons in ways of depicting subjects of common interest, as when he acknowledged that studying perspective in Australian landscape art, and ‘their way...of painting objects within space, made me write things more visually’ (C42), or more critically they could be a dynamic source of inspiration, suggesting new angles of vision and firing his creative imagination: ‘Strolling from one picture to another in art galleries, even commercial ones, I am assailed by literary ideas which beg to be resolved’ (L47).

The most crucial intersection between painting and Bail’s early fiction concerns the seminal aesthetic challenge of the twentieth century. Often referred to as a crisis of representation, it arose from the progressive problematising of conventional notions of normative, objective reality. Developments in photography throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century had both challenged artists’ time-honoured raison d’être of accurate representation, and provided them with an opportunity to seek new subjects, approaches and media. Suprematism, Fauvism, Futurism and Cubism, as well as a multitude of other movements and manifestos, signalled a liberation that was well underway by the outbreak of the First World War. As the century unfolded this artistic revolution accelerated until, by the time Bail was composing his stories, it could be stated as ‘self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist’ (Adorno1). Art, as Adorno’s synopsis continued, had replaced deterministic empiricism
with infinite possibilities; however, artists still needed to stress their own and their work’s autonomy—as Bail does, for example, in ‘A B C etc’ with repeated reminders of the story’s status as artefact (‘These marks on paper, and so on’ [183]). Modern art had become unapologetically intent on presenting the individual artist’s response to reality, much as it had moved from smooth, flawless paintings, where any trace of a brush-stroke was effaced, to avant-garde works that underscored their own materiality, whether through clotted, dripping paint or a boldly slashed canvas.

Bail, having immersed himself in the major modernists and their doctrines, had comprehensive knowledge of these developments, and railed about their short-sighted reception in Australia.4 ‘There just aren’t any cubist paintings in Australia. Not one’, he noted bitterly. ‘So we’ve been deprived of the third great modern experience’ (D276). Locally ‘dun-coloured…realism’, and its artistic equivalent in the eucalyptus-dominated landscapes of Hans Heysen or Albert Namatjira, still enjoyed popular acclaim in Bail’s youth.5 Overseas, however, he was able to see art works that embodied the modernist revolution: ‘The Red Interior of Matisse is jammed with confidence’ (LA6). Though not acknowledged but presumably appreciated, the canvas marks a high-point in the shift of painting away from objectively rendered matter to its subjective observation and formulation, for this ‘interior’ is painted entirely in vibrant red and filled with Henri Matisse’s earlier works. Artistic perception and its individual evolution provide a sufficient and all-important subject, which the painter boldly espouses (‘jammed with confidence’), raising cognate issues for a would-be writer, and affording arguably encouragement to embrace audacity and invention in his own work. Further support for adversarial, iconoclastic intentions was sought among artistic precursors, as his notebook reveals. The maxim ‘the practice of art is antichrist’ is attributed to William Blake (L107); to the painter, Francis Bacon, the dictum that ‘the image must be twisted if it is to make a renewed assault on the nervous system’ (L80). According to Bacon, who ‘manages to say things…that are beyond most writers
on art’ (UP), the need to defamiliarise reality boldly and to launch a visceral assault on audience complacency constituted ‘the peculiar difficulty of art today’ (L80), and is one obviously embraced in Bail’s early fiction.

*Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975) marked a stark break with ‘dun-coloured…realism’, in favour of interrogating how reality is known and presented. Rather than focusing on psychological development, in the manner of Flaubert, the great Russian novelists or White—authors whose example he has praised—Bail is intent on how individuals perceive and react to the world during a revelatory incident, like the narrator of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ or the rabbit-trapper in ‘The Silence’, who finds intolerable the fortnightly intrusion of a work-mate on his outback solitude. More extremely, other stories are predominantly ‘propositional’, in the sense of ‘proceeding to answer a certain problem or to explore one’ (D265). Also realists rarely foreground the authorial contrivances that foster an impression of verisimilitude and lend coherence to their account, whereas Bail, aligning himself with a modernist aesthetic, repeatedly disrupts his audience’s willing suspension of disbelief by underscoring the status of his tales as artefacts, as in his often anthologised story ‘A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z.’ Its very title draws attention not to a potential story-line but to the inert building blocks of fiction, and to the fact that meaning depends on their arbitrary or, more usually, manipulated conjunction—points underscored from the outset:

> I select from these letters, pressing my fingers down. The letter (or an image of it) appears on the sheet of paper. It signifies little or nothing, I have to add more. Other letters are placed alongside until a ‘word’ is formed. And it is not always the word WORD.

> The word matches either my memory of its appearance, or a picture of the object the word denotes. TREE: I see the shape of a tree at mid-distance, and green.

> I am writing a story.

> Here, the trouble begins. (173)
The opening offers a series of affronts to the realist tradition and its informing empirical assumptions. These presuppose an objectively knowable reality, language commensurate to its depiction, and usually a one-to-one relationship between signifier and the object or property signified. The ‘trouble’, mentioned intriguingly above, is identified first with William James’ proposition that ‘the word “dog”…does not bite’, then with the evocation of ‘philosophers other than myself [who] have dismissed the inadequacy of words’ (174). For Bail’s speaker, words are inherently neutral, but our understanding of them is highly personal. It is likely to invoke a visual image that reflects the reader’s subjective conception and cumulative experiences, rather than any unalterable universal, whether the signifier be ‘tree’, or the starting-point here, ‘a weeping woman’. Thus, instead of being a conventional short story dealing with an unhappy protagonist, Bail’s fiction becomes multi-layered, grappling with the roles of language, writing and subjective perception, as well as providing an inquiry into what produced the woman’s condition.

The interconnectedness of the written and pictorial realms, evoked here, and its potentially transgressive implications are elaborated on through the main protagonists. Kathy, a librarian in the British embassy in Karachi, and her eventual lover, the Pakistani Syed Masood (‘Perhaps he is our best painter [but]…I have my doubts’ [176]), are linked respectively with books and art and, importantly, with unconventionality. From the outset she is not a stereotypically staid and narrow custodian of book-lore, adverse to outside experience. Rather she is willing to embrace other ways of knowing and expressing reality, witnessed in her unusual decision to learn the local tongue, Urdu, and her empathy with its speakers (174). Because of this openness to foreign influence her home soon becomes ‘a sort of salon’ (175), a word redolent with the French avant-garde, and she remains receptive to further radicalisation through a contemporary painter. For both protagonists traditional values, and their signifiers, have become unstable. ‘When Kathy thought of London she often saw “London”—the six letters arranged in recognizable order. Then parts
of an endless construction appeared, much of it badly blurred’ (175). With an effort she can recall other details, some of them ‘strangely dead’, while half-conscious awareness of the dependence of this reality on her subjective perceptions encourages the feeling that ‘it [London] existed only when she was there’ (175). To her Karachi ‘stands for something else’ (175)—an open-ended formulation rich in radical possibilities.

Masood represents the antithesis to bourgeois valuations of life or art, and dramatises the modernist challenge through his iconoclastic attitudes and actions. On one occasion he wilfully destroys one of his own prized canvases, on another he states: ‘You can spell my name four different ways’ (179). Then, having mockingly demanded she look up a word, which to them has distinctly personal significance, ‘in one of your English dictionaries’, he challenges her to think of him as ‘an exclamation mark! It amounts to the same thing. I would see you, I think, as a colour. Yes, I think more than likely pink, or something soft like yellow’ (179). Englishness, and its clear, authoritative definitions, which are embodied by the approved lifestyles of embassy staff or standard reference works, are played off against a view of reality as constituted by variable, interchangeable and intensely personal codes. Flagrant breeches of the imperial or master code eventually cost Kathy her job, with her trajectory affording a potential parable of the perils for a literary sensibility of being affected/infected by modern art. She is forced to return to London which, like its governing values, has never ceased to exist or exercise a very real sway. There, in the final scene, she is moved to tears by the unexpected receipt of Masood’s self-portrait in the mail. To the end, the story affirms multiple ways of knowing and exerting influence on the world, with officialdom serving as a surrogate for those stable, commonsense traditions against which Bail has repeatedly railed in interviews. Their shortcomings are shown to include a limited response to emotional needs and complexities, as well as a failure to encourage what is most spontaneous and inventive in existence, like art itself.
Further inklings of the kind of ‘literary ideas’ which presumably had ‘assailed’ Bail in London galleries, and ‘beg[ged] to be resolved’ (L47), emerge in ‘Heubler’. This character is clearly based on the American Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (1924–1997). His excellent eye was first revealed spotting, from the air, camouflaged enemy positions during the Pacific War—and camouflage is a Bail leitmotif—while post-war he made headlines by announcing an intention identical to his fictional counterpart: to ‘photographically document…the existence of everyone alive’ (3). Though seemingly unrelated, both ‘Heubler’ and ‘A B C etc’ play on modern dilemmas of representation and, as the first and last stories, arguably draw attention to kindred material in the collection.

 Appropriately ‘Heubler’ focuses on the form of reproduction, photography, which accelerated the crisis of representation, and underscores the new medium’s hubris and limitations. This is done respectively through Heubler’s undertaking and by depicting characteristics, or ‘types’, that would escape a camera’s purview, accompanied by the provocative comment: ‘I offer them to Heubler, helping him, one artist to another, whether he likes it or not’ (4). Two centuries earlier William Blake’s narrator, at the end of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, had promised readers his ‘Bible of Hell: which the world shall have whether they will or no.’ The parallel is apposite, for both speakers are committed to a radical enterprise that involves subverting conventions and anticipated responses. Blake’s composition is profoundly antinomian, reading black where the majority see only white and embracing, through the Voice of the Devil, antithetical codes that privilege energy over constraint, imagination over reason, and infinite over finite potential—an evaluation dear to the Australian writer, who had noted: ‘The practice of art is antichrist’ (L107). Bail’s aims, though cast in a less tendentious and morally confronting key, are similar, inverting straightforward, univocal meaning in favour of inventive, ludic readings—thereby setting in train a project that culminates in the narrative challenges posed by ‘A B C etc’.
The keynotes of these twenty-three ‘portraits’ are reversal of expectations and a privileging of diverse, rather than one, form of presentation and narration. For instance, ‘1. At least one person who always has to have the last word’ turns out to be a character who, to overcome fear of his own mortality, is determined to contribute the last entry to the Oxford English Dictionary. First he produces coinages, such as zynopic or zythm (5); next he contrives to have them appear in print, so that they may qualify for inclusion in this standard compendium of the English language. Even the empirical gathering of data is open to manipulation; subjectivity apparently will not be denied. The next portrait, ‘2. At least one person who would rather be almost anyone else’, depicts an architect, doomed to minor commissions by the distrust he awakens in clients. He cannot bear his own characteristics when reflected back to him in the face of his son. Reproduction and duplication, as this vignette shows, can assume many forms, while the fact that recognition of these family similarities is emphatically subjective, and that the boy’s face is said to function ‘like a camera’ (70), constitute an unsettling commentary on photography and the way viewers respond to its end-products.

These varied ‘portraits’ also blur the supposedly definite categories of fact and fiction. This begins with the transposed vowels in Heubler’s name that signal the appropriation and tweaking of historical detail. Still playing with facts, the next ‘portrait’ is nothing more than a bald summary of personal details: ‘Age: 54/ Date of Birth: September 22, 1920/ Status: married’ (8). But is it any less a portrait and, if so, do reader-viewers expect something more than the merely factual? The data hardly rises above an official questionnaire and is adjudged ‘a bit woolly’, either because of its dubious bearing on the type portrayed or because the bare facts fall short of constituting an adequate portrait (8). Ensuing heterogeneous matter challenges conventional notions of what is permissible in fiction. The title of ‘15’, for instance, breaks off in mid-sentence and is followed by two blank pages, while ‘13’ is set apart by distinctive type-face and the claim: ‘I tore this out of the London Times on June 16, 1973. It
can be reprinted here without changing a word’ (23)—strategies that broaden the range of potential narrative modes, much as the modern artist, no longer limited to oils or water colours, might include collage, words and found objects on his canvas.

Throughout the collection the essentials of Bail’s argument remain unchanged, though the variables by which they are expressed mutate imaginatively. The imbrication of subjectivity and supposed objectivity is underscored, and critical awareness about fiction and its motives is promoted by challenging, multi-layered stories which acknowledge the viewers’ role, whether as artist, main protagonist or audience, in the creation of meaning. Texts at their best ripple with word-plays, resonate with allusions, as the ludic principle trumps definition and grounded knowledge is shown to be wanting.

Repeatedly reality appears elusive or unreproducible, and words mediate limited or subjective perceptions. Efforts to transfix ‘the essential nature of a thing’ (65) are in vain, as Zoellner and the fledgling cartographer in ‘Cul-de-Sac (uncompleted)’ learn. Mere imitation or reproduction, through pantomime and synecdoche, fails lamentably to capture or bring to life an individual in ‘Portrait of Electricity’, while promised panacea, from extraordinarily high-yielding ore to man-made nirvanas, prove equally delusive to their intellectually limited questers. For simple Hector, the ordered view and routine provided to him as a bus-driver seem to bring fulfilling happiness within reach: ‘The distance to Paradise, with the great screen framing all kinds of life, gave him this gentle advice: move, slow down, stop, let them get on, move, see, Paradise. The world was beautiful. It was plainly visible’ (117). Yet reality is shown to be more complex, and exceeds the superimposed frame of reference through collision with a green van. Relatedly, the dentist narrator of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ belongs to a profession which, unlike modern painting, has definitely not turned its back on the referential object, nor abandoned belief in knowable, ‘plainly visible’ reality. Nevertheless, this proves no impediment to his highly subjective reading of Drysdale’s canvas. Also, although he may arraign the artist for ‘altering the truth for
the sake of a pretty picture, or “composition”’ (60), he himself has been guilty of far greater omissions, oversights and manipulation of detail or perspective in his private life—which ultimately cost him his wife. Again an empirical mind-set is found wanting with regard to art and the vital, emotional existence that sustains it.

*Homesickness* (1980) provides much additional evidence of Bail’s inspirational encounter with the heritage of artistic modernism. People, objects and settings yield up at times a modernist impression of shapes and colours: ‘The surface [of the pool] tilted with the shifting dining room fixtures and candles, fluid lights, and the board floated, an interesting twisted rectangle’ (*H*22). Pointed allusions to its high-points abound, whether in references to such early masters of abstraction as Malevich and Mondrian, or to seminal schools from the Bauhaus to Abstract Expressionism and Conceptualism. These are evoked respectively through the building housing the pygmy museum, Hofmann’s passion for stripe paintings (associated with the unnamed Jasper Johns), and the nose of an Englishman presented as a replica of Ayres Rock: ‘Performance and conceptual artists tried to claim Russell...three of the world’s great museums had all offered him prestigious One Man Shows’ (329).

Covertly specific scenes ripple with riffs on the modernist legacy. The first collection visited, for example, makes sense not as a museum of handicraft (its alleged subject), but as an assemblage of ready-mades: ‘On a pedestal waist-high for easy viewing stood a soda-water syphon…it possessed a compelling strangeness under a bright light in a museum’ (29). Though to Mrs Cathcart such ‘*objets trouvés*’ merely evoke the junk in her garage, Bail liberally scatters among them items famously elevated to the status of art by founders of the genre, from an umbrella, bound to an early Singer sewing machine by ‘its jabbing needle’, to ‘a porcelain urinal’, whose presence is signalled by ‘what seemed to be the hiss of a small fountain’ (31). The latter, playfully entitled ‘The Fountain’ and attributed to R. Mutt, was the brain-child of Marcel Duchamp, while the entangled duo enacts Lautréamont’s celebrated image of ‘the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and
Here is incontrovertible evidence of how the significance of givens varies according to the experience brought to them by individual beholders, while Bail’s reprise of these objects reissues their original challenge to the established canons of art and consensual values.

In scene after scene, knowledge and perception are shown to be fragmentary and coloured by individual experience. London, for example, is described as the ‘capital city of facts’ (75). Here if anywhere should be found a solidly grounded reality, as well as the means of dispelling nagging possibilities and maybes. ‘Let us stick to the facts’ (65), the narrator enjoins, as if they represented a tangible certainty, and focuses accordingly on such reputable forms of knowing the past or recording actuality as newspapers and museums. Yet reality, as the narrative stresses, is not a simple given; rather it presents itself as a text to be interpreted (‘Messages were everywhere’ [65]) by intensely subjective viewers liable to error (‘a foot occasionally slipped into the gutter, tilting their vision’ [67]). In addition, no two persons’ realities are tailored alike, nor the opinions of any individual immune from joining the ‘grey sludge’ of variegated ‘shades of opinion and history’ (68). Typically their knowledge depends on the ‘vaguely remembered or briefly seen’ (198), as well as on a ‘certain angle of vision’ (199). It has no intrinsic claim to validity, nor does it encompass actuality, while paradoxically what seems solid is frequently undermined by the very perceptions and conjectures that sustain it, or in a striking physical analogue of this condition, by the operations, in the form of myriad tunnels and excavations under London, which honeycomb its very foundations (358–59).

Hence by the novel’s end Bail’s protagonists are no closer to wisdom and self-knowledge, as individuals or as a group, than at the outset. Then dazed and disoriented, they deplaned among ‘fragments, static and commonplace…Soon it would become a slowly moving fresco, clarifying, but with certain parts vague or completely missing; always be missing’ (2). In the final scene they, the creators of coherent meaning, are identified with the surrounding, fleeting impressions, in
a brightly-lit museum that exhibits only their shadows and reflections on its white walls. This is the nadir of so-called objective knowledge but the beginning of modern art, epitomised by an insight attributed in ‘Cul-de-Sac (uncompleted)’ to ‘the great Giorgio de Chirico’: ‘There are many more enigmas in the shadow of a man who walks in the sun than all the religions of the past, present and future’ (150).

A further dimension of this interweaving of Bail’s passion for fiction and modern art was played out by his working, in tandem with Homesickness, on a substantial study of Ian Fairweather. This was an intriguing choice—and a revelatory conjunction. Why burden himself with additional labour when his first novel was proving so demanding? Why single out a painter of English extraction and international outlook, when Australia was preoccupied with its landscape artists, or the radical figurative and representational innovations of painters such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker? Unlike these loosely associated, Melbourne-based individualists, Fairweather was a pronounced loner, known for subtle, at times almost monochrome abstractions, infused with the lessons of Cubism. According to Bail, on returning to Australia he had ‘thought that given the renaissance in art publishing, there was bound to be a full treatment of Fairweather. To my dismay there was nothing’ (D268). It was long overdue. Fairweather ‘was the great artist, a painter’s painter—ask the painters’, as the novelist obviously had. Making good this shortfall enabled him to render homage where it was manifestly due, and to explore a life that ‘morbidly fascinated’ him (D268). Bail also forestalled the charge of having foolishly divided his own creative energies by presenting his biographical efforts as virtual leisure-time activities. Week days were set aside for the hard labour of composing fiction; evenings and weekends allowed him limited opportunities to research a non-fictional monograph. Gradually ‘a mountain of material’ was accumulated. Bringing it to paper took five months. ‘It wrote itself, it was like a holiday’ (C41).

The Fairweather project, however, was complementary in unspecified ways: namely in focusing Bail’s thoughts on seminal
issues of modern art, refracted in his novel, and on what a dedicated, creative career might entail. Artistic individuality, as he knew well, ‘is not spontaneous. It is a search’ (*IF*118) often carried out in solitude and Spartan conditions. It is not achieved through imitation or, like much Sydney abstract art, by following the latest fad, but must ‘come from within’ (*IF*160). Fairweather, determined to discover and unfold what was truly distinctive in his own talent, chose the modernist trajectory, exemplified by Cézanne, of overcoming conventional academic training through the reclusive cultivation of his craft and genius—with Bribie Island becoming Fairweather’s version of the master’s Aix-en-Provence. Bail himself, alert to the high seriousness of his calling, exercised a similarly rigorous discipline, producing at best 200 words a day, but sought comparable isolation and creative focus in the anonymity of major cities: first in a below-street-level dwelling in London, then in a bare, white-washed retreat in Balmain. And he, no less than the painter he was writing about, subscribed to a radical tenet of modernism, encapsulated by ‘Giacometti’s proposition that reality is unsharable’ (*IF*213), that is, composed of perceptions unique to each individual, which become a hallmark of that person’s art.

Importantly, too, the Fairweather monograph underscores how the distinctive vision of *Homesickness* has at least as many similarities with vanguard modernism as with any later movement. Once again individual perception and its consequences are foregrounded. Bail’s Fairweather, from early on, had ‘the sure knowledge that I am not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect the scene had on me’ in a ‘picture that conveyed my thoughts’ (*IF*15). Repeatedly Fairweather’s subject is identified as the ‘regrouping of shapes and feelings’ (*IF*204), while Bail’s account of a key canvas could serve as a description of the conclusion of *Homesickness*: ‘Fragments of armpits, buttocks, breasts, ankle and elbow advance/retract: now you see me: now you don’t’ (*IF*128). Not *prime facie* proof of nihilism, such a scene may well project subjective perception or point to ‘the eternal mystery of the
world’ and, in the case of Fairweather, hint at ‘its comprehensibility’ (IF128). Congruence is evident also in their responses to creative issues. Fairweather’s paintings are read, by the self-professed novelist of ideas, as ‘visual equivalents which present ideas in a new and original way, often quite ravishing in its unity and clarity’ (IF206). To the painter are attributed the thoughts: ‘there was nothing new here (Fairweather’s constant phrase)’, and ‘our ways of seeing are infinitely more complicated’ (IF114)—which recall Bail’s quest for a ‘new meaning of art’ (L5) and forms of expression commensurate to ‘the complexity of the world’ (S). Here was a life-story that clamoured to be told because it intersected with the painterly sources of his own writing, and afforded numerous affirmative analogies.

The complex legacy of artistic modernism, then, not only provided Bail with enriching, intertextual allusions, but it also helped shape his earlier depiction of how individuals interact with the world. Indeed, by the completion of Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories he had provided a fictional response to many of the key dilemmas that had preoccupied artists throughout the century, as well as presumably to those art-inspired literary ideas which, during his London sojourn, had ‘beg to be resolved’. The impact of modernism is discernible, too, in his paradigm for achieving artistic excellence, and in the lives of the early antipodean modernists he chose to explore in detail. Far removed from the hapless, ineffectual protagonists of his short fiction, Bail’s creative heroes are great and idiosyncratic loners, from White to Magritte, from Fairweather to McCahon, who remained true to their vision of art at whatever the cost. Small wonder, then, that when he came to re-organise and reprioritise his library, the accompanying culling reflected his mature convictions, as well as the completion of his earlier apprenticeship. He threw out ‘whole shelves of dry Australian novels, story collections, stolid histories and biographies’, having thoroughly passed beyond such ‘dun-coloured’ writing. Less predictably, he also divested himself of ‘hundreds of art books’ (UL). The separation from these ‘accidents’ of modern art was reportedly ‘painless’, presumably because he had so thoroughly internalised
its history and lessons, together with its uncompromising artistic credo, which was encapsulated for him by Delacroix’s claim that ‘real superiority…admits no eccentricity’—an adage which his fiction and non-fiction, from the outset, insistently confirmed (N266).

Notes

1 This was a frequent verdict of reviewers, confirmed by such ground-breaking studies as Daniel 193–217, and Gelder 14–19, 115–16, although Bruce Bennett argues that Bail’s short fiction prefigures a local ‘postmodernist turn’, completed by a later generation of such writers as David Brooks and Gail Jones (224).

2 References to interviews and occasional commentary on his own work are identified by the following abbreviations: C: Chisholm, ‘The blue biro world of Murray Bail’; CS: ‘Continental Shift’; D: Davidson, ‘Interview with Murray Bail’; L: Lysenko, ‘Portrait of Murray Bail: An Interview’; S: Sayers, ‘A search for something else’; UL: ‘Unpacking a Library’.

3 L indicates a page reference to Longhand; N to its sequel Notebooks; IF to Ian Fairweather. Other parenthetical page references are to Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories and Homesickness.

4 See Ackland 29–82; Haese; and Stephen 98–148.

5 The quoted phrase was made famous by Patrick White in ‘The Prodigal Son’ (1958), and its recurrence in Bail’s early writing signals an affinity with White’s program, while Bail’s own views on the local art scene are refracted in an early story: ‘Arr, Australian art…They’re all slaving away in a style everyone else dropped thirty years ago. It’s all representational stuff…There must be a figure in it or a bloody gum tree. Still, in 1970! Jesus!’ (1972 18).

6 ‘Comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d’une machine à coudre et d’un parapluie’, from ‘Les Chants de Maldoror’ (Walzer 24–25). The early sewing machine featured in other iconoclastic art, most famously perhaps when, shrouded with a blanket, it was baptised by Man Ray ‘The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse’, which was Lautréamont’s given name, in homage to his influence on Surrealism.

Works Cited


Last Time I Saw You Your Hair Was Long

Renee Pettitt-Schipp

I don’t know how it should work,
driving down the South West highway, thinking your 
bundle of flesh and bones is in cold storage somewhere 
while we race back through the heat to help make 
arrangements.

I think of the thin pile of you 
stacked against beige pillows and us trying to 
rearrange you 
prop you on your spine in front of your 
white cut sandwiches, crusts off, 
blinking as you ate them slowly like a tired child.

Your hair, always perfectly set 
(audience or no) 
its unruly rebellion now out of reach kept 
bothering you. 
Tenderly I stroked it into a bun 
and I think you were glad though 
you thought I was my mother, ‘Jan’ you said 
and I guessed she probably was thirty five 
the last time you saw her.
Renee Pettitt-Schipp

Christmas and we left you
alone in that cubicle
worrying about the spider
behind the light.
Christmas and we left you
inserted between pastel screens
we three believing we had
little choice.

At the door we forgot the code to
get out and laughed saying
‘imagine we could not leave’ and then
were silent.
47 degrees
Re: Black Saturday

Maria Takolander

Like succulents and the nocturnal,
my newborn and I keep secrets from the sun.

*

He consents to being lulled by the air conditioner
in the absence of my heart and lungs.

*

While we sleep, cots are x-rayed into molten,
and radiance seals the eyes of women and men.

*

Black-out. Torchlight in my child’s room
catches his silent, cloth-bound watching.

*

The world, at dawn, is a tray for yesterday’s cigarettes,
unattended for my infant and his lush bawling.
During the weekend, Uncle Len,
Lounging before the fire, would rouse
Himself enough to listen to
The races, urging to come first
The horse he’d had a flutter on.

Or else he might shift his behind
Grown heavy from three decades with
The Hydro as a desk-bound clerk,
And go with thermos, thick warm rug,
Aunt Vivienne and me to watch

The footy from the comfort of
The members’ stand his boss could get
Him tickets for. At Sunday lunch
They’d warn me, eighteen years of age
And boarding there, off catholic girls,

Drink, reading books in preference to
A social life, about ‘the perv’
Who lived unmarried with his mum
And cat above the corner shop.
Then studying late, I picked up,

To move it closer still, a switched
On radiator by its bar,
Not so much from absence of mind
As sub-consciously driven to
Shock myself out of their small world.
Decansos (sestina)

Rachael Mead

No beam of light illuminated you,
just a smear of non-descript shadow
pooled where you lay near the road,
a place not special for any reason, just
a stretch of unremarkable ground
under a conifer's fingers laced with dawn.

In that dim patch untouched by dawn,
lying there as if dreaming, you,
on that familiar but not yet known ground,
looked so comfortable on your bed of shadow,
as if about to stretch out of sleep, just
a breath away from shaking off the dew of the road.

But on this ordinary stretch of road,
as bleak reality begins to dawn,
until now just the way to Ashton, just
the valley road until this very moment, because it's you
lying there in the moist shadow
no longer part of me, now part of the ground.

And the world is moving beneath me, the ground,
the geography of this place, the road,
the air, the trees, the light and shadow,
the clattering birds of dawn,
all are shifting now, around you
lifting and sinking into a new topography just
unrecognisable from how it appeared just
one night ago. And life, now rudderless, runs aground
right here where it’s you
lying so still by the road
among crickets fiddling a dirge in the dawn
for you and all that has passed into shadow.

All dims to a palette of shadow
and any faith in the balance of fate to be just
is lost here and now, in the glacial dawn.
This foreign land, this strange new ground
has with tectonic shifts resettled, its core now this road,
my world still spinning on the axis of you.

Bright flowers might be placed on the shadow strewn ground,
just here, or nailed to the conifer by the side of the road
but every day my fresh decansos¹ for you will be the dawn.

¹ Decansos is a Spanish word meaning rest or resting place. The practice of erecting markers called decansos at the site of fatal accidents originated in Mexican folk tradition and is now becoming widespread across the world.
There is a place named Quelcon near Denmark. This name Quelcon is of Noongar origin, and it means to dodge a spear. The same word was the call of the Noongar eagle man who finding his waterhole covered with the lice of his nephew, the crow, had called on his nephew to dodge the spear he was flinging.

From this one word an epic is born, and a story rests waiting to be told. This place name Quelcon rests like a footprint left by its previous owner and yet remains readily translated by those who know the story of this ancient relationship between eagle and crow, and what went wrong between them.

The crow man aims with his sharpened beak, the spear he holds between his black eyes, and his feathers all shiny hide his thoughts and all he watches.

Yet here in suburbia as green Swan transit buses pass me by I often speak with the crow men I meet. For some crows, they readily introduce themselves as such, and warn you they are watching. Others meanwhile tell you they are curlews or frogs but are crows and attempt to conceal their tracks and intentions.
'Well, hello,’ he says. ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time...’ and he watches and waits for you to react. ‘I was only thinking of you and wondering how you were getting on,’ (but you know he’s come looking for a song or some article he can snatch and fly away with).

See an eagle man taught the Kingfisher who taught me and the murder of crows know it and seek me out. And the crow who would steal the meat from your mouth if you let him is brazen in his perfected art of politeness.

‘Oh, you’re looking great, do you remember when...’ he tries to placate you with his pleasantries, but look close and you can see his skinny black scaly crow legs and feet, sticking out from beneath his trousers and shoes.

‘I need that song,’ he tells me. ‘And, if I get it, I will do what I have never done before, I promise I will share my wealth made from the Kingfisher with the Kingfisher’s family of golden swallows.’

And I am inwardly laughing at his charade. A crow man sharing with golden swallows, unheard of—no way!! But he seems so humble, so sincere, and so I make him promise that he will keep his word, but true to his black feathered lice filled kith and kind, he disappears. Ever the crow he is gone, he disappears into thin air with that song never to be seen or heard from again.

He was true to his kind, in every way a crow, as true as the lice beneath his black suit coat, which flaps in the breeze like crow wings, I should have known, I should have seen him coming, but didn’t. Crows don’t hunt their own meat and are always on the take, they always want a piece of yours.

Now this crow man who calls himself a frog and who sings the songs of the Kingfisher, who taught me, he says he learnt them from around the fires of tradition, from the old ones and fires he had sort out to sit by. But all the while he is singing Aaarrk, aaarrk, aaahhh as he constantly patrols and hunts along the highways looking for his next feed of road kill. But unlike most other hunters of road kill, he knows which way to jump—smart crow that!
Now to the Noongar of old, the crow was one of several moieties or divisions within their clan that once endowed social order and rules over who one could marry and, the social attitudes and expected ways and mores of acting within the group. In the southwest the crow or Waardang was one half of the division and Munitj the white cockatoo was another. Both were nephews of the eagle man. In Kellerberrin there was another moiety of birds. My old teacher was a kingfisher or Djooak and I, his adopted son became in turn the golden swallow, or Birrangaa. Kellerberrin holds to different country from that of the western or southern lands of black crows and white cockatoos, and for us kingfishers and golden swallows our knowledge of crows and cockatoos was supposed to give us a deep and enduring suspicion and awareness of them. The white cockatoo who boasts and the crow man who scavenges and watches had supposedly given the peoples of the east a reason to take care, but how easy we forget.

Now the Noongar legend of the crow names him as one who killed his younger swan wife from an act of rage and then who having been saved from drowning by his uncle an eagle man from the east, the crow tracked his uncle’s hidden source of fresh water and dirtied it with his body biting lice. Old crow nephew of the eagle man couldn’t be trusted. But in the bigger scheme of things the crow and eagle were linked by a relationship, one of uncle and the other of nephew, one of teacher and the other of student.

Now further, this story whilst relating to those Noongar who are crows who try to hide it, like their ancestor who tried to hide the fact that he had stolen and polluted the waters of his uncle all those many years ago is also about my experiences of a crow who masquerades as a Wiilo or stoned curlew; who with long skinny legs, big bulging eyes, is all seeing and remains akin to the crow, well camouflaged.

Now this crow who masquerades as a Wiilo walks on skinny legs, and true to the crow has rarely caught his own meat but has lived depending upon the scavenging of another. Now before I knew this crow was indeed a CROW, singing as a crow, with feathers shining like a crow and with black legs of a crow, I imagined something
different. He did not boast like a Munitj or white cockatoo, well not least initially, for he seemed humble and dedicated. He wore a different feather coat entirely, and I had thought, that he wore feathers like my own, for birds of a feather flock together. I even imagined he wore gold under his wings, but true, you seldom see what is under someone’s wing until they fly above you, but ever since I found his lice floating upon the water of the old man’s rock water hole I learnt from, I have known, too late, that he was not the golden swallow I thought he was, but every bit the crow.

Now the etymology of the name Wiilo might be the one who originates from another’s territory, the stranger who comes unannounced to do harm. Noongars still talk of their fears of the feather-foot beyond the lands of their own who travel from the north or east to unleash their magic upon the unwary. My old teacher, old kingfisher spoke one night in whispers, a Yamatji revenge party was moving through the town on their way to Quairading. We all hunkered down and turned out the lights. Now Wiilo remains one that is respected. He stands among a league of messenger birds well-known for his unwanted and feared messages. My old teacher had a song for that bird, the Wiilo, and he’d sing: weelo wang mai wang woll to buddin gaabin ngany mai wang woll...singing, ‘Curlew talk, sound and talk, alarm, I wonder who—who does that song belong to, to whom is that weelo singing, I wonder who?’ For the message was most often one of great clarity, ‘Who is that message for, for whom?’ To the Noongar of Albany, the threat of the Will tribe or Wiil ‘strangers’ from the north was never underestimated.

The Wiilo did bring messages and came as ghosts. Uninvited and unwanted men with messages from the north must always have been their consternation, so what did they think when strangers appeared from the ocean in the south? What were these ghosts with their pale white skin, who brought their diseases and strange ways? The Minang Noongar of Albany attempted to claim them as their own ancestors who had returned from the dead, and perhaps that is why their fear of them was lesser than the fear of the northerners.
Thus to Mokare’s people mimicking the ghost’s red coat’s march upon the shore, the Wiil or WIL was a direction and more, much more. Sure north of Albany, way beyond Bluff Knoll with its meeyowl boolaa, old hill with ‘many eyes’ was watching where the six toed, six fingered blood eaters went creeping this way and that, gnawing upon raw flesh and whose serrated teeth marked every marrow filled bone on which they fed.

Were the Wiil the ‘Wheel-men’ or their word for all people and things, messages, and threats from the north? To the Minang, the southerners, the Wiilo who went crying in the night, were stoned curlew, bad news bearers who on their wings of fright, were bad news singers forecast bringers of death with messages to fear, foretelling future eaters where a stranger’s shaft of spear might finds its mark and dig their future grave.

Now I don’t know why, for what’s behind that curlew’s eye bulging round like the full moon, but we shouldn’t be afraid of him or his tune. I once shared with a Wiilman, I talked into the night near my smoky fire till this smoke of me shared its scent with him, and he within ear shot, listened and mimicked my smoke, and from the smoke of that fire he discovered where to find the old man’s maia, his hut where he lay and his ngaama rock water hole, fresh and deep, and then this Wiilo shape-shifted, he became a crow man and ever since I have seen some parts of him, floating in the cool clear water, his itching flesh eating lice.

His black feathers and white lice still line the bowl where he drank from, his crow tracks still surround the old man’s rock water hole, and like that place named Quelcon we know it is him, how does he think he can mask his theft of the old man’s water when the tracks of him sit so visible upon the soil and page. For from that old man’s hollow I sometimes read his most recent revelations where his black steps upon the white page convey his attempted footsteps dodging spears.

He would try to hide his tracks but we know it is him. ‘Quelcon’ said the eagle man, ‘Quelcon,’ dodge this spear if you can!
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
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<tr>
<td>birrangaa</td>
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<td>djooak</td>
<td>sacred kingfisher</td>
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<td>quelcon or kwelkon</td>
<td>‘dodge this’</td>
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<td>maia</td>
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<td>meeyowl</td>
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<td>minang</td>
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<td>Mokare</td>
<td>name of historic elder</td>
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<tr>
<td>munitj</td>
<td>white cockatoo</td>
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<tr>
<td>ngaama</td>
<td>rock water hole</td>
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<tr>
<td>waardang</td>
<td>crow</td>
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<tr>
<td>wheelman</td>
<td>name of people of the Jerramungup region as recorded by Edith Hassell</td>
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<tr>
<td>wil</td>
<td>north, direction term, or tribe from the north of Albany</td>
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Michael Ackland holds the Roderick Chair of English at James Cook University in Townsville. He has published widely on 19th and 20th century Australian poetry, colonial verse, and Henry Handel Richardson and is currently working on a book on Murray Bail.

Isabela Banzon teaches at the University of the Philippines. Her book of poems *Lola Coqueta* is introduced by Dennis Haskell. She lives in Metro Manila.

Bruce Bennett is Emeritus Professor of the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, he was awarded a Doctor of Letters degree of the University of New South Wales in 2004 for his research and publications in Australian literature.

Peter Bibby has written poems, plays and short stories over a long period. His work has been published in magazines, the press and anthologies and performed on radio, television and the stage. He worked as an editor with Magabala Books for ten years.

David Buchanan lives in north east Tasmania and has published poetry in Australian and New Zealand journals since the 1980s. He is a senior lecturer at the University of Tasmania in the Faculty of Health in Launceston, where his principle area of research concerns better understanding of the neuroplastic brain and what this may mean for the whole person in mental health and persistent pain states. He is also a playwright and musician.
Adrian Caesar was formerly Associate Professor of English at UNSW@ADFA. More recently, he has split his time between teaching creative writing at ANU and writing full-time. He is the author of several books of non-fiction and four books of poetry, including his latest publication *High Wire* (Pandanus Press, 2006).

Aidan Coleman’s poems have appeared in the *Australian Literary Review*, the *Weekend Australian*, *The Age*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Antipodes*, the *Warwick Review* and *Westerly*. His first collection, *Avenues and Runways* (Brandl & Schlesinger) was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. In 2011 he has an Australia Council New Work grant.

Bruce Dawe is one of Australia’s best known poets and his work has won many awards. His collected poems, *Sometimes Gladness*, was the only volume of poetry included in a list of the ten best Australian books of the decade in 1984.

Ross Donlon lives in Castlemaine, Victoria, where he convenes a popular monthly poetry reading. *Tightrope Horizon* was published by Five Islands Press as part of the New Poets program. He was the Varuna Dorothy Hewett Flagship Fellow for 2009.

Brooke Dunnell has been published in the collections *Allnighter*, *Best Australian Stories 2009* and *New Australian Stories 2*. She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia.

Diane Fahey’s *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* will be published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2011. Her previous collection, *Sea Wall and River Light*, was a winner of the ACT Government’s Judith Wright Poetry Award.

Helen Gildfind has had book reviews, short stories, poetry and essays published in *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Westerly*, *Hecate*, *Veranda*, *Idiom*, *Poetrix*, *antithesis*, *AWBR*, *TEXT*, and *Voiceworks*. In September of 2009 she was the Emerging Writer in Residence at the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers’ Centre in Perth.
Jonathan Hadwen is a Brisbane poet, who has been published in journals in Australia and overseas, including Southerly, Overland, Page Seventeen and Small Packages. In 2010, eight of his poems were published as a ‘micro-collection’ as part of the Brisbane New Voices series.

Helen Hagemann has prose and poetry published in Australian literary magazines, including Overland, Island, Westerly and Southerly. She is the author of Evangelyne & Other Poems published by the Australian Poetry Centre, Melbourne, 2009.

Matthew Hall is completing a PhD at the University of Western Australia. His second and third collections are coming out in the coming months: Distant Songs from Sea Press Meta in the UK and Royal Jelly from Black Rider Press. His poetry, prose and criticism regularly appear in journals internationally, and he is the Feature Editor at Cordite Poetry Review.

Susan Hawthorne is the author of six collections of poetry, the latest of which is Cow (2011). Earth’s Breath (2009) was shortlisted for the 2010 Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She is Adjunct Professor in the Writing Program at James Cook University, Townsville.

Graeme Hetherington is a Tasmanian who formerly lectured in the classics department at the University of Tasmania. He now lives in Czech Republic and is the author of four books of poetry.

Paul Hetherington is Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra and the author of eight collections of poetry, most recently It Feels Like Disbelief. He is co-editor of the online journal: Axon: Creative Explorations.


Pat Jacobs lives in Perth, Western Australia. An historian, fiction writer and reviewer, she has received awards for both history and short fiction published in Australian journals and anthologies. Her novel, Going Inland (1998), won the WA Premier’s Award for Fiction in 1999 and was long-listed for the 2000 Dublin Impac Award.
Notes on Contributors

Christopher (Kit) Kelen’s most recent volumes of poetry are *God preserve me from those who want what’s best for me* (2009, Picaro Press), and *in conversation with the river* (2010, VAC, Chicago, USA). For the last eleven years Kelen has taught Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Macau in south China.

Graeme Kershaw has published two novels with Fremantle Press and, more recently, poetry in *Indigo, Canberra Times, Famous Reporter, Westerly* and *Eureka Street*.

Chris Konrad has lived in the hills around Perth pretty much all his life. He works currently with the new and emerging communities and is undertaking a PhD in creative writing. His poetry has been published with four other WA poets in an anthology, *Amber Contains the Sun* (2008), and in many journals and on line zines and journals. In 2009 he won both the Tom Collins Prize and the Creatrix Prize (WA).

Blaze Kwaymullina is a Palkyu person from the Pilbara. He is a Lecturer at the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. Blaze is a published children’s author with an interest in all forms of writing.

Roland Leach is a West Australian poet and the proprietor of Sunline Press. He has two collections of poetry published and is a past winner of the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim has published seven books of poetry; the first, *Crossing the Peninsula*, received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. The most recent, *Walking Backwards*, appeared in 2010. Her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, won the American Book Award; and she has also published short story collections and two novels. She is currently Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Miriam Wei Wei Lo lives in the south-west of Western Australia. A widely published poet, she is working towards her next book.

Anthony Lynch works as an editor with Deakin University, is the publisher for Whitmore Press and author of the short story collection
Redfin (Arcadia). His collection of poetry, Night Train, is forthcoming from Clouds of Magellan.

Caitlin Maling is a West Australian poet who has previously published across Australia in journals such as Blue Dog, Going Down Swinging, the Sun Herald Extra, and Quadrant.

Tim McCabe is an anthropologist who maintains an active interest in the Noongar language, in placenames and cultural landscapes of the eastern Noongar. His work with the late Noongar elder, Cliff Humphries, formed the basis for the Noongar linguistic report in the Native Title Claim of Bennell versus the State of Western Australia (2006). His writings relate to his observations and experiences tied to SouthWest palimpsests and the stories they reveal.

Megan McKinlay is a practising poet and children’s writer. She has a PhD in Japanese Literature and has taught Australian Literature, Japanese Language and Creative Writing at UWA and other tertiary institutions.

Rachael Mead’s poems have been published in a range of journals. Her chapbook was shortlisted by Varuna for publication with Picaro.

MG Michael is an honorary senior fellow at the University of Wollongong where he researches ethics and privacy issues in information and communication technologies. He has been previously published in a number of literary journals and anthologies including Five Bells, Southerly, Westerly, and Ulitarra. ‘Uberveillance’, a term he coined to describe the trajectory of embedded surveillance systems in the human body, was recently entered into the Macquarie Dictionary.

Jo Mills is a poet, short story writer and budding fantasy novelist who lives in the Perth hills. Her poems and stories have won or been shortlisted in numerous competitions, and published in anthologies, journals and online. She is currently working on a quartet of epic fantasy novels, and blogs with four companion writers at http://egoboo-wa.blogspot.com/.

Bob Morrow is a Melbourne poet who is particularly interested in what makes up a sense of belonging. A keen body-surfer, he divides his time between the city, the bush and a Bass Strait beach.
Notes on Contributors

Mark O’Flynn’s poetry and short stories have appeared in a wide range of journals and magazines. He has published three collections of poetry. His second novel, Grassdogs, was published by Harper Collins in 2006.

Geoff Page is a Canberra-based poet who has published eighteen collections of poetry as well as two novels, four verse novels and several other works including anthologies, translations and a biography of the jazz musician, Bernie McGann.

Renee Pettitt-Schipp is an emerging Western Australian writer whose work is currently inspired by living on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean territories. In November 2010 Renee was short listed for the Trudy Graham Biennial Literary Award and in 2011 she won the Ethel Webb Bundell prize for poetry.

Clare Rhoden has recently completed a PhD at the University of Melbourne. Her thesis investigates the representation of leadership in Australian Great War narratives.

Page Richards is Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong who publishes on poetry, drama, American literature, and creative writing. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and books and she has written Distancing English: A Chapter in the History of the Inexpressible and a book of poems, Lightly Separate.

Kerry Stokes (1949–2009), Westerly’s cover artist, taught art and printmaking in Perth, Broome and abroad, and participated in and organised a myriad of festivals, master-classes and field trips. Her work, as painter, sculptor and printmaker is held in significant private collections around Australia and internationally as well as in notable public collections. Latterly she worked mainly in oils and acrylics, and her style had become abstract and intuitive, but with her sculpting background and knowledge of materials, she was always fascinated by the possibilities offered by different surfaces that allowed her to control the absorbent qualities of her support.

Maria Takolander’s short stories, poetry, and essays have been widely published. She won the inaugural Australian Book Review short story
competition in 2010. Her book of poems, *Ghostly Subjects* (2009) was shortlisted in the 2010 Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards. She is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria.

**Yann Toussaint** is a tutor and PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Western Australia. He lives in Albany on the south coast of Western Australia.

**Rob Wallis**’ second poetry collection *My Life As A Sheep Dog* was published in 2009 by Mark Time Books. His short stories and poems have been published in various magazines, and his awards include first prize in the FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Prize in 2006 and second prize in 2009.

**Annamaria Weldon** was awarded the Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2010 for ‘Memory of Earth’. Her essay ‘Threshold Country’ won the 2011 Nature Conservancy Australia Essay Prize. Both were written as part of a landscape journal set in the Mandurah-Pinjarra wetlands, on which she has been working since her 2009–2010 residency at the Adaptation Project, Symbiotica UWA. In 2008 Sunline Press published her poetry collection *The Roof Milkers*.

**Kate Whitfield**’s short stories have appeared in many Australian journals. She lives and works as an editor in Melbourne.

**David Whish-Wilson** is a writer and a lecturer in Creative Writing and Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies. His second novel *Line of Sight* was published by Penguin in 2010.

**Chris Wortham** is an Emeritus Professor of English at UWA. His most recent publications are a co-edited book on early drama published in early 2011 and a further co-edited book on *Perceptions of Terra Australis* now in press.
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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