A MILE FROM GRAPPLE X

Five young men frolic in the blood-warm water of the lagoon, splashing each other, jumping on and ducking one another like zoo animals dropped unexpectedly into an unfamiliar habitat. Already their flesh is beginning to burn under the unfamiliar sky. Soon it will peel.

- Get off, I carn swim, y'bugger!
- Pansy!
- I ain’t no –
- ’Ere, look at this! Looks like a bloody sea monster!
- Give us a look. Sea monster, ya daft bugger! It’s a, y’know, one of them sea urchin-wotsits.
- Reckon that’d be reet tasty wi’a bag o’chips an’ some vinegar.

A few months ago they were working in butcher’s shops and driving coal lorries, one worked down a tin mine, one in an iron ore foundry. One built ships on the Tyne and expects one day to return there. But by the time he returns there will no more ships to build.

The coral lagoon they play in teems with fish – bonefish and trevally and a thousand smaller varieties they’ve never seen before and will never learn the names of. At the shallow northwestern entrance to the lagoon the coconut groves begin, home to vast sea bird colonies of petrels, boobies, frigates and terns. Enormous land crabs, eyes on stalks, stand guard over the roadway like sentries at a barracks.

We are on an island in the Pacific some 1300 miles south of Hawaii, the oldest coral atoll in the world, uninhabited and undiscovered. Until Captain James Cook sailed into its lagoon on Christmas Eve, 1777 and named the atoll for the festive season. Now, exactly 180 years later, the island is about to be made uninhabitable once more. At 17:47 hours on the evening of 8th November, 1957, a hydrogen bomb will be dropped
into the ocean from an aircraft. The first of six over the next ten months.

But that’s tomorrow. Today the air is still and in the late afternoon heat the five young servicemen run along the beach tearing off their boots and leaving them in the sand where the surf won’t reach them.

The shipbuilder lies in a large double bed, a shaft of early morning sunlight parting the blinds and softening his features. His daughter, Julianne, watches him for a moment then leans over and smooths out the bedspread. The scene on the island is only in her mind. It may never have happened, yet it’s as vivid as a memory.

Her father is already dead, his skin translucent so that in the dawn light the body’s skeletal frame shows through, more clearly than a skeleton ought. Soon she will identify his body for the ambulancemen and remake the bed after he is gone. Ought she to change the sheets or leave them for her mother?

Already there is a smell in the room like disinfectant.

She remembers conversations from her childhood - *What was it like Dad, was it hot?*

She remembers his laugh, his laconic replies. 

- *Hot? Course it were hot, Pet. Still, never too hot for a bit o’ a dance.*

And he would leap up and grab Mum’s hand and twirl her towards and then away from him and croon some line from Elvis or Duane Eddy or The Everlys until Mum brushed him off.

- *And, Dad, when the bomb went off, did they make you wear shiny suits and big shiny crash helmets?*

She sees him smile. Years later, when he can no longer leap up and grab or dance, she sees his eyes follow the trajectory of a football on the television screen.

- *What for, Pet? They just told us to look away, like, to shield our eyes with our hands.*

Even after so many years in a new country his Tyneside accent is still there, she can hear it now after he’s gone, hear him saying -

- *Ay, but they did hose us all down, afterwards. An’ they give us a postcard, like, of a mushroom cloud.*

He’d said this in the way of someone who’s received a gift when he’s expected nothing.

Julianne has seen that postcard, it’s mounted between the thick, cardboard pages of an old photograph album, held in place by three yellowing corner mounts, the fourth one missing so that the black and white postcard juts out when the page is turned. A vast white cloud billows
over a fat greyish stalk, the cloud held for an instant within the frame of the postcard, caught mid-billow.

-Pontoon!

Two cards, an ace and a jack, are slapped down on the long wooden trestle table. A loose pile of coins is swept up into a single pile.

-Bloody 'ell!

-Ah, yer jammy bugger!

-That's me out then.

-Jackie, me boy, you in or out?

The shipbuilder hasn't looked at his cards. The mail has arrived, off a troop ship that morning. He glances at the handwriting on the pale blue airmail letter he has just been handed. The letters have been stamped B.F.P.O. in black ink. British Forces Post Office. He slides a thumb nail beneath the fold, slits the letter open and begins to read. The card game has ended without him. The winner skims coins into his pocket counting as he goes. A chair is scraped back with a mutter. Someone reaches for a discarded newspaper, five days old.

-'Ere look, "Japanese Protests at nuclear tests ... More than 5,000 Japanese students, some carrying effigies of the British Prime Minister, last night clashed with police who intervened to stop the demonstration against hydrogen bomb tests."

There is a shuffling of chairs, a shrug. No one looks up.

-Yeah, well, stands to reason, dunnit? Japs got more reason 'n most to fear it, int they?

-Ain't you got anything else in that paper, 'Arry?

-"President Eisenhower's Republican party needs to win senate elections - nah!... Colombo: British Airbase handed over to Ceylon Government" -

-Bloody 'ell! Anuver one! Where's it gonna end, ay? We'll 'ave nuffink left at this rate.

-Alright, settle down. Wos on the box, 'Arry?

-BBC ya got "What's My Line", ITV "Abbot and Costello", "Wyatt Earp", "Highway Patrol" ... 'Ere ya go lads, "Sat'dee Night at the London Pally" starring the luvly Diana Dors.

-S'more like it!

-Sat'dee? How's about the football, then?

There is a flurry of pages and everyone leans closer.

-Wolves hope to increase their lead over West Brom at the top ... 'Ere y'are, Spurs playin' away to Sunderland, Chelsea at Blackpool.
-Well, it's already 'appened, innit? Five flippin' days ago. Wonder 'oo won?
-'Ere ya, Jack, Newcastle playin' away to Leicester.

The shipbuilder sits reading his airmail letter, its flimsy single sheet hanging limply between his fingers in the moist atmosphere. Behind him someone flicks on the television set. There is a burst of static. He frowns, leans forward and reads the words again

-Alright, Jackie lad?

At that moment an officer enters the hut in impossible creases and gleaming boots carrying clipboard and attache case, a sergeant at his elbow.

-Right then men, this is it. Zero hour minus 45 minutes. Take your positions at the Drop Zone.

-You 'eard the officer! Move yerselves, quick smart! screams the sergeant.

A ripple runs through the mess hut like wind across the surface of a lake. It's lost almost immediately in the scraping of chairs, the thud of boots on the hard ground, the murmur of voices growing louder then fading as the hall empties.

The black and white television set, mounted in a wooden box, continues to crackle away to itself. Harold MacMillan, dark suited like an undertaker, stands at the doorway of Number Ten, Downing Street, and speaks in measured tones to the microphones of waiting reporters: "When the nuclear tests are complete, as they soon will be, we shall be in the same position as the United States or Soviet Russia", he says. "We shall have made and tested the massive weapons. It will be possible then, to discuss on equal terms." A flash-bulb explodes and his face vanishes in a flash of white.

The mess hall is empty now, rows of wooden tables and benches deserted, a few items of kit strewn on the floor, an airmail letter lying opened on the table. The ceiling fan hangs motionless as though the heaviness of the evening is too much for it. An orderly comes in from the kitchen, face shiny from the ovens and the tropical heat, and turns off the television, replacing it with the forces radio station. There's a burst of static high up where the speakers are positioned.

-Wake up little Susie, wake up, we gotta go home -

The orderly wanders back into the kitchen. Everyone's outside piling into trucks, line after line of servicemen taking up positions, waiting for the fireworks to start. It's evening, that tropical sort of evening when day plummets from the sky and tumbles over the horizon in an instant.
The mosquitos are biting, the giant land crabs shuffle across the tracks away from the troops in a slow but ordered evacuation.

Standing on the beach, about half a mile from where the bomb will drop, the five young men wait, fiddling with sticky clothing, slapping at mosquitos, wondering whether they can light a cigarette. On the sand are a pile of cigarette ends where yesterday they were swimming.

Julianne has read reports in newspapers, articles in magazines. There’s even a support group but it’s in England. There’s no support here – the Australian Government has its own victims to ignore. While her mother made trips to the hospital and learnt about home-nursing, Julianne was busy, gathering statistics, reading medical reports about radiation-related birth defects in grandchildren, about skin defects, miscarriages, still births, birth deformities, thyroid cancer.

She touches her throat. Where exactly is the thyroid? She lays a hand on her stomach and she wonders. The British Government has never released figures for the hydrogen bombs tested in the Pacific.

She would tell others but who is there to tell?

Her mother is away, down the coast, visiting Auntie Joy who’s sick. Sickness follows her mother, it seems. In a moment Julianne will telephone her mother but bad news can wait. Instead, she wonders about the ambulance, about whether they will cover his face with a blanket – or is that something they only do in hospital dramas? Her father always hated to be the centre of attention. Almost as much as he hated the beach. This room, his final resting place, was chosen because it faced onto the street and not on to the crashing surf and smooth sands of the bay behind the house.

There have been 2057 known nuclear tests in the world. Julianne reads in the newspaper that the British Government is to scrap a quarter of its nuclear defence force. The Ministry of Defence says that all RAF freefall nuclear bombs will be removed at midnight. Which is forty years too late, she thinks.

The airforce gives them names. The first one, Grapple X, will be dropped from an RAF carrier. The men stand in rows, half a mile, a mile, two miles from the drop zone. It’s a quarter to six, dinner time. The shipbuilder hears his stomach grumble but he doesn’t feel like eating. Moisture runs down the middle of his back, collecting at the waist band of his fatigues. November, he thinks, and still a bugger of a hot day. Bit like standing in the engine room of a steam ship – except for these
bloody huge mosquitos. He splats one on his forehead and feels the blood mingle with his sweat. On either side of him, the others are horsing about.

-Ere, look at Bill’s boots, call that a shine?
-Ah, give it a rest!
-‘Ee ain’t got no time for shining, ee’s too busy-
-Wotchit! I ain’t tellin’ya-
-Yer wot? I ain’t doin’ nothin’-
-Leave orf, will ya?

They wrestle for a moment in the growing darkness, falling over on the white hot sand, a hat is knocked to the ground until a sergeant, somewhere in the trees barks an admonishment. They fall silent. The hat is retrieved.

The shipbuilder stands very still and wonders whether his boots are still attached to his feet, are still touching the sand. Jenny, his girl, is getting married today ... yesterday .... The dateline confuses him. Anyway, she’s getting married, to a bloke from the Co-op. An assistant manager. She’s waited nearly two years and now, with less than two months to go, she’s marrying some other bloke. He should have requested special leave, made something up, told ’em his girl was pregnant. Fat chance, now. Could have been with her right now instead of-

Far above in the Southern sky a buzz of engines heralds the approaching aircraft. Heads go up, hands shielding eyes from the last rays of sunlight. There it is, a vast bomber, fuselage glinting silver in the dusk, propellers whining then roaring as the aircraft veers eastwards. The men stiffen as one, muscles tensing, voices dying away. The shipbuilder feels a mosquito stinging his ear but he doesn’t brush it away. The aircraft is distant now, nearly at the dropzone.

Silence. Is it there yet? Now? Surely -

There is nothing, no command, no gunfire warning, just the opening of the bomb hatch. A cheer goes up from the watching troops.

“At the end of the countdown, there was a blinding electric blue light, of such an intensity I had not seen before or ever since. I pressed my hands hard to my eyes, then, realised my hands were covering my eyes. This terrific light power, or rays, were actually passing through the tarpaulin, through the towel, and through my head and body, for what seemed like ten to twelve seconds, it may have been longer. After that, the pressure wave, which gave a feeling such as when one is deep under-
water. This was followed by a sort of vacuum suction wave, to give a feeling of one’s whole body billowing out like a balloon.”
Observer, Monte Bello Test Site, 16 MAY 1956.

The scream of an ambulance shatters the suburban illusion. That was quick. It seems like only moments ago that she rang. Julianne stands at the bedroom window and looks over the red roofs of a Brisbane street, cars parked in driveways, jacarandas littering the pavement in mauve blossoms. Mrs Szrecki next door, wheeling her garbage onto the roadside, stopping now and looking blankly at the ambulance coming towards her.

On the dressing table, almost hidden by a jumble of pills and medicines, is a small framed photograph. It shows five young men, pale skinned, sunken chested, jug eared – typical English lads on National Service, knobbly-kneed in loose khaki shorts. One gives a thumbs-up sign, another bares buck teeth, the third holds up two fingers in a victory salute, the fourth looks off to one side, pointing. In the middle stands the shipbuilder, slightly side-on, round-shouldered, squinting, one hand raised to his forehead as though in nonchalant salute. Or perhaps to shield his eyes from the sun.

The ambulance has driven up onto the curb, dismissive of neat lawns and flowerbeds. Doors are flung open, a stretcher slides to the ground, chrome gleaming in the midday sun. Two ambulance men – no, a man and a woman, both in shirt sleeves – push and slide and open and close doors and handles with the silence of expertise. She must let them in.

She turns slowly, holding her swollen stomach, pausing for a moment until the baby gives a feeble kick. She breathes outwards then, and goes to open the front door.
She lives on one side of a hill that has, on its other side, the word "Hollywood" in large white letters. People come here from all over, drawn like Christians to a hanging. I came here, though I was neither Christian nor condemned prisoner. When I left I was both.

She takes me to the top of the hill where the city is spread out below us, bigger than some nations. She points - "This place was used as a location in a movie once." But I soon learn most of this city was used as a location in a movie once. I learn not to be amazed.

She knows this city well, too well for someone who is here temporarily. She acts as though she belongs here, as though this were a place where normal people could live. "I'm popping out," she says, "to get pop tarts and oreos," but it takes an hour to drive to the store. This city has 2,400 kms of freeway. I wait for her and 295 TV channels clamour for my attention until she returns. Did I explain I came here to take her back with me?

She has a day job working for a theme park. She has a night job too, but I find that out later. So, we drive to the theme park along the Santa Ana Freeway passing the billboards that are marked as landmarks on her street directory and she tells me about her work -

"We have an ideology," she says which means she has learnt how to smile for eight hours a day. When she lived with me she didn’t smile for eight minutes a day. Perhaps I didn’t pay her enough. At the theme park the parking stations are colour coded which discriminates against people who are colour challenged. "One man," she tells me, "parked in the green section and roamed the brown section for four days until someone rescued him." It’s an urban myth. They’re making a movie about it. She parks her orange car in the orange section, collects an orange ticket and boards a bus driven by a character from a cartoon. Inside the theme park
everyone smiles and she smiles too because this is her domain. Her teeth are whiter than I remember them being, her hair blonder. She glows with healthy vitality and wholesomeness. One of the children she fondles might be a talent scout in disguise and she smiles while she waits to be discovered.

We join a queue and each ride that we go on has a theme, and each ride is faster and scarier than the last.

"Could we not", I suggest, "start with the last ride and work backwards so that each ride will become progressively slower and more friendly?"

She stares at me and I realise this is not an option. I am sitting in a hollowed out log as I say this – not a real log, I mean not a timber log, a reinforced plastic and fibreglass log, which here, is real. As the log tips over the brim of a twenty metre vertical drop I remember that this is a love story. We are riding Death Canyon and my stomach leaps out of my mouth, my eyeballs pop out of my head, my hair turns white and there is a click as an automated camera records this profound moment forever. It’s ok though, we are all animated cartoon characters and we snap instantly back to our original form.

"Life," she says afterwards, "is a metaphor for Death Canyon."

"Don’t you mean, Death Canyon is a metaphor for life?" I say.

She stares at me and says: “No.”

We find her orange car in its orange stable and join the freeway. On my left are a cluster of tall, shining buildings like those at the start of a soap opera or a cop show or a sit com. Am I looking at a film set or is this really the city? Where is the city? There are no landmarks to tell me where I am.

“This is the spot,” she says, “where James Dean’s car crashed.”

She looks up expectantly, proud of her city and I remember why it is I lost my head over her. I remember that James Dean was decapitated.

Did I mention she works for a theme park? Her home is a theme park, each room faster and scarier than the last. I’m afraid to go to the bathroom in case someone tries to sell me a souvenir of my visit. Inside the bathroom cabinet is the healthy vitality and wholesomeness that she buys from a store downtown.

“Do you always travel by car?” I ask her but in this city such a question is like asking “Are you alive?” Some people live their entire lives in their cars – and not because they don’t have five bedroom homes and a Mexican maid in some distant suburb.

“We could take a bus ...” she concedes. “It might be cool.”
Outside the rain falls in crisp bursts like soda on bourbon, falling on those who don’t have cars. The bus arrives.

“Can I getta transfer?” she asks the bus driver and when he nods she dips her ticket into his machine. Where I come from, a transfer is a fake tattoo. She sits holding tightly onto the handrail, waiting for the bus to hurtle into the Tunnel of Death, spin on its wheels and splash into a waterslide. When the bus trundles to the next stop she looks vaguely disconcerted.

In the street outside the drains overflow and a river surges along the gutter.

She takes me to a theme cafe where the decor is neon and over burritos and chilli dogs she offers me post-romantic love — it is flexible and hygienic, it comes in many colours and sizes, I can use latex and pay for it with plastic. Above her head is a gold plated toilet seat from Gracelands. We are served theme food with sour cream and in my glass of soda I can see the future, fizzing and popping in a billion tiny bubbles winking into life then exploding into oblivion. The future is here in this diner in this city. I ask for the bill but all I get is a check. This is not my future.

Outside the streets flow like rivers, washing the city into the bay and young hopefuls from midwestern farms wait to be rescued by emergency crews with TV cameras and on-the-spot news reporters. She watches and I might as well not be here.

At night she locks her doors because cosmetically perfect people with chemically induced personalities roam the suburbs committing ugly crimes with semi-automatics. In the morning these same people queue for screen tests at Universal Studios. In this city you don’t watch the sunset, you walk on it and the footprints are set in concrete. In this city streets are called boulevards and are lined with used-car lots. If you’re lucky you can get arrested picking up a hooker. If you’re luckier still, you can be the hooker that gets picked up.

But I forgot — this is a love story.

She locks her doors at night but now I realise she is not inside when the locks are turned. She is out in the night waiting to make her fortune, waiting to be discovered, waiting to be arrested and photographed. She locks her doors at night but it is to keep me in, not the night out.

On my last day she finds a suburb far up in the hills, she points and says, “this place has never been used as a location in a movie” and I stare around me in wonder. They should turn this place into a theme park.
Tomorrow there are two seats booked on an airline to take us home, one in my name, one in hers. When I tell her she smiles a smile that tells me I can buy her seat not her. I remember her telling me once that she was homesick, homesick for places she'd never been. I practise smiling but I haven't had her training, all I can see is the mist on the distant freeway and I wonder if I'll find my way back.
The brambles are returning.
They're creeping up the steep slope below the house,
Reclaiming old terraces,
Starving the wildflowers
And choking the boles of stunted Tuscan olive trees.
I fought them back one hot summer
With leather gloves and a cane-cutter's blade,
As barbed purple stems snagged my clothing
In a kind of urgent supplication.
A thousand little stings
For each ten by ten foot cleared,
And at the end,
My forearms bloodied with welts.

The brambles are returning,
And in dark, steamy holes beneath their cover
Fat wild pigs drop blind, pink litters.
The local dogs tense suddenly at their fringes -
Every muscle quivering to the scent -
And bark at night at the misty ghosts
That eddy coolly through our dreams.

When I had cut back the worst of them that summer
I found a fine stone wall
Taller than a man,
And ancient revetments
So old that even the stooped matriarchs of the village
 Couldn’t name the owners -
Though there was talk of little Narciso,
The deaf mute,
Who loved the girl from Ponte di Sorana
But never married,
And who died in a fig tree alone,
Near the village square.
(The details about him were a little hazy. 
If he beat his dog, no-one remembered. 
Only the poetry of him has survived our wonderful, wasteful memories 
And the brambles.)

And so the brambles are returning. 
In spite of old scars
I welcome them this time. 
We have forfeited our tenancy 
And slowly
They're coming back to take what was theirs. 
The wall will be obscured. 
The terraces will disappear. 
An old discarded glove 
That a young man toiled in one summer 
Will be consumed, 
And years from now 
We will all seem a little less clear. 
Old men –
Still children when the smoke from our bramble fires 
Sullied their grandmother's washing – 
Will recall us only dimly, 
And stripped of our worst features 
By the rasping vines of the brambles 
We may even - like Narciso - seem a little better for it: 
Joanna who took them on a little at a time, 
Robin who used the herbicide neat 
And wiped out a hillside, 
And the skinny young man 
Who would lean against the wall of prickle 
With a raised left forearm 
Like Achilles with a shield, 
Swinging the blade like a weapon
At the exposed green root stems.
All that railing!

The brambles are returning.
We are ready for them.
Calmly waiting.
This time they will meet no resistance.
It's a trick the seven year old has been practising all morning; spacewalking around the palings with the balance bar of her arms outstretched. Her sandals are blue, the blue of her mother's plastic necklace the girl once broke, then hid, piling its kaleidoscope of planets into a box under her bed. Now she threads herself along the string of the fence looking down to two striped feet with their strapped-in cargo of toes. Her father lies in the house behind, his limbs aligned for visitors. His polished shoes rest exactly on one horizontal line of the chenille bedspread. In her pockets are the two things she has stolen from his bedside table. No one has noticed. All morning her mother's eyes have been brown stones sinking beneath the weight of water. The girl does not touch the heaviness of the objects she has taken for fear of a similar drowning. Still she knows their dimensions; the tin that becomes the words 'cool' and 'slick' when held in the palm of the hand, the sailor's face riding the crest of a wave, and the name Dr Pat. Her father
once taught her how to open the lid without spilling the contents. He let her twist it back and forth while pressing down until she felt the seal give up its aromatic splinters.

In her other pocket is a hard black stem with a chewed end. She keeps the two apart by the warmth of a body-width. She measures their coldness this way, as she measures the fence by the flat spaces where she can place her feet and not by the spikes that divide them.

For months her dreams will be filled with impaled things, landlocked sailors buried above ground, bushfires, but for now she remains balanced – the pipe on one side, tobacco tin on the other and in the middle, her unlit heart.

STONE

The dreamtime Numbakulla took their knives to its formless shape, imagining transparencies of the first Arunda tribe below the surface.

It seemed simple enough, to carve away all that wasn’t human, the miracle of toes, fingers and eyes appearing as if they’d been imprisoned, and now were free. They didn’t know that Stone had drawn them to it, yearning for their transformations.

Enormous stone figures once shook the earth with their movements. In Penzance there’s a footprint that belonged to a Cornish giant. In Iceland too, the hoofmark of an eight-legged horse who’s gallop spanned territories.
Runes mourn the passing of such heroic fictions. They sulk inside the soft confines of their task, having no patience with the ambiguity of symbol, nor with painless pasts and futures tattooed with a feather on their surface. Stone predicts in its own way and time. Suicides who jump come closest to knowing this, as they turn in air to see a ravaged cliff-face move up to meet their expectations. There is a calm fatality to it, as if Stone is practising its shapechanging. The faster they fall, the smoother and more impassive the face, until those who go this way are so reminded of their own elusive god, that in the end the brokenness barely surprises them.
BEYOND PIMBA

Nothing here is tall enough
to give the wind voice
or, excepting day’s edge,
throw shadows to modulate the sun
over a plainsong of saltbush
unharried by track or pole
which distances could clutch
for degrees of scale.
Only the heat haze moves.
In mockery of rain on glass
wavers against hulks of mesas
moored on an horizon
antique before time became a thought.
I shy a stone at silence
cast about for a phrase to encompass this place
but like a leap to see over a wall too high
my lexicon falls away.

The road north a scrap of black thread.
Introduction

The Macquarie Dictionary defines an “interstice” as “a small or narrow space between things or parts; small chink, crevice, or opening” (915). A similar definition is found in the book Sociologia degli Interstizi (Sociology of the Interstices [1998]) by the Italian sociologist Giovanni Gasparini. He argues that an “interstice” is first of all “a narrow space separating two different bodies or two parts of the same body: therefore it refers primarily to the experience of being in-between two things or objects” (1. My translation). Gasparini offers a second reading of “interstice” which coincides with an extreme situation, an exceptional event in relation to the ordinary and the normal. Thus the “interstitial” experience is defined as something marginal and peculiar, outside the expectations one may have of day-to-day life (171).

My study, although basing its central argument on the first definition of “interstice”, also makes use of the second to enter a comparative analysis of two authors, Italo Calvino and Gerald Murnane, whose narratives can be defined as “interstitial”. This is by no means a characteristic peculiar to Calvino’s and Murnane’s fiction, and in fact one could well argue that most of contemporary fiction, especially in recognition of its strong metafictional thrust, might be called “interstitial”. Let us take an author like Murray Bail, for instance, whose narrative, especially Eucalyptus (1998), could be fruitfully interpreted by applying the “interstitial” framework. In Eucalyptus the act of story telling woven by the mysterious young man opens an interesting “interstitial” space between the enclosed garden of native eucalypts wrought by the pro-
tagonist, Holland, and the outside world impersonated by the many suitors of his daughter. It is the in-betweenness of the story telling that in the end breaks the imprisoning enclosure detaining Holland’s daughter. The Italian author Antonio Tabucchi, to name one more example, devoted a whole collection of short stories, *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1987), to narrativizing what, in the “Preface” to his book, he calls “the interstitial spaces of our quotidian reality” (9. My translation).

The middle, the hybrid, this timeless zone in which the self can lose (but also find) itself in an endless mental and physical wandering has indeed fascinated many contemporary authors. And yet it is rare to find the same degree of attention and consistency that Calvino and Murnane have applied over the years to the discussion and fictionalization of the “interstice” and the attendant zones enveloping or bordering it.

“There is another world but it is in this one”

On page 100 of Murnane’s novel *Inland* (1988) we read the sentence “There is another world but it is in this one.” The sentence is in italics because is borrowed from the French poet Paul Eluard. The narrator of *Inland* finds himself drawn to that sentence in which he recognizes preoccupations similar to his own in that he himself believes in the existence of another world – “there is another world, and I have seen parts of that world on most days of my life. But the parts of that world are drifting past and cannot be lived in” (100) – and in the inductive assumption that “this one” coincides with fiction itself:

But what place exactly do the words *this one* refer to? They cannot refer to the space between the covers of the book where I found them. I have never yet found a book whose preliminary pages and whose inner pages belong together. And in any case, the name of the author in front of my book is not Paul Eluard but Patrick White. The words *this one* can only refer to the so-called world between the covers of a book I have never seen: a book whose author is a man named Paul Eluard. (101)

The collapsing of the “another world” into the world of reality is discouraged by Murnane’s narrator who explicitly says that this other world “cannot be lived in”. The reader is left guessing what this third and undefined dimension might be and the relationships that it has with reality and fiction. In fact a relationship between fiction, within
which the “another world” resides, and reality, from which parts of this other world can be seen drifting past, becomes apparent. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), Calvino operates a distinction between three worlds which can simultaneously provide a key for the interpretation of Murnane’s three-dimensional juxtaposition, an insight into Calvino’s narrative world and an initial poetic connection between the two authors. He says that:

The artist’s imagination is a world of potentialities that no work will succeed in realizing. What we experience by living is another world, answering to other forms of order and disorder. The layers of words that accumulate on the page, like the layers of colors on the canvas, are yet another world, also infinite but more easily controlled, less refractory to formulation. The link between the three worlds is the *indefinable* spoken of by Balzac: or, rather, I would call it the *unde cidable*, the paradox of an infinite whole that contains other infinite wholes. (97)

In Calvino the separation and qualification of the three worlds is apparent; “imagination”, “reality” and “writing” have their own rules and functions. They are different and yet connected, but it is precisely this connection, the place where they meet or interact, and the “how” this connection is brought about that Calvino defines as “undecidable”. Taken separately they make sense and one can nominate them and analyse them, but as soon as they mix the study becomes fuzzy, undecided, blurred. We can gaze on and possess them as individual entities but not as a unit.

It could safely be argued that for Murnane the “another world” coincides with “imagination” as well, or, as Murnane would probably prefer, “pure thought”. In an interview with Ludmilla Forsyth, Murnane stated that:

Somewhere under the Red Sea, I believe, are places where the magma from inside the earth rises up through cracks and turns into beads of metal when it meets the water of the ocean. This tremendously hot stuff pours into the water and suddenly it’s beads or pellets of gold and zinc and whatever. I think of my thoughts as bursting out from some unfathomable place and then turning into all these funny, lumpy little things called words. And the words are valuable, which is nice to know; but the hot stuff, that’s something of a mystery. (45)

Murnane’s thoughts come from “some unfathomable place” and are
“something of a mystery”. What is left of them, their visible and interpretable shell, is made of words. In Murnane fiction becomes a sort of translation where “thought” is translated into words which, although carrying a resonance and echo of the original, have lost its essence. The “other world” is in “this one”, but it is hidden, confused, hardly distinguishable between the folds of language. As imagination encounters language, as both Calvino and Murnane appear to believe, it undergoes a process of transformation which ultimately fails to render it in its elemental form.

One could be brought to infer that for Calvino and Murnane fiction has the function of giving some tangible form, however inadequate this might be, to the world of imagination and pure thought. This is partly correct, especially in relation to the all-encompassing cognitive push that writing acquires in Calvino’s and Murnane’s writing. “Murnane”, argues Don Anderson, “has always been concerned with the impossibility of representation, and with the necessity of hermeneutics” (3). As for Calvino, his later fiction, as JoAnn Cannon has remarked, “seems increasingly to be inspired by a spinta conoscitiva (cognitive thrust): indeed the author believed that such a cognitive impulse must animate any valid work of fiction” (52). They are both writers interested in using fiction to know better the world inside and outside them. And yet, ironically, their quest for knowledge achieved through fiction invariably becomes stuck in fiction itself as if language, although striving to represent and give form to something else, ends up reflecting and talking about itself. As a result Calvino’s and Murnane’s books, despite having as their primary purpose the arrival into the world of imagination and reality, continue to travel endlessly in the “interstitial” space of fiction. Recasting Peter Beilharz’s summary of Bernard Smith’s work, one could say that their “work seem to invest with new meaning Montaigne’s wisdom: that not the arrival but the journey matters” (150).

Their fiction does not lift the veil placed over imagination and reality, whatever their meanings might be, but probes and explores the space in-between from which glimpses of both bordering zones may be commanded from time to time. Calvino’s and Murnane’s books are not so much about presenting and describing arrivals as mapping the uninterrupted journey towards those invisible and never-to-be-reached arrivals. What we are reading and confronting are not therefore definitions and ultimate or definitive insights into imagination and reality but profound and detailed introspections into a liminal zone which is a mixture and a combination, a fusion, a translation in which the original
constantly resonates but never discloses itself entirely. Borrowing a sentence from Paul Carter's *Living in a New Country*, a study of Calvino's and Murnane's work ought to preoccupy itself not with the question of "how to arrive" but on that of "how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events." (101) It is the encounter between language, imagination and reality, which in turn brings about fiction and its interstitial function, that interests me here.

**Fiction as an extreme experience**

Fiction as interpreted and practised by Calvino and Murnane is not only in-between imagination and reality, it is also an extreme experience, an act that requires rigour, devotion and a degree of spiritual and also physical detachment from the quotidian world. It thus becomes a process leading to some kind of marginalisation and isolation. This is somewhat corroborated by the original personalities of both Calvino and Murnane but also by their unique and highly individual styles and approaches to fiction. Their attention to, even obsession with, language is notorious. In many of his theoretical essays Calvino reiterates the need to be linguistically precise. In a sense his ideal of language was silence, but it is a silence resonating with and punctuated by words. In his later fiction, *Mr Palomar* (first published in Italian, 1983. English translation, 1986), Calvino puts these thoughts in the mind of the protagonist:

> In fact, silence can also be considered a kind of speech, since it is a rejection of the use to which others put words; but the meaning of this silent speech lies in its interruptions, in what is, from time to time, actually said, giving a meaning to what is unsaid. (94)

For Calvino the written and spoken language were a pragmatic and commercial necessity that, given a workable alternative, he would have happily done without.

Murnane's discussion of "true fiction", his famous refusal to conform to conventional narratives by insisting on stripping his fiction of names, dialogues and clear plots, even in the face of commercial unpopularity, testify to an uncompromised search for a medium through which metaphysical and philosophical preoccupations can be firmly engaged. In an article explaining his role as narrative consultant for the literary journal *Meanjin*, Murnane stated that:
An interesting story convinces me from the first few sentences that the author has written the story in order to discover the meaning of some part of his or her experience. (If any person concludes from this that I prefer to read stories written in the first person or stories that are obviously autobiographical, then that person has not begun to understand what I am saying here.) A boring story usually puts me in mind of an author who is confused or vain or anxious to impress or who thinks that *Meanjin* stories have to be about the things that some journalists call issues or have to have characters who talk about ideas. (1989: 193-194)

If on the one side Murnane’s uncompromising poetic stance has gained him the respect of many critics, on the other it has alienated many readers.

It is not that Murnane’s characters do not talk about ideas, they obviously do, but they do not flaunt their knowledge or their existentialist drama on a theatrical set with lights trained at them. They are not heroes directly confronting, and as such suffering or conquering, big issues. On the contrary, they are ordinary people who go about their life. They circumnavigate ideas and issues rather than plunging into them with their hand posed dramatically on their forehead. Theirs is a journey toward but never “in” the “other world” and as such the latter is experienced not as a full blown picture but rather as metaphors, snippets, sketches, glimpses which are always in need of interpretation. Besides, this is the only possible function that writing can have; it cannot pretend to be the “other world” or to offer a faithful representation of it. It can only, in Murnane’s words, “reproduces the contour of our thoughts” (1986: 516).

Calvino’s characters are more daring and sometimes find themselves uttering the thoughts and the ideas that their narratives set out to investigate. Yet they do it almost inadvertently, as if stumbling onto something or as if being struck by a sudden illumination. However, these are not ever-lasting events or apparitions and they disappear as quickly as they came leaving the character as mystified as before if not even more confused. In this sense Palomar, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, represents the quintessential Calvinian character. He is a befuddled ordinary man in search of answers to his many metaphysical and existential questions. But his innumerable attempts to learn more about the “other world” invariably disappoint him: “Only if he manages to bear all the aspects in mind at once can he begin the second phase of
the operation: extending his knowledge to the entire universe. It would suffice not to lose patience, as he soon does. Mr Palomar goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything" (7).

Palomar’s continuous and uninterrupted attempt at naming, cataloguing and ordering the chaotic nature of life and imagination is reminiscent of Bouvvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert’s characters in the eponymous novel, but as opposed to them Palomar lacks the arrogance, and of course the naivety, afforded to Flaubert’s characters by the alleged power of science. Whereas Bouvvard and Pécuchet were convinced that one could make sense of the world through a sound scientific knowledge, Palomar no longer has a solid basis on which to read and study life. Even his language is inadequate and always struggling to arrive at conclusive and satisfying arguments; continuously contradicting itself by changing and readjusting its vocabulary. The incapacity of science to offer definitive answers to the conundrums of life is emphasised by Calvino’s decision to name his character after a famous American observatory. Palomar is thus the man who looks at the world through the “objective” lenses of a powerful telescope, and yet his reading remains fragmented, subjective and ultimately inconclusive. While Flaubert in Bouvvard and Pécuchet represented the limitations, indeed the failure of positivism, Calvino’s Mr Palomar is a convincing portrayal of the postmodern condition.

Palomar and Murnane’s characters have many things in common. Like Palomar, Murnane’s characters are the postmodern equivalent of Bouvard and Pécuchet. They have replaced the comical assertiveness of Flaubert’s characters with a comical clumsiness arising from their attempts to enter into a realm, the “other world”, which is also the world of the definitive and unquestionable “Truth”, the ur-text of pure thought, or as Imre Salusinzsky has called it, the “paradise-lost” (3). Their failure is not determined by their individual inadequacy but rather by the insufficient tools afforded to them by language and by a tentative self which has irreparably lost a sense of unity and harmony in relation to itself and the world surrounding it. In Calvino and Murnane the fragmentation of the self is indistinguishable from the fragmentation of language. The former has indeed transformed language from a faithful referential instrument into an insidious companion whose voice cannot be trusted. It is in this sense that in Calvino and Murnane the struggle of the self is inevitably linked to the struggle of language.

Mr Palomar, as Francesca Serra has noted (1996), is narrativized on a
constant renegotiation of language where the text is propelled by dubitative signals such as “but”, “perhaps”, “or”, “instead”, “maybe” and so on. Their purpose is to contradict or question the preceding statement in a kind of cannibalistic act where in order to survive language must first negate, annihilate, itself. Hence the digressive and fragmented narrative structuration of *Mr Palomar*, a feature which characterized many of Murnane’s fictions as well where the narrative follows a zig-zagging and sometimes backward line rather than the traditional linear and forward trajectory.

Digressions and detours testify to the arduous journey from the point of departure to the point of arrival. They do not negate these points, but rather than nominating them they allude to them via their in-betweeness. The narrative focus is necessarily away from the static points of the journey and firmly placed on the always changing and moving middle trait. It is this movement that counts, it is this approach that is narrativized, and it is this interstice that is brought into the foreground of the text. Further, it is “this world”, this interstitial fiction, that we, as readers, are called on to interpret and reckon with.

**The Plains and Mr Palomar**

In Murnane’s fiction the interstice, this journey in-between, is magisterially represented in *The Plains*.

*The Plains* is narrated by a nameless “I” who takes the reader into a realm whose connotational elements are experienced as if enveloped in an oneiric film which simultaneously reconnects with and removes us from the landscape we usually associate with everyday life. Images of what we are used to calling reality provide Murnane with the stepping stones by which his narrative enters more volatile, diaphanous, gaseous territories whose visibility is refracted, as if seen from within a prism. Commenting on Murnane’s books, Imre Salusinszky has used the visual notion of the “ghosting effect”, of that instance which “sometimes blurs a television image” and whose effect “show[s], fleetingly, how something would appear if it could be seen from two positions at once” (11).

*The Plains* appears as an intricate dream or wrapping device enveloping and muffling, veiling and obscuring its central kernel, qua the objective, apparently undisputed and non-fictional dimension. Yet Murnane is not so much interested in articulating a polarising context between two highly problematic and controversial realms as in illus-
trating the now painful, now comical, attempts by the individual to come to terms with life and with the unintelligibility of the original urtext. And so is Calvino who clearly positions Palomar within that interstitial zone from which reality and imagination are continuously negotiated. *Mr Palomar* was published in 1983, four years after *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*. It is also the last book that Calvino wrote before he suddenly died in September 1985. Both the strong autobiographical elements of the novel and its essayistic style make of *Mr Palomar* a literary testament as well as poetic manifesto comprising most of Calvino’s poetic and stylistic preoccupations. The continuity with his previous work, especially *If on a Winter Night a Traveler* (1979), *Invisible Cities* (1972) and the *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), is emphasised by the privileging of sight over other senses. Palomar is a powerful eye who constantly watches and observes the world outside him and the world within him in the attempt to either match them or to make sense of their irreconcilability. And it is precisely this irreconcilability that ends up rendering imagination and reality so chaotic and unspeakable, so out of reach.

Sight has always been one of Calvino’s main themes and literary tools. It propelled the narrative of Calvino’s first book of fiction, *Il nido dei sentieri di ragno* (1947), and offered *The Barons in the Trees* (1957) the paradigmatic foundation on which to base an individual’s reflection on nature and the cultural and moral values of a whole society. But whereas in the first period of Calvino’s production, let us say until but excluding the *Cosmicomics* (1965), sight enveloped the outside and the inside as a whole, in the subsequent production the world is divided into minimal segments which Calvino’s protagonists proceed to analyze fastidiously in the hope that the micro will disclose a readable image of the macro. This process of segmentation, of obsessive dissection of the phenomenological and imaginative worlds is never so apparent as in *Mr Palomar*. If sight is the scalpel in the hands of the protagonist, language, the fissure, the interstitial zone par excellence, is the medium through which the narrator translates for us, the reader, Palomar’s discoveries.

But as in Murnane’s novels, Palomar’s discoveries are also and invariably coloured by the sense of negativity; by the feeling that the result they set up to achieve has not yet been grasped. The intriguing insight brought forward by Calvino and Murnane in their work is that what we have been given to believe as real, unquestionable, matter-of-fact, in other words reality, is in fact absent, and that the ur-text of imagination is utterly unspeakable. What renders this poetic position innovative is
that the absence of reality is not supplemented by an alternative reality to be found in fiction, which may offer comfort and a sense of security and cosiness. On the contrary, as a metaphor and dream, fiction has the ability to remind us that we are eternal travellers lost in a middle way between the “absence” of reality and the undecidibility of the ur-text.

Murnane understands literature not so much as representation but as exploration, for its supposed object of representation, qua the ur-text, is not a given, undisputable truth, the reality we inhabit, but rather a chaos of meanings and signs. Similarly, Calvino understands literature as a knowledge-making process shedding light on the fragmented (Calvino uses the word pulviscolo) condition of the contemporary self. 

*The Plains* opens with the account of a journey which, twenty years before, brought the narrator from Australia (the apparently solid image of actuality) to the plains (the shimmering, multilayered, metamorphic, wrapping-like landscape of mental experience). Yet this trip is only alluded to, never described in detail. The result is that in the first section of the book the reader is not given factual insights into either the coastal zone from where the narrator comes or the plains to which he travels. The reader is immersed instead in a kind of zone in-between which divides two dimensions whose traits are disclosed to the reader by means of theoretical digressions. Even the boundaries between coast and plains are not clearly definable: “And I cannot even say that at a certain hour I knew I had left Australia” (3).

The second part of *The Plains* describes the protagonist’s long sojourn in the plains. They are years spent in endless conjectures about the plains, other people’s feelings and thoughts, the act of watching and that of translating mental images and feelings into a film or a book. These are years spent in an interstitial time; in a time marked by waiting and long periods of silence.

Clearly the plains, although given as the point of arrival, are never reached by the protagonist. Their essence will continue to escape him and their impreciscrutability will keep pushing him into a vorticious mental journey which defies the very notion of arrival. Not only are the plains a mirage, they are also defined as the extreme outpost, as a zone at the margins, far away and estranged from quotidian reality. They combine thus both meanings of “interstice”: the in-betweenness and the peripheric.

Palomar, like the protagonist in *The Plains*, does not stop travelling, either mentally or physically. And like the protagonist in *The Plains*, he spends his life waiting in silence and thinking about his state of waiting
and what might put an end to this time which ticks away in a space in-between actions. But unlike the protagonist in Murnane's book, Palomar does not have a set destination in mind, or rather, this destination keeps on moving away from him or otherwise changes altogether, forcing the character to reappraise his journey. There is something though that never changes in Palomar's travelling, and that is the means of transport: it is always the sense of sight. It is his eyes that take him around and nudge him forward and backward and side-ways in a constant movement made up of images. In Mr Palomar there are no trains or airplanes or cars or boats to speak of but only places where Palomar finds himself as if his eyes have conjured them up:

“All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun,” the swimmer Palomar thinks, “but inside my head, in the circuits between eyes and brain. I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me. This is my element, the only one I can know in some way.” (12)

And yet, like in Murnane, the meaning of the world arrived at through a profound, almost osmotic, understanding of “pure thought” is impeded by the filter of language. As soon as the imaginings projected onto the retina are expressed into words they become uncertain and imprecise. How can I be sure, Palomar seems to ask to himself, that a given sentence or set of words can effectively translate the original image? Could it not be better conveyed by using this word rather than that? The problem of translation is compounded by the continuous readjustment of Palomar's perception of the world and the fact that even his viewing is never certain but always susceptible to changes:

So then: there is a window that looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here, what is there? The world still - what else could there be? With a little effort of concentration Palomar manages to shift the world from in front of him and set it on the sill, looking out. The world is also there, and for the occasion has been split into a looking world and a world looked at. And what about him, also known as “I”, namely Mr Palomar? (102)

In the end it is the richness and the multifariousness of Palomar's perception and imagination, his inability to reconcile the many different and divergent views he has of the world into a cohesive and fixed structure that refuses a comfortable and safe point of arrival. If the self is
fragmented so is its language and the world it is plunged into. This determines a condition of vagrancy which in turn brings about the existential and postmodern experience of being in-between, inescapably locked in a frantic, timeless and boundless waiting room.

Palomar travels and waits, waits to be served at a cheese shop, at a butcher shop, in a deli, waits for somebody to tell him the truth about a Mexican temple, waits to make some sense of the sky and the many constellations, of waves and animal life. At first he is patient and determined to get to the solution. But as his imagination multiplies the possible answers and his language collapses into a heap of alternatives, Palomar gets increasingly nervous and anxious. Yet he knows that there is no way out of this interstitial condition since its origin is firmly grounded in himself. That is why we find him waiting still in the next chapter of the book as if nothing had happened. Palomar and vagrancy are bound together indissolubly until the end, that is Palomar’s death. In the last paragraph of Mr Palomar we read:

“If time has to end, it can be described, instant by instant,” Palomar thinks, “and each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen.” He decides that he will set himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them all he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies. (113)

Conclusion

If it is correct to assume that Calvino and Murnane are two of the most representative commentators of the postmodern condition, it follows that the notion of “interstitiality” is one of the prominent characteristics of postmodernism. There is not doubt that the fragmentation of the self and the attendant problematization of language, although experienced and to a certain extent narrativized in modern fiction as well, are paradigmatic to postmodern fiction, simultaneously propelling the narrative proper and the poetic and theoretical preoccupations of postmodern authors. As a result notions such as time, space, landscape and its apperception, on which until last century some claims to transparency could be made, become increasingly blurred. Their reappraisial, together with that of the self and language, has determined a renegotiation of a set of cultural and philosophical values that in turn has chal-
lenged our position of beings in the world. One of the results of this debate is to be found in the gradual disappearance of tangible points of arrivals, be they master narratives or universally accepted truths. This has also made a vast zone, until recently unseen or unexplored, emerge in-between those almost taken for granted truths. I have called this zone “interstitial” and through the discussion of Calvino’s and Murnane’s fiction I have attempted to describe it and some of the ways in which the postmodern self negotiates and deals with it. It is not a comfortable zone to find oneself in but perhaps the thought that it is better to search and question than be under the illusion of being satisfied and cosy in a home that no longer exists could make it more bearable. As Murnane says in Inland: “Do not merely suppose, reader. Look with your eyes at what is in front of you” (64).

Works cited


MAYA LINDEN

THE MIRROR GAME

"... You are suspended in me
beautiful and frozen, I
preserve you, in me you are safe."
Margaret Atwood
'Tricks with Mirrors'

And now there seems no escape. So quickly my world has changed into a vast emptiness, endless stretches of creamy whiteness continue unplundered and unmarked. Where I walk, I leave no footprints. My feet hover on this soft carpeted air and trace careful circles around now inverted lamp shades which open up like exotic glowing flowers on their taut electrical stalks. I trace the dry white plaster of a ceiling rose with my bare toes. Flakes of crisp paint splinters split and drift upward, away from me. The bare light bulbs are so close to me now, everything glows a fresh yellow gold.

I can see nothing of myself, only where I walk, following this unfamiliar trail across ceiling arches into the darkened dip of an arched hallway roof. I step up into a doorway - below me, emptiness - the chill whiteness of smooth plaster beckons from the spread of my bedroom ceiling. I step down into it and begin to walk the peripheries of the roof - the sharply angled corners, the spiderwebs and dust which have only ever been above me, threatening to fall. Now I conquer them, now the walls are close and silent. I cannot feel them but I sense the smooth echo of their mute paleness, their blank politeness. I am trying to find a way out of this suddenly inverted world - running across sparse ornamental plaster, through a maze of light fittings - I cannot seem to find a place where I will cease to suspend in this horrifying limbo. Frustrated and becoming slightly scared by this subtle incarceration, I drop the mirror down onto the crumpled whiteness of my bed. From where I stand now,
firmly on the soft, bumpy wool of the rug, I can watch my silent reflective world coexist within the finite glass of the square mirror. It does not seem as threatening now as it had when I was within it, seeing my breath gradually form a sheet of sweeping cloudy frost across the trembling fragility of that ivory vision.

There is something so addictive about walking in the ceiling’s reflection and my fear. Shifting softly across that virgin whiteness unscuffed by the tread of countless feet, and the sensation of being so close to the unfathomable brightness of the sky, always just below, and swirling with clouds and unwalked paths of mystery.

My sisters and I amuse ourselves like this for hours on some days, each of us, holding the silver lake of rectangular mirror before us. We walk, not seeking our own reflection, but, waiting for the moment when our regular grounded world of dusty furniture and dirty carpets is dissolved into the palace of the ceiling, of the sky. Up there, the light takes on a different dimension— the uncarpeted radiance of pure sun seeps through sky-lights and air vents to hover on the ceiling before being lost in our dark, furnished world below. We absorb it all, ravenously, scaling the cavernous heights between arched doorway and ceiling of room, overhanging rafters on which we hesitate before becoming engulfed in the electrical glow concealed within the curved structure of lamp shades.

I am so high up, so invincible, like light myself. There is an ominous feeling of detachment and distance from which there is no avenue of escape. Once you are inside the second maze-like house that the mirror holds before you, latches and locks on doors become purely ornamental. You cannot leave a reflected world, so how can you prevent an escape for which there is no opportunity?

Trance-like, I relax into an aimless drift, exploring areas of the house never touched before except, at night, when, lying in bed, I stare at the ceiling with a sleepless desire to feel its chill, absent surface on the soles of my feet. It is a solitary journey.

There are accidents. Sometimes, forgetting my real whereabouts and tracing the angle of where a pressed ceiling becomes wall, I will walk into the edge of my bed or into bookshelves and tables. There are times when, all three of us lost in the milky brightness of our ceiling world will collide, and, mirrors dropped or broken, come face to face with each other. Then, we reflect each other’s bewildered expressions of shock and disappointment at the discovery that we have somehow fallen back down to earth from our triple navigation of these urban heavens.
Like the recurring dream of a stranger, each of our experiences of this place are unique, our fascination with walking these unstratified surfaces is lost in the confusion of others who attempt to understand what it reveals. How can we explain to them that it is not what you see, it is what you make of it that fulfils.

This habit of mirror-walking gradually becomes a kind of shared obsession. At home, my hands feel empty without the familiar rough edge of cut glass resting solidly between them. I develop a vague fear of the cluttered darkness which pervades my daily life, yearning instead for the pure expanse of that weightless air above. We each take to frequenting glass supply stores where, giving precise instructions on size and shape, we have our own mirrors cut from river-sheets of rippling silver. I imagine a house where all the floors and walls are mirror so that my entire consciousness is consumed by reflections echoing off the glare of each other’s brightness. And I build it in my mind.

Somehow this mirror phase passes without us consciously realising we have forgotten to do it anymore. Then we begin to seek our own reflections rather than that of another reality. I become accustomed to exploring the undiscovered surface of my own skin, breathing pores gaping like tiny mouths, my own lips, pulling taut to reveal my teeth, my tongue, the endless dark hollow of my throat. The internal landscape takes hold and bids me enter.

I can’t remember what ceased our exploration of the ceiling. Perhaps it happened because the secrets of those territories were exhausted or because, one day, thinking that perhaps escape resided behind the heavy dark wood of the front door, I stepped up and out of it, falling into the sky, its swirling galaxies drowning out my curiosity. The flash of mid-afternoon sun, caught in the mirror, white-blinded me for what seemed like an age. I was wrong, there is no escape.

Now my own face in reflection holds eternities. All of history can be seen if you look long enough and deep enough below the surface. The face is like a lake. Its surface too can be broken. If I relax the muscles holding my eyes, my vision blurs into a cloudy fog of face and hair softly hanging in the hard silver of the mirror. Have you ever noticed that the mirror holds no colour, no form, except that which is lent to it by us? It wears its silver sheen over everything like a mask of armour.

My blurred reflection shows me endless shifting visions which follow a slow amorphous progression. Features blend into blankness and emerge in different constellations from their muffled evolution, bringing with them fragments of memory, fragments of recognition.
My face becomes a magician’s illusion, continuously constructing and
deconstructing – the effortless way in which I become the pointed,
furred muzzle of a bear or the chiselled circular O held in the mouth of
a grey and wrinkled woman, is fascinating. My different incarnations
hang before me on the wall. My body has become blurred, sensation and
solidity flowing into the racing passage of reflection. Sometimes I
become a skull, as if, stripped of curved flesh, the white tomb of my
bone speaks clearly in the glass. ‘Here, this is what you are, under this
cloak of life’s protection, this is what you and all you have known will
become. See how your eyes have gathered into pools of blackness, teeth
clenched below a hollow nose?’ I can no longer hear – the movement
from the mirror is deafening and the sides of this smooth bony skull are
flat – in death there is no voice, there is no sound. I turn away from the
mirror to the basin below and, switching on the tap, let the cold water
hiss and bubble over my hands. I cup them, squeezing my fingers togeth­
er tightly and splashing my face with the chilly wetness. Above me, my
features silently return.

Together, my two sisters and I devise another game. This time we are
the mirrors. One of us lies flat on our back, the others, sitting above and
behind her, observe her inverted face. From this angle, the sister’s fea­
tures are comically jumbled, her mouth breathes warm air from where,
to us, her forehead should appear. Her eyebrows grow like a hideous
moustache above her forehead, now a mouthless, voiceless chin. We can
play this game over and over, staring at each others inverted faces until,
in one terrible moment which we both desperately desire and fear, the
face becomes another entity, so unfamiliar that we have been known to
scream and cry out, running from the room and begging from our hid­
ing places behind the door for the transformed sister to stand up and
revert back to her normal self, the self we find comforting in its known
warmth and speech. We catch glimpses of otherness and flee.

I have a recurring dream. Mostly it is a fever-dream but sometimes it
surfaces in peaceful sleep. It is a dusky night, the air is chilly but when
a breeze blows it is warm as if from a forest fire burning somewhere in
the distance. I stand alone on a wide wooden bridge, gently arched over
rough black stone and mounded soil below. Somewhere there is a trick­
le and flow of water. On either side of the bridge, dense forest rises up
like dark clouds on the horizon. The bruised sky is a purple-blue.
Everything glows dull with it.

A young girl walks toward me, she is fragile and pale, blowing across
the wooden slats of the bridge, weightless. The gaps in between reveal
steep rubble. I lean against the damp railing of the bridge, the horizon
is all around me. The girl reaches toward me, holding out one hand. Her
eyes are large and wet, they glisten darkly. She knows more than she ever
reveals. Her wavy hair tosses in our silence. The translucent hand she
extends holds a tiny white flower, its perfectly smooth petals curving
away from its dark centre. I take the flower from her, holding the succu-
culent green of its stalk, supporting its delicate petals in the smouldering
breeze. Then it falls from my hands. I find myself voiceless, the land-
scape drowns me in sound. The flower has fallen onto the jagged black
rocks below and as I watch, the darkness seeps through, bruised black
ridges swelling across the minute white petals until they are all grey and
broken. A dark cloud of foreboding storms the sky and I wake. Even now,
if I see a smooth white piece of paper being crushed or pale flower petals
trod into asphalt, I am clenched with a terrible gut-deep horror. The
dream rests now somewhere there inside of me, waiting, below the sur-
face of the lake.

Between the smooth whiteness of my sheets once, at night, after study-
ing my face for too long in the mirror, I wake up crying and run to my
mother. I am eleven or twelve. I sit in her big wide, warm bed which is
wrinkled with blankets and feels like sleep on my skin. I am crying
because I don’t want my face to alter. I don’t want the tiny spiderweb
capillaries in my cheeks to become more visible, my skin to wrinkle in
diagonals from the corners of my eyes. I don’t want my mouth to show
the repetition of its smile in folds of flesh. She cannot understand. She,
warm and curved, holds me and takes me back to my own bed which has
become cold now. I lie awake for a long while, trying to smother the fear
of a changing reflection, of time invading the smooth, white perfection
of my skin.

My other muffled reflections, and those of my softly sleeping sisters,
find their voices in the darkness. Above me, the ceiling calls out, its
unplundered surface pristine and ageless.
X

Being the tenth part of a minor verse epic in progress.

Kayserling came
and did not want cake,
although I quickly cooked coffee dust soup
when his horse blackened the hilltop.
He wanted to see pastor:
everybody knows, pastor is civilising thursdays,
which is always done outside
when Sun is drunk and careless,
and its gumtrees imitate pastor postures
with scorn mock and rustle giggle,
until gumnuts roll about the ground,
belly clutched with laughing.
So I brushed sugar crumbs, cockroaches and fruit pickles
onto cake plattering sticky with cream,
and held it between Kayserling and me.
He was not shy today,
instead brought wurst from wife and pearwater,
of the special, not for pastor kind.
I looked at thick thighs, and thought
why not.
Of course, it is harder;
we had to sit at kitchentable,
him complain about farm bank drought wife,
me about sandy soap, potatorot and pastor grump;
Kayserling looking into apron,
me at bignec kst sticking out of collardust
like the figtree outside from his dead leaves, 
   wondering whether possums run up those sinews 
   and teethbats and screechbirds live there.

As Dark sweeps up
the last suncrumbs around the house, 
we eat wurst and open pearwater, 
until mossbranches press apronflowers into hips. 
Something silly said, as I think
Kayserling, for a big man 
you need lots of chattering. 
But we must pearwater wife away. 
So the fig moved slowly, 
hardly stirring bats  
(just one screamflapped into stars) 
while possums keep scurrlying, 
until I’m kept in airroots 
and breathe black treeair, 
blindlooking into branchpits 
 - nobody lives there not even possums 
only trapped leaves rotting. 
But then I forgot smellpondering, 
and welcomed stickydark and boughs 
so moths and moonbreeze 
crossed me like sleeping air.

When birds woke screaming and flighted away 
I filled the iron with embers to re-press his shirt, 
figleaves stuck to my thigapricots, 
watching my sweat dropping 
dark rounds on yellow dirt: 
not a good housefrau, Frau Kayserling. 
As the tired horse clumpered into Dark, 
I ate the wursttail, 
arranged bread, butter and milk for pastor, 
so he not need to go to bed hungry.
KATERI AKIWENZIE-DAMM

I CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT THE WAY THE SKY TOUCHES THE EARTH

and how the whole world is wet and lush and alive and my heart is pounding like i am walking through boreal forest. your tongue a fish jumping in my mouth. i wait awestruck on the edge of sleep's escarpment. dive into cold sky. tossing and turning. spinning in sheet-white clouds. remembering what you said. every word entangled around my arms and legs and hips. man of letters pulsating words streaming sentences. i am dreaming consonance. dreaming my body a question mark. if you were here with me now where would i put fingertips, tonguetip, dark red lips? man of illumination talk to me of volcanoes. hot lava erupting. flowing to the sea. talk to me of stars shooting across the dark belly of sky. of roots pushing and straining into black loam. the thick damp smell of muskeg. the meaning of these open mouths. oh dark sky covering this rich red earth. speak my name.
The Drowned Whore

It was as if the tide had dragged me here, but it was him. There was something different about the day, I was not of it.

The angel took my heart and lifted it up through my throat to heaven, I cried like pigeons, softly.

My mouth on his nipple, now motherless. It was the mouth of the wind that rested there.

He was the only one who had ever loved me. I never lived to see this moment.

The grass departs beneath my feet, flowers diminish. But he has lifted me higher and cannot put me back.

I've been lost. There is no climate.

My swollen cheek rested in the cup of his silken feet. Even in this distant way, it was as if he would bring me back. The cosmos had entered my body, its immense peace.

The world and all its history resided in my skin. Was I really touching him?
He is my chrysalis, whilst torn asunder, I am now released.

My hair is tangled weed, which he parts and strokes. My mouth is damp, a shut moat, mud lives inside it.

Yet he brings me close to him, and he is wonderment.

My arms around his shoulders as he lifted me, the humped wings, his pale blue face, he’s golden silver, like sunlit water.

Folded in, how I have tried to return with him. To the city of angels, but I was faint and undecided.

Beneath the bridge, my dress faded in the water. I was invisible, joyful. Take me into your dreams, I slept in his cloth.

I kissed his palms, like he was the messenger. I heard the music, my clouded senses, this path was intimate. The river brought me to this moment. I have waited for it.
I wanted to tell you that one of the main characters in my novel is no different from the other twenty thousand who came swooping down on this continent before the June 4th Incident in Tiananmen Square and who came with no intention other than to learn English and then make money. He is perhaps a little different in that he intends to do a bit more than just learn English and make money. Once he attempted suicide in China while a university student. That is recorded in a full length novel that remains as yet unpublished in Chinese. His surname is Wu. The surname of an ancient Chinese king. And the surname of many unknown Chinese people, too, throughout centuries. It is formed of the two Chinese radicals of “mouth” and “sky” with the mouth over the sky. To distinguish it from other Chinese names that sound exactly like “wu”, one would say, “oh, my name is the Wu with the mouth over the sky.” In Chinese, it sounds exactly like the word for “nothing”. Even when formed with new word-combinations, it retains its sense of being nothing, with added meanings of “anonymous”, “empty”, “nothing to do”, “nowhere to hide”, even “wu liao”, a word-combination that defies translation. And, as a matter of fact, his name is Wu Liao.

He was lucky for being selected to come to Australia to study its history for a year on an exchange program, himself being a student of Chinese history at Wuhan University. When the decision was made, it was in the early spring of 1989 when things were very quiet, signifying nothing that was about to erupt. He was told to stay on school campus around the Spring Festival to wait for the visa because as soon as it came, he would have to pack up and go. There was no time for reunion at the Spring Festival with his family members in the small village on the Yangtse River that was called Ba Wan. The school authorities said that he would better stay until the visa arrived so that he would not miss
out on this once-in-a-lifetime chance because of the festive occasion and he did as he was told, feeling so anxious that he would go to the school mail office on a daily basis to check if there was anything bearing the name of Australian Embassy in Beijing for him. He felt as if the name on the visa would change into someone else’s if he was not there to actually see it himself. He had heard stories that a train had got derailed somewhere on its way from Beijing to Shanghai, scattering the mail containing visa documents and passports all over the place with human limbs. As a result, many people forfeited their chance of going abroad because they had missed out on the deadlines. He dreaded such possibilities.

The campus was quite deserted on school holidays and it was terribly cold in the dormitory where there was no central heating. To keep warm at night, he had to cover his quilt with all his clothes and put down the mosquito net to prevent the chill from coming in. And, of course, he had to soak his feet in hot water until his feet became red before he went to bed. Each morning, his window was dripping with riverlets of the steam from the night, the result of the difference in temperature between the inside and outside. The tall plane trees lining the avenue winding down the Luojia Hill were bare of leaves, their branches skeletal against the sky. He had just had his lunch and was taking a walk up the avenue towards his dormitory, his mind occupied with something he would later call a historical moment, when the thought struck him again that he had somehow come to the end of Chinese history. Whether this was because he was going to Australia or that he had come to the end of the tree-lined avenue where he could see a full grey sky, he could not say. But it was a feeling that he had had ever since he started planning his suicide in that piece of unpublished fiction. He had not realised what that was. He only vaguely sensed something approaching, like the stink on the wind of a distant toilet that stayed for a brief second and was gone. There was a hatred in him that went deeper than words. His going to Australia was ostensibly for the study of the history of that country but secretly he knew that there was nothing much there for him to study. It was not based on any book knowledge. It was only an instinct, an instinct akin to a woman’s, that informed him that, of all the places in the world people went these days, Australia was probably the bleakest that flapped like a piece of blank paper somewhere down there. He knew from his reading that this was untrue but he liked to indulge in this sort of day-dreaming simply because he thought that, if there was nowhere to go, Australia might be somewhere to go. Better still if it was
a blank spot. If only for the purpose of putting words down on that blank piece of paper. What they termed history in a mere two hundred years is a miscellany of crammed indiscriminate and uninspired facts that in Chinese terms could mostly be pared away. It was not important. What was important to him though was the solution that he thought he had found to all the problems that were present in China, whose history was sometimes just too long for him to bear. The historical facts that he had to stuff his head with filled the notebooks so that wherever he went he smelled the death: death of thousands of years gone by, with its billions of famous and infamous people, death of tons of thoughts and emotions that once stirred this ancient nation and plunged it to cyclic destruction and renewal, death even of the sky overlooking a constantly changing landscape. That is it, he thought to himself. I am going there, to Australia, a country that originated in convicts, a country that rode on the sheep’s back, a country that few gave a damn about. Am I not a convict myself? He thought of the gay teacher he once knew. His name was Li. He used to be a famous conductor in a state orchestra but was expelled from it for sodomy, thus starting a succession of expulsions from everywhere he stayed until he was a village school teacher, only for a short while. He was ugly, to be frank, but a very interesting man to talk to because he knew so much about music and other things. At school, he only taught revolutionary songs like “The East is Red” but outside the school, he would tell him fascinating stories of how he conducted Beethoven’s Eroica and works by such strange names as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. He did not remember those things he had told him about but those evening walks with him on the riverbank and the way in which he grew romantic at the mention of those strange names were still fresh in his memory. This went on until his father stopped him, saying, “Be careful with that man! He used to be conductor of a national orchestra but he is now a village teacher. You know why? Because he liked the boys, which is a hideous crime they called ‘sodomy’ or ‘chicken rape’. Avoid him, son.”

He still thought of him fondly because the village teacher had never ever touched him whenever they were out together so that the image of a sodomite did not seem to fit in the picture. Later, around the end of the Cultural Revolution, he disappeared. It was said that he had gone overseas to Australia to join his relatives. As to where in Australia, no-one knew.

This historical moment was the realisation that he was no longer here in Wuhan despite his physical presence. It resembled a dream in which
one’s body was lying in bed but his mind soared or wandered elsewhere, miles away, indeed a thousand miles away. It was more real than a dream, though, because he found that he had reached a stage where he would be talking and laughing with people, making people feel his reality, while scarcely making any mental connection with them at all. He had basically gone to Australia, the blankness, in spirit. He had thought himself incapable of doing such things before, being a creature of comforts and a Chinese at that, the latter a thing that he thought from time to time that he would eradicate like a disease. Indeed, he had secretly harboured desires to completely re-write the history of China and had said so in a class meeting. His voice was soon jeered and drowned by his classmates who held that such a deed would be tantamount to committing a suicide, a historical suicide on a national scale. So what? He thought to himself. If I thought so, there must be a reason for the existence of such a thought. Right? Like if a child was born, whether in or out of wedlock, it has a right to exist no matter what. He wasn’t one to openly confront his classmates, knowing well that there wasn’t any point trying to convince them. All he needed to do was carry on with his own secret thoughts until one day when he might be able to get them into a book. Who knows that this may not happen in that blankness, Australia?

That moment soon went past, like all the other moments, small or big. He came to Australia, smoothly, in the spring of 1989, before anything happened, before anything had had time to happen. He was to consider himself lucky for having escaped possible involvement in the student demonstrations, thus avoiding forfeiting the chance to go abroad in the aftermath of the June 4th Massacre in which nearly all the programs with overseas universities were cut short. He was all the more happy for this because, being the kind of person he was, he felt that he could see through the history. Everything that was going to happen, he realised, seemed to have happened already. It is not just history repeating itself. It is history reneging itself and renewing itself in an attempt to avoid imminent death. Chinese history had degenerated to such a degree that the cycles of its renewal were considerably shortened. Every ten years or so, the nation will go into this death struggle causing millions to die, people who disappear without a trace. No-one to mourn them. No use mourning them for even the mourners do not know when it would be their own turn to die. The dead are a necessity for the rebirth of the nation on a short lease.

But he was in Australia now. He shared an office with Professor Sean
Dredge, whose name at first puzzled him because he could not pronounce it properly, calling him “Sea En”, as in the Chinese translation of the Irish writer, Sean O’Casey, pronounced in Chinese as “Sea En, Ao Kai Sea”, and because he could not understand why the Australian’s surname was such - dredge, dredging up, dredger, as he found out in a dictionary in the library. He dared not ask the question about his name for fear of breaking the etiquette but was soon put right by Professor Dredge that he should pronounce it as “she-ong”, which puzzled him further until he found an equivalent in Chinese, “xiong”, a common Chinese surname that is exactly the same as “bear” the animal or “ferocious” depending on what tone the character fell on. Professor Dredge’s task was to supervise him in his research leading to the completion of his M.A. thesis for final submission in China. The thesis was to be written in Chinese but the research had to be done in English because of a lack of adequate Australian material in China. He hardly had any ideas what to write about. The first few months he spent like a tourist. Philip Island. Great Ocean Road. Twelve Apostles. The Grampians. Until he narrowed his circles and settled for less. His roommate, a language student who came from a coastal province in China, told him one day that he should go and visit one of those places where girls danced naked, emphasising that it was very expensive. “Ten dollars,” Jia said. “But if you produced your student card, you might get some discount.” He never knew his real Chinese name although the name Jia sounds exactly like the word for “fake”. He came in one day in response to an ad one of his roommates who was studying in the same university as him had put up on the campus and told them that he would like to stay in the lounge room for A$25.00 a week. After negotiation, the price went up to A$32.00 and the deal was closed. There was no bed but a mattress picked up from across the street and a wardrobe used as partition. The guy known as Jia or Jack, an English name that he gave himself, lived an anonymous life going to work somewhere in Epping early every morning and coming back very late at night. He spent the weekends sleeping until lunchtime wrapped in his dirty quilt that never got washed for the duration of his stay and making phone calls to his “friends” in his local dialect, which to Wu was totally unintelligible. Even if he was calling him names or making unpleasant comments, he would have no way of knowing.

Wu visited one of those “shops” one day. He did not go in. He was invited in with open arms; nowhere in Australia would Chinese be extended such welcome, he later noted, only in brothels and casinos. The man who stood guard was all smiles and made obscene gestures indicating
the roundness and bigness of a woman's breasts and said in broad English, “plying all dye all ni.” He heard his own voice within warning him against such wrong doing. He felt his blood rushing up to the temple, blinding his eyes momentarily but his feet were irresistibly drawn to the sinister opening in the shape of a window that resembled the vagina which he had only seen in pornographic magazines. He handed his ten-dollar note obediently, forgetting to ask about the discount, which he remembered later in the show, belatedly.

It was something that Wu found hard to forget: a naked girl wagged her bum as she walked along the aisle, stopping next to an old man sitting right in the front seat where he could look up right into the crotches of the dancing girls, and she took off his glasses and putting them between her legs. When she came down again, she put the smeared - Wu thought it must be smeared with the liquid oozing from between her legs - glasses underneath the man's nose for him to smell, and, possibly, to lick. He noticed that girls never looked his way although many had gone passing by and never even attempted to touch him with their white slabs of flesh that set him afire sexually. He attributed this to his ugliness or racial difference that might turn girls of other nationalities, particularly Caucasian origins, off, for in the first few months in Melbourne, he often found his eyes wandering in the direction of Asian women's faces as he walked down Bourke Street or Swantson Street, window-shopping. Then he dismissed the idea as unthinkable because the old man was not only ugly but old and near-sighted, who had nothing to recommend himself except perhaps wisdom, which at this moment was all smeared with the oozing vaginal liquid. Wu moved to the seat next to the aisle in the hope that the passing girls might perchance touch him with their twisting and turning buttocks or even hold his face up and print their red lips on his face. As his desire grew stronger, he became bolder but no girls seemed to show the least interest in him whatsoever.

It was a night of disappointment and also restless excitement. He had to quench that excitement by masturbating himself again and again with the imagined red liquid oozing out of the vagina hole of the passing girls until he was totally exhausted after he came home. It felt worse afterwards. He wondered why Jia said that he had spent all day, over ten hours, there, to make up for the ten dollars he had to pay for the show. For him, two hours were more than enough. If he had stayed longer, he would have gone limp and totally lost the interest. Besides, he began to notice that the intervals between two girls were too long, there were too
many repeats of the same love-making scene on the wall screen and the time in which the girls performed was too short although he was unaware of this capitalist trick. He had to leave because he realised that he might miss the last bus.

*A History of Australia* by Manning Clark was lying on his desk hardly touched for weeks and weeks while the number of pornographic magazines was growing in his leather suitcase brought from China. This newfound freedom, hitherto unavailable in China, put him in touch with women of all nationalities and sizes, on paper, so that he could indulge in his wildest dreams making love to them while gazing at them making love to their men in most unlikely ways. The cover of *A History of Australia* bore convincing witness to this for, in one of his wildest moments, he spread all the pornographic magazines open, fifty or so of them, all around his little room, covering up the wooden desk, his mattress, the floor, and the place where the walls joined the floor, on the window seal, so that his little bungalow room literally became a sex dungeon where he was masturbating himself vigorously, looking at men and women fucking each other on the coloured pages and cuming and organs in and out and cuming until he could no longer control himself. When he woke up from his entrancing indulgence, he found, to his horror, *A History of Australia* was partly covered in his semen, white Chinese semen. My God! Startled, he uttered a cry, because this was a book Professor Dredge had lent him. What if he detected the traces of dried semen on the cover? Worse still, what if the implication struck him as portentous and possibly destructive, prompting him to take some sort of legal action? Would he be accused of soiling the history? Would Australians come and burn his bungalow down? This troubled him a lot even though he tried hard to wipe it clean, with the Chinese toothpaste he had brought with him.

History had now ceased to mean anything to him. It turned into a blank page in which he daily performed an exercise that was both necessary and forgettable. At least he thought so although future historians might argue that what had happened with Wu Liao could be added as an appendage to a contemporary history of Chinese in Australia or some such things. Indeed, if Australians borrow the terminology, “wild history”, from Chinese, they might find this an apt instance to be written about. Unfortunately, their English is still not flexible enough to take in such new elements.

Meanwhile, our hero or anti-hero continued his existence in Reservoir, sharing accommodation but not anything else with two other room-
mates from China, going about his research haphazardly, reporting to his supervisor that things were going well, that there was nothing to worry about and that he had done quite a lot of reading in Australian history, and he might have added physical Australian history. His supervisor, Professor Sean Dredge, was a historian who knew little about the Chinese and what they thought. The only reason he accepted Wu was because he thought Wu was useful to him as he was researching for a book he was going to write on the recent Chinese experience in Australia, particularly after the June 4th, 1989. He was no Chinese, of course, but he was intensely intrigued by the Chinese and their way of life which he found unique by comparison with other nationalities. In a climate where all things Asian were good, the Chinese were quite a commodity to market. As a historian, and one with a business mind, Sean was quick to seize the opportunity while others were still debating whether the option was viable. He knew he had made a fine choice because the first time he saw Wu he realised that there was a lot to get out of him in terms of raw information. The short, thin, black-haired Chinese wearing jeans and a pair of China-made fake Nike runners seemed a man affable enough and malleable enough for his own use. Soon, he found that his was not the case, for Wu seemed a very mysterious person by Australian standards. You never really knew what he was thinking about. While he was talking to him, his mind seemed miles away. He asked if he missed home but Wu said “No, not at all.” He was concerned that Wu was not making any progress. This would seriously reflect on Professor Dredge for it was him who had made the recommendation about Wu among a dozen contenders a few years back. He had read a couple of essays that Wu wrote in class and was impressed. Although they were written in poor English, they revealed a mature mind with penetrating insight that was matched by few of his classmates. One argument that was particularly impressive was that Wu seemed to think highly of Australia as an island continent that, like Japan and Great Britain, previously two very aggressive nations in the world, might play an important role in forging a cultural link with the rest of the world, particularly Asia, by the kind of drive that typified the island people despite their insularity and exclusiveness. The argument was not well sustained with supportive evidence but Professor Dredge saw something intuitive that echoed his own inner thoughts and the fact that a Chinese student who had never been to Australia could have thought so was reason enough for him to make the decision. However, he did not understand why he didn’t seem to make any progress after a
few months in the country. A recent essay that he handed in showed that he was still in two minds about what to write: the discovery of Australia by Chinese or Chinese interactions with white people and Aboriginals. In some way he thought he was responsible for this because he had asked him to read too much without showing him the correct way, the liberal Australian way disciplined and tempered by the century-old European intellectual and humanist tradition of free thinking. The ways in which Chinese students were taught seemed quite mechanical and unimaginative, slavishly sticking to the factual and empirical evidence, and smacking of mere undigested book knowledge. There was a lack of theoretical grounding as well. Yes, that was what it was. He needed theories.

Then he found Wu quite a stubborn student, for he insisted on researching in his own way despite the warnings against relying too much on empirical evidence. After a while, he began to wonder whether this clinging to the true historical facts, this slavish thinking in regard to the historical position of Chinese in Australia and this inflexible attitude towards change might not be a product of the educational system under the present communist regime. Nothing could be worse than to train a scholar who refused to take fresh views of a history, or, for that matter, any history that can be revised. After an argument with Wu, in which Wu said that Australian history was not something to be seriously reckoned with, that it was simply a blank page compared with Chinese history of five thousand years, that just because it was so short a history the Australian historian had a tendency to cram all the trivialities and inflate the pages, many of which could be simply omitted, he decided that he wouldn’t give a damn about the slavish and recalcitrant Chinese and now all he was concerned with was that Mr Wu do his work so that he could finish it in time for submission to the Chinese Examination Panel when he went back to Wuhan, thus putting an end to it all.

Wu, on his part, simply ignored the professor’s concerns about his academic progress. He had read about the student unrest in China after the death of Hu Yaobang in the newspapers and on T.V. and heard from his room-mate Jia that this may be of benefit to them. “You see,” Jia said one day, “if they continue to demonstrate, it may get to a stage where we won’t have to go back but just stay here as political refugees or illegal immigrants.” It sounded unbelievable, but Jia firmly believed in it, perhaps because he came from Fujian, a place traditionally known as a source of illegal immigrants? He did not know. For him, the kind of vac-
uum-like situation continued in which he went from bad to worse until he hit the Men’s Gallery. This time, Jia again initiated him and was kind enough to take him there on the condition that he paid the bill, which he duly did at the entrance guarded by a tall man who stared at him for a second and waved him in after deciding that he did wear a collared T-shirt. He still remembered that date because it was June 4th, 1989. For students occupying Tiananmen Square, this was the most intense moment, akin to an orgasm, a mass political orgasm, and for him, too, it was an equally, if not more, intense moment. For the first time, he was literally surrounded by white female flesh dancing in all stages of undress on spiky shoes. He bought a Carlton Cold for Jia and a Coke for himself and stood watching. The girl in front of him was twisting her body this way and that, her hands reaching over her head to touch the ceiling from time to time where a big coloured lamp resembling a terrestrial globe was turning round and round casting coloured lights all around. Men were loitering around tables with glasses in their hands or smoking, talking to each other or just looking. He saw an Indian man sitting against the wall with his head lowered in a half-dreamy state where one did not know whether he was looking at the girls dancing or was just thinking to himself. A guy went to a white girl wearing black high heels and talked to her in an intimate fashion, the girl whispering something into his ears. Jia said, “See that? They are discussing the money because the man wants to see her naked before his eyes.”

“Have you ever done this before?” Wu wondered aloud. “How much is it?”

“Of course I have. It’s only ten bucks,” Jia said proudly and added, “the only trouble is that you can’t touch her genitals even when you most want to because it is against the law to do so.”

With a glance, Wu noticed that the girl took a ten-dollar note and tucked it under the rubber band around her thigh and started undressing until she was a rippling white shining meat, spread open right under the man’s nose, feeding, almost feeding him. Strangely, Wu found himself not moved in the least. In fact, he did not even have an erection as he would be most likely to have when watching a sex video quietly in his room all by himself. He thought that might be related to the openness of the situation where it was so transparently open that one had the feeling that he could not even hide his erection because he felt as if everything was exposed to the eye, male and female. He told Jia so, who laughed at him, saying “You think too much. People who come here don’t think. If they do, they only think with their private parts. Just con-
centrate on the woman's hole and you will feel like bursting out any moment."

Wu had a look around but did not see any man feeling like bursting. He didn’t like to burst with his seeds so openly, either. That would be so embarrassing. Wu remained unconvinced until a short lady walked by wearing a silvery badge sort of thing on her left arm, whom he immediately recognised as Asian and was instantly turned on. His eyes followed her accompanied by an Australian man who walked her to a dark corner where she began performing a dance that Jia told him was a "Lap Dance". He watched other girls performing indecent acts with self-indulgence, half expecting the Asian girl to come back. As if reading his mind, Jia said, “You want to try the Asian chicken? She is nice, you know. Australian men like Asian girls.” Wu said he didn’t know how to but Jia had already started walking towards the girl who had just put on her scanty garments consisting of only a bra, a G-string and kneehigh boots. He heard his heart racing fast, his eyes avoiding looking their way. Then he heard, “How are you?” and turned to look into a pair of black eyes in an oblong face with very red lips. The girl held out her hand and he gave his hand for her to take, despite his initial unwillingness, and heard the girl commenting, “What a nice warm hand.” That drew his attention to his own hands, which were indeed “nice and warm.” The first thing the girl asked him was where he came from. He said China and asked the same question to the girl, who said Japan and China because her mother was Japanese and her father Chinese, adding that she had never been to China although she would like to go there one day. He had another look at her whose face bore no Chinese or Japanese features whatsoever but an olive skin that was very Thai. So he said but you do not look like a Japanese at all to me. The girl shrugged her shoulders and spread her hands in a manner that suggested that there was nothing she could do about it. While he was still hesitant, the girl had already taken his “nice and warm” hand in hand and led him to the corner in which she had done the lap dance to the Australian guy. He didn’t know what to do but followed everything the girl said: move that sofa there, put it in front of this sofa, sit down, spread your legs wide open, no, like this, spread open, yes, that’s right, how much money? Give me twenty bucks, not ten, ten was only an introduction, the girl’s mouth was on his ear, at least twenty if you wanted to see anything at all. He had lost control of himself and followed the girl’s instructions obediently, producing the twenty-dollar note from his trousers pocket where he could feel his own half erection through the cloth. What followed was a series of acts that
the girl performed probably to what only in retrospect he realised was a
formula in which she turned from a clothed woman into a total dancing
machine of flesh except her high-heeled boots which was the only thing
that he had ever dared to ask to have a touch at. The patent leather felt
quite warm on the outside as if it was paper-thin. The girl, whose name
was Japana, a name that Wu had adopted for her after learning about
her origins, spread her legs open like all the other white girls, her boots
resting on his thighs. He could unmistakably see the entrance to her
vagina shaped like a wall with a vertical slit on it and no hair. He admit­
ted to himself that he had never seen anything like this before, even that
window that resembled a vagina was nothing like this, because the top
of the wall was so straight and level that it looked sharp like the blade
of a knife. When the girl finished her performance, she was actually sit­
ing naked in his arms and said in his left ear that she was now finished,
signifying the completion of her task by printing a kiss on his left cheek.
In an instant, she was gone.

When they arrived home late at night, Jia switched on the television
and, instantly, they learnt that PLA soldiers had broken into the Square
and were firing indiscriminately at the students. But Wu was so exhaust­
ed that all he could see in front of his eyes was the wall of the girl that
stood inviting entry. In his sleep that night, he dreamt that he entered
the girl like a bullet, deep into her until the wall broke.
1. The Soldier

Soon after his mother's death
he had seen a horse led to an open grave,
boots & carbine hanging from the empty saddle.
It was years later before he learnt that a good pair
of boots and gun could save you from the grave,
at the time he had just felt his loss,
death opening before him
as a hole in the ground,
a place where we were all heading
as warned by scriptures.

Eight years old when the cavalryman
from the 15th Hussars stepped into the silence
and raised his rifle, and the boy wondered
why he was aiming into an empty sky.

2. Taxidermy & Dreams

He learnt how to stuff animals
from a freed black slave
who had come from Guyana
and as he learnt the tricks of stuffing
Darwin listened to his stories
of South America and rain forests,
dreaming macaws and waking hot
in his cold Edinburgh room,
writing home to his sisters that he was learning
to stuff birds & dream from a blackamoor.

3. Advice
He often thought about home
but Fitzroy told him to forget visions
of green fields & nice little wives
or else you would go mad
like the previous captain of the Beagle.

4. Cigar
He was a man who liked his cigar,
liked to ride and hunt
and at night crouched around the fire
he felt what it was like to be a gaucho.
In his later years sitting in his chair
with a shawl across him
he remembered these nights
when he ate roasted game and drank mattee
lying beneath the stars
blowing lassoes of smoke-rings into the darkness.

5. Tapadas
In Lima he couldn't keep his eyes off the tapadas,
young women of elegance in tight gowns,
a sight better than a hundred old churches,
who took small white steps in their silk stockings,
and wore a black silk veil fixed behind the waist
so that when it was swept over their heads
and held by the hands before the face,
it allowed only one eye to remain uncovered,
so dark and glittering that it was enough.
6. Flowers

On his return he remembered
his old love, Fanny,
now married (unhappily he heard)
and pregnant with a third
in a castle on the Welsh Hills
and sent her flowers.

THE WOMAN IN JOHN STREET

She loved walking up john street
on hot days after the beach.
A shadowed street of norfolk pines,
ten degrees cooler than the glaring beachfront
and she would go barefoot
smiling at the young girls who always sat
out the front of the rented cottage
drinking beers and watching boys
in their hard bodies & boardshorts,
thinking she should have lived here when she was twenty,
walking on, sometimes chatting with acquaintances,
who drank coffee at outdoor tables at the cafe,
as people streamed down from their homes
with towels draped like laurels,
seeing the glassed ocean at the end of the street
and sometimes if she had timed the walk
she would hear the rainbow lorikeets at the corner,
larrikin birds bullying the evening light into darkness
as if it would stay day eternally without their screeching,
arriving home in her little cottage to put on the kettle
as if there was no greater pleasure on earth
than drinking a cup of tea on her porch.
Why a man, mature in years,
would choose to purge himself
through the inconsequence of poetry,
is as incomprehensible for others
as for me why a mature man
would choose barrel and bullets,
blasting apart a flapping duck
he's startled from the reeds.

I would be wings and quiet water,
drift on web and feather,
bob for food,
and never know, let alone suspect
if today was my season,
only if the sun was short or long.
This paper compares the poetics of three Australian poets: James McAuley (1917-76), Francis Webb (1925-73), and Vincent Buckley (1925-88). Each was officially Catholic and each was writing at the time of Vatican II, when verticalism and horizontalism crossed words over who would have control of God. Each of the three poets went into the vast storehouse of Catholic metaphor, myth and dogma and came away with something different. In each case it was something their poetry picked for them. McAuley’s poetry was first and forever tempted by the myth of the Fall. Webb’s poetry yielded to the image of the stigmata. Buckley’s poetry incorporated the metaphor of the Incarnation. And in each case, what the poetry picked had an iconoclastic or atheological or kenotic capacity that the poets themselves might not have realised, might not have wanted.

When James McAuley converted to Catholicism in 1952, he turned to what he called a vision of ceremony, though it might also be called a philosophy of natural law perfected by a theology of divine ends. In this Catholicism McAuley learned that faith was not irrational and that grace perfected nature. He also (re)learned how to imagine poetry according to a vertical hierarchy, giving supreme authority to the light of reason over the dark wisdom of the heart and certainly over the maze of nightmare. His resistance to modernism found an ally in Thomism, with its doctrines on the realism of knowledge and the metaphysical nature of truth. In The End of Modernity (1959) McAuley argued that the culture of Western modernity was anti-poetic because it was anti-realist and anti-metaphysical. Moreover, he declared that ‘The number, weight and measure of verse bear a kind of sacred character by reason of their analogy with the divine ordering.’

This belief in a natural law for poetry encourages, in the period imme-
diately after McAuley's conversion, a poetry of natural law. Some, but not all, of the important poems of *A Vision of Ceremony* (1956)² convey McAuley's desire for a poetry obedient to the 'grammar of existence'. 'Celebration of Divine Love' speaks of 'secret patterns printed in our being', patterns perfected in Christ who is 'the bond and stay of his creation'. 'New Guinea' describes a society where 'Life holds its shape in the modes of dance and music' and prays that such a life may be 'Configured henceforth in eternal mode'. 'An Art of Poetry' scorns individual, arbitrary and self-expressive art in favour of art which traces its 'secret springs' to the Word, and venerates the 'universal meanings' which are revealed to its formal, lucid contemplation.

Needless to say, such a poetry and such a poetic earned McAuley a reputation as a conservative, even a reactionary. This reputation has, in its turn, led most critics to ignore the possibility that McAuley's poetics of ceremony is connected to an aesthetics of loss, sometimes close to despair. McAuley's is a writing where the desire for order and ceremony, whether Christian and/or natural, evokes a sense of separation. His speakers are almost always falling back from social and political ideals, from natural scenes and landscapes, into their own awareness of imperfection. Their time is very often 'too late': too late to write the kind of poetry John Dryden wrote, too late to love the father, too late to justify the ways of God. This suggests that McAuley's poetry was from the first rewriting the myth of the Fall. And if so, it is a happy fault, since this is what saves the poetry from the poetics. McAuley's work is a reminder that the will of the poem is not always in line with the will of the poet, a signal that perhaps poetics is located in the space between what is declared and what is undeclared.

I can only afford one example, and it is 'An Art of Poetry'.³ The poem ends 'impatient for that loss/ By which the spirit gains'. This can be interpreted as a use of theological paradox to support the poem's anti-modernist agenda (evident in the association of 'individual' with 'arbitrary' and 'self-expressive' and in the hierarchical positioning of 'intellectual love' above 'carnal maze') and place its argument beyond the reach of knowledge (and language). Yet the poem's desire that 'speech be ordered wholly' has already been questioned:

Let your literal figures shine
With pure transparency:
Not in opaque but limpid wells
Lie truth and mystery.
And universal meanings spring
From what the proud pass by:
Only the simplest forms can hold
A vast complexity.

This does more than declare belief in ‘universal meanings’. It attempts a most uneasy equation of ‘truth’ and ‘mystery’, but instead distances ‘mystery’ from ‘truth’. In its longing for pure figuration, it equates the pure with the clear, drawing a line from ‘literal’ through ‘transparency’ through ‘limpid’ to ‘truth and mystery’, then looping back, by the half-rhyme, to ‘pure transparency’, and so to an alliance of mystery with epistemological and representational purity. But this is to risk reducing mystery to a literal and transparent truth. One reading is to say that this is exactly what the poem does: it reduces mystery to its own images of Christ and the real. Another is to say that ‘mystery’ begins to pull away from the rule of ‘truth’, just as ‘vast complexity’ begins to pull away from ‘simplest forms’. I do not see the need to decide between these two readings: taken together, they show a faultline opening in the surface of certitude. Here, as with the other ‘Catholic’ poems, the discourse of the via negativa cannot be simply made obedient to theological propriety. It resists such an imperium; it is a language of (spiritual) poverty, not of (theological) power. So McAuley’s use of the via negativa encourages instead those activities by which his poetry participates in uncertainty, qualification, deflation, and rupture in order to save its desire for the Word.

While Christ and the Catholic Church feature prominently in Vincent Buckley’s early poetry and prose, his later work barely recognises them, and then as sites of cultural memory rather than personal belief. This development might be seen as evidence of a shift from transcendent to immanent models of the sacred, or even of some failure of belief. I want to suggest another possibility, the possibility that it represents an unexpected realisation of Buckley’s primary religious metaphor of incarnation. In this reading, the Divine Word is subjected to a fraction rite, distributed to history, time, and death, and disappears, leaving the believer only the empty tabernacle of the Holy Thursday liturgy.

It is possible to trace a development in Buckley’s writing. The early poetry and prose are high on creed, confidence and cadence. Then in the mid-60s, Buckley writes Poetry and the Sacred, shifting from a theological to an anthropological approach to the sacred, and ‘Stroke’, the sequence dealing with the death of his father (and perhaps the death of
God) and signalling a separation of the doctrinal and sensual registers in his speech.4 'Golden Builders', the sequence that follows 'Stroke', is the poem that tests Melbourne for sacredness, finds a hollowed church and remembers the empty tabernacle, but cannot find the grave of Christ.5 Once the father is written as dead and Christ as not risen, an interesting transfer begins in Buckley's poetry: the father is replaced by land, particularly by Ireland, the land of forefathers and, correlative to this, the theological imagination is replaced by the mythic imagination, which now stands in for the mediatory process of Incarnation. By the time Buckley's writing, after his death, arrives at Last Poems6 the mediation is no longer of divine and human, but of soul and body, and it is performed, if at all, by poetry:

Then poetry
will be your body's line
 to what the soul can't remember.7

Which is to say, perhaps, that Buckley's poetry has abandoned religion and become religious.

In one of these late poems, 'Seeing Romsey',8 the great Eucharist hymn, 'O Salutaris Hostia', is made a broken piece of memory and Buckley's incarnational poetics persists, if at all, as a poetics of liminal sensation:

I see Romsey through a hole in the wind
as I used to in late autumn, in the southern gales,
just there, not vibrating with changes
but like a model that has grown to its full height.
The timber houses have roofs of painted iron,
the brick ones are lowering with warm tiles.
The tree near me is the one I climbed
fifty-three years ago. I smell roses on the fence
where once the whole air was brushed with cypress.
Proust's madeleine, nothing. Even the smell
of trains that haven't run here
for forty years. Smelling strong as they slow down.
Smell of the comics they brought each Saturday.
Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,
or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs
or that great heap of blossom in Yeats's window.
Nothing to this. To the firesmell of the forge,
This poem engages in something like an Ignatian 'composition of place', intended to bring the (older) speaker back into communion with his first home, and to do this by way of the senses, particularly the sense of smell. It is smell that, by way of incense, introduces the memory of 'voices singing O Salutaris hostia'. But these sacred words are incorporated without privilege. They are at once remembered and displaced by the text: they are included among the other pieces of the past, then judged by a present, critical intelligence, then sealed under the silence of Latin. The final image is a very understated, almost unwritten 'version' of what might once have been called Incarnation. It concentrates images used in these late poems, images of water and earth, cool and heat, and, if I can be permitted to stretch the pattern towards a theological perimeter, spirit and flesh. This late poem does not sing Latin either. It has forgotten its language of high sacrality, in order to 'use all the processes of language to create either the depth and intensity, or the transparency, of experience'. In so forgetting, it writes the incarnation into dust, even though the dust 'flashes', ruptures, when it receives the blessing of rain, the mystery of water. The Incarnation, that is, is merely a ghost of its former self; it has entered a mortal text and not escaped that mortality.

In this way Buckley's incarnational poetics ends the Incarnation. As Mark C. Taylor remarks:

The main contours of deconstructive a/theology begin to emerge with the realization of the necessary interrelation between the death of God and radical christology. Radical christology is thoroughly incarnational – the divine "is" the incarnate word. Furthermore, this embodiment of the divine is the death of God. With the appearance of the divine that is not only itself but is at the same time other, the God who alone is God disappears. The death of God is the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar. Incarnation irrevocably erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script enacted in the infinite play of interpretation. To understand incarnation as inscription is to discover the word.
Francis Webb's poetry is a writing of desolation: it envisages the absence of God, and this to a degree and in a manner more complex and uncomfortable than Buckley's fading metaphor of Incarnation or McAuley's determinedly believing work. The religiopoetic character of Webb's writing derives from its involvement in empty, stigmatic, stigmatised spaces. If one wanted to view this in slightly more theological terms, one might say that the poetry, evading both belief and scepticism, puts its hand into the wounded side of meaning, that even as it writes its theology of crucifixion it engages in a crucifixion of theology. Carl Raschke, trying to establish a rapport between deconstruction and postmodern theology, could be describing the way Webb's poetry fractures its belief:

\[\text{deconstruction is the death of God put into writing. In that respect the movement of deconstruction within theology rounds out the enigmatic anticipation of the end-times. But it is theology's 'ending' not in glory, but forsakenness. The theologia crucis, the 'theology of the cross', is at last translated from a style of intellectual voyeurism into an evident ordeal: it becomes the crux theologiae.}\]

This crucifixion of the Word, I would argue, continues throughout Webb's writing. It is there, for instance, in the poetry's attraction to empty centres, its belief in truth as 'a mass of stops and gaps', and its use of suffering servant theology. For the moment, however, I have to reduce this complex poet to one poem, and it is 'Poet'.

At first reading the poem seems to confirm that theology of compassion which many identify in Webb's poetry. But this is, I suspect, largely an effect of reading habits. We see that it is employing the story of Christ and the woman taken in the act of adultery (John 8:2-11), a story about healing love, we privilege the gospel, and so we assume the poem is also about healing love. At one level it is. It creates a confrontation between two languages: the language of 'lawless words' associated with the desert and and the language of 'thick grey loam' with which the Pharisees construct their 'unshakable houses', defend their sacred order, and deploy shrewd words in the house of God. The desert provides an image of reconciliation, which is also an image of poetry, as camels become words moving between horizon and sky. This image is then confirmed and completed in the vision of Christ and the woman 'strangely together' as his sky bends to her bent earth. But there is another adulterer here: the poet-speaker. He is the one who is tempted to judge the sinner, and, in a related act, to betray the 'uneasy connubial whiteness' with which desert words bring together horizon and sky. The betrayal of
compassion and the betrayal of poetry are the one act.

The poem develops as a series of margins or 'choices' between 'lawless' and 'orderly' language, and the more it develops these choices the more it reveals that it is 'orderly' language which is adulterous. At first the poet's words seem wedded to the desert; language and landscape are 'holy' and 'stinging'. From the desert, from the void, come the camels, come the words, comes the unknown, comes the wound at the heart and origin of writing (so death does, indeed, hurt the hand of the poet). Even though he is confessing to the Pharisees and seeking their approval, the poet-speaker cannot quite control the image of the desert, which begins to move away from him. So, he has to begin the second stanza with a forceful denial. It is basically a denial of figurative speech. To the pharisaic mind, figurative speech is at best a means of illustrating dogma, at worst an enemy to the orderly signification by which God is known. Accordingly, the speaker adopts a strategy that mirrors the pharisaic prejudice: he diminishes the status of metaphor, even as he exalts that of law.

By the third stanza the poet is part of the plan to destroy Christ:

And this One you speak of as the enemy of order,
As the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight:
I do know that we could never exchange words
(But the tinkle and psalm of rubbing harness sometimes
Upon my word and image blowing drowsily ...?)
Vah! You are the law, my masters, the thick grey loam.
I shall go to the temple with you, take Him in the act;
From the bed of the sick child He comes, from alleyways of the possessed,
And with this woman He shall speak His public perverseness.

The reference to Christ as the 'the enemy of order' is double-edged: while it mimics the pharisaic judgment that Christ was undermining the Law, it also subtly acknowledges that Christ is the iconoclastic metaphor of God. Nor is the poet as law-abiding as he pretends: his memory of the camels, his own metaphor for poetic speech, makes another breach. So that when, in the fourth stanza, he thinks he holds a word big enough to execute Christ, he falls victim to the lawlessness of metaphor:

The big stone in my hand will fly shrewdly, I assure you,
As your words, in the house of God.
When the comma creates a slight, ungrammatical, pause before 'in the house of God', the comparison rebounds, exposing the calculated and self-serving power play which motivates the masters' external order. For the comparison admits that, as well as stones, it is their prayers which are 'shrewdly aimed', and so places 'God' within their 'house' as the victim of their 'words'.

When the poet then 'sees' Christ, he rediscovers his poetic words. He also finds that the stone has reversed the direction of death, becoming like stigmata:

He stands confronting the woman and death in my hand.
No words between us, I say, for You are the loneliness,
My home, You are the broad light all about me:
You are the train of camels within that light.
Speak up, my masters, quickly, for death hurts my hand.

The main activity of this stanza is to redeem the forsaken implications of earlier fragments. 'No words between us' returns to 'I do know that we could never exchange words' and makes words unnecessary. The conjunction of 'loneliness' and 'home' reinstates the desert of the first stanza. The 'broad light' breaks open the constrictions of 'houses', 'law', and 'loam', returning through 'refractory sunlight' and 'haze' to the 'con­nubial whiteness'. Christ, because he effects the return, the redemption, of these words, is then identified with the camels, and so poetry. Within this return, notions of marriage and adultery are also being turned around. It is the desert that represents 'marriage': because its 'whiteness' is uneasy. It is the town that represents 'adultery': because, for all its black and white intentions, it is 'grey' (perhaps because its words are constrictive).

When, in the final stanza, the 'first stone' is ordered thrown, it too rebounds, breaking the language of 'grey loam' and freeing the poet for a word that belongs with wind and sand:

Cast the first stone. And the grey loam is scattered,
And we slink out one by one. But my narrow clever desert eyes
Peer back over my shoulder. They are strangely together,
A grave broad light in the temple. Breast upon knees,
The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday
Bent earthward. From the two together a train of camels.
She has given her love – but Paradise, what is his love?
To a hundred of us. Again she will love, may tempt me;
But can ever this stone fly into the face of beauty
While the wind, as his delicate burning finger,
Gives a Word to the Sand?

The only time Christ speaks in the poem is to say ‘Cast the first stone’, but this line is so altered that the words can barely be recognised as Christ’s. In the gospel story Christ says to the woman’s accusers, ‘Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.’ By forgetting the first part, the poem takes a significant turn in meaning. In the gospel no stone is thrown. Christ’s words arrest the action. In the poem Christ’s words themselves become the stone hurled at the pharisaic vocabulary in which the subject has tried to house himself. The result is that the house crumbles before the desert and the subject becomes the broad light and temple where Christ and the woman meet to redeem the desert’s ‘sky at midday/ Bent earthward’ (which might encode the image and process of kenosis, even crucifixion). This saving sign seems to centre the poem, but is not itself a centre: it addresses the space between the woman and Christ. Christ is, in fact, never a direct presence in the poem. He appears only as himself something of a ‘haze and quandary’, an effect of differently angled reflections: signs hidden in the desert, enemy of order, refractory sunlight, perverse healer, adulterer, train of camels, sky bending earthward, love, delicate burning finger, and Word. The poem, in accordance with the uneasy shifts that constitute its own subjectivity, has so refracted its Christ, that it denies itself an easy reconciliation. The last two lines are very troubling. The ‘wind’ is likely to represent the Holy Spirit, source of inspiration. The Word is Christ, and, just as the desert has ‘humming stinging virtues’, Christ has a ‘delicate burning finger’. But why ‘Sand’? It may incarnate Christ in the desert, the loneliness which is also home, but such a reading has to exist beside another which says that wind and sand will see the Word itself ‘scattered’. At the risk of being obvious, I would point out that the last line does not state ‘Gives to the Sand a Word’, which would be quite a different ending.

While writing this paper, I have had in mind something Kevin Hart said in a recent interview. I have been trying to say how writing that wants God is writing that recognises want as both absence and desire. Hart says:
There's a sense in which poetry answers to the absence of the Word, the unique master word that underwrites all other words. Not even the word 'God' can do that, for as soon as you pronounce the divine name it divides like spilt mercury. As soon as it enters the world, the Word is lost. Writing poems is a search for that Word … But any recovery is partial: you come up with words, not the Word.¹⁴

Endnotes

² James McAuley, A Vision of Ceremony (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956).
⁵ Vincent Buckley, ‘Golden Builders’ and Other Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976).
⁷ “Arrival”, Last Poems, 81.
⁸ Last Poems, 145.
¹³ Collected Poems, 152-53.
Jennifer Wawrzinek

DEAR CIRCUS AERIALIST

The light in my room is only very small. In my light I can see my fingers crawl up the walls. In my light I cannot see my hands, as you do. This is what you said. You said that your hands climb the ropes and that your body floats out there, in the light. You said it floats like a streak of coloured light and the colour changes depending on your costume. And sometimes your body as a streak of coloured light might be silver.

I know this because the words say so - here, on the slip of paper I carried away with me all those years ago. The paper with your photo on it in silvery white and black which I keep hidden away in my carved timber locked-box together with the tattered photo of my father, the one from the newspaper all torn around the edges and crumpled over the face. Oscar Seeigel, it says, winner of the prestigious Nortinger Mathematics Pri- and then the rest is gone, torn away by careless fingers. Not my fingers. Oh no, certainly not. I found that photo, one morning, thrown in the rubbish bin, Oscar’s face smiling up at me from potato peels and snotty, crumpled tissues. There’s a grease stain spreading out from the tip of the nose, but I keep it still. Just to remember.

You see, dear Circus Aerialist, my father always said that one day there would be no bodies. That one day we would be free of these cumbersome prisons that only serve to tie us down and keep us bound to one linear trajectory. Without our bodies we could be like light, diffuse and random, dancing through moments of time as though we were everything and yet nothing. My father tried to explain this to me using long sequences of numbers and a strange hieroglyphic language of dashes and strokes which he would sketch out in chalk on the cliff-faces staring out across the infinity of the ocean. He was always up there, my father, sitting on the rocks above that cliff with the wind streaking his hair across his face in long dark waves. He’d push his hair away and curl it
around the back of his ears, smoothing out the papers of his sketchbook and readjusting the bulldog clips at the corners. But he wasn’t sketching the ocean. Oh no. There were no realist or magical-realist or impressionist or abstract drawings of the rough grey-tinted blue with seagulls and albatrosses dipping over the waves. Certainly not, for my father was sketching the wind with his long, draw-out hieroglyphic strokes and dashes. He was analysing air velocity, tracking thermals, air flows and slip streams with his aerometer, barometer and barograph. He was collecting the traces of wind movement so that we might understand how it could be possible to turn a body into light and streak out above the ocean with only the hands crawling over the smooth chalky surface of the cliff-face.

I would scramble down the rough-cut steps hewn into the cliff-face and play on the sand while my father sat up there against the blue sky, his arm moving this way and that, eyes squinting against the late afternoon sun. He made wind equations and I stacked lumps of wet sand one upon the other, decorating the edges with broken seashells and strips of seaweed, while the foam-fringed waves pushed themselves higher and higher up the beach until they lapped at my seashell house to reclaim their treasure, grain by grain. I would stretch out my legs on a blanket of hot sand watching the waves dissolve my house, watching its walls slide down in miniature avalanches until all that was left were a few seashells rolling back along the sand into a temporary valley of water.

That’s the way it is. That’s life, my father would say when I asked him why the seashell house always had to go back into the water, grain by grain. You stick the grains together, he’d say, and then they disperse, floating around then colliding again with each other until maybe someone else, on another beach somewhere, maybe faraway in another land, also builds a seashell house only to have it reclaimed by the tide.

Nothing is ever permanent, Eunice. That’s what my father would tell me. We are always burning ourselves into rock or metal, building great mausoleums of stone and glass where we collect remnants of our existence on canvases and books and rolls of film. We store and catalogue and list and then display so that we can force remembrance. And in the end, when we become like light, just colour and movement, we will have no need of those great and complicated tombstones because every thing and every one will just be.

Did you also have a daughter, dear Circus Aerialist? And did you also take her to the cliffs overlooking a soft white beach every Saturday afternoon and talk to her about becoming like light, about the necessity of
dissolving into the ocean like the grains of a seashell house? Did you show her how to fly a kite across the dunes, running, skating, sliding down the collapsing feathery slope with the string growing evermore taught as the kite flew higher and higher into the blue? And did you one day fill a balloon with helium and wrap the string around your daughter's fingers so that the balloon could float up towards the cashmere clouds, the string quivering in the wind as it swept over the dunes and then the saltbushes and Teatree? Did you lean in close and whisper in your daughter's ear, so close she could smell the peppermint on your breath, did you whisper that even small round things could float in a bubble of light?

Did you do these things? Because I've seen you float through the air, arms and legs squashed up to your body and your back curled so tight you were just a golden ball floating through the air from swing to swing. And then your legs and arms sprung out into a long long line and you shot through the air, streaking past as a golden ray of light, smooth and fast. This is what I know. I know because I have seen you. I have seen your body merge so completely into light that it refracts off everything around it.

In the circus tent I watched you and I marvelled at how all that my father told me could be true, for the seashell house and the kite and the balloon - they were just toys, children's playthings to make me understand something which I thought I could never know. In the circus tent I sat with my father in the front row as the rain dripped through a hole high above and splashed into a rusty tin bucket sitting in the sawdust by my father's plastic seat. We'd skirted our way around the tightly packed cars in the field outside, our shoes sinking deeper into the mud with each step. My father held his umbrella in close to our bodies, shielding us from the rain which slashed the floodlight beams in heavy streaks. We'd shouldered our way past wet bodies steaming in the foyer tent to the knobbly-kneed programme seller who stood on a raised box and called out, Programmes, two dollars, programmes, programmes. Ladies n' Genlm'n, get ya programmes heah! My father pulled a crumpled two dollar note from his pocket and the knobbly-kneed programme seller waved a shiny little booklet through the air like a flag flying towards my father. He pressed his lips to my forehead and placed the shiny little booklet in my hands. On the shiny little booklet, emblazoned there on the front page in violet, cobalt blue and silver, yes silver - there you were, dear Circus Aerialist, spinning in a whirl of colour as you somersaulted through the air. And there below, neck arching in the light, sil-
ver mane rippling back into the breeze, was a silver-grey Arab trotting freely around the ring as it waited for you to alight momentarily on its back before you somersaulted up into the air again.

I sat there, in the front row next to my father, I sat there all evening with that programme laid out on my knees, with your somersault ball of colour springing from the page and your words, printed there inside the booklet on the centrepiece. Your words said that you can only see your hands as they clutch at a rope, brush at the neck of your horse, finger the slender wooden rod of the trapeze swing. They said that when you fly through the air your body becomes like light streaming out from your hands and that sometimes your body as a ray of light might be silver.

I know that this is what you said because I have those words, that page before me now. I have that shiny little booklet opened out on the chenille bedspread as I write these words to you, dear Circus Aerialist, in the small light of my room. Small so that my mother can't see the strip of yellow light which might otherwise peep out from under my bedroom door, giving her a clue as to the paper scratchings coming out from the half-light in my room. She's scraping away pieces of sausage, mashed potato and peas leftover on the milky white china plates from dinner. She's clanging pots and clinking cutlery as she tidies the kitchen, spic and span, wiping those shiny blue tiles so clean you can watch your reflection in them as you walk past.

You see, my mother has an imaginary button in her mouth which she tightens whenever I ask her about my father. She screws up her lips and makes twisting motions with her fingers and she pierces me right through with her hard blue eyes. Her stare is so cold it turns me to ice. And then she spins on her heel, apron flying out in a whirl, and she plunges her elbows into the sink, scrub scrubbing and scraping and scratching hard at that grime and grease with her ajax and the thin green scouring sponge.

After that night at the circus, when circus performers turned into dancing fire and spinning lights and bubbles of colour which floated through the air colliding, turning, bouncing and sparkling - after that night, on Saturday morning at 10am, I waited on the front steps in my shorts and sandals, with my beach-bag slung over my shoulder. I waited for my father's rust-tinged Holden to come farting up the rise of the hill. I waited while Mr and Mrs Flanagan reversed from their driveway with Sally all dolled up in the back of the car, her pink tutu spraying up from the back seat like a toilet-roll cover. I waited while the Papos boys scram-
bled around the corner on their bikes, dropping them in a heap by their front door as they ran inside, slamming the heavy wooden door behind.

I waited while the Flanagans bumped over the ditch in their driveway, easing to halt so that Sally could re-emerge from her limousine and pirouette down the pathway, disappearing behind the wisteria covered lattice. After that night at the circus, I sat on the front steps until the crickets began making their crrrrrrkkk crrrrkkk noises and the hill on the horizon was dotted with little lights. My mother took my hand in hers and led me back inside. She sat me down on that old floral couch in the loungeroom and she said, Your father's not coming any more - he's got a grant from the government.

So I watched from the window, next Saturday and the Saturday after that. I waited by the window each Saturday until the postman brought to the door a parcel wrapped up in plain brown paper with German stamps and my name on it. It was him, I knew, I knew. And folded up inside was a letter. And in that letter were my father's words saying that he was sorry he couldn't take me to the cliffs any more, that he was busy working on equations in a land far away and that for now he would write and he would send me parcels. That's the way it is. Nothing is ever permanent, Eunice. That's what my father said.

In the parcel was a kaleidoscope. I keep it still, there in the drawer beside my bed. I still hold the circular glass disc up to my eye and stretch out the long plastic cylinder to the light, let it refract through those coloured crystals sliding around each other until they fall into vibrating lace-frilled star shapes, or curly spirals and waves. I keep it there in the drawer even though my father's letters became shorter and sketchier with each delivery. Even though the postman slipped less and less frequently into our mailbox those German postmarked airmail envelopes. Even though it was not long until the letters stopped altogether.

Did you ever sit around a fire late at night, dear Circus Aerialist, drinking beer over a fold-up table with a man who claimed to be a mathematician of bodies as light? Perhaps you told him how it was to leap from a horse in a streak of colour and then catch a rope with those disembodied hands and then string your whole being out in a whirling line as it spun in circles around a rope. And perhaps your mathematician friend leaned forward into the firelight and curled his long black hair behind his ears. And perhaps he made notes in a sketchbook using a strange hieroglyphic language which spoke of dissolving the container walls of our bodies so that we could fly through the air like sea eagles. And perhaps he told you then, dear Circus Aerialist, that he had a daugh-
ter who was small and round and had eyes like her mother’s eyes, deep blue like the ocean – a daughter who would one day become a helium balloon and float away in a bubble of light across the wide expanse of blue, trailing a long thin line across the surface of the earth.

Eunice Seeigel.
LAISHA ROSNAU

NIGHT SWIMMING

When the lake pulled us from the dock, swift-bodied and drunk, we already knew

how it would feel when weeds wound slick around our ankles, tugged us farther into water which had no depth only layers of darkness,

knew how it would feel when, one by one, we jerked our ankles free, split the lake’s surface our mouths gaping.

What we didn’t know was this: that Christine would sell sex in Germany, that Jen would waitress until the day her tongue twisted over the specials, struck dumb with monotony, that Tanya would love women and be hated for it,
that we would each forget
how the air would dry the flat, smooth
skin first – how we could harbour
lake water in our hair, beneath
our breasts, between each toe.

We crawled back to the dock,
cuffs of imagined green
staining our ankles and we knew
how it felt to lie open to the night,
nothing holding us under.
SEIZURE - AN EPIGRAPH

no words

no thoughts no feeling

just the animal past keening

kicking dumbly at the page

no image no lyric

no incisive wit no rage

but blurred spoor

spilled ink white noise

in this unpoem of death

that is

by life made strange.
Stories about Other People: Recent Non-Fiction

Writing in The Australian Review of Books, the writer and critic Drusilla Modjeska recently addressed the use by a number of Australian authors of autobiography as a narrative device. Modjeska argues that while some are “using” it within the traditional constraints of the form, others deploy it much more subtly, though not necessarily as successfully. Focusing specifically on Robert Drewe’s latest work, The Shark Net (Viking, 2000), she notes that reliance on autobiography allows the writer a greater degree of intimacy with the reader than is usually the case with Drewe’s writing. Modjeska then follows up her discussion with a reading of various other works, often returning to Shark Net as a sort of template against which other writers employing autobiography as a means of telling a story might be judged. Hers is an interesting thesis, though I wonder if perhaps a little too kind to Drewe.

Autobiography, life/self-writing, memoir, testimony, are some of the ways in which the self seeks to make sense of its place in the world. Sidonie Smith has long argued that these are genres most suited to self-invention, to the reinscription of otherness within the self. In writing down one’s recollections one engages in a process of memorialisation that is at once profoundly emancipatory and intrinsically flawed. The process of (re)membering implicit in the form is almost always also, perhaps inevitably, a one-sided view of the world. Indeed, Suzette Henke (Shattered Beings, 1998) recently reminded us of Freud’s view that “it takes two to witness the unconscious”. In other words, autobiography is a process of self-analysis that needs to be framed within specific critical and conceptual discourses. Truth has a peculiar tendency to appear to its maker in rather minimalist ways. Sharknet seems to me such a sleek piece of story-telling that I wonder if autobiographical detail in any way provides the decisive, or even a significant impetus to the narrative. This
a gripping, utterly controlled and stylishly written account of the crimes that sent shock waves through Perth's lushest streets in the 1950s and 60s. In tight, elegant and chilling prose, Drewe's telling of the story of the boy parallels that of the city's own loss of innocence. Shark Net is "a vibrant and haunting memoir that reaches beyond the dark recesses of murder and chaos ... charting new and exciting territory", the blurb tells us. An interesting read, perhaps. But haunting is not a word that I would use to describe this work. Drewe's ability to make us see the intruder at the window, and with his mother frantically rushing for the telephone reveals the sort of craftsmanship we have come to expect from him. But there is ultimately little sense of Drewe the man, and of the boy we learn only what the man allows us to glimpse. In an interview she recently conducted with Helen Garner, Margaret Simons cited Janet Malcolm's view that "the important power journalists have is the power over how their subjects are represented to the public". She might have been talking about Shark Net. Drewe plays his cards too closely to his chest, and although the relationship between father and son is on occasion mildly frank, on the whole there are few gaps through which we might see into the mind of the man.

Kim Mahood's Craft for a Dry Lake (Anchor, 2000) is another work journeying close to the autobiographical coast. Setting out in the footsteps of her father, Mahood, a visual artist, travels through outback Australia in a quest that is both personal and political. Her desire to (re)visit the places her father walked, and to encounter the space of the father, provides her with an opportunity to explore race relations in Australia in a way that historical or sociological texts do not always succeed in doing. For Mahood herself occupies a number of ideological spaces, from the defenceless woman to the adventurer in the mould of the Nineteenth-century woman traveller. She is in turn historian and story-teller, at one with and Other to the world she enters. Recalling the journal of Allan Davidson, "the only official documentation of a previous traverse of the Tanami region", she writes:

But now, persevering, I find myself slowly drawn in, because I can imagine how it was for him to see the country for the first time, this country that I am travelling through, remembering my own experience of seeing it for the first time, remembering my father's description of seeing it for the first time. (50)

The colonial(ist) fantasy, the emphasis on the primacy of inscription on
a land presumed tabula rasa, resonates with the way counter-Mabo and Wik discourses operate, but Mahood is in no way an ingénue. Although her style often shifts between the lyrical and the banal, she is a perceptive and sophisticated reader — of the land, of people, of herself. Particularly fascinating is Mahood’s own implication in the process of land inscription, dispossession and occupation that is at the heart of settler-postcolonial Australia. The daughter of an Afghan Australian, Kim Mahood spent part of her formative years in the Northern Territory, where her father worked as a stock inspector. She recounts his increasing uneasiness with his role as a member of a brutal and uncaring system, and his resignation to set up Mongrel Downs. Although the station got its name in a rather mundane manner, the ironies the name evokes could not be richer. In these days of hybridity and interstitial spaces, Mahood’s description of her return to the land her father once “owned” is typical of the situation faced by settler colonies, as the recent upheavals in Zimbabwe and South Africa show. Mahood’s moving account of a quest for the traces of her father frames what is ultimately a profound meditation on the nature of place and self, especially as it is seen from the perspective of settler-Australians: “If you can’t locate yourself in some sort of narrative or myth, you can’t survive for too long in this country. It needs to be a strong story to take its place out here, and it needs to be something that comes from the country itself” (203). If at times there are hints of a Rousseauiesque view of Indigenous Australia, Mahood’s remains a powerful text, one where intimate spaces merge with the public domain.

For Modjeska texts such as Drewe’s and Mahood’s reflect a newly discovered passion for the story of the self, minus the couch, and relate in part to the way postmodernism has persuaded us of our fragmented multiplicity. We are “shattered beings”, to borrow Rainer Maria Rilke’s words, in search of a bit of tea and sympathy. But in the postmodern moment we have rediscovered an ethical dimension to our reading, and writers have had to accommodate us. Stories of self are multiple, and they disseminate themselves in a variety of sub-genre that, if Modjeska is right, is a reflection of the new Zeitgeist. Form becomes in fact an apt mirror for the performances of the work’s content — the “self-in-progress”. To the reader, who approaches the autobiographical text very much in the way of a voyeur, the desire to know about the other’s self is enhanced when political, social and environmental conditions provide more than a theatre of action: they, too, are the subject of analysis. Perhaps Drewe’s work will prove unputdownable reading for Perth resi-
dents. But what of “straightforward” autobiography, such as Anne Summers’ *Ducks on the Pond* (Viking, 2000) and Margaret Scott’s *Changing Countries* (ABC Books, 2000)?

Anne Summers’ book provides an account of her activism in the women’s movement in Australia, and to that extent it cannot but be political. Summers’ move from Adelaide to Sydney in turn represents also an intellectual transformation. She writes of her time at university, and of tentative discoveries of a degree of agency that she had presumed was denied her as a woman. Her involvement in the Women’s Electoral Lobby, her work with women’s refuges, and her participation in the ideological conflicts that assailed women’s movements at the time are dealt with meticulously, if also a little tediously. Perhaps because so much of what she writes about is such an intrinsic part of our cultural baggage in the Australia at the end of the 20th century, at times Summers’ endless listing of boyfriends, meetings, exciting sexual encounters (then perhaps, but now a little like braggadocio), ensure that this work is twice as long as it should be. Perhaps if she had strayed a little from the truth, Summers might have sounded less falsely modest about her achievements, remarkable by any measure. One of the most disturbing aspects of the work relates to its focus on a troubled, painful relationship with an alcoholic father. Ultimately, though, this is very much a product of a sensibility such as Summers’. Writing out of, and about the second wave of Feminism, Summers produces in 2000 a book in which whiteness, of a kind disturbingly normative in its echoes of the White Australia of the middle of the century, is paramount. There are no non-White participants in this struggle for women’s rights, though the ethnicity of the Irish or Scottish women accepted in the refuge figures prominently. Perhaps it was always so; perhaps non-White women were that much oppressed that they lacked the time, and the means to take part in the struggle for change and reform. A reference to Bobby Sykes and Charles Perkins, both at the time young Indigenous Australian activists, is incidental, casually inserted in a comparative setting of a radicalisation of the women’s movement. The account Summers offers in *Ducks on the Pond* is undermined by its White, middle-class women politics, not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with such focus, but rather because there is no recognition of it.

Margaret Scott’s *Changing Countries*, while also very much autobiographical, clearly exists in a space of its own. Scott is described on the back cover as “one of Australia’s wittiest writers”, a view which, though subjective, the work on occasion does confirm. As a writer, Scott is at all
times intensely conscious of the slipperiness of the genre she has engaged, and of the fraught relationship between writer and text. Her preoccupation with disclosing her awareness of the limitations of self-analysis (she might have cited Freud ...) reveals itself in the fragmented narrative structure she adopts. In Changing Countries “Clare and Lizzie and ‘I’” function as three separate yet intrinsically symbiotic narrators, each telling a story that is recognisably Scott’s own. Whether the different versions are all true to fact becomes almost irrelevant here, for Scott is so disarmingly honest about the fictions of self-making that we simply give up trying to pin her down. “Is she fact or is she fiction?” Does it really matter? Like another migrant in another land, Salman Rushdie in his beloved London, Scott knows that migration is too tempting a homeland not to buy oneself a new set of frocks. “In Australia we are busily reinventing ourselves”, Peter Carey once told an appreciative audience in London. Appreciative because in the land of Tradition his audience probably felt that such trickster ways would be better suited to poor colonials. Scott is an Englishwoman who recognises that her subject-position in her new country was always determined by her ethnicity, by her gender and by her class. Her reading of her own position, even when at its most naive (and but does Scott know how to be naive ...?), offers a fascinating portrait of the complexity of self-making.

Stories about ourselves

Peter Read’s Belonging (CUP, 2000) deals with White Australia’s engagement, or lack of it, with Indigenous Australia. Written in a style that might best be described as “dead-pan larrikinism”, Read’s work is an eclectic rummaging through Australian culture, borrowing for the purposes of his quest from a diverse assemblage of poetry, country music lyrics, interviews with “ordinary Australians” (my phrase), both Indigenous, White and other more recent arrivals, specifically of Asian and South American descent. Read is interested in the echoes that arise when we juxtapose different voices, and the title of one of the book’s chapters, “Voices in the River”, conveys in some sense the underlying mood of Belonging. Focusing on the present, Read sifts through it in order to uncover ways in which the past might begin to feel to all Australians like a space from which new articulations of Australian place and identity may be made real. “The past is never simple” (28), he tells us. No. Or silent. Ours, in contemporary Australia, must be shared
in turn between Indigenous, White and migrant Australians. Interestingly, Read’s “Voices in the river” would seem the equivalent in settler Australia to the Caribbean emphasis on “noises in the blood”. There as here, the past remains a much visited space, but largely we tend to take away from it only what suits our own specific interests. Witness Gerard Henderson’s rather agitated reaction to Robert Hughes’s piece in the *Olympic Souvenir Edition*, and his accusation that factual error should not have been allowed to appear as official discourse. Call me postructuralist avant la lettre, but “factual error” has never seemed to me as transparent as Henderson believes it. That Hughes’s view of Australia is an antiquated one, that of the anguished expatriate to whom “Ostraylia” will always be home from afar, does not preclude the validity of some of his interpretations. Sometimes there is nothing like a little distance to make us see the forest and the trees. Peter Read, too, is selective in his choice of quotations, but that is his right. Reading what he cites of Les Murray’s bitter rantings against Indigenous Australians and “multi-Ethnics”, I knew his was a skewed reading of Murray’s verse (not unlike mine, either), but I found myself recalling a number of other, equally unimaginative “you big ugly Australia” pieces by Indigenous and migrant Australians. But Read is an optimist, and addressing in his concluding words the “shadow brother” whom he invited on a journey “to explore together our own proper country and our separate griefs” (29), Indigenous Australian Dennis Foley, he remarks: “Yes, Dennis, our griefs are different, but your dreamtime is not dead. Neither we or our peoples are dying. The deep future lies within us” (224). A cynic, and in the mould of Manik Datar, “a global nomad” (158), I waver(ed) between “hear, hear”, and “good on ya’, mate”.

In *Through Silent Country* (FRAP, 2000), Carolyn Wadley Dowley adopts an approach not unlike Read’s, but her stance is much more closely that of the listener. While Read is at his best when on the offensive, showering his interviewees with what must feel like a barrage of questions, she has few to ask those whom she encounters. Mostly, Dowley listens, and lets others speak. She appears overwhelmed by the profound truth of the responses she receives. Occasionally she remarks on how (dis)similar they are to others she has heard elsewhere, as she moves among the various Indigenous Australians in Western Australia, thus establishing a sense of contiguity in the experiences of Indigenous Australia. Dowley too is an historian, and with Read she relies on stories, only in her case oral ones, to construct an alternative Australian history. She differs from Read in that she is less intent on analysing than she is
on giving voice to stories rarely circulated in mainstream Australia. The
journey she undertakes in, and Through Silent Country, however, is any­
thing but silent, and here too the voices in the river — the noises in the
blood — that individual stories represent resonate loudly against “factual
accuracy” as it is recorded in the books sold in bookshops, taught in
schools and universities. For as she notes in the Introduction to the
work, of “the story of exile and escape” told in this book she “couldn’t
find any mention … in other history books I looked into” (14). “Factual”
has hardly ever been sufficient criteria for inclusion in history books.
Dowley’s work constitutes one of those rare moments when academic
authors manage to resist the urge to do what is in their blood: question,
challenge, overwhelm with detail and information. Commenting on one
of the many encounters with the Wongutha people, she notes the varia­
tions in their stories. Sometimes each new version of the same events
takes a different shape:

The story is less vividly told [now], some details are omitted. I don’t
mind, I am happy with for Auntie Rosie to tell whichever version she
likes, it is her choice, she can freely construct the story and the
telling of it for the wider, unknown audience. It is right that she
should modify the telling if she wants to (62).

In that cantankerous-Father Christmassy style that he has made his
trademark, Humphrey McQueen once remarked on the “adoption of the
[Indigenous Australian] Dreaming by settler Australians …” as “less chal­
lenging than Country with its implied claim for Land Rights”. “Country”
and “Dreaming”, without capitals, are words Read and Dowley too like
to use in this sense.

In ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality (Harper Collins,
2000), on the other hand, David Tacey seems to have set out to prove
McQueen right. Tacey approvingly quotes Robert Dessaix’s suggestion
that it is possible for Australians to reinvent themselves “through re
immersion in untransformed landscape and in listening to what our
indigenous Australians find magic in” (248). It is indicative of the level
at which this work operates that neither the essentially banal notion of
an “untransformed landscape” (no potatoes, perhaps?) nor the deeply
offensive notion of possession implicit in the pronoun “our” when
applied by White Australians to Indigenous Australians are addressed by
Tacey. Indeed, if at any time there is an awareness of the need to, at the
very least, set out a recognition of one’s own position when speaking of
environment, place or people, it is largely articulated through the slippery assertions such as “It is my firm belief”, or “I sincerely believe”. No one doubts his feelings, sincerity and commitment to his work or his cause, but as a reader I felt that much the same is available in any of Mr. Packer’s women’s or men’s magazines, and for a lot less money. Tacey’s manifesto for a more spiritual Australia might have made more of an impact if it were not so obsessed with White (my qualification) Australia’s supposedly inveterate secular nature. Ironically, his own work begins thus: “Australian attitudes towards spirituality appear to be undergoing a profound and dramatic change” (1). I wondered if Tacey knew that Billy Graham too said much the same thing during his visit to Australia a few decades ago. As Drewe remarks in Shark Net, “Billy Graham was declaring there was a spiritual flame sweeping Australia” (160).

**Hip critics catch up with the times**

The last set of texts I want to address consist of literary and cultural criticism, and include both a number of essay collections and a couple of works devoted to single authors. Edited by Sue Hosking and Dianne Schwerdt, eXtensions, is a collection of essays which cover a wide range of topics, and seek to capture “the diversity of subject matter and the variety of critical approaches now used in English Studies”. While the essays go some way towards doing so, one wonders if the enormous unrest currently being experienced by all disciplines in the Humanities is in any way reflected in the sort of ad hoc series of writings collected in eXtensions. In spite of all the best intentions, one is left with a rather unsettling experience of a trip to a Benetton store, or to McDonald’s in Paris, where Le Big Mac is, well ... actually, a hamburger. Precisely one of the things that departments of English have been attempting in the last few years, has been to reflect a greater balance between inclusiveness and contextuality, a tolerance and enthusiasm for Otherness tempered by respect for the specificities of difference. There is in eXtensions just a little too simplistic a sense of “culture-vulture” practices that might seem perfectly in place in Mr. Murdoch’s Australian Magazine, but a little contentious in a collection of this nature.

Clearly less ambitious in its scope, Australian Nationalism Reconsidered, edited by Adi Wimmer, nevertheless offers a significant contribution to an assessment of the ways in which national considerations have made a comeback into the Australian (un)consciousness in
the years since Pauline Hanson. Presented at the European Australian Studies Association, held at Klagenfurt University in 1999, the essays bring together some of the most influential names working in Australian Studies. Indeed, I feel almost as if I am nit-picking as I point out that I found it odd that the only voices asked to comment on the residual influences of Hansonism in contemporary Australia are those (Anglo-Celtic ones) less likely to have been psychologically or physically confronted by it. A pity, as the contributions collected in *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered* would have been greatly enhanced if “framed” (yes, I’ll happily echo Sneja Gunew) by the words of Other Australians. *Interlogue* (Ethos Books, 1999), a new text in the Studies in Singapore Literature Series, consists of a number of commissioned works written by scholars from Australia, Singapore and the UK. Edited by Kirpal Singh, Volume Two of this series focuses essentially on Singaporean poetry, though on occasion read comparatively, or cross-culturally. While it is impossible in a work of this nature to do justice to such a complex and diverse range of critical approaches, a number of essays are particularly insightful. Written by scholars working across a number of cultural and linguistic registers, the essays frequently reflect a profound awareness of the subtleties of difference and / in culture. *Interlogue*’s focus on Singaporean writing, one of the minor literatures in English currently experiencing a boom in terms of literary and critical production, makes this an important research tool within postcolonial studies.

*Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (UNSW Press, 2000) is edited by John Docker and Gerhard Fischer. This is a timely contribution to the area of race criticism. In common with Kirpal’s work, *Race, Colour and Identity* reveals a truly admirable attempt at reflecting both the diversity of critical approaches in discussions of race and the labyrinthine notion of critical positioning in multicultural Australia (problematic though it may be, I am not persuaded that the term has lost its usefulness in contemporary Australia). Indeed, as Docker and Fischer point out, via Charles Taylor, “the discourse of identity is as old as modernity itself” (4). The hipness of the new has of late become one of the crucial markers of value in cultural studies, with each new published work purporting to be at the cutting edge of one discourse or another. The point Taylor makes, and one Docker and Fischer endorse, is that so often what appears to us as yet another earth-shattering step in the march of Modernity to overthrow Tradition, has really been dealt with by others before us. Citing the reception accorded Taylor’s piece
worldwide, the editors argue that while such issues are not in any way endemic to "the multi-cultural, settler-colonial nations like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand [...] it seems as if these societies allow the peculiar problems of the contemporary identity discourse to be presented in sharper focus" (6). Quite; and only distance makes me want to overlook the fact that once again the comparison between settler colonies and somewhere like the Caribbean islands is overlooked, for some of the finest treatments of issues of race and identity are at present to be found in the work of writers of that region. Such a comparison might have tempered the suggestion that the "[t]he fashionable discourse on multiculturalism and identity seems to be a characteristic feature of what is described as the post-modern and post-colonial condition" (3). Fashionable ...? We are getting there now, but others have come and gone. W.E.B. DuBois over 100 years ago. Nevertheless, *Race, Colour and Identity* manages to convey some of the contentious debates in contemporary criticism in Australia and New Zealand. The decision to divide the book into sections, each addressing a separate range of issues, works particularly well: in addition to an Introduction, there are chapters on "Aboriginal Identity", "Asians in Australia/Australians in Asia", "Biculturalism and Multiculturalism in New Zealand" and "Whiteness". Ensuring extra points in terms of hip value, the latter section is only just beginning to be explored in Australia. In Australia we are still more likely to acknowledge racial difference by looking out, rather than in. *Maman, un Blanc*.

In his introduction to *The Model: Selected Writings of Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie* (UWA Press, 2000), Richard Rossiter cites from Mackenzie's unpublished work, "Frontispiece", the views of its main character, Heron. In one of the many games Mackenzie plays with his readers, Heron notes that what he writes "isn't ordinary autobiography, because for one thing, it's properly honest, and for another I'm mixing past and present according to a recipe I've thought out" (36). It is a passage worth quoting for the insight it offers into Mackenzie's writing techniques, and aesthetic politics. In "Frontispiece" more than elsewhere, Mackenzie reveals an unusual self-consciousness, in Australian writing of the Thirties and Forties, of the nature of his craft in a quasi-postmodernist way. It is a point Rossiter pursues in his "Introduction" with specific reference to the intricate game of *mise en abyme* of "Frontispiece", of which an excerpt appears in *The Model*. That Mackenzie's fictional work is now recognised as strongly resembling his personal life, as Rossiter underlines, should perhaps not surprise us
inordinately. But his stories seem to me to prove Modjeska’s case in a way that Drewe’s book does not. Autobiography is about making sense of the self for the self; memory, even if freed of the cloudy veils Mackenzie’s alcoholic passions induced, is a fickle friend. Richard Rossiter’s selections of Mackenzie’s published and unpublished works, both fiction and poetry and his examination of the background of their production make this book an important contribution to Australian, and more pointedly, Western Australian literary historiography. Of all the books reviewed here, The Model has by far the most stunning cover, though Race, Colour and Identity comes a close second.

Ann Blake’s Christina Stead’s Politics of Place (UWA, 1999) sets out to re-examine of Stead’s “major post-war novels, Cotters’ England and Miss Herbert (Suburban Wife)” (12). To this extent Blake’s work would seem to constitute an important addition to criticism of Stead’s writing. For although notions of place in Stead’s work are frequently dealt with, the novels Blake addresses have attracted scant critical attention. Unfortunately, there is a sense in which the work becomes little more than an interminable listing of Stead’s vertigo inducing itineraries (eg., 67-70), the implications of these dislocations ultimately left unclear. At the risk of repeating an oft-quoted mantra, I could not help wondering to what extent a little more theory (of cultural translation; of gender; of place; even of race and empire, given the reference to the Barbadian writer George Lamming) might have made this a more exciting work.

An example of a lively close reading of Australian texts, including Stead’s Cotters’ England, is found in Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of form in Australian Fiction (Halstead Press, with ASAL, 2000). Susan Lever’s decision to base her study on such a broad set of texts makes her enterprise a tricky one, as there is a clear risk that each reading will be necessarily short and limited. However, her ability to draw on a theoretically informed reading framework ensures that each chapter constitutes an illuminating re-reading of some of the most widely read and taught works in Australian studies. Moving between Ada Cambridge and contemporary experimental feminist writing, Lever treats with great energy and originality also the work of influential male writers such as Joseph Furphy, Vance Palmer and David Foster.

In The Stranger from Melbourne (UWA Press, 1999), Paul Adams undertakes a comprehensive literary biography of Frank Hardy, possibly one of Australia’s “least read best-known” writers. Adams discusses the general background of the scandal following the appearance of Power Without Glory, arguing that “[t]he conditions which had made Power Without
Glory possible were about to disappear as Australia entered a new phase of modernisation” (67). Adams’ text conveys the zeal with which Hardy constructed his work, writing and rewriting four successive versions of The Outcasts of Folgarch (1956; 1959; 1965; 1968). One of the book’s most fascinating aspects relates to a discussion of Hardy’s complex and conflictual relationship with the Australian Communist Party. In his assessment of Hardy’s idiosyncrasies, Adams points out that he repeatedly refused to obey the party line. On the issue of Indigenous Australia, Adams notes that Hardy’s stance caused much friction and discomfort within the ACP, for calls supported by Hardy for an end to discrimination against Indigenous peoples were perceived to distract from a wider concern with the struggle for the rights of (White) Australian workers. Adams’ painstaking scholarship, and his infectious enthusiasm for his subject, make the encounter with The Stranger from Melbourne an extremely rewarding one.

Equally committed to his subject, John Miles in Lost Angry Penguins (Crawford House Publishing, 2000) considers the literary movement named in the title of his book by looking specifically at the work of Douglas Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer. This is truly a labour of love, as the acknowledgments already foretell. Miles, like Adams, has long and tirelessly researched his material. Unlike Adams, however, he remains simply too reverential towards the subjects of his research to allow Lost Angry Penguins to offer any real sense of literary historiography. The most valuable contribution this text makes is that it brings together the most significant works of Douglas Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer. But I suspect that Miles would be quite pleased with such a limited outcome. He concludes his study thus: “Again, then, may the offer of memory and two poets’ work please some understanders” (178).

The last work I want to refer to is neither an autobiography (though one might feel tempted to trace the self’s marks on the page), nor a collection of critical essays. Neither is it literary biography, though, again, an argument might be made along those lines. Depth of Translation/The Book of Raft (NMA Publications, 2000) is a collaborative effort between Paul Carter and Ruark Lewis. Both authors well-known writers and visual artists, they produce in this work a fascinating account of the act of translation, both literal and metaphorical, literary and cultural. Using words and images, and resorting in their meaning-making journey to a range of Australian and foreign languages, the authors propose ways to imagine a new relationship to, and of place. Carter’s contribution consists of a rambling but engaging disquisition on the nature of writing.
and translation, of self (and) Other(ing), of truth and fiction. An erudite examination of the work of T.G.H. Strehlow, and particularly of his "half-forgotten autobiographical lament for his father and his own lost childhood" (18), *The Book of Raft* moves seductively and dazzlingly between genre, languages and linguistic registers. But as with Art capital A, which in its self-consciousness it seems to be crying out to be, this is a text that remains, when all is said and translated, a (pre)text for adumbrating Strehlow himself in ways that are not always particularly illuminating. They reveal much of Carter's interests, but less of those of his subject. Lewis' visual montage complements Carter's work to an extent that the latter's might have done to Strehlow's. Perhaps that was not the point. Besides, *Depth of Translation/The Book of Raft*’s most certainly is cross-genre in the act of performance.

**Endnote**

DAVID McCooey

AFTER A LINE ABANDONED BY CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBÉ

The world is full of little animals -
the cats with measured steps
perform their scholarly enquiries
to chairs and doors; the legs
of squid are really lips (with thanks to time

Which frees the doodling gene ‘Mutation’).

Small birds trace maps like battle lines across
the sky; and possums stare
away the blessed emptiness of night,
while underneath a star
you call to moths, these creeping things, and whales:

‘Release the tiny hamster of desire.’
MIKE WILLIAMS

BOY IN SUFFOLK 1962/63

(1)

see the boy as quiet fire
across the summer fields
to the owled wood
moss cool & dank shadow
splashes through brook
that stones its way to river
night read journeys
ache behind his eyes
looks back across the barley
as he sinks into the trees

(2)

fishes the stream
his bike leans against oak
alone in the dappled shade
of the kingfisher day
in these holy hours of boy & river
light leaf bark sky
listens through the bell-tracked hours
where monks walk cloistered lives

he sees them medieval through the trees
boy & monk in their quiet worlds

(3)

in the night from his window
he sees the first snow of January

the house is adrift
& the moon when it comes

rising over the woods in the hard air
grins like the fool of winter

awake at this deep hour
in wonder at this frozen place
Naked Woman and Mirror

for Jennifer Harrison

I am balancing bare before the glass.
Whose is this breast I hold in front of me?
Standing, staring at all my nakedness:
Of course, the more you look, the less you see.

Is this your breast I hold in front of me?  
My heart locks on a weird kick of time.  
The less you feel, the more you will feel free,  
Your deep self shocked by the beautiful crime.

My heart has locked, again. It is the times.  
Look through the wrong end of the telescope:  
You will see beauty, and you will see crime,  
This type of development being no trope.

Look through the wrong end of your wildest hopes.  
Let all of us just get naked, and die.  
So much new development. Who could cope?  
Parts of us are called before others. Why?

Yes, let us all just get naked and die.  
Cheap estate, strange garden, and all this mess.  
It happens, I guess. One never asks why:  
The silk gown you gave me now holds my breasts.
Strange garden, silk nightgown, and all that mess.
Staring, and staring. At my nakedness.
And there, by some grace, go my beating breasts,
Before the glass, balancing. More or less.

WHAT FALLS

Morning never falls. It is the night that comes down, demoted angels and disposable stars in the pall of its formal descent. The dollar on Wall Street often falls, along with spirits when things get depressed, ideals at conferences, tears in bed, the mighty on whom we so blindly depend. The temperature falls at the end of the day, like clockwork, for certain, eventually returning on the warm upward thermals of dawn. Faces fall at all the wrong moments – as do families, empires, whole civilisations – while final curtain calls at the close of the show seem right. Less so, fall-out on foreign nations, incomplete cadences in late Bach or Beethoven, kids in playgrounds, ideas in infancy: cite Newton, Genesis chapters II and III. Some marks fall in a pleasant fashion – birthdays, bar mitzvahs, those celebrations – whereas fines, unwed mothers, hail and radiation make hell. Waves fall, for every good reason (see dominoes, periods, tourism industry) and autumn leaves do it, if only to tell us the season. But what worries me here is the rate at which they all fall. Yesterday was slowly, today is quickly, tomorrow may not occur. It is no longer relevant to follow the trend of What Goes Up Must Come Down. It has stalled on this: a simple matter of what, and who, falls when.
A SHORT REPORT FROM HAPPY VALLEY

I got back yesterday and I'm writing quickly because tonight I have to go to Brisbane to see about that bovine-fever business. I haven't even bothered to unpack my bags. Yes, you were right. Strange goings-on, and I've seen some strange goings-on of late. The strangest thing of all was when I first arrived (Wednesday was it?) and dropped in to see that Dr Andrews you told me about. (Are you sure he's a doctor?) Very helpful, very polite; put on his coat and took me straight away to a house at the end of the main street (that's all Happy Valley is really, a main street with thirty or so houses, a general store in the middle and a petrol station at the end). But we weren't allowed to go inside. So Dr Andrews stands at the front gate, calls out, picks up a stone, throws it at the window and calls out again. The front door opens and out comes a bed with an old man lying in it, about eighty-odd I suppose; dead to the world. Two men are carrying it, one on either end, and they put it down on the front lawn. Before I know it half the town is there, all lined up along the fence. It seems this old man is some sort of 'village elder', has been asleep longer than anyone else (thirty years, says Dr Andrews) and commands great respect from the people in the town. Because this is the strange thing, I mean what puts it beyond just another outbreak of a previously unrecorded disease that I seem to be criss-crossing the country like some kind of mad tourist these days to look at, and that is that for them this sleepiness is not new at all, has been part of the town, has almost defined the town for years and is now worn proudly, like a badge of honour. So I stood beside the bed and looked down at the old man; one hand in my pocket fiddling with my keys, one hand stroking my chin. You can speak to him, says Dr Andrews, standing behind me – and he gives me a little push. I lean forward – what do you say? How are you feeling? I ask. The old man kind of squirms inside, as if a thought is moving through him;
his eyelids flutter, though they still don't open; he runs a fat worm
tongue across his bottom lip. A sound comes out of his mouth, but if it’s
speech I can’t catch the meaning. Dr Andrews puts a hand on the small
of my back and moves me forward again. I lean down with one ear
turned towards the old man’s face. Slugs and snails, he says. Slugs and
snails? – and I hear a low murmur in the crowd behind me. All right, I
think, slugs and snails it is. I stand up straight and nod my head. Dr
Andrews catches my eye and nods his head too. (Slugs and snails, Pete,
did you get that?)

That man’s name, the old man, is Sanderson. He was the first to come
down with it, and for a long time he was the only one affected. (I’m back
in Dr Andrews’s office now – are you sure he’s a doctor? – with the jars
of pickles along the wall.) Then all of a sudden, about ten years ago
apparently, it swept through the town like the plague, affecting every­
one in it in some way or other, and to varying degrees. Some, like
Sanderson, are out to it completely, some hover more precariously
between sleep and wakefulness, others, like those lining the fence when
I first arrived just have a certain vacancy about them that is difficult to
describe. Even Dr Andrews, as we talked back in his office, would every
now and then sort of lean back in his chair, let out a yawn and sit star­
ing vacantly into space for a few seconds as if trying to find his way back
to the waking world.

The phenomenon is not new, of course; as recently as the 1960’s there
was that case in Belorussia where a whole village fell asleep for over a
year until on the second Sunday after Pentecost they just as mysteriously
woke up again. The recorder in that case, a Dr Shinovski, made par­
ticular mention of the fact that during the course of the year the Town
Hall clock had actually run fast, gaining in total almost three and a half
days. There was a woman recently in Minnesota who gave birth to what
was thought to be stillborn baby but which just prior to its cremation
suddenly woke up. The woman went on to explain to the specialists who
then hungrily fell upon her that she was the descendent of a ‘village
elder’ (similar to Sanderson) who in the 1920’s along with one hundred
and thirty five other people in the mid-western town of Wendover slept
without interruption for almost five and a half years. There have been
sporadic outbreaks since – some recorded, some apocryphal – and as you
yourself mentioned, Pete, there was that case in Melbourne just a few
years ago where for about twenty four hours no-one seemed to care.
The following morning Dr Andrews took me around to see some of the more severe cases; one of them, a woman, is probably worth a mention. She was young, early twenties I suppose, laid out on the bed with the most serene expression on her face. I leant over and pulled the covers back (discreetly, you understand) and touched her here and there. It's difficult to describe what I felt, there was this kind of radiance coming from her, of warmth I suppose, a milky-white kind of radiance, the kind you get from sleeping babies, though you'd know nothing about that of course. I looked at Dr Andrews - I was touched by it, I admit - and he just looked back at me with that familiar hazy-eyed smile. How is she fed? I asked, putting the covers back again. (She wasn't skinny, you understand, she was if anything well-proportioned: discreet, discreet; yes, I know.) She's not always asleep, said Dr Andrews, adjusting the covers; even the worst cases aren't always asleep. They wake up at meal-times, and at other times too; it's just that when there's no real reason to be awake they lapse back into sleep again. And let's face it, Mr Stevens, he said, getting all serious all of a sudden, who hasn't at least occasionally yearned to live their life like that? (Well no, Doctor, I thought, if doctor you are; I'm a busy man, six hours a night is enough for me.) I pulled back an eyelid, the one furthest from me, and looked into the pupil. An indescribable sensation, like falling into a deep blue lake, as if the eye were suddenly somehow bigger than me and that I was floundering in it.

The rest of the afternoon I spent exploring the town on my own, despite 'Dr Andrews' almost badgering attempts to join me. I didn't need him anyway, there was always someone waiting outside the next front gate willing to take me dreamily by the hand and lead me down another front path through another front doorway into another dark shaded room where another person lay sleeping. I managed to have a few conversations (by timing some visits with meal-times): the people were happy to talk to me, as curious about me, in a way, as I was about them. But the general mood was one of an all-pervasive serenity and over the next few days I found myself falling into step with it, this strange, irresistible quiescence, like when on a tram going home at the end of a long hard day someone yawns and without knowing it you find yourself yawning too. The sleep I slept on my third night, though still only my customary six hours, was as deep and as tranquil a sleep as I think I have ever had.
I spent the last day with Dr Andrews, in his office with the pickles on the wall. I was tired now, and anxious to leave. But I'd gone this far on my good friend Pete's account that I thought I'd better finish the job. (My invoice will follow shortly, by the way.) He asked me what I thought, or if I had any theory at all. I ventured to him that it may be a pathogen, but that I couldn't be absolutely sure. I would discuss it with my colleagues, I said, when I got back to the city. He suddenly spun around in his chair and pinned me with his gaze. You know as well as I do it's not biological, he said, if it were just a case of diagnose and prescribe I would have fixed it years ago. Its cause runs deep, much deeper than that: you won't find it in your lists. A crack has opened up in the spiritual life of the people here and their élan vital has dribbled out. They are dead inside, each day they die a little more; don't be fooled by this facade of contentment, it is an act they have put on for you. At this point Dr Andrews leant down into the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet and took out a sleeping baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes. He held it out for me to hold, the way supplicants hold out their offerings. It's the child of the young woman you saw yesterday, he said, she's already forgotten she had it. I admit I went a little weak at this point, having not held a newborn baby since Sophie, nearly six years ago now. And will this child live its life in somnolence too, he continued, never having really been born? When you went to university and did your medicine is this what your lecturers called life? I couldn't answer him, it would have started an argument, and I would have woken the child. Besides, hadn't Dr Andrews himself already pointed out the envy that was at the heart of all this, that we would all like to sleep like this baby slept, not for a night but forever? I handed it back and he returned it to the drawer. When Mr Sanderson first started nodding off he said, turning around to face me again, he was the laughing stock of the town; a lazy good-for-nothing leech who was better off out of the way. But it didn't take long for them to all figure out that Mr Sanderson was one to be envied. That's how it starts, Mr Stevens, and it's all downhill from there. You only need to recite the Litany so many times – Why Not? So What? Who Cares? – before it drains all living from you. In the case of Happy Valley, this is exactly what's happened. And already in its infantile dreams that baby too is reciting the Litany and drifting away from itself.

Well that was Dr Andrews, and his views are worth recording. But they are by no means definitive. They've all got their own theories, Pete, credible and incredible, and hardly need a trouble-shooting pathologist to tell them what makes them tick. Some say it's something in the water
(pumped from a bore on the north edge of town); some that it's a pollen that is blown in off the acacia bushes peculiar to this area; the garage attendant, a very weird-looking young man who filled my tank when I left, tried to tell me that it's a soporific made from dandelion seeds that they gather out on the paddocks each spring and smoke communally throughout the year in weekly meetings in the old school hall. The local storekeeper thinks it's a brainworm, a theory that speaks for itself.

But whatever the cause (does there have to be a cause?) the fact is that these people have made a virtue of it anyway. Even if I had an antidote I doubt I would offer it to them. Leave them alone! Let them rest in peace! (And this is a man with three years post-grad immunology speaking!) And anyway, Pete, you know what I really think? (and I know you'll love this): Happy Valley is nothing more than God's little joke, and like all the best jokes it is one designed to point us in the direction of the ineffable, the profound. So there. Write your article. I'm sure you'll make a meal of it. As for me, there's a sick cow waiting up in Brisbane somewhere, and I've got a plane to catch.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Jordie Albiston has published three collections of poems. Jordie received the Dinny O’Hearn Memorial Fellowship in 1997, and was original editor of the poetry e-zine Divan. She holds a PhD in literature, and has two teenage children.

Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm is a writer and spoken word artist of mixed ancestry from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, and lives and works at Neyaashiinigmiing, Cape Croker Reserve on the Saugeen Peninsula in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Kateri’s writing has been published in various anthologies, journals, and magazines in Canada, the USA, Aotearoa, Australia, and Germany.

Paolo Bartoloni lectures in Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Sydney. He is the editor of Re-Claiming Diversity: Essays on Comparative Literature (Melbourne, 1996) and Intellectuals and Publics: Essays on Cultural Theory and Practice (Melbourne, 1997).

Marion Campbell’s novels are Lines of Flight (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1985), Not Being Miriam (FACP, 1988) and Prowler (FACP, 1999). She currently teaches at the University of Melbourne.

David Cookson lives in South Australia. He has been writing poetry for several years, and is a member of Friendly Street Poets in Adelaide. He tries to reflect the loneliness of the Australian landscape through imagery.

Bruce Dawe is a well known Australian poet whose work is set at secondary and tertiary levels. His collected edition, Sometimes Gladness, is now in its fifth edition.

Michael Deves works as a freelance editor and publisher in Adelaide. In 1999 he completed a doctorate on Brian Castro’s novels at Flinders University.
BILL FEWER is a librarian who lives in the Blue Mountains, using the daily six-hour commute to Sydney to write. His poems have been published in Australian and overseas journals for the past twenty years and he has performed them in many local venues.

AMBER GENEVIEVE FLYNN is currently studying at the University of Western Australia, but often returns to her real home at Goode Beach, in the beautiful South-West.

THOMAS HOAREAU is a Perth artist whose work has been shown in numerous group and solo exhibitions. It is held in the National Gallery as well as the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the galleries of the University of Western Australia, Curtin University and Edith Cowan University. His painting has received several art awards and Hoareau has won two national travel grants.

CORAL HULL is a full time writer and visual artist specialising in poetry, experimental prose fiction, prose poetry, literary articles and digital photography. Her work has been published extensively in literary magazines in the USA, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

MAGGIE JOEL is a Sydney-based public servant by day, studying for a Masters in Creative Writing by night, and a staff writer for Campaign magazine on the weekends. Her short stories have been published and read on radio, she has written one full length work and is working on her second.

JUDY JOHNSON's first collection Wing Corrections was published by Five Islands Press in 1998. It came second in the Anne Elder Awards, and is on the Year 10 Literature List in Western Australia. Her new project is a verse novel concerned with pearl diving in the Torres Strait.

A.F. JOHNSON is a writer and painter from Melbourne. She tutors in creative writing at the English Department of the University of Melbourne. 'Eugen's Fall' is one of many stories that are gathering together to form a retelling of the life of the colonial painter, Eugen von Guerard.
ULI KRAHN chose to come to Australia when young. Once almost a scientist, nearly in business, she finishes an Auslit degree, writes her second novel, and is grumpy.

ROLAND LEACH travelled recently to the Galapagos Islands and Peru on a poetry grant. He has just started Sunline Press, a new publishing outlet for poets.

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM is Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong, and Professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her first collection of poems, Crossing the Peninsula (1980), received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and she has published subsequently four more books of poetry. In addition, she has three books of short stories, a memoir, Among the White Moon Faces (Feminist Press, 1996), which received the 1997 American Book Award, two critical studies on Southeast-Asian literature, and many edited and co-edited volumes on Asian American and Asia-Pacific writing and cultural studies.

MAYA LINDEN is currently studying for a Bachelor of Creative Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts. She has had her work published in various journals and magazines and is presently co-editing VIVID, the VCA creative writing journal.

WAYNE MCCCALEY is a Melbourne writer. He has been published in various literary magazines and was the winner of the 1995 The Age Short Story Competition.

DAVID MCCOOEY is a poet and critic. He is author of the ‘Contemporary Poetry’ chapter in the recent Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature.

CARMEL MACDONALD GRAHAMÉ first studied literature in the 1960s. Recent literary studies, for an MA from the University of Western Australia and a PhD from Edith Cowan University, have been a rich and invigorating experience. She has taught literature, literary theory and creative writing in universities for ten years.
MAL MCKIMMIE is a poet writing in Perth, Western Australia. His poems have appeared in various literary publications in Australia over the last ten years.

OUYANG Yu is a Melbourne-based poet, critic and translator.

MATT ROBINSON, winner of the 1999 Petra Kenney Memorial International Poetry Competition, lives and writes in Fredericton, Canada. His first collection, forthcoming in late 2000, is 'a ruckus of awkward stacking,' from Insomniac Press.

LAISHA ROSNAU is a Canadian writer and snowboarder based in Vancouver. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies in Canada and the USA. This is her first Australian publication. She is currently finishing her first novel just in time to visit Australia to learn to surf.

NOEL ROWE is a Sydney critic, poet and co-editor of Southerly. He teaches at the University of Sydney and has a research interest in modern Australian poetry and theology.


TRACY RYAN was born in Western Australia but has been living for the past four years in Cambridge, England. Her most recent book of poems is The Willing Eye (Fremantle Arts Centre Press / Bloodaxe) and a short work, bloc-notes, is forthcoming with Potes and Poets in the USA in 2001.

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA completed a PhD in English at the University of Western Australia in 1996. He teaches in the School of English at the University of Exeter.

ANDREW SNEDDON is a part-time writer currently studying for his PhD in archaeology at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His poetry has been published in a number of Australian journals.

BRENDAN SOMES was born in Canberra and now lives near Canberra. His short stories are soon to appear in Overland and Island.

RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE is a freelance photographer originally from Chicago. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in a number of international journals. He is the editor of Sundog: The Southeast Review, and also serves as coordinator for the annual ‘World’s Best Short Story’ competition. His first book, American Diaspora, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press.

JENNIFER WAWRZINEK is a Melbourne writer who has had short fiction published in Gathering Force, Redoubt and Overland Express, and who performs spoken word with the group ‘The Skywriters’, at various venues around Melbourne. She is currently researching her PhD at Melbourne University and is completing her first novel.

MIKE WILLIAMS writes poetry when the ‘mood’ strikes; he also edits and produces Navigations, an occasional broadsheet publication for Western Australian poets. His paid work is for a bookshop in Perth; he lives with his partner, also a poet, her two sons, and a disturbing number of animals.

JOSHUA WILSON is a writer of peripatetic ficto-criticism and the Editor-in-Chief at In Emergency Press.
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ARTICLES
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Carmel Macdonald Grahame on recent fiction
Tracy Ryan on the year’s work in Australian and Asian poetry
Tony Simoes da Silva on recent non-fiction