Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes
Essays on the Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific Region

Edited by BRUCE BENNETT & DENNIS HASKELL

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The Centre for Studies in Australian Literature
The University of Western Australia
NEDLANDS WA 6009
Phone (09) 380 2101    Fax (09) 380 1030
EDITORS: Delys Bird, Peter Cowan, Dennis Haskell

EASTERN STATES EDITOR: Bruce Bennett

EDITORIAL ADVISORS: Margot Luke (Prose), Brenda Walker (Reviews), Fay Zwicky (Poetry)

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ADMINISTRATOR: Caroline Horobin

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Editor's Notice

The Editors wish to advise contributors and subscribers of some changes in organisation of the magazine.

Firstly, we are pleased to welcome Fay Zwicky as Poetry Editor. Fay’s appointment will result in a much quicker assessment of poetry manuscripts received.

We wish to advise contributors of articles that these may now be submitted by email, addressed as follows: westerly@uniwa.uwa.edu.au; if email submission is not possible, we would prefer submission by disk. We use Microsoft Word 5.1 on Macintosh computers, but can deal with work in Microsoft Word, Word Perfect or ASCII completed on Macintosh or IBM machines; please indicate on an accompanying note which programme has been used. If neither email nor disk submission is possible, we ask contributors to submit two copies of each article.

From the beginning of 1994 Westerly will be available for subscription by email or in the traditional hard copy form. The email subscription rate will be $10 p.a. If you wish to subscribe to this form of the magazine, please send your email number to Caroline Horobin together with your subscription payment. Each issue will be sent to you once its preparation is complete; please note that normal copyright provisions will prevail.

We hope that these changes will result in an even better Westerly for both subscribers and contributors. The editors welcome comments on the magazine at any time.
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### CONTRIBUTORS

Cover by Susan Ellvey of Designpoint using “Toodyay Blossoms”, a watercolour by Western Australian artist Naomi Grant.

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The fat lady in front of me in the line ordered three cheeseburgers, two small fries, and a chocolate sundae. I was becoming a little concerned, as I had told my son not to enter the toilet cubicle on the far-right. But one just never knows with children, does one. I ordered a Big Mac for myself, and a cheeseburger for my son - holding the pickles on both - and proceeded to find a comfortable place to sit. I ordered no drinks or fries. After five minutes of waiting I decided it would be best if I checked out the men’s toilets. I approached one of the men at the basins and posed the question, “Have you seen anyone enter the far-right cubicle?”

He replied, “Yes, a little while ago. A little boy in a blue top.” I thanked the man for his help and leaned against the wall. My son had entered the far-right cubicle.

As there was nothing I could do straight away, I decided to go and eat my Big Mac without the pickles. As my son would not be requiring his cheeseburger, I ate that too. As one can imagine I did not enjoy my meal - it was cold. I placed my rubbish in the bin and went home. Several days later I telephoned the McDonald’s store and spoke to the manager about my son and the far-right cubicle. To my surprise, I was told that I had to visit the store in person if the matter in question was the far-right cubicle. This annoyed me slightly as I had a rather busy week-end planned, but I agreed to go along.

On the Saturday morning I had difficulty finding parking at McDonald’s. Eventually, after much persistence, I found a suitable parking spot. In the car next to me, an old lady had made quite a mess of eating a fillet-of-fish burger. She had tartare sauce all over her nose and left ear. But I decided to ignore her and continued into the store, which was quite busy. Herds of ketchup-stained brats scurried around amidst pathetic families having a ‘lunch-out’, and old couples nibbling at junior burgers and sipping coffee. What a vulgar place. I would not eat there again. I’ll take-away instead. However, for that day at least, I ate there.

A girl with a pseudo-polite voice served me. After my meal of a Big Mac, small fries and caramel sundae - a unique combination for me - I decided to speak to the manager. As business had become quieter, he agreed to speak with me. Indeed, I could hardly believe he was a manager. He was quite young - no more than twenty. He had so many pimples I thought perhaps he should be kept away from food - lest one of them burst over a Big Mac. However, this was not my primary concern at the moment. After explaining to him my son’s situation, he thought for a space of about five seconds.

“Yes. You see, the problem is there’s not a lot we can do once someone has actually entered through the door of the far-right cubicle. A fall is inevitable.” “Can anything at all be done?” I found his explanation not at all satisfying.
“You see, the fall lasts for as long as the participant lives. And, of course, even when they’re dead, their rotting, putrid corpse will keep falling until it becomes nothing.”

“Oh, I see. But surely there must be some course of action that you follow under such circumstances?”

“Yes, I’ll write to Head Office. However, I’m sure you realise that the child should not have entered the far-right cubicle. It’s not our fault, nor our responsibility.”

“Yes, yes. I realise that. It’s just one of those things.”

Before I left the store I had a look once again at the far-right cubicle. Around it, everyone was going about their routine business - ignoring it. It is unfortunate that my son did not ignore the far-right cubicle as well. I stood there in the toilets watching the door of the far-right cubicle for several minutes, but this was most likely because I was eating another caramel sundae, and was quite content to stay where I was. The door of the far-right cubicle was not much to look at - just a full length door with a small sign saying, “Please do not enter.” I placed my empty sundae container in a bin outside and went home.

It was several weeks later that I received a letter from McDonald’s Head Office. I was most impressed with the store manager. He had, indeed, written to Head Office as he’d said he would. I’d seriously consider eating-in at that store from now on.

The letter was very polite.

“Dear Sir,

With regards to the incident brought to the attention of this office, we can do nothing at this moment in time to facilitate any form of resolution.”

Well, as I said before, it was just one of those things, and I firmly resolved to forget all about the unhappy incident.
Eve and Adelphos

She has paused for breath. Those purple eyes her only violence. Then again her words. Her words above the table, pulling up the cloth and cutting through the bread. I am pinned in my chair by her screams which shake the kitchen drawers. There is just the two of us. All the doors are shut. The windows are closed. I am trapped as well as she inside my home. The path stops here.

Her windmill arms pump blood into her throat and I am silence. My appetite has gone. Fuelled by anger she can talk and eat at once, tearing great chunks from the loaf of bread between us, stuffing her words and drowning them with coffee. Nothing shakes her. Not the burning of her throat so obvious to me. I drink my coffee slowly, scalding from the stove. She slams the table. Pours another cup. An endless stream. Those red-ringed words. Those purple eyes. She switches from the table onto me and out behind me to the window, searching in the hills.

She is calmer now. She is telling me how it happened. She is telling me about the apple. She is describing its texture. Its colour. Its function. How he sliced it open to reveal the perfect pentacle. The small brown pips dissected. Juice along the knife. Then he laid it to one side and took another, just as smooth and just as red. He put it in her hand and opened up his mouth until the slackness of his jowls was tight. The skin a bloodless white. And she is feeding him the apple. Feeding him her soul.

Now she is telling me his name. Adelphos. A rattle in her throat to stir the dreams of Beelzebub. And she pushes the bread toward me. Pours another cup of coffee and whose house is this anyway? She is welcome to it and my clothes. Having come to me in a red-stained purple, torn and loose against her filthy skin. She wears my favourite dress; a soft bone silk that hides her lightly, two hard nipples rub against the fabric as she leans toward me. Now she is a Goddess. Rolls a cigarette so slowly and her mouth is open. Full and damp. Her movements measured by her sex. She strikes a match and talking all the while, breathes smoke as if it’s music. Now she leans away, the loose sleeve falling back, her slender arm.

She always was too beautiful to come to any good. A gypsy child of polished walnut. Barefoot ran the length of her rope to find it was elastic. Ran away with the ruler of the hills. Tattooed her name across his face. You could say she’s to blame. Played with fire. Stepped into their world as if she was born to the throne. By they were always wary of her purple eyes. They’re paler now. She isn’t speaking. She has spent her anger and I can smell her fear.

Her hair has lost its sheen through all this trouble and she’s thinner now. Though even that’s seductive. She’s staring out the window at the hills. I have to ask her questions. When would they have noticed you missing? Do they know this place? Of course they know this place. She can keep no secrets. There is nothing
she keeps sacred, so she can take no refuge. Not even here. They will come and he will lead them. They will have missed her in the morning. Bringing water for the cleansing to an empty room. A room of stone and that is where it all began. The child's conception. Semen mixed with blood. The star he drew across her stomach, empty of her soul.

She has started to undress in front of me. The wide red streaks still shining on her skin as if just freshly painted. She is screaming again. It must be washed away. You have to help me wash it off. They cannot find me if the star is washed away and she is lying on the floor. I scrub her skin till it is raw and still the star, still the bright red star to mark the place where his child is wrapped around her bowels. A child she wants to keep. A child he prophesied as evil. A child that cannot live and nor can she. For I am not the one to disbelieve his oracles and nor are they. Coming through the hills in search of her.

The sun has fallen and her fear has found a place in scratching at her wrists. The star still marked beneath her dress. But they wouldn't care if it wasn't. They always hated her. Her purple eyes. Her naked sexuality.

I am silence. She is silence, and the hills are dark. Soon their torches will be lit and dance like fireflies toward this house.
The Woman Who Loved her Axolotl: A Fairy Tale

Death and resurrection, twins, games and deformities. Such were the responsibilities of the Aztec God, Xolotl. Trying to escape banishment, Xolotl disguised himself in forms grotesque and ugly. Such thoughts occupy Mary-Anne Phillips as she feeds her axolotl in the house that she shares with her husband, Christopher James. As she watches her axolotl snap up the strips of raw meat that she offers, Mary-Anne wonders at the desire to live that drove Xolotl to assume his grotesque forms in order to survive. Lying in her bath with her axolotl nestled between her breasts, she wonders if Mexican gods existed before the aboriginal dream time or if the people of her own country had long ago sung the Aztec Gods into existence.

Mary-Anne is a tall and slender young woman with grey eyes and dark hair cut in a bob. She loves her axolotl and coos with delight as she feeds her. Once she had loved Christopher, and he had loved her, just like in the fairy stories her mother had told her when she was a child. Mary-Anne had been a princess. She had been her father's special princess, and he was her king. Kings, alas, are not always regal and kind. Like Xolotl, they can be ugly and appear in grotesque shapes of deformity, but Mary-Anne had kept her secret promises and continued to believe in fairy tales. “Silly Mary-Anne,” her mother thought just before she died, leaving Mary-Anne alone with her father. And her illusions. This all took place a long time ago before Mary-Anne met her prince. Before she met her prince or found her axolotl. Before she learned that princes, like gods and kings, can be cruel and ugly, hiding their deformities in hate’s twin and opposite.

Mary-Anne met Christopher at a party in a New-South-Wales country town where she attended university. She was wondering why people called them “B and S” balls when she first saw her prince. He was wearing jeans and riding boots and a hat like her father’s. Her girl friends had giggled when they invited her to the ball. For a moment Mary-Anne had feared they were laughing at her, but her closest college friend, Julie, assured her that Bachelor and Spinster Balls were “some of the best chances to meet the boys from the college that housed the campus’ spunks.” “Besides,” Julie added, “they’re loaded too.” Mary-Anne hesitated. She had heard the rumours about these boys. One night in a pub not far from the campus she had heard a group of them laughing about one of their girlfriends. They had called her a bush pig. Mary-Anne thought the term horrible; the boys found it hilarious. In the end Mary-Anne set aside her reservations and went to the party. Her fairy godmother must have been taking a night off.
Christopher James seemed nice. He was a shy boy with red hair. He told her that his father owned a property where he worked during the holidays. Mary-Anne liked his easy manner and his infectious laughter. She told him about her own family and how she enjoyed studying at the university. It had been a long time since she had heard her mother’s fairy tales, but when Christopher told her how he loved to ride, Mary-Anne imagined him astride a white horse. As the evening wore on they danced and talked. They liked the same kinds of music and films and discovered an amusing and shared dislike for a lecturer whose long, droning speeches they had both endured. Christopher was kind and attentive. He made sure that she had plenty to eat and that her glass was always full. Of such things are fairy tales made: tall, handsome Christopher dancing with the happy and beautiful princess Mary-Anne in his arms. Such is life: drunken, angry Christopher forcing his way into Mary-Anne in the back of his ute - Prince Christopher’s deformed, ugly twin laughing at drunken, sobbing Mary-Anne, too weak to struggle any more as the blood stains on her beautiful, new ball gown deepen and widen to the sound of breaking glass.

Time heals all: (or is that, too, a fairy tale?): wounds and rape; tears and pain; even broken dreams and illusions can be forgotten with the passing of time. Mary-Anne now has her prince Christopher. She forgives him for the pain after her girlfriends reassure her that life is sometimes like that when princes and princesses meet. Christopher apologises and acts so contrite that Mary-Anne is sure his heart, if not his actions, can be trusted. Silly Mary-Anne. Clever Christopher. But Christopher knows that he is not all bad. After all, he decided to marry Mary-Anne. She is attractive and from good stock (if not quite one of the town’s “best families”) and can be trusted to be faithful. Taken home to meet his parents, Mary-Anne receives the prince’s household’s seal of approval. They have their ups and downs, but at the end of this part of the story, our prince and princess ride off into the setting sun of a three-bedroom house and life in the same country town where they first met.

* * * * *

Time passes (as it does in life and fairy tales), and three years after their marriage, Christopher and Mary-Anne attend a reunion at Christopher’s college. This time Mary-Anne’s fairy godmother (or a wicked witch in disguise) is at her post and whispering into the ears of all who will listen. “Whatever happened to that pig you won all that money on, Chris?” asks a friend who neither recognises Mary-Anne or realises she is listening. “Yeh, you dag,” adds the friend behind whom Mary-Anne is standing, “I didn’t think even you woulda rooted that one for money.” Christopher sees the alarm in Mary-Anne’s eyes, but it is too late for him to stop a third friend who adds, “Yeh, Christ what a drongo you were ... Makin’ up with some bush pig you pissed off, so’s ya could make money off yer mates lettin’ em watch yer root ‘er.” With an astonishing accuracy (perhaps it is the fairy godmother), Mary-Anne hurls a glass a Christopher’s head. He stands with a look of shame on his face half-framed by the blood running down his temple. His friends watch in stunned surprise as Mary-Anne storms out of the reunion.

Now Mary-Anne Phillips lives alone with her axolotl in the house which they share with Mary-Anne’s husband. “Ooooh, your sooo beautiful, she sighs as she dangles small pieces of ox heart in front of the axolotl’s dim sight. Shunned Christopher watches. “I don’t know why you keep that thing,” he snaps. “It’s
disgusting. The damn thing looks like a slimy dick with frills.” He hopes for a response as Mary-Anne bends over the tank where the axolotl hangs suspended just below the surface of the water. She gives no sign of hearing him but giggles with delight as the axolotl’s long, thick black body squirms rapidly in the direction of the meat. “You’re getting weird,” Christopher shouts, but in the tone of his voice is a plea for attention. Mary-Anne strokes the soft gills behind the creature’s head. Frustrated by the lack of attention, Christopher taunts her: “Shit Mary-Anne, you are a very sick woman. You never touch me any more. I bet you would rather try and root that tadpole than me.” For the first time in oh-so-long, Mary-Anne allows a blank gaze to rest on her former prince. For just a moment her eyes almost seem to recognise Christopher, but with a quick blink the recognition disappears. “Perhaps we should try that, my love,” she croons towards the tank. “At least your not a bush pig are you hmm?” she asks the soft black creature hanging gently in the tank.

Some houses are homes; others are not. The three-bedroom, brick house where Mary-Anne lives is both at once. It is a happy home for Mary-Anne and the axolotl who shares her room, but in the cold sad room where Christopher broods, it’s a house and not a home. Never mind fallen prince. You can soon return to your father’s kingdom and ride your brown horse out hunting for feral pigs. But first you must walk down the dark hall way to the bathroom where your princess lies enchanted by the work of an evil witch. Perhaps it’s not too late. Perhaps there is still time for you to rescue her. If not then you can throw her out on the street where you secretly believe all women belong.

That’s right. Tread softly down the hallway. Pause outside the door. Now listen. Surely something is wrong. That soft singing sounds almost happy. Something must be wrong. Why would your princess sing so happily while you, tall and handsome Christopher, son of one of the best local families, feel so lonely and unhappy. Listen to the singing. How could she ignore your suffering? Tell her how you feel. That’s right. Open the door and gaze inside. Can you feel how warm it is in here? Look at the soft light of the candles reflecting off the walls. How many plants there are cascading around the bath. Do you smell the perfume of the incence and the fragrant bath oils? Look now to where you know your princess will be playing with the disgusting slimy creature. But what’s this? Your princess is gone?

Puzzled, ex-prince Christopher stares at the empty bathtub. The singing continues, so he steps forward to look into the tub. There, far below the surface of the tub, much further down than where the bottom of the tub should be, he sees two tiny creatures swimming and playing. Mary-Anne and the axolotl twist and turn playfully far below the surface of the water. Sometimes Mary-Anne hangs lazily on her back with the axolotl swims around her, darting beneath her arms, behind her head and between her legs. At other times Mary-Anne rides happily astride the axolotl’s back, seated just behind her gills. Swimming and singing, twisting and rolling in the water, Mary-Anne plays joyfully with the god Xolotl as they both evade banishment. With a mixture of horror and disbelief (the prince’s mother never told him fairy tales), Christopher stares down into the water until his attention is attracted by the flames of the guttering candles. They flicker as Christopher feels a warm wind play upon his cheek. Quickly the wind increases in force, turning cold and whipping up the surface of the water into a foam that conceals the figures cavorting below the waves. Stepping back from the tub, Christopher stumbles and
almost falls. He feels the harsh sting of cold salt water upon his skin. Fumbling for
the handle to the bathroom door, he finds it and leaps into the hallway just ahead of
the waves that pound across the floor, sweeping away everything in their path.

SELWYN PRITCHARD

Catechism

“What is your name?” The book was worn,
the answer, ‘n or m’ a holy mystery when
all we had were our shy syllables.
Ma Sellars’ glasses sparkled, her ruler stabbed:
“Who gave you this name?” Now we could chorus,
“My godfather and godmothers at my baptism

wherein I was made a child of God...” Slyly we watched
Anthony tethered by fear at the playground’s centre
and the maypole hatch where HE could see him,
hoping for cloven fire to prove our innocence
in a flash! His radiant soul was spotted dim
with sin, like an electric bulb, we knew.

At Church Road (C. of E.) Primary, God,
the ruler, made life straight and narrow, governed
with guilt, more flexible than the hangman’s rope.
The Solace of Art

There should come a time when life would resolve simple as Astronauts’ Earth... but the parent beyond the morning mirror stares back baffled still. “Dad...?” I always got the same reply:

“Keep carrying on. Say nowt.” By my age, his muscles gone, thanks to the market’s munificence, he was off on his bike by six and at his offices, his morning humiliations, the man-of-the-house.

“Off the tools, on the dusters and vac.” He was rough on Mum’s expert advice until he pitched face-first in the ditch, heart broken. “Ta-ta” he told her. “Ta-ta, May”, but they got him back grey-faced until he could grasp his pension.

Again and again he met Spring’s offensive with his spade,retreating before Winter to his hearth; except on Thursdays every blaspheming week for Evensong from some cathedral up and down the land, basso profundo in his armchair, echoing those last sounds of Christendom, words worn away like stone with use, tunes shaped sure and odd as scythes, day gaudy above the rows of empty pews.

“Christ!” he said, when I drove him up the Malverns, all Wales at his back, and pointed out Worcester, Hereford, Gloucester, spires Langland would have seen, sharp above the Midlands fug.

“Space rockets to search for a sky god,” I suggested, “stuck on millenial hold.” He said nothing at first, squinting across the shires, then softly, “Talk bloody sense.”
A Sestina's Centre

The boy's hand trailing from the sail boat leaves a scratch upon the sea, a gesture of no importance. He is happy - the current loses the blemish swiftly. But the labyrinth remembers the trace of palmprint, eats again at the clumsy fingers in their bright little trough. The boy imagines the ocean as thirsty for daydreams. An only child, he strokes his ocean licks salt from his lips and thinks how his father leaves the nets to drift at dusk, his father's fingers an older, calloused gesture swollen and cool which the tide remembers, remembers and loses. And sometimes at dawn, a lobster, for the man who loses his God each night. Each sunrise, the boy also grieves that he loses the moon. But the sparkling waves, the bright jewel ocean comfort him with a blueness like the eyes of a mother he remembers.

Idling at anchor beyond the reef, his skiff leaves a shadow on the water which disappears at noon. A gesture of child reappears, a head, a splay of limbs and fingers, a boat lengthens and thickens, until the sun fingers the horizon with crimson and gold. The day loses its colour, becomes all shadow. Sunset is the gesture of farewell the boy keeps in his heart as the ocean grows oily and black. Travelling homeward across the bay he leaves a tiny silvered wave for the sunset he remembers.

But if the night is wild, his grandfather remembers something else - the treachery of rocks. The old man fingers his pipe by the fire and tells the boy stories: of how the wind leaves wrecks along the coast, how a storm loses its centre, spinning off into a hard rain, denting the ocean-
how in '73 a hurricane ripped the land open, such an angry gesture

the townsfolk knew the devil was waking and in prayerful gesture
they huddled in twos and threes. All this. And the graveyard remembers the dead. But the boy, his new voice breaking, his eyes wide pools of ocean
looks deep into the fire and thinks how his fingers leave a tiny wave in the moonlight, of how his body loses
then finds its shadow each day..................At seventeen he leaves

his village in the gesture of adulthood, but his fingers remember in a woman how a man loses
his centre to the ocean - his love, like a sunset which never leaves.

Imaging The Brain

Am I really insubstantial as a skeleton, as this X-ray the doctor holds to the light its celluloid stripping down the flesh to black and white, bones and air?
I look upon the body's new minimalism which lays the functions bare - carpal to metacarpal pushing this pen across the page, the words fumbling down my fingers from a strange skull basket.
The CT scan declares a brain to be free of tumour or haemorrhage, but doesn't comment on the mind's possibilities. Stark or industrious, the faint white streamers I see across the filmy cortex, must be sentences.
Chemotherapy

The man who straddles the nautilus room
at the hospital gym, a Collosus
bronzed from a ray lamp
he is nobody’s father.
He does not strain beneath the bell bar
and forget the small observation
sheltering between his thighs.
He drags his body back and forth
pumping sero-positive blood
out from his heart into his muscle
and back to his heart
in a silent daily circuit
a smooth oiling of sweat
a machine fear won’t quit with.
He throws the one-hundred-pound toy aside
and wipes away the chalk from his hands
while I continue laps in the twenty-five-metre pool
pushing my arms through water
the temperature of warm blood.
His bald head is a twin moon to mine
and I feel for him, as for a brother,
the intimacy of the sick
which need not speak to know the task.
We exercise away our particular knowledge
mine of motherless children
and his of a death
sewn into quilts the size of football fields.
"With a Pen Poised Over the Old Chaos": Julian Croft and the Problem of an Australian Diction.

In his 1987 book *Reading Australian Poetry* Andrew Taylor knits Elaine Showalter’s theories on ‘literary subcultures’ with the work of Harold Bloom to produce some arguments which he relates to that body of poetry, expressing certain themes in certain formal ways, and in certain linguistic modalities (although to be accurate, for ‘certain’ we must also read ‘uncertain’) which, as a result of our reading, our education and even our conversation, we have come habitually to associate with the country and the nation we call Australia, (p.20).

Taylor takes as a starting point Bloom’s thesis that:

any poet … who becomes ‘strong’ does so not by neglecting his or her precursors but as a result of an obsession with a parental figure whose work he or she must wrestle with and ultimately rewrite, wrench askew, in order that it might be made right, got right (p.9).

In reference to Bloom’s ideas, Taylor notes that:

Slessor was such a strong poet, the first in Australia. His unique problem was that this dominating parent, this arche-text which he had to wrestle with, wrest askew, rewrite in his own handwriting, did not exist… subsequent poets have been influenced by Slessor in the obvious sense: for example, they deal with Australian material like he did, openly and unashamedly; they admire and try to emulate the rich materiality of his description; and they respond deeply to some of the emotional qualities of some of his best poems (p.55).

In Julian Croft’s *Confessions of A Corinthian* (Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1991) the poet stakes out an individual territory in executing his stylistic, linguistic and thematic strategies. Yet in terms of the nuances of personality and tone which colour his narrative personae, this essay was prompted by a familiarity I found in Croft’s employment of diction, and an agenda of ‘re-examination’ in the expression of his basic themes. These features in turn prompted a re-examination of the question of the ‘strength’ which is to be derived from a poet’s acceptance that any poetry, almost inevitably, is in part a response to the poetry of others.

Taylor delineates the source of this ‘original familiarity’ in Croft, through Bloom’s ideas that:
The meaning of a strong poem is another strong poem, a precursor’s poem which is being misinterpreted, revised, corrected, evaded, twisted askew, made to suffer an inclination or bias which is the property of the later and not the earlier poet. Poetic influence, in this sense, is actually poetic misprision, a poet’s taking or doing amiss of a parent poem. 3

This, Taylor posits, happens within the larger process of poetry as:

a kind of individual developing to maturity, to freedom from a parental culture, and also a family in which this Oedipal revolt and others are already and always occurring; it is both a terrain and the map of the terrain; it is both something which defies definition and its definition which substitutes itself for it as both signifier and signified (p.21).

In Confessions the poet demonstrates the evolution of a controlled, comprehensive vision which is articulated in a firm but subdued tone, emerging laconically from a distance emotional as well as physical. Combined with a sharpness in the reification of theme and emotion in image and metaphor there is ‘strength’ in Croft’s latest approaches to the “work he...must wrestle with and ultimately rewrite, wrench askew” (Taylor, p.9).

In implying that Croft is in that tradition of attempting to write about ‘Australian’ subjects in an ‘Australian’ language (whatever that might mean to individual writer and/or reader) one might distinguish a relationship Croft, and some other contemporary poets, may have with the idea of national poets ‘needing’ to compulsively revisit familiar themes of the search for identity, personal and national. To this is related the attempt to find new modes of expression to help resolve and renew the paradoxes and inconsistencies in existing descriptions of the relationship between human and landscape, spirit and soil. Such a ‘compulsion’ has been seen as central to those works which have in the past most persuasively defined ‘an Australian response’.

Lest one be said to be foisting arche-texts on an original voice in an unwarranted manner, Julian Croft himself has commented on the subject of poetic influences, of ‘parental figures’:

I’m very conscious of Hope being there...a lot of his themes as well as his kind of language; and I think every time I write formally I hear Hope in the background ... it’s that eighteenth century distance, and that’s something I guess I wouldn’t want to emulate in a way. But I do like the idea of the music, you know. That’s the wonderful part of things, the wonderful thing in poetry. 4

In dealing with Hope as an arche-text Croft has taken and developed individual elements of Hope’s - the distanced narrative stance, the careful use of diction - and encinctured them within his own stylistic context. Ironic meditations are peppered by contrasts of register which are used to disrupt the ‘conventionality’ of the description and to make difficult attempts to categorize or restrict the narrator, and the meanings to which he directs us. Despite this very ‘modern’ evasiveness Croft aspires in phrase to the same kind of musicality as Hope, while eschewing any hints of a pretentiously poetic diction. The effect is of a fresh ‘variation’ on a rather familiar tune, in effect and intention rather like the musical syntheses of Dvorák or Bartók.

The Hope in his famous poem Australia, “A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey.../Without songs, architecture, history” and its people as “her monotonous tribes.../Whose boast is not ‘we live’ but ‘we survive’” is issuing an implicit challenge to those following to fill the vacuum, to find within the challenge of the “Arabian desert of the human mind” and “such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare/ Springs in that waste” at last “some spirit which escapes/The learned

doubt, the chatter of cultured apes/Which is called civilization over there.” Croft’s poems feature ways of doing what Hope’s contemporaries, perhaps, could not do: find an Australian solution to the problem of perception, via an Australian diction which would escape the effect of ‘the chatter of cultured apes’ for the admittedly sometimes unusual tones of a more thoroughly native register.

Croft’s debt to Slessor is more a matter of tone, and subject. Some of the poems in Confessions have familial resemblances to poems of Slessor’s, like ‘Country Towns’, ‘Wild Grapes’ or ‘South Country’. It is interesting that Croft says of this precursor: “I’ve read Slessor over and over and over for many years. It’s hard to get away, again, from him” (my emphasis).

The results of Slessor’s ‘solutions’ to his lack of arche-texts, and of Hope’s adoption of European modalities through which to explore and express ‘identity’, have themselves become arche-texts, as solutions and responses to a reality of contemporary experience. Slessor’s poetry provided a direction for a diction that progressed beyond the legacy of Romanticism, which had so pervaded Australian literature. Hope’s measured elegance might also be said to have influenced Croft; yet there are not so much echoes of Hope and Slessor in Croft as responses to them, ways of tackling the same dilemmas and of depicting similar things.

The centre of Croft’s poetry is a diction of which he has said:

I think the one thing I’m trying to get...to [is] something fairly natural and honest out of my own linguistic experience...the persona that’s evolved, linguistically, at any rate, is one which I hope can use the registers of Australian speech in just an ordinary and dignified way.

Croft’s achievement in Confessions is that he has achieved a distinct and fluid expression which both refers to, and evolves from, earlier Australian poetry. No one poet or crafts-person, needs to reinvent the wheel which has served previous generations, unless arrogantly, irredeemably iconoclastic by temperament, or convinced that a superior form of locomotion is available. Croft’s mixture of synthesis and originality enables a sophisticated poetic exfoliation of the poet’s central concerns in this volume: the way in which memory, its expectations, apprehensions, influences and lessons, colour present experience and distort its reception. The vehicle for thematic play is appropriate in form, allusion, and diction, and all the richer in meaning and resonance for that.

‘Ubi Sunt’, ‘The Road to the Coast’ and ‘Strangeness and Charm’ show how the context of the past is in a constant interrelationship with the facts of the landscape. In ‘Luxe, Calme et Volupté’, ‘Darkie Point’, ‘The Road to the Coast’, ‘The NRMA (Nothing Really Matters Any More) Guide’ and in the foreboding afternoon shadows of the closing, title sequence ‘Confessions of A Corinthian’, some of Croft’s landscapes go further, almost suggesting that if the gods of the aboriginal Australians emerged autoctonically in ‘Dream-time’ myth, some of the demons of a later invader might be said to have arisen in the same way. In Confessions a dark history, personal and national, and an ambiguous response to the country seems to lurk just off the road, behind the curtain of scrub, or behind the dingy windows of country hotel rooms.

‘Mann’s Bookshop’ is a modern urban version of a meditation on mutability. The realization of a vital personal landmark ‘suddenly’ vanished, is underscored by a fear that the ‘unexplained’ loss means a diminution of more than memories. The past that shaped the individual threatens to vanish in other than physical space. There is threat to the self for which the bookshop is metaphor. Summoning the shop’s interior, its neighbours, and “the mysteries:/darkness, books, ideas, strange people” the poet finally focuses on the ‘meaning’ of Mann’s Bookshop, and in articulating
it attains it and retains it:

not in this street, but in my head:
my mind, Jim Mann's bookshop,
my art, his window with my letters on it.

(Confessions, p.4)

His loss proves only the loss of the physical connection; the connection of memory is disrupted, and re-ordered, by time, but not severed. ‘Luxe, Calme, et Volupté’ is a deceptive piece; it is built around a curious sense of absence which is skilfully allowed to be ‘seen’, or conceived of, only late in the poem. There are only two ‘negative’ utterances in the poem: “there was not/another to be seen, no one waiting on that shore” in the second stanza, and, in the poem’s penultimate stanza: “it was not/the sea I knew but one I see through you, another shore”. The ‘absent’ is undefined, unsettling, and its almost palpable shadow darkens into a dense, warning tone which becomes more marked on each re-reading of the poem. There is a cloud over the sun, so to speak, which exists as a result of the mood cast by narrator’s dreams. Yet it is his waking vision which is altered, masked and interpreted by an enervating participation in the ‘otherness’ which lies in the mind and in the landscape, even in the weather, as:

Dreams, as much for Baudelaire, Matisse, leach me,
melt through the page, run into oil until the knot unties, wind and water fly apart, the shore expands...
...the small hill overwhelming by importuning and futility, hell runs, until through the black hole, gold reaches to me, black sides everting into light, the topos a knot tied into untying...  (Confessions, p.35.)

The invocational use of the names of poet and painter increases the intensity of Croft’s own gold, black, indigo and yellow. The black-light contrast and broken rhythms literally throw the knot motif into higher contrast; through the motif recalled states and states of mind inhabit the poetry as much as the physical facts of the landscape: “it was not/the sea I knew but one I see through you, another shore.”

The final, resolving stanza sees perhaps the volume’s most affirmative, least ironically embroidered image. On “the difficult shore”:

...your six naked bodies lie beside the waves, and there you let me watch the flower unfold, petal over petal, each one you, as you run, worry, laze, teaches me the meaning of my world: you as you tie your hair up in a knot.

Meaning, metaphor and symbol bring past into present; a defiant positive, a centre without paradox, if only because its ephemerality, its context, dies with the moment. Realization of what the past meant gives new meaning to the present; the act of interpretation from ‘now’, however, condenses all the inconsistencies and ambiguous responses into a formative part of the ambiguous response to the present. The knot is the image for this meeting, this intertwining. The self exists ‘now’ because of ‘then’; the metaphor of the knot is neither tied nor rooted in either continuum. It connects and binds the temporal; it threads and transcends the limitation of the two views that are constrained by being ‘in’ time, past and present, effecting an entirely appropriate symbolic ‘marriage’. The knot is the metaphor that contains the
resolution, the centre of the poem. The final vision, a fleeting, beautiful ‘now’ (already, in the telling, lost), is the gold that edges the black, and if it fades like the sunset its trace in this poem has a richness which does not.

From ‘The New England Almanac’, to isolate a single example, a lone word - Onkaparinka- gives an instance of Croft’s unique ‘solution’ to this problem of an Australian diction. Normally the poet’s employment of words and phrases is not so prominent. It is ‘natural’, as Croft has said he intends. By using a combination of the acquired resonances of Australian words and metaphors which clarify through allusions to the diction of his arche-texts here the poet is allowing an accessibility which helps the strength of his poetry. The example is a word which might have pleased the Jindyworobaks; but its ‘natural’ occurrence has been conditioned by a history which has allowed it connotation and metaphoric possibilities, not coinages forced on any ideological grounds.

The haiku brevity of ‘Easter, Wallabadah’ from Breakfests in Shanghai “ (‘grass the colour of Hartog’s plate/sheep old spuds, mouldy and full of eyes) is a precursor of this finely wrought piece which deals with the regrets and reminiscences of a farmer awake at dead of night. Croft pens the tides of domestic rituals in the rural year, the days, the driving, the elusive, dream-like passage of time:

On Anzac Day, the first flame is raised in the grate, and the goats are put together in the back paddock.

Melbourne Cup, and not a day before, tomato plants, which K-Mart has had for weeks, are now orphaned out...

and the farmer’s bed still has the leckie blanket on, on Christmas Eve—just in case...

The farmer stretches to the warm rump of his wife from the freezing fringe of the Onkaparinka, and thinks himself floating in New Year at Lake Cathie, in a foot deep doona on a cold water bed.

In his dreams he flies the black calendar of road, white bars of days disappearing under the car, the trailer, the tent, across plains made lunar by frost. ('New England Almanac', Confessions, p.47)

The archaic, clinking ring of the consonants in the proper name and town name of the once-ubiquitous blanket and its succession in metaphor by its successor as popular manchester, the doona, is droll. Croft seems amused, as well, about the fact that the currency of the first metaphor has already nearly passed, when acknowledging:

I try and talk to people of my own generation; I mean probably a whole generation of people are coming up in Australia who wouldn’t know what an Onkaparinka rug was, or whether the bloody blanket is still made. I mean, the place is still there, but I don’t know whether people associate it with that. But it’s such a great sound, too. (Laughs) Oh, God. So, I mean, you do need those touchstones...I suppose it’s nostalgia. People accuse me of nostalgia all the time but what they are is, I think, very strong visual touchstones of where you are; two intersections, time and place, basically. I’m a prisoner of time and place and those images are located there and you can do no more than drag them out and put them in something. As I say, it mightn’t appeal to a coming generation; it might appeal in fifteen generations time.

In a moment marked by a lack of serious or academic analysis Julian Croft articulated for me much of what I feel about his writing. His nexus is artistically and philosophically coherent in a way that is made possible by his awareness of that
‘imprisonment’, and his response to previous works concerned with the anxiety of that same dilemma. Most importantly, the result is ‘effective’ or ‘enjoyable’ or ‘artistic’. I did not need to know why I found resonances in the poem, nor their exact nature, to enjoy the results the first time I read this book. Beyond the laden title of ‘The NRMA...Guide’ Croft probes with all the strength of Slessor’s ‘rich materiality of description’, but with a dissimilar emotional impassivity. Simplicity and clarity replace nostalgia across lazy quatrains. The Australian irony of this ‘odyssey’ lies in that the poem’s journey may amount to a search for self, but this narrator is Slessor’s voyager, his Cook archetype, easily distracted, almost, as Browning’s knight in ‘Childe Roland’, beaten by ‘the way’ long before any final confrontation. His search for identity is conducted with all the urgency and intellectual rigour of a bush race meeting. The finish will be sometime, and somewhere, so why worry? ‘She’ll be right’ may be recognizably unattractive as a national motto, but its ubiquity, and noble European antecedents, give it a place here, quietly influencing nation and poet. The trouble is, for the poet:

Whether you can go by that road
or find another in time of flood
or whether you say bugger it and head
for the uplands where the water drains rapidly

are decisions made on the spot
without proper knowledge, but which
say more about you and life (yours)
then any horoscope or curriculum vitae.

(The NRMA (Nothing Really Matters Anymore)

The reduction of a life to a “horoscope” and a “curriculum vitae” tells us that, whether escapee or traveller, in the poem’s protagonist's country journey to “reach those/tableland towns where wind and ice/clean out the dusty passions of the main street” he plainly hopes to participate, and be renewed, by immersion in the face of the primal energies adhering to that journey. However, there are immutable forces at work. One’s own experience is ever being interpreted, reinterpreted, and causing interpretation. The trace of memory is a co-conspirator of a landscape with a long experience of frustrating and diverting dreams and intentions. The effect is that:

you can’t relax, the roads are open

but they lead nowhere except to each other—
from stock to station agents, from Imperial
to Federal Hotels, from one shut railway station to another,
in splendid isolation on heights beyond floods.

The landscape has a muted hostility; threat is implicit in the elemental forces. If it is not exactly music, it is the essential rhythms, the ghost-gum voices, of the Australian bush with which Croft is so splendidly in tune here. To strain the metaphor, Croft ‘translates’ a native musicality with the aid of formal techniques which complement it. The old theme of mutability, too, has original applications in Australian contexts. Hope, and Croft, in this volume, share a reference to classical models and modes; Croft’s search for his place in the physical landscape has a partner in the search of European-Australian culture to fit its language, and its art, around the experience of Australia, and the landscape and the people which preceded them there. An Australian expression of the search for re-birth, and the expectation of regeneration is both forward and backward looking thematically and in terms of language. A. D. Hope, like Auden, and Croft here, gains an increased sense of relevance, of contemporary problems and perceptions being given voice because of,
not despite, the deliberate evocations of the past in form and diction. A comparison with Hope’s diction might be made in a number of places; one which relates to the verse immediately above is from “Vivaldi, Bird and Angel”:

Somewhere beyond this frame of natural laws,
Moving in time on its predestined grooves,
I hear another music to which it moves.

This example provides another point of comparison. Although A. D. Hope probably had, with the ‘Music of the Spheres’ loftier matters in mind, it is the consciousness of the presence of something greater behind the face of life, something which must need be spoken of in the terms of a “Mystery”, that is, that may only be spoken of indirectly, which also marks the way Croft echoes Hope. Both poets sense the power and possibility behind life and the landscape, and try to give this a voice and a shape in their poetry. Hope looks to older paradigms and modes of expression; Croft utilises a more contemporary diction; however, in terms of rhetorical stance and word-choice, there are comparisons to be made.

A sense of immanence characterises Croft’s poetry in Confessions. Taylor quotes Brissenden as saying that “Hope is a poet of an immanent order.” (p.72). When Taylor directly quotes the latter’s noting of Hope’s assertion that “‘Man’s apprehension of the fundamentally coherent nature of things also manifests itself in poetry’” (p.72) we come to the point of Croft’s attention to minutiae, and the way his notation and expression of detail is so often paired with a thematic focus on the passage of time. The play created between the great and the small serves to work in the reader a sense of the temporal space which matches the sense of the physical space in Australia which is so finely observed in Julian Croft’s best poems. By closely evoking a distinct Australian-ness Croft can utilise larger ideas, themes of coherence behind what seems temporary, metaphorically mirrored by the stretches of time and distance that are a central characteristic ‘fact’ of the country. In so many Australian works space becomes, quite literally, a ‘lurking’ presence/absence, a counter to all civilisation and order and possession and definite meaning. This ‘silent character’ in Croft comes quite close to the surface. Here the traveller following the NRMA Guide surrenders to the details of “the Royal ... cold lino and 40-watt globe” his search reduced to the pathetic human dendrochronology as he comes to “count the years in the rings of the wash-basin” and as he invites the reader, his other invisible companion, to:

ruminate on your lamb and three veg:
here where the last ash should have been shaken into the Vat 69 ashtray years before...
A whole life stretched out on a single chenille... waiting for the future to break down the door from which the last occupant removed the knob.

Practical problems on a grand scale divert the nation; writ small their comic potential, so effectively mined, underscores the physical opposition of the capricious ‘body’ of the nation to the attempt of the human mind, the naming, organizing entity Homo sapiens, to coerce meaning from life ordered by the tension of striving for permanency, fruitfulness and stability when neither the ‘self’ nor the ‘land’ which helps define it will co-operate in the venture.

In many of his poems Croft charts a wistful but persistent undercurrent of searching in an uncertain attempt to find stability in that which is not the self, but which by its nature, its opposition, expresses a truth about the self and the country.
to which it belongs. As many have noted, the land seems to own us in a much
greater way than we own the land. Our debt, our dependence, our culture, our
language, mock any pretension of the impermanencies of humankind and its
creations to ‘control’ or ‘ownership’. Acceptance of this fragility, temporary and
temporal, is perhaps why Croft’s ‘isolatoes’, like Ted Hughes’s, are measured
against the yardstick of the natural processes of a harsh environment which both
assaults and helps to define them.

Meaning centres on the line of memory where past meets present in experience
of life ordered by memory’s contexts. In this experiential, primary, world the
personal is in part accessed through the national; indeed, a search for an Australian
self can hardly fail to deal with the stereotypes and myths which have been handed
to us by history as the national life constitutes it. “I’m terribly afraid of
nationalism,” Les A. Murray said once. “...But an injured identity in a country is
a terrible drag on that country, and it’s a sore that will go on running until it’s
solved. I’d like to see the matter of Australian identity settled ... So the bloody
thing can go away ...”

Murray’s comment, nearly a decade old now, is instructive as well as amusing.
Croft delves into, and sketches aspects of, this identity, snatching impressions from
a grudging, secretive reality. Definition is found by finding what one is not, by
rejection, as much as by a regretful acceptance of inevitable disappointments and
compromises. Unsettled, finding accommodation, identity and integration elusive,
Croft ranges from the satire of form and character of ‘To the Pious memory of a
Young Lady from Arrnidale, Well Known for Selflessness and Charitable Works,
Who Died in Katmandu—An Ode’ to the complexities of the shifting, melancholic
voices of ‘Confessions of a Corinthian’.

The titles of the poems within this sequence (‘Works and Days’, ‘Bucolics and
Pelagics’, ‘Beach Study’, ‘Wategos’ Beach’, ‘At Corinth’, ‘Idle Moments at the
Beach Hotel’, ‘Coral and Shell’, ‘Confessions of a Corinthian’) give a good
indication of intention, execution and mood. The poet likens the carefree (and
careless) Australians to the sybaritic Corinthians of antique Greece. However, he
weaves this cloth with a vigorously contemporary and indigenous hand.

The ‘classical’ Croft peeks intriguingly from under the brim of a weathered
Akubra; a Roman nose is daubed with Pinke Zinke. The shifts in register facilitate
a multi-level portraiture, beginning with the beguiling passage of days and the easy
sensuality of the Australian life of ‘Works and Days’, to ‘Bucolics and Pelagics’:

\[
\text{the God from out of town blown in}
\text{in the shape of whatever the TV promises:...}
\text{But this is home, like it or not, where Jove}
\text{is only a summer tourist like the rest.}
\]

(‘Confessions of a Corinthian’, Confessions, p.55-6.)

Croft begins to develop the historical/mythical/classical comparisons, using shifts of
diction to bind his reflections to the relation his metaphors have to his ‘task’. Once
more the present is conditioned by the past, in this case the symbolic echoes not
from childhood, but from literature.
The metaphor, translated to ‘Beach Study’, imagines the scene as:

\[
\text{Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew,}
\text{stops in front of the dressing shed;}
\text{Lot turns his back on a beach which takes}
\text{shapes from bodies who bask in furnace fires.}
\]

We wait for Daniel and his mates to arrive to cool off with a quick surf after
morning shift at the steel mill. Thrifty expression of a sun-drenched sensuality, the
mating of a coarsely good-natured ‘folk’ perception with the sophistication of form and allusion of the classicist generates the sustained success of the comparisons and contrasts on which the sequence is built.

For this reader Julian Croft’s artistic choices are successful ones; his diction has sufficient resonances to allow both accuracy of narration and diversity of interpretation. I see a coherency of theme, and a ‘response’ to earlier manifestations of concern with those themes, facilitated in transmission by an alert poetic vision, shaping symbols from common cloth and highlighting them in an original design. In the simple recording of a ‘fact’, the ubiquitous hotel icon, the Vat 69 ash tray, Croft finds an effective symbol for the ominous melancholy which hangs over the denuded farm country of western NSW. In the same way his Onkaparinka is as one with its ‘memory partner’, the chill of winter nights on the Tablelands. Croft has not forgotten the primacy of memory, for all the intrusions and complexities of maturity. Like a landscape painter hurrying to catch a scene in the last light of the day, Croft worries about the ephemerality of his own visions. In ‘Idle Moments at a Beach Hotel’ he wonders:

Who can say that language fails us, here now
on the pub’s patio with a pen poised over the old chaos
...I am
waiting for midnight and the last drink
catching the swell for when winter and work call

(Confessions, p.60)

The ‘old chaos’ is an old creative problem, perhaps the problem; its Australian manifestation continues to be problematic, in a personal and national sense. That poets make some impact on this, ultimately, may be evidenced in a final observation; made possible by the work of Slessor and Hope particularly, Julian Croft’s poetry dismantles any sharp distinctions between the city and the country response, a division once marked in Australian literature and still apparent in the work of Les Murray. Croft’s narrators face a more difficult enigma; they are of, but not part of, the land, and moved by the dictates of, yet divorced from, the spiritual life. An alien soul seems to pervade the entire space, settlement and bush. In the pensive voice town-country is just one more puzzling dichotomy in a land, and an experience, composed of them. The poet articulates this, musing as

in these quiet days when the season stalls...
We sit in the morning verandah’s last pool of summer sun,
and the currawong sings ‘this is as far as we go’:

and I have put on dark glasses to turn aside the beach’s glare
—for no one here looks face to face—
‘but this is as far as I go’
calls the currawong from the dead gum at the fence
‘as far as we go’...
and we get up from morning tea
away from the sun and into a cold house
where I am learning a little of faith and hope
but where I look to others for charity.

(‘Idle Moments at a Beach Hotel’, Confessions, pp.61-2)

The poet’s final ‘confession’ might be too self-critical. Looking inward, Croft’s narration of personal experience is as hospitable as a chat over a cup of tea; but the hand that pours the cup uses gestures we recognize as a kind of native tea ceremony. Croft’s metaphors move from the individual to the national; one person’s experiences to a recognizable common experience of Australia. If this is
successfully attained, if there is sufficient power in the evocation, it means a successful, if inherently temporary, solution to the problem of an Australian diction.

NOTES

1 Showalter proposed phases in the development of these 'subcultures': "a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views of social roles...a phase against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy [and] a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity." (Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, Princeton, NJ.: 1977, p. 13.) in Andrew Taylor, Reading Australian Poetry, St. Lucia, Qld.: 1987, p. 21.
4 This and other quotations from Julian Croft come from an interview in which he kindly participated on 13/12/91.
Power Failure

Such is the quiet of this night
After the wind and the rain
That the silence is louder than sound
And sound is no intrusion.
Down the hill, over darkened roofs
And invisible windows, where no street light guides,
A moving light startles my piano keys
From sound to silence
And runs on, down and out.
Over the bay a channel light blinks on —
one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine —
And off — one to nine —
Measures of darkness beneath a golden rising moon.

Not yet to sea level, moon shape growing over the black rim of the hill,
At last moonlight touches the water my side of the bay
And unwinds towards the blinking light which, suddenly,
Brightens, sparkles, flashes
In the incandescence of the cool moon.
Track turning silver drifts to the beach of the bay
And beacon warning again points out of the dark.
Flu

Between tea and the crackle of frying onions,
turning pages lifted off his sleep,
pages of a third-hand dictionary worn soft
and darkened like outside the double glass.

He saw the rain was dawdling. Snow
falling carelessly as if shaken out,
almost like insects in the streetlight.

Ragged flakes melting on the rail
and with a soft crushing sound he supposed
in the ears of the people who had sacked
the ziggurats of luminous fruit
and were stepping off unworried into the street,

though night had come
between each stone and each hung
glistening like the rails
glimpsed below while rushing buoyed
over the airshaft grille.
Girl on a White Line

Caught on the slender sanctuary
of the line that divides
the surge and countersurge
of the faceless windscreens,
she looks for the lull
to complete her crossing.

The road needs its ruling,
but is no more strict
than the poise of this fragile statue
with its shoulders squared
and its smile taking heart
from the imperturbable green
of the street-verge lawns and trees.
It is only her dress and defenceless hair
that stirs, stung by the air
lashing before and behind her.

I recall how once I watched for an hour
a rock-stranded plant in flower
midstream in the flood of a wilderness river.
Turkish Bath

In the Turkish bath foyer
our eyes widen to fountain fall

and ears respond to waters cooling
plash on marble and tile.

Here no woman is concealed;
the age-brittle, tattooed,
swollen-bellied, surgeon-scarred
move or lie with languid ease

sleeked by heat and sweat.
Some pour water from bowls of brass

over hair and face. Moist marble
reflects candle-flare from grottos of light.

Talk and laughter resonate under arch and dome
as the skin’s accretions

are scrubbed, buffed, oiled away
and soothed with fragrant cream.

Massage-lithe we recline on vermilion palliases
and long for soft diaphanous robes.

We pull on jeans, aware of limbs locked
into an oppression of taut, unyielding cloth.
My grandmother died when she was a hundred and one. "I'm ready to go," she would say, matter-of-factly, from when she was ninety-eight onwards. She was actually quite proud of living to be a hundred. She enjoyed the lavish party, the gathering of relatives, her telegram from the queen. After that her words became a little more plaintive, more certain. "I'm ready to go."

Until she was ninety five she lived alone, painting small landscapes, reading, cooking her sparse meals, walking to the beach, swimming every day in summer. As her eyes began to fail things became more difficult. When she could no longer manage to live alone my aunts arranged a rest home, the best they could find, a large one with manicured gardens and a complete range of activities. My grandmother was not interested in bingo, bus trips or having her hair curled on Wednesdays. She couldn't see well enough to do Cottage Crafts and she refused to watch television. "Drivel," she would say. She listened to the radio and went for long walks until her sight grew so bad she began to trip over the curb, cutting the thin shiny skin on her legs. She used methylated spirits to clean the cuts and toughen the skin, but they took a long time to heal, as flesh does when it is old. My grandmother woke at seven and went to sleep at nine, just as she had always done, the days punctuated with meals in the dining room and the dull slow pulsing of time.

It was a long bus ride. Keen for a visitor my grandmother would be ready and waiting in the lobby, beside the cage of twittering finches. There was an archway and an ornamental concrete pool with water dribbling from the upheld concrete boot of a statue of a farm boy. One acknowledged the attempt at ambience but also recognised failure. The place was a hybrid, a cross between an efficient small hospital and a tacky sad hotel.

We ride up in the lift together. My grandmother wears an ornate brooch on her neat cardigan in honour of the occasion, a droopy floral dress, the sensible shoes that all old ladies wear. Me clutching a paper bag of wholemeal shortbread and a few bananas, a jar of ginger marmalade that she can take down to the breakfast table. The marmalade is not just for eating. It is a status symbol, indicating a visitor, surplus, prestige.

In my grandmother's room we drink tea. Thin china cups with roses, buttery crumbling biscuits. We talk, each dredging our lives for meaning, for something to offer. I try to tone my reality down, turning chaos and disaster into the commonplace. My husband sends his love. We have planted a lemon tree and two
passionfruit vines. My son likes his kindergarten. Not really the truth, but one version and near enough. It will have to do. My grandmother has the opposite and even harder task, trying to turn a succession of days on which nothing happens into a conversation. It’s uncomfortable. Neither of us are good liars. We are rescued by Auntie Joyce’s letters, which a nurse has already read to my grandmother once and which I now read to her again. My cousin Mary’s husband is dying of cancer. Daniel’s daughter is old enough to ride a horse. Siobahn is learning the violin. We’ll never hear it. Ghosts. Half remembered faces, their lives blue ink on paper, a net of cobwebs. Faces displayed on my grandmother’s dressing table and around her mirror, into which she can no longer see. Weddings, red-eyed restaurant shots, lots of babies, an uncle with a fish.

We put the shortbread into the jar, safe from ants, and put the bananas in the top drawer next to a wizened apple. “Glenda rang,” my grandmother tells me, “Tomas is cutting a tooth.” She is sitting on the edge of her bed, neat as a pin. I want to cry.

Three thirty five. Four twenty. For diplomacy’s sake I have memorized the bus-timetable, so I won’t have to get it out and look at it. Timing my departure is tricky. A visit of an hour is too short while two hours stretches endlessly, too long for both of us, I know, but better perhaps than unseemly haste. And if I leave after an hour and a half I will sit alone at the bus stop for an interminable half hour, feeling unbearably sad. I hate leaving, hugging Gran goodbye in the foyer, admiring the ridiculous finches, turning and walking away.

For the last few years of my grandmother’s life I was living in another country. Every few weeks I would write to her, another ghost grandchild, another inky life for my aunt to read out on Sunday over tea. She liked those letters, and she wrote back as long as she could, huge spider writing that she herself could not actually see. Each Christmas she made my aunt send me a present, a linen tea towel of Auckland, The City of Sails, or a calendar which jolted me with homesickness, those red pohutakawa trees, the vibrant blue bays and unbelievably green islands.

Each time I went home I visited my grandmother, all those visits melting now into one. “I’m ready to go,” she kept on insisting, “I won’t be here next time, you know. I’m ready to go.”

“Oh, you always say that, Gran,” I would reply, “You said that last time. You’ll still be here.” My dumb inevitable response. Hoping for my sake not to have to face her death, knowing that soon she’d be gone. A hundred and one, for God’s sake!

My grandmother’s name was Esther Mary Come. She had buried her husband thirty years ago, two of her four children, all of her friends. She had lived from the very first car to the man on the moon. She’d done her time. I had suffered a deep depressive episode she had told me “Keep yourself busy, that’s all you can do.” Just the merest allusion to a dark time of her own, a hint, a glimpse.

“I don’t suppose you’d want this, would you?” she would ask me, those last three times I visited her, and then she would give me something. “You probably don’t want this.”

The bread and butter plate with purple pansies and a blue rim. The book they gave
my grandfather when he retired from the Customs Department. Her old leather bag.

Of course I do. Thank you, Gran.
I've always loved this plate.
This is really good leather. I'll use this, you know.

How oblique and clumsy words can be when we need them most, for the giving and receiving of love.

My grandmother died when she was one hundred and one. Gradually fading. She lay down one day and drifted into sleep, and died the next day, gently sliding. Nothing to hold on to anymore. It wasn't her we wept for, you realise, it was us.

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WESTERLY. No. 3, SPRING, 1993 33
The City Square

Man on Street Corner
Mother on an Island
Woman in a Shoebox

The Flower Lady stands at the corner of Murray and Barrack Street on Friday afternoons. A pink-patterned scarf tied neatly under her chin shuns a spring wind. Bunches of carnations and
daisies wrap themselves tenderly around her legs. Pencils in a cold wind. Keeping them warm. Out of sight. They stroke bunches of yellow marigolds and cardboard roses. Carefully she wraps them in angel pink folds. Nice touch with tissue paper. Offers them to her customers.

January Heat:

The child cries. In the sultry afternoon sea air the sound interrupts her dreams. Reluctantly she reaches in the basket and presses the distressed body against her cotton dress. The child’s pug-like arms gropes for the comfort of the mother’s cool breast. With deep paper bag breaths she sucks.

Yesterday, you came
why not today?
today stinks, the dead stench
is all over the valley
spread like super
spread evenly
cultivated
mushroom compost
in a shoebox

The mother smooths the child’s almost bald head, damp from the humid day. From next door: the sound of loud music. Teenagers. All of them old. Their clothes baggy against a tanned skin: the breeze penetrates that empty space claiming it for posterity. Music braces against the heat. Later they meet at the hotel. Later their bikes form a guard of honour. Later.

you are modern machinery
grease thick on your face
i want to spread it thick
thicker, over my hands
my hands are too small
too smooth, made only
of words, the grease drops off

In the spring the city’s commuters delight in the golden smell of brown and yellow Boronia. In the spring its potent perfume - heady - is heard halfway down Murray Street. The Flower Lady’s regulars rush to buy its delicious aroma. They carry it home tucked underarm. Mixed with the tickly smell of deodorant. Safe on the bus.

between the lines
i am hiding can you see me?
safe
ring-a-ring a rosie

Safe against the hotel’s cream-brick piers, a salute to youth and vigour and freedom. Whose freedom? Get back in your shoebox. The mother slices tomato, lettuce and onion onto a plate. A breeze titillates through the front curtains. The back door is closed against shifting sand and an invasion of quokkas. Yesterday a quokka poked a rat-like head in the back door and frightened the mother. She nearly dropped the child. She thought the quokka was a rat. Last week

the grease drops off
the edge of my short
fat fingers - i can
barely reach the keys
i stretch, i stretch
i slip - my nails
are broken - help me

Last week she heard of another mother who left the island because a rat danced across her kitchen floor. That mother took the morning ferry back to the mainland. This mother is not so stupid. She knows it is best to close the back door to rats and yellow-skinned cockroaches and somehow it makes her feel safe from the music and vigour.
broken edges
yesterday too short
today too long
the man returns tomorrow
maybe, just maybe i'll
be out. Trying on girdles at Target
eating lamb kebabs at the James
Street Souvlakia bar
where is the Man?

The Boronia is carried home on the bus, tight under armpits. On the bus to Karrinyup or Morley or even Midland. Each spring the bus drivers’ smile. Must be spring, they say, the Boronia is here. We can smell it. It puts a smile on our faces. They smile.

Where is the man?
i scream
the man returns tomorrow
i will hide right here
in this gap.

One Friday late in October, the Flower Lady is gone from her place at the corner of Murray and Barrack Streets. Instead at her corner stands an icecream cart. Yellow stripes. White. Red. Green. Gelati, Gelati! cries the icecream seller. His voice zig-zags across the intersection. Darts into open doorways. Slips under doors. Gelati! Vieni!! vieni! Men in strained suits rush by in their pinstriped way to the station. Women in worn out heels swing their handbags around the corner as they follow.

i had hi heels once
spiked
his hi heels
he called them
he walked with them holding my hand
i rushed behind
trying to keep up
my shoes are
a size too small
they catch in the compost

The child cries again. The mother slices the tomatoes faster, then slices the rolls bought fresh from the bakery that morning when she was fresher. When he was still with her. Before he left on the morning boat. The child cries louder now. Plaintive. Distressed. Her pink arms reach high into the air. Humid. Breezeless. Punching it like a boxer in training; her legs kick in time with the arms and the music.

my hand in his
tight he made sure
the rest of me swum in a shoebox
with a tight fitting lid
let me out! you bastard
where is the man?

Gelati, Gelati, Limone, Strawberry, Chocolaty! shouts the Gelati man from the south of his face. He stands, armed on the corner, arms in the air, and shouts till dusk.

body change
what does it mean?
what do you care?
how do you know?
myself on the inside

is hiding between gaps

Two lovers walk by. They hold hands. They buy a lemon gelati to share. The man packs his van and heads home.

must i wait in this
shopping queue?
the checkout chick is dead
the 1st customer is dead
the 2nd customer is dead
i am dying here
i wait my turn

The mother puts down the salad knife and wipes her hands on her shorts. The boats sail past the front windows. Yachts with their dinghies attached. Others, cabin cruisers and the like, moored, their owners coming to the island to escape the oppressive January heat of the mainland or the people, or both. The mother had also seen it as an escape from the morning routine drudge and the afternoon peak in temperature.

Headline: Woman in a shoebox
suffocates from heat
yes, you have found me
covered with soft tissue paper
my face in the toe end
my fat legs in the heel.
So? you have found me
What are you going to do now?

Two lovers walk by. They hold hands.

That’s not you
put back the lid
it’s not your turn
i scream something
untouchable in my head
& i wait my turn

Tossing her hair from her face, the mother lifts the child from the basket. There is nowhere to bath the hot face. She dampens a flannel with water from the
tap in the bathroom and cools the waving arms and legs till they coo and slow and stop. Then they sleep. Her back aches.

must i wait in this
queue?
i am dying like them
Soon i will be dead. a clock on the
wall says when - big hand on 12
little hand on 3.
I crouch out of sight
press hard against cardboard
where is the man?

The following Friday afternoon at the corner of Barrack and Murray Street, the flowers return: roses, carnations, everlastings. The Gelati Man wraps each bunch in pink tissue paper before bowling them to his customers as they rush past his cart towards the station.

you can't see me
hiding in this shoebox
i'm not coming out
don't tell the man
i want to scream
't between the gaps
i wait my turn in the queue

It is the lull of the morning and before lunch. The mother quietly closes the front door and crosses the street to the beach. She wades deep into the water cold against her breasts. Trips over shells and rocks. Splashes the tops of her arms, her face. Her cotton top clings to old milk-laden breasts, separating her from the music. Refreshing her neck, her hair, her breasts. Move along please!

so you have found me
between gaps in stories
where i hide
put on the lid
leave me here with my
thoughts - pile
words all around me
they warm me
i am woman in a shoe box
but where is the man?

Suddenly hungry, the mother crosses the street for lunch.
**On Rereading and Misreading**

*Such Is Life* is a book that assumes a reader - an ‘observant reader’ - who is willing to read and re-read. When forwarding his original manuscript to A.G. Stephens in 1897, Joseph Furphy thought that his first reader would notice ‘that a certain by-play in plot and éclaircissement is hidden from the philosophic narrator, however apparent to the matter-of-fact reader’. Despite this authorial prompting, Stephens made no comment on the narrative strategies when he reported on the manuscript, or when he recommended that the *Bulletin* should publish it; and his later references suggest that he always thought of *Such Is Life* as a work of bush reminiscence and reflection rather than as a novel with an original approach to narrative. Of the reviewers of the first edition, only Grant Hervey (who had the benefit of prior correspondence with Furphy) recognized how *Such Is Life* differed from ‘the ordinary novel’, and made the connection between the method, which requires the reader to uncover what is hidden in the text, and the experience of ‘real life’. Furphy’s sanguine hopes of the ‘matter-of-fact reader’ were not realized. How little sense he had of his potential readership was underlined by his own report of the reaction of the very sort of reader with whom he would have thought himself to have most in common: ‘Yet one intelligent man - an old fellow-expert on the Hornsby - bought a copy at Cole’s a month ago, and hasn’t got more than a quarter of the way through yet. He says it is the hardest reading he has met with for years.’

Even a local newspaper reviewer in Shepparton felt it necessary to warn readers that *Such Is Life* had to be read carefully. There were actually two major obstacles which the early readers encountered: the apparent discontinuity of the narrative, and the weight of commentary. In his *Bulletin* synopsis-review, Furphy directed readers to ‘undercurrents of plot’ beneath the ‘obvious dislocation’, and ventured a criticism upon his own efforts: ‘In fact, the studied inconsecutiveness of the “memoirs” is made to mask coincidences and cross-purposes, sometimes too intricate’. It was not until the 1940s that the intricacy of the hidden connections in the text was discussed publicly in any detail - which is not to say that all previous readers and commentators were unaware of these connections. An essay by A.K. Thomson in *Meanjin* in 1943 initiated a new phase in the history of the book’s readership. *Such is Life* became one of the few Australian texts to be read and discussed on university syllabuses. It was one of the foundation texts of the early Australian Literature courses, along with such established novels as *His Natural Life* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. The new, ‘educated’ readership relished the task of exposing the hidden narratives and discussing their implications, with the great modernist novel, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,...
offering a paradigm. At the same time, the philosophical reflections and the extensive use of allusion, which made *Such Is Life* such hard reading for Furphy’s fellow-workers, increased the interest of the text for university readers.

The new and unexpected audience which *Such Is Life* found in the universities in the 1940s was one which took pleasure in exploring the intertextuality of the writing. A public exchange between H.J. Oliver of the Sydney English Department and Frank Dalby Davison in 1947 makes plain the appeal of the book to academics. Davison complained in *Meanjin* that at a public lecture Oliver, pointing admiringly to the use of a quotation from *Henry IV* in chapter III of *Such Is Life*, had remarked to the audience: ‘I wonder how many other Australian authors have ever even heard of Falstaff’. Davison protested against this ‘piece of intellectual snobbery’, and Oliver defended himself by saying that the ‘real point’ he was trying to make was ‘that writers who possess Furphy’s experience and understanding of such occupations as bullock-driving do not normally combine with that an accurate and detailed knowledge of Shakespeare’.8 Like most of us in university departments of English, Oliver knew more about Shakespeare than about bullock driving. Furphy’s text offered the pleasures of recognition to such readers who were well-read in Shakespeare - and in English literature generally. However, with the immense cultural changes that have taken place in the century since Furphy wrote his novel, there are now comparatively few readers - even in universities - whose literary background could be said to resemble Furphy’s, so that without the assistance of notes the ‘scholarly’ reader, no less than the ‘unscholarly’, may well go astray.

Thanks to the researches of a group of Australian academics, *The Annotated Such is Life* now offers readers a degree of access to Furphy’s learning.9 The sources of most of the literary and historical allusions are given, foreign phrases translated, colloquial usages explained, plot links are pointed out, and jokes explained. It is one thing to provide this information, however, but another to establish how it is significant in any particular instance. To take a simple example. Introducing the husband-hunting Mrs Beaudesant, Torn Collins identifies her as the daughter of ‘Hungry Buckley of Baroona’.10 The note in the *Annotated* explains that Buckley is the hero of Henry Kingsley’s *Geoffry Hamlyn*, and quotes Furphy’s remark in a letter that he ‘wanted to get a cowardly welt at Henry Kingsley a la Richardson-Fielding’; in other words, Furphy aimed to criticize Kingsley through burlesque, as Fielding criticized Richardson’s *Pamela* with *Shamela*. This is genuinely helpful, but to appreciate what is at issue the reader needs to know the values of Kingsley’s fiction, and, further, to know the reputation of the novel when Furphy was writing. (In 1884 Rolf Bolderwood was referring to it as ‘that immortal work, the best Australian novel’.11) Tom Collins has earlier (in Ch IV) dismissed *Geoffry Hamlyn* as an exceedingly trashy and misleading novel’, and warned against accepting its version of pastoral life in Australia. The ‘history’ of Mrs Beaudesart represents a rewriting of Kingsley’s novel. Whereas Kingsley has Sam Buckley succeed so brilliantly in the colonies that he is able to recover the family estate in England, Furphy has him lose his colonial property ‘by foreclosure, to the hands of a brainy and nosey financier’. That is, Buckley has borrowed from a Jewish (‘nosey’) moneylender, and has been unable to meet his payments. This explains, perhaps, why he has been so mean towards his employees and others as to merit the epithet of ‘Hungry’ (like ‘Hungry McIntyre’ of *Yoongoolee*). He is described by Collins as having been ‘addicted to high living and extremely plain thinking’. His failure, then, is no surprise: ‘People who had known the poor gentleman when he was very emphatically in the flesh, and had listened to his palaver, and noticed his feckless way of going about things, were not surprised at the misfortune that had struck Buckley’. The palaver of Kingsley’s hero includes such passages as this:
‘What honours, what society, has this little colony to give, compared to those open to a fourth-rate gentleman, in England? I want to be a real Englishman, not half a one. I want to throw in my lot heart and hand with the greatest nation in the world. I don’t want to be young Sam Buckley of Baroona. I want to be the Buckley of Clere. Is not that a noble ambition?’ (Geoffry Hamlyn, Ch. XLIV)

In the *Such is Life* version of Buckley’s life, he dies poor (‘poor gentleman’) in Australia, and is remembered for his self-indulgence, his empty talk and his incompetence as a land-owner. Collins’s version of Buckley’s life constitutes a total rejection of Kingsley’s imperialistic romance. The concluding phrase - ‘that had struck Buckley’ - was a common one that Furphy turns to his own purpose. To quote from J.C. Hotten’s *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant*:

‘Who struck Buckley?’ a common phrase used to irritate Irishmen. The story is that an Englishman having struck an Irishman named Buckley, the latter made a great outcry, and one of his friends rushed forth screaming, ‘Who struck Buckley?’ ‘I did’ said the Englishman, preparing for the apparently inevitable combat. ‘Then’ said the ferocious Hibernian, after a careful investigation of the other’s thews and sinews, ‘then, serve him right’.

Elsewhere in *Such is Life* Tom Collins describes himself (after obtaining a pair of trousers in Chapter III) as ‘overflowing with the sunny self-reliance of the man that struck Buckley’ (p. 120). The use of the phrase in relation to Sam Buckley, an Englishman, really turns the point around, transforming it from an anti-Irish to an anti-English Joke.

Without the assistance of *The Annotated Such is Life* there would be few readers, if any, who read the phrase ‘the misfortune that struck Buckley’ as having any meaning other than its literal sense - and perhaps the loss is not great. The problem is, however, that this is not an isolated example. This phrase, for instance, contributes to the anti-English perspective in which Maud Beaudesart is created. She and her brother (unnamed) are described as taking ‘positions of vantage, such as their circumstances allowed’. They are out to exploit their social standing to the full in the hope of making wealthy matches. Their attitude is represented most unfavourably as that of the gambler:

> each being prepared to stake his or her gentility (an objectionable word, but it has no synonym; and nasty things have nasty names) against any amount of filth that could be planked down by an aspiring representative of the opposite sex. (p. 209)

The parenthesis about ‘gentility’ invites the reader to ponder the word and its possible meanings (which include the obsolete meaning of ‘being a gentile or heathen’, and the obscure sense in Roman law of ‘belonging to the same “gens” or family’) and to see that the two Buckleys are ready to sell themselves for ‘filth’ (filthy lucre) to ‘aspiring’ marriage partners.

Young Buckley, not making a catch, goes in for ‘blacksmith work’ (that is, forging) and, being unable to afford a good lawyer, gets a stiff ten-year sentence - ‘a tenner hard’. But Maud has the good looks which enable her to become ‘a veritable heroine of romance’. The narrative suggests that for the reader a nod is as good as a wink:

> A German prince, whose name I forget at the present moment, visited these provinces; and our Beatrix Esmond - Well, perhaps a reflected greatness is better than no greatness at all. (p. 209)

The two signs that the reader is expected to be able to interpret are ‘German prince’
and ‘Beatrix Esmond’. As the editors of the Annotated suggest, the royal visitor must be Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria’s son, who visited the colonies in 1867-8. The description of Alfred as a ‘German Prince’ was literally accurate as in 1893 he succeeded his uncle as ruler of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. (He is best remembered as the object of a would-be assassin in Sydney, but was also the subject of gossip because of his liking for prostitutes.) Beatrix Esmond, in Thackeray’s Henry Esmond (1852), is the prototype for Maud Buckley - or, to put it the other way around, Maud is a colonial version of Beatrix Esmond. In Thackeray’s narrative, Beatrix attracts the interest of Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, on a secret visit in 1714 to London where he hopes to regain the throne on the death of his sister, Queen Anne. His promiscuity leads Esmond and others to turn from the Jacobite cause and welcome the Hanoverian George I. Beatrix is rescued from the clutches of Charles before he can dishonour her, but as Henry Esmond sadly reports, ‘ever after that day at Castlewood, when we rescued her she persisted in holding all her family as her enemies, and left us, and escaped to France, to what a fate I disdain to tell’.

After her encounters with ‘greatness’, Maud Buckley finds a husband, whose name tells us all we need to know about him - ‘Lionel Fysshe-Jhson’ marries her ‘on the strength of her celebrity’. In less than two years he goes to his ‘reward’, but Maud is well and truly launched in society. After three husbands - the second is the rich, self-made Mr Tidy, and the third the spendthrift Hon Henry Beaudesart - she is left in reduced circumstances, which lead to her eventually being installed as housekeeper at Runnymede. Her decline is the subject of a paragraph of reflection by Tom Collins on the ‘elegancies of life’ which she once enjoyed, not as a result of her own labours but as ‘the balance of profit accruing from the continuous labour of at least fifty average industrious women’. She is identified as ‘the spoiled child’.

The ‘relationship’ between the narrator and Mrs Beaudesart is based on her thinking that he is, like herself, one of the distressed gentlefolks (the result of a joke by Montgomery when introducing them). Instead of clearing the matter up, Collins goes on playing the part of a gentleman who has come down in the world. In conversation with her Collins, chameleon-like, presents himself as a good Conservative who shares her clan values. The character of her conversation is indicated by the following paragraph:

Another thing. Mrs Beaudesart possessed a vast store of Debrett-information touching those early gentlemen-colonists whose enterprise is hymned by loftier harps than mine, but whose sordid greed and unspeakable arrogance has yet to be said or sung. Socially, she knew something fie-fie about most of our old nobility; and her class-sympathy, supported by the quasi-sacredness which invests aristocratic giddiness, lent tenderness of colour and accuracy of detail to some queer revelations. She could make me fancy myself in ancient Corinth. (p. 211)

Mrs Beaudesart knows a great deal of indecent (‘fie-fie’) gossip about the goings-on of the upper classes in the colonies: Tom, listening to her, could fancy himself in ancient Corinth (where prostitution was practised at the shrine of Aphrodite).

This laboured exposition of some (not all) of the implications of two pages of text introducing Mrs Beaudesart points to the difficulty facing the reader of Such is Life today. These two pages precede a description of a scene involving Mrs Beaudesart in her role as housekeeper, and a maid, Ida, ‘the white trash whose vocation was to wait on the narangies’. The account of Mrs Beaudesart begins with the announcement that she is ‘well born’. Ida is ‘the low born daughter of a late poverty-stricken Victorian selector’. This is the frame in which their encounter is viewed. It continues the theme of social gradation with which the chapter opens.
Ida is, 'without any exception, the ugliest white girl I ever saw', according to Tom Collins, who declares that 'I often felt an impulse to marry the poor mortal; partly from compassion; partly from the idea that such an action would redound largely to my honour; and partly from the impression that such an unattractive woman would idolise a fellow like me'. She has admirable moral qualities (unlike Mrs Beaudesart), but 'ugly, illiterate - and above all, ill-starred, lowly, and defenceless - as she was, she would have made an admirable butt for the flea-power of your illustrated comic journal'. Mrs Beaudesart humiliates her in front of the men, displaying the worst kind of class hostility and insensitivity. Tom Collins is among those who observe the scene, and his language preserves a distance. Ida, he says, 'certainly belonged to the same mammiferous division of vertebrae as Mrs Beaudesart, but there the affinity ended with a jerk', and the scientific classification is repeated twice. He sums up his attitude in language which indicates the extent to which the narrative is concerned with ideas rather than emotions or impressions, but which a present-day reader will not find amusing:

Beauty in distress is a favorite theme of your shallow romancists; but, to the philosophic mind, its pathos is nothing to that of ugliness in distress. At the best of times, poor Ida was heart-breaking; her sunniest smile wrung my soul with commiseration; and when the sympathy naturally accorded to helpless anguish was superimposed upon that which she claimed as her birthright, the pressure became intolerable. It had always been my consolation to think that she would yet be a bright and beautiful angel; and now I fell back for solace upon that thought - though how the thing was to be accomplished seemed a problem too vast for the grasp of a water-worn and partially dissolved understanding like mine.

Mrs Beaudesart is exercising her power over Ida in abusing her verbally and the abuse consists not simply of a reprimand for some failure on her part but also of a lecture on the class situation. Ida’s parents ‘forgot their position’, ignored ‘the divine command to do our duty in that state of life which it has pleased God to call us’. When Mrs Beaudesart hints that Ida, though lacking ‘the snare of beauty’, does not have ‘a character beyond suspicion’, the latter turns on her, not only protesting her virtue but hinting, hysterically, that she could ‘cast up somethin’ you wouldn’t like to be minded of’. Mrs Beaudesart, using all her social skills, retires ‘greater in defeat than in victory’. (My italics)

The row can be read as a variant on the mistress-servant conflict, complicated by the inversion of stereotypes. Mrs Beaudesart who preaches class morality, is not only a bully but also a person who is morally compromised: in the idiom of the period, she is a woman with a ‘past’ (which is why the slander about Collins’s past in no way diminishes her interest in him as a possible husband). As housekeeper on the station she is socially superior to Ida and has power over her; but the powerless, socially inferior servant is morally superior. The episode, it should be noted, follows an extended analysis of the class stratification on a Riverina station. And the variations on the theme of superior/inferior continue in the chapter with the implied contrast between the Irish storekeeper Moriarty, who holds extreme racist views, and the Aboriginal stockman, Toby, whom he regards as his inferior; and later the explicit contrast between the Australian squatter, Montgomery, who is a gentleman ‘only by virtue of his position’, and the supercilious English landholder, Folkstone, who is a gentleman ‘by the grace of God and the flunkeyism of man’. (p. 239)

The reading which I have here proposed of pages 209-14 of Such is Life is very different from that of Julian Croft in his recent book, The Life and Opinions of Tom Collins 12. So different, indeed, that anyone comparing the two accounts might wonder if we are talking about the same text. To the extent that a reader ‘creates’
a text in the process of reading, we are reading different texts. What is at issue between us is not only how Furphy's text is to be interpreted but what is there to be interpreted. He does not see Geoffrey Hamlyn as a potent presence in the text in the way that I have suggested. He does note that Mrs Beaudesart is 'a descendant of Sam Buckley of Baroona, the hero of Henry Kingsley's The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn' (p. 184), and appears to regard this as no more than an indication of her 'genteel background'. He takes no note at all of the Thackeray allusion, which I have taken to be a sign to guide the reader in his interpretation of the character. He does, however, base his whole approach to the reading of the relationship of Collins and Mrs Beaudesart on a literary association of which I find no trace in my text:

Tom's description of his 'ignoble ease and peaceful sloth' encourages the reader to think of Runnymede in this chapter as Circe's island in the Odyssey, and Maud as a sorceress of equal potency. (p. 186)

(The Miltonic quotation prompts the speculation that unconsciously Croft may be associating Collins with Belial!) The notion of Mrs Beaudesart as a sorceress is central to Croft's theory of the moral corruption of Tom Collins which governs his interpretation of the last two chapters of Such is Life. In his version Mrs Beaudesart has a 'truly Circean' effect upon Tom Collins, turning him into 'a scandal-mongering snob, an unreconstructed Conservative, and one of swinish contempt for the canaille' (p. 186) - which is, in my view, a misreading of Furphy's text.

The earliest readers took Such is Life at its face value as a chronicle of bush life, and probably H. M. Green's view of the book as 'a great almost formless slab of out-back experience and fireside yarns' corresponded to their impression of it - their first impression, at any rate. Contemporary readers, knowing that the literal author and the fictional narrator are not identical, and that there are patterns in the narrative not observed by the narrator, approach texts with expectations of complexity and secrets to be uncovered. Criticism of Such is Life since the 1940's has been generally based on what Fredric Jameson has called 'the idea that the object was fascinating because of the density of its secrets and that these were then to be uncovered by interpretation. Over the years critics have brought to light many interesting aspects of Furphy's text; but not even a reader who, like Julian Croft and myself, has been reading Such is Life for decades can feel sure that he or she has the cultural competence to decode the text accurately and arrive at a coherent interpretation. In its heterogeneity of reference the novel is particularly resistant to interpretation. Tantalizing in its resemblance to other works of fiction at various points, it is nevertheless a nonconformist, stubbornly idiosyncratic composition; and the experience of reading other works is less help to the reader than might be expected. Julian Croft has confidence in contemporary 'reading strategies' as a way of grasping the book's distinctive nature, but I am inclined to think that Croft's study reveals the limitations of that approach.

Veronica Brady has wondered whether Such is Life is 'a book invented by its readers', and one can see what she means. There is such an abundance of detail the relevance of which to any controlling conception is not immediately apparent that the reader is constantly struggling to produce a narrative shape which is amenable to interpretation. An interesting example of how a sophisticated reader may get so caught up in the possibilities of meaning he finds in the text that he starts unconsciously to write his own version is to be found in R.S. White's Furphy's Shakespeare. In the course of his lecture he argues that Tom Collins's 'chameleon qualities' are not to be taken as 'totally admirable'. To support his view that Collin's 'quick-change adaptability is often dangerously close to congenital evasion of responsibilities' he quotes from the final chapter in which the Scotsman, Tom
Armstrong, says that Collins is not the man he thought he was. White continues:

In the same chapter, one which shows nemesis catching up with Collins, we see a tragic consequence of his habitual changes of persona. Earlier in the novel, pretending to a medical training, he had mistaken a marking in the eye of Andy Glover (the tragic swagman) for an iron filing, which he crudely tried to remove. Glover returns semi-blinded, reproachfully says in reference to Tom Armstrong but with unconscious irony applicable to Collins himself 'He ain't the man I took him for - an' I'm sayin' it to his face'.

This is a very striking instance of 'tragic consequence', but it is not to be found in Furphy's text. White has confused two characters: the bushman on whose eye Collins 'operated' was his bullock-driver acquaintance Warrigal Alf, not the swagman Andy Glover. (One could also point out that Collins did not seriously claim to have a medical training.) Glover's near-blindness is in no way caused by Collins. On the occasion of their only previous meeting - when Glover is not named, incidentally - Collins notes that the swagman is a 'victim of the scourge of ophthalmia' (p. 91), a painful condition of the eyes, all-too-common among bushman as Furphy himself had reason to know. Tom Collins tells the reader that he carries a pair of clouded spectacles to wear when afflicted (p. 268), and it is these that he gives to Glover, whose need is great, at the end of the novel.

Critics are sharply divided on how to read the concluding pages of Such is Life, in which an unforseeable link between Collins and the swagman is apparent to the reader - to the 'observant reader', at least. Glover tells the story of how he was sent to gaol for three months for the burning of Quarterman's haystack, and among his hearers is the actual perpetrator of the deed, Tom Collins. Many readers cannot accept that, after listening to Glover's story, Collins does not make the connection and realize his own responsibility for what has happened to Glover. The crucial passage is worth looking at in detail because readings of it so starkly illustrate the problem contemporary readers have in decoding Furphy's text. The argument of those who see Collins as morally corrupt hinges on their interpretation of a verbal exchange involving Collins, Glover, and a young rouseabout called Dave, who is drawing Glover's story out of him:

Croft's argument hinges on his interpretation of the narrator's conversation at the point at which Glover gives the name of the farmer whose stack was burnt.

"Well, the Court day it come roun'; an' when my case was called, the prosecutor he steps down off the bench, an' gives evidence; an' I foun' him sayin' somethin' about not wantin' to press the charge; an' there was a bit of a confab; an' then I foun' the Bench askin' me if I'd sooner be dealt with summary, or be kep' for the Sessions; an' I said summary by all means; so they give me three months."

"What was the prosecutor's name?" shouted Dave.

"Waterman."

"So called because he opens the carriage-doors," I remarked involuntarily.

"Do you know him, Collins?" persisted Dave.

"I neither know him nor do I feel any aching void in consequence," I replied, pointedly interpolating, in two places, the quidnunc's flowers of speech. (pp. 294-95)

Noting that this is the first time that Collins 'has resorted to such floral adornment', Z.P. Richters declares: 'The conclusion is inescapable: Collins is lying, not only to the other characters present at the scene he is recounting but also directly to the reader' . Julian Croft takes a similar, if more subtle view of what is happening. He finds Collin's reaction to 'Waterman' 'facetious' and 'incomprehensible', and his uncharacteristic swearing to be an 'out-of-character lapse of taste': these are 'indications that Furphy wanted us to believe that Tom was not as innocent as he pretends to be' (p. 214).
Both these critics believe that the relationship between the narrator and the reader is fundamentally altered in this final scene: as he has deceived others, the narrator is now out to deceive the reader. G. A. Wilkes suggests that this possibility cannot be dismissed, but notes that ‘it would mean that the comic mode is here suspended.’ He highlights the anecdote of the penguin and the man-o-war hawk told to Collins earlier in the chapter by Jack the Shellback, and concludes that Collins’s behaviour on hearing Glover’s story is ‘consistent with the penguin-like concern’ that Collins shows on other occasions.

I find the notion that the narrator is lying to the reader a disturbing one: if the narrator is, without warning, ceasing to be honest with the reader, then the convention observed for the rest of the narrative is broken, and the relationship of narrator and reader is entirely changed - in the last two pages of the novel. How is the reader expected to know that the narrator has been suddenly transformed? The argument seems to be that the reader will find the narrator’s behaviour so odd at this point that the reader will decide that he is rattled by the realization of his responsibility for the swagman’s fate. Why should Collins want to hide from the reader his feelings when he is so ready at other points to draw attention to the unforeseen patterns of cause and effect involving him? Why should Collins be unwilling to acknowledge his role in Glover’s story? Why should he feel guilty for what he could not possibly have been foreseen? There is nothing in the text to establish that Collins has paid any attention to the detail of Glover’s story and is hiding his true feelings from the reader. The claims of Richter and Croft rest upon their misreading of detail, which they take out of context. Having made this claim of my own, I shall now attempt to justify it by what Julian Croft calls ‘the traditional art of close reading’.

To begin with Collins’s puzzling response to the name of ‘Waterman’ (the deaf swagman’s version of Quarterman). Surprisingly, The Annotated Such is Life offers no help: ‘An obscure remark for which we can provide no satisfactory explanation’. Rushing in where angels fear to tread, I suggest that if we consider the dynamics of the situation and the characterization of Collins as a pedant, a philosopher whose philosophy ‘mostly consists in thinking he knows everything, and other people know nothing’, as his lifelong friend Thompson says (p. 24), then it is not difficult to account for the ‘obscure remark’. Glover is being questioned loudly by Dave, ‘an open-mouthed, fresh-faced rouseabout, who was just undergoing that colonising process so much dreaded by mothers and deplored by the clergy’ (p. 293). Dave, whose ‘jorrio’ has previously annoyed the old stockman Vandemonian Jack, hears Glover say that he has been unjustly gaoled for three months, and starts asking the sort of questions no one versed in bush etiquette would ask. He is even crass enough to ask Glover’s mate, Tom Armstrong, what Glover was gaoled for. Armstrong, who is described in the text as ‘Carlyle’s townie’ (not only because he comes from Eccelfechan, one surmises, but because he is the embodiment of Carlylean integrity), ‘after slowly surveying his questioner from head to foot’, replies that he knows nothing but good of his mate. Armstrong’s loyalty towards Glover and care for him reveals the ‘fine manhood’ referred to three chapters earlier (p. 160). The relationship of Armstrong and Glover is the most striking example of mateship in Furphy’s writing. Armstrong’s moral strength is shown by his handling of Glover when the latter mistakenly thinks that his mate has told the others about his having been in gaol - Armstrong shows ‘gentleness and commiseration’, and actually tries to head Glover off from talking about gaol. Young Dave, ‘the catechumen rouseabout’, is greedy for details, and shouts his questions, though he has moved to sit alongside the deaf swagman. When he elicits the farmer’s name from Glover, who is sitting opposite Collins, the latter remarks ‘involuntarily’: ‘So
called because he opens the carriage-doors’. This cryptic remark is a joking reference to the occupation of a ‘waterman’: ‘an attendant at cab - or coach-stands, whose primary function was to water the horse’ (O.E.D.)

Tom Collins’s remark is wholly in character, an example of what he described in The Buln-buln and the Brolga as ‘a habit of airing some scrap of unhackneyed information, apparently, though not actually, with a view to effect.’ And it is, incidentally, meant to divert attention from Glover’s story, which Dave alone wants to hear told. The information is wasted on Dave (as on present-day readers), who misses the point of it, and whose mind is on Glover’s story. He persists with questions, now asking Collins does he know Waterman. Collins’s reply is meant to show his disapproval of Dave’s behaviour, by imitating the youth’s clumsy attempt to be manly in speech by putting an expletive in front of each verb. Dave continues to interrogate Glover, oblivious to the general disapproval in the hut, and the whole story as Glover understands it is told.

Andrew Glover is an object of general sympathy, but although his narrative does prompt passing comment on justice among those present, ‘the matter-of-fact reader’ is expected to see more in it than does the narrator. The ‘by-play in plot and eclaircissement’ that passes by the narrator does relate to him quite directly. The issues it raises about individual responsibility and cause and effect have been articulated elsewhere in the novel, most notably in chapter II, where the theory of the ‘controlling alternative’ is expounded. In the final pages of the novel the narrator’s thoughts are on identity, not the story that Glover tells. He is conscious of being in disguise, albeit unintentionally, and this disguise aids in his deception of Tom Armstrong for a second time. Collins himself is troubled by the thought that he has seen Glover somewhere on another occasion - as, indeed, he has. His immediate concern is to try to account to himself for ‘my vaguely-fancied recognition of the man’. His attempts to analyse the possible working of his mind (in what reads like a parody of nineteenth-century thought) don’t lead to a satisfactory explanation. From here he is led to think about Tom Armstrong’s ready acceptance of things at their face value. There is an implied contrast between Armstrong and himself, between the practical man, ‘guided by unweighted, unanalysed phenomena, and governed by conviction alone’, and the ‘seasoned specialist’, the ‘ether-poised Hamlet mind’. The ‘matter-of-fact reader’ might well ponder the fact that Collins, no less than Armstrong, fails to get at the truth: the failure to recognize Glover and to realize that the stack-burning affair involved him is only the last of a series of failures by the narrator in reading the facts that he records.

In his reflection on Tom Armstrong’s make-up, Collins affirms a belief in Absolute Truth, and in the metaphor of Error in orbit he predicts his own inevitable exposure by Tom Armstrong. That revelation is in the future: sufficient unto the day. Confident that Tom Armstrong will not see the truth now, Collins ‘fearlessly’ gives his ‘clouded glasses’ to the suffering Glover. It is an act of kindness, as the spectacles will ease the discomfort of the swagman. The scene is rich in teasing ironies; though Collins has taken off his clouded glasses, he does not see more clearly; not is he seen more clearly by Tom Armstrong (whose look of gratitude reflects his feeling for his mate). To Armstrong Collins’s act is, indeed, an affirmation of brotherhood.

The final scene is Such is Life is of men gathered together for a communal meal, ‘the institution which predicates and affirms the brotherhood of our race as positively, and to the philosophic mind, as thouchingly, as death itself’ (p. 289). That brotherhood is seen not as an emotional bond consciously acknowledged but as shared fate. The final irony with which the book ends is the acknowledgment that
all individual relationships involve a kind of acting, that all the parts belong to a play the significance of which is unknown.

Julian Croft regards Collins's gift of the spectacles as a ‘gesture of mockery’ (p. 214), and Collins’s use of the term ‘mate’ in addressing Glover ‘horribly ironic ... a complete inversion of the whole ethos of “mateship” which the radical-nationalist critics would have us believe is at the core of both Furphy’s and Lawson’s fictions’ (p. 19). I argue to the contrary that Collins’s use of the word ‘mate’ is wholly free of mockery. It could be noted here that Glover is the only character whom Collins addresses in this way and that he is so addressed on the only two occasions that they meet (pages 93 and 296-97). It is also relevant that on the first occasion Collins reproaches himself for not having offered more than a plug of tobacco to the obviously down-on-his-luck swagman. Collins’s state on that first occasion is not so different from his state in the final scene - preoccupied with a train of thought. Collins’s cerebration is not a moral fault but it can affect his capacity to interpret what is going on around him - a weakness towards which we as literary critics have every reason to be charitable:

*Such is Life* is a novel which demands close reading, but equally it demands that the reader confront the impossible question of how life may be interpreted. In this essay I have been concerned with very basic problems of comprehension, on which interpretations of the novel’s larger meaning have been built. Furphy criticism has come a long way since the days when the novel was read as a kind of sacred text of the nineties, and as Ivor Indyk remarked in the course of a very perceptive essay some years ago, there is no going back to the earlier reading ‘which stressed the Australian and egalitarian character of *Such is Life*.20 The legend of the nineties has been well and truly deconstructed, and books like *The Annotated Such is Life* now give us access to some of the materials out of which Furphy fashioned his fictions. At the very least, *The Annotated Such is Life* is a challenge to readers to reflect again on how Furphy’s learning affects his writing of fiction. It marks the beginning perhaps of a new phase of Furphy studies.

Pierre Bourdieu has observed: ‘The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it’.21 *Such is Life* was written by an autodidact working in isolation in a late nineteenth-century country town, and in my view that profoundly affects both its form and substance. I should like to see future studies of Furphy look more closely at *Such is Life* as a cultural creation, That won’t necessarily make us more perceptive as readers but it could make us less likely to misread.

NOTES

1 Joseph Furphy to A. G. Stephens, 2 May 1897.
3 Grant Hervey (G. H. Cochrane), *Worker* (Sydney), 14 November 1903, p. 8.
4 Joseph Furphy to his mother, December 1903, quoted Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 324.
5 *Shepparton News*, 21 August 1903, p. 2.
6 *Bulletin* (30 July 1903); The sentence read: ‘In fact, when the ‘synopsis - review’ was published in the studied inconsecutiveness of the ‘Memoirs’ is made to mask the intricate cioncides and cross-purposes’. I have quoted from Furphy’s own copy in the Kate Baker papers, National Library.
10 Tom Collins, *Such is Life* (1903), p. 209. Further page references are given in the text.
Lunch on the Rue Jacob

Our sidewalk table hardly holds the food from the mid-range *prix fixe* menu
An old woman in a dress with puffy sleeves and wearing ribbons in her hair
sings a children’s song to us and dances a bit turning on the curb in sandals and ankle socks
We give her money out of embarrassment

The diners across the narrow road are having a special treat:
another old woman stops at each table and insults them for being *très riches*
—There’s a certain moral disadvantage when you’re a grown-up wearing a bib and dismantling a scarlet lobster

Even in Paris *plat du jour* doesn’t quite translate as daily bread
A Death

Over the counter she's on her own, so secret nothing comes out the equivalent of what she's thinking.
She dreams of the perfect question, the silencer. On the way home the streets follow like crumbs.

In bad weather she goes for the extreme where actions tell you everything.
For ten years her best friend thought loyalty wasn't safe though a debt's better off than death, and fear can break through anything but that.
On her bed she pictures you.

The unreal sun is alive in the corner.
A table shifts.
She means more than she says but doesn't want to. The kids are playing with time and their hands hurt.
When she leaves through the door it's all they can see.
The Cell

He turns to evade you, smiling at the empty space as though it should be you. You agree too easily, his criminal steady life draped in his arms like a doll. He wants to adopt you in his costume way, faking unreality so you'll forgive what he looks like. The crooked lines in his hands won't go away.

Your repetitive response shocks you. In the room between the instant and understanding, he'd rather be you, your useless knowledge propped like a funeral while he says talk, pointing at the vacant wall, the lot. Decades circle his eyes. He wants to keep you like a post card from somewhere else, before he was born.

You separate thought from feeling, show 'success' with your in-control mouth. The image of you is what you are, he says, distinguishing hope from fact. (The gates in his dreams are soundless.) When the light shines through your skin he’s equal, wrecking your what’s-the-point disguise. Internally, he's happy when you come, not miles away. From his perspective you could be anyone.

His heart kicks like a siren drilling for tomorrow.
Four Sonnets: To Scattering Seed

"Motherhood is the fantasy ... of a lost territory"
Julia Kristeva

"And a nice wind take her far enough ... out of sight"
Sophocles: Women of Trachis

I

When the wind blew north then north your family floated,
Caught in the sails of your skirts
You swelled and shrank,
Children stacked beneath you like chairs
Blowing from bellows with gunpowder smiles
Pocketwatch and fuse in their clammy hands
Exploding precisely each flag unfurled the length of your brain
Rabbits running free in the starched high corn;
You patched your petticoats and grew as quickly as they:
Them chasing you and you chasing them, full of
Emu eggs, but already you wanted them back inside,
Dressed in jungle greens or carrying a tree,
You had to disembark or be a dwarf; there was more
Room in you for them, than room in them for you.

II

When the wind blew south you paused and rested.
A quiet rustling in the leaves and that was all,
The weight of the ever-growing in your boughs,
Trunk sinking lower into earth, pockets inside-out
Sleeping children breathe the best lullabies,
You shut down too; all you want to do is
Turn their dials or read the fine print
On the pads of hands and feet;
Everything comes down to sucking your own sap,
The chorus of women keeps naming
The prairies of your body you'd hungered
For the matching cloth of cousins
Until your brood screens all
Anomalies from sight.
III

When the wind blew east you could only move against it,
Your family caught cold and the smallest died
It was your life or his, you lifted him up
He was the third you could have done without,
Easier to find him on your beads than round him up;
By the age of twenty you’d shrunk so much
You stood on them like stools, watching
The last to leave your blocks pursue the lead.
Finger-prints pockmarking every wall,
Your stairs were theirs as well; it sorted out
The way they spun you round and round
Blindfolded, losing them in the crowd
Breaking and entering
Till they called themselves home —

IV

When the wind blew west you took up swords and scattered.
Your foes looked sweet, your friends did not
But sweeter still to christen you again
And drop you home, your family mostly out,
Another civil war;
You roamed their rooms and sacked their beds
For a crib your true size, for leftover sleep —
The wind was never strong enough to take you on its own,
You had to push as well,
Count yourself in numbers;
Skirts were short and many fled in them
Her love ran out, it bore you like an atlas,
Your body into colonies, your young breaking ranks.
Goblin Market

for Christina Rossetti

I

The pipes of goblin men between their lips
Your sweet-toothed daughters
Drew back their dainty mouths
And drained food-hoarding merchant men of juice
They wouldn't sell but only share:
Initials bitten into every fruit,
Goading the girls to tongue their own in braille
Lizzie with her open heart,
Too big to do much with but draw a curtain round,
Laura in an absent dream
Loved by tramping little men, who frisked her thin,
Who grew in stature as she made them say
The words she couldn't turn around,
Which they aligned and stamped into the ground.

II

Lizzie and a Laura, split down the centre
One wanting life, that life wouldn't chafe against:
She drew the mouthed to drink
The calm lake of her face
And dragged the mouthless back,
For what hurt her she wouldn't prize apart,
She loved to wrestle as an invalid.
Laura, sick to death of lawful digging
Wanted to climb and pick a few;
She dropped an apron-full
And found them spread out like a family tree
In carnivals where thieves translated instantly,
While others like her sister kissed but couldn’t understand,
To them her plainspeaking was sleight of hand.
Blue clouds scuttle the eucalypt sun
as it fizzles and winces with impending
rain, sultry weather dampening
the orange hearts of King parrots.

The scimitar roads cull the golden grain
from dump trucks and belly spillers, tarps
tethered loosely, illegal loads shifting
over axles tense with excess tonnage.

Rosellas gather about the grain offerings
and the torn bodies of the fallen. Woodsmoke
hustles a magpie lark out of an uncharacteristic
torpor. A crow hangs low and watches intently.

Observing the rites of passage a Regent
parrot plunges into the dead eyes of a semi,
eyes of silver nitrate, tarnished and stained
shadow black. The orange, golden, and emerald
hearts of parrots litter the roads. I drive
slowly and whisper prayers of deflection.
For Joseph

Your ears will never hear sounds
that to me are ordinary as air.

From the hour that you were born
the tight white shell of silence
closed around you.
You edged away from friendship.

Silence clung and stung like sand,
smothering words before they could
break free.

Sand has a brittle sound
as it stutters underfoot.

But you are no longer like sand.
Though your ears will still never hear,
words gather, demanding as seagulls.

Now, you stretch wings towards the sky.
Glide closer to other lives.
Reach them with the rising tide
of your imperfect speech.
There's a Dog in my Window

Nick’s patience is giving way to anger. He is losing count of the number of times he has to repeat himself. The phonecall gets shuffled around the station as if it is a deck of cards.

‘Officer,’ Nick begins, with forced politeness, ‘there is a dog in my window.’

‘Sir?’

‘I said there’s a dog in my window.’

‘So?’

‘I live on the twenty eighth floor and there is no window ledge.’

‘What is this dog doing?’ The officer’s voice does not mask the sarcasm.

‘He seems to be talking on the telephone.’

‘Sir, are you on medication?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Then I think you should be.’

The only other sound Nick hears is the telephone hanging up. Then he imagines what the dog is saying:

‘Officer, there’s a human in my window.’

‘Let me guess, you live on the twenty eighth floor and there is no window ledge.’

‘Yes...’

‘I suggest you move to the twenty seventh floor.’

Later, the doorbell rings. Nick knows that it is Sharon - she is the only person who pushes the button five times.

He opens the door and she pecks him on the mouth. Apart from a quiet ‘Hi’, Nick is silent. He looks expectantly towards the window. The dog meets his stare and tilts its head. Sharon follows his gaze.

‘Is that pervert across the street still taking peeks at you?’ she asks.

Nick is bewildered at first, he didn’t know that there was ever a pervert taking peeks at him.

‘The dog,’ he says, ‘Can you see the dog?’

Nick knows the answer. Sharon scans the view in front of her.

‘What dog?’

‘Never mind.’

‘I think you’ve been working too hard.’

They make love. As usual, Nick is satisfied. Sharon is tolerant, but then angry as he turns his back on her.
Nick breaths deeply and enters a restless sleep as his REM begins. Dogs whine in his ears. The sounds are clear, sharp. His eyesight is faint, devoid of colour. But his nose is assaulted with a barrage of odours. They are distinct, and surprisingly pleasant. The dalmation down the end is on heat. Nick feels himself become aroused. He paces up and down the cage that keeps him in his black and white world. It is empty apart from a tacky water-bowl in the shape of a telephone and the scents of the previous occupants. In the background, distinct smells rise - the stench of smouldering fur followed by the sweetness of burning flesh.

The minute hand of the clock on the wall moves as if it is a second hand. Seven hours have already passed in his dream. Despite the impending doom, Nick feels optimistic. There is hope in the form of a window. He stares at the window and his world dissolves back to one that is scentless yet colourful.

The alarm rings, the shower is warm and Sharon is cold. Nick cooks breakfast and watches the sausages slowly drown in their own fat. He joins Sharon in the main room and glances toward the window. The sun is yet to break into the maze of high-rise buildings as the dog continues its vigilance.

‘Still here?’ he says quietly to the dog.
Sharon looks up.
‘What’s that supposed to mean?’
Nick fumbles, realising his mistake: ‘I wasn’t talking to you.’
‘Look, there is no need to make snide remarks. It’s obvious from that comment that you’re just as dissatisfied with this relationship as I am.’
Nick is perplexed, but he can see that she was waiting for any excuse to start an argument. So he argues.
They shout at each other.
The fight ends with a slam of the front door that marks her departure. Nick looks down at the greasy sausages, pushes the plate away and begins to quietly cry.

The days pass by. Nick comes home alone and sees his friend there. They share a drink on each side of the glass. He is always thinking - what is on the other side? He has tried to look. He peers skyward and there’s a sky. He looks toward the ground and feels vertigo as he sees the concreted ground way below. And left and right, there is just that. But never does he dare to open the window, until one day.

He stares at the dog. And naturally, the dog stares back. Nick approaches the window. He presses his face and hands hard against it as he tries to feel the other side. Failing to do so, he steps back. The mist his hands leave on the window quickly fades, but not before he sees the shape - dog paws. And where he had his nose there is now a wet spot in the shape of a triangle.

Nick opens the window. And as if waiting for some cue, the dog approaches it from the other side and disappears. Nick passes his hand through the gap and it is immediately covered in fur. He takes it back quickly but curiosity takes over and he pushes it through again. In a moment of recklessness, he lifts himself over the ledge and in one jump, he is on the other side. For a moment, he expects to feel air blow past him as he accelerates to the ground, but he just feels cold concrete floor below him. In the confusion, Nick fails to see the window slam shut.

He paces around on all fours, not managing any more than a whimper. Scents, various and strong hit him again - the dalmation is still on heat. The clock on the wall still counts off a minute every second.

Nick looks back towards the window as it slowly fades away. He watches a naked man - who strangely resembles himself - feel his body from head to toe and examine it in the mirror. Nick sees him dial Sharon’s telephone number. She arrives later with tears and eventually a smile. He chases her around the flat. Later
they make love in bed, on the couch, in the kitchen. Their bodies tangle as they squirm. Nick has never seen Sharon so responsive.

The window completely fades out at breakfast. Sharon is smiling. She laughs as he eats the sausages raw - at least they weren't as greasy.

Then they come. Initially, Nick can only hear their voices.

'Nobody has been to collect number twenty eight in the last week. It's time to put him down.'

Nick looks down, the collar has a badge tied to it - number twenty eight. Nick cries out and barks; runs around the cage and struggles.

One of the voices says to the other:

'Look at him. Spends all week staring forward in the same gaze, only stopping to drink out of that stupid waterbowl and now what? Jumps around like a mad thing.'

'It's a shame,' says the other voice, 'I'm sure he could have found a new home somewhere'.

Sharon enters the flat, drops of water cling to her shoulders from the rain. She hums to herself. Finally her relationship with Nick has all the energy that she hoped would someday eventuate. He is different and she is certain that it is for the better. Her thoughts are no longer of breaking up, but of marriage, children.

Sharon can hear Nick using the electric razor in the bathroom and is surprised - he had so little need for shaving in the past. She calls out and receives a muffled acknowledgment. Slowly she tidies the flat and removes her wet clothing. She pulls back the curtains expecting to see the rain falling against the window. A small gasp escapes when she sees the apparition before her. A dalmation, spotted and panting meets her gaze.
Mistakes

An actor, pretending he was a gipsy, was doing something in the intimacy of a shadowy caravan with a lovely young actress. The programme was a double feature, both films based on D.H. Lawrence’s novels. A message appeared across the bottom of the screen, and a nerve stabbed inside me when I realised everybody was reading our names.

The manager leaned against the window as I opened the door. My wife, Noreen - she’s my former wife now - said: ‘I bet it’s Mum.’ Her voice shook.

‘Where’s the manager’s office?’ I asked. My voice sounded odd, too. I looked back towards the screen. Things were going to happen any moment in that gipsy caravan.

‘I don’t know. Up there, where the projectionist is, I suppose.’

I heard Noreen’s footsteps on the gravel as we walked, one on either side of a row of cars, under a black sheet of night studded by stars, to the only building. I could see where the projector was housed, and I noticed vague silhouettes of people close together inside their vehicles. Nothing had happened to these people, nothing dramatic to change their lives, yet our evening was changed with a suddenness that seemed unfair. I heard a muffled sound-track, noises like kissing and groaning, a sex scene, but I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder again.

‘It could be your parents. They’re getting on,’ Noreen called in the night, between cars. ‘Or the kids. Or a fire. Oh God!’

I said nothing, wanting to appear calm.

The manager’s office was easy to find. He stood in the doorway, dressed up in a bow-tie, expecting us. I had on a work shirt and moccasins that bulged.

‘Mr and Mrs Pratt?’

‘Yes.’

‘Your neighbour, Harry Van Acker, wants you to return home immediately. You’re to go to his house. He telephoned.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Noreen said. ‘What’s happened?’

The manager, uncomfortable, said: ‘Your neighbour will explain.’

‘Is it Mum?’ Noreen said. ‘Is my mother dead?’

I sympathised with that manager who looked at my slippers and repeated himself as though hiding some dreadful truth.

‘Your neighbour will explain. That’s the telephone message.’

‘Come on,’ I said.

‘Is it the kids?’ Noreen said. Our kids were with the Van Ackers.

‘Come on. Harry’ll tell us.’

‘Are my children all right? Please tell me that much.’

‘I can’t,’ he said, looking wretched. ‘I’m sorry.’
As we hurried back to the car the action on screen made no sense.

‘I bet it’s Mum,’ Noreen said. ‘Or the kids. Something’s happened to one of
them. I never realised how sick Mum was. I could never tell.’

‘Let’s not panic,’ I said.

* * *

I remember how Noreen’s mother had been ill for a long time. She was only in her
fifties when she started talking about going to meet The Lord. She talked this way.
If *The Lord’s decided it’s time for me to walk in his garden*, she would say: *then I’m ready.* A blissful expression would take over my mother-in-law’s face and
Noreen’s dad usually said something like: *I’ve made a pot of tea.* Noreen’s mum
would sigh, and say: *All right, dear,* the light in her eyes fading.

One reason for her illness was lack of nourishment. In the evenings she made
a big production of spooning a tiny portion of stewed tomatoes or some other variety
of invalid’s food into the centre of a large dinner plate, serving herself last. *Is that
all you’re having?* Noreen’s sister, who never stopped eating, would squawk, and
her mum would say: *It’s all I can keep down,* and clutch the back of her chair, as
if to steady herself, before sitting at the table. I remember. I lived there at the
time. My mother-in-law, who was never a big woman, became as thin as a saint.

Noreen’s dad, Sid, had not long been retired the night we were called from the
drive-in, and Noreen’s mum seemed to have recovered from her eternal illness.
They had planned a trip to the Gold Coast and Sid fussed and fretted about the
expense of the holiday now that they were on the pension. We all told him to stop
worrying, to take his wife away and relax a bit. Noreen’s mum had the finances all
worked out. Sid had superannuation and savings.

I’ve been all over since those days. I’ve lived interstate, and even overseas,
always restless after a while, moving on, never settling for long. I got restless. But
I’m okay now. When Noreen and I met as teenagers I had yearned for a settled life.
She was an innocent yet we were going at it from the start. We couldn’t leave each
other alone. Her mum let us marry underage because she was frightened we would
have to marry. People talked about unmarried mothers in those days.

When I parked outside Harry’s our car backfired again. The neighbours always
knew when I had arrived home. I had been thinking as we drove the last mile
without talking, how Noreen’s parents had never had enough money. Her mum had
told Noreen that she washed condoms and hung them on the line because they
couldn’t afford a new packet when they were young. They couldn’t afford any more
kids either. I had recently taken Noreen’s married sister on - not the one who was
always eating - in a fierce row over whether or not Noreen and I were the cause of
her mum’s sickness. Her sister, who hated me, said it was all the worry.

The porch light came on and then I saw Harry, moving slowly, lighting a
cigarette.

‘What’s happened?’ Noreen said. ‘Tell me, Harry.’

I knew by Harry’s face the news was bad.

‘Your brother-in-law, Bruce, rang. It’s your mum. I’m afraid she’s dead. I’m
sorry.’ Noreen made a noise of suffering that I never wanted to hear again, although
I have, and I know I shall hear it again. She cried. I put my arm around her
shoulder, feeling useless. ‘Bruce wants you to ring him,’ Harry told me. ‘Straight
away.’

Harry’s wife, Mickey, was taking Noreen inside, doing a much better job of
holding and comforting her than I had been doing, using both arms, squeezing
Noreen against her large breasts, her cigarette wobbling in the corner of her mouth,
reassuring Noreen about our sleeping kids, and talking in a soothing voice about
how sick Noreen’s mum had been. I accepted a cigarette from Harry and he said Bruce’s number was next to the telephone. We didn’t have a telephone.

I heard Harry close the door softly behind me. He usually made a lot of noise. I didn’t want to pick up that telephone but I picked it up. I dialled twice because I thought I might have got the number muddled the first time. Bruce, the hot-shot accountant, answered. We introduced ourselves. I wondered what I should say.

‘Are you ringing from Harry’s?’
‘Yes. We just got here. We were at the drive-in.’
‘They reached you with a message then?’
‘Yes. Our names were on the screen.’
‘It must have been a shock. Has Noreen been told?’
‘Yes.’
‘How’s she taking it?’
‘Um...she’s pretty upset. When did it...occur?’
‘Late this afternoon. I had to identify the body. Have you ever been to the morgue?’
‘No, nor do I want to.’
‘Why? It’s a fascinating place. There’s nothing to be afraid of. The dead can’t hurt you.’
‘What did she look like?’
‘Bad. You can imagine, with that kind of death.’ I couldn’t imagine. Then Bruce said what I thought was: ‘They had to cut him down.’

‘What did she die of, exactly?’
After a silence Bruce said: ‘What do you mean? He hung himself.’
‘What?’ I couldn’t believe Noreen’s mum would do this.
‘In the garden shed. Didn’t Harry tell you?’
‘No.’
‘I’m sorry. I didn’t realise.’
It sounded like Bruce had said he instead of she. Something was wrong with our conversation. We never had communicated very well. Bruce was married to the sister who hated me. I felt sorry for Noreen’s dad, and concerned.

‘How’s Sid?’
‘What?’ Bruce said. ‘Beg your pardon? What do you mean How’s Sid?’
‘Is he coping with the shock all right?’ I asked, scared now, and sure something was weirdly wrong.
‘Sid? Sid’s dead. Sid hung himself.’
‘Jesus!’
‘What did you think?’
‘I thought you weren’t making sense. Harry said you told him Mum was dead.’
‘No, I told him Sid was dead. He must have misunderstood. Is that what Noreen believes?’
‘Yes. She thinks her mother’s dead. Now I’ll have to tell her. Jesus!’
‘He stood on that little stool - you know the one the cat’s dish sits on - and hung himself. There must have been only inches to spare. You know the size of that shed. Who would have thought he’s do that?’
‘I’ve got to go and tell Noreen,’ I said. I had had enough of Bruce. ‘By the way, it’s hanged, not hung.’

* * *
‘There’s been a mistake,’ I said.
‘Is Mum alive?’ Noreen’s eyes were full of hope, desperate.
‘Yes.’
‘Thank God!’
‘I don’t get it,’ Harry said. ‘Your brother-in-law told me she was dead.’
‘He seems to think you misunderstood him.’
‘What?’ Harry said.
Mickey said: ‘You fool!’
‘He clearly said...’
‘Shut up, Harry,’ Mickey interrupted.
‘It’s not your mum,’ I told Noreen. Her face was a tear-smudged question.
‘It’s your dad.’
‘Christ, Harry!’ Mickey muttered, and blew smoke out noisily.
Harry looked insulted. I didn’t want to talk about how Sid died, and I knew that subject would come up next. Noreen dabbed at her nose and said something about poor Dad. Mickey wanted to make more coffee. I hadn’t touched my first cup but managed to signal the Van Ackers before suggesting that I take Noreen home. Harry offered their telephone at our convenience.
‘Anything, mate,’ he said. ‘You name it. Anything we can do.’
He looked as though he meant what he said. Mickey was still apologising for Harry’s mistake and I wished she would just drop the matter. We were not to worry about the kids until the next morning.
We got in the car and I drove around to our house. Out the front Noreen said:
‘What did Dad die of?’
‘This is going to be another shock.’
‘Tell me. What? What is it? What else is there?’
She looked as though she could take no more. She had had enough. I said:
‘He hanged himself.’
Noreen was quiet and still for several seconds, then whispered: ‘Are you sure?’
‘That’s what Bruce said.’
I had often seen Noreen crying but never with such bitterness. Nothing penetrated. She was utterly alone, rocking with grief, and perhaps something else, and the darkness outside seemed to surround us like a shroud.

* * *

I returned to that drive-in recently. I happened to be in the area so I parked my car and started wandering around. The speakers have long since gone but the skeleton of the screen remains. I plunged into the dreams of my past and saw again the shadows of that gipsy caravan, just a momentary glimpse of yesterday’s action, that story cut off before its end.
Part of the old drive-in is now a church. This church is modern. Its shape is round and a fence separates the new church from what looked like a scrap-yard. I could get into the scrap-yard but not the church. I wanted to see the stained glass windows but their beauty needs to be seen from the inside. I was outside so I couldn’t see the way the light heightens those brilliant colours.
A cold wind insisted, reminding me of the graveside scene years ago, although old Sid’s death seems not so long ago when I think about it. I don’t like to think about those events but I remembered that funeral as I stood hunched in the wind at the former drive-in.
The sound of a football being booted back and forth by two kids beyond the cyclone mesh fence repeated itself. Papers and other rubbish were blown along the
ground, sometimes swirling together in a flurry, then settling in the dirt with other discarded items. A sheet of old newspaper, dirty and yellow, caught around my leg. The paper clung, pinned by the wind. I flicked at it several times before I finally flung that stale news from me.

I watched the boys handling that football, and I recalled how Noreen’s mum made us all pretend that Sid had died from natural causes. She’s still alive today, that old lady who used to tell me she never lied. Christians don’t lie, she once told me. The Lord would know.

AILEEN KELLY

Looking for Andy

The police knocked early at my daughter’s door looking for Andy, just wanting to check. Politely. Once inside suddenly more like a drugbust. She and her husband took deep breaths, sat still. There’s nothing in that house, no secrets and no drugs, not even coffee. My deaf grandson watched a stranger browse through his clean socks, and made the sign for crazy. Later my daughter came to ask me where Andy might be, what sort of trouble, how they could help. I wish I had an answer. There’s only been a phone-voice: “Listen, cow, your Andy really ripped us off, the bastard. Tell him we’re gonna break his fucking legs soon as we find him.”

Andy, please call home. Andy? This is an urgent message whispered into old dark space. With love from Mum.
Ecstatic buddhist, male, forties, seeks younger female, view to enlightened friendship. I am genuine. No contented, merry, happy, pleasant or jovial buddhists please.

Ecstatic buddhist, male, forty, wishes to meet young female similar, view to ecstatic relationship. I am ecstatic nearly all the time, are you? No happy, blithe, jokey, serene, imperturbable etc. buddhists please.

Ecstatic solitary buddhist, male, fortyish, married, seeks younger female similar, single, view to special ecstatic relationship. Even when I’m gloomy I smile. Does this make sense? Only genuine ecstatics, please.

Ecstatic solitary buddhist, male, forties, blissfully married, wishes to meet single female similar twenties view to relationship. Genuine ecstatics only.

Aging male ecstatic buddhist invites correspondence from young woman buddhist the same with view to relationship; is this really you? No convinced, dogmatic, well-meaning, intellectual, or wistful buddhists, please.

*SOUTH CHINA* is a book of poems written to celebrate the Religion-Nation of Tibet and to mourn and protest its invasion and attempted destruction by Communist China.
The Spaghetti Maker

In her hands, this stilled
sunlit wave. We place our order for pizza and slightly
turning see her . . .

Spaghetti streams from the machine
and she holds it like hair, wheat-blonde, wet-combed,
long lazy strands

from the scalp of a child
or someone ill.

Soon we will walk talcum-shadowed
under melaleucas flaking their filo bark.
On a bitumen hill,

snow gulls with red-hot breaks
will melt, watching our fingers fill

with teased gold cheese, warm dough
and a predatory perfume of prawns . . .

We will join a glitter of lunchtime pausers,
parked like an audience at a broad daylight drive-in -

all feeding on the sight of sea

blissed blue-green-turquoise - an ocean opening itself
industriously smashing its sparkle
them calming back

into something huge and whole again.

But first: we pause with pasta. Here, under a stucco sky,
chianti bottles are basketed in dust -
but in the woman's hands, sun-on-water sets.

Like a swooping bird her scissors slowly
snip the loopy light. She scoops it all towards her, then settles its swirling life like a boneless wing on a bench to dry . . .

Outside in the sun the day is proving, rising sweetly ordinary

as she begins again again
to embrace whatever the still

steel offers -

to comb out to air this gold,
to coax it into her arms and to fill our watching with these drooping, resting waves

until
she has comforted as much as she can hold.
Rain

In Brisbane, at 4 p.m. precisely,
this huge pavlova, high in the sky.
Whisked to a frenzy of passionate peaks,
the clouds soar up and swallow sun.

Suddenly birds - blood-red, young-yellow -
flare from the hearts of poincianas.
Suddenly umbrellas’ tight buds
break open and whirl, petals flipping
the wrong way down.

In Brisbane, at 4 p.m. precisely,
tanks in backyards like pub-men in singlets
ripple, scoffing schooners of light.
On a hot road, shadows sizzle,
slicking at the whiskers of bauhinias
out for their leisurely afternoon slink . . .

Like a dreamy girl, waiting for a storm
to be born in, I let the rain
run over me. In the middle of an oval
where plovers crack the edges with warnings,
my feet tumble clovers’ tutus. Bees
will pirouette on my toes - if I’m unlucky.

In Brisbane, at 4 p.m. precisely -
accidentally-on-purpose caught in the rain.
Testing courage. Romance. While the umbrella trees
shivered and shook their roots.
In the stillness afterwards,
transplanted in the world - a little torn, older -

still these storms slip me through
time and gravity. Anxiety lights the lawn.
Lilies lie down under falling clouds
and though dark rooms chill
like no-longer inhabited joys -
the house so huge and empty
holds suddenly somewhere deep in its heart
an umbrella of silence unfurling . . .

In Conga lines through my veins
how the sudden drip drugs: rain rain -
how these words (blood-red, young-yellow)
storm sense and flare free.

PHILIP HARVEY

Quadrilateral

The what-good-will-it-do cadences
Of their most scrupulous lines,
The keep-the-whole-show-going cycle on sheaves
Beaten out during their strong hours,

In cartons over water, cartons of merchandise,
Cartons for the rich lifted over forests,
Tied with masking, slapped with customs,
Cartons over blacktop, cartons on the ledge that

Trundled through doors, centred in packing rooms,
Are knifed open - the tissue sponges,
Gleaming covers and the smells of paper glue,
Crack at the opening of the spine -

For the righted words the distances loan.
Inside our dailiness the authors enter
As though space and action and education,
Forests and customs were never there.
Grace

Grace flirts with graciousness
and veers away. You are, one day,
in certain company, more one
than the other.

You are awarded
Brownie points, you make
an impression like a pikelet
on a tray. You give yourself
a mixed report
including 'could do better yet'
and 'a solid year's work. The lad
is developing well
and beginning to reveal...'

You look
in the mirror
and look away, self-effaced.
You're told
not to rely on words
if you want the truth,
but you know the truth already:
either or ether.
Unlearning Dominant Modes of Representation: Mudrooroo’s *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription For Enduring the Ending of the World* and Robert Drewe’s *The Savage Crows*

Mudrooroo’s *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* and Robert Drewe’s *The Savage Crows* both reconstruct a particular segment of Australian history. By reworking information contained in the diaries of George Augustus Robinson, each novel tells the ‘story’ of the demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines. While Mudrooroo’s novel is narrated from the point of view of Wooreddy, the last Aboriginal male of Bruny Island, Drewe’s text adopts the perspective of Stephen Crisp, a white male who juxtaposes his contemporary existence with the genocide of the Aborigines.

Although written from different cultural perspectives the novels share political and thematic interests: they pose questions from particular points of marginality. Although being ‘marginal’ may imply a state of powerlessness resulting from representation through difference and deviance against a dominant norm, I will suggest that such marginality is not simply imposed nor are subordinate groups always victims, using Jan Pettman’s formulation:

Dominant representations of difference function to exclude and/or exploit, and to justify unequal access and valuing. Subordinate groups, on the other hand, may use difference to mystify, to deny knowledge of themselves to the dominant groups and to confuse and neutralise those who attempt to control or ‘help’ them. They may use difference to stress their own separateness and to authorize their own representations. They may seek to legitimise their definitions of cultural differences ... Here, powerlessness is a comparative and rational concept, for the ‘weak’ often have spaces within which they can act and some choices about how they play their roles, no matter how small.¹

Subordinate groups may resist and subvert, using marginality in their own interests. They may seize the category, claim it as their own and attach positive value where before it was negative. For the purposes of this paper, marginality refers to the situation of narratives which do not conform thematically, linguistically or structurally to so-called traditional or establishment writing. It is not necessary for the narrator to belong to a specific minority group; it is enough for him/her to feel discontented and dissatisfied with prevailing social constructions and ideologies.

Instead of perpetuating the status quo by maintaining dominant historical and cultural constructions, marginal writings question, disrupt and challenge these
constructions and in doing so reveal their powerful capacity for historical, cultural and linguistic subversion. For example, the narratives of Mudrooroo and Drewe undertake a conscious rewriting of history and thus pose a direct challenge to traditional historical constructions. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how such texts use their marginality as a strategy of writing which refuses to reinforce predominant cultural and historical myths. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, I will examine the discursive heterogeneity of marginal works: how and why such writings focus on plurality, incongruity, experimentation and subversion.

Crisp and Wooreddy speak from different marginalised positions. In *Doctor Wooreddy*, Wooreddy’s membership of a minority group means that both he and his views are automatically relegated to a position outside the more dominant Anglo-Celtic discourses. In the case of Crisp, it is not the colour of his skin which is the source of his marginalisation but his lack of identification with the dominant culture and his subsequent rejection of it. Throughout the text, as he confronts traditionally entrenched ideas and histories, he is persecuted by his white contemporaries for questioning their authenticity. According to the Commission, he is “a screaming radical”. According to his friends he is a “communist” who sprouts “left-wing propaganda”. His brother Geoff thinks he is simply “peculiar”, not only because he rejects the traditional work and marriage ethic, but because of his subversive beliefs and opinions:

> What had become of him lately? Obsessed with Abos and death and smartarse social issues. Screwing up his marriage, tossing in a good job, not much money in it but a secure job and his face on TV every week. You could do a lot worse. All those liberated women he knocked about with, tits bobbing everywhere most likely ... he seemed to have lost his shrewdness, too.²

Crisp’s denial of the traditional codes of conduct and the dominant values by which the majority of his contemporaries live acts as a disruptive threat to those characters who cling to the security of their own cultural perspectives, doing so because to adopt or even partially accept Crisp’s alternative values would mean a negation of their entire existence. His determined effort to write his thesis as “an act of laying down” (14) and of putting “everything - past, present, friends, strangers, the whole obtuse yet complicated place - into perspective” (9) is a challenge not only to institutionalised traditions but to the very ways in which those contemporaries perceive their collective past and present. He is viewed by his contemporaries as a kind of anarchist, as a reverse ‘Other’ of the bourgeois.

Both texts retrieve an Aboriginal past from white histories, expressing an alternative historical construction. Mudrooroo interrogates a genocidal past in order to help heal the cultural fracture within contemporary Aboriginal communities. Drewe explores the same history in search of explanations for the unsatisfactory and sterile conditions he sees existing in white society. Mudrooroo and Drewe effectively step out from under traditional explanations and definitions in order to escape from what Foucault terms the ‘microfascism’ of everyday life and particularly from common modes of representation. As Frantz Fanon explains, it is imperative to revise and re-establish alternative representations of cultural stereotypes:

> Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates. But in my own case I knew that these statements were false. There was a myth that had to be destroyed at all costs.³

By destroying some of the myths propagated in Eurocentric Australian history and culture, the narratives of both Mudrooroo and Drewe attempt to unlearn what Raymond Williams terms the “inherent dominative mode” of representation.⁴ Each
novel calls into question the validity of white Australia’s cultural and historical constructions of aboriginality and suggests a far less palatable version of history. As one commentator declares, marginal writings are an “area of plurality, disruption, non-closure, deferred meaning and process”. The speaker of each novel utilises the text as a writing cure, a means of explaining himself, of telling stories about the world and his place in it.

Mudrooroo rehumanises the Aborigines by celebrating their culture and their dignity, so legitimises an Aboriginal history. In an affirmation of cultural inheritance, the novel counters the sense of chaos and dislocation experienced by many contemporary urban Aborigines by achieving a liberating sense of cultural and historical identity. There is a fundamental nexus here between establishing a meaningful connection with the past and forging a confident sense of self: only with the discovery of this inheritance can the possibility of freedom begin. By using an Aboriginal history which has been neglected and excluded from most Australian history books, Doctor Woorreddy attempts to reshape white Australia’s historical consciousness by offering a revised and positive reading of Aboriginal history and culture.

In Drewe’s novel there is a similar preoccupation with the past and an awareness of the importance of history to contemporary living. Crisp is haunted by the past but his research is also part of a wider compulsion, to “try to understand everything, starting with himself and working up to the nation” (8). His memories of childhood, parents and marriage are interwoven with re-worked extracts from Robinson’s journal. Against the history of the demise of the Tasmanian Aborigines is set a recreation of smaller contemporary histories in Crisp’s own life. While the Tasmanians fall victim to exploitation, murder and dispossession, Crisp reveals his own past to be full of bodies which have met with similar fates. His childhood friend drowns, his mother dies of a cerebral haemorrhage and his father of a heart attack. Friends have been killed by electrocution or self-inflicted gun shot wounds, one has been decapitated by “spinning shards of helicopter propeller blade”, one is “swept away by flash flood and mudslide”, another is “choked by lump of beef in windpipe”, while many others are crushed to death in motor accidents. Crisp also recounts a number of suicides which are, perhaps, a further reinforcement of his sense of the futility of contemporary living. Crisp is surrounded by a society in decay, a nation of arbitrary violence and of sudden death. Significantly, as he researches the history of the Tasmanian genocide there emerges the suggestion that the public world of historical event acts as a weight clamping down the present: “Why did guilt weigh upon him like a wet woollen overcoat?” (9).

As Crisp delves relentlessly into the forgotten history of colonial destruction he implies that Australians still refuse to come to terms with their genocidal past. His own brother Geoff is testimony to this: “in the fastness of his study, embedded in a deep soft chair .... Geoff said, ‘You can’t live in the past forever’” (122). Drewe subverts the notion of an egalitarian and creative Australia as he portrays a nation of sterility, hostility and historical amnesia. Crisp, as a narrator willing to confront his own feelings of racial guilt, is consequently a character speaking from the fringes of white society because he is bringing to light notions of guilt and self-reproach which most other white characters would rather ignore.

In their own way, each novel finds a new means by which to question cultural certainties and reject binary oppositions set up by traditional cultural definitions in Australia. Most importantly, the texts attempt to create a space of what Kateryna Arthur refers to as “in-betweenness”, a place where meaning is not absolute but endlessly provisional. Drawing on the research of Mikhail Bakhtin, Arthur suggests that the fascination “is not so much with the oppositions themselves as with the
spaces between them where the meaning-making goes on. It is the space in which political action is possible, where everything is open to question and doubt and therefore to change”. Bakhtin is concerned with the multiplicity and unending proliferation of meaning within language. The view that the novel is a genre which is “heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-languaged” enables it to challenge the “great centralizing tendencies” of European verbal-ideological life. The matter “consists in the fact that there may be, between ‘languages’, highly specific dialogic relations; no matter how these languages are conceived, they may all be taken as particular points of view on the world”.

Sometimes, however, marginal writings may find themselves attacking the discourses (in history, literature and politics) whose dominance is paradoxically reaffirmed by the very process of reiterating, from a marginalised position, the structures that are being opposed. Doctor Wooreddy, for example, with its linear chronology, closed plot and representation of character, does display a conventional European realist organisation thus re-confirming, in a sense, the dominant mode of European discourse. Despite this the novel achieves political power as it inverts the inherent narrative structures by presenting a series of reversals and inversions of black and white positions and attitudes. Similarly, The Savage Crows redefines centrality by providing spaces of “in-betweenness” (the open-ended plot, the incongruous paralleling of oppositional histories, the presentation of the white world as a place of disorder and absurdity) that subvert ideological structures within the text. Aspects like these force Crisp to recognise a lack of social and ethical structure surrounding him: they are the tenuous spaces where “everything is open to question and doubt and therefore to change”. As he comments on the visions of universal disorder projected by the more dramatic aspects of the novel, Crisp, cynical and disillusioned, is an outsider who acts in defiance of a world he finds offensive and chaotic.

The subversive power of Doctor Wooreddy emerges, in part, from the reversal of narrative point of view. Unlike many European accounts of Australian history, it is the Aboriginal Wooreddy who is the central character and it is through his consciousness that the reader interprets the experiences of both the European and Aboriginal protagonists. Not only does this reversal subvert prejudices regarding the intellectual and emotional capacity of Aborigines, it redefines the whole concept of civilization. The Europeans are portrayed as barbaric savages as they become the objects of a controlling gaze and a set of alien discourses. The white settlers, far from being portrayed as brave and daring pioneers, are seen to be not only aggressive but inhuman and unnatural as well. Nearly all white characters are physically deformed, have some kind of speech impediment and are renowned for their cannibalistic tendencies:

They had been prepared for the meeting, but not with such an evil-looking ghost .... Wooreddy tried to put their minds at rest by saying that the ghost looked hideous because he had a skin disease and that under the ointment he had smeared on his skin, he was quite handsome. They were not entirely convinced.

“But apart from his ugliness and bad smell, he even acts like a demon. He ran out of the jungle as if he meant to devour us all! And don’t tell us that the num doesn’t eat humans, they eat each other and who knows what they would do if they caught one of us”.

The aggressive evangelical zeal of the Christian George Augustus Robinson is of central concern to Mudrooroo throughout the text. In his portrayal of Robinson as a missionary intent on imposing foreign religious values on the indigenous people, disrupting their culture and undermining their self-image and identity, Mudrooroo effectively re-interprets the concept of white protection of Aborigines. Robinson is not represented as a harbinger of salvation but as an insidious agent in the
destruction of Aboriginal culture. For Mudrooroo, he is an embodiment of a host of colonial characteristics, a metaphor for the imperialist impulse. The various stages of his evangelical intervention correspond to the major stages of the colonising process. He engages in self-aggrandizement, he establishes and maintains structures of power and persuasion over the indigenous population and he constantly attempts to dismantle Aboriginal social structures in order to consolidate his own domination. In an imperialist strategy, Robinson works to gain political domination through subtle forms of economic sabotage and eventual physical control.

Crisp is similarly subversive as an outsider in his contemporary white society who scorns and recoils from its dominant values and beliefs. His travel around the chaotic environment in which he is encapsulated is an attempt to understand himself and the world around him: “He didn’t realize it at the time but his enthusiasm for pacing the country’s geographical boundaries was probably a harbinger of his later preoccupation with attempting to clarify and explain things in general” (61). The shocking existentialist revelations he offers regarding contemporary white disintegration and disorder are exacerbated by his references to past violations committed against the Aborigines. This juxtaposing of oppositional histories in the opening pages of the text creates an atmosphere of discomfort for the reader of the story:

As Crisp says later in the novel, “I have considered them and their real suffering only increases my chaos” (239).

In both Doctor Wooreddy and The Savage Crows there are interruptions to the continuous flow of the text. In Mudrooroo’s novel these interruptions emerge in the form of narrative inversion and the subversion of ideological structures by a series of simple reversals of black/white attitudes. Arguably, such subversion could be seen to be a partial betrayal of Aboriginality through complicity with the other culture’s way of thinking, feeling and speaking. However, the incongruity of combining a European realist narrative with Aboriginal subjectivity is also a source of parodic power. One of the most significant contradictions in the text is the process of Mudrooroo’s re-writing history. Aborigines have a different understanding of time and thus do not recognize history as a category in itself. In Doctor Wooreddy, Mudrooroo attempts to reproduce a cyclical interpretation of time within the framework of a linear literary form and inevitably undermines his purpose at the same time as he tries to promote it. However, although the novel form is not effectively able to convey an Aboriginal experience of time, it is effective in its revelation of a particular time of crisis and change. Frank Kermode states in The Sense of an Ending, “apocalyptic thought belongs to a rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world (because) History is purely intellectual discourse which abolishes Mythic time”.10 The white tendency to marginalise Aboriginal culture by excluding it from white literature can be read, then, as a logical outcome of the deeply
ingrained habit of perceiving history as apocalyptic narrative. The impulse towards closure that is built into European historical narrative inevitably supports the colonising impulse to break traditional cyclical continuities. It is this very impulse towards closure that Mudrooroo exploits to further emphasise the tragic severance of Aboriginal cultural continuities with the genocide of the Tasmanians. Wooreddy and the other Aboriginal characters in the story are not only dispossessed from their land, they are also repositioned in an alien time scheme:

Wooreddy noticed that the structure had begun to sag at one corner, and sighed. The old ways were losing their shape and becoming as the cube .... “It is the times”. His words summed up the general mood of the community. No one had any trust in the future .... Thus it was, and it was the times. Everyone knew this and accepted it. Wooreddy alone knew more. He knew that it was because the world was ending (9).

Since there is no Aboriginal word for time, the irony in Wooreddy’s rueful comments is playful but emphatic. This carnivalesque, subversive imitation acts as a powerful political strategy as it highlights the extent to which white invasion has dislocated traditional cyclical continuities. The closed nature of the text, which is emphasised by Wooreddy’s death in the final pages, signifies an awareness of the true ending of the traditional world for the Tasmanian Aborigines. However, the notion of a distinctive and eternal Aboriginal spirituality, which has been alluded to throughout the text, does continue to live on with the spirit of Wooreddy. Although the corpse of Wooreddy may be buried in a shallow grave:

the real Doctor Wooreddy had disappeared before they could get to him and inflict further humiliation upon him ... Then Laway Larna, the evening star, appeared in the sky as the sun sank below the horizon. Suddenly a spark of light shot up from the beach and flashed through the dark sky towards the evening star. As it did so, the clouds closed again and the world vanished (207).

Mudrooroo exploits the apparatus of European literary communication in order to mediate between the two cultures and gradually construct an oppositional history. Importantly, although the text adopts foreign literary structures, in its descriptions of tribal ceremonies and beliefs, its use of Aboriginal words, its general political will to historical re-interpretation and its intimation of spiritual continuity in the face of virtual annihilation, it does not fail to exude a sense of Aboriginality. Doctor Wooreddy adopts a strategy of writing which reinstates the cultural importance of Aboriginality, and offers a new means of understanding a once neglected culture.

In The Savage Crows, a continuous flow of first person narrative is absent as Robinson’s re-worked journal entries relentlessly intrude to remind the reader of past cruelties. Even Crisp’s contemporary narrative does not offer the reader a smooth ride. His brooding about his own past, present and future creates a dispersed and scattered view of many places, people and histories. The reader is often jolted from one place to another, from one person’s history to another’s.

At the same time, the novel also ‘interrupts’ dominant literary structures by engaging in formal experimentation, whereby its political potential can be found in its apparently meandering and uncommitted mode. The novel does not offer a traditionally satisfying ending. As Randolph Stow asks of the book’s conclusion: “One wonders of what he has been relieved, and how?”11 However, it is precisely this lack of clear resolve and resistance to conveying a final and definitive conclusion to Crisp’s introspective wanderings which work to subvert the impulse towards closure that is often built into European literary tradition. In its very resistance to closure and its self-positioning in the spaces of “in-betweenness” the novel rejects and parodies entrenched literary notions of competence, completion and
certainty. This is not to say that the text fails to offer readings or analyses of its subject matter. However, instead of attempting to present the reader with a set of certainties or philosophical truths, the speaker's purpose is to arouse individual introspection and "to stimulate the lagging discourse". In a quest to emphasise the importance of remaining aware of the fluidity of circumstances, relationships and social states, the novel concludes in an atmosphere of restlessness and dissatisfaction rather than one of security. In the words of Samuel Beckett: "Set aside once and for all, at the same time as the analogy with orthodox damnation, all idea of beginning and end. Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness."12

Both texts, then, are written in a spirit of what Bakhtin refers to as "carnivalesque" inversion. Not only do they parody established versions of history, they challenge the nature of historical and cultural constructions by suggesting that realist narrative itself can be politically implicated. There is a close relationship between Aboriginal experiments with 'disobedient' or subversive writing, displayed in Doctor Wooreddy, and the disruptive experimentation in English presented in The Savage Crows. Both challenge entrenched conventions of standard white Australian literature at the same time that they reveal aspects of social injustice and racial bigotry. They actively promote rather than suppress an atmosphere of foreignness and gain an expressive strength from their 'incompetence' or 'marginality'. The texts come to represent the struggling existence of other-speaking people as they attempt to find a form of expression that makes sense to an English-speaking audience while still displaying the marks of its home-language.

As Foucault points out, there are no relations of power without resistances and such resistances are all the more effective because they are created precisely at the point where relations of power are exercised. Like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies. In this sense, transitional or experimental writings can exert pressure on dominant literary conventions, and in consequence, question and review the wider discursive practices. Doctor Wooreddy and The Savage Crows, by posing uncomfortable questions from particular points of marginality, by publicly articulating the past and, indeed, on-going experiences of Aborigines and outsiders in general, challenge and disrupt the dominant amnesiac state towards such marginalised experiences. The stories' ability to question cultural certainties and unlearn the "inherent dominative mode" of representation gives them their seditious power. Doctor Wooreddy and The Savage Crows articulate 'marginal' experiences, revealing the powerfully subversive capacity for marginal voices to question, disrupt and de-stabilize cultural and historical constructions deeply entrenched in Australian society.

NOTES

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in Michael Holquist (ed), The Dialogic Imagination
IAN TEMPLEMAN

A Venetian Christmas

For Romola

Murano is an island of artisans, of factory stubble and furnaces where with blow pipe, a peregrine flourish of the wrist and fire you shape a bubble of glass, magically transform it into Harlequin.

This masked figure of amusement and melancholy dances at the edge of your imagination in silence, a vitreous poltergeist threatening an orderly recall of name days, marked with private observance.

Exiled, we celebrate this birthday with song, with candles, flowers, the ritual exchange of gifts, pledge an unspoken love, knowing we belong to a coterie of glassblowers lost in memory drifts.

As makers of icons we share a transparent happiness, give allegiance to the private phantoms of darkness.
He designs space, encloses light,
builds patterns detailed with memories;
remembered mist laden, high valley mornings
when a schoolboy buried his face
against the soft flanks of milking cows
feeling their moist warm breath against his skin.

He recalls coaxing voices across
a steaming yard, cows with family names,
ic on the water trough, a smell of milky hay,
the cold dawn an intoxicating mix
of laughter in the robust company of men,
cursing as they stumble awake to unlatch the day.

He romped across the weekend hills
yelping with the larrikin dogs he released
from the dog catcher’s cage on the edge of town,
later he drew plans on the salt pans
imagining structures beyond sugar bag camps
delighting in the nap of stone, steel, timber, glass.

He walks now in a family dreaming.
Eyes absorb the colour of upland forests,
the boyhood careers of bushranger or musician
neglected, he discovers the structure
of his life is incomplete, the architecture
unresolved other than a plan scratched on his palm.

He is unable to explain in words
this refugee inheritance; a mother’s voice,
a seafarer’s restlessness, a secret dance held
tensely within his body, the embrace
of an unknown grandfather, vodka on his lips
who whispers poetry to him, sings of another country.
A woman watching cricket

No woman will ever commentate
Even if she is fluent in the positions
Or be let into the secret of how
They remove the red ball stains from trousers.

It is enough for her to see
And applaud in the right places
White men on a green field
Over a brown crease like a parting.

Even if she can pick a spinner
And understands about boxes, cover drives
And can tell a six before the signs go up
Or the umpire performs hieroglyphics.

There are no women to replace the covers
When it rains though rain is a player
As anyone knows and as powerful
As any number of openers.

There will never be a woman commentator called Blowers
Who says ‘My dear young thing’
And puts her hand on a white thigh
And goes off to lunch in the pavilion.
Fountain worked by a coin-in-the-slot machine

Thirty seconds to breathe deeply
Then the fountain starts to play.
Gently at first its lower reaches

Low as grass in need of mowing
The white ghostly grass is growing
Then a stem shoots up to flower

A stem that curls back to the water
With a head of foliage
Each colour change a new hybrid.

Then quickly comes the middle distance
To be filled: spires are nothing
Without earthly gardens.

A fountain is a landscape built
On principles like the Tuileries
The highest hand throws the cake

To dancing rivulets which celebrate
With something like a hedge or fence
The aspirations of their race.

For 50 cents the fountain runs
Its range of heights and colours through
And drops into the lake again.
No-one thought to bring the Pictionary or Trivial Pursuit so after dinner we congregate in one of the dormitories and like children at summer camp play party games. This one is called Wink/Murder and we play it at Ian’s suggestion.

The weekend is interminably long. We came here to commune with nature and find inspiration in the bush. In the mornings there are seminars where we discuss the nuances of our work. In the afternoons we are free to absorb the atmosphere and create.

This afternoon most of the artists decided to walk along the red dusty paths towards the cliff face. After admiring the view they sat at the edge with their sketch books, paper, and pastels and attempted to draw nature in all her glory.

This is not where I choose to work. I dislike the bush; it oppresses me. I watched the others communing. There was talk and the occasional awe-struck silence, as if they had never seen a tree or a view from a cliff edge before. I could not work or paint there. My landscapes are interior. And I am afraid of heights.

I read once that there are two reasons why people are afraid of heights. The first is the fear of falling over the edge, and thus of dying. This is the fear of dreams, and I suspect, the more rational fear. The second fear is more potent. It is the fear of the impulse, that comes from somewhere deep within the psyche, to throw oneself off the edge. The first is a drawing away and the second a moving to. I suffer from the second.

I drew doodles across the page and longed for the weekend to end.

In the game we wait for the murder to wink at us. The idea is to catch them at it and shout out their name. If we fail and are caught by a wink then we must lie back on the bed and pretend to die. If we catch them out then the game is over and someone else has a turn at being the murderer.

I blame my mood solely on the presence of Ian. When I arrived yesterday morning I almost walked into him. We smiled and kissed and I tried to hide my dismay. This is not the first time our paths have crossed like this. We are a continuance. We meet at openings, at galleries, and in strange places like coffee shops in foreign cities. Ours is a small world of artists, cafes and galleries, and I know we will meet like this. But it disconcerts me...I had hoped our work was dissimilar enough for us to become strangers.

I have other ex-lovers who will cross the street with pain etched faces if they see me coming. Which is the way I think it should be. Ah! Those glorious endings; the rent clothing; the screamed words, the torn and weeping hearts,
everything pointing to the fact that it is finally, completely over. I believe totally in completions. And that above all endings must be final.

It is different with Ian. Nothing was ever said between us, one day; simply, we stopped being lovers.

Sometimes I catch myself in the act of mentioning our meetings to others, as if, God forbid, we were friends. I feel that there is something unspoken in our meetings and I suspect he is taunting me deliberately, following me, haunting me. I have to remind myself that these meetings are never planned.

There he's winked at me. I knew Ian was the killer but instead of calling out his name and giving him away I have been waiting, patiently, for him to attempt to murder me. This is the moment I expected. I swirl the warm liquid in the plastic cup, lift the glass to my lips in salute and slowly and deliberately wink back. The game is over.

When I see him I am always surprised by little things. Like how tall he is or the exact colour of his hair. He is famous. People know his work, they recognise it by the colours; blue on blue, yellow, green, primary, basic, primordial.

Everything about him is like that.

"You've ruined the game," one of the younger artists complains, half laughing. "You were supposed to die." The others laugh too. We start the game again. We close our eyes and wait as Ian makes his rounds to select the next murderer. I feel the tap of his fingers on my forehead, alien, familiar. I am the murderer now.

When the conferences or openings are over we escape and discuss our lives. This afternoon, after the walk to the cliff we went to the pub. As always we slipped into an easy bantering.

It is always like that. We carve words around our lives until all I have are fine words on gossamer threads; links given out in the spaces of time.

Sometimes I wonder if I could call it love.

When we were lovers I told him it was not. I tell half truths.

"I'm so glad you're here," he said this morning.

It is his superficiality that breaks me.

At the pub I told him I was here because I wanted to escape from another ending. An ending I have been planning (if I am honest), since the first time I met my latest lover. Even during the preliminaries I was planning it. I thought the weekend away might give me time to think, and I thought, mistakenly I now realise, that the company of other artists was what I needed.

I am enjoying the game now. So far I have done nothing, winked at nobody and made no move to show that I am the murderer. Eyes search around the room, lock in contact for a moment and then slide uneasily away, afraid to be killed. People begin to titter.

"Is there a murderer?" someone asks to break the silence.

"This person is subtle", says somebody else.

With all my endings I seeth and sob and paint talismen of the affair into a painting. Then I can forget. I use objects. There are on the table amid the chaos, a silver cigarette lighter or a gift that was given to me during the affair - my messages are simple. They refer to things that are over. Sometimes I discuss with
Ian how I put the past into my paintings. He wonders if the people concerned will understand the context and I tell him I doubt they will. I hide myself, dropping hints.

I never put him in my pictures. To me we have never really finished. Sometimes he asks when he will appear.

All my lovers have been in the arts; poets, writers, musicians, I once went to see a band in the city and in the audience were three ex-lovers. It didn’t bother me that they all chose to ignore me.

He was the only artist.

They are still waiting for someone to wink. I look around the room and meet their eyes, uncertain who I really wish to kill. I look at Ian. Because he was the last murderer it is forbidden that I wink at him. He stares at me his eyes, green, rimmed, inscrutable. I have an idea, the best of ideas. Slowly I sink back onto the bed. “I’m dead,” I say. “Gone, murdered.”

*People breathe sighs of relief to know that someone winked. Silently they wait for the next victim.*

When I saw the programme I wondered why I had been invited. I am not known as someone who finds inspiration in the bush. But last night I looked again at the programme and saw his name as one of the organisers and I knew for certain that he asked me here.

I can never be sure if his pleasure in seeing me is genuine. I have been told by friends that I am mistaken. That he is a simple man who likes me as a friend, and that is all. I know better than this. There is something perverse in him that refuses to let me go.

He enjoyed the walk to the cliff. I saw him standing, unfettered, near the edge, admiring the view and pointing out places of interest to the others. There was a cold wind and behind us the bush shuddered and trembled. I could have pushed him, the urge was there, but I let the moment pass. He turned and saw me, standing a little distant, away from the edge. He laughed and winked at me.

“You were always afraid of heights,” he said, “even with your talent.”

I tell the group I’m going for a walk. They barely acknowledge me as they wait, eagerly, for the next person to die. Let them wait I think. What they have forgotten is that even a murderer can commit suicide. I walk, no stumble outside.

The clouds have lifted, it is bright now - a full moon. I see him at the door, hesitant, as if he might come after me. He doesn’t. He goes back inside. Even here on the edge of the cliff path I can hear his laughter echoing.

Soon they will drink the rest of the wine and tell stories of the macabre.
REVIEWS

The following is an edited version of the talk given by Fay Zwicky at the launch of *Full Fathom Five*.


Faced with a number of practised and resourceful rhetoricians who go by the name of poet, I sometimes catch myself longing for some blessedly ungraceful, risk-taking human intelligence that refuses to express itself with that cool assurance and arty composure that passes for poetry today.

Fortunately for us, John Kinsella has such an intelligence and a recognizably human voice - the real as distinct from the fake. So I’m genuinely delighted to have been asked to launch this, his third collection of poems. With its alluring purple and green jacket, a splendid handcoloured woodcut by Fred McDonald, the title’s haunting resonance is beautifully echoed and extended. Its swirling currents draw us down to where outer and inner worlds merge, down to those unpredictable and sometimes dangerous rips and swells of consciousness that lie below the surface of language.

The title, taken from ‘The Tempest’, forms the first part of the epigraph to a 7-part poem that both reflects on a Jackson Pollock painting and, by association, on the recent death of a friend by drowning. The second part is a quotation from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the pattern of allusion grounded in the Shakespearian original but refusing its hypnotic spell. It points up John Kinsella’s own power to transform and synthesize disparate cultural references without strain, and to weld them into an artefact beyond the merely personal. To do this without losing the human intonation in the voice is a considerable achievement.

The development of the sequence is characteristic of the way in which Kinsella objectifies his feeling through paintings, and his acute sensitivity to the creation of visual impression, never present just for its own sake. He manoeuvres the feeling outside himself by finding a taut, active, and adventurous language for it, putting it inside the framework of a painting or visual image and yet managing to remain both inside and outside the frame simultaneously. In doing this, he’s able to shape an appearance and a life distinct from the feeling that sparked the poem off in the first place.

The poems focus so strongly on colour that in my mind’s eye I came to divide them broadly into what became his “Red” and “Blue” poems, fiery and watery, killing and regenerating by turns. By emphasizing colour in this way, the poems catch at something very subtle and elusive in ourselves, a primitive, deeply instinctive sense of the colour of our emotional lives. One of these “Red” poems is called ‘Swarm’, and it explores a world of corrosive anxiety with restraint and menace:

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Black fire with an orange heart
rages amongst the red branches
of the swarm-tree. I tell her it’s
temporary, like last year.
The hive, high in a hollow
in the neighbours’ yard, erupts
and sparks. Our son bursts
through the flywire door
screaming bees! as if their
frantic clamour were drums of war.
It hangs bristling and fluid,
its mystery an optical illusion.
A midday astronomy - the eye
of the telescope scorched
and holding the cold heat
of space. Towards evening
the swarm lifts and rolls
chaotically downwind,
settling its orange cowl
about the dark outline
of a tree.
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A pressure is exerted on us like a physical sensation with an emotional charge attached. We’re compelled to accept its reality, drawn into agreement because the authentic note of feeling is present in the language. Generating growing unease, the poem progressively involves us as observers and accomplices even if the source of that fear may not have assumed significance in our everyday world.

When we’re faced with language that mimics and projects our feelings truly, a poem comes alive. The individual self behind the social mask is present but not oppressively so. The intrusive “I” has become a detached voice merging with its objectified world. What is frankly revealed is some natural quality of mind or personality familiar to us but which usually comes disguised or repressed in daily life. By isolating and stressing what hits the senses
hardest, there is the risk of being over-elliptical and sometimes obscure, often in self-defence. It's a risk always present when awareness is heightened to bursting point and when the language and rhythm mobilized to express it is placed proportionately under strain. It's a risk I think John has earned the right to take even if he makes the going tough for his reader now and again.

In spite of certain difficulties met with along the way, a good poem will always be circled with a space of truthfulness, an aura of frankness. A bad one will muffle and fog up that space. You know as soon as you read or hear the words if a poet isn't being straight with himself, if a good deal of embroidery seems to have taken over. Working under contained pressure most of the time, John doesn't go in for embroidery. Nor does he avail himself of hand-me-down myths about this country and their aestheticizing effects. When he speaks of "open space as collusive as a vaulted cathedral in Europe" we know he is just as alert to the falsities we impose on nature in the New World as he is to the paralyzing mystique of the man-made wonders of the Old.

Thoughts and ideas generated by reflections on paintings are offered not as logical arguments about principles or beliefs, but as a series of turns and variations on inward preoccupations planted solidly in physical sensation. The pressure to go after a private insight until it resolves itself in a poem that is both a world complete in itself and a window into the secret mind of the artist, poet and painter indivisibly linked, lies behind this kind of poetry. It sets up dynamic boundaries for itself which expand and contract according to the reader's capacity for empathy. Within those limits, the poet allows us a freedom of response that has little or nothing to do with whether or not you agree with his observations and transformations.

One of the bonuses that reading these poems gave me was the spur to extend my limited knowledge of contemporary painting. They sent me skittering to reference books, to dictionaries and Companions, to reproductions and essays on artists mentioned. Like Kenneth Noland's 'Turnsole', Helen Frankenthaler's 'Interior Landscape', Morris Graves's 'Blind Bird', and the work of that extraordinary pioneer of motion photography, Eadweard Muybridge (born Muggeridge) who photographed a horse in motion to settle a bet as to whether a horse had all four legs off the ground simultaneously! Many things I didn't know before and to which, thanks to Kinsella's poems, I've become more receptive.

It's easy to get stuck in time, to dismiss as not worth the trouble those newer aspects of created work that some of us older bats think of as alien to what art ought to be. It's hard to shift ground when your life and work have been based on what once seemed ageless aesthetic tenets that have proved as shifting as time itself. John's poems help strip away some of those preconceptions and emotional armourings which have formed a protective fence against a changing world of sensation, particularly with regard to visual art. These poems did much to open me to an awareness of the floating images of a less restricted, more transient consciousness that I had either defended myself against or couldn't summon enough energy to respond to.

By animating his poems so persuasively, by establishing empathy without ideological coercion, by allowing language to release its own charge of symbolic energy, John has managed to recruit me to an acknowledgement of his own emotional discoveries. This is what I believe good poems should be able to do, and I hope you'll give these poems a chance to work on you in the same way. It's worth it.

To conclude then, I'd like to have written a poem in reply to John's work, but because of a week literally floored by arthritis I couldn't sit for long enough to come up with anything worthwhile. Instead, I've made use of some lines by Ezra Pound that seem to define what John's poems have said to me. Since Pound often launched his own work with Catullus's classic formula of farewell, I've put together a composite fragment taken from two poems, 'Commission' and 'Ité':

Go, my songs to the lonely and the unsatisfied,
Go also to the nerve-racked, go to the enslaved-by-convention...
Speak against unconscious oppression,
Speak against the tyranny of the unimaginative,
Speak against bonds...
Go in a friendly manner,
Go with an open speech...
Go to those who have thickened with middle age,
To those who have lost interest...
Move among the lovers of perfection alone.
Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light.
And take your wounds from it gladly.

I think these lines express something of the courageous compulsion in John to take on unprovincial concerns in art, to look outward and to aim beyond the narrow confines of poetry’s prescribed decorums, beyond nationalist nostalgia, the sex war, and those safer myths that freeze and cut short our imaginative reach. Trying to write well and incorruptibly in a provincial society where artiness is as harmful as philistinism isn’t easy, and the tyranny of the unimaginative is always around us. So I’m grateful to John Kinsella for the release of imaginative energy his poems offer.

Fay Zwicky


One of the central motifs of Chin Woon Ping’s first collection of poems is an attempt to dis/place the speaking voice/s which emanate from locations as varied as Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Shanghai, Jakarta, Perth, New York and Toledo. The poet who is of Straits Chinese descent grew up in Malaysia before moving on to live and work as an academic in the USA. She has travelled widely and has taught in China, Indonesia and Malaysia. This collection which is published by Times Books International came about during a two year stint as Senior Fellow at the National University of Singapore. Does this make her a Singaporean voice as the back cover of the collection suggests? Or is she Malaysian? Or Asian-American? Perhaps she is that hybridized transcultural and transnational creature so beloved of proponents of “World Literature” - the cosmopolitan exile?

The Naturalization of Camellia Songspeaks with many voices, in many accents and rhythms, and from many subject positions. There is the voice of a Malaysian exile who has lived through the heady days of the immediate post-independence period in “Say We Were Fool-hardy That Night”; the disabled beggar in “Jakarta Woman”; the Asian-American man in “Ah Sin Talk Back”; the immigrant in “The Awakening”; the Chinese patriarch in “Father’s Letter”; and the aesthete in “The Rapt” and “Graceville Summer”. This is not to suggest that the heterogeneity is without direction or grounding. Chin’s montage of voices demonstrates a high degree of control and purpose; the multiplicity of voices never erodes into the fashionable idea of endless difference or the deferment of authority. Rather, the main impetus appears to be an attempt to grapple with gender, social, cultural and racial differences as a means towards constructing meaning and identity (however fleeting) within specific social and political contexts.

The motif of “place” - both geographical and metaphorical, plays an important role in grounding the discourses of identity and significance. The poem from which the collection takes its name, “The Naturalization of Camellia Song”, centres on the process of immigration and the deconstruction of homelands. Like her namesake flower which is now growing in various lands beyond east Asia, Camellia Song sings about displacement and the process of reconstructing the hybrid self in different forms, in different languages, different places and at different times. The following stanza which begins with the images of death and burial places, telescopes back to the history of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

If in hostile places or unjust times, she broke into angry words or action, was this the way of the warrior? She could have been shopkeeper, kongsi mama, jungle-cleaner breaking her nails at simple clod Jia Por tearing at tropic vine, feeding nine mouths by sifting dirt, halloing across the camp to the likes of Yap Ah Loy, back when the land was fierce as tigers and intractable.

Chin is adept at juxtapositioning different images and time-frames to achieve a montage effect. This results in a sense of dislocation for we carry the traces of past images with us as we land in yet another place. In the final stanza, Camellia is in contemporary Singapore:

She could hear the city’s last engines riding home - how peaceful were the pauses! Yes, this too was home, the here and now afforded by industry and chance, the breathing in and out of three million lives in a packed place built on the dreams of fellow diasporics.

The stanza ends with a wishful world-weariness:
they call this island-home
home, there was little to fear
if she could just trust the ground
of her goodness, if she could just
close her eyes now and trust
the wash of sleep.

One of the main thematic concerns of the
collection is the nature and function of memory
- racial memories, past loves, memories of
childhood, youth, and memories of communal
struggles. Readers who are familiar with
Malayan history would grasp Chin’s reference
to the racial riots in 1969 as mentioned in “Say
We Were Foolhardy That Night” and in
“Lorong Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur, 1969”. That
event marked the turning point in Malaysian
politics and is partly responsible for the state of
(self-imposed) exile by artists such as the late
Ee Tiang Hong. “What It Means To Be A
Patriot” is a powerful plea against ethnic
divisions which structure the local political and
social milieu. In this poem Chin looks back to
a precolonial past before “divide and rule”
became the reason d’etre:

When moist winds blow north-easterly
to see in mind’s eye a tapestry
unfolding, of ancient races moving
in subtle friendship with the forest
and among themselves, their languages
consonant with sounds of leaves rustling
or waves soothing hot sands,
to go as far back in history and many lands as
possible to search for sources
of commonness and harmony.

“In My Mother’s Dream” echoes the experi­
ences of many mainland Chinese women forced
to seek a better life in countries like Malaya,
only to suffer a similar or worse fate:

..., there are no rumors
of Japanese soldiers advancing
with gleaming hatreds and no running
for refuge to leech-deep jungles, no digging
for tapioca roots, no tears when all that was
hoarded
was Banana notes for a smoky bonfire,
the body does not split with pain as it evicts
the unwanted dead and courses its accompanying
effluents of crimson...

Chin’s recital of history’s brutalities sent deep
resonances within this reader - these are the
same images, the same stories my grandmothers
and mother speak of. This is also part of
the cultural baggage which determines a commu­
nity’s sense of itself and the place of
the individual within it. Migration, education, a
change in the individual’s social status does not
and cannot erase the past which continues to
shape the experiences of the present. “Memo­
ries of Underdevelopment” works on a similar
theme, this time treated with a lot more irony.
The poem moves from the horrors of the
Japanese Occupation to the poet’s birth when
she was named Peace to augur the future. The
second stanza of the poem however deflates
such expectations as the poet lists the continua­
tion of atrocities in Asia:

pummelled by policemen
slashed with machetes
situasi tegang
mai lai massacre
hiroshima mon amour
you ask me to sing love songs
but i’m still searching
for a place to sort out
some old memories

The poet’s voice slips easily between and
betwixt the Centre and the margin, foregrounding
the material and historical construction of these
monuments. “Wayang Kulit” plays with the
idea of subverting the power of the gaze. In
this poem, Chin identifies herself with the Other
- the Indonesians whose exoticism is being
constructed by the “pale tourists” who are
“decorously taking notes” at the theatrical event
quite unconscious of the fact that they are being
simultaneously exploited as consumers of tour­
ist culture as well as objects of entertainment
for the locals. Other occasions in the collection
enable the poet to claim a position within the
Centre in order to comment upon itself.
“Invitation to A Voyage” is a parody of
colonialist discourses of the Orient with its
exoticism, mysticism and feminization of the
Other. By positioning the protagonist as the
dominant interloper in this thinly veiled
Malaysian landscape, Chin becomes a sort of
Gulliver and makes some very pointed com­
ments about the place:

...I will teach you the delights of corruption
as we sail on a magic carpet of pandanus,
platinum watches and ten-courses meals
surround us, platefuls of Indian breads laced
with vindaloo, mermaids sing in fishtanks
cleansed of slime. Disregard the offers of
clemency, we have an itinerary full of
equivocation, we will ride on a wave of
pleasure while we peruse the history books
for monuments of magnificence and quirki­
ness - Srivijaya, Majapahit, Parameswara -
all names to be collected in our pouches
filled with trophies from the jungle and from the sea. We will go native and scream nationalist slogans as we plunge into each other’s flesh.

The collection also includes a four-part performance piece titled “Details Cannot Body Wants” - each part corresponding to a section of the title which interrogates the construction of feminine identity. The focus of the play shifts from the socialization of a Chinese girl in an Asian context to her gradual exposure to western cultures and its particular regimes of gender inscription. The performance features a single actor known as Woman, and a chorus of four. There are some hilarious scenes such as the donning of an elaborately decorated bra which is then inflated with a bicycle pump to incredible proportion while the Chorus solemnly chants ‘SILICONE IS SEXY, SILICONE IS SEXY...”, or when the actor changes from playing the submissive Asian Doll into a sassy Black Mama who says to the American stud, “Hey Muthafuckka. Quit messin’ round with me and mah sistahs you hear?... Go wash yo own goddam underwear! Clean that toilet seat after you take a leak! Take yo goddam inflated inflatable prick and shove it up yo skinny ass!”

While cross-cultural fertilization of linguistic and symbolic forms work well in the poems to create a richly textured and multivalent experience, the same cannot be said of the play. I say this with some regret for I applaud and empathise with much of what the play attempts to say. My quarrel is with the form these sentiments are expressed. The juxtapositioning of eastern and western images and languages here comes close to being gimmicky, particularly in what I perceive to be an over reliance on objects/props to foreground a particular situation. I also feel that there is an imbalance of agency on the part of Asian women in the play. Opportunities to talk back to manifestations of the patriarchy are articulated by the Afro-American woman, as in the above quotation and in a rap recitation. Whilst there are occasions when the Asian woman does speak out, it seems to me that the most confrontational and powerful critique of patriarchy comes from western forms. I do not mean this in any essentialist way but merely to suggest that the myth of the passive Asian woman in need of western (however marginalized) protection or radicalization, is being unwittingly reaffirmed.

These are minor criticisms in the light of Chin’s contribution to the ever widening spectrum of post-colonial voices which decentre notions of cultural, racial and gender essentialisms. The Naturalization of Camellia Song offers the rare opportunity to celebrate differences and cultural hybridity without losing sight of the political and historical specificities, nor undermining the pain and conflict that can arise from cross-cultural encounters. Camellia touched me, she provoked me, made me nostalgic and gave me hope ... I recommend it heartily.

Jacqueline Lo


The Common Rat(1993) is an unusual collection of twenty-nine prose pieces in which no clear distinction is made between fiction and non-fiction. The decision not to specify which items are essays, autobiographical reminiscences or short stories is extremely apt: Carmel Bird’s tales often contain elements traditionally connected to all three forms, this is part of the quixotic charm of her writing style. It is also part of a self-conscious echo of fascinations which underlie this most recent collection of her writing. These include a delight in unusual patterns and coincidences and in sudden surprises, in particular the abrupt surfacing of the grotesque.

The introductory chapter “Asking for Trouble” contains a melding of genres characteristic of Bird’s work. It begins with a personal anecdote centred around the author/narrator’s interest in rats. This starting point gradually proceeds to the image of human beings as “naked pink and white rats” and finally becomes connected, through a sort of literary free-association, with Bird’s first book, Births, Deaths and Marriages, which possesses a similar pink and white colour scheme (p.3). Such leaps of subject and departures from logical sequence are frequent features of the stories of The Common Rat. They are particularly favoured in the discursive techniques of Bird’s female narrators and often
seem to be a protective device for Carmel Bird’s emotionally wounded female characters.

The instability of Bird’s female characters, and the unusual patterns of their thoughts, is often misinterpreted and exacerbated by male characters. This is particularly true in the world of Part Two of The Common Rat, a group of seven stories which has the same title as the book itself and which is centred around an eccentric female narrator. Geraldine, the narrator’s sister, is labelled insane by her husband when she is discovered walking along the beach at night thinking about her marriage and her friend Jean, a sad, slightly hysterical divorcee is admitted to a mental asylum and given treatment that merely disorientates her further. The dreamy narrator is also perceived as demented by her lover, Jack:

... he looked sideways at me the way he always used to do and I felt a familiar silence gathering around us. I wanted to scream at him, but instead I changed the subject (p.42).

The narrator’s lessening grip on reality and her isolation are exacerbated by Jack’s failure to share her more whimsical enquiries and interests. The connection with the husband/lover seems especially important because of the narrator’s claustrophobic isolation within her house and her uneventful life. An enduring image in “Red Letters” is of the narrator looking out from the boundaries of her apartment and its back yard, imagining a life for her elderly neighbour. Carmel Bird’s tormented female characters are treated sympathetically; their unusual perceptions are often attractively bizarre.

It is suggested that extremes of pressure, often a lack of challenging options or recognition of their difference, have driven these intelligent women to unusual mental limits. The sense of isolation and hopelessness often harboured by these characters recalls the plight of the female mental patients studied in Jill Matthew’s book on the historical construction of femininity in twentieth century Australia, Good and Mad Women. In Carmel Bird’s short stories a repressive definition of femininity seems connected to the profound anguish of her female characters, with disastrous consequences for both sexes.

The stories of The Common Rat are told almost completely from first-person female perspectives. They often deal in a sympathetic fashion with the tensions within the household, traditionally considered the female domain, and with relationships between women, particularly mothers and daughters. Quite sensibly, Carmel Bird does not reject the concerns of the private sphere; her stories often celebrate the female connection with the household, recognising the special ties between women which have been fostered by the painful, and continuing, exclusion of women from the male-dominated public sphere. The tropes of domestic life are important in the memories of Bird’s numerous female narrators. Symbols of the household, of fine linen and sewing machines, for instance, provide fond reminders of shared moments between female relatives. The narrator of “Getting My Mother’s Sewing Machine Across Bass Strait” is reminded of the need to reconcile the presence of her step-mother in her dead mother’s house by the image of a Singer sewing machine, left to her by her mother and not yet collected. In “Pomona Avenue”, a woman walks through her parents’ house in her mind and gains some insight into the character of her mother, who committed suicide when she was just a child. This fascination with the household-centred perspective is refreshing; for many recent writers the exploration of the continuing ties many women have with the household has been lost in the concern with the struggle for women to gain access to the public sphere.

Although the household and its implements provide an important sense of connection between women in Carmel Bird’s stories, there is often a tension between the wonderful memories of home and mother and the need to restructure and widen the meaning of femininity beyond that which women of previous generations have experienced. For instance, the historical over-emphasis on the importance of female physical attractiveness is explored in two excellent satires. “Every Home Should Have a Cedar Chest” juxtaposes the assurances of nineteenth century fashion magazines that whale bone corsets are feminine necessities with the anatomical detail of the baleen whale. The comparison sharply stresses the idiocy of fashions that distort the female form, especially those that pervert its shape with parts of other species. In “One With the Lot”, an adult female narrator traces her preoccupations as a
fashion-conscious fourteen year old, presumably during the late 1950s. The narrator describes her favourite attire of the time in detail, pausing over her delightfully pointy Maidenform bra, and outlining torturous methods of depilation, before proceeding on to details about heavy lipstick and full-circle skirts. By comically highlighting the accepted female fashions of the recent past those of the present are also brought into question.

Another common interest in this collection is the attainment of a certain threshold of discovery by young girls; a moment that is often identified by a distressing glimpse of the flawed nature of the adult world. In “The Balloon Lady”, a young girl becomes aware of adult errors; a liaison between her grandfather and her nanny results in the nanny’s dismissal. After this shock the narrator’s ambitious child fantasies seem impossible and she becomes repulsed by human physical ugliness. The idea of proudly marching hand in hand with the unsightly lady who sells balloons no longer seems a dream of hope but completely undesirable.

As David Malouf does in his short story collection Antipodes, Carmel Bird explores the theme of children broaching an adult world, but with a focus on young female rather than male characters. Bird’s tales add to this preoccupation not only the sharp tone of the social satirist Kathy Lette, but more than a hint of the peculiar logic and horror which characterise Grimm’s fairy tales. The “balloon lady” is described in an unexpectedly wicked sketch:

She had a fat face, teeth like a rat, and a few white whiskers.
She sucked air in through her teeth and smelt of cake (p.142).

This collection of short stories contains delicious moments of grotesque observation, from the description of the balloon lady, to that of a painfully tidy room-mate at boarding school, to a woman who “had the most awful way of cutting up oranges”. For these moments alone, Carmel Bird’s The Common Rat is worth reading.

Cathy Bennett


A passion verging on obsession smoulders subcutaneously in Ruth Park’s autobiographical novel, A Fence Around the Cuckoo. She writes of a love as rapacious and ferocious as the most omnipotent sexual attachment, and she makes the object of her desire apparent from the earliest pages.

It seems that almost as soon as Ruth Park was conscious of her own existence, she became acutely aware of the richness of language and writing, which beckoned, like an irresistible beacon, all her life.

From early childhood, books were greedily devoured and writers idolised like rock stars. It began vaguely as a dullish tone in early childhood, when she’d gather snippets of experience, like raw jewels, to be brought to shining relief later in the pages of her work.

Even as a young girl sent to the streets to snag bargains during the Great Depression, she told her worried parents: “I don’t mind. It’s all experience. A writer has to have experience.”

With time, Park’s quest for literary fulfilment increased in intensity and urgency, so that by the time she was an adolescent, the sight and sound of the beckoning beacon must have been maddening. Good books were hard to get. At one time, the best she could do was to read the newsprint that adorned the living room walls of the family home.

In one sense, A Fence Around the Cuckoo is a fascinating study into what makes a writer tick, and in particular, how real people emerge in print as fictional characters, in whole or part. At the same time, it is a wonderfully warm and engaging story about an extraordinary woman and a sharp social commentary on the New Zealand of the Great Depression.

Student of literature and aspiring writers will not be the only ones fascinated to trace the emergence of this multiple winner of writers’ awards. And they won’t be the only ones surprised by Ruth Park’s persistence. A myriad of main stream myths about writers are mercilessly crushed in this book. Like the myth about true love conquering all, the romantic ideal about creative talent holds that critical acclaim is inevitable for writers with “real” talent. But Ruth Park is proof that this is simply not the case. She is a formidable mix of talent, nous and single-mindedness. Her talent
might otherwise have been lost.

It seems Ruth Park had all the reasons in the world not to become a writer. Apart from a less than privileged childhood, women in the thirties were primed for roles as mothers and wives, and little else. Her early writing aspirations were hardly fostered by friends and family and the one person she really admired professionally told her she'd never make it.

But Ruth Park's mother, I believe, was pivotal in the whole process. Christina Park failed to pursue her own interests for the sake of husband Mel, who wouldn't be "kept by a woman". Park writes: "My mother's ingenuity and skill ... could have made our day-to-day life much easier, as well as given her personal satisfaction."

Appeals to Mel's sense of logic failed miserably: "If I have an accomplishment why can't you let me help out a little? ... I'd be so much happier, Mel."

'I won't be kept by a woman,' was what he said, furious at last, a flush rising in his face."

Park viewed her mother's life as one of suppression, vowing, perhaps unwitting, that she'd never permit the same fate for herself. "I pitied her with all my heart and often secretly wept for her. I knew that she had expected to share a life with this admirable man, but found instead she was to be added to the one he already had."

Witnessing her mother's needless despair, perhaps strengthened Ruth Park's own resolve to pursue the fulfilment of her creative needs. And her mother warned her often of the perils of marriage: "'Never forget,' she said to me many times, 'that in marriage a woman and her children are paupers. Always make sure that you are independent.'"

Ruth Park's professional life began in earnest in the reading room of the Auckland Star newspaper, where women were paid three-fifth as much as men for the same work.

The "ritual generalisations" justifying unequal pay included: "women ought to be home, (were) slow workers, (had) smaller heads, therefore smaller brains (and) would only spend the extra money on lipstick."

In the Star newsroom, where she was the first woman journalist, the "thousands of lessons" she learned from "sub-editors' slashings" proved invaluable, yet the widely-held belief that a writer's best grounding lay in journalism, Ruth Park dismisses as "outstandingly untrue".

The newsroom was a seething pit of sexism that, by today's standards, seems appalling (although my own dismissal from an Australian newspaper several years ago was said to be justified by the fact I had a husband to support me, unlike my male colleagues whose job were spared).

Ruth Park's highly-strung, prickly aunts, who heckled tirelessly for top spot in the family pecking order, without doubt inspired many of Ruth Park's characters. She describes them as "exquisite, giggly, capricious creatures with good hearts, terrible tempers and a soap-opera approach to life." The sisters' merciless antagonism of their mother is a rich source of humour in the book. "The aunts could not come to grips with her lack of concern for the thrilling trivia of their lives, the fights with husbands and each other, the taking of umbrage at what the butcher said, the discussions about Ross's truancy, Grant's pimples and Uncle Kenny's sudden and suspicious desire to buy a number of rather bright new shirts. When these subjects were broached, Grandma gave her daughters an evil green glance and said, 'To the devil with ye!'" Wonderful stuff!

Ruth Park manages to combine with ease the close perspectives of her own life within the broader context of a sociological snapshot. The book would do well on required reading lists for social history students. And yet A Fence Around the Cuckoo has the warmth, intimacy and informality of a hearth-side yarn with a beloved friend.

Fiona Adolph

Nicholas Hasluck, Offcuts: From a Legal Literary Life 268pp. University of Western Australia Press, 1993. $24.95

In Scott's Guy Mannering Counsellor Pleydell advises the young hero, who aspires to a career in law, to read widely: "A lawyer without history or literature is a mechanic, a mere working mason; if he possesses some knowledge of these, he may venture to call himself an architect." Pleydell, like Scott himself, is a citizen of the eighteenth-century republic of
letters, in which lawyers, poets, historians, philosophers and others combined their specialist interests with a broad engagement in intellectual debate, reading, writing and political activity.

*Offcuts*, a collection of essays, reviews, verse satire, travelogues and memoirs by Nicholas Hasluck invokes this tradition in several ways. Not only does the author conform to Pleydell’s ideal of a well-read lawyer, but the book’s cover features an eighteenth-century engraving of a lawyer with pen in hand and documents tumbling out of chests. Above all, Hasluck’s dual citizenship of the now virtually autonomous realms of law and literature enables an interanimation of legal and literary concerns, of syllogism and symbol, of personal commitments and public policy. These writings seek to extend the ideals of the “public sphere” in an age of narrowing, sub-dividing specialization: they advocate dialogue across disciplinary fences, and insist on reasoned debate as a means of resolving issues of political controversy; they defend the principles of liberal democracy, but value critical scrutiny of their institutional effectiveness.

Hasluck is conscious that these combinations of interest are unusual in contemporary Australia. The common concerns of literature and law are not taken for granted: their theoretical relationship and the author’s experience of the bafflement of members of both “camps” form the subject of several essays. “Devising Legal Fictions” draws humorously on Hasluck’s first court case, “an exquisitely complete disaster,” to explore the two disciplines’ common attention to language and reliance on narrative, and pertinently observes sources of difference. His argument defines the special role of the novelist using an analogy that Scott would recognize if not rejoice in: “Most people, and the same is certainly true of lawyers, find it more exciting to play a part in, than to build a model of, reality” (p.21). The title of “Impudent Friends” is drawn from Canetti’s *The Human Province*, and shows Hasluck’s sense of the memorable quotation, the image in which an idea may be visualized. The essay recommends that lawyers and writers be “impudent friends,” conferring through their affection and tolerance the freedom to parody. While some writers on law and literature unwontedly assimilate the two fields, Hasluck acknowledges the importance of both “general rules and customs” and private expressions of impudence, the lawyer’s valuation of social order and the “truant state” of holiday and transgression. These terms are adduced in answer to the question whether writing is a force for change. No single, theoretical answer is attempted; rather, Hasluck grounds his discussion on his own use of satire and the mystery/thriller, and adopts Doris Lessing’s modest formulation, “the role of the writer is to be a small personal voice.” Hasluck’s experience as lawyer and writer leads him not to deal in the millennial transformations of romance, but to try and add to “the stock of honesty in the world” (p.107).

Freedom of expression emerges as a key value from a number of these pieces. Hasluck urges that Australian law develop a “public figures defence” to claims of libel by politicians, to facilitate the earlier and more open criticism of scandals like W.A. Inc. This is a practical and cogently-argued suggestion. Two essays address the issue of public funding for the arts. Hasluck believes this a beneficial policy, but that mechanisms and priorities must be subject to scrutiny and debate. More broadly he expresses his concern that particular criticisms are taken as outright opposition to the Australia Council and its programs. In an era when “rationalism” is usually prefaced by one word, “economic,” Hasluck stresses the total political and intellectual responsibility of rational debate. This value, he argues, is lacking in Australian public discourses, where a tendency to label and denigrate, rather than to understand and refute, unfashionable positions predominates.

Post-structuralist literary criticism is censured for being over-reliant on unexplained jargon and destructively sceptical. Hasluck himself labels it “the new sophistry,” drawing from I.F. Stone’s analysis of Socrates as a radical doubter (p.187ff). Given the Nietzschean influence in contemporary theory, this formulation has some merit, but sophistry usually betokens fallacious reasoning, and one might have expected a more detailed attempt to refute the arguments of Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault. This term is disarmingly introduced “for the sake of a non-scholarly but hopefully enjoyable discussion.” What is interesting about this invitation to debate is its explicitly oral terminology. In a digression which underlines this
Hasluck reports that he has not yet "come across a semiotician or deconstructionist who can give [him] a comprehensible account of what he or she is up to in a few brief words." Even the style here is conversational, projecting an image of the writer in dialogue with a general audience. With its emphasis on clarity, attentiveness to other positions, reasoned disagreement, the search for truth, Hasluck's approach recalls the "ideal speech situation" of Jurgen Habermas, the social theorist who defends the "Enlightenment project" against the post-Structuralists, and who provides the definitive modern account of "the public sphere". Hasluck concludes that "in applying the new analytical methods a balance has to be struck between constructive questioning as a means of clearing out dead wood on the one hand, and the rejection of all civic values on the other" (p. 190).

Many constructive questions are directed at our culture in this book. Some of them are constructive in the "architectural" sense favoured by Pleydell, and contribute to the design of a just society. Some are constructive because they involve poesis, working out speculations and disconcerting images in a mixed narrative and discursive form. Three pieces, "The Antipodean Panoptique", "House of Mirrors" and "A Sense of Time and Place - The Untold Story" ask such questions, and they are the most moving and eloquent parts of the book. "The Antipodean Panoptique" draws on Foucault's Discipline and Punish and describes the evolution of The Country Without Music. It is a haunting essay on the relationship between reason and its others, past and present, Europe and its Antipodes: "are we, those who live Down Under, actual and fictional characters alike, because of our unusual history, all just part of an antipodean counter-system, ghosts in some vast, panoptic machine?" (p.60) "House of Mirrors" shows how a thirteenth-century satire came to cited as authority for a legal rule, and moves beyond absurdity to an affirmation of legal creativity. "A Sense of Time and Place" (which appeared in part in The Blosseville File) discusses the representation of Perth in fiction: is it the city of yachts on the river, or of the "Nedlands Monster"? For Hasluck these possibilities are connected in his recollection of a young boy seated, shivering and tearful, on a jetty, between two policemen: "I feel that I have something special to say about him - if only I could tell the story" (p.132). Writing is here indissociable from recognizably legal functions of witnessing and advocacy, from a sense of relationship to a person and a place, and from reflections on language and genre. Offcuts is too modest a title for work of such complex and committed connectedness.

Kieran Dolin
FIONA ADOLPH is a freelance journalist and critic who is currently preparing a book on mothers in the workforce written by West Australian women writers.

BERT ALMON works at the University of Alberta. His work has appeared in six collections in the US and Canada, and in such magazines as Chicago Review, the Malahat Review, Iowa Review, Poetry Durham and Ariel.

CHRIS ANDREWS was born in Newcastle in 1962. He is a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian Studies at the University of Melbourne.

JOHN BARNES has written a critical study of Joseph Furphy, edited a selection of his work, and most recently a biography, The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy (OUP, 1990).

CATHY BENNETT is a PhD student in the English Department of U.W.A. She is writing a thesis on Asian migrant writing in Australia and Canada.

JODIE BROWN completed a Master of Philosophy in Australian Studies at U.W.A. last year.

ALEC CHOATE was born in Hertfordshire, England, but has lived most of his life in Western Australia. He has published three volumes of poetry, Gifts Upon The Water, A Marking of Fire and Schoolgirls at Borobudur.

KIERAN DOLIN has recently been awarded his PhD for a thesis on representation of the law in fiction.

JOHN DOUGLAS in a few months will be a qualified secondary teacher. It is hoped that through the education system, he will increase student awareness of the dangers of far-right cubicles.

JOAN FOX lives in Albany, Western Australia.

ANDREA GAWTHORNE comes from the south coast of N.S.W. and has had stories published in various Australian magazines.

NAOMI GRANT is a Western Australian part Aboriginal artist and designer. Naomi has had a recent exhibition at the Accent Gallery in Subiaco, and has just won the 1993 Bayswater Shire Council prize for pastels.

DALE HARCOMBE has been published in various magazines and newspapers. She is currently writing a novel and teaches Creative Writing at Central West Community College.

JENNIFER HARRISON spent three years in Boston, USA, where she began to have poems published in a number of small press journals. This is the first publication of her work in Australia.

PHILIP HARVEY is a Melbourne poet. "Quadrilateral" is part of an encyclopaedic work in progress.

CATHARINE HASSALL was born in 1967 in Buxton, New South Wales.

AILEEN KELLY is a Melbourne poet and adult educator.


JACQUELINE LO lectures at the Drama Department at the University of Newcastle. She has a particular interest in post-colonial studies and is presently completing a thesis on post-colonial theatre in Malaysia and Singapore.

BRIGID LOWRY is a New Zealand born writer who lives in Perth. She has published poetry and short fiction and is currently a post-graduate student at Curtin University, working on a semi-autobiographical novel in collage form.

SCOTT MENDHAM failed English at high school, and with honours in Chemistry, was naturally suited to become a writer. His first published story was subtly titled “Pieces of Paul”. Scott is currently a marketing and communications consultant in environmental monitoring.

SUE MOSS is a Tasmanian poet, performer and song-writer. Her collection The Upwardly Downward Mobility Blues is to be published by Penguin in 1993.

SALLIE MUIRDEN is a Melbourne poet whose work has appeared most recently in Southerly and the Australian Women’s Book Review.

SELWYN PRITCHARD left the UK in 1980. He teaches in Victoria and has published extensively: Homage to Colonel Rainborough (1984), Being Determined (1990), Stirring Stuff (1992) and It's Too Late to Call Home (1993).

A. R. ROUGHLEY was born in Liverpool, England. He has published widely on James Joyce and critical theory and is author of James Joyce and Critical Theory. He has also been involved in theatre as an actor and director.

ANDREA SHERWOOD has been widely published in magazines here and in the U.K. Her collection of poems One Siren or Another is to be published by UQP this year.

IAN C. SMITH lives in East Gippsland. He received recent writing grants from the Literature Board of the Australian Council and The Victorian Ministry for the Arts. “Mistakes” won the 1990 K & M Teychenne Short Story Award.

ELIZABETH SMITHER has recently published A cortege of daughters in the UK and her New & Selected Poems will appear from Auckland U.P. later this year. A recently completed collection of short stories, Mr Fish & other stories will be published by John McIndoe.

NIGEL SPENCE is completing a doctorate at The University of New England.

IAN TEMPLEMAN lives in Canberra where he works at the National Library of Australia. He recently established the limited edition publisher, Molonglo Press.

DANE THWAITES lives in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, and is co-editor of HOBO poetry magazine. South China, a book of poems written to celebrate the Religion-Nation of Tibet and to mourn and protest against its invasion by communist China, will be published by Hale & Iremonger in January.

BRIAN TURNER is a freelance editor and writer whose books include six volumes of poetry - the first Ladders of Rain was joint winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize; his most recent Beyond, won the 1993 NZ Book Award for poetry. He lives in Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand.

ROSE VANSON is a vigneron’s daughter and lives in the hills near Perth. Her interests include performance poetry and multi-cultural writing. She is currently writing her autobiography.

FAY ZWICKY, poet, short story author and critic, writes full-time. Her latest book, Poems 1970-1992, was published this year by UQP.
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