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EDITORIAL COMMENT

Orientational metaphors can be revealing. The English word 'suburb' derives from the Old French 'suburbe': it thus begins its history in English 'beneath' or 'under' the city. In contemporary Australian usage, according to the Macquarie Dictionary, a suburb is 'a district, usually residential and to some degree remote from the business or administrative centre of a city or large town and enjoying its own facilities, as schools, shopping centres, railway stations'. The word's secondary sense as 'an outlying part' indicates its difficulty of definition: as distant or remote from somewhere else, the suburb seems destined to a kind of limbo.

When the quasi-proper name 'suburbia' is used, it denotes the suburbs collectively, especially as they embody 'the middle range of community standards and values'. It is only one step from here to satire, which is already implicit in the common Australian use of 'suburban' to mean narrow-minded and conventional in outlook. One step to Patrick White's Sarsaparilla and Barry Humphries' Moonee Ponds.

Relegated to the netherworld of suburbia, yet choosing to live there (here), what do our writers and artists now make of their surroundings? At a time when the swagman was already assuming mythic proportions as an Australian hero, in the 1890s and early 1900s, the term 'suburban swagman' was invented by the Bulletin, wherein one of these figures was reported in 1911 to have been 'caught robbing the boss's best bulb beds'. Such acts of insurrection against the settled order have continued. Charlie Fox's article on street bookmakers is one such manifestation; Margot Luke's discussion of suburbia in recent Western Australian fiction points to an increasing diversity of styles and perspectives, in which antipathy to convention plays a large part.

Metonymic use of 'suburban' for ignorant, conformist, mechanical behaviour was common among Australian intellectuals in the inter-war and early post-war years. For some, the only solution seemed escape. But where? To the bush, for some, but for others overseas to the world's 'real' cities. The painter Sali Herman and social commentators such as Robin Boyd, Hugh Stretton, Donald Horne and Craig McGregor indicated that other perspectives were possible: Australia's suburbs, if not offering paradise, might at least be true to their name and offer a satisfactory compromise between our traditionally imagined alternatives, bush and city. A later phase of thinking, fostered by Robert Drewe, Geoffrey Dutton and others, gave mythological and fictional status to the beach, thus offering a triangular set of alternatives, bush, beach and city, but still resisting the repulsive magnetism of suburbia.

A new phase in the reimagining of suburbia was entered in the 1980s. One testament to this is the Oxford Literary Guide to Australia (1987), edited by Peter Pierce, in which readers are introduced to the named specificities of many Australian suburbs and their literary associations. Suburban histories also became common. As Julie Lewis's 'natural history' of Scarborough in this issue of Westerly shows, memory and emotion are invested in such places even though, as Jenny Gregory reveals, their construction began in the hearts and minds of real estate agents. George Seddon further complicates any simple notion of nature as the basis of suburban gardens by revealing their constructedness according to fashion, need and circumstance. Within such contexts, the imagination operates at different rates and intensities: Jean Kent's poem 'Listening for Lorikeets in Birkley Road' and Geoff Page's 'Between Venetians' are both recognisable 'suburban' but the tonal qualities, tempo and sense impressions are worlds (not just streets) apart.

Wit and humour are characteristic of the images of suburbia which we have gathered in these pages, ranging from Nicholas Hasluck's story 'Supermarket' to Robert Drewe's affectionately wry reminiscence about the invasion of company slogans and values into the suburban home. If readers should remain in any doubt about the continuing potency for artistic experiment in the Australian suburbs in the 1990s, they should turn to Marion Campbell's musical theatre script, 'Dr Memory in the Dream Home'. Angry, wild, funny and nightmarish, Campbell's piece may seem 'metropolitan' in intensity; at the same time, it is an anti-text to her vision of suburbia.

The suburbs, then, might be more fertile territory than we thought. Let's explore.

Bruce Bennett
Westraly
Volume 35, No. 4, December 1990

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Cover design by Susan Ellvey of Designpoint using a handpainted photograph by Tom Gibbons. (See Page 4 for details.)
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OBITUARY NOTICES

PATRICK WHITE

Patrick White (1912-1990) was perhaps Australia's best known novelist, our only Nobel Prize winner. But he was not the most popular, as the grudging nature of many of his obituaries suggests. That is not surprising; all his life he wrote against the grain, challenging perceptions of self reality and value, insisting that fiction existed not merely to represent but to rework, to enlarge possibility, above all the possibilities of language and thus of perception.

Born in England, he nevertheless felt that he belonged to Australia “in my bones”. But this “country of the bones” was an austere one, a state of mind rather than a place. Against the banalities of the Sarsaparilla, his mythical Sydney suburb, he set the splendours and terrors of desert, the “state of silence, simplicity and humility” which he saw as “the only proper state for the human being as well as the artist”. Austere though the way to it may be, this state was also joyous, comic even — his gift for social comedy grew with the years. Like Yeats, he grew increasingly aware of the comedy of life against death, that the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart” was also the place “where all ladders start”.

His twelve novels, three collections of short stories, his plays and, more recently, his speeches constitute his monument.

Veronica Brady

Mr Patrick White has won numerous readers and admirers throughout the world and his death is a great loss not only to the Australian people but to people all over the world. As a reader and translator of his works, and as the last Chinese scholar to interview him, I extend my condolences to my Australian friends upon the death of this great writer.

Zhu Jiong-Qiang
Hangzhou University

A note on the cover picture

Tom Gibbons’ “Edgewater” is from an exhibition of thirty handpainted photographs of the Perth Metropolitan Area taken by Roger Webber of the University of Western Australia’s Geography Department in 1978.

With the help of Dennis Rumley, a collaborative randomising technique was used to arrive at a series of images which Tom Gibbons hoped would “reveal more about our surroundings than would have been gained by depicting sites according to my own conscious and almost inevitably ‘picturesque’ choice”. His intention was to produce a series of “relatively impersonal images which would hover ironically and coolly somewhere between painting and photograph”.

WESTERLY, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1990
The Suburban Garden in Australia

I Beginnings

There is a great variety of suburban gardens in Australia, and I shall offer a crude taxonomy presently, but first let us try for some common characteristics. Typically, the suburban garden is *negative space*, what falls between two very positive boundaries. One is the boundary of the block, looking out. It functions as a moat, defensive to a wall — the wall being that of the house itself, looking in. The 'garden' is what is left between, a kind of no-man's-land, scarred by earlier events. The block has been surveyed, the bulldozers have done their work, cleared away the trees and topsoil, the builder has come and gone, leaving a rubble of plastic odds and ends, broken tiles, dropped nails, shattered concrete. This is the birth of the suburban garden.

There are other ways of designing and building, but they are rare in Australia. One is to survey the site, orient the proposed building in relation to the topography, keep the trees, whether indigenous or from an earlier garden, and maintain the land form, rather than flatten it. All of this happens at times in relatively affluent new developments in forested areas like parts of Sydney's North Shore, parts of the Dandenongs, the Loftys and other Hill Stations on the urban periphery. But it costs the developer more, and requires care, so it is not common practice. Another way to build, more common than our way, is to take the block of land itself as the design unit — a common example is that of the building as boundary, with an internal courtyard, so familiar in Europe and Latin America. But our building regulations do not encourage this, although it often suits our climate. So we buy a block, flatten it, and plonk a house in the middle.

Why? The answer lies primarily in the way our cities have been surveyed and our building regulations drawn up, but behind these codifications lies a set of attitudes, substantially English in their origins, and far from simple. Dickens catches the territorial imperative of the suburban English, that intensified sense of a defensive space between house and the external world, and 'explains' it by implication, in *Great Expectations*. Pip visits Wemmick in Walworth, in nineteenth century suburban London:

> . . . Wemmick's house was a little wooden cottage in the midst of plots of garden, and the top of it was cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns.
> "My own doing," said Wemmick. "Looks pretty; don't it?"
> I highly commended it. I think it was the smallest house I ever saw: the queerest gothic windows (by far the greater part of them sham), and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at.
> "That's a real flagstaff, you see," said Wemmick, "and on Sundays I run up a real flag. Then look here. After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up — so — and cut off the communication."
> The bridge was a plank, and it crossed a chasm about four feet wide and two deep. But it was very pleasant to see the pride with which he hoisted it up, and made it fast; smiling as he did so, with a relish, and not merely mechanically.
Dickens has taken the popular saw, that 'An Englishman's home is his castle', and pursued it, through Wemmick, to the point of affectionate burlesque. The parody of territoriality — the drawbridge — is put in context by 'it brushes the Newgate cobwebs away.' London was Europe's greatest metropolis, and English cities were the first to industrialise, which both intensified slum crowding and created the affluence which offered an alternative to all but the poorest, by building detached and semi-detached houses, each within its little plot of land, in the new suburbs. The acute territoriality is a response to crowding. But Dicken's fantasy shows too other aspects of English social life. Everything in Wemmick's abode is scaled down, not something created in itself, but a minute version of something grander. This may be seen, perhaps, as illustrating the nature of English class structure, in which the aspirations of even the lower of the lower middle class are modelled on those of their superiors. A robust peasant and labouring class has its own cultural values, but these were eroded in southern England by the pervading force of the middle classes. Finally, Wemmick is Robinson Crusoe (a very English figure), dreaming the dream of self sufficiency, using his back garden productively. This too may be in part a response to the insecurity of urban life in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Much of our background comes from Wemmick's Walworth: the omnipresence of middle class values, the scaling down, the productive use of the back yard and its sharp differentiation from the front yard, and above all, that strong consciousness of the individual boundary, not nearly so common in other cultures: the Americans rarely fence their front yard, even at the sides; while most Europeans live, as they always have, in apartment buildings with a shared internal courtyard in a building complex often fronting directly on to a piazza or other public open space. The individual has some rights in each of these spaces, but different ones, and so the 'drawbridge mentality' has less encouragement in a milieu that offers a gradation from the private to the communal.

II The Cadastral Survey

Another major cultural force that underwrites suburbia and its gardens in Australia is the cadastral survey, that rectilinear grid imposed at various scales on an entire continent by the geometers of a remote imperial power in the nineteenth century, squaring off this old, irregular landscape to impose an order convenient to an authoritarian colonial administration. It is so much a part of our lives that many Australians are scarcely aware of it as a massive imposition, yet a glance at the map shows only two natural boundaries at State level, the Murray River, and the Tasmanian coastline. The survey grid is a characteristic of empire; the Greeks used it in their colonies in southern Italy, and the Romans carried it throughout their imperial domain, ruler straight. The grid was usually set to the positions of the compass, the cardio (north-south) and decumanus (east-west) of the Romans — of which Hoddle Street and Victoria Parade in Melbourne are an example, set by Victoria's colonial surveyor as the axis of his grid nearly two millennia after the Romans. The British took it wherever they imposed their rule; Ireland, India, North
America. It was convenient for the movement of troops, for making a census, for imposing taxes. It has the logic of a central administrative power, but it ignores natural features, and has often had a heavy cost in Australia, where, for example, most farm fences now turn out to be in the wrong place. There are a few early subdivisions which run to a different logic — the narrow river frontages and long narrow blocks running back from them at Guildford, also at Hahndorf in South Australia. Much of early Sydney has an irregularity of form that is the product of a topography that could not be ignored because it was so rocky and so steep, but also because there was an improvised and adaptive quality to its first phase of settlement.

But regularity is the rule in suburbia until the curves of Canberra became popular. Thus the legendary ‘quarter-acre block.’ This notion is so much a part of our self-image that perhaps it is worth giving the background. First, we might note that although the quarter-acre block was fairly common, it was never standard, either in Perth or elsewhere in Australia — there was great variation in size both in and between cities. The ‘classic’ quarter-acre was one hundred links (or 1 chain) by two hundred and fifty links (or two and a half chains), with a frontage of 66ft and a depth of 165ft (roughly 20m x 50m — 1000m²). This was the standard subdivision in Dalkeith and Nedlands in Western Australia, for example, but blocks in South Perth were subdivided at the same time (1916 onwards) at 32 perches, which represented 4/5th of the Dalkeith standard. In Claremont, an older suburb than Dalkeith, frontages were generally narrower (often 55ft) but many blocks were deeper, 180 or 200ft. The critical point is that most suburban houses everywhere in Australia other than the innermost cities had big back yard spaces by world standards. The measurements and their names — chains, links, perches — are alien and bizarre to those brought up with a decimal system, but they were so important in the production of Australian suburbia with all the values and design habits this form has engendered, that they are worth a footnote in themselves. The measurements have an ancient and practical origin. An acre, for example, was the land that one man could plough with one horse in one day; as a strip of cultivated land, it could be conveniently measured out by two chains in width, five chains in length. The system lasted because it was familiar and convenient. The ‘chain’ was valued, culturally because it was the length of a cricket pitch, practically because it was both Imperial and metric — 66 feet, but 100 links. In short, it was a magic number. Roads, for example, were commonly one chain wide. When they curved, the width had to vary. The surveyor could then use trigonometrical tables to calculate the variation from 100 links by shifting a decimal point. It was a physical chain until well into this century — first the Gunter chain, later a steel band. Many country towns, especially in New South Wales, were laid out in 10 chain square blocks, and then subdivided into housing blocks that were one chain wide and five chains deep, half an acre, and very deep (for example, Tumut). The system began to be metricised in the Eastern States from the 1920s — the ACT, for example, used a metric foot — but it persisted in Western Australia until the introduction of the metric system in the late 1960s. And that is why so many of us now live, in a city, on a block of land of the length that a man with a horse could plough a straight furrow, and the area that one man with one horse could plough in one quarter of a day.

There would never have been much point in ploughing the infertile sands of Nedlands, but the form remains, with all its virtues and its costs. Intellectuals in Australia sometimes under-rate the virtues, which are very real — the spaciousness, the privacy, the room for children to play and for adults to entertain, room for the pool, and room to be Wemmick, your own engineer and carpenter and gardener. All of this is seen as a great privilege by the crowded urban dwellers of less happier lands. The costs are also great: above all the costs of servicing such a low density,
which makes public transport grossly uneconomic and thus leads to car-dependence, with all its problems, including the isolation of young women with children, and of the elderly and of young teenagers — all those without a car become locked in their green prison.

The aesthetic cost is also great. In a suburb such as Nedlands, the natural diversity of landform, soil, vegetation and aspect has all been wiped out except in a few privileged streets such as Viewway, and the grid then emphasises the monotony. But we crave diversity, so that a spurious man-made diversity has been imposed, lacking any natural logic. And so that which should be diverse has been made uniform, while that which should be, if not uniform, at least homogeneous — the built form and the continuity of landscape style — has become heterogeneous. But we should turn now from the boundary characteristics and other general features to a crude typology, beginning by asking what goes on within the block.

III A Functional Typology

A way of classifying gardens is to ask what they are for. To a group of upper-middle-class gardeners the function of a garden might seem to be self-evident, but in fact there is considerable diversity of function in Australia, and the primary functions have changed substantially through time. There is, or was, also a sharp distinction between the function of ‘the back yard’ and ‘the front garden’.

When I was young in the 1930s, and for several decades on either side, the function of the typical Australian back yard in the cities and country towns could be known easily from a list of its contents. It had all or most of: a woodheap, often with a rickety woodshed with a low roof of galvanised iron, and a fence for the back wall; a wash-house, with two tubs and a copper with a grate beneath it to heat the water and a wire rack to hold the Velvet soap and Reckitts blue; a clothes line; one or more tanks on wooden tankstands, with mint and parsley under or near the dripping tap in a cut-down kerosene tin; a dunny against the back fence, so that the pan could be collected from the dunny lane through a trap-door; there might be a kennel for the dog, although he often slept under the verandah; there was sometimes a crude incinerator, often an old oil drum, although rubbish was also burnt in an open bonfire. There might be chooks, usually in a chook-house along the back fence, and sometimes a sleep-out, usually a verandah enclosed with fly-wire, but sometimes free standing. A lemon tree was nearly universal.

In short, the back yard — and remember that ‘yard’ and ‘garden’ come from the same root — provided a number of essential domestic services, now centrally supplied. And of course it also had a few fruit trees and a ‘vegie patch.’ In the 1930s, the garage appeared, usually in the back yard, at the end of a long, narrow driveway, later migrating to the front yard, where it skeletonised to a car-port, and at length was built into the house. Sewerage meant that the outside dunny was replaced (or often merely supplemented) by an indoor toilet. The Hills Clothes Hoists sprung up like skeletal mushrooms in suburban back yards. Then the brick ‘barbie’ went in, and at last the pool. The function of the back yard changed from production and service to recreation, and in the more up-market homes, to display, which used to be one of the functions of the front garden; some of its characteristics now moved round back. It would be wrong, however, to think that these changes are universal. Perth, for example, is still only 73 per cent sewered; Brisbane slightly less. And the old, untidy back yard used to store junk, fix the car, or build a boat or play cricket and football on the cape-weed lawn is till alive and well, with its own cheerful vitality.
IV Some Common Garden Types in Australia

1. The nostalgia garden
This comes in two forms. First the Hill Station garden, found in the Dandenongs and Mt Macedon, Mt Wellington foothills outside Hobart, and elsewhere in Tasmania, The Loftys outside Adelaide, The Blue Mountains, and Mossagong — that conurbation that now stretches from Mittagong to Moss Vale outside Sydney. It represents a total rejection of the Australian environment, and its transformation into something else. It represents a class culture, the product of money, travel and education. Some of the best gardens in Australia are to be found in The Hill Stations, but they are not Australian gardens, and although some of them are very valuable in their own right, they are largely irrelevant to garden design in Australia, since they choose to grow all the plants that in general cannot be grown well here, and in ways that are not generally available either.

The second common nostalgia garden is the ‘cottage garden’, now very popular in the professional suburbs like Hawthorn and Kew in Melbourne, North Adelaide, Claremont in Perth. They are also a class taste, and some of them are very attractive. They are pseudo-historical, commonly setting off Victorian houses behind picket fences, but rarely bear much resemblance to Victorian gardens in Australia. That hardly matters. Since many of the perennials and shrubs used have a Mediterranean origin, it is possible, although not very common, to design such gardens to be in reasonable balance with the natural ecology.

2. The tidy suburban garden.
This is the common model, almost universal in middle-class suburbs, and common enough both in working-class ones and in the wealthy one like Toorak. Its object is not so much ostentation as respectability, the garden equivalent of brushing your hair and having clean underpants. Neatness is the primary virtue; shrubs are clipped, lawns are cut, edges are trimmed, weeds are expelled. I suspect that these gardens have considerable psychological significance for most Australians: they are not only an outward mark of respectability, but they also give an opportunity to control our immediate environment, perhaps almost the only opportunity most people have. That the control should be so strict perhaps indicates that the natural environment is still alien to many suburban Australians.

3. The nice show of colour
This is a special version of the above, with more effort; the tidy garden is ‘brightened up’ with annuals (usually). In Perth, colourful annuals like Nemesia, the Iceland Poppy and Sweet Peas are popular. The garden experts like Kevin Heinze, Alan Searle and Don Burke tend to encourage such displays, and why not? We are looking at one of the popular arts, and also at an activity that generates innocent pride in the exercise of horticultural skills. In general, these displays require a substantial input of fertiliser, chemical spray and snail bait, but they are not necessarily prodigal of water: in Perth and Adelaide they are late winter and early spring beauties, which coincides with the natural growth rhythms. A few people are coming to recognise that this seasonal flush is natural, and that it can be produced without Nemesia and Sweet Peas. The annual Helichrysum species, Brachycome iberidifolia, Brunonia australis can also give sheets of spring colour and reseed themselves each year, without the fertiliser; and there are perennial ground covers like Gazania rigens var. leucolaena and others from South Africa and elsewhere that will flower in sheets in spring and protect the soil the year round.
The standard suburban garden in Australia for most of the last forty years. This example happens to be in Koroit, Victoria, but could be anywhere.

Riverside suburb, Perth. Thirty years and three thousand kilometres separate this and the garden in the top photograph. They are nevertheless strikingly clear expressions of a single, persistent, class-free, continent-wide gardening culture.
A vegetable garden in the backyard of a house in Port Fairy, Victoria, with brick-edged, raised beds — functional and elegant in their simplicity.

The Italian garden in Australian suburbia showing most of the essential features, including the balustrades, cement lions and other statuary.
Both the 'tidy suburban garden' and 'the nice show of colour' are also nostalgia gardens, in their own way, but with a different class origin. My next common type also has a nostalgic component. It is the

4. Italian Garden

By this I do not mean the kind of garden that expatriates have made in Italy (like Bernard Berenson at I Tatti outside Florence). I mean the gardens that Italians make in Australia. Middle-class Australians tend to mock them, but I find them as much a legitimate personal and cultural expression as the 'tidy suburban garden'. These also come in two forms. The one I like best is simply productive, with tomatoes and onions and egg fruit in the front garden, along with a grape-vine on a Cyclone arbour. The other version is the hose-down garden, with paving, statuary and water: it often goes with terrazzo paving and a fat white concrete balustrade to the verandah. This type of garden has some significant virtues: it is easy to keep clean, and well adapted to our climate and life style, in that it is not wasteful of water or fertiliser, and there is a recognition that lawn, summer flowers, azaleas and the like are extravagantly inappropriate here. There are no weeds, and therefore no weed killers or pesticides fouling the environment. And the easy maintenance leaves time for leisure, hospitality and social interaction, which are characteristic of most Italians.

5. The Collection or Prize Specimen Garden

This is a garden type in which horticultural passion over-rules design criteria, and is thus not so much a style as an emphasis, which can find diverse modes of expression: The collection can range from species tulips or cyclamen to a dozen different 'forms' of Grevillea thelemanniana (yes, I have a friend who has the latter — one form is called 'Wynyabbie Gem', I think). Many of us are plant snobs — there is undoubtedly a pleasure in having things that have rarity value — and this is wrong only if it leads to contempt for the common plants that grow easily. The 'collector' may work on varieties of one genus, or rare plants of many kinds, or grow prize specimens of a chosen plant: show roses, or gerberas, for instance. Horticultural skill and the pride of achievement are the driving forces. They are difficult to reconcile with good design, which has different objectives.

6. The Native Garden

This title might be incomprehensible outside Australia, but its meaning is clear enough here: it refers to a garden made of indigenous plants. It is thus not strictly a style, merely a choice of plant material, but Australian plants are so distinctive in their form, colours and texture, and also in their horticultural requirements, that such gardens are inevitably distinctive. However, the simple term, 'Native Garden', conceals great diversity in form, plant material, history of use, and design, and the subject deserves a paper all on its own. To give a few example of this diversity: first, only a handful of purists actually restrict themselves to indigenous plants, plants from that area. I have been re-establishing the indigenous vegetation on a limestone hill in Fremantle, using Callitris preissii and Melaleuca hugeli, but could not resist adding a couple of Araucaria heterophylla which do so well in Perth. The Norfolk Island Pine is 'native', more or less, but assuredly not indigenous, it comes from nearly 5,000 km away. The Norfolk Pine is one of a group of 'native' trees and shrubs that were accepted very early into the common Australian garden vocabulary, and planted along with the roses and the geraniums — trees like Tristania conferta (the Brush Box) Ficus rubiginosa (the Port Jackson Fig) Melia azedarach (The White Cedar), and shrubs like Chamaelaucium uncinatum (the Geraldton Wax). On the other hand, shrubs like its close and very beautiful relative, Chamaelaucium ciliatum
(the Albany Wax) or the stunning *Verticordia chrysantha* have been propagated commercially only recently.

In the last century, rainforest species were often domesticated; in the last thirty years, 'native plants' tends to mean plants of the heathlands, which generally are conspicuous in flower. This has been partly reinforced by the design work of the later Edna Walling gardens, and even more the work of Ellis Stones, who used mossy boulders and railway sleepers with his heath plants, creating subtle gardens that were said to be 'a recreation of the Australian bush.' This they were not — railway sleepers are not common in the Australian bush — although he certainly studied and learnt from the natural scene. In my view, however, the primary design influence, albeit unconscious, was American West Coast, which is to say, a Japanese influence interpreted by Californian landscape architects.

There have been several other important contributors to the effective design use of Australian plant material, including The Canberra Botanic Gardens, the Melbourne and other Botanic Gardens, including Kings Park, Bill Molyneux at *Austraflo*, Glen Ford, Roger Elliot; one of the finest designers is Kath Geery at *Karwarra* in the Dandenongs. This is a rather Victorian list — one could add names like Bruce Mackenzie, Jean Verschuer, Marion Blackwell — from the other states and the ACT. Despite much progress in the last decade, which includes a dramatic increase in horticultural skills and commercial availability, there is still much to learn, and I believe that this is by far the most significant growth area in garden design in Australia, not for nationalistic reasons, and not because of the myths of 'low maintenance', but because the design possibilities are so exciting, and still under-explored.

IV CONCLUSION

There is much to learn about the design and maintenance of Australian gardens, although I believe that some of the advice we get from our 'gardening experts' in the media is inappropriate. Enormous advances have been made in horticultural science here, so plant *performance* is better understood, along with horticultural needs, selection and positioning. But maintenance should also have an aesthetic component. We seem to have two schools. The obsession with tidiness is still very common; with native plants we need to accept some degree of 'untidiness' — leaf litter, asymmetries, and so on, but this should not lead to the other school 'put them in and leave them alone.' To show their form and texture to best advantage I believe that native plants need as much loving care as exotics, but of a different kind — pruning to reveal form, for example, by removing internal twiggy growth that obscures the branch patterns. In the intimacy of the court-yard garden it is possible to experiment with form (the Japanese garden in the Japanese Studies courtyard at The University of Western Australia is an interesting example, in which pruning is used to emphasize and create form, rather than to mutilate it).

Gardening is still a passion with many Australians, and although our cities are changing in so many ways, it is hard to doubt that they will not continue to garden, provided they still have a place to do it. The free standing house with space before and behind has been the Australian dream. That too is now changing. Units, strata titles, duplexes, apartments, row housing, infill housing, penthouses, townhouses, all are names for denser living with reduced outdoor spaces. Australia, for better or worse, or both, is becoming urban, and the generous old back yard may become a threatened species. I should be sorry to see it.
Seasons

She's planting her new garden, spiced with sweet scents. Here is Lad's Love, which some would call Old Man — good to put between the sheets. And no regrets for what she's left behind. These young trees will fruit before long in such rich soil. This garden's planned for keeps, fragrant, easily maintained. She's done with watering, staking, sheltering tender plants. This spot in the sun for herbs, here's rosemary, for seasoning, not remembrance. No rue. See here Johnny-Jump-Ups returning year on year.
Pushing up Daisies

That's how they said it once, but nowadays few lie in earth, which of itself had seemed natural, expedient, but for the parcelled, stubborn skeleton, declaring, 'I was a man. I claim this plot of earth.' Burning's less gross, the empty shell melts to its elementals, the little residue scattered in ceremony, niched or planted.

We pass the Post Office, my little son, who'd toured the cemetery not long before, and been explained the columbarium says unexpectedly, 'I wouldn't like to be buried here.' I follow the direction of his eyes, and smile, explaining these are Post Boxes. Relieved, he says, 'I'm glad. It's much too noisy here,' showing a proper spirit of respect for the quiet dead, thoughtfully housed and named, the uncaring dead beneath their cluttering stones.

Make of me fire and ash. Leave me no bones.
Between Venetians

1. An Augury

First thing through the nerves at dawn, a crow across the frosty grass: two closings of a rusty door, two black scratches on the glass.

His climb, it seems, was bad narration, someone else's picaresque — some half-attentive god or clerk staring vaguely from his desk.

The story now has levelled out, each day more dense with repetition. Our hero, restless in his bed, has understood the crow's inscription.

2. Foxtrot

Three years since the funeral our widower across the street when backing down his drive on Sunday has someone new in the left hand seat.
The baked beans on their single flame,
in the corner,
the cold slice of a double bed . . .
are interrupted now forever.

My neighbour, who's been introduced,
retells it, drawing short of laughter.
'Julie, have you met,' he says,
'Evelyn, my . . . er . . . dancing partner?'

3. A Different Grace

Each night they let the world come in — and take it with the evening meal.
The headlines are a kind of garnish, little scrapings of the real.

Small Plane Said To 'Fall From Sky.'
Small Boat Missing:
Four Men Drowned.
Tollway Smash
As Seven Die.
Stolen Baby’s Body Found.

Thirteen Dead
On City Street . . .
those faces still too white to grieve and other voices further off:
'For What We Are About To Receive . . .'
Betting and drinking at a Fremantle hotel, 1953.

(Photo courtesy of The West Australian.)

Saturday afternoon at a Guildford hotel.

(Photo courtesy of The West Australian.)
Hedging their Bets: Street Bookmakers and Suburban Space

In August 1953 Perth’s *Western Mail* send an expedition out into the suburbs. A news editor and a photographer in a covered utility braved a wet and cold winter’s Saturday to investigate Perth’s most visible, permanent and intractable social problem. Their quarry was not hard to find because they knew where to go. There it was at every hotel, in every suburb, exemplified by a small and motley crowd. The investigators drove slowly past their marks, the photographer lying prostrate in the back snapping off shots with a high powered camera. They were recognised of course. At several locations they were abused; “you dirty . . .”, called one person. At one they were even stoned and as they left another, two policemen followed them, caught them and “drove past grinning”. Still the expedition was a success. A reel of photographs of their targets going about their unlawful business. A story fit to last three issues. And a banner headline; “Street Betting is blatant, sordid and evil”.

It doesn’t sound like the suburbs in Australian historiography, their “mindless conformism”, their “spiritual degeneration”, their “cultural emptiness”, (to take a few labels from Alan Gilbert’s recent essay on Australian anti-suburbanism). Nor does it sound like the suburbias of the nineteenth and twentieth century urban planners for whom the suburb represented the pristine synthesis of country and city, the refuge from the city and a private space for all. But it does sound like Manuel Castell’s prescription for a new history of urban space as a site of social conflict.

People always need a material base on which to organise their autonomy against the surveillance of the political apparatuses controlling the spheres of production and institutional power. Only in the secrecy of their homes . . . in the communication of taverns, in the joy of street gatherings may they find values, ideas, projects and, finally, demands that do not conform to the dominant social interests. The control over space is a major battle in the historic war between people and the state.

What was this bookmaker’s space in suburban Perth? It was the footpaths, the streets, the lanes, the vacant lots and verandahs and window ledges of hotels, in short the open spaces to which street bookies resorted to make their books and take their bets. This is not to say that each bookie’s space was the same. Each was defined by the suburb which created it. The urban space of leafy Nedlands was not the same as in gritty East Perth, nor was there much similarity between Cottesloe space, where beachgoers in summer were cooled by afternoon sea-breezes and faraway, working-class Midland, a suburb of homes, workplaces and well-used routes to the country. Nevertheless every suburb had its SP bookie, working his patch around a suburban hotel; and hotels, like the one in Bayswater which found itself without a local bookie, rang up the big city men like Pat Healy, Jerry Higgins, or Cliff Begley and made sure they got one. In every instance the bookies’ stand was next to an hotel. They fed off each other. The crowds (and the bookies at times) wandered from one to
the other. Publicans put wirelesses in their bars so winners could shout their mates. On good days bookies took their faithful clients in for a drink when the day’s racing was over and every bookie knew that a few beers loosened more than a drinker’s tongue.

If off-course betting was so common, then why would the *Western Mail* send out its expedition? It was because SP betting was illegal. It was made illegal in 1893, when the parliament passed Western Australia’s first Act against off-course betting. The legislation followed closely the British Betting Houses Act of 1853:

> No house, office, room or other place, shall be opened, kept or used for the purpose of the owner, occupier or user, or any person using the same . . . betting with persons resorting thereto, or for the purpose of any money, security, etc., being received, by the owner, as or for the consideration of any assurance, undertaking, or promise of agreement, to pay or give thereafter on any event or contingency of, or relating to, any horse race etc., and every such house shall be deemed to be a common nuisance and contrary to law.6

Though it tried to cover every contingency, the law had little effect. By 1897, Perth was ‘overrun with tobacconists carried on by gentlemen as a cloak to betting.’ Clever lawyers advised bookies of the linguistic imprecision of the Act. What was a ‘place’? What did ‘use’ and ‘keep’ mean? To the courts they meant a measure of possession over a place, a right of occupancy. But could bookmakers be said to have possession and a right of occupancy over a street or lane? Of course they could not, so those who chose to evade the law simply moved outside their shops and took bets in the street.7

Street betting grew rapidly in the first two decades of the new century as the cities and towns of Western Australia expanded and became more complex. But in the 1920s police began to use the obstruction clause of the Traffic Act against the street bookie. There did not have to be actual obstruction of pedestrians. The courts ruled that if bookies might potentially obstruct a passer-by then they were breaking the law. In other words, bookies were obstructing the traffic even if there wasn’t a soul within a mile of them. The Police Commissioner confessed it was a ‘very left-handed way of dealing with them’.8 Indeed it was! Perhaps police were left-handed because in the last ten years of illegal S.P. betting they laid over 17,000 charges of obstruction against street bookies and for a while in the 1940s the courts sentenced over 200 of those charged to terms of imprisonment.9

Street bookies stood at the lower end of the bookmaker’s status system. At the top were the big shop, credit and telephone bookies, wealthy men, with city offices, grand homes, political connections and their own political lobby group, the City and Suburban Turf Commissioner’s Association. In between them and the denizens of the street were shop bookies, who liked to see their customers and the colour of their money and who were prepared to pay the fines irregular police raids imposed on them. Then there were shop bookies who moved back and forth, from shop to street and street to shop, perhaps setting up their boards and radio on their own window ledges. But the real street bookies stayed permanently in the street. They were poor locals, the friends of publicans, the takers of small bets from the ordinary bloke. They organised, too, a body called the Metropolitan Sports Association, because even the big bookies in their own search for respectability (and legality) thought they were beyond the pale.10

Nevertheless they were there in the ’40s and ’50s, in every suburb, their numbers increasing as shop bookies were driven out of their shops by heavy fines or by the owners of premises subject to recent new laws which made them liable to prosecution. Police knew of only 28 locations in the metropolitan area in 1939 where street bookies could be found. In 1941 there were 42, and by 1954 there were probably 70, some of which like the East Perth Hotel’s pavement, were home to a whole community
of bookies. Working class suburbs had most, and in Perth these were still the inner city suburbs of Perth and Fremantle. In the 1940s, in what is now Northbridge, 20 street and 10 shop bookies clustered around a string of hotels. In Fremantle and its contiguous suburbs in the '40s the working-class culture which spawned a string of street corner pubs also spawned 28 bookies in shops and on street corners. There were five bookies in the outer working-class suburbs of Midland, between five and ten in Victoria Park, and five in Subiaco.

It is to be expected that there should be a world of illegal betting in such suburbs. After all, those who wanted a bet could hardly go to the races where the Western Australian Turf Club and its proprietary offshoots set their admission prices high to keep the masses out. But there were clusters of bookies in the most solid middle-class suburbs; three in Nedlands, six in Cottesloe and six in Claremont. This seems peculiar. Was there a secret life of danger and deviance beneath their solid, respectable facades? Perhaps there was. One bookmaker whose haunt was a lane next to a Nedlands hotel was raided weekly in 1945 and generally much more often than his contemporaries because a local woman regularly complained about him. Yet he continued to bet. If he paid the usual £20 fine for obstruction then he paid over £1000 in fines in that one year. It must have been a good place to work.

The street bookie was a local institution. Picture the scene painted by the explorers from the Western Mail, of the Guildford bookmakers. One bookie took his bets up a lane next to the Guildford hotel. It was conducted on business-like lines with a large board bearing a mass of racing detail leaning against a wall facing the street:

A few feet away was a smaller board displaying brief information that could be absorbed at a glance. A few feet away again was a portable radio set on a wooden box.

It was cold and wet on this Saturday. The saturated gravel laneway stubbornly refused to absorb the rain and muddy pools clogged the well worn route from bar room to betting board and beyond to the latrines. Around the portable radio were huddled about a dozen men. There were others squatting on the running board of cars and still others crowded in front of the betting boards...

About a mile away in Guildford still is the Woodbridge Hotel. No laneway for operators here. They have chosen a fine old tree near the hotel for their site and beneath its sheltering branches they have set up their boards, boxes and portable radios. Comfort, it would seem is the keynote. The clerks take piping hot tea from a billy between races. It wouldn't have surprised...if they had offered tea all around. But they didn't.

This doesn't sound dramatic or exciting, although the bet was undoubtedly just that to punters. Really it sounds rather drab (and wet and cold). But there was drama here, a suburban drama, which was staged with embarrassing frequency in the '40s and '50s. These were small dramas. There were none of the big and burlesque police raids like those on John Wren's Collingwood tote, when dozens of constables secreted in covered wagons sprang from their hiding places, sledgehammered down doors and arrested everyone not quick enough to slither through Wren's escape hatches. The raids in Perth seemed more everyday. At least they were to Pat Healy, who told a Royal Commission in 1959 that when police used to raid his shop in the 1920s they would “have a cup of tea and tell me I had to go off and I went”.

In fact, police raided shop bookies like Healy on a roster, raiding perhaps six to eight each Saturday. Police records show that this was a deliberately worked out policy, applied because police thought it was impossible to stamp out S.P. betting, (it was just too popular and the laws prohibiting it were impossible to enforce) and that it was unjust to try anyway. Why, they asked, should they enforce the laws against people betting off the racecourse when betting with bookmakers on the racecourse was not touched despite the fact that it, too, was illegal? Yes, the Police Act also outlawed on-course bookmakers, because they kept and used a place for betting, identified by their umbrellas and stands. Governments ignored this however; after all they had given course bookies a quasi-legitimacy by taxing their betting tickets.
And when in the 1930s the A.L.P. Minister for Police was asked to prosecute on-course bookmakers, he tersely replied "No!".16

Unlike shop bookies, street bookies were dealt with harshly by the police because they viewed street betting with greater disapprobation. Street bookies were just too conspicuous. Doubtless many did obstruct pedestrians, as the police claimed, especially as the betting stands were often in shopping streets, and very probably groups of men congregating around a radio presented an unedifying spectacle to more sober citizens. More important, however, street bookies were an obvious and open advertisement that the police were not doing their job. Shop bookies at least were off the street, hidden from view behind a barber's chair or the trays of pipes in a tobacconist's shop. Western Australian police manifestly did not like the public exhibition of law-breaking. That other "deviant" population, Perth's prostitutes, were also kept firmly out of sight behind the doors of their madame's brothels.17

How did the police enforce the laws against the street bookies? The first part of the answer, is often. In the later 1940s and '50s, police laid between 30 and 40 charges of obstruction per week. They preferred to charge bookies with offences under the Police Acts or Criminal Code hoping that the courts would accept their plea that the evidence (usually two betting tickets) indicated that the place the bookie stood was "a place" in the terms of the Acts. But this was too difficult. It became customary, then, to try to seize the betting book and tickets because the courts accepted these as evidence of betting and this was sufficient to make the charge of obstruction stick.18

A very left handed agreement indeed.

Obtaining the evidence was the problem and the drama. Picture the bookie under his verandah writing out his tickets, calling out the bets to his clerk, who pencilled them into his book. Perhaps they were surrounded by a dozen, perhaps fifty keen-eyed men intent on horse, odds and winning. A radio blared out the voice of Bert Bryant calling a Flemington race or Fred Carroll doing the honours for Sydney. On the corner stood the nitkeeper, keeping watch for the police. If he saw a police car, a "bobby" on a bicycle or a stranger (strangers were likely to be police in plain clothes, members of the Liquor Inspection Branch — the anti-gambling squad — or police cadets in mufti, so dressed to try and break through the bookies' defences by subterfuge), he would give a pre-arranged signal. If he was subtle — and subtlety came only with nerve and experience — he might pull out his handkerchief with a flourish and loudly blow his nose. If he was new to his job he might panic, wave his arms and run, shouting to his master, "here they come, here they come!" The punters then would try to look innocent or would scatter guiltily. The bookie would adopt his own subterfuge, perhaps slipping the evidence into a rubber casing and immersing it in a handy oil drum, or he might throw it into a neighbourly backyard. One bookie, who doubled as an undertaker, slipped his book and tickets into the coffin in the back of his hearse and looked saintly. If subterfuge failed and, the bookie was found out, then a stooge would step forward to take the rap. The stooge's job was to hang around with a mock betting book and tickets. If there was a raid he would push himself forward and claim to be the bookie. For the dubious privilege of getting a police record he would be paid £3 or £5. If he went to jail the bookie would look after his family, if he had one.

The drama did not always work out this way however, with bookies themselves assuming the role of director. With their nitkeepers, bookies were known to wait outside the Police Instructional School to familiarise themselves with the faces of new recruits.18 Some networks of nitkeepers were so efficient that local police could not even leave their station on a Saturday afternoon without being spotted. In 1946 one Midland station sergeant plaintively reported to his superiors
I accompanied P.C. . . . on Saturday afternoon last in an endeavour to assist him in apprehending betting operators but it was quite apparent that from the moment we left the police station our every move was known from West Midland to Helena Vale.20

On some occasions the police took drastic action. Spurred on by the debate on S.P. betting in Parliament, a press exposé or the appointment of a new Commissioner they blitzed the bookmaking fraternity, raiding everyone they knew. This was not because they thought it was possible to suppress the S.P. trade, because the equilibrium soon returned. Rather it was because they needed to be seen to be doing something. Perth’s biggest blitz followed hard on the heels of a Parliamentary debate on the 1938 Bookmaker’s Bill. The blitz was so intense that the police did something extraordinary: one Saturday they arrested all eleven of Pat Healy’s clerks. Healy had to pay £250 to bail them out.21 At other times, despairing of the regular raids, the police sent constables out to picket the places where the street bookies took their bets. It worked, but it was a strategy that could not work for long. There were other things for police to do on a Saturday afternoon. The blitzes and the picketing broke the rules of the game, which the contestants knew and played by. However if all the rumour and innuendo is true then the bookie would have been forewarned of an imminent raid, not by his nitkeeper, but by a friendly policeman, whose new suit would have been paid for by a regular weekly backhander of a pound or two.22

If the bookie had been caught, his books and tickets seized, then that was the end of his day unless he could organise bail and get straight back to work. If his stooge was taken instead, then all was well. The police had their arrest, the stooge got a bonus, the bookie kept on making money and the punters kept on betting. On the following Monday, the local magistrate or J.P. might grumble but he would hand down a fine or a jail sentence and the state would add another £20 to consolidated revenue. All were happy, except for the editor of the West Australian who would protest at another flagrant prostitution of the law, the Turf Club which would bemoan the loss of more betting money to the S.P. industry and the non-conformist churchmen and women who would complain that more pacts had been made with the devil and another sixpence, or a pound or ten pounds had been lost to the suburban family.23

In the 1920s and again in the 1950s some state governments conducted local option polls, to give suburban residents the chance to exclude hotels from their suburbs. No government ever did that with S.P. bookmakers. If they had, we would have had a source from which to make judgements about the place of the bookies in the suburbs. Instead we have to make do with the impressions of police, bookies, punters and parliamentarians, none of whom were without a special interest in the matter. Western Australian observers of the S.P. betting days, although they sometimes noted the “vast and far flung demand” for S.P. betting, inevitably claimed that the S.P. bookie catered mainly for working-men, which was why most punters were to be found in working-class suburbs.24 However, after the war when most of the big-city shop bookies had turned to credit betting, the Metropolitan Sports Association laid exclusive claim to the working-class punter.25 And the working-class punter laid claim to the bookie. Police well knew that punters protected their local bookies, warning them of approaching trouble.26

Yet there were complaints to police about both bookies and crowds from individuals in the most working-class of suburbs. At the same time there were crowds around the bookies in the most middle-class of suburbs. Once again complaints were always acted on. But who were these crowds? It is almost impossible to say, however there are indications that they were not the typically respectable residents of such suburbs. A deputation from the Nedlands Road Board to the Police Minister in 1945 complained
that the sight of a large body of men in the vicinity [of one hotel] obviously engaged in
betting detracted from the district. Residents complained bitterly of the crowds in the area
and the language used. Most of the residents had to use the main road for shopping. One
bad aspect was the use by bettors of a block of land at the rear of a shop near a hotel
as a public convenience.27

Inconvenient? Disreputable? To the respectable, the street bookie was more than
their opposite. He represented the demi-monde, the shady, shifty underworld on
the border of criminality. He was a bit of danger from the un lamented past of the
inner-city; the hawkers, the musicians, the larrikin gangs, the overflowing pub-
crowds, the processions, the street life that had been pushed aside by businessmen
intent on reducing competition, social reformers intent on suppressing popular
culture, the state intent on promoting social order and the process of urbanisation
itself, depopulating the inner-city and turning its street space into macadamised
conduits for getting somewhere. The S.P. bookie was the last remnant of this culture,
transferred, ironically, to the suburbs where he became at once prosaic, cheeky and
dangerous, depending on which suburb he worked in. He also seemed to be an
anachronism, a relic of another world in a suburban culture of private homes and
privatised families.

How then did he flourish? By rights he should have withered before the gaze of
the “private sphere”, died in the permafrost of Barry Humphries “suburban tundra”.
In fact he survived for reasons that were both beyond and part of the process of
suburbanisation. In the first place, he survived because of the continuing demand
for off-course betting facilities in the face of the inability of parliament either to
suppress him or legalise him. He survived because of the refusal of the Turf Club
to welcome anybody other than Perth’s social elite to its race courses. He survived
because the decline in shop betting after the war and the growth of telephone credit
betting forced many punters to bet with him; he was, therefore, a practical solution
to a series of problems. He survived also because of the suburbanisation of recreation
and the corresponding decline of inner-city vitality and because of the sexual division
of leisure. Suburban culture has never been the private and privatised culture that
its critics have suggested. In any case, suburbs are different. In some, the separation
of home from work (an image that is based on the sexist assumption that home
work is not work) on which the archetypal suburb is based, had never happened
so the private suburb — public city dichotomy had also never happened. In those
where it had, recreation became the public face of suburban life.

Clubs, ovals, halls and suburban picture theatres, river foreshores and parks
became suburban leisure space situated so that suburbanites didn't always need to
travel to the city for their fun. Of course these were mostly a part of respectable
leisure, a post-war version of nineteenth century improving recreation. On the other
hand, there were the pubs and the bookies, the working men's retreats, the place
where the sexual division of leisure was most pronounced and where the mixture
of men, liquor and gambling in a rough, masculine bonhomie harked back to the
city's unrespectable past.

In 1954 the reign of the street bookie ended. The Government legalised off-course
betting and the bookies who got the licences to run the new betting shops were those
associated with the Turn Commissioners Association. So the bookies and their
punters went indoors out of the rain and the heat, away from the prying eyes of
journalists and the disapproving gaze of the respectable. The denizens of the street
either gave up the game altogether or became workers, clerks for their former rivals.
The conflict over street space had ended. In the final analysis the street bookie was
defeated, not by the police but by a combination of the state, legislation and his
own unrespectability. It probably didn't matter to punters where they bet as long

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as it was local and as long as they won occasionally, but the move indoors robbed the suburban street of its one remaining vestige of life.

NOTES

1. Western Mail, 2 August 1953, p.7; 13 August 1953, p.5.
5. Interview with Vic Godwin, ex Perth S.P. bookmaker, conducted in 1979. The details of these interviews can be found in C.J. Fox, Off-Course Betting in Western Australia, 1934-1954. M.A. Thesis, The University of Western Australia, 1979.
6. The Statutes of Western Australia, 1893. Police Act Amendment Act, Colony of Western Australia, 56, Victoria, No. 10, Section 4, p.2.
9. Fuller statistics can be found in Fox, Op. Cit. pp.xx and 196. Annual convictions were compiled from the annual Police Commissioners Reports which can be found partly in Parliamentary Papers and partly filed separately at the Battye Library, Microfilm, PR1796. On the jailing of traffic obstructors see the evidence of Sergeant A.J. Baird, Royal Commission on Betting in Western Australia, Transcript of evidence pp.637-8.
13. Western Mail, 13 August 1953, p.6.
15. The Police Commissioner wrote in 1942 "My instructions to the Inspector are to raid from six to eight shops every Saturday... he must obtain the evidence, allow no discrimination and give all known shops a turn."
23. Ibid., Chapter 4.
24. See for example P.B. Healy, E.T. Begley, C. Derby, R.J. Higgins and G. Mackay "Statement of a case presented to Hon. W. Kitson applying for the legalisation of off-course betting", 10 September 1937, in Chief Secretary's Office, Box 446, Unclassified Confidential files 1907-1944. Their estimate was 60% of Western Australian adults bet regularly. The Police evidence to the 1948 Royal Commission put the figure at 15%. (Report, p.18). The words "vast and far flung" are in Liquor Inspection Branch Annual Report, Police File, 2746/1951. On the argument that S.P. betting was for the working man see the Healy et. a., application and the West Australian, June 24, 1936, p.21.
27. West Australian, 24 November 1945, p.11.
Streetwalker

A woman walks
into summer

along streets
where her life
stands, trimmed;
and being what she is
she stitches
boring samplers
prettily
to the click of the tongues
that had taught the mothers

when once she had seen
an imagined infinity
opening out
and wished upon.

It's the sameness
that brings on the melancholy

the desire
to desecrate
the predictable; the house,
the trees, the garden; to
cut the texture, and stand
deep in cool
slashed silk; to conjure
design
from its vagaries.

At the end
of summer

she sits

is weaving
her shadow.
Bumpers

There was a certainty in my youth. Every Christmas between the ages of twelve and sixteen I received a pair of Dunlop Bumpers. Every Christmas Eve I went to sleep knowing the morning would bring more Bumpers, and it did. Bumpers were strange looking shoes. They came in two styles, each with the same creamy yellow rubber soles nearly two inches thick. You had a choice of navy-blue canvas or chocolate artificial suede uppers. I would be given the fake suede ones. (The navy-blue had a middle-aged yachting, golfing look.) I should point out that this was the late 1950s, the era of the desert boot, and the only other shoes in existence were black school shoes or sandshoes. Every Christmas I put in an optimistic request for desert boots. My requests were actually foolhardy and increasingly provocative. Dunlop did not make desert boots. Dunlop made Bumpers and my father, Roy, worked for Dunlop. It is not going too far to say that he lived for Dunlop.

The Dunlop management, including my father, believed that Bumpers were superior to desert boots. My father said that Bumpers did not have “a bodgie image”. He was right. Nevertheless, Dunlop had created Bumpers to cut into the teenage desert boot market while still satisfying the adult casual-shoe market. Something was wrong with this idea. Dunlop and my father did not understand that “a bodgie image” was entirely the point. “A bodgie image” was desired by thousands of customers.

In all my teenage years I never saw another boy wearing Bumpers. Dunlop could have asked any teenager, especially those who laughed at my Bumpers at North Cottesloe beach and the Claremont, Windsor and Dalkeith picture theatres, whether Bumpers seriously rivalled desert boots. Bumpers had no panache. Bumpers focussed undue attention on the wearer’s feet and dominated the rest of one’s clothing, the pegged jeans and pink shirt, for instance. The only thing apt about Bumpers was their name.

* * *

If Bumpers were the symbol of my adolescence, rubber was the force that united and drove my family. We wore, played with, slept on, walked on, sat on and were conveyed by Dunlop products. We were a Dunlop family. My mother taught our budgerigar to chirrup the company’s advertising slogan of the day — “Today You’ll Use a Dunlop Product!”* It occurred to me only recently that this might have been irony on her part, or something stronger. To have Clark desert boots or Goodyear tyres or a Spalding tennis ball in one’s possession, even in the general vicinity, was to commit a crime somewhere between treason and sacrilege. It breached the Dunlop

* Dunlop took over Ansell, Australia’s biggest manufacturer of condoms, twenty years after this slogan was popular.
faith, the faith of my father. So we were loyal to the big D of the advertisements and the Dunlop colours of yellow and black (chosen for their eyecatching qualities). In our house we had bottle openers and ash trays in the shape of huge Dunlop-65 golf balls. When my father married my mother he told her (she said later), “You know you’re marrying Dunlop as well as me.” Certainly we would often hear him announce self-righteously at parties, “Dorothy knows Dunlop comes first.”

I seem to remember that the males present (usually Dunlop employees — their social life revolved round the company) nodded sagely over their beers. I would like to remember the women, especially my mother, scoffing or laughing, but I do not.

* * *

Another thing that militated against Bumpers’ success as Christmas gifts: I knew they were just a tick on a docket somewhere. No one actually shopped for them, nor was full price paid. A secretary could fetch a yellow and black box of Bumpers from the backroom store in five minutes. Even twelve-year-old Dunlop kids knew this.

I tell a lie — there was one good thing about Bumpers. They made you two inches taller. There are album photographs of our family taken during the same Christmas holiday at Shoalwater Bay. In one shot we are all ready for the beach, lined up self-consciously in our bathers. I am barefoot and my father, wearing sandals, is taller than me. In another snap I am dressed up in that Christmas’s pair of Bumpers, a cream sports-coat and matching chocolate pants. I am smiling managerially down on my father’s head.

* * *

One Saturday I was caddying for my father at Cottesloe Golf Club, hauling the Dunlop bag, Dunlop clubs and Dunlop-65 balls. I was wearing my current Bumpers because they would be gentle on the greens. During the afternoon on the course I actually saw two other pairs of Bumpers — worn by non-Dunlop personnel or family! Both pairs were the navy-blue variety and fitted with golf cleats. Their owners would have been well into their forties. Of course my father was also wearing his (navy-blue) Bumpers, so there were four pairs of Bumpers on the one golf course! Only my Bumpers were the chocolate ersatz-suede type. The moisture on the fairway soon turned the nap on my Bumpers sleek and black, and they stayed like that, like wet otter skin, even when they dried out.

* * *

Because of their Dunlop connection — and lack of other attractions in Perth in the 1950s — famous visiting sportsmen sometimes came to our house to eat or, more often, drink. Tennis players, golfers, Redex trial drivers like “Gelignite Jack” Murray: sportsmen promoting something like Dunlop Maxply racquets or Dunlop-90 tyres would drink beer in pewter tankards in our lounge room. When I was thirteen or so I met all the Davis Cup stars, even the Americans like Pancho Gonzales, Vic Seixas and Tony Trabert. I had lunch at the Adelphi Hotel in the company of Rod Laver and observed that the left wrist cutting his steak and salad was twice as thick as his right. Once Lew Hoad spoke to me. Well, not to me. Of me. There were two company cars ferrying players to the Kings Park tennis club where an interzone final was to be played. I had been given a spare ticket. I was wearing my Bumpers.
My father asked Lew Hoad, “Which car would you like to travel in?” Lew gave
a sleepy indication of his head in my direction. He said, “I’ll go with Shoes.”

* * *

Dunlop was a strong believer in the family. My father’s secretary, Miss Edna
Kirwan, always bought my mother’s birthday, anniversary and Christmas presents.
One year Miss Kirwan was in hospital and my father forgot my mother’s birthday.
I had remembered it, however, and I don’t think he ever forgave me. Miss Kirwan
was a sensible, aunt-like figure about fifteen years older than my parents. When
Dunlop children visited the office she was crisply generous with tea and biscuits.
Another family-oriented employee was Dunlop’s most rotund executive, Jim Shute,
who played Santa Claus at the annual children’s Christmas party. Despite the heat
the party always took place indoors, in the main office in Murray Street. The floors
were Dunlop rubber of course, thicker and bouncier than normal commercial
flooring, so the parties were sticky, noisy affairs, with everyone feeling compelled
to spring about on the squishy floors, and with the sweet smell of rubber hanging
over the festivities. Dunlop gave you a present every year until you were thirteen.
They were proper presents, not just Dunlop products, and we all appreciated this.

There were Dunlop dances and balls and football matches, and in the cooler
months the social club organised Sunday “chop picnics”, as barbecues were then
called. We would drive up into the Darling Ranges; the men would build barbecues
out of rocks and boil billies, the women laid out home-made cakes on checked
travelling rugs. My brother and I played with knives and compasses and caught
tadpoles; on sunny days we tried to start bushfires with magnifying glasses, or we
dammed streams with rocks. On other random weekends Dunlop children got to
“see over the factory”. This happened more times than they may have wished, and
the process from coagulated milky latex to gutta-percha to rubber sheeting was firmly
impressed on the mind of every child over six or seven.

* * *

A weird experience known to Dunlop children: compressing a Dunlop golf ball
in a vice and then cutting it in half with a saw. The results were amazing.

* * *

I drew on the Dunlop ethos, if not actual memories, to create Hallstrom’s, the
company for which Murray Crisp was assistant State manager in The Savage Crows.
I had Hallstrom’s manufacture gelatine instead of rubber. I think I liked the idea
of Murray Crisp supporting his family on the proceeds of reconstituted animal parts;
somehow it fitted the genocide theme. Hallstrom Gelatine resembled Dunlop Rubber
only in the way it was like the State branch of any national or international company.
Perth in those pre-boom, pre-entrepreneurial days was a branch manager’s town.
Men like my father from head offices in Melbourne and Sydney formed a prominent
group in the life and business of the city. As young executives they had brought
their initially complaining wives and families across the Nullarbor to the most remote
western city in the world and deposited them in its leafy and tranquil middle-class
suburbs. And then they were seduced by the light and the landscape and the promise
of prosperity and stayed forever, resisting national advancement and calls back to
head office.

They became great boosters of Perth and of something they called The West
Australian Way of Life. But there was then this urge, this itch, to make the big end
of Australia — the “Eastern States” — and the world appreciate their wisdom in choosing this Eden as their home. If only Perth could be “put on the map”. Putting Perth on the map became something of a crusade.

Most of these businessmen (and its sporting interests put the Dunlop team well in the foreground) saw the Commonwealth Games in 1962 as the grand event which would finally put Perth on the map. As it turned out, 1962 was a pivotal year for my family, as well as for Dunlop and the State of Western Australia. While we were quietly but eagerly anticipating getting on the map with the Games later that year, my first child was born and my mother died. Meanwhile the Games was rarely off the businessmen’s and politicians’ lips. No one dreamed that an event of this magnitude could possibly be eclipsed, that our city would literally beam from the globe, if not the atlas. We hadn’t envisaged N.A.S.A.’s Mercury space program, John Glenn’s becoming the first American to orbit the earth and our direct participation in the adventure.

Perth turned on all its lights to welcome Colonel Glenn. Not only that, but he saw the flow and remarked on it. (“Thank everyone for turning on the lights,” he said from 125 miles up.) For our warmth and camaraderie the Americans dubbed us the City of Light and we were proud to be so called. Now we were certain we were on the map. But it had been touch and go. The Premier, Dave Brand, who had earlier asked the U.S. vice-consul to ask the State Department to ask N.A.S.A. to ask Colonel Glenn would he mind announcing as he passed over Perth that it would be the host city for the upcoming Commonwealth Games, admitted the next day that the astronaut hadn’t delivered the whole PR message. “But his reported sighting of the lights of Perth was ample reward,” the Premier said, putting a brave face on it. “And there is the fact that Perth will be favourably remembered by America and the rest of the world.”

* * *

I remember a canny Perth businessman at the pet-rock end of capitalism making a killing in 1962 by selling sealed, empty tins labelled Guaranteed Air from the City of Light. They gave people a giggle. My father bought a dozen cans of air and gave them away to bigshots visiting from head office in Melbourne.

* * *

If in 1962 Perth was still a branch manager’s town, becoming the City of Light allowed it to kick over the traces. Within a month a couple of the more boisterous businessmen had even suggested officially changing Perth’s name to The City of Light. There was new bravura in the beer gardens. Women moved from Pimms on to other drinks. When girls got pregnant they did not leave for aunts in Melbourne. Reporters were no longer sent to Guildford airport to interview random travellers arriving from the Eastern States. Restaurants were born, old buildings were torn down and wine and skyscrapers appeared. Desert boots were no longer fashionable; leather soles were popular, and sturdy brogues seemed to combine both a rural determination and an urban flair. Perth was on the map and my widowed father, no longer resisting further advancement, moved back to the Eastern States.
A Commuter's Song

Each afternoon at four forty-four
how my senses stray.
All day the office and I
have been interchangeable. Work
has put my heart to sleep.

So now I shall shoulder a soft suede bag
and carry it across the threshold
marrying its plum shadows
to a distant silence.

I will put on my cloak and go now.
I will settle into a silver carriage
like sugar slipping down the valley
of a teaspoon and I will wait
in that granular time

for rails to slippery-dip me
beyond honeycombs on the Harbour,
beyond office blocks which drip
sweet light, but hold in their cells
cleaners, caretakers, prisoners of overtime.

Each afternoon at four forty-four
how my senses stumble, longing like an addict
for the secret spoon to fill
as I put on my cloak and go
far, far from here

toward a cup of sighs
sunk deep between mountains and sea
a sky of fallen silver
where business dissolves
and the world darkens

ankle-deep in ripples
and is still.
Seven Floors Up

And rain again
mists across the valley;
the oyster tones
darken into cloud
late afternoon, fog blossoming
the black escarpment.

In the apartment
lights flick on,
silhouettes are rounded
into flesh. Passion
generated on waterbeds

is dampened with the switch
to neon. Her neat rounded breasts
try not to accuse, but neither
do his thin legs boast. Fever
might just have been a spectre
in the gloom, as limbs
twisted and sweated against limbs;
but in the stark white
artificial light

they
are conscious once again
of human nakedness. Black rain
sheets against the window,
the lovers dress themselves
as participants in a
drowning. They grope
for one another’s hands
to divert the accusation —

the silence of rain on tiles
seven floors up
in the fog.
The house hunched to one side as if to relieve pressure pains in old worn joints, and the impression was emphasised by holed downpipes and a sagging balcony. The once decorative wrought iron was pocked and broken. Large patches of paint had peeled away to hang from the walls, and pink undercoat showed through like unhealed wounds. Frayed awnings hooded the windows to shield its secrets from outsiders — though not even the sharpest eyes could pierce the heavy drapes.

Emma stood at the gateway to study this relic of her childhood, comparing it with the shape still haunting her dreams. It was darker than she remembered, as if gloom had settled into its pores. She turned to stare along the grimy street. The footpath was cracked and broken but no clumps of weed had survived the pollution of scuffing feet. A few trees struggled for survival, stunted by exhaust fumes and snatching fingers. The other buildings were just as old as this one, if not as neglected, and memory swamped her with visions of the neighbours of childhood. All kin to Grandma. The thought turned her eyes back to the house. A misty rain had begun to fall and droplets gathered to ooze from deep cracks in the weatherboards. Faking remorse, Emma thought, and shivered.

"Are you cold Mummy?"

"No Beth, I'm just happy to be seeing Grandma again after so many years."

Beth accepted the lie without question. She had discovered that Mummy lied at times. When Mummy was opening that letter with a knife it had slipped and cut her hand. She'd said it didn't hurt, but she had smeared blood across the writing, then torn the page to tiny bits. And Mummy wasn't really happy about seeing Grandma again, she was here because Daddy said it was her duty. All the things Mummy hated doing were duties, yet she went ahead and did them anyway. Afterwards she wore a special look. Smug, Daddy called it.

Mummy straightened her shoulders. "Come on Beth, we have to go in sooner or later."

Beth looked into her mother's face. A squeeze of fear made her hang on to the gatepost. There was something terrible in this house.

She feels the evil in this place, Emma thought, just as I sensed it when they brought me here after my mother's death. I was Beth's age then, and that old woman used me from the first day. Fetching and carrying, catering to her every whim. The flunkey of every family in the street. My needs were selfish, my wants sinful. How I hated her. Almost as much as she hated me.

Perspiration trickled down Beth's back, though the day was cool. There was a feeling flowing from her mother, unfamiliar and frightening. She didn't like this house. She didn't want to meet Grandma.
The creaking gate woke her. She blinked rapidly to clear the dregs of sleep. Pushing herself against the reinforced arms of the old chair she tilted sideways then leaned forward, literally falling into an upright position. The half empty bottle of stout was an invitation and she grabbed, lifted, threw down the contents in one gulp. Her shoulders hunched and released to ease an aching back as she peered through a smeared window. Her eyes met the disdainful stare of a slim, well dressed young woman, then slid away to fix on the child. She first thought of pretending to be away from home but she knew Emma had seen her. Not that it mattered, her granddaughter expected rudeness and was rarely disappointed. The girl's abrasive nature invited harshness. What a lazy, contrary child she had been, and what a snobbish ingrate she had turned out to be. But the child looked sweet. A warning thrummed through her chest and she held her breath.

She was old and weary and sick of pain.

The door opened slowly. Emma's face paled. Nothing had changed. The same large bulk, the iron grey hair pulled back into a severe bun, the heavy lidded eyes. Even the same mauve dress. She moved forward unwillingly to kiss her grandmother's cheek. The same smell of herbs, the strong odour of stout on her breath. The crepey, age blotted skin — and the fingers gripping her shoulders were still a command for attention.

Beth released the gatepost while she stared at Grandma. A big lady, bigger even than Daddy. Her dress was the colour of the roses in Mrs Dory's garden. Beth loved that colour, but when Mrs Dory had given Mummy a bunch they had been thrown into the garbage. She craned upward to peer into the round face with funny crinkly skin and was immediately won by an inviting wink. Grandma reached down to lift her and she sniffed in the Grandma smell, smiled into eyes that reminded of light in a dark room. Then she noticed the look on Mummy's face and struggled to be put down.

Emma placed a protective arm around Beth as they followed Grandma into the kitchen. Her nose wrinkled at the odours, her look flicked the stained furniture with disdain. The floor had not been washed for a week and cobwebs hung from the ceiling.

Grandma noticed the look. A flash of anger made her hands shake. It was her sinful pride that once she had been known as the cleanest woman in the street, and that had not been easy after her husband died and Emma came. She had spent half the night cleaning, all day sewing and ironing to feed herself and the child. Emma, with her constant demands for attention, had been little help. Precious time and energy had been spent in making her accept responsibility. That was necessary to prevent her growing up with her mother's ways. But now mildew gathered in the bathroom, dust had turned walls and floors to a uniform grey, curtains huddled together to hide grimy windows. An aura of gloom proved that the house knew it had become a burden. She tried to keep the rooms tidy but her sight was failing and old bones were no longer willing.

Shame made her tongue unnecessarily sharp. "I've not cleaned today, I've been ill."

Emma stared at new lines on the old face. Deep grooves in the forehead, a pinching around the mouth. Perhaps she should offer to clean. It was her duty, and if she stayed a day or two she might be able to learn more about her mother. But what was the use, Grandma had always refused to talk about that first Elizabeth. She had never listened to questions about her, or anything else for that matter. She never
had time, never listened, never spoke except to criticise. Memory was a rebuff and Emma's lips folded to suppress the offer.

"Yes, I had a letter from Great Uncle Bert. He said you weren't well. The same old headaches and aching back is it?"

"Not this time. I'm dying. You're my nearest kin so you'll inherit, if that's what you came to find out. The tea things are where they always were, you can make us a pot while I talk to this child of yours."

Beth climbed onto the broad lap. A comfortable place, much like Daddy's old chair. Softer than Mummy's bony angles. A vague unease made her glance at Emma. Anger was plain to see. She struggled to be put down. Unease deepened to confusion.

"The child is like you Emma. Have you taught her to be contrary or was she born that way?"

Emma's retort was sharp. "Beth is always shy with strangers."

"Strangers?" Grandma snorted. "I'm her great grandma, she doesn't have to be shy with me."

Beth frowned at the harshness in Grandma's voice. The old lady shouldn't speak to Mummy that way. She was about to tell her so, but she was stopped by a sharp hiss of indrawn breath. She looked up quickly and pushed a fist into her mouth. Emma's eyes were points of ice. Beth could no longer choke back a scream. Her first glimpse of hatred was terrifying. Her routine world has split and crumbled, her mother was a stranger and Beth was alone in this dreadful house. She screamed again, covering her face to block out these horrible people.

The sudden piercing shrieks shocked an old worn heart into protest. Grandma's face marbled blue. With hands clutching the front of her dress she crashed to the floor. She could feel her heart stutter and knew its beating would soon stop. She watched Emma lift the vial of tiny white tablets from the table.

Don't push one of those down me throat. I don't want any more pain. Let an old woman die in peace.

But though her eyes were eloquent just one word escaped. "Please."

The ice of Emma's eyes melted to shock, then a flare of triumph.

I owe you nothing old woman, not even your life.

Her hand tightened on the vial. She slipped it into her pocket.

Thanks, my little Emma. The old eyes blinked and clouded. Her smile was serene.

Emma did not see the smile as she lifted her child to stride from the room without looking back, but Beth recognised its meaning. The special look was on Mummy's face and Grandma was happy too. Life was normal again. She sighed content.

Emma misread the sight. "It's all right darling. Grandma was a very old lady. No one can blame us."

Beth struggled to be put down. The image of a smile was replaced by a blue mottled face. The memory of ice in her mother's eyes became solid, became a knife, and she remembered that Mummy sometimes lied. She turned back to stare. Heavy rain washed down the windows, pulling away the scabby paint to make new wounds. Water ran from the holed downpipes in deep, gulping sobs.

Beth turned and ran from the shape that was to become a focal point for all her nightmares.
The Household Muse

(Katherine Mansfield talking after listening to Milhaud)

Piano Suite: 'La Muse Ménagère

The house takes up much time. There's dishes and getting the food while all the talking is going on. It is a stage set with two or more players. I am servant and you say there's nothing much to eat. All very well if you haven't anything to do but I walk around with a mind full of saucepans and sharp smelling stoves that hiss at high temperatures and go out when the door slams. No good dreaming of log fires and buns. Romance went out with all that kitchen sink stuff, 'le soins du ménage' (household chores) and arranging flowers for friends dropping in for tea, (you know the story) it's domestic and fraught with cats to feed and not only the onions that make you cry. Even the sky is full

(1915)

(Life of Ma Parker)

of tea-leaves.
Supersaturday Supermarket

Arthritic crabs, the trolleys
Set off along our pre-conditioned
Maze, passing the other droll,
Dull or elegant members
Of the tribe. We have trained
Ourselves well, know exactly
Where to go.

Specials. Neat weights and prices
On the civilized products of our
Slaughtering, plucking, picking.
Astonishment at the by-gone
Habit of meeting friends.
All one in the elaborate kindergarten
Of the senses.

Is it possible to want and need
So much? Purposeful amblers
Say yes. The cartons topple.
Bottles clink. Always one last
Corner to turn. Yearning
Ineluctable. Cravings sire such
Reflexes in mind and eye, mind's
Eye, the out-reaching stomach.

Gatherer-hunters, not hunter-gatherers,
We pile our chariots high:
Consume, consume, drools that solitary
Tune, as we thirst and assess, flattering
Newest products first. Money is the safest
Passport, and we head for homeland.

With mild disgust we dissect
The booty that others have tastelessly
Garnered. The foray ends.
We have pillaged enough.
Pockets reek of emptiness.
Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
The shelves hang low  
Their weeping fruit;  
Like grasshoppers in cardboard castles  
We are almost content  
To be content.

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**AILEEN KELLY**

**Nan**

Careful on the pension she walks past  
Safeway to the nearest public phone  
set low enough. Her daughters do seem pleased  
really when she rings, come when they can  
what with having to run round their own kids,  
Daniel already taller than her and hungry  
when he does come, handsome, talking football  
and nice-mannered considering. Just last week  
some youths with plastic hair and beerbreath jostled  
hers here by the supermarket, “Watch it Shorty”;

all elbows, chainsaw laughs and acned faces.  
She picks the checkout where the woman knows her,  
“Your grandchildren well?” Going home  
her feet beat voices from the passive pavement,  
the shopper’s wheel squeals. For so many  
years (until so many years ago)  
her own big cheerful Danno called her Shorty  
meaning Love.
Supermarket

“You can’t leave it there, lady!”
   Too late.
   She already had.
   The disc jockey was on his feet now, headphones off, calling after her. “You can’t leave the trolley there, lady. We’ve booked the space.”
   “Have to.”
   “Get rid of it or I will.”
   “Back in five.” Jacqui held up a widespread hand to show the number of seconds she needed.
   She kept going. Shopping plazas were for shoppers not disc jockeys. Let him squawk.
   She swept past the front entrance — the sale signs, the checkout girls, the turnstiles — hurrying down the ramp to the car park. She skipped in front of a Range Rover and reached the door beside the lift. It slammed behind her. The stairs were a godsend. They would take her straight back to the store. She mounted the steps two at a time.
   When she got to the fire-door, she paused to catch her breath. Best not to look flustered. Be calm. She opened the door and walked down the aisle towards the cereals section. Nice and casual. Yes, anyone watching would think she had been looking for biscuits in the neighbouring aisle and had wandered round the corner to pick up some muesli.
   Saturday morning.
   Just dawdling along.
   He was still there: jeans and blue shirt, trolley in front of him, peering at the cereal packets like a schoolboy hoping to cut out a coupon and win a trip to Bali.
   Or was he sniffing them?
   Jacqui plucked a packet of muesli off the nearest shelf and sauntered onwards. It was pathetic really. The man was supposed to be an up and coming architect. A lion leaping from one skyscraper to another. Instead, he spends his time tracking down bargains at the supermarket — a trip to somewhere on the back of a weetbix packet.
   “Having fun?”
   She was past him by the time he found out where the voice had come from. She couldn't tell whether he was pleased to see her or not. A wry smile had found its way into his eyes. But that was his style: self-deprecatory, amused by his own shortcomings.
   “This definitely isn't my scene.”
   She glanced over her shoulder at the little heap of tinned foods in his trolley. “Apparently.”
At the end of the row she attached herself to a checkout queue. *Don’t look back.* It was up to him now. If he wanted to come after her, meet her in the coffee lounge, he could. That would be his decision.

The queue moved forward.

No sign of him.

Nothing happening.

Maybe he was parking his trolley somewhere, finding a niche. That too was part of David’s style — fussing round to find a safe place for his trolley before going after the woman he loved. Whichever way you looked at it, Jacqui reminded herself, he was a bit strange, and always had been. Not quick on the uptake. Too casual.

She wouldn’t turn round to see where he was, not if it killed her. It was up to him now.

She peered at the display of brightly coloured chocolate bars which had come into view. *Chocolat Suisse.* Toblerone. The little pyramids laid out in rows. Tiny tombs. The queue moved forward again. Jacqui found herself staring at the checkout girl. So young. Fingers moving so fast.

The girl glanced at the packet of muesli while the fingers of her right hand danced up and down the keys. “You’re in the wrong line,” she said as she took the note Jacqui held out to her. “There’s a checkout by the entrance for those with less than eight things.”

“I didn’t notice. I was in a hurry.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” The girl handed over the change and transferred her attention to the next customer. “It’s meant to be quicker, that’s all.”

Jacqui waved the young man doing the packing away and tucked the small cushion of muesli under her arm. She went through the motions of depositing the change in her purse and closing it. Perhaps David had found his way to another checkout point and was about to catch up with her.

She dropped the purse into the pocket of her coat and sneaked a glance sideways. No sign of him. Just the row of checkout booths, the girls in their blue uniforms, and the packers stuffing things into plastic bags. When the bags were full they went into the trolleys and the trolleys went down the ramp to the car park. *This definitely isn’t my scene.* A couple of tins in a wire cage.

“I don’t believe it,” Jaqui said to herself. “He sees me and he goes on shopping. I do not believe it.”

Well, if that’s what he wanted to do, bury his head in the weet-bix, so be it. Let him. She had her own cage to walk to the car, enough shopping to kill her, and no time to spare. *This isn’t exactly my scene either. I have things to do too.*

The disc jockey must have seen her coming.

“You left the trolley, right?”

Standing up inside the kiosk, he looked and sounded like a sentry. The frizzy beard and the headphones circling his neck made him seem foreign, like the guardian of a frontier somewhere. Kampuchea, maybe. Timor. Sri Lanka. Perhaps that was what a shopping centre in some godawful suburb felt like — the wilds. He kept glancing at the spinning turntable as if to reassure himself he was still on air, in touch.

“I don’t see it.”

“You don’t see it because I got rid of it. When we do a promotion we book the whole space. How can people tick their sheets if there are trolleys all over the place?”

“Somewhere to leave it for five seconds. That’s all I needed.”

The disc jockey glanced at his record again. “I don’t have time to talk. One of the packers got rid of it. It’s probably back there in the store.”

“Where’s your heart?”
“Where’s my heart? Very funny. What a scream.” He took another peek at the record. “They send me up here to run some loony competition and I’m supposed to be minding trolleys too. Terrific.”

Jacqui picked up the roving microphone which was lying loose on the counter. She raised her thumb to the switch and tilted the mouthpiece towards her. “Alright, then. I’ll cast a vote.”

“A vote? That’s more like it!” The peevish sentry had been spirited away. In his place stood a T-shirted disc jockey, the slogan ‘Let It Be’ adorned his noble breast. “Now?”

“No. Wait till I give the signal.” He was back in his seat, saddling up, fingers bringing the mike in close, the other hand poised above the turntable. “Which way should I vote?”

“That’s for you to say, babe. It’s your decision. This here is the democracy of the airwaves.”

Another minute and he’d be off into cloudland for good, zapping the world below with bullshit, gee-whiz bursts of American-speak.

“Who are you favouring?”

“Vote the way it grabs you. Rock or local reggae. Anything you like. Whatever turns you on.”

“Are you a mainland station?”

“We surely are. So let’s go.”

He adjusted his headphones and flicked a switch. “‘Lazy Days and Lazy Nights’. Another teaser from home town hero Teddy and the Teddy Boys. But right now it’s Jimmy J. coming to you live from the Beauty World Centre north of Blosseville, and let me tell you that means ‘north’. Oh, boy! It’s incredible up here. Still part of the mainland, they tell me, but freewheeling up the freeway, it feels like you’re out at sea. Hey, Mom, I’m drowning! That’s fine, by me, folks. I’m in the right place to lay it on you yet again: the mainland or the island sound? That’s the question I’m putting to a real sweetie now. She’s old enough to vote, but still a swinger!”

He thumbed an invisible switch and added “Go for it.”

“I vote for the island sound,” Jacqui said. “Because I like it, and because the mainland stations lose things.”

The microphone had gone dead, she realized, but she soldiered on. “If peanuts like Jimmy J. hang round shopping centres they should make themselves useful.”

She put the mike back on the counter.

“So there we have it,” Jimmy was saying, his amplified voice ringing around the glassy plaza, “another vote for giggles and good times. Let’s mark that one down to experience, folks. The lines are open and the votes are pouring in. So let’s hear something from the king of local reggae, Nathan Lelo. Yes, the island sound.”

Jacqui turned away from the booth, looking for her trolley.

“Smart arse,” she heard the disc jockey shout after her.

She couldn’t help smiling. Jimmy J. He didn’t get tongue-tied when things went wrong, she had to grant him that. Go for it. She could still feel the serrated switch riding upwards, her thumb disappearing into the spongy bulb, and her voice booming back at her. She liked quick thinking in a man. Verve.

The smile faded. There were wire cages everywhere. She was stuck up here at the end of the freeway: alone, adrift, drowning.
The Lesson

The yobbos occupied the train
Like drunken conquerors that day,
And cursed and swaggered in disdain
Of us, their inoffensive prey.

There was no remedy at hand,
No power that could interfere,
And we began to understand
The jungle had reverted here.

True, we had the moral right,
But saw it was no use at all
Unless we were prepared to fight
An all-out boots-and-bottle brawl.

We were the civilized, the tame,
Confronted by this other thing:
We huddled silently in shame,
Felt ignominy's bitter sting.

Because we turned the other cheek
We gratified the brutes; we sowed
Fresh havocs for the small and weak,
Legitimised the jungle code.

It was a vision of the age,
The naked moment when one sees
What random, predatory rage
We've learnt to flatter and appease.
Dr Memory in the Dream Home

Script for Musical Theatre Piece for the music of Stuart Davies Slate

This script was generated from Stuart Davies Slate’s concept and written for his music. Funded by the Music and Literature Boards of the Australia Council, the production of Dr Memory in the Dream Home for the 1990 Festival of Perth was commissioned by Evos, directed by Andrew Ross and performed at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art with Camilla Sobb as Marseer, Helen Doig as Justina, James Hagan as Barry Rank, Susie Evans as Esta Marvell and Hartley Newman as Dr Memory.

SYNOPSIS:

Marseer, the manic virgin, strays from the confines of her quarter acre plot and the family romance in which she has been trapped. She somnambulates into a Display Home where there's an attempt to deflect her desires towards the consumable vistas of the White Home Dreaming. Barry Rank, Minister for Housing of the New Phantom Corporate Labour Party and Esta Marvell, Real Estate Agent of the Decade are there to seduce her. However, with the presence of Justina, chardonnay socialist and amateur urban ethnographer and Dr Memory, the singing provocateur, the Dream Home becomes a spinning mixmaster of images, a tug of war between consumer and erotic fantasies and the sordid realities its inhabitants would forget. (The R and I Tower sold with the sky-line from the Dream Home is the Pinochet Fix, the Bond link with the Chile Telephone Company and all that this entails.) Marseer tries to reactivate in this new dream space her own fantasy collection of lovers and husbands One, Two, Three. Walking the dog can after all lead one's desires astray.

Dr Memory in the Dream Home

DR MEMORY:

We sell you the gleaming Pinochet fix on the sky-line with the city-line, the hill-line, the song-line,
the story-line,
all vistas yours to compose
from the sweet dream home.
Here's a site vacated
exclusively for you!

**Marseer:** What's the set I've strayed into? You want me to talk? What are
these players doing here? What do they think they can coax out with their
instruments? I'll not confess. If you like I'll translate whispers from the wings.
(looking at musicians) Whose voices do they think they're channelling? - Doh
ray . . . and what about me? . . . They think they can say what escapes me . . . I'll
speak but it won't be true, it's simply something I did to give me material.

**Dr Memory:** But isn't that life, something we do to furnish a story we can
tell about our life?

**Esta Marvell:** Could you tell me how you came to be here? We didn't
advertise, after all . . .

**Marseer:** I was lying in bed with my third husband . . . The phone rang.
(slides of satellite controlled telecommunication systems . . . interior:
interrogation cell, naked bulb swinging.)

**Justina:** A phone-call in the night can be terror.

**The Phone Rings:**

**BARRY RANK:** That'll be for me.

**Dr Memory:** Avaricious Holdings . . .
Buy 441
Sell 882 . . .
Greedy Investments . . .
**Marseer** (looking at the other actors and then at the audience): I was lying . . .
No this is not a confession. Don't lick your greasy lips. I can see your eyes swivelling
their jelly through the dark. I can feel your earholes tuning for hot words straight
from me. What are you looking for here? That's what I'd like to know. I never thought
it would be like this. I have an appointment too with . . .

**Esta** (to Justina): Do you think she's legit? Or just one of the Sunday cruisers,
peeking in all the dream homes, with no intention . . .
(Rising babble as all discuss Marseer . . .)

**BARRY RANK:** Our government offers medium density developments for the
post-nuclear family. We're not after puncturing your dreams. Our party is into dream
renovation and accommodation. It's got to be the Decade of Introspection. Australians don't want to look outside
anymore because, as you know and I know, there's been a 17% erosion in real terms
of our dreams be they dry, wet, night or day dreams. Have you got that Harry?
Could this woman be an envoy from the Opposition, here to disrupt, a state housing
stray? But we've re-sited them in Woopwoop . . . The single mothers, the late
developers . . .
(slides of Homeswest ghettos)

**Marseer:** The voices won't leave me alone. You'd think it'd be easy, wouldn't
you, to take off in a dream but it always leads me to such crowded places . . . This
isn't company I want to keep, I don't like their looks at all . . .

**Esta Marvell** (murmuring hypnotically):
Atrium and sauna
involving native flora
jacuzzi, gazebos
and endless placebos
for action . . .
With bull-nose verandah
the semi-character home
has instant past appeal
instant past appeal . . .

MARSEER: (above heads of audience)
The babble, the babble, been here before . . . If only I could get beyond the memory line . . . I was looking for Nigh . . . His name has gone just like that! He'd be able to tell me. I was lying with my third husband when . . . It was Nigh's voice . . . He used to do voice-overs for TV. I always loved him most when his voice and body were separate. He lives at the edge of a park unnamed in a suburb unnamed, fleeing in your rear-vision mirrors . . . Perhaps he's here too. (scrutinizing audience) He's a Developer; perhaps he's one of you? (looking at Barry) He's dark like you, has a touch of the Scot in his lil't and always smelled of a sea sweat. Unlike you. In fact, he's well equipped: fork-lift, ditch-witch, bob-cat . . . I won't go on if you prefer your own images. My story is not about torture, it's about the . . . devious nature of desire.

DR MEMORY (quoting to the spectators):
You may say the space
between you and her,
between you and
the world of objects
is a no-man's land;
you may state it so,
as Terra Nullis,
if you're up yourselves

... (Beckett with liberties)

BARRY RANK: A phonecall in the night can be terror, you say. You know as well as I do that as long as we remain without pasts, without names, there will be no terror. There's nothing to fear, here. Nothing's a good start. This is a free country. We must speak in the future. Yes, we can invent. Take inventories of the new. That's freedom.

JUSTINA:
I came here to get away
from the antics of colonists
clutching at the coast,
and what do we have?
Stupid talk of nothing!
There's no blank page,
nothing unsing. (Notes in pad.)

(Silence . . . with structuring music)

DR MEMORY:
This has been a pregnant silence,
but it's the pregnancy of nothing
we'll have to abort.

MARSEER:
If nothing's pregnancy that's terror.
But of course you wouldn't know
my phantom pregnancies.
When I met him on the verge,
I knew . . .
JUSTINA (under hot spot light, looking towards spectators):
Terror is waiting
in a lit room
with no-one visible watching.

DR MEMORY:
No, it's the freedom to remember
that counts. Amnesia,
that's the official policy,
remember?

JUSTINA:
You're talking,
that's always from the past.
Words don't spring up new,
they sweat, they drip,
they're fingerprinted,
they carry the rot from before.

BARRY RANK:
(slides of Terra Nullis — bulldozed sites)
Nothing is always what people begin with.
There are infinite nothings.
Nothing, call it desert,
clean sheet, blank page,
call it the great unmapped,
nothing's a beginning.

DR MEMORY sings:
Naive, naive.
That's what you want to be.
Bank, new.
Barely born.
Untold.
Is there is a sense
in innocence?
Innocence of what?
What are the charges?
What are the charges?

ESTA MARVELL (echoed by Dr Memory):
The semi-character home provides for a reasonable $250,000, five bedrooms all
with ensuite, mezzanine dining, breakfast room, formal sitting, casual lounge and
formal lounge. All with oregon pine and jarrah skirtings, balustrades and
quarterround, saunas involving atrium views and or jacuzzi can be had for a mere
$20,000. Orangerie space is provided for . . . The double carport with its turned posts
and spindled gables is a basic feature of the New Federation Semi-Character
Home . . .

JUSTINA:
Nothing is a cluttered place, no man's
land is crowded. Always, always.
I went inside this country once
to get away from shoreline wisdom
I only wanted to hear the spirit maps
ringing, welling . . .

DR MEMORY (on tape, voice hushed, fading):
Ringing welling
ringing welling . . .
And now you’ve been there, 
done that. 
Remember before your remembering. 
*(Looking at Marseer, lying in her shades)*

She is pregnant with something, is it life, is it death? My voice will make her 
swoon and yet it could be another. She mistakes it, calls the one close at hand, my 
love, my love, but wanting developments from the distant one, she finds the words 
escaping her. She is confident in her genius for travel. She is pan-sexual; letting the 
traffic’s hum solely occupy her, she comes.

I am utterly in my body. 
My voice is its expression. 
But you can sing through me, 
I sing me me me *(pitched)* . . .

**JUSTINA:** Doh ray me indeed . . . Just look at our Seer in her raybans there . . .
*(slides: blood drenched zoning maps of real estate developments)*

Nostril dilate, tongue delivers 
little sounds that twitch and shiver, 
through the blood that rolls forever

*(Tennyson with liberties)*

Trying out a new reclining pose she remembers. Just imagine her efforts to dream 
herself out of the state housing plot. Give her a go. I suppose you’re going to tell 
her this is the development she wanted all along.

**MARSEER:** Yes Mother, I’m coming Father . . .

**DR MEMORY:**
She will not readily say this, and indeed, it’s enough to put anyone off —
This middle-aged woman lives with her aging parents. 
They passed away years ago
but their voices are still in full control.
**ALL (except Justina and Dr Memory):**
There must be something wrong. 
There must be something wrong. 
With her personal development. 
With her sexuality. 
Living with her parents
on their quarter acre plot!

**DR MEMORY:** Trust you Real Estate people . . . The blurred edge of her dream 
recedes . . .

**MARSEER:** I dreamed the ending of it all in my suburb: but I had to absorb 
its death . . . My companion was a flat man, who strayed from someone else’s 
story . . . Perhaps he’s your husband, or yours or yours or yours or yours? Or did 
I ever know him?

*(MUSIC THROUGHOUT as Marseer is joined by Barry (who becomes the Flat Companion)*

It came with no visible agent. It was simply there, about to happen. As my 
increasingly flat companion and I came to the top, we were alert to the overstatement 
of the sky, deepening beyond bright racing clouds.

**BARRY RANK AND MARSEER:** *(laughing)*
Just look at that!

**MARSEER:** In the folds of one of the clouds, there was an intensification of 
blackness. We gripped one another in recognition of the shallowness of our laughter. 
The cloud organized itself around an anus-like formation, a sucking centre from 
which billows issued with unspeakable speed. We waited for the bang, cupping our
ears. We quaked on the path. No shelter. On the tuart before us, each leaf was given shocking definition by a sweeping luminosity. I was pinned to the pavement with the gravity of a paper weight. As if it was up to me to anchor the scene, to keep all the surfaces from final detachment. My companion collapsed softly like a felt figure, like the Little Prince dying. He folded into the pavement slabs, into the disappearance of his own shadow. I took his shape in my arms and watched the radiation ripple from the cloud centre. I saw the full spectrum in frizzy waves. I was reminded of my mother’s hair. Then Father’s cap of white bristles danced before me. Returning home was unthinkable. I knew I was radiant, terribly so. We would have to retire to the cove of green light under the wattles which presented themselves at the edge of the park. I would let unconsciousness lap over me until I fused with my companion.

**DR MEMORY** (*chanting, woman’s voice, mock Scottish*): Go on, go on m’lass, take your pleasure but of course y’know where that’ll lead you, no I don’t expect you thought to pick up Father’s drycleaning, so many other things on y’r mind, it’s too much to ask, I’ll go in the morning myself although Doctor says I mustn’t overdo it with my arthritus, but no my dear, I’ll manage, I’m sure, I did your washing for you by the way, Marseer, that mini-skirt, surely you don’t mean to wear that, it’d be mutton dressed as lamb (*masculine voice, again Scottish*) . . . Have you seen to your insurance yet, I wish you’d taken a page from our book and not borrowed from the A.G.C., you need your head read, it’s usurious, your mother and I have always paid cash for everything, do you realize we had to suffer the indignity of a summons this morning, a policeman on the mat . . .

*(slides of police interrogations from Australia to Chile)*

**DR MEMORY:**

A policeman on the mat!
A policeman on the mat!

**Marseer:** With the voices pitching so, my blood would dance and die . . .

I was lying in bed with my third husband, not the Sleeping Prince when the phone rang . . .

**Justina (fatigued):** A phonecall in the middle of the night can be terror.

**DR MEMORY:** (*slides/music*)

Terror is waiting
in a lit room
with no-one visible watching.

**Justina:** Terror is excessive visibility before one disappears. (*Writing in pad murmuring.*) This must be why locals fetishize the atrium these days. The introversion policy. Zero Visibility to the outside . . .

**Marseer:** The phone rang. It turned out to be my man from the park.

**BARRY RANK:** (*Scottish*) I have Gaston. Your dog, Gaston. What? You didn’t miss him? Yes, I got your number off his collar. I’ll be waiting for you then. Aye, on the verge.

**Marseer:** The man who lay at my side when I took the call said:

**BARRY RANK** (*masc. Australian*): Who is it? What does he want?

**ALL** (*mouthing*) DR MEMORY sings:

Should she go to the dream companion at the edge of the park?
Is it only the separation
of the voice from the real
substance of the body
that seduces?

**Marseer:** You see I’m lying in bed with a man I’d like to call my dream husband, no, he is *not* my father, a man big like I fancy them big, a man with a
huge barrel of a chest and awesome thighs. And now this voice percolating through
the holes resonates in the body doubling mine and makes me mourn for all men
insubstantial, for all men of my dreaming, for all my flat companions. Will I find
him in the dream home? On the park’s edge?

The mirror says in my father’s voice:

**BARRY RANK** *(Scottish):* What does he want? What did he say?

**MARSEER:** He has my dog. He’s found Gaston. The mirror man says:

**BARRY RANK** *(again as Marsee’s Scottish father):* Are you doing this to give
him back real volume, because you murdered him in your dream? Let’s see if he
gives you more than a glimpse of his biography this time.

**MARSEER** *(scrutinizing audience):* I will invent an encounter for you . . . I was
lying in bed with my third husband, a man big like I like them big, a man with
a huge barrel of a chest and awesome thighs. Over the years I had trained him to
accept what I called my intermissions, my absences. He started with the tender facial
careses I needed before the developments he kneeled towards.

The phone rang.

*(The phone rings. Again, Barry answers it, this time receiving bulletin on floods,
rising temperatures, melting polar ice-caps etc. He delivers his policy statement to
the phone but also to the fantasized audience before him.)*

**BARRY RANK:** Look I’ll tell you where we stand on the environment. Enough
of saving the wilderness elsewhere. I ask you how Antarctica, Tasmania or Kakadu
is going to change your lifestyle here on this Albino coast. Reduce the wilderness
to bonsai size and import it here, I say! Bring it on home! For each and every West
Australian, his or her share. Carve it up! That’s democracy. We’re bringing a little
outback into every home: I say let each living room and sleeping zone of every West
Australian have atrium wilderness involvement! By the year 2000 I promise a
Tasmanian tree fern for every atrium and in later developments, your own Tasmanian
Wolf, yes a free Thylacine hologram to complete the picture.

**MARSEER:** My third husband asks me questions, getting me to confess. What
am I imagining, he says, what does this guy think he’s doing ringing up so late?
But he’s trying to get me to unsheathe myself. Well, I know that exaggerated
confessions preserve something inviolate. I say to him: *(delivers these words to Barry,
who takes up the role):* Yes, of course, he’s my Phantom Lay, waiting for me like
Heathcliff at the edge of the park, his velvet cloak flapping in the black wind, the
dog, of course, just the alibi we agreed upon.

**JUSTINA:** She finds, even in this rehearsal, that she begins to lose herself, saying
I is taking her to crowded places, she is the dog, the stranger from the park, stranger
and stranger. Look at her: she’s afraid. She’s strayed beyond the memory line, into
New Developments. The site has been cleared. The bulldozer dust has settled . . .
The Developer looks squeaky clean. Perhaps this is love’s true estate. The dream
opening doors within the dream.

**MARSEER** *(To Barry Rank):* Oh! It’s you!

**MEMORY** *(Sprechstimme):
She can see it in his smile
as he walks towards her,
his peignoir flapping open
in the black wind.
Is this a Harlequin Encounter Romance
or an episode hallucinated
in the margins of her story?
She doesn’t know.
BARRY RANK (Scottish): I can think about nothing but you since I first saw you walking Gaston.

MARSEER (to the audience): Can I tell him that I dreamed of him flat, nothing at all, the prop my story needed? But your voice... Your voice won't leave me alone. (To Barry) I know your voice, I've heard it before, that... signature tune.

BARRY RANK (modest): I used to do voice-overs for TV. You probably heard it there.

MARSEER: I must go, here Gaston!

JUSTINA: And did she run back to her car, back to bed. The only problem was the dream husband wanted answers, wanted to weigh the evidence.

RANK: Well, what did that weirdo want?

MARSEER: Just as I told you, sweetheart, he was waiting like Heathcliff at the edge of the park.

BARRY RANK: (Mock American)
I get the picture,
He was waiting for you
in his Birthday suit,
waiting for you to call the toon.

MARSEER (Mock Deep South, à la Blanche):
I can call a toon.
I am Mar-seer,
I am self and other,
am manic virgin sunbathing
in my raybans on my lawn,
I am confident
in my genius to travel...

DR MEMORY (singing, to the tune of “In the Mood”):
I'm on the verge,
on the verge of something new.

MARSEER: There's a blown up image: a ruined landscape, fissured, tessellated; it's silver on black, invaginated then, a dark aperture in which something far and close as a sun blazes, torching the distances — I know it's my eye and the wrecked skin around it writ huge against my raybans but it's enough to set me off... I send myself along the amorous channels to the point of disappearance... Have I come too far? My capacity for love is enormous: I am pan-sexual, letting the traffic's hum solely occupy me, I come; I could make love to a pruned tree, understanding Van Gogh's propensity... Oh I am, as they say, just moaning in my birthday suit. Waiting in my skin. Sizzling for a song.

JUSTINA: I've met that type before, these superannuated hippies who think they're Rimbaud as soon as they look at the inside of their shades. The seer, the prophet is a fascist at heart. Rimbaud ended up as a gun-runner in north Africa: it was a logical conclusion to the dream.

ESTA MARVELL: I'll show you what is real. From this exclusive site all citizens can view: the cityscape at night, river and ocean glimpses and the glorious ring of hills, from lilac to lavender: a panorama for every taste.

MARSEER:
It was my eye, thrown back through the cosmos;
it was death inside the raybans,
in me galleons, warships and traders,
white sails fluttering the black insignia.
But now I am an explorer of a different kind:
I refuse to leave my mark.
Esta Marvell: What you need darling is an appointment with Esta Marvell. Yes, that’s Yours Truly. I am the Real Estate Agent of the Decade...

This is what we call the Semi-Character Home.

Marseer: I follow my goddess Esta Marvell... Oh Mango Lady shining, through the skylight there... Show me the dream homes you’ve named after wines, the Verdelho, the Chenin Blanc, the Chardonnay... My parched quarter acre, my sundrenched verge has gone... I can just make out the albino coast under the sun...

Is that the last whoosh whoosh of traffic or night insects awakening?...

Justina: Just listen to our fake seer using what’s available for the Reality Effect.

Esta Marvell: Now my dear we can really travel to dream homes, bid at the auctions until desire exhausts itself... I’ll give you the rub of the realisable on the verge of fantasy.

Look at this one here. The Dutch bonnet gable gives it an instant mature look, don’t you think: it belongs, echoing as it does, the colonial lines of the houses around... You don’t just buy a home, you know, you buy a locality... Look at the Federation touches!

BARRY RANK: See, our government is doing all it can to encourage a sense of national identity, a sense of origins now now now... And we’re looking after the needs of Middle Australia. You might say, what about me, what can Barry do for me? Maybe you think you don’t rank with Middle Australia? I say each of you ranks with Barry. Are you the no-spouse, no-lover but the phantom lay, no certainty but in the random, no-pets but the video dog, no-thrills but cheap thrills? Are you swinging or marginal, AC or DC, radical celebrate or marginal voter err I mean virginal martyr? (to spectators) Are you, too, reduced to daydreaming on your verge? Oh yes, you’ve had in vitro dreams and phantom pregnancies... Are your kids and grand kids still ideas in the sperm bank? I say you can Bank on Barry Rank. We’ve got the plot for you. Multiply your daydreams with the Atrium Policy of New Phantom Corporate Labour.

Esta Marvell: First I’d like you to admire the terra-cotta roof tiles, with the distinctive Federation finials on the ridges, and the authentic clay pot topping the Corbell brick chimney! Add to this the panelled oregon front door complete with side lights and finials... But wait a minute! Don’t miss the imitation shutters which give such a lovely decorative touch to the twin gables, don’t they? These yesterday notes are married to the hyper-modern. See, the theme is echoed in the ornate cornices and central roses on the ceilings, the 15 cm moulded skirting... Look, even the quarterround is fluted!

Marseer: But, I still can’t get past the Chardonnay Display at Murdoch Fields...

Esta Marvell: Yes, it was like tasting a good wine, wasn’t it?

Marseer: It was like...

Esta Marvell (key words picked up by Dr Memory): And the mirrored ORANGERIE! The INVOLVEMENT of atrium and jacuzzi! The mirror gave you two for one, two Babylons for the price of one! And while, as I explained, the namesake in local wine is fruity, a clean drinking beverage that has you looking for more, it was the same overall effect... Panache and prestige.

Marseer: The street elevation really gave me no idea. When you uncorked the Chardonnay Home for me, I didn’t want to go back to sobriety...

Esta Marvell: Yes, it certainly can be a heady experience... What a nose, what a palette, what after-taste it had! But let me point out here the Burning Log Video is wittier by far than any real fire...

Dr Memory (picking our syllables throughout the following speech from Esta): Video video is wittier by far
Texture junkies' perfect fix
Suspended from atrium
with greenhouse effect.

ESTA MARVELL: This ecological feature IS audio-visual co-ordination at its most modern, the extensive planters in dialogue with the raked walls, give the Texture Junky the perfect fix: they lend such definition to all transition spaces, don't they? First the dining area seems to be suspended between two gardens — a mirrored atrium complete with skylight while a floor to ceiling window gives view of the greenhouse — effect-ive isn't it! — And this hanging double garden boasts tree ferns especially imported from the wilderness of Tasmania . . .

JUSTINA: I'm just wild about the atrium . . .

DR MEMORY (singing to the tune of I love a Sunburnt country):
I love a bonsai wilderness
Where simulated genes
And holograms of fauna
Lend substance to our dreams . . .

BARRY RANK: What no-one and I repeat, no-one, in this debate has confronted is the real aspiration of the average West Australian to have an inner sanctum, an atrium where they can simply be themselves. Now isn't that the essence of democracy, to be yourself? To hear your voice repeated, in agreement, in unison, with yourself: See your bonsai wilderness go forth and multiply through our infinite mirror play? Who needs Tasmania? Who needs Kakadu? Who even needs a quarter acre plot? Now that's why my party has set in place Amnesia as its Policy: total erasure of the past, a clean slate, *tabla rasa, terra nullis*, bulldoze the site I say and start from scratch. The New Federation Home keeps you spinning in a blissful Now Now Now.

ESTA MARVELL: Now look at this cathedral ceiling here, you'll think there's no end to it — and extra? — you're wanting to ask, but not at all, a Basic Feature of the Semi-Character Home . . . And the balustrade in blonded oak features, for contrast, turned and fluted jarrah spindles, bringing you back to the bush in all its glowing glory . . . And there appears the mezzanine level: No, no it's more than that, it's an entertainment area for adults with its bar alcove and its 360 degree fresco of sea and clipper ships arriving.

BARRY RANK (to Marseer):
Yes yes yes my dear,
we'll find a little plot
for your own dream home
that's what this government's all about
forget th'expense of quarter acres
and the waste of verge (triumphant)
We offer the postnuclear family
intro-versions for the nineties
bringing the outside in
bringing the outback down to bonsai size
herewith I'd like to launch
the Decade of the Atrium!

ALL (lead by DR MEMORY who says "They're . . ."): We're the driven citizens of *flash flash flash*
we're the freeway citizens
in overdrive and overdraft
we overcome our shoreline angst
and claim our tamed interior
in the sheen of this veneer

W ESTERLY, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1990
where jarrah knows no die back
where mini-nature answers back:
*we’re safe for ever here*
a site like god which multiplies
itself
we’ll follow the signs and found the site
throw us the line Esta and we will chant
the song of the dream
the song of the sweet sweet
the song of the sweet dream home

**DR MEMORY:**
Have you heard
have you heard
it’s enough to knock
the postman off his bike
I am that I am
I am that I am
If amnesia’s not bliss well you could’ve
fooled me
I am I am amniotically buoyed
I hum for them the I poem
in the atrium
and all around the vacuumed
dream
home hear the hum
here the hum of I am
from the atrium!

**ALL (Dr Memory leads with “They’re . . . ”):**
We’re essentially ourselves
*ousia* is where we are
what easy breathers we can be
no wheezing in the sound track
from the inner shrine
of the atrium.

**DR MEMORY:**
Here’s a man who wears guilt
like épaulette braid
a man of dapper dressing
pure silk ties
handstitched shoes

**BARRY RANK:**
A stitch in time saves nine
I can tell you
But I am the Time Collector
Never been a ribbon-snipper, baby-kisser
lacrymose confessor,
I deliver the goods in black and white
call me mortician if you like
between the tick of the beginning
and the tock of the ending
I’ll trace your curve in time for you
sweet mortgagees I put your interest first
ALL:
Bank on bank bank on
Bank on Barry Rank

BARRY RANK:
I am the clock collector
time is money money time
in any nation worth its salt
that's the capital philosophy
let dividends mature
let dividends mature my sweets
and I'll say you're worth your salt

MARSEER (wistful, letting go of her fantasies):
He always smelled of a sea sweat.
I can't smell the salt on you.
I left him on the verge at the edge of the park . . .
I can see it now: we've come a long way,
it's a tiny line on the rim of vision . . .
I can see Gaston, his shadow travelling,
pulling Mummy and Daddy on his leash . . .
My third husband snores in his leggo bed,
my second turns in his grave
but since I lost him, my phantom lay,
all my loves develop in the dark
and till all the lakes are salt
I know . . .

BARRY RANK AND ESTA MARVELL:
It's closing time, you'd better sign . . . As for the options we'll let you have the
dark room for the price of a jacuzzi. How about that? A word with your bank
manager will fix the deal. We can even customize a view of the park for you . . .

BARRY RANK: We're sensitive to the needs of virginal martyrs in postnuclear
families everywhere. For girls like you pushed to the verge of your quarter acre plots,
we've a down market version, sans jacuzzi or gazebo but with endless placebos to
supply your needs.

ALL:
And may your sky lights
and dark rooms go forth and multiply
while the atrium projects for you
everything that your heart desires.

JUSTINA (notes in pad)
A dream opens doors within the dream:
and now she's travelling through the space
of the New Federation Semi-Character Home . . .

ALL:
Will she make them an offer on the sweet sweet,
is she doing a deal on the sweet dream home?

DR MEMORY (fading):
They sell you
the gleaming Pinochet fix
on the sky-line
with the city-line
the hill-line
the song-line
the story-line . . .
DAVID CURZON

What Remains

I

I need these preparations:
meat as steak,
grapes crushed for me; a taste's all
I can make.

II

I cut what's there to bite size
and I take
a taste; the sauce that's oozing
from this steak,
the wine too, comes from flesh that
goes to waste;
my palate salivates for
after-taste.

III

And from the dead I'm learning
proper pains;
who but the dead can teach me
what remains?
A Member of the Staff

I was brought about in a distant town
which for several years I considered home
until, after inconclusive travel,
I found at last preferred circumstances,
a location in which at least I could feel
less uncomfortable, where I
continue my unease among familiar
strangers, aliens of like proclivity

who have also acquired the godsend of employment
in an undertaking of comprehensive intent,
spending days in tenacious meetings
(where some on occasion actually note
what other egos choose not to mute)
and in writing messages to be read by exiles
situated in many remote places,
colleagues in the same copious enterprise

who perhaps in youth had also imagined
a future when they’d make distinctive contributions
and as a consequence also annotated
hundreds of taxing auspicious volumes
including the tracts of secular ponderers
and numinous records of East and West
to eventually come to comprehend the importance
of the palm’s warmth, a light touch.
Cruising

Eight fifteen on this Friday morning, and I'm cruising Leach Highway for the twenty first time this month and hearing the announcer on the radio yet again extolling the virtues of sprayed on pool liners that are so effective up there in Alice Springs so why not try them down here in Perth. The yellow micro bus in front is driverless as two passengers lung at each other. He's obviously angry. He's sweeping the air with a closed fist. She doesn't even duck. One eye on the road and one always on her. Lucky Lady. There's the little Italian chap who waits each morning at his gate. Leans into the mesh with his grey waistcoat and matching flannels, bi-focals, seeing me and others floating past. A peloton. He's probably back at the Giro d'Italia, with a flagon and a dark eyed, smiling senorita. He's probably half Spanish. The flat cap on his head frames him. From here in my silver Suzuki he's captured. Incognito.

Flash flash . . . . . . The lots where the old wool store once stood. Vacant. Another prime real estate development coming up. Palmyra Heights or something a little more obscure. Ominous. A thick brick or brushwood surround to hide the cemetery opposite. The other vacant lots. Flash flash . . . . . .

My star signs for the day are promising. I'm to stand back and take in the overall picture. Well someone must be watching me cruising this highway. I'm a Bruce Springsteen number. An original Highway 61 revisited, updated. I'm racing in the streets and it's eight fifteen and the Cottesloe chaos is just around this corner and up over the bridge. There should be a Blessing of the Fleet this morning, it's so turbulent out on the water.

I remember when I first saw those minis with their little signs that read 'floats on fluid', and colouring them aqua . . . .

The maniac up front is headed into Fremantle and I'm at least three car lengths from a sheep-transporter. The air will be heavy over South Fremantle, Coogee and Hamilton Hill/Kardinya. Three car lengths or three seconds between lamp posts. I've no demerit points or delusions. Just a desire to fly . . . .

Eight thirty three and we're stopped outside the garment factory. I'm amazed at the Asian workers. They come from over the railway bridge and along Mosman Park with their vinyl bags and sunny dispositions. A woman lifts her face to the clouds and her prayers are answered. There's a little break in the traffic and they surge across the highway. One mass. Shouting and gesticulating to drivers and we return the greeting. "Get a move on willya."

There's space up ahead and it's all mine. I take the car up to seventy and the vibrations help me imagine we're doing ninety eight in a thirty five zone. I'm so reckless this morning. Those kids better watch out 'cause the teacher's running hot and she's ready.

I'll take them on with a little 'what is poetry?' discussion and probably end up condemning the genre for its superficiality. It's like the senior master.
MASTER. Let's show some respect for the historically deified. Old S.M. with his white hair and his archaeological jaunts. He undermines with his subtlety and his gracious good will. Good gracious. Good God. Will do . . . . .

Thank heavens it's Friday. The announcer calls it wee-ha day and he's half right. Perhaps a small drink in the staff room after lunch, while the boys are off to footy, is in order. Perhaps Daniel, the resident rake, will work himself loose and saunter over so casually and whisper to me of imagery unimaginable and offer an aperitif, an invitation to dinner. And, perhaps I'll accept . . . . .

"So, how's it going Sybil?"

"Fine, fine . . . . You're rather early this morning Daniel. Are you coming to see our guest lecturer after all?"

"Maybe . . . what's this you're working on? . . . Good idea. Get 'em working eh? Come on Sybil, just go to it. No need to ponder . . . . ."

"Oh, it's procrastination time. It's this room and the clutter and my position."

"I've been meaning to speak to you about that . . . . ."

Daniel leant over my left shoulder and scrutinized the monitor and my fingers hovering over the escape key. *Here he comes, so close, closer*. Hand on my shoulder. Sliding down as he leans in and my breath holds. Still. He follows my text, whispers the expected, and I murmur I'm no coy mistress and cruise the grey lines of his directional suit. To his face. To the astonished countenance of the Head of Department as he straightens and removes his hand and smiles. So slightly. Just enough to hint that my position is tentative . . . . .

One-fifty five and I'm heading South Suburban. After-work drinks are not on. The radio's turned up and the announcer is talking about the very latest in computer games for those who'd like to push back the boundaries of perception. *Some of them provide you with interesting snippets of information . . . some come complete with handy equipment but this game throws you deep into enemy territory with little more than a low-powered, single shot repeater for protection . . . you can increase the odds in your favour . . . just throw away lines and leave them. Dangling.*
Grandma branded my mother a shiksa. Even at seven I recognised the insult, sensed the word's bitter cut. *Shiksa!* woman who steals my Jewish son. (But I knew nothing of *Hannukah gelt* or the custom of the *Bobbeh* who gives.)

The last time she visits us, Hannah Ziebel rabbi's daughter, gives me, because her son who is no longer a son asks on my behalf — a present for Christmas. A bangle made of gold. "Thank you Grandma," I say as I've been told. "What's that?" her voice scratches between us. Into her other, good ear I shout my gratitude.

Afterwards she picks at the luxury of a fowl killed in her honour, plucked by my father and cooked by Mum especially for the feast. Her fork pecks, pecks. "Is it clean, kosher?"

For a time the truculent gold shone thinly nine carat, but soon wore to baser metal. Its mean inner seam tore at my wrist. What I had craved, given at such cost . . . I knew nothing then of seven generations.
It's the season of sweat, of long, hot nights
and no wind, no air to breathe. Outside, a moth
beats against the pane, drawn to the light
again and again, until death. Closer still,
but half a world away, choppers
circle like birds of prey, their shadows
hugging the ice, a deep blue. The hunters,
pondering boundless space, search for signs and listen
to their own breathing. I can hear them now. Snow cracks
beneath skids, the screeching rotors stop.
Out on the floe we are being watched.
No hurry. One by one, we move out,
our steps sure as heartbeats.

These are the dumbest of victims: soft, round faces tum
to meet the clubs. Reflected in black spheres,
our swelling images glisten like astronauts
in deep space. The work warms us: an easy
harvest rhythm; but I would sooner burst
this false skin and sheathe myself in
living fur: a whiteness that marries ice
and, sliding smoothly, does not burn, as blue sky
joins blue ocean in a round universe.
But the white world buckles
and melts. Long arms flail sharp-taloned
benedictions, and great continents shear loose,
collapsing with thunderous peals.

I cannot move. My own weight
pins me to the bed, and I ache
with inertia. Each breath is a fist
pounding my chest. Across the ice
dark tracks disappear into an empty sleep.
I went for a walk along the beach today, after I'd been to see my old mother-in-law in the Home.

I'd been wanting to walk on the wet sand all season and here the season was almost over.

I was alone, me with a husband and a son and a daughter and six grandchildren. All alone, dangling my shoes in my hand, walking along the edge of the ocean, the water running up to me, seemingly to tease at first and then, in a sudden rush of pity, bathing my feet, cooling the red arthritic joints.

I should have gone earlier in the season. I shouldn't have waited. There's my mother-in-law waiting there in that Home and she's got four sons, six grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. It all comes to the same in the end.

Mind you, my mother-in-law is surrounded by people. They sit in this big room facing each other. Before she went senile, my mother-in-law objected to a woman across the room who laughed and said she could see her bloomers.

She doesn't object to anything now. Occasionally she gets into a panic about her money and then I let her feel the few coins I leave there in her purse.

She said the children had been in to see her today.

“That's nice,” I said.

The pauses get longer all the time and casting about for conversation, I asked her what they were wearing.

She described a cardigan she had knitted for my son when he was ten years old. It was green, with a Fair-Isle yoke. I remembered how nice it was.

I reminded her that she had knitted it.

“How old is he?” she asked eventually, after another long pause.

“Thirty-six,” I told her, but she didn't appear to have heard me.

She looks up at the ceiling. Her tongue rolls around in her mouth.

It is Easter Sunday and the nurses come in parading their Easter Bonnets.

“They've gone to a lot of trouble,” I say. “Just look at this one!” and I explode into laughter for my mother-in-law. “See, a chamber pot! That tall nurse puts me in mind of the old Queen, don't you agree? Her hats always reminded me of chamber pots.”

My mother-in-law sniffed, “Larking about in the staff room. There's been nobody on here since breakfast.”

I shuddered, remembering that tone in her voice.

“I had a very nice hat when I met Tom,” she said. “We had huge hat pins to hold them in place then,” and she grinned, the paper-thin skin glowing grotesquely with its roseate rash.

“Jab with the hat pin,” she gestured and laughed out loud. The glint in her eyes was evil.
“Mrs Carter was ninety-three yesterday. She got a baby for her birthday,” she
continued. “It’s nice to have children — that’s what I told her. Now you’ll never
be lonely again.”
“What did she say to that?” I asked her.
She struggled to concentrate.
I looked out of the window. There was a brown butterfly hovering there. When
it landed on a flower, I saw how precise the design on the wings was. Neat circles
and a fan shaped border — an ethnic design. I wondered why I thought all butterflies
were female. Were they?
“Her daughter isn’t coming in today,” she whispered sotto-voce. “She’s gone off
with another man.”
“But isn’t her husband dead?” I asked.
“She’s off with other men,” she said.
The nurse stopped in front of us to let us admire the bonnets. She ignored them.
A nurse with arms bursting in the too tight sleeves, her uniform straining on her
hips, exposing her thighs, bent over my mother-in-law. She wore a Swagman’s hat
with pill bottles substituted for corks. She thrust her face up to my mother-in-law
and playfully touched her nose with her fat clean pink forefinger.
My mother-in-law turned her face away.
When they’d gone, I said, “I think I can smell pork. It’s roast pork for your
dinner.”
She pulled her mouth down. “Mince,” she said. “It’s always mince.”
“Not today,” I said. “It’s Easter Sunday.”
She gave me a pitying look.
“What a lovely day it is today,” I said to the old woman sitting in the chair next
to her. The old woman was tied in the chair with a piece of sheeting. She lifted
her head. It was egg-shaped and almost bald. Whisps of white hair, like mercerised
cotton, were stretched back into a meagre knot, exposing the pale scalp.
She looked at me, her eyes blank, uncomprehending.
Humpty Dumpty sat in a chair.
Humpty Dumpty had a big stare.
Nurse, I want to go to the toilet,” she suddenly whined.
“There’s nobody here. They’re all off having morning tea,” my mother-in-law stated
in a flat tone.
The old woman reared forward, clutching, clawing at me.
“You can take me. You take me,” she cried. “Take me to the toilet.”
“I’d better wait for a nurse. Sit still or you’ll fall. They’ll all be back soon.”
All the King’s Horses . . . All the King’s men . . .
“I want to go to the toilet,” my mother-in-law chanted.
“They won’t be long, they’ll be back shortly,” I said.
“They’d better hurry, or there’ll be a fine mess,” my mother-in-law chortled with
glee.
The old woman fell back into the chair, continuing to whine.
Then I fancied I heard the clatter of clogs on uneven cobbledstones. My mother­
in-law heard it too. Her eyes opened slyly, but it was only the old woman who totters
about all day with her walking frame; her pink face smiling, her cotton-wool head
nodding, her heavy shoes slipping off the shrunken feet with each tiny step, clip­
clopping. She moves fast, with the momentum of a clockwork toy.
The clip-clopping amused her so much, that no sooner had she sat down, than
she got up again and clattered off across the room and up the passage.
“She’s off again,” I remarked, smiling to my mother-in-law.
“It will do her good. It will make her baby grow,” she said.
Then she sat silent, her eyes shut.
I watched her. Her features are my husband's. They are cast from the same mould.
“You’d better go now,” she said.
“It’s all right. I can stay a bit longer.”
“No, go away.”
“Would you rather be alone?”
She didn’t open her eyes.

And there I was, on the beach. I saw a starfish washed up. I saw the skeleton of a dead crab. It shone so brightly in the water, like silver, that I bent to pick it up. I looked down at my hip for a child to show it to, but there was none there.
A young man came towards me, walking in the water, his body firm and brown. He smiled at me and I smiled, hitching my shirt just a little higher — to save it from getting wet.
I reached the far end of the beach and using my shoes to rest my head on, I lay stretched out on the sand, the sun warming my knees.
A single cloud hovered ahead. I examined it, the cotton-wool edges all teased out, like it had been pulled off a roll.
There was a cupboard full of cotton wool there in the Home. Why did they need so much of it?
It was so quiet, only the gentle lap of the water as the tide came in. “Hush,” it said, “Hush, hush, hush . . .”
And I closed my eyes.
But my thoughts darted about like a dozen dragonflies, probing the hidden parts of me. I had watched the sun come up and I’d seen it go down again before my labour ended when my baby was born.
“I couldn’t have faced another dawn,” I’d said to her.
“The other girl never even cried out,” she’d said. “And me, I had to have chloroform at the birth of my children,” she’d continued. “They were such big babies.”
Lucky old you, I should have said, not having to face it cold turkey, but she wouldn’t have understood. How could she — cold turkey was served for lunch on Monday when she was young.
There was a man on the railway bridge. “Come here little girl,” he said to me, “Come and see the rabbit. Come and see the bunny.”
I knew it wasn’t a rabbit.
They gave my mother-in-law an Easter egg in the Home today, as if she were a child.
She behaves like a child. I’ve heard them chastise her, “Naughty girl. Oh you are a naughty girl.”
There was another Easter, a long time ago, when I lay on the sand, limbs entwined, his eyes shut in passion; mine wide open, searching his face, striving to imprint his features on my mind to keep for after, but I never could recall his face afterwards, not then, not now.
The sun’s caress was gentle, an Autumn embrace. The fire had gone out of it, but it was still warm.
I felt a certain deja vu.
I felt so young, like a child, like I had this day to waste and all the rest to squander, like the tide would never reach me.
The sun was so warm, the sea was so gentle, lapping, licking and smooth sand. It was hard to remember it was Easter and the end of the summer; that winter would soon be upon us.
At the Nursing Home

She wants to let go. My mother. Lying there small, in her coffin of fresh cotton sheets. Rails on each side to keep her life safe. Their steeliness a reprimand for her wanting to leave.

Scraps of tossing memory cannot find her tongue. They lost the way and unwanted foreign sounds take their place.

The white gull of remembrance spreads its wings. Goes searching for the honeyed sun of yesterday, the flowered hill, name of a lover, a child. It does not return.

Clouded eyes plead against the relentless pump of a heart allowing no amnesty to pain. Sometimes, words are released from the cage. How . . . long. Tiny mouse-whispered words looking for their hole of darkness.

Ninety-five years of travelling and we do not know the half of it. We who love her can only hope that divine carelessness be corrected. That she be allowed to let go. That her appalling bed will soon be empty.
Field of force relations
1989

A view of my neighbourhood from the second floor, looking down and across treetops: clouds in a clear sky, then red beacons shining out to mark just the tops of the tallest city towers. The tips of the mosque's minaret and the skinny trees that frame it can be seen if you know what you are looking for. Twin lakes of dirty water shared by ten species of birds; around the lakes thin sandy grass, and Moreton Bay Figs planted ninety-one years ago. The park is the important landmark north of the city. Its people come out to stroll late on most days, always on Saturdays and Sundays. Same sex couples are as visible as heterosexuals: men and men, women and women, women and men in different configurations, in other forms of families. People from other suburbs come here too, but usually earlier, and we take the upper hand with a familiarity and our neighbourly ease. At a coin-operated barbecue area in the far corner some visitors picnic, others congregate and snigger at the local exotica: flamboyant dressers, fancy boys, some transvestites. On weekends you can always hear loud, heartfelt sighs at the appearance of the faulty children cradled to the bosom of a walking family. We have all made our investments in here, in this public space, and often territorial rights are challenged.

There is a regular tap-tapping from the home renovators on the otherwise quiet side of the park; a yapping by neighbourhood dogs caught behind fences while visiting animals have the run of the paths. Kept on their leads while the Ranger does the rounds, and when brides with their parties arrive for photographs, sometimes in buggies, but usually on foot, following the best man and his esky filled with champagne and glasses. The state's daily newspaper features these photographs on Saturdays, in the popular style of man and woman artfully captured in the rim of a champagne glass. Around here, even on this day with the brides queuing for the lakeside, land is the focus of conversation. Property deals, the names of the buyers and where they last lived become common knowledge to other property owners for three blocks down and across. Each street has its turn as the favoured one, the up and coming, the good investment. Colour schemes are altered after most of these transactions. Layer upon layer of paint, each improvement over the years needing to be scraped away. Nowadays, Italianate facades are being stripped back to reveal other shapes, original Edwardian styles.

I collect some stories from the park: try to imagine the elaborate wrought iron fence that enclosed it until it was dismantled for ammunition in the last world war effort. People sleep in here every night of the year, on bus shelters, in the little brick and borewater stained resthouse, on the grass. The maintenance people first thing each morning collect discarded objects, move people on, and leave no trace of the park's nocturnal life. Some people live here, keeping just ahead of either the Ranger,
welfare workers, or the police. Men meet here, too, each night, for sexual exchanges. Park their cars in side streets, or weave visits into a jogging routine. Other men follow nightly with brochures and free condoms and advice. Hard to imagine in a perfectly ordinary landscape like this one, tranquil and bland, welcoming and warm, that victims of torture can also inhabit it. But they do: encircling the park all day, sleeping in the afternoon sun on the northern stretch of grass. Some homeless, others, like this man, choosing this place as a haven from communication and conflict. I begin to invent stories about him, about where he came from and how he managed to arrive here. Need to justify his presence here, his despair, the sack of a body I can see from my window, lying there hour after hour. To justify the impossibility of assisting him. He will not speak, will not allow eye contact, has lived here now for half the year, getting supplies from the corner deli, getting more ragged by the day.

A call from the western desert at sunset: to tell me about it there — slashes of vibrant orange painted across the sky, clumps of grass glossy and green after the recent rains, and bushflowers covering and softening the spinifex. Whites and reds and yellows in many shades. An aircraft heading for another country has just passed and left its white signature, straight as anything, across the top of this. Otherwise, there is only sky, all around. Childhood images are remembered: the weightiness of the Irish-Australian folk tradition, dominant images of the Wild Rover, the Wild Colonial Boy, the pronunciation of the words in the songs sung at school. How odd and oblique it was, then and now. I look out my side window, across the park. My view includes small hilly places, the gold and maroon of Shell’s neon trademark, the Norfolk Pine peaking out over all the other trees, the Byzantine lines of the church on one of the hills, its dome perched amongst treetops in my field of vision, many rounded arches and spires in a cream colour against a red sky. The park’s lights and the streetlights are just warming up for the night, cars streaming along in both directions.

In the corner seat at a table in the busy, bustling, fashionable cafe, I write into a green notebook and watch. Writing is a fashionable pastime here: the young male poets can sit all day, drinking short blacks and eating toasted sandwiches. The regulars here are also seen at other Italian cafes in the area: we all do the rounds, and seriously, getting to know the blends of coffee, the coffee makers and some patrons. Mostly though, we remain strangers in a small city. Our lives intersect each day but we avoid eye contact, choosing to imagine encounters — drunken, intellectual, each charged with our erotic strengths. Fantasy is always the more satisfying option. Making sense of daily and faceless contact, we use nicknames, we speak in code and name our community. Pixie. The Pig. Elephant Bum. Snortin’ Norton. The Double Tragedy. We make up stories, embellish others. Baby Blue — he is still wearing baby blue. Everyone’s favourite, a sweetheart. Cowl-necked jumpers and cardigans in pastel shades. Prone to big baby sobs, even in cafes, fleshy smooth, smooth skin. Fleshy, roly-poly tummy. All the sadnesses. Pinched, puffy eyes after all the sobbing. At the sophisticated opening we all attended for an exhibition of messages on paper, he watches one child frolic amongst adults during the speeches. Intently. The child has run to a parent and hurled herself into open arms. Baby Blue sinks almost to the floor: his knees give way under all he no longer has. Desiring his mother’s arms, really any arms will now do. Many of his friends are sad and confused; at breakfast here at this cafe each Sunday morning, gathered at long tables, they are limpid, and will joke that their modern lives wear them down. They would say that this solitude is what saps their very life force.
When the acclaimed composer comes home to attend a recital of his new and unrecorded work, it all comes back to him — childhood, adolescence, family, influence, repressions. His short life flashes in front of his eyes. He has now come of age in a more important place than this. Sitting with elderly parents and his brothers in the darkened music theatre, he worries about the loudness of the drums and his father's dicky heart, about jolts and gongs and the flashy dramatic twists ahead. Swallowing hard, he fears they will detect the slander, the work's crude jokes, even its blasphemy. This music has limits, and strictly defined borders. It bounces around off these borders, one side to the other, worked and reworked, repetition is its motif, drawn over and over. He hopes his family appreciates its intricacies, won't think it just kid's stuff. You sense the spirit of cooperation between the players: they respond passionately to the work of this composer, and are thrilled to have him here.

He remembers a conversation with a colleague, a choreographer, about parents and creative children, whether you wrote with your parents in mind. Bill had never imagined that his parents would see his work, but after a special, secret trip across the country, they attended an opening night. The dance was written around a central sequence that tackled many of his unresolved sexual tensions: it featured a naked male dancer moving to his father's most favourite song — the aria sung by baritone and tenor from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. The beautiful melodies were overlaid with the sound of big bubbles being blown underwater, and the dance and the dancer's expression was vaguely lewd; no, overtly sexual. The parents attended the evening's celebration party, congratulated their son and went home, and never mentioned it again. They were deeply surprised and nervous about their youngest son, while he wrote for himself a smooth explanation of colonialism and Victorian values, the use of the exotic Other, Australia's conservatism, and the value of parody, in case they ever asked.

Walking towards the city from the park along the street named after the lake, you come across a row of small and medium sized houses, with both a uniformity and fine individual touches. Each separated off by Cyclone fences with strong corners, once or twice the old fashioned type of picket fence. Each is painted a different colour: all in a subtle, sun bleached shade: Mediterranean blue, pale green, cream, beige. They all have immaculate gardens, manicured but bursting with healthy growth. Stone lions poke out through ferns, or sit boldly on front balustrades. Spires decorate the tops of most of the little houses. The residents here are all middle aged to elderly, mostly Italian, and they have been here for years, observing the many changes in these streets — the trends of home owners, of transient residents, of sub-cultures, of street brawls, the council plans for freeway connections. Further down this street is a row of twelve terraced houses, Baker's Terrace, built as worker's housing for the tobacco factory opposite the railway line. These houses have been through more changes than any other in the area. It is now a prestige address, where the colour schemes regularly change in a small repertoire: from apricot to bottle green to pale pink, and this last time to cream with dark green trimmings. A couple of the houses resist any change, and look just as they did ten years ago when I came here for parties. Ornate picket fences replace wire ones and the patterned brick walls from another fashion era. In a book of photographs in the historical library I find one of the heir to the tobacco fortune, just a toddler, sitting with his nanny in the back yard of one of these houses.

There are cafes and shops nearby, a collection of buildings mostly in disrepair. The new buildings stand out with their uniformly flat sides and shapes. On each
street there is a warehouse, some of them huge, filled with Italian products of every
variety. Australian almonds sit in cartons as part of the exchange. Nearby, there
is a sweatshop that still functions, employing scores of young girls and older women
who eat their lunch on the pavement at the front each day. Sample folders, leather-
bound, decorate the front office, showing fabrics from The Executive Collection,
The Prince's Ransom; drawings of six different designs for a man's suit. Photographs,
too, of the big machines hang on the walls.

His lover throws all of his clothes out the window of the flat they shared in the
rabbit-warren block in Saint George's Terrace before it was replaced by the big bank.
 Throws them out in a moment of passion. He sees his ties on other men's chests
for the rest of his residency in the Terrace, long after the lover had gone, and come
back again, then gone for good.

The Terrace is the street of power in this fabulously wealthy city. There are at
least five executive gymnasiums, where corporate players use the squash courts and
name their teams the Cowboys, the Pirates, the Snake-Oil Charmers, even the Bad
Motherfuckers. This is a frontier town, where money can flow like good French
champagne. In the noonday sun the Lord Mayor is greeted on the street by the biggest
nightclub owner and his coterie of lawyers with a reverent “Good afternoon, Lord
Mayor”. Not all of the money is blue chip, but there is plenty of it. In one week,
the leading tycoon buys most of the assets of the state's holiday island, the most
expensive painting the world has known, the city's leading restaurant. He already
has a finger in every pie: the name can be seen wherever you look. When the ship
starts to sink and the battles begin between tycoons, the rats start scuttling and there
is shouting and crazy talk on the television. Just as much public outrage over claims
of marital infidelities as can be heard about tax shelters and the other rorts. With
a clarity of vision, and lessons to learn from starving and demented artists, now
dead, whose work graces corporate walls for tax benefit, he asks himself, “what
makes an all-round man?” Knowing in his bones that self-made men are always
forgiven for their lapses, and given expansive canvases to try again and again. The
perspective often becomes muddled, but here people rarely disappear. I look out
at the city's panorama from the fiftieth floor of the tallest building, through the
counterpoint of construction and demolition (and there is hardly any demolition
left now), and I look for my home, but it is obstructed by the bushiness of the park's
many trees.

The bus stops here every day: the bodies come bounding off it, young people
pushing and shoving, limbs stiff from the epic journey. Delivered outside the youth
hostel in the main street of an area that resembles Kalgoorlie — buildings inspired
by gold rush money and taste, exquisite in their prime and let to rot over half a
century. This shabby area sits in striking contrast to the postmodern glory of the
city on the other side of the railway tracks: an expansive shopping town made of
styles discarded everywhere else before they were attempted here. The corrugated-
iron water tank that sat atop Boans until two years ago is a faint memory, and has
been replaced with an electronic bulletin board, selling news and goods.

The young tourists come from all over — many Europeans but also Americans,
Australians, New Zealanders. They all stay around these streets: this has become
backpackers territory, with dormitory accommodation and mediocre food in coffee
shops with those old-fashioned vinyl menus — you open them to read through a
long list of sandwiches. The combinations are limitless, but every day someone orders
a variation from the list. Staff turnover in here is high: the travel bug spreads fast
through the young people after meeting so many travellers, and they often head
for Sydney or Melbourne once the bus fare has been saved. Only the adventurous travellers eat at the Vietnamese cafes, the Hung Long, Ly Tao, or the delis with their delicacies, big bags of peeled garlic, five types of greens, moon cakes, fresh herbs. The backpackers sit around in beanbags in the communal rooms at the hostels, reading *Australia on a Shoestring*, *How to be Normal in Australia*, and *Great Shark Stories by Ron and Valerie Taylor*. They share stories that seem to be universally told, with local signposts altered in each country. They take these stories home, as well as talk of the different customs, injustices, local humour, oddities, savages, ravages. Make up stories, embellish others.

I make my lists, as I do at this time each year. A seasonal thing on the nights before Christmas. Dead. Pregnant. Unhappy. Affluent. More affluent. Terminally unhappy. Suicidal. Dead. Needs and wants. The ways I have been touched by my friends. Some catastrophes. The little, daily upsets. Final gestures. Triumphs. We talk about it all, of course, in conversation and in therapy. Sadness and happiness. Finding our place amidst it. I am single, healthy, responsible, and full of lust. Incapable of more than a little satisfaction, thrashing on my bed once or twice a night. I cloak my needs, barely, and follow other distractions, suitably indulgent and often fanciful. Last week, I started on a series of dreams, one a night, about death — my death, abattoir death, catastrophes and pandemics, tape worms being coaxed out with a lump of steak at the lips. Suffocating to death as your tongue slips down your throat: the childhood horror stories. Freud explains these dreams to me: they are about death, certainly, but they are to tell me, reassure me — no, not this time, I am not ready yet.

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**ALAN RIACH**

**Vaucluse**

There is a menace in their indifferent scale,
the steely sky on the slate-blue sea: big,
abundant in space but blank —
as if they invite some great catastrophe:
like the jaws of an awful and ancient place
a vast doubled sombre still sunny oppressive weight
returning the glare of a fixed intensity
and nursing thunder. Boats are steel skelfs, planes wait
without moving against that heavy blue.
Silver gives glints, the blasts of hot wind
fall up from the distance, shock the suburbs here —
and Sydney climbs to its heights, a wedge
between the flinty uselessness of air
and millions of unnumbered and polluted tons of sea.

WESTERLY, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1990
A short introduction to my Uncle Glen

Glen was always building sheds. He'd buy wood. He had a thing about building sheds. He built six stables in his garden, then realised he'd have to buy the horses for them (and did). He built at least three aviaries and more kennels than I can remember. He filled the aviaries with parrots and canaries from Australia, Pacific Islands. He always had dogs: Alsatians, a Great Dane he would dance with around the kitchen, before he was married. Now, his kitchen cupboards are full of his kids' litters of Jack Russells. He used to like Lonnie Donegan. He used to play the guitar and yodel like Frank Ifield. At every piece of news to-day you tell him he looks amazed and shakes his head and says: 'My, my!'
A couple of years ago some of the family took a week's holiday in Tenerife. Glen was walking on the beach with my father, talking. Apart from the army, when he'd been in England and learned to be a chef (and cook these great sweet yellow curries) he had never been out of Scotland much. He said to my father, 'Jimmie,' (which is his name) 'you've sailed about the world a few times.' (Which is true.) 'Tell me,' he said, 'Where exactly are we?' Surely, it's the best way to travel.
Speak to Me

“Perhaps it’s just the frame . . . that’s it, I’m sure. What do you think Maya? And Maya agreed — “but Darling, there’s nothing wrong with Art Deco” . . . And I looked again.

I’d seen it in a window. About to cross with the lights it had caught my eye — and held . . . and I stopped. There was something about that painting . . . . Was it the light — yes. There was a kind of radiance, a sweep of colour and form that seemed . . . mystical — and I stood . . . then peered, but there was no price. None of the lamps, fans, ivory, bric a brac were marked either — which was sign enough. Anyway the shop was closed, and I took this to be an omen, as I’d already borrowed on next week’s wages . . . so I walked away.

But the memory haunted, especially when I looked at the walls of my third floor flat. They were green, like a hospital waiting room. The landlord said I was lucky; he’d just repainted, and that he didn’t usually let to young people. He pointed to a clause concerning damage, and I said I knew.

There was a bed, a laminex table, chairs, fridge, carpet squares — and expectance. As if the Bed. Sit. Was waiting for style to be imposed on my six months with options.

So I moved in, put my plant on the mantlepiece where it could trail to the floor — it was a darker green than the walls — deposited the three-in-one next to it — and was satisfied. I would cook every second night.

I met the couple who lived below, because they shopped together every Saturday morning. She, dark and tall, wearing short slacks, before they were fashionable; and he chunky and attractive. Bob and Gwen. But they weren’t friendly, beyond a G’day when I met them on the stairs. I was told she was in Public Relations. The only neighbour who was at all neighbourly was Maya, a Hungarian widow; a dressmaker, who invited me in for coffee when she wanted to show off a creation. Once, when one of her clients refused to pay up, she offered me a white top with a black cockerel, sewn sequin by sequin, on front. This I gratefully accepted, as I didn’t have many clothes, and didn’t mind the cockerel being slightly off centre. I wrote it with my black skirt to a Christmas Party at work.

But I still remembered the painting — and went back to see if I had been right. Luckily it was still there, in the window — and I looked — and it shimmered like before . . . making me glad . . . .

This time the door was open and I stepped into the too clean shop, among tastefully arranged velvet and crystal, up to an unexpectedly attractive man who seemed to know what he was about. I pointed to the painting, and he said “Ah yes”. It was from the school of one of the lesser Dutch painters, but was still a find. He spoke
of depth and line, of experimentation with form — and before I could enquire about price said he didn't mind taking it from the window.

He set it on the sideboard — "Superb, isn't it?" He watched my face. "How much?" — and he told me. I barely caught the words "bargain . . . frame included". What did I expect . . . I knew it would be expensive — but not quite that much — and tried to smile, explaining that it was a little above my means. He said he understood, and turned to greet a grey lady in pearls who was enquiring about a Wedgwood bowl. She bought it. I lingered, and tactfully he withdrew — but when I turned to ask, found him at my elbow. "Could it be paid off?"

That night I lay awake reckoning expenses, finding a comfortable position, throwing off blankets, hot, cold, talking myself to sleep, knowing there'd be exhaustion, why had I committed myself, could I get my deposit back — when the alarm jumped me awake.

I wished there was someone I could confide in, so I told Joan, who sat next to me at work — but without divulging cost. "Never imagined you liked art . . . you must show me" — and asked me to join her for lunch. Maya said what was life without beauty? — and a fortnight later I paid the second instalment. That was when Chris — he said he didn't believe in formality — took it out of the window and, with a flourish, put my name on it. I was lucky, he said, because someone else had been interested. He asked if I had studied art, been to The Hague . . . Florence . . . and seemed surprised when I said No — because I had an eye, he said . . . and the next time I came another painting, almost as lovely, was in the window.

Weeks passed, and I ate less, offered to work overtime, totted up columns of figures — and graduated to a monthly tenancy. I also went to gallery exhibitions, when they were free, wondering if Chris would be there . . . Anyway, they gave me something to talk about. Occasionally Joan came — when her boy-friend was studying . . . and she was all right but — it irritated when she pestered — so in the end told her I'd given permission for my painting to be shown interstate, and she'd see it when it came back.

Once, when I was feeling low — I'd paid over half by then — Chris let me have another look. It was closing time anyway . . . so he led me to his store-room, round the back. He unlocked the door . . . and I followed, close behind — into the dark. I tried to quiet my breath. I could hear him breathing. There was a smell of wood . . . and precious things . . . which mingled with the after-shave he wore — and hurtful yellow when he snapped on the light — as chatting, moving, thrusting, reaching, he pulled off a dustcloth — and there it was; beautiful, unspoiled. Still a dream . . .

And when I got home, I stroked the green where it would hang . . .

The following Sunday I went to the Ivanyi Galleries in South Yarra. I went for the sake of the art . . . a John Perceval collection was being exhibited — when I saw him. Chris didn't notice me at first, engrossed in what seemed to be animated conversation with the man by his side. They were standing very close, and I could feel my heart pounding because I wanted to go up. I wanted to impress . . .

So I walked up — to where they stood — and they were close, smiling. I came near — and knew — I had to get away — but Chris saw. He called . . . and introduced me to Pete . . .

I hung my painting on the green wall . . . where it glowed, and sparkled, and spoke to me. It hung opposite the front door, so that it was the first thing I saw when I came home at night — and looked for each morning. My flat had character — and I invited Maya, and Joan, for a coffee.

Like a mother I stood aside to let them worship; watching as they walked up
to the painting, then backed away. It was nice, Joan said, at last . . . then she started
talking about the frame . . . maybe something narrower, plainer — while Maya said
“Darling, it’s all a matter of taste” - and my smile ached — so I opened a jar of
Nescafe, and with stiff hands poured . . . and we drank . . . and talked of other
things . . . .

The frame was gilt; its width noduled by leaves and rosebuds which glowed when
mirrored in light . . . Its opulence enhanced — I thought — and I studied the
whole . . . then covered part of the frame with a cloth, a fawn one — but No. Something was wrong — and let the gold shine through, again . . . .

Foolish to let it keep me awake . . . but it did — and next morning I found myself
looking at the frame . . . and not the picture — before I realised I’d never thought
of them as separate, before.

So I went to work, came home — and stared at the painting, then the frame . . .
and thought of Chris — but no; I couldn’t . . . go back . . . so concentrated on the
picture, and the frame . . . until I looked away . . . .

On Saturday, I carefully wrapped the picture in a pillowcase, placed it in a red
and white Safeway’s bag, and took it to a picture framer on High Street. He had
just what I was looking for, he said, and picked one out — plain, and in ash wood
— from several samples. “It’s difficult to tell” — so he positioned the ash, below
the gold . . . and I looked — and saw that it blended.

“A perfect match” he said, when it was ready, ten days later — and I looked,
and saw that it was . . . .

And it looked as it should, hung on my green wall . . . and I slept the whole night
through . . . .

But when I returned, and threw wide my door — there was no sparkle . . . there
was no light . . . and I took the picture down . . . .
Barney Reece's camp at the swamp, c.1917.
I park my car on the hill in Coral Street and walk down towards Sackville Terrace. A utility stands in the drive shielding the spot where our earth closet at Risingholm once stood. The layers of ordure are overlain with lawn and bitumen. I click a couple of shots, walk up Sackville Terrace towards Joyce Street. Five green garbage bins are on the verge in front of a new block of units. Next door in the garden of a house (circa 1950) stands a clump of old tuart trees. More than fifty years ago those same tuarts shaded the loose sand where our pony and trap churned its way towards the cottage. I remember the rough track of Joyce Street, its limestone lumps bulging through the gravel which skirted the slope that dropped towards the swamp and Mr Millar's one-roomed weatherboard shack. I tumbled there, onto the stones of that track, my knees bleeding, as I rushed to greet my mother, who had returned for the weekend from the city in Millet's char-a-banc. The present house, (like those earlier cottages), the roads, the garbage bins, are ephemeral. Only the soil, leeched and barren though it now is, and dependent upon chemical additives and concrete to give it validity is the sole link with the past. Yet who now would choose to live in an unsewered house, draw water from a well, drink unpasteurised goat's milk, and wind a gramophone to listen to the thin tenor of Peter Dawson's voice? Nostalgia, for all its appeal, can also be subversive. You can't go back except by creating a kind of fiction. A truth more compelling than the reality.

Emigration begins with one simple decision. Much thought may have been given to the making of that decision. Doubts, questions, alternatives and in personal terms, sometimes despair. The story is common. Someone dies. Someone is left. What the survivor does is not so important. It is what is felt that impels the action — the decision to stop living, or to go on. Despair has many faces. Few people encounter alternatives to the ordinary. The weeping. The silence. Yet fusion of a kind does take place. You can't say 'my family began in 1906 or 1952 or 1983 because . . .' A family is part of a continuum. You slot in to your own beginnings, back a generation or two perhaps, and project only as far as your grandchildren — if you are lucky. For some, their own death ends the era.

I have heard women in 1990, cushioned by comfort, say they can't understand a mother leaving her children. But there are different ways of caring. It is their pain those women can't endure, not their children's. Nell Heath was made of tougher stuff. She buried grief, put her children into temporary institutional care and went to Hamburg, where she joined the German ship Sedlitz and sailed to Australia.

She told me none of this. Her tales were of happier times, of her own childhood and later when she and her sons were reunited. I baulk at dramatising her story.
It is enough to say she left her children and went alone to a new country, without expectations or illusions.

Suburbs are for families and establish a tension between public and private lives. Within the walls of any suburban house domestic life is sacrosanct (even if profane) but on the verge, the front verandah even, through the network of quiet streets, the park and playing fields, the churches, the cluster of little shops (that now have spawned a vast complex, a mini-city) there is common territory. Some suburbs do this better than others, and Scarborough's beginnings were slow but always linked to its seaside appeal. A suburb's genesis is arbitrary, arising not so much from a need as from expediency — a developer sees a chance for profit, a city or a shire needs to house an expanding population. In the case of Scarborough the former was the case. In 1916 Scarborough Beach, named after its counterpart in England, was seen as an ideal playground, offering simple pleasures — bathing, surfing and beach fishing — for the urban community west and north of Perth. There were already one or two settlers out there in the bush who had taken up land holdings earlier in the State's history — the Mannings, Butler who owned a dairy and Mrs Cunningham-Smith. The soil was disappointing — a few dairy cattle roamed, and horses, (the Ffairington double FF brand could be picked out on the hocks of animals grazing by Herdsman's Lake) — and unproductive. By 1916 companies like Peet had acquired large areas for subdivision. There were no roads to speak of, and no services, though there was promise of a tramway to the beach, an extension of the No.15 service that terminated at the corner of Main Street and Scarborough Beach Road in Osborne Park. Beyond that point a strip of macadamised road wound its way through the market gardens, and a plank road spanned the half a mile or so of loose black sand, skimming the edge of the lake between Osborne Park and Innaloo. There were plans to put in passing bays but the money ran out so there was always the occasional confrontation between masher cart and motor car with fists and voices raised. We could turn off the track at Westview Street and drag through the bush where Sackville Terrace is now aligned, or go down to Joyce Street and follow its gravel track until it too petered out into sand near the swamp.

Barney Reece lived in a slab hut down by the swamp. There is the evidence of his bush shelter in the photographs. I do not remember ever seeing Barney Reece — perhaps he died before I was born — but tales were told about him during those years we lived out there in the bush.

I'm not sure why I am remembering Barney — the legend of Barney Reece — at this moment because he plays no significant part in subsequent events and his connection with my family was only ever tenuous, (or simply fortuitous) some common experience, perhaps, with my grandfather when as newchums to this country, they may have met briefly, on the goldfields. That is where this story could begin. On the goldfields, at my grandfather's grave, rather than at the site of Barney Reece's camp beside the swamp that is now partially drained and has become a playing field for today's children.

In the great cities, London, Paris, Rome, the suburbs enticed a rural population nearer to the centre — where things happened. In places like Perth, the suburb offered a chance to get away from the boredom of small town life, yet, after the novelty had worn off, the residents had to endure another, more insidious kind of boredom and some women, for whom the ghetto of the suburb has lost its meaning, escape through the flickering shadows of the midstday movies, softened by valium, librium, tripelol, largactyl or alcohol.

Memory plays tricks. It skips whole generations to make connections or deliberately leaves gaps to avoid confronting pain. Now, I try to reconstruct my own beginnings:
to make the man who was my father real. He said to his brother “They tell me I’ve got what Dad had”. He was twenty-seven. His father had died at thirty-six and within a year of learning of his complaint, my father too had coughed his lungs away.

**September 4th 1980**

We have come to find the grave; my grandfather’s grave. The Boulder cemetery is flat and dry and gravelly, a few sparse and spindly eucalypts offering dappled shade. There are gusts of desert-chilled wind. It is not what you’d expect. You think of the goldfields as hot (in this country anyway); searing with baked earth, and the blue of the sky so intense it hurts your eyes. In the summer of 1906 it probably was like that, especially to someone with soft white skin, used to grey and weeping English skies, but in the early spring of 1980 there is a surprising coolness and bluster about the breeze that makes you uncertain about believing myths no matter how reassuring they might be.

There is a photograph of my paternal grandfather taken before he left England alone in 1906, for Western Australia and the healing sun. In the photograph he is standing behind the seated figure of his wife, Nell and their two small sons, John and Stanley. I have another memento. The remnants of a silver rattle that bears tiny teeth marks. It is inscribed *Cecil Arthur Owen Heath*, but it is hard to read the inscription because of the crumpling of the silver.

Now, in 1990, almost a century since Cecil Heath came to this place, I try to retell the myths that my grandmother, Nell once told to me. She was a practical woman and stuck to the facts, but these no longer satisfy me.

The doctor has confirmed that it is consumption. The cough has become more insistent lately and there have been specks of blood in the phlegm. The winter has been severe. Fogs day after day. Sometimes you cannot see your hand in front of your face. I find it hard to breathe sometimes, bent over the ledgers. The figures swim and the double entries become jumbled. They have suggested that I stay in bed, eat nourishing food. But I have no appetite. The Heath men are supposed to have weak chests, yet my brother, as forty-five is strong and healthy, certainly not consumptive. Nell says, ‘Ah, but you see he didn’t marry.’ Nell is strong. She is a good woman.

My grandmother said ‘It is better to be good than beautiful’. Her life might have been easier if she had thought otherwise. And mine might have taken a different direction. But I am drifting into fable, away from the certainty of fact. Six months after he began work as the accountant on the Perseverance Mine, Cecil Heath was dead. The sun’s promise had proved false, dry heat did not repair those scrambled lungs.

Widows had a tough time. There were few options. Remarry. Sell yourself. Take in laundry or lodgers. Nell’s solid asset, apart from a few shares worth one hundred pounds, was a house in Dulwich, London, left to her by her late husband. She chose to let rooms to gentlemen. Some put off paying their rent, some asked for favours, some simply robbed her. She decided to come to Australia.

My grandmother’s energy was invested in her sons. The years between 1914 and 1920 were the happiest of her life. Her poverty was relative, not desperate, and brought about by choice. ‘Waste not want not’, ‘Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves’. Within days of landing she had a job — bookkeeper for *Bon Marché* and three years later had saved enough for a deposit on a house, proving that being a woman was no impediment to raising a loan. It was she who proposed the holiday cottage in the bush by the sea.
Masher cart — Scarborough, 1926.

“Risingholm” — Scarborough, 1926.

31 Sackville Terrace, 1990 — site of "Risingholm".
The links between grandchild and grandparent have a different intensity from those between parent and child. The emotional investment is less at risk. My mother never told me (though she told my daughter, her grandchild) that she ran five miles through the bush to the tram terminus, boarded the tram, her breath rasping her throat, urged the clanking bogey every inch of the way, got off at the corner of William and Murray and sped up to the Perth Public Hospital with a specimen of my father's phlegm.

On Sunday evenings we had boiled eggs for tea. My mother approached hers in a different way from my grandmother who would carefully test the spot with a tentative tap before lopping the top just at the point where yolk met white. My mother, on the other hand, carried out a series of gentle taps with the back of a spoon to craze the shell. Then she would carefully pick off the fragments to expose the gleaming white mound. She liked her eggs soft-boiled and the trembling of the membrane which encased the flesh gave her the anticipation of pleasure. My grandmother preferred her eggs hard. She would spend endless moments as I faced my egg (undecided whether to swipe or crack and not very interested in eggs anyway), drawing humpty dumpty faces and setting up bread soldiers to 'march down the red lane.' When the last soldier had been dipped in yolk and swallowed and the scrapings of white peeled from the bottom of the hollow shell, she would divert my attention, reverse the shell in its cup and present me with a second egg. Once the trick was revealed and I had lopped off the top to discover an empty shell she passed the power to me and responded predictably each time I replayed the trick on her.

It's 31 Sackville Terrace now. The original lot 51 on Plan 3827 has been subdivided to become lots 101 and 103 'being portion of Swan Location 1186 on Diagram 34201.' The language of officialdom conveys nothing of the social history of the place. At the Titles Office, clutching my priority ticket I wait to explain the reason for my search. I marvel at the transactions that have taken place and at the encumbrances and restraints imposed upon individuals whose only aim had been to get 'a place of their own'.

'It'll cost you,' says the clerk. '$8 for each copy of title.'

Thirty two dollars and I have the title with my father's name on it. JOHN ARTHUR OWEN HEATH. My grandmother hadn't made all those sacrifices to acquire more property in her own name. That land was for her sons, both still minors. When it was purchased in 1916, the corner block for my father cost twelve pounds, the other for my uncle, eight. She paid in cash.

I knock at 31 Sackville Terrace. It is mid afternoon and there is no-one home. I try the house next door, walk up and down the street, knock on doors where cars stand in the drive-ways. No-one answers. Are they shift workers, asleep? Are they out walking the dog? Are they peering through the curtains, suspicious of a woman at the door who carries a bundle of papers. The suburbs seem empty of people at 2.45 on a weekday afternoon. Children at school. Mothers and fathers at work. Grandparents safely stowed in retirement villages. Life in the suburbs can be secure and reassuring. The whirr of lawnmowers on Sunday mornings, the whoops of children playing in the park. Terrible things can also happen. In the nineteen-sixties Greensleeves lured at least seven children to their deaths. In the eighties backyard pools were silent killers. A whole family was shot while watching television one evening — that happened in Scarborough. But on this June day there is nothing dramatic and finally, further down Sackville Terrace, someone does answer my knock.

'I'm not aiming to convert you and I'm not selling anything,' I say.

'Good,' she replies. 'I wasn't sure.'
She's lived there thirty-five years, remembers the cottage and the lady who lived in it during the early sixties — an old woman who was known as the animal lady and who had a hunchback daughter, some sheep, a horse, dogs, cats. The RSPCA were concerned about the animals. The cottage and its owner made the headlines briefly before the demolition and she got the credit for being one of the district’s pioneers.

**But Nell Heath and her sons built the place.**

My uncle wrote:

‘In 1921 we bought another 3 blocks — one pound down and ten shillings a month. All the area was well timbered and old Barney [Reece] had shown us how to fell trees and split logs for fence posts. The fencing kept us occupied for a long time and then we decided to build our own house . . . we would go out each weekend and quarry some stone. When we had raised a sufficient pile of stones we would buy and cart out a bag of lime and with the sand on site laid stone on stone until the required height. There was no such thing as plans for the Council in those days though I think your father would have drawn a plan. Eventually a long room was completed, two doors and three windows and a fireplace. We subsequently partitioned the room. We bought all the timber frames and iron for the roof second hand, new bricks for the chimney and carted them out weekly. We’d carry the water for our own use and mixing mortar from Barney’s well and when we had our own roof for catchment we built an underground tank, cement lined which was a great boon.’

That was 1921. By 1928 the elder son had married, become a father and died. A husband, a son; dead before their prime. Only the matriarchal thread — paternal grandmother, mother, me — holds us together, tensile and transmigratory (*Thy firmness makes my circle just/and makes me end where I begun*).¹

There is a soul sustaining network operating in the suburbs. A meshing of minds over cups of tea or mugs of coffee, an unravelling of lives and an attempt to order things. It has always been so. But in other houses not built with hands, in those spirit lives on their gyratory paths (*what remains when disbelief has gone?/Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky;/A shape less recognizable each week,/A purpose more obscure*)² an obdurate will maintains a kind of equilibrium.

A suburb works through its phases. One day it may revert to its natural state. Roads will break up, houses crumble, vegetation encroach. There have been precedents. The bush will avenge itself, reclaiming the soil.

Nostalgia is seductive and has to be subverted.

**NOTES**

¹. John Donne, from *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*.
². Philip Larkin, from *Churchgoing*.

**WESTERLY, No. 4, DECEMBER, 1990**
A Gunner's Sights

Watching the Australian Open
backhand drop-shot
volley backspin cross-court pass
we talk of
selling uranium to the French — changing the atmosphere we know, inviting their waste to contaminate billabongs, poison eucalypts.

Unemployment foreign drug dealers multinational enterprise &
computerized lifestyles corner imaginations as homeless youth wander our cities

Aboriginals still dream of Maralinga, know the secrets of 'the eyes of America' at Pine Gap will be first to go

"Perfect shot!" cries the commentator — tactics to end it all.
Birth Of Our Son

(for Jonathan)

Your kicks displaced organs,
movements push
and roll the stomach
like a contorted wave-
motion rising
until your mother
is short of breath,
your head caught
in the pelvis —
elbows and knees
entwined.

This is how I saw
your lively form,
the ultrasound
entering your playground
like a lonely child
wanting to join in
from the world outside.

I stood by the delivery
chair holding her
foot like a stirrup shouting
"push, push! well done
keep going!" while the
doctor on the other side
shouted directions —
when to stop or push
and pointing in the
mirror's reflection where.
Like a package awaiting
time's weary brow
your head is suddenly
unwrapped and turned
on its axis
like a work of clay,
your body growing out
from the shoulders and
slipping recklessly
into our lives.

AUSTRALIAN WOMENS BOOK REVIEW

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Imagining Suburbia: The Role of the Real Estate Agent

Suburbia has had a bad press in Australia. Critics as diverse as Robin Boyd and Barry Humphries have disparaged the Australian penchant for suburban living. Much of this criticism has been based on the apparent sameness of the Australian suburbs — the mile upon mile of red roofed houses that surround the city centre — in which it is assumed that lives of mindless mediocrity are lived out. Yet despite such elitist critiques the Australian ‘dream’ is still a home in the suburbs, for the critics of suburbia have failed to realise that the suburban home has a psychological as well as an economic value for its owners. Even for tenants the psychological need to create a home is strong. There are good reasons for this, as J.M. Richards observed over forty years ago in his seminal British work, *The Castles on the Ground: the Anatomy of Suburbia*, “in the suburb each man can see his own handiwork . . . to some extent he can feel responsible for his own environment and thus get a sense of controlling his destiny”. While today we might argue with the gender bias of Richard’s words, it must be acknowledged that for its inhabitants each home in each suburb represents a statement of individuality.

This individuality, however, is a tricky notion for it is dependent on only a finite array of choices. In choosing to buy or rent a home in a particular suburb individuals soon find that their choice is limited by what they can afford. Particular suburbs are meant for particular classes. The apparent sameness of Australian suburbs is a myth, for there are suburbs for the wealthy, suburbs for the poor and a variety of middle class suburbs for those in between. To a greater or lesser extent all simulate an imagined ideal and it is in the suburbs of the wealthy that this ideal is most closely approximated. This article looks at the origins of the notion of an ideal environment, examining its influence in Australia and the way in which it was used to boost the development of a Perth suburb in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The enthusiasm with which Australians accepted the ideal of suburban living is in part an expression of the strength of anti-urban sentiments in nineteenth century Britain. These sentiments, which linked the city with notions of evil and corruption, were examined by several writers in the early 1970s, years when contemporary urban degeneration was the subject of widespread concern. The idea of the corrupting influence of the city can be traced back to Greek literature and was particularly influential in English literature. However, in the nineteenth century anti-urban sentiments tended to wax and wane in response to changing economic conditions. In times of depression, when destitution and squalor were especially visible in the city, writers looked back to the environment of rural pre-industrial England with nostalgia. Anti-urban sentiments reached their peak during the nineteenth century when Britain was in the throes of the profound economic and social change that accompanied rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.
The British historian F.M.L. Thompson has argued that the strength of anti-urban sentiments was a major influence in the suburban development of Britain. Basing his conclusions on a number of case studies, he discarded the usual economic reasons for suburban growth in favour of an ideological variable. For although he believed that broad economic cycles, building costs, the availability of cheap plentiful land and the provision and extension of transport, all played a part in suburban development, he concluded that they were not the cause of this development. Instead he argued that middle class ideology was the prime variable. The British middle class, basing their ideas on romantic notions of rural pre-industrial life and its association in the imagination with gentry and aristocratic styles of living, believed in the advantages of a rural environment. *Rus in urbe* was an ideal compromise, for the newly developing suburbs on the rural fringes of the cities offered all the advantages of country life within easy distance of the city. Thompson inferred that it was for this reason that middle class suburban dwellers valued their suburban gardens as something which “was a piece of tangible evidence, however minute, that the dream of being a townsman living in the country, was something more than just an illusion”.4

Paramount in the development of anti-urban sentiments amongst the British middle class was the fact that social problems were in sharpest focus in the city. During the Boer War it was found that standards of fitness amongst British army recruits were abysmally low. This apparent degeneration of the race caused enormous public concern and the conditions of urban life were believed to be the cause.5 It was known, for example, that disease was most prevalent in the city, for the British social reformer, Edwin Chadwick, had recognised the link between the environment and health. His reports of the early 1840s demonstrated the correlation between insanitary conditions, defective drainage and overcrowded housing in cities and reduced life expectancy. Although the reasons for this were not fully understood, this knowledge informed the efforts of urban reformers in most industrialised societies. Initially they concentrated their efforts on improving the sanitary provisions of cities, where the worst concentrations of disease were to be found, and later advocated town planning and housing reform as a means of improving public health.6 Throughout this period the image of pre-industrial rural Britain — the Merrie England of green pastures, rolling downs, thatched cottages and sturdy yeoman farmers — was contrasted with the filth and squalor of the city and romanticised as an ideal society. The city was the root of all evil; its antithesis, the country, was conversely the fount of all goodness.

Anti-urban sentiment was also prevalent in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia. Indeed it partly accounts for the enduring success of the bush legend which was popularised by writers and artists in the 1890s and thereafter. They believed that the environment of Australia's frontier wilderness would provide a test from which a new and better national type would emerge. Writers whose work was popularised in the *Bulletin* and the Impressionist artists of the Heidelberg School, with their Arcadian visions of the golden summers of a benign rural landscape and their celebration of pioneer life, did much to soften the harsh realities of the Australian bush. Hence rural life in Australia came to be endowed with the same romantic qualities as pre-industrial rural life in Britain.7

However, in accounting for suburban development, Australian historians have tended to follow the majority of British and American historians who have emphasised demographic, economic and technological factors. But, in this nation where cities and their suburbs cling to the coast of a vast and underpopulated interior, they have also alluded to the importance of environmental and ideological factors. Davison for example, although arguing that economic and technological factors such as the provision of transport and essential services were vital for the suburban
development of Melbourne in the 1880s and 1890s, concluded that the belief that the urban environment was deteriorating was also significant. He argued that Melbournians transplanted the British ideal of *rus in urbe* when they promoted suburban living with all “the Advantages of Country and City Life Combined.”

Hence Melbourne people looked for “a green and secluded neighbourhood . . . fresh air, a pleasant view and a shady garden” and, in accordance with popular late nineteenth century ideas about the spread of disease, saw “wind-blown hilltops and seaside promenades” as desirable home sites. Similar tendencies were also apparent in late nineteenth century Sydney where the city’s spectacular topography played a strong role in shaping suburban development.

Studies of twentieth century suburban development, however, have tended to take environmental and ideological factors for granted. For example, Kelly, in his discussion of land sales in Sydney’s eastern suburbs in the 1920s, relegated harbour or sea views, cooling breezes and the proximity of the beach, to the imagination of real estate agents, arguing instead that economic and technological factors were the key variables in the development of Sydney’s eastern suburbs.

The language used by land and real estate agents in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Perth indicates that anti-urban sentiments were widespread. Indeed they were used extensively to promote suburbia as an ideal place in which to live. Yet the role of estate agents in suburban development, or indeed in the development of particular classes of suburbs, has rarely been adequately acknowledged, for they have generally been castigated as mere boosters. Although a number of historians have discussed the role of land agents in urban development very few have attempted to explore their rhetoric or its ideological basis. Much of the work on urban development in Australia has focused on the big players — major land owners — and their links with local and state governments. Real estate agents were generally the middle men and have only attracted the attention of historians when they themselves owned and developed large tracts of land. Land development in Melbourne has been the main focus of attention, although there has been some work done on the nineteenth century Sydney and Perth land markets. The twentieth century has been less well served, with most analysis focusing on Sydney and its suburbs. In neither nineteenth nor twentieth century Australian urban and suburban development have real estate agents been seen as key players.

There has been very little research into the use of advertising in the marketing of land and housing. The limited amount of research into the growth of the advertising industry in Australia as a whole suggests that it grew rapidly after the Great War. Certainly it was well developed by 1940 when a treatise on advertising was published in Melbourne, as its opening statement “advertising is one of the most effective aids employed in the science of selling” indicates. However, even a glance at the real estate columns of the *West Australian* from the mid 1880s onwards shows that advertising was increasingly recognised as a powerful and indeed essential means of selling land and houses. Real estate agents were well practised in picking up aspects of the existing image of an area, marrying this with contemporary ideology, and developing a rhetoric based on these factors to advertise land and housing in a district. As one real estate agent commented succinctly in 1918:

> We are only common Land Agents, but we are alive to every move and know what is best for the people, after our experience of nearly forty years.

Today it is very clear that, with intensive advertising, real estate agents can turn an apparently worthless piece of bush on the fringes of the metropolitan area into a desirable place of residence.

In 1880 a tract of bush midway between the city of Perth and the port of Fremantle was just such a piece of land. Today we know it as the elite suburb of Claremont.
Then it was only distinguished from the surrounding bush by a small settlement known as Freshwater Bay which lay on the banks of the Swan River. This had been established in the 1850s by the government as a convict hiring depot and small parcels of land on the river and at Butler's Swamp nearby had been allocated to Pensioner Guards and their families. The aim was that eventually they would become self-sufficient. However, few of the men had any farming experience and most were forced to seek employment in other parts of the colony. By 1880 only about a dozen families lived at Freshwater Bay.17

Improved transport was the main impetus for the development of Claremont as a suburb, but there were other factors which led to its development as a well-to-do suburb. Access to the area was considerably improved when the Perth-Fremantle railway was built in 1880, but when the first subdivision of land in the area was advertised in that year by its owner James Morrison, a Guildford estate agent, he chose to emphasise the rural nature of the land and its suitability and convenience as a suburban retreat;

Claremont has now been laid out in Building Sites which will be offered for sale by public auction. . . . when gentlemen engaged in business, wishing to have the pleasure of a country life after their day's work is over, will have a chance of buying at a low rate, a Suburban Villa Site in a healthy, rural, but centrally situated locality — a locality likely (in the course of time) to become to the residents of Perth and Fremantle what South Yarra is to Melbourne, or Kensington is to London.18

The message contained in this advertisement was to set the scene for Claremont's future development.

The seal of approval was given to the area when members of the Western Australian elite bought up large estates in the district. The Colonial Secretary, Roger Goldsworthy, bought a magnificent site overlooking Freshwater Bay as a suburban retreat on which to build his home. Goldsworthy was soon posted to another part of the Empire, and when the estate passed to his son-in-law, Alpin Thomson (later Under Secretary for Railways and Tramways), he capitalised on Perth's land boom of the late 1880s by selling part of the estate off in three large sections. His new neighbours, three of Perth's leading citizens, built impressive homes on these subdivisions, ensuring that the emerging tone of the district was maintained.18

Suburbanisation occurred slowly over the following two decades. Claremont land was soon caught up in the speculation associated with any land boom, but it was not until the goldrush years of the early 1890s, with its associated population surge and buoyant economic times, that the sale of small suburban blocks on smaller subdivisions accelerated. There was a time lag before many homes were built, with the most extensive building phase occurring after the turn of the century when the district's population trebled.20

Integral to this process of suburbanisation were the continued activities of land and real estate agents. It was they who consolidated the tone of the emerging suburb. Initially, land was Claremont's most marketable commodity and estate agents used romantic imagery to entice prospective buyers. Among the first subdivisions to sell was one advertised as having "delightful Park-like Scenery . . . with Charming Views of the River Swan".21 When the Perth land boom showed signs of slowing, Claremont land was advertised in Sydney, where a lengthy advertisement waxed lyrical in a romantic description of the drive from Perth to Claremont; "the drive is diversified by charming views of hill and dale, silvery river and wooded crag". It prophesied with a fair degree of accuracy that the area would gain popularity as the "merchants and citizens seek their residences in umbrageous suburban retreats".22 Even in the 1890s the names which were given to subdivisions, such as Silverdale, Prinsep Vale and Bayview, continued to echo the romantic imagery of the 1880s.
By the end of the 1880s real estate in Claremont had been endowed with qualities which reflected the status of its leading inhabitants. A local estate agent predicted that Claremont “will without a doubt shortly be what Toorak is to Melbourne” and throughout the 1890s the jargon of estate agents was pitched at an appeal to status. Descriptions of the suburb ranged from “a pretty little suburb” to “the premier watering place of Western Australia”, “the leading suburb for summer residence” and “a most salubrious residential suburb”. Newspaper articles and official publications confirm that Claremont’s transition to fashionable suburb were not just an advertising ploy. In 1892 the Daily News featured an article on Claremont, concluding that while Claremont “a few years since had the appearance of a barren waste, [it] today contains some of the finest residences in the colony”. Even the Governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Gerard Smith, condescended to describe it as “an exceedingly picturesque and pleasant locality” when he opened the Claremont Wildflower Show in 1898.

At the end of the nineties the grim realities of life, for the thousands of Perth people living in over-crowded and insanitary conditions, were the fear of typhoid then ravaging the city, unemployment and homelessness. The new residents of fashionable Claremont were sheltered from such concerns. Even so, real estate agents moved to disassociate Claremont from either disease or depression, by reviving Claremont’s image as a place of suburban retreat and renewing their use of the rhetoric which tapped into anti-urban sentiment. As one of the many land agents operating in the district put it

Alan Deuchar feels it is his duty to inform the West Australian public where to live for the benefit of their health . . . . This charming suburb is the daddy of them all for health, peace and pleasure. The people who responded to such rhetoric were largely Perth’s upper and middle classes. By 1904 almost one third of Claremont’s male population were members of Western Australia’s upper class — leading professionals, financiers, wealthy merchants and manufacturers, and influential civil servants. Half were members of the middle class — middle echelon civil servants, accountants, clerical workers employed in banks, insurance and shipping companies, and semi-professionals such as journalists and draughtsmen, salesmen, commercial travellers and owners of small businesses. The remaining third were working class men and, as would be expected in a rapidly growing suburb, most were members of the building trades — carpenters, painters, stonemasons and bricklayers.

The homes that the residents of Claremont built confirmed the tone of the emergent suburb. Overlooking the river were the “splendidly situated and magnificent” residences of the elite with servants’ quarters, stables and often a ballroom. On the outskirts of the suburb or tucked behind the main shopping street were the small jarrah cottages of artisans and workmen and their families. But most typically, and most suitably for members of Perth’s burgeoning middle class, were the “handsome”, “elegant” or “charming” brick villas, with names like ‘Hazeldene’, ‘Cotswold’, ‘Grassmere’, Ashlea and ‘Roseview’, that lined Claremont streets. Indeed, a contemporary architect believed that many of the best villas in Perth were to be found in Claremont.

The popularity of the ‘villa’ amongst the Australian middle class in the late nineteenth century, underscores the extent to which anti-urban sentiments had penetrated Australian society. The term originally described a country house, but by the nineteenth century in Britain a ‘villa’ was a well-to-do residence in the suburbs on the edge of town. Claremont was predominantly a suburb of villas. The names that residents gave to their villas, names that were redolent of the British countryside, indicate just how successful land and real estate agents had been when, at a time
of unfettered and rapid urban growth with its undertones of squalor and disease, they marketed this tract of bush using a rhetoric which conjured up the image of an ideal British environment.

NOTES


9. Ibid., pp. 144-145.
16. Thomas Tate, director of T. Tate and Co and one time Director of the powerful Sydney based Intercolonial Land Building and Investment Co, in advertisement in the *West Australian*, 30 November 1918.
19. For details see Gregory, op cit., pp. 120-123.
20. Ibid., p. 147.
28. Information based on occupational analysis of the 1904 *Western Australian Legislative Assembly Electoral Rolls*. For details see Gregory 1988, op cit., chapter 5.
Listening for Lorikeets in Birkley Road

Listen: up a hill, lorikeets shrill.
Their sharp, high song salts the sky . . .

In Birkley Road, houses gasp open their gills.
Arriving from plains miraging waves over wheat,
we tiptoed into alien jaws. Scales glittered
through the garden — all our windows smashed.
Inside, the last tenants' low tide —
quarrelling clothes, cupboards chopsticked,
a home gutted. Over the hill, the sea
remained just-a-lick of blue. On its fins
the hazed house rocked, waiting
for twilight's ripple.

Our first Sin City year. On Sydney Road's Big Dipper,
the country child I had been popped her eyes.
Up and down salt air, arpeggioed houses. Lives,
like sand, flung into sky. My history hovered behind
as turning near the man who lived on a tower
of tyres, riskily high, I skidded toward
the sea's sun-wrapped reward.

Soon beyond fresh glass, morning glory's macrame.
Busy blue days netted us. Mondays in the park,
football crowds and picnickers
vanished like foam. Only kookaburras kicked voices.
To-and-from the ferry, too busy for the beach,
I longed to live like those lilac ear-rings
always in sun on the lilly-pilly.
And yet, our future did not flounder.
In spite of afternoon tabloid predictions
it was an easy time. In Birkley Road, by our door,
a high-rise camellia welcomed warm
pink holidayers on every floor.
Two years the house was ours. Then, demolition.
A multi-storey nursing home rose above our view.
Now lorikeets, shattering from sea-gnawed pines,
mend in magnesium-bright light and shrill
over premonitions of towers where,
at twilight, in the windows, aging faces
hang like silent bells.

Listen: above a lick-of-lake now, up a hill . . .
how Birkley Road carillons.
Swamp to Supermarket: Suburbia in Recent Western Australian Fiction

There are three catchy titles in the literature that hold a promise of suburban relevance and revelation: Dorothy Hewett's poetry anthology *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, Randolph Stow's novel *The Suburbs of Hell* and Tom Hungerford's *Stories from Suburban Road*.

Of the three only Tom Hungerford's book, hovering on the margins of autobiography, local history and mythmaking, lives up to the promise of the title.

In the Hewett anthology the reader is teased along to search for the Rapunzel poem, the last in the book, but the presumably intended significance of suburban limitation and frustration is so thoroughly overwhelmed by the ferocity of its imagery that it is difficult to claim the poem as a statement about the suburban experience.

The 1984 Randolph Stow novel, although inspired by events in suburban Nedlands twenty years earlier, is firmly set in England, and only the initiate would appreciate the connection. In any case, the novel is not so much about suburbs as about hell.

In the local literature so far no detailed or explicit picture of suburban Perth emerges. Whereas Melbourne and Sydney suburbs have been well chronicled (in Melbourne Morris Lurie, Helen Garner, Serge Liberman spring to mind; in Sydney Peter Corris, or for that matter 'The Balmain Push'), Western Australian writers when defining a locale tend to opt for the bush, the beach or the bed — firmly rural or unspecified domestic, not the buffer zone in between, which though often implicit, is rarely visualised or commented on.

Even so, it is possible to trace a development of growing awareness and within this awareness a range of attitudes.

To the writer primarily interested in surf and sea, the adjoining suburb is as irrelevant as a distant country. Where Robert Drewe in *The Bodysurfers* vividly creates the beach, the fringing suburbs are barely acknowledged — whether the fast food shops are in Cottesloe or Bondi makes very little difference. Tim Winton, too, lightly skims the distance between home and the ocean on streets that relate to the car or the bicycle but not to residents.

On the other hand, in the writings of Tom Hungerford and Peter Cowan the suburbs assume significance both as background for individual characters in the stories, and as a vehicle for wider comment on social attitudes and developments.

Hungerford's childhood reminiscences, shaped into well defined stories, present a study of pre-war South Perth rich in period detail, from the price of vegetables to the roll call of colourful local characters. The unquestioningly accepted ethos of the family and its sense of rightness in time and place is as clear an indication of a vanished world as are the chaff-sheds and draught horses. The most surprising aspect for today's reader is the changed scale of distances and generosity of environment: easily accessible by boat, yet clearly separate from the city, this version
of South Perth, dominated by the river, is a place of horse-paddocks, Chinese market gardens, the zoo, fishing, and areas of bush for birds-nesting. To go to Como was an Outing, and when there was a storm the young Hungerford was aware of the thunder 'rolling away over South Perth and Victoria Park and the hills, and then Kalgoorlie and the rest of Australia."

While one is aware that these pictures of South Perth are seen through the inevitable golden haze of happy childhood memory, it is striking that this is the only example of a suburb seen as a joyful place in its own right and simultaneously as the gateway to the promise of a larger world rather than a place from which to escape. It is seen neither as a constriction, nor as a quaint embarrassment, but rather as a lovingly presented genre painting.

Peter Cowan's corner of South Perth in *The Hills of Apollo Bay* shares some of the ecology but none of sunny charm of Hungerford's place. The main character is a reluctant resident and a friend suggests that he would be better off in West Perth. For reasons of economy he is staying with an aunt whose house backs the same river foreshore, but here the water, instead of offering adventure, is an ever-present threat (hadn't it drowned an uncle on his own back steps?) It invades the house, lush growth overtakes the garden, the plants are a hostile army, old creepers cover half dead trees.

The scene is one of menace and decay and yet there is a remarkable vitality in Cowan's rich compost of natural vegetation and hinted-at family history that contrasts strongly with the more characteristic Cowan streetscapes of stories (e.g. in *The Tins*) set in newer suburbs, where the rectangular gardens and cement paths echo the arid lives of the characters. Their failures, futile lives, and sour jealousies are framed by an uncompromising ugliness that is achieved by an absence of encroaching nature, a sterility more relentlessly destructive than the florid decay of the South Perth scene.

This difference of a writer's response to older or newer suburbs is one of the few constantly recurring factors. The imagination is stimulated by the older places, and whether positive or negative, the result has a richness, is multi-layered and colourful. Along with the more elaborate descriptions of the surroundings there is a suggestion that the reader is simultaneously allowed to penetrate more deeply into the inner lives of the characters. When writing of the newer suburbs the focus of attention moves to the externals of social interaction. Life styles, consumerism, elements of class and hierarchy are anxiously examined or satirised.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* demonstrates the impulse most graphically, though in this case it is not the writer of fiction deliberately manipulating material to give point to a story, but the Aboriginal women of three generations responding to the challenge and atmosphere of their surroundings. From the 'Gladys Corunna' section of Sally Morgan's *My Place*:

We'd only been in Manning a month, when Mum began to complain about all the Aborigines living in the swamp. 'Did you hear that music last night?,' she said. 'They been having corroborees every night, I think I'll go down there and tell them off.' I often sat and listened to it with her after that . . . One night, I told Mum that there were no Aborigines in the swamp . . . 'There's no one down there,' I told her, 'it's a spiritual thing'. After that, we just accepted it. She'd sit out and listen to it and then go to bed.

From Sally Morgan's own schoolday reminiscences differentiating between Manning (swamp) and Como (better class residential):

Children from Como always had totally different lunches to children from Manning. They had pieces of salad, chopped up and sealed in plastic containers. Their cake was wrapped neatly in grease-proof paper, and they had real cordial in a proper flask. There was a
kid in our class whose parents were so wealthy that they gave him bacon sandwiches for lunch. By contrast, kids from Manning drank from the water fountain and carried sticky jam sandwiches in brown paper bags.

In the novels of Elizabeth Jolley, particularly the early work, there is a constant shifting of focus, with the suburb assuming a variety of functions.

In *Mr Scobie's Riddle* the leafy suburb surrounding the nursing home is an extension and reminder of the semi-rural paradise the ageing men are mourning. There are quiet side roads and lost lanes, and deserted back gardens with fruit trees. Although irony is evident in the contrast between the badly run, depressing hospital and its glowing and fragrant surroundings, there is more savage irony in the discrepancy between the hopes (disappointed) of old Mr Privett and the aspirations of his grasping daughter-in-law:

'I suppose I could have a bit of a shed and a fowl yard on one of them new housing estates,' he squinted up sideways first at Jack and then at Lilian. It was one night after tea in the shabby old kitchen.

'Oh yes Dad of course Dad. You can have anything you want.' Lilian jumped up and kissed the pointed top of his head. With judicious excitement she showed him pictures in her magazines. He turned the treasured thick pages carefully, gazing at feature walls, patios and bedrooms in white and gold with bathrooms to match.

'You're a good girl,' he said. 'We'll sell this old place if you like.'

The point made here is not merely that of the contrast between shabby comfort and glossy soulless display home, but between the sort of people who live there, who might as well belong to different species.

Probably the most interesting treatment of the suburban theme is in Elizabeth Jolley's *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. Architecture, plant life, socio-economic mix and social interaction, are all integrated as essential elements of the story. Here the suburb has vestiges of the old village community, with 'Weekly' the central character, who cleans the houses of the neighbourhood, acting as communal gossip and information service as she runs into her various clients at the local corner shop.

Two kinds of women went into the shop on the corner of Claremont Street: those who rode horses and played tennis and shared car loads of children to kindergarten and school, and an older kind in floral dresses and cardigans. They held coloured parasols over their faces, wrinkled and dried out years ago in childhoods spent in the goldfields; they dragged their shopping home in plastic folding bags bumping along on little squeaking wheels.

The coexistence of the two kinds of residents mirrors the architectural mix of the houses, and whilst it is clear that it is the affluence of her employers that is responsible for the gradual destruction of the suburb, the author slyly restores the balance by giving 'Weekly' the advantage of squeezing a little dishonest money out of them.

All the old houses . . . would be pulled down and the big old trees, Norfolk Island pines, Moreton Bay fig trees and the gigantic mulberries in the old gardens, would all be bulldozed and burnt and cleared away.

It is no doubt Jolley's perspective, at that time as a recent newcomer to Western Australia, that enabled her to encompass the separate elements as part of an evolving pattern, permitting her to respond with a freshness of vision unlike that of long-time residents who were too close to events shaping the life around them. Her later books either return to a similar neighbourhood or tend to avoid the suburbs altogether, though in *Milk and Honey* there are glimpses of places Peter Cowan's characters might have found familiar:

It was a suburb between the railway line and the sea, a place of closed houses and loneliness.
The preoccupation with lifestyles becomes more pronounced with the writers of the 'eighties, who become both more critical and more uneasy about their findings. Even as early as 1978 in several of the stories in his collection *The Hat on the Letter O* Nicholas Hasluck had, with relish and accuracy, drawn a picture of Yuppie culture well before it became a cliche. The pool parties, the affectations, the boozing, the inane witticisms, all were evidence of a new and sophisticated method of dealing with the material closest to hand. The writer's detachment gives the stories a cool poise which distinguishes them from the work of both earlier and later writers, with the former accepting conditions as they were, the latter resorting to more aggressive forms of satire or surrealism.

Both Adriana Ellis and Julie Lewis introduce the theme of anxiety into their stories.

In the volume of Ellis' stories *Cleared Spaces Clear Moments* there is a progression in life-style from the carefree nomadic singles in the 'seventies to the sedate 'eighties where a young mother who is tethered to suburban domesticity, and alienated from her friend of earlier days, is feeling shabby and unfashionable and guilty about her less than perfect housekeeping. At the same time she is surprised to be regarded by the (still single) friend, as somehow enviable in leading a sheltered life. The faintly ironic undertone leaves the reader uncertain how far the envy is genuine and how far it is a flaunting of the single woman's freedom.

You wouldn't know, my friend Carol said. Your life is so cloistered. And privileged. It's a jungle out there. Relationships.

Somewhere else Carol says 'I love living in the hills. You meet a better class of people up there.' The promising theme of the suburb as status symbol, sadly, is not pursued further.

In the stories of Julie Lewis the feeling of unease is intensified and given more dramatic shape. The ultimate image of cosy togetherness receives a nightmarish twist in *Christmas Cracker* when the shopping centre with its Christmas cheer exudes a subtle menace. The writer reinforces this with an aside about shopping trolleys, which makes the menace spill over into the normality of everyday experience.

Once I saw a shopping trolley in a storm-water drain. It trapped plastic bags, bottles, discarded cigarette packets and crushed aluminium cans and effectively dammed the water. I tried to drag it out but its wheels were permanently locked. Now it is that trolley I always seem to choose when I do the shopping.

The same writer creates her strongest image of suburbia as a nightmare in her story *The Walls of Jericho*. Here she leaves the realistic mode, which is no longer adequate to carry the burden of her material. The idea of 'cracking up' is given concrete form. The narrator seems the only one in the family to be aware of the first signs of the comfortable family home beginning to crack, and even when the whole place has crashed down about them, everyone else carries on unperturbed becoming involved in trivialities and refusing to face the facts of the catastrophe. Meanwhile the thousand dollar Yamaha organ played by an invisible presence, that caused the fatal vibrations in the first place, mysteriously disappears along with the narrator's mementoes of the past, while the family have already forgotten its existence. This concise study strikes at the heart of the hollowness and futility of suburbia with its clutter of possessions and failure of communication.

Is there anything we can do says my neighbour. Like a cup of tea? We'll manage says my husband. What shall I do if I want to go out I ask. Anyone could break in. You could string a curtain across says my neighbour.
But thieves I say. We can't leave all this stuff exposed. There's silver and valuables. I suppose I'll just have to stay housebound.

In the work of Marion Campbell this preoccupation becomes even more pronounced. Her world is shown as cluttered and overcrowded with meaningless activity and her characters suffer from crises of identity. Her complex novels, likened by critics to labyrinths and tapestries, are in their very form a representation of lives neither to be controlled nor comprehended by the participants. In the work of Marion Campbell, more than any other contemporary writer in Western Australia, the walls of suburbia become transparent. From the external, public places, she penetrates the kitchens and bedrooms and finally the secret lives and motivations of the inhabitants. This aspect of her work found its most extreme and grotesque expression in the music-theatre piece *Dr Memory in the Dream House* premiered at the 1990 Festival of Perth, reproduced in this issue of *Westerly*. However, for the purposes of this article a paragraph from the novel *Not being Miriam* might be considered:

Since then at Garden City there's been the Staghorn Fern Society and the Booragoon Ladies' China Painting Association and the Skate Board Champions from the US of A and the Kung Fu Demonstrators and the Estonian Dancers and the Matchstick Model Builders Association and the Nativity Plays but never Sammy Schultz, the Organ Demonstrator with the music in him. Back she comes all the way along Leach Highway in the 105 bus with her K-Mart bags full of compensation shopping.

The above examples have all been taken from novels or short stories collected in book form. Recent uncollected material appearing in literary journals has shown that interest in the suburban scene is growing, and as the geographical area of Perth expands and the range of writers' backgrounds and experience widens a more diverse picture is emerging.

**BOOKS REFERRED TO:**

Hills/Storm Rabbit

Sunset erupts and collapses
into a feeding city — wavering
  buckling
the luminous cloud blossoming
in its own light, polyp on polyp,
the collecting rubble and heavy airs,
sand and charred stumps, retaining
the thin line of sea that could expand
either way, washing speculation aside,
frothing at the base of standpoint.
It is the storm that centres,
the immediacy of the electric claw
— etcher of the finite Grace —
the light without fed through
pinpricks in a cardboard sky.

From our coastal vantage point
we watch as the tale of the rabbit
unfolds — withdrawn via third forces,
seconded to hill, inheriting storm,
pupils reddening, carmine calyx
unfurling . . .
REVIEWS

SUBURBAN SCENES


It did not occur to me to link these two volumes of stories until I noticed that each book was dedicated to the other author. As a too rare example of hands across the Tasman (O'Sullivan is a New Zealander, Matthews an Australian) this in itself seemed worthy of notice. But I was intrigued to find other correspondences, and indeed some answers to the worry felt by certain editors and critics that contemporary short fiction has come to a dead-end.

What I discovered, as I read The Snow in Spain and Quickening was a range of stories with their authors' individual signatures firmly upon them, but sharing certain qualities. Both books are written by intellectuals, and show a knowledge of past and contemporary literature, but they wear this learning lightly, and indeed often ridicule those who give it too high a place. While indulging playfully in postmodernist modes of experiment, they do not lose themselves in Borgesian labyrinths; in this, they move beyond the impasse of much contemporary short fiction. At the same time, they both show respect for that concept of 'story' which Walter Benjamin complained was being lost in contemporary industrialised societies — what might, in Australian yacker, be called 'a good yarn'. Another feature I discerned in these collections was a distinctively male authorial voice, which nevertheless gives great scope to women's voices. Both present suburbia as the principal battleground of contemporary values and attitudes.

The title story of The Snow in Spain is set principally in the northern suburbs of Perth, where New Zealander, Vincent O'Sullivan, stayed for a time in the late 1980s. A stream of consciousness technique introduces us to a first-person narrator whose identity is withheld, but whom we learn to be a dwarf engaged in one of the more bizarre obscenities of Australian pub life, a dwarf-throwing competition. O'Sullivan's dwarf is closer to Nathanael West's Abe Kusich in The Day of the Locust than to Christopher Koch's in The Year of Living Dangerously. Indeed, O'Sullivan's Perth and suburbs of the 1980s is perceived through some of the prisms which characterise West's Hollywood of the 1930s. His characters are from an underworld still largely untapped by West Australian writers — of hookers, bouncers, boozers and show business sharks.

'The Snow in Spain' demonstrates O'Sullivan's delight in colloquial language, from the casual remark to the more extended comment or joke. Perth, on a hot summer's night, is encapsulated in a passing comment:

— we had to sit inside in summer even because if there was only one mozzie in the state he'd sniff you out the minute you opened the wire door . . . (61)

The story's title, on the other hand, refers to a fantasy, a world unvisited except in daydream by the disadvantaged protagonist.

O'Sullivan's story almost steers clear of the sentimentality which could so easily invade his subject matter by making his little hero himself a sentimentalist. Restricted always to the lower case, it is not surprising to see Muzza extending himself in fantasy, gigantism and sentimentality. In one monologue, he recalls the action with his tattooed thrower, Mitch:

— i reckon when you let me go beneath all that husky sweat and your rippling tattooed eagle you still wish you were the one with the light flaring past in this wobbly streamer and the lovely bit, never mind it's only a second or so, the bit when arms out and all i'm really flying. Then the racket starts up again and i thud on the foam mattresses and they're shouting out fucken beauty and terrific and did you see him go the little cunt. (73)

But the story offers quieter moments, too, such as contemplation of the Swan River, observed from across the water at South Perth:

— i get so bored sitting here even with perth across the stretch of water there so shining and all it makes you think of oz at the end of the movie it makes you think there has to be something wrong with it, it couldn't be that lovely. (60)

Later, the river reflects his despondency, 'the city appearing in the river like something massive's been killed and all this bleeding across the water.' (72)

In the end, though, this story celebrates, in a spirit beyond morality, the resilience of the
human species, vitality in adversity. This may be a fantasy land peopled by underworld figures, but it shimmers with an irrepressible energy:

— alright muzza are you, you nearly always say that mitch when we're suddenly left there, just the two of us. and i nearly always raise my thumb like i'm in a plane and signalling through the windscreen. i'm beaut, mitch, i'm saying. fucken beaut. (73)

The presentation of self here as a Biggles hero might also be read, in a spirit of pathos and comedy, as a Walty Mitty figure living in 'the remote intimate airways' of his mind. The boyman needs his fantasies to survive.

Throughout The Snow in Spain, O'Sullivan's fourth volume of stories, he shows a special fascination with human fantasy and its uses. In 'Location', for instance, a film set is the site of a director's fantasies, which are treated a good deal less sympathetically than Muzza the dwarf's. 'Location' is, in fact, wonderfully satiric at the expense of commercial film makers who pose as makers of art. Here are the director and his wife:

They had long French bread and beaurojais. The director wore his lightmeter round his neck all the time, the way the girl's lover, the chief in the movie, wore his whalebone carving. The director's wife, who was petite and dark, often wore a black beret and short skirts, the gamin transposed. They played it as a game, this touch of the francaise, this playing at making films while actually making them as well. It was fun they were entitled to. Because the director, with Seapals certainly and with the tougher Stock before that, had proved he could do it, that he could make a fist of the real thing. He was not, his wife said, buggering about with some mickeymouse backyard box-brownie 16 mil wank that would only ever be seen by people in film courses at the university. This was big bickies and it might just be art as well, she didn't see why you had to worry about labelling things. Did any of them worry? (3-4)

This story raises questions as pertinent as any in the French Canadian classic film Jesus of Montreal about the links between art, religion, commercialism and fantasy. But the questions are not merely superimposed on the material, as in so much theoretical fiction: the 'location' is vividly dramatized (O'Sullivan's skill as a playwright is apparent here), so that the site of contestation becomes not just an ideological battleground but the actual voices and attitudes of our contemporary society. Finally, through the cracks in the edifice opened up by satire, comes an affirmation, as in much of O'Sullivan's fiction, of the 'primitive'. As an archaeologist of contemporary society, we find him continually digging for the clues to durable emotion beneath the layers of pretence and prejudice.

The titles of O'Sullivan's stories in his fourth volume indicate his special interest in cinematic illusions and their influence. In addition to 'Location', we are given 'Reflections on a Moving Surface', 'Wonderland' and 'Exposures'. In another story, 'L', the narrator, who is involved in an affair with a fantastic woman (fantastic in that she evokes so many fantasies for him) recalls a childhood of movies:

My father took me to hundreds of movies so that what I remember now, when I think of being a kid, is our walking in and out of cinemas, of lightning-fast holsters and prolonged kisses, and my dad is somewhere amongst all that, between Aegean yachts and puffs of grenades. (146)

The scenario of another story, 'Putting Bob Down', is reminiscent in some ways of the film The Big Chill. But O'Sullivan's story is entirely his own and distinctively Antipodean. A wonderful interplay of sardonic wit and affection is conveyed in this story about Bob's survival after death in the memory of his wife and mistress. O'Sullivan's stories roll on, even from the grave. Typically, Bob is remembered for his jokes, such as the one that 'a Christian [is] only a lapsed atheist.' (28)

Women often have the strongest say in O'Sullivan's work. The stories 'Three Sisters' and 'Closing the File' both demonstrate a female talent for making the truly radical statement, ripping asunder the foils of prejudice or convention. His women are often wickedly sharp of tongue, naturally theatrical satirists:

[Fran] wore purple blouses with frilled fronts and bright patterned slacks, and in winter a llama wool poncho. She knew very well she looked like a tea-cosy. 'Stuff them anyway,' she said. She meant the lot of them, the array of neighbours who supposed she was a former barmaid, or a retired whore. (101)

O'Sullivan's suburbia in The Snow in Spain is clearly not a graveyard of drab uniformity. Knowing all about Paris, Derrida and différence, he constructs Australasian suburbs...
that seethe with their own difference, diversity and imaginative audacity.

Brian Matthews' first collection, *Quickening*, which contains seventeen stories, shares with O'Sullivan's book an interest in the metaphors and procedures of cinema. The opening story in *Quickening*, ‘Scenario’, is arranged in two sections, ‘Action’ and ‘Freeze’. Matthews uses the device cleverly to disrupt the surfaces of a domestic suburban scene. In the ‘Action’ sequence, for instance, we are introduced to David and his wife, Susan, attempting to deal with the problem of an old water main running under their house and the consequent need for their cobblestoned courtyard to be dug up. David, an accountant, wears a T-shirt which says across the front, IT'S OUR STATE MATE, but the camera eye of this story allows us to imagine another T-shirt specially made for him by Susan, saying ACCOUNTANTS HAVE LEAD IN THEIR PENCILS, which he refuses to wear. While Matthews' story begins with jokes and light satire of this kind, it also reveals the spaces behind these almost allegorical figures. As in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, we are invited to observe emptiness in the architecture of a dwelling:

the house closing in two sides of the courtyard is a facade. When they go through that sliding door, no tastefully furnished sitting room nor busy bright-looking kitchen nor cosy den ... There is nothing; just space. It has not been necessary to think beyond the defining walls and trellis — not so far anyway, and perhaps not ever. (8)

This story might at first seem to share the territory of Cheever or Barth, but we are continually brought back by Matthews to the voices, and accents, of contemporary Australians. Then, as if by mobile camera, we move almost whimsically from the frozen stills of a marriage to ways of reading them: will we choose psychobiography, narratology or a post-structuralist way of reading? Appropriately, for an opening story in a collection, we are invited to read these facades and structures as we will. The writer will offer us alternatives but will not tyrannise us into a particular reading.

The title story of Matthews' book, ‘Quickening’, focusses on the sensations and apprehensions of a pregnant woman in the suburbs, whose husband travels interstate for several days and leaves her alone for the first time. The scene is introduced as a dawning of middle-class suburbia:

In the darkness of the leafy, suburban street, roosting sparrows, blackbirds and magpies rustled, trilled and experimentally carolled, suspecting dawn. The first droppings of the coming day whitened on silent Commodores and Lasers. A sprinkler, brought to life by its time-clock at five, began to click officiously over unseasonably dry lawns. (15)

As in other stories in this collection, the detail here is visually precise while also working symbolically (in this case to signify the story's apparently unresolved opposition between 'natural' and 'automatic' behaviour). The woman's consciousness of her essential aloneness, with the growing child within her, is rendered vividly; and in a deft switch of point of view to the husband at the story's end, we are led to share his apprehension that the total intimacy which he had shared with this woman for eighteen months has been irreparably broken. This is a consequence of her own 'quickening'; a recognition of the dual nature of such quickenings pervades this book.

The quickening of Brian Matthews' suburbanites often implies a breakdown of habitual order, and even potential anarchy. However, his characters do not theorise anarchy, as Frank Moorhouse's journalists do in 'Buenaventura Durruti's Funeral'; they are closer in spirit to Barry Oakley's would-be revolutionaries in *Walking Through Tigerland*, who reveal the vulnerability of the social order and themselves. In ‘The Norfolk Island Pine’, a widow grows increasingly independent after her husband's death and, in an act of guerilla-like intrepidity, she organizes the ring-barking of a Norfolk Island pine which has been cracking her wall. From one point of view, her act, too, is a quickening.

Brian Matthews' first book reveals a considerable range of tones and stylistic flexibility. The story which perhaps touches the rawest nerve for an author is ‘The Anecdote Affair’, which deals with the apparent breakdown of the storytelling capacity. On the one hand, this could be an exemplary tale for Walter Benjamin's thesis about the disappearance of storytelling, but Matthews' collage of narrative fragments suggests the irrepressible
nature of story, which pops up like grass between the paving slabs.

Another story, 'Dog Lovers', is a reminder of Brian Matthews' previous life as a Henry Lawson scholar. But like the anecdote man in the story just mentioned, the author here builds on Lawson's dog stories and goes well beyond them. Like other stories in Quickening, 'Dog Lovers' deals with metamorphoses in a marriage. A childless couple, Charlie and Madeleine, have a 'neat suburban garden' and Charlie is 'a keen cultivator of quality roses and a grower of prize-winning vegetables.'(99) When Bonzo, their first dog, disappears, they obtain another, Pip, and Madeleine takes him to obedience classes, where she falls for the German dog trainer. Bonzo however returns. Chaos reigns in the suburban garden, as in the marriage, and Matthews' comic prose revels in it as Charlie observes

The husband, Charlie, responds to this suburban battle of the sexes by acquiring a third dog, Lisa, a Boxer. At this point, the story leaves behind all relics of Lawsonian farce and moves into modern sexual comedy as Charlie and Madeleine find themselves as 'true dog lovers.' (119) Matthews' capacity to maintain narrative balance, and a straight authorial face through these difficult transitions reveals his skill as a comic writer.

Vincent O'Sullivan's and Brian Matthews' books of stories are hopeful signs for contemporary short fiction. While exploiting current intellectual movements, and gaining from shifts in literary experiment, they do not succumb to pallid, self-absorbed theorising. Rather, they use intellect to celebrate the traditional sources of storytelling vitality — the common speech of 'ordinary' people who, if we only listen to them, are often extraordinary.

O'Sullivan's fourth volume shows a writer in the full flight of confidence, an often flamboyantly theatrical satirist flouting convention and relishing the bizarre possibilities of suburbia. Generally more tentative in his first volume, Matthews is an ironist rather than a satirist, opening up gaps behind apparent conformity and acceptance, revealing the quickening towards independent life of those who break from the mould. Both authors relish a good story and tell us plenty of them.

Bruce Bennett

WILD CARD — TWO VIEWS


I

A good autobiography draws one in to experience the events and circumstances, and flavour of a particular life in a particular time and place. It also gives one an inside look at how another person has coped with the general dilemma of being human; here, the level of fascination of the autobiography is very much dependent on the character and vitality of the author.

On reading Wild Card I found myself thinking of Pirandello's great character, Henry IV. Henry IV is a man who was caused to fall from his horse many years before the action of the play. On falling he hit his head and suffered concussion, which rendered him insane for some years until he spontaneously regained his senses.

The character describes to another his desolation on finding himself deprived of so many years of his conscious life:

... down your sleeve, something is slipping away, slithering like a snake. Life, Monsignore, life! You're astounded to see it escaping like that, before your very eyes.

Most of us, I think, have long periods in our lives which, though not utterly lost to us, are semi-blanks in our memories. They may be periods in which we were bogged down in the humdrum of everyday routine, or so caught up in activity there was no time for reflection.

Dorothy Hewett, on the other hand, has no such cause for anguish — certainly not for her first 35 years.

Wild Card is a celebration, a celebration of life fully experienced, and arrestingly well remembered.

Reading it, one finds that here is a life which has not been allowed to slither away, but which
has been seized, and examined, and transformed with great craft and feeling into words.

Samuel Johnson said, "When I read, I tear the heart out of the book". Dorothy Hewett has torn the heart out of life, with all the pain and passion that entails, and in *Wild Card* she shares her experience, generously and unflinchingly, with us, her readers.

She does so in vigorous prose, which sometimes bristles with Australian 'down-to-earthness', and sometimes is poetical in its lyrical intensity. What's more, she can combine both styles to good effect, as in this paragraph on her visit to the Pilbara in 1946, during the strike of Aboriginal stockmen:

"The sun is sinking in a great red ball, trembling over the scrub, as we make our way along the deserted railway line. Here is the shed. We knock, a voice calls 'Come in', and there is Don [McLeod] sitting smoking and grinning at us by the light of a hurricane lantern. He is taking us to meet the mob.' As we walk further down the line, I look up. On the top of the embankment, the sentinels stand silhouetted in a silent line, the first great blazing desert stars behind them. The air is full of the delicate scent of the white native rose bushes blooming in the darkness. We come to a clearing of pale grass and sit down to wait. There is no sound except the crickets clicking and the occasional cry of an unknown night bird."

When one considers her literary corpus, the poetry and dramatic flair of Dorothy's prose in her autobiography are not surprising. With 15 plays and 6 volumes of poetry to her credit, she has published just one novel, *Bobbin Up* — and even that was 'dramatised' on ABC Radio last year.

*Wild Card* covers a childhood in the bush, student days in Perth, and political activism here and in Sydney — and much more besides!

On reading it I was interested to see how much Dorothy Hewett and I have in common. We were both brought up on farms in the wheat-belt, both attended the University of Western Australia as students, and both lived for a time in unpicturesque squalor in Sydney, she in Redfern, I next door in Surry Hills. We both, as students, became concerned about social justice in Australia, and the changes needed to bring it about. And we both went on to teach at the University of Western Australia for a time.

In fact, Dorothy was my tutor in first year English. She was a dedicated, charismatic tutor, and has been known to receive ovations for her lectures.

In some respects, though, our paths have been very different, and that is partly because growing up in the 1960s was very different from growing up when Dorothy did.

Australia in the late 1930s and 40s — and Dorothy Hewett evokes the atmosphere brilliantly in *Wild Card* — was a very conservative place, narrow in outlook, and stifling to someone like Dorothy, who rebelled against strictures which most people then never even thought to question.

Dorothy was born a romantic, free spirit before her time. She made her own way, tackling prejudice and misunderstanding head on, seeking her own solutions — and painstakingly finding them.

She is a great writer. She is also an extraordinary woman.

I would like to pay tribute to the memory of Hal Porter, whose idea Dorothy's autobiography was, and to her husband and devoted helpmeet, Merv Lilley.

And I would like to assure Dorothy that if she has ever felt herself to be a Cassandra, whose pronouncements, though true, never mattered and were never to be believed, she is now widely listened to, and read, with great respect and the warmest admiration.

Carmen Lawrence

II

When the young Dorothy Hewett, fired with enthusiasm for the working class cause, came to help on the *Workers' Star*; Perth's only left wing paper, we were quickly aware of a rare talent.

I can still see her scribbling out her copy, totally absorbed, untidy masses of golden hair falling over her face and flamboyant red dress. 'Toddy' as we called her, worked hard, turning out far more than we could squeeze into our tight eight pages dictated by wartime newsprint restrictions. But she went unerringly to the kernel of stories, found an original twist for a lead-in to the dullest meeting.
One day, admiring her passionate commitment to Marxism, I was surprised by her reply — that she was very ambitious, wanted to make her name as a writer, admiring Edith Sitwell with her monkeys and whitened bones — heresy to the Communist Party leadership of the time.

As youthful editor of ‘The Black Swan’, the University of Western Australia’s Student Guild magazine, she was in a dilemma. How far could she go to the Left? Her edition, quickly dubbed ‘The Red Swan’, brought cries of horror from academic authorities. Reading it over today in a different political climate, you could wonder what all the fuss was about. But it was a brave venture then, an indication of her willingness to do battle then and in the future for her convictions.

That vital young Dorothy Hewett, thirsting ‘to drink life to the lees’ is here again in *Wild Card*, an autobiography as fresh and challenging as she was then, but shaped with the sure hand of a mature poet and dramatist.

Her personal story is set against the backdrop of Australian history — the Depression, World War II and the Cold War — but never overshadowed by it, always firmly in the foreground her own striving for sexual equality, fulfilment of those writing ambitions while deep in ‘hands on’ left wing politics in a crucial period for civil liberty. Engagement that eventually drew from her the bitter cry:

...where is the rebellious girl with the hooped ear-rings and the black velvet beret... in burying her, have I fragmented my personality so drastically that I have killed the poet in me, traded the gift of tongues for a Marxist Utopia?

Not so, as her body of creative writing and this autobiography proves. As a literary creation it will carry the spell of an earlier time to new generations. Dramatically shaped in three parts, the childhood house ‘that sits in the hollow of the heart’, the Art Deco house of adolescence, the political house of cards that comes tumbling down with the exposure of Stalinism and other events that cracked the idealistic image of socialism.

Her language is sensuous, filled with sharp poetic images, action is brought to life in vivid scenes. In the train leaving Perth with her lover, leaving her child, banished by the Communist Party, she draws the image of the silver tower of the Dingo flour mill, the irony of a black sickle painted on its side. Again the immediacy of the scene, walking the streets of Redfern when Les Flood has kicked her out into the night; in the spinifex of the Pilbara as the digeridoos begin to drone during the Aboriginal strike of 1946. At crisis points the present tense gives immediacy and involvement.

Few writers can draw on such Gothic drama in their own lives or such tragic ironies as the death of her first child from leukaemia on the heels of our collection of signatures for the Stockholm petition against the atom bomb; traumatic years with the proletarian father of three more sons as he became more and more demented and jealous of her writing; herself, the fervid campaigner for civil liberties, subpoenaed to appear before the Petrov Spy Commission, feeling the icy breath of the Cold War.

But underneath the typical Hewett piling on of events, lusty sexual liaisons, family crises, the narrative sweeps along, the story of a rebellious, courageous woman told without self-pity or whingeing, uproariously candid, bitingly honest.

Ambivalence adds tension in a number of aspects of her life: the farm is ‘a Garden of Eden... but I know that under the bridal creeper and the ivy geraniums the black snakes wake and slide.’ Jack Frost is ‘wide and glittery and vengeful’ in her childhood. In love there is always internal conflict — ‘We love and hate ourselves most tenderly’ as she once wrote in the poem ‘There is a loveliness that burns’: love and hate for her parents is a thread of conflict through the book. The frank recognition of her own sexuality contrasts with her mother’s own dry love life.

The roots of mother-daughter ambivalent relationships are still being probed by feminists. Hewett describes this acutely:

...her switches of mood from protective love to destructive hatred bewilder me. I learnt never to trust her benevolence because it was sure to be followed by persecution... Often it seems to me I have two mothers...

Yet there is understanding: ‘These strong dominating even pioneering women are perpetually fuming with an excess of energy and nothing satisfactory to use it on.’ Seeing that they are unusually powerful because they are financially independent. It is her own lack of financial independence that is the biggest
obstacle to her walking out on the bullying Les Flood. When she finally does so she is exhausted — and no wonder! She has raised a family, done time in a spinning mill, been ground down by poverty, torn by the day to day demands of political struggle versus the need to write her first novel *Bobbin Up*.

*Wild Card* ends leaving the reader with the feeling that she doesn't give up, of inner conflict as a driving force played out on the larger stage of social conflict. It ends in 1958 when ‘the rock-hard certainty of belief has trembled a little — more than a little — under the impact of the 20th Congress’, a decade has been lost to creative writing, but there is certainty that she will find her way back to ‘the country of the imagination’.

As she said at the Perth launching, the truth has many versions, seen differently by different people. Whether or not larger than life, exaggerated for artistic purposes, her truth touches and convinces the reader with its warm humanity, its vivid portrayal of a turbulent political and creative life.

But memory can play strange tricks, minor errors will be picked up by those who were there. For instance, the Communist Party Dissolution Bill was introduced by Menzies in April 1950, not 1945; declared invalid by the High Court in March 1951 and the proposed ban defeated in the referendum of September 1951.*

* Crowley, Modern Australia in Documents, Vol.2.

Justina Williams


Dorothy Hewett’s poetry looks like “confessional” poetry, like a transparent window onto “real” people. The notorious litigation surrounding Hewett’s *Rapunzel in Suburbia* (1975) took this view to one conclusion. Another conclusion has been to dismiss the poetry as formless and self-indulgent. Here the window is seen to show the poet rather than others. Still other readers, one suspects, enjoy finding windows which disclose sensational views of love, lust and sexuality.

There are critical weaknesses in the view that Hewett’s poetry is “confessional”, and Kirsten Holst Petersen, introducing the selection, points them out. Rather than offering direct transcripts of the “real”, the poetry typically proceeds through literary allusions, fairy tales and fantasy. A fascination with the histrionic is clear throughout the poet’s career, at least as this volume represents the career. In poems from *Alice in Wormland* (1987) there is the story of Alice and Nim. In *Rapunzel in Suburbia* there’s the Rapunzel story. In *Greenhouse* the poet takes characters like Madame Bovary and the Russian poet Mandelstam. And in *Windmill Country* (1968), Hewett’s earliest volume collected here, there are the revisions of the bush ballads and of Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott”.

Such persistent recourse to fictionality and in particular to the histrionic is a reminder of the importance to Dorothy Hewett of role-acting. As a schoolgirl she discovered her capacity to create and enter a role so as to bring a more satisfactory order to the chaos of experience. Speaking to Jim Davidson in *Sideways From the Page* (1983) she recalls:

> I'd worked out that as long as you had a persona, you could get away with anything. Of course the persona I picked out for myself was the maddest, craziest sort of God's fool that I could think of. And I was quite good at it, I discovered. (p.188)

It is this kind of exploration of the histrionic with its possibilities to invent or impose order which seems to engage Hewett in her poetry.

We not only overlook Hewett’s interest with the histrionic, we also undersell the pleasure of a good part of the artistry, the wit and irony, if we read this poetry only for “confession”. Conversely we deny ourselves much of its emotive power if all we see in it is fantasy. The poetry’s spark seems to come from leaping across the two poles of reality and theatrics. As Ken Goodwin points out in *A History of Australian Literature* (Macmillan, 1986), the poetry is “full of a sense of the larger-than-life personality of Dorothy Hewett in the act of balancing confession and play-acting” (p.205). Hewett’s poetry continually dramatises this “act of balancing”, and with seemingly inexhaustible fascination the poet explores the connections between confession and histrionics.

The poem “Lay Lady Lay” in its cultural references (*The Story of O*, the Bob Dylan song, and Mussorgsky’s orchestral work of the
witches’ sabbath, “Night on the Bare Mountain”) shows how deeply our culture inscribes a gender division. In “Lay Lady Lay,” the novel The Story of O, with its catalogue of torture offered as eroticism, becomes an apt if terrible image for male objectification and use of women. The speaker leaves the novel for the air-hostess, perhaps a dry comment upon the air-hostess’s role, or perhaps to educate the air-hostess into how men might see her. Through its drama rather than didacticism, the poem shows how women in this context have little way out: in the culture’s terms, for the “Lady” to reject passive suffering and assume action is to become a “lay”.

A poem reprinted from Rapunzel in Suburbia reflects further upon cultural objectification and abuse of women. (In the contents page the poem is called “The Witness”, in the text it is “The Witnesses”, which is it? The title makes a lot of difference to any reading.) The poem introduces a predatory animal and prey, a hawk and mice, and the speaker queries “Which of the three wild things am I . . . / Murderer, victim, recorded cry”. The vignette is set against some “bumpkin boys” and a girl they have raped and murdered. The use of imagery from wild nature would be unfortunate to say the least if taken to justify the rape — as though the boys and their victim were enacting the same “natural” imperatives as the hawk and its prey. The juxtaposition of “nature” and “culture”, for me doesn’t illuminate but obscures the issue and breaks the poem’s artistic integrity. A reply to this criticism might point to the speaker’s query. In asking her question, the speaker goes beyond accepting anyone role. The role options the culture offers do not answer her experience. To question, even implicitly, the validity of the roles is to undermine the justification that they are biologically rather than culturally determined.

As Kirsten Holst Petersen explains, one of the claims Dorothy Hewett’s poetry on our interest is its vigorous assertion of the quest, taking for women that which men have traditionally reserved to themselves. The speaker’s opening role in “Lay Lady Lay” is very much the Byronic hero (“I’m the celebrity here”, she says in one of those lines which seems so throwaway yet prove so apposite). In the Alice and Nim stories from Alice in Wormland the active and passive, falcon and owl, are explored in a quest pattern which eventually resolves, not for “ever after” but for “the time/when they made friends with death”. For Alice and Nim there will be other times and other adventures.

Dorothy Hewett’s interest goes beyond the reversal of stereotypes and expectations. In her poetry if self-definition comes through social roles, it also closes off other possible selves, other experiences which characters desire. But while roles are a means of social control, they also offer a security of identity. To change is to assert control over one’s self, while, paradoxically, surrendering the self by dissolving certainties and entering the chaos of unformed life. Metamorphosis becomes one of the poet’s obsessions. And perhaps one of the reasons why Hewett writes with such gusto of the sensational experiences — lust, love and death — is that such primary experiences most strongly test the cultural constructs we take (or are taught to take) and through which we define ourselves.

It is also worth remembering that for all its importance, sexuality has not received much attention from writers — certainly nothing like that accorded war and landscape. Despite the advertised taboo-breaking of the modernists, the subject of sex seems to remain difficult for writers. Perhaps this is marked in Australia where writers reflect social habits of assuming a public role and denying individuality, or to take it in its more positive aspect, of respecting privacy and individual dignity. Gwen Harwood, reviewing Hewett’s Alice in Wormland in Westerly (1987, No. 4) offers that the poems are “a grand evocation of the agony and exhaustion of all-consuming romantic love” (101); and comments: “Many women have been forced into silence, or into disguise and evasion, trying to write poems like these” (101). All of which is to suggest another reason why Dorothy Hewett’s poetry is of importance and will remain so.

Jim Davidson refers to Hewett’s “sense of the incredible richness of the moment” (198). And certainly this richness is reflected in the poetry and in the characters’ powerful passion (with all the ambiguity of that word). Replying to Davidson, Hewett speaks of absorbing herself in the particular moment as a way to understand a more generalised reality. She relates this to having a weak sense of structure. Overwhelmed by the richness of the moment, she explains, one can lose sight of larger patterns. The comment can be misleading if we then read her poetry as a spontaneous upwelling of powerful emotion. Certainly there is a romantic sensuality in the
poetry, but there is also a cooler perspective with a strong sense of shape and structure, an eye with a lively sense of wit, an ironic perspective beyond the reach of the characters caught up in their lives.

Hewett's poems present themselves as largely "chance" imagistic poems, rendering strong "given" moments, powerful experiences which resist imposed patterns of concept as they resist imposed poetics. Yet to read the poetry is not to experience the chaos of a random notation, although the world of the poem may be bizarre and challenging indeed; rather it is to be caught up in a very strong onrush which moves with its own compelling sense of form and assurance. Typically each detail — seemingly incidental and unrelated — is observed and set down in a style pared back to the basic naming. The cool precision itself offers an ironic commentary on the intense and intimate events being dramatised. The disposition of detail and event serves as a kind of pulse, a metric of experience, while it can also carry and develop the poet's thematic concerns. Usually the movement converges upon a detail which gathers up earlier observations. This strategy serves the poet variously to recapitulate, to conclude, to comment ironically, or to expose as ever-present a significance which earlier had been hidden. And then again, as if to undercut such epiphanic closures and the will for order, the poet sometimes ends on a detail which seems nothing more nor less than another detail.

For gathering the work of this important writer A Tremendous World in Her Head: Selected Poems should be warmly welcomed. Kirsten Holst Petersen's introductory literary-critical essay is a model of sympathy, tact and lightly-worn scholarship and usefully ranges from the critical reception of Hewett's poetry to an overview of the poet's development. The book itself is attractively produced by Dangaroo Press with a striking cover design, "Paradise Lost", from a lino cut by the Danish artist Henry Heerup. In addition to the wrong title for "The Witnesses", there are four literal errors in the text. This is a "select" selection, which means the book is a peak of achievement but many favourites known from anthologies have been left out. And as the early volumes are now unavailable there is a growing need for an enterprising publisher to bring out a Collected Poems to complement this lively book.

Lawrence Bourke

Pat Jacobs, Mr Neville, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $19.99.

'Mister' Auber Octavius Neville seemingly needs little introduction to a Western Australian audience. Pat Jacobs' biography nonetheless presents us with a stranger. Neville is best known for the time he spent as Chief Protector of Aborigines, 25 years during which he is credited with shaping — or misshaping — the lives of Western Australia's Aboriginal population. The immense power associated with this role is the basis of Neville's unattractive reputation as tyrant. But the purpose of Jacobs' work is not to rescue Neville the misunderstood from the miasma which envelops his name. Jacobs recreates Neville very much in his own terms, as an immensely hard-working highly principled Englishman driven by ideas of imperial duty and the white man's burden.

Neville came to Western Australia in 1897 and soon embarked on his life's career as bureaucrat. Following a successful period in Immigration, Neville was disappointed to be moved sideways in 1915 into the far from prestigious position of Chief Protector of Aborigines. The area was becoming contentious; but Neville was appointed less because of his abilities than because his predecessor had ruffled feathers and Neville, as a lower-ranking officer, was a cheap replacement. Despite his initial reluctance, duty compelled Neville to give the position his utmost. He rapidly acquired a formidable knowledge of Aboriginal affairs and — more surprisingly perhaps, in view of his reputation — a great respect for Aboriginal culture. Under Neville, state interference in the lives of Aboriginal people increasing immeasurably.

Today we find many of Neville's policies, such as the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, segregation of camps and deliberate encouragement of miscegenation for the purpose of 'breeding out the black', abhorrent. For different reasons they were equally distasteful to many of Neville's contemporaries and Jacobs is at her most effective in charting the forces which worked against Neville as policy-maker. He encountered the opposition of bureaucrats, politicians, powerful northern pastoralists and humanitarians and, as Jacobs shows conclusively, many of the most vicious outcomes of Neville's policies resulted from their obstructionism. Jacobs does not attempt to justify Neville's
actions from the point of view of the devastation his policies wrought on Aboriginal culture, especially in the south-west. However, she is highly successful in presenting Neville as a man of vision and compassion, with an absolute faith in the rightness of the policies he sought to impose on his 'subjects'.

Jacobs has produced a lucid and lively text and *Mister Neville* is a finely-written example of narrative history. Occasionally I found Jacobs' literary devices and allusions overdone. Her metaphor for duty, for example, a concept crucial to our understanding of Neville, is the Neville family home, the Ford rectory set in the soft Cheviot hills of Northumberland. While it is a powerful and apt image, Jacobs overworks it to the point where it becomes intrusive. Similarly Jacobs' frequent ventures into Colonial and Edwardian fiction and poetry and her tendency to draw parallels between the life and experience of Neville and other observers of colonialism are occasionally illuminating but with repetition become irritating, even pointless. George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, for instance, is used to show Orwell's recognition of himself as the focus of the hatred of the colonised Burmese: yet nowhere does Jacobs present evidence of Neville's perception of his own role in these terms. Despite these qualifications, *Mister Neville* is a compelling account of the life of a man whom I had not expected to find so sympathetic.

At one point in the text Jacobs quotes Rhaghavan Iyer: 'it was a despotism all the same, as any system must be in which people are given what is good for them instead of what they want.' The real shortcoming of the book is Jacobs' complete failure to take up such issues. What did Aboriginal people want, and how did they react to Neville's 'despotism'? Abundantly peopled with Neville's associates and family and even with contemporary literary figures Neville apparently never met, there are very few Aboriginal people in the text. Similarly the text is virtually silent concerning the antagonism Neville aroused amongst Aboriginal people. Geoffrey Bolton, who wrote the preface to this book, wrote in 1981 of the history of black-white relations, 'the difficulty with using official archives, as with so much colonial history, is that it filters events through the eyes of administrative headquarters.' While Jacobs has gone beyond official sources in writing a biography of some intimacy, it is still history written from the point of view of the victors. Aboriginal writers such as Jack Davis and Sally Morgan have recently presented something of the Aboriginal perception of Neville. But this figure is denied a place in Jacobs' biography. Even as straw man, it should have been there.

Jan Gothard


The stories in this collection reveal subtle shifts in perception and attitude, from those of a young woman during and after a series of travelling experiences in the United States and those of a woman approaching middle age, married and with children, in Australia. The style is pared down, sharply perceptive and the narrative rarely predictable. It is this sense of surprise, of sudden shock that gives Adriana Ellis's work its freshness. In the title story for instance, one of the most recently written, just as the reader is coming to terms with Fran's dbemma when an old lover visits and upsets the equilibrium of her rather mundane and ordinary family, there is an unexpected revelation about her husband.

"Nev leads a different kind of life. He's a burglar and he goes to work when he feels like it. He's always well dressed, sometimes wears a suit. He says it helps. He tucks a few tools into his pockets . . . I don't like to talk about the business with him so I have no idea how he chooses his places . . . We worked out a budget and I get my housekeeping money each week and he pays the bills. So it's up to him how much money he makes . . . Sometimes I think I don't know what we'll be doing when I am fifty. Nev says maybe by then he will have hit the jackpot."

The cover of this collection *Cleared Spaces Clear Moments* with its surreal dislocations is the first indication that the reader must expect surprises. A mirror reflects the empty corner of a room — a cleared space. Woman is seen both as an object to be used (her lap is also a chair seat) and in control (her hands hold the mirror in place). There is a suggestion of stillness and of a moment held. It is this stillness in the midst of clamour that is one of the strengths of the collection. Always there is a woman under
different kinds of pressure, with a kind of intellectual strenuousness that enables her to transcend the mundane; the problems of ordinary life. The stories explore the interactions between men and women; the tensions within relationships, between friends and lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children. They also offer fresh insights; moments when a character takes time out for spiritual restoration; sharp (or subtle) glimpses of sexual tensions.

In Bloodlines, Roy, an unawakened country boy has been taken to stay overnight with a family because his vehicle has broken down. The family is what we'd call 'alternative' quite unlike ordinary life. The stories explore the interactions between husbands and wives, parents and children. They relationships, between friends and lovers, between men and women; the tensions within the family takes time out for spiritual restoration; sharp (or subtle) glimpses of sexual tensions.

In Bloodlines, Roy, an unawakened country boy has been taken to stay overnight with a family because his vehicle has broken down. The family is what we'd call 'alternative' quite unlike Roy's own who are conservative country folk and he becomes aware of awesome possibilities between Nadya and her brother Chris.

"Will you wash my hair Chris?" Nadya spoke to him as though he were a servant.

"Okay," he said without hesitation and began to brush her long blond hair. She took her T-shirt off. Roy stared at her pale brown breasts. There were triangles marking the times she had worn her bikinis. Nadya ignored him. He lowered his eyes. The excitement he felt was quickly replaced by shock, then a gathering outrage. It was not that she had undressed in front of him, a stranger. It was that she had undressed in front of her brother.

More oblique in its sexual implications and implied violence is a passage in Partners, a wonderful story about two girls who lead each other into different kinds of discovery, usually resulting in punishment.

Val chased me round and round the house but I slowed up near the vegies. Val's Dad was working in the vegie garden. It was his pride and joy. Rows of carrots and lettuce. Peas, passionfruit and chokos hung on wires. Val went over to where he was working. I edged up behind her. His fat sausage fingers moved in stubby swoops on the peas. He once grabbed me by the shoulder. His fat fingers pinching me to the bone. Now he took his knife out of the sheath and began taking the chokos off with a quick slash.

Ever seen one of these before, he said to me, holding one out.

Val stepped aside and I fell forward. It was bumpy and hard, prickling me as he pushed it into my hand. He was looking at me so I nodded my head. He took it off me and put it on a rock and cut it with his thick knife. He cut right through its pale green heart. It was pearly coloured in the middle. He pulled the seed out and popped it in his mouth. I was staring at his teeth crunching on it.

There is an awareness in these stories, a readiness for possibilities. The spaces are significant. Nothing is expected, nothing is taken for granted, and while change and growth are possible, they evolve naturally, are not forced.

One story sits rather uneasily in the collection, I feel. In The Courtship of Louisa O'Farrell Ellis probes romantic ideals, middle-class expectations, and woman as object with considerable insight, mirroring in words the cover's visual themes, yet the story seems 'about' these things rather than emerging naturally from deeply felt perceptions. The bizarre ending rescues it.

Reading this collection is like going on a journey. On the way there is always the possibility of disillusion. Somehow instead of disillusion, illusions are transformed by clear sight, enabling the protagonists to see beyond a situation, take from it what is needed, make no judgments and accept what is. While looking for their own space, these characters also allow others theirs.

In Floating in Warm Air Adriana Ellis illustrates this need for space, at the same time expressing the doubts that go with enquiry.

Some Mondays I want to sit down and take a deep breath. To call a halt. The mornings are always a rush. An effort of will to get the boys out the door on time. On days like this I used to take a sickie when I was single . . . I'll try to get myself to the doctors, I would whisper. Then I would go to Kings Park for a good long walk. Or coffee and a gallery . . . I would think of it was time to organise my life. To think about the meaning of things . . .

One of the most moving stories in the collection is White Shadows — the last months of a mother dying of cancer. The story focusses on the perceptions of the family: the buffalo grass that invades the cracks in the walls, the cats that run wild, the long unbearable summer. Yet at the same time there is vigour as life goes on. People visit. A neighbour steals nickers from a line, the family has a picnic in the park.

The cats crisscrossed in a game, white shadows running. We only ever kept the white cats. They all ran wild in the long grass. The
younger ones could only be approached with a handful of red meat.

... 

After mother died we let the cats into the house. They had litter after litter in the wardrobes. We girls went out a lot. One night I came home about four. I had my shoes off, my feet were sore from dancing. I tiptoed inside then stopped, caught by a peculiar humming sound. I switched the living room light on. There were cats everywhere, on every available space. On the floor, on shelves, on cupboards, tables, chairs. The humming was coming from the cats. They were all looking at me, every eye in the room, unblinking.

In the title story, which is the last in the book, Adriana Ellis reinforces the need for a cleared moment, a clear space. Fran is visiting her mother in a nursing home, carefully avoiding mention of Nev, her burglar husband.

Sitting on the verandah is a cleared space in my life. Sometimes I only want to say life is rich, life is good. We sit in the sun. She's managed to snag a rocker today and we're both feeling happy. There is only the squeak of her rocker on the boards.

These stories are concerned with the experience of being a woman. They also offer insight into all kinds of human longings, small achievements and disappointments.

Julie Lewis
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BRUCE BENNETT — is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia. His latest book is Western Australian Writing: A Bibliography (1990), with Peter Cowan, John Hay and Susan Ashford.

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JEAN KENT's first book of poems, Verandahs, will be published by Hale & Iremonger in 1990.

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JEFF KLOOGER — is a poet from Alphington, Victoria.
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CARMEN LAWRENCE — is Premier of Western Australia. She launched Dorothy Hewett's autobiography, *Wild Card*, at the Nedlands Campus of the WA College of Advanced Education on 14 August 1990. The co-author of her speech was Kerry Ross.

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