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WESTERLY

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Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

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Administrator
Monica Anderson

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS
PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2002:

Petra White
for her poem “Grave”

and

Bruce Dawe
for his poems “Drayton Cemetery Memory” and “Evening on a Country Road”
Julie Lewis, biographer, fiction writer and teacher and editor, lived her life with passionate commitment and prodigious energy. An only child in a family in which her widowed mother was the breadwinner and her paternal grandmother was the home maker, Julie was exposed from an early age to strong confident women. Her father, John Heath, died of consumption aged twenty-eight. For the first three years after his death, the household was a stone cottage in the isolation of Scarborough, a beachside suburb then on the outskirts of the city. Julie’s grandmother, Nell Heath, brought her up while her mother earned a living for the three of them as a bookkeeper in Perth. Her mother could only come home on the weekends, travelling from the city in “Millet’s char-a-banc”.

“I guess if you’ve lived in a household of women you perceive the world in a slightly different way”, Julie told an interviewer late in life. There were no schools at Scarborough in the early 1930s so when Julie was ready for school the family moved to Perth where Nell Heath owned another house. Julie lived there until she married Western Australian engineer, John Lewis, in 1951.

Julie was a gifted student whose potential was endorsed when she won a secondary school scholarship to Perth Modern School. On completion of her five years at Perth Modern School, Julie began teacher training. It was partly a practical decision – a living had to be earned – and there were few options for women. Julie had youthful notions of being a dress designer or an artist. She graduated from Claremont Teacher’s College in 1944 in the top four of her year and began the career, crowded with achievements, as a teacher, biographer, fiction writer and editor, which continued until the end of her life.

Julie was one of a group of high achievers in her generation who had a sense of obligation to contribute to the fabric of society: a belief that they could return something to the community in which they lived. Her first teaching posts took her to schools in the south-west where there were...
conflicts with the principals. Julie thought she may have been “too self-confident”. It was inevitable that 1960s feminism via Betty Freidan and Germaine Greer, would not pass Julie by. It was a sea change. She recorded having trouble with another school principal for putting Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* on a High School reading list. In 1964, two years after her third child was born, Julie began writing. She returned to University and completed an Arts degree. Although she continued to teach part-time through the 1970s, as she put it to an interviewer, “it was no longer enough”. In 1979 Julie published the first of her five biographies, of Catherine King. Two years later she published her first collection of short fiction, *Double Exposure*. At the same time she was tutoring in creative writing in Adult Education classes. She would sustain this pattern of simultaneous occupations for many years.

In the 1980s Julie increasingly focussed her energy on writing. Much as she loved teaching, involvement with people, and her commitment to the Arts community, writing was becoming her overriding passion. In 1987 *The Walls of Jericho*, her second collection of short fiction was released. In this collection the stories are more complex, the irony more apparent than in the first. Stylistically, she was experimenting with deft time shifts, surrealism in the use of dream sequences, and an increasingly astringent prose. While each story is clearly located in a place, they are not embedded in landscape; they do not depend on a particular place for their cogency. Julie moved with considerable skill in her chosen territory: the inner world. Her themes are often bleak and disturbing, connecting in subtle ways with collective experience. Given her personal vitality and extroverted temperament, the warmth and compassion she brought to her relationships with friends and colleagues, it seems surprising that her language was reminiscent of the austere, spare balance of Peter Cowan’s prose. She admired his work and acknowledged his influence on the development of her own fiction. In the same year, 1987, her biography of Kate O’Connor (with P. A. E. Hutchings) was also published. Between these two events Julie had visited Nepal and Kashmir with her husband John, trekking in the foothills. This experience, in her own words, “caused a change of direction” in her outlook, one which would be reflected in her own work in later years, as she became interested in the practice of yoga and contemplative meditation.

In the vacuum left after a year of publishing and travelling Julie accepted a commission to write the biography of Jimmy Woods, iconic Western Australian aviator. It was her third biography. By the time it was published in 1989, she was immersed in the research and writing of *Olga*
Masters – A lot of living, published in 1991. In 1992 she was awarded the Order of Australia for services to literature and teaching. There would be yet another biography in 1997, Mary Martin: A Double Life. Julie was caught between her interest in “the strong determined eccentric women ... who refuse to be stereotyped ... Who break free of societal pressures to conform”, and the drive to achieve a form of creative fiction that would truly satisfy her.

At the same time, Julie was moving into a deeper exploration of human experience and the means of translating it. In “Cropping”, a story in the anthology Reading From the Left which included author’s notes, a contemplative preoccupation is evident. The processes of memory and the culling of the past are under examination as she writes:

The mind calling up the past makes links and connections, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes bizarre, sometimes prophetic and frightening .... No act of will is required. It happens – this intrusion of the past into the present during moments of contemplation and reflection ... You recall, you eliminate, you improvise, you reinvent ... Fiction allows the writer to get closer to the underlying truth than is possible through a mere anecdotal recollection.¹

By 1990, Julie had compiled material on her early childhood which was the beginning of an intended longer work. She wrote: “Nostalgia for all its appeal can also be subversive. You can’t go back except by creating a kind of fiction. A truth more compelling than the reality.”²

Her record of the bleak facts of her father’s early death suggests her mother’s determination – and desperation – during his illness. She writes of her grandmother’s strength in leaving her two infant sons in England and coming alone to Australia to make a life for them; of memory playing tricks, leaving gaps to avoid confronting pain. It was an unsentimental search for what was significant in her own history and a study in the processes of her own creativity:

Only the matriarchal thread – paternal grandmother, mother, me – holds us together, tensile, transmigratory (thy firmness makes my circle just /and makes me end where I begun).³

In the course of writing the biographies of four women Julie developed a process of meticulous research, cross-checking her sources, and ranging widely for corroborative “hunches” that would develop when aspects of the life were concealed. She sifted the “evidence”, prepared to discard the
uncorroborated anecdote, no matter how intriguing. It was an ethical stance, a preparedness, ultimately, to forgo the sometimes sensational detail for a keenly judged interpretation of the evidence available. With the self-effacing generosity which was so much a part of her nature, her own ego never overshadowed her subject. She felt strongly about this. At the March 2000 Writer’s Festival in Busselton, she gave a paper titled “Secrets and Lies” in which she argued the ethics of the biographer’s role: “I work to reconstruct the life, not to ‘de-construct’ it. I believe a biographer must consider the subject in the context of the times in which he/she lived, not as happens so often at present, reinventing the life in terms of the writer’s times”. She was very aware of the fictive power of story in constructing a vision of a life. Finding a resolution to the conflicts inherent in writing biography was an issue she continued to explore and reflect upon.

Mary Martin, the restrained Unitarian Adelaide bookseller who was the subject of Julie’s fifth biography, spent the last ten years of her life in India, but revealed little of that time to family and friends in Australia. She had written however that seeing Shivaram, the Indian dancer, perform in Adelaide in 1947 had opened a “vast new world” to her. Julie’s intuition that Martin’s other life would reveal a different, richer texture was the impulse for the months she spent in southern India, retracing Martin’s journeys. Finally, Julie travelled to Cochin where she met Shivaram, famed dancer and guru. It was a significant meeting. In researching Martin’s passion for India, Julie moved further along the spiritual path of Hindu philosophy, adding to her existing interest in Buddhist philosophy and the practice of meditation and yoga she had maintained for some years. The epigraph she chose for the Mary Martin biography is from the Mahabharata: “It is better to blaze up, even for a moment, than to smoulder forever with desire”. In Julie’s meeting with Shivaram, beyond the “outward calm and inner peace” she caught a glimpse of the “vital energy” that had set Mary alight.

When Julie returned to Perth she could not shake off a weariness and “heaviness” of body. She put it down to the ill effects of travelling and possibly arthritis. Handwriting was becoming tedious. In 1987, while travelling in Kashmir, she had reached a point of exhaustion which, temporarily, she could not overcome. In a moment of prescience she recalled thinking that she would pay a heavy penalty for pushing herself so hard. That moment was almost at hand. In 1995 she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease.

With enormous determination Julie completed the Mary Martin biography, which was published in 1997. The signed bookplates in the
copies at the launch in Adelaide were a charming way of glossing over the fact that Julie was no longer able to sign them herself. It was her last major publication. With the candour and strength of mind she had applied to all her achievements she began to research the illness which was robbing her of mobility, determined to record what was happening to her. Her memoir was another genre, another form in which the processes of memory and transformation would be crafted, written and re-written, with almost unbearable difficulty. In the last months of her illness, volunteer helpers spent time with her several mornings a week, while, in a slow, barely audible, whisper Julie dictated her text: fragments of the major contemplative memoir she had intact in her mind. The pieces she left are distillations of the spiritual journey she was on. When the words could no longer be uttered, a vibrant, dynamic woman was silenced. These are the words Joan London has edited for this *Westerly*, in Julie Lewis’s memory.

Speaking of her grandmother and mother Julie had written: “an obdurate will maintains a kind of equilibrium”. She had maintained that equilibrium with consummate grace.

Notes

1 Julie Lewis, *Reading From The Left*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994, pp. 120–121.


3 “Natural Histories”, p. 81.


5 “Natural Histories”, p. 81.
A STATIONARY TRAVELLER

Nothing really terrible ever happens to us writers – it’s all material.
Alison Lurie

A story can start anywhere and for my purpose this story begins in the mountains of India fifteen years ago. At least that’s what I believe now. Something triggered the process long before there were obvious signs.

Each visit to the Indian sub-continent was a transforming experience. You expect transformations to be uplifting, positive, and at the time, mostly they were. It’s strange how, when something good happens to us, we accept it willingly, gladly as though it were our right, but when misfortune strikes we look for something or someone to blame.

I am reminded of the misleading calm of Dal Lake where we stayed in an idyllic setting. When you think about it though, that lake, for all its calm serenity is just a giant cesspit filled with the waste from hundreds of boats, and scores of dwellings around its edges. Human waste, animal waste, rotting vegetable matter, dead rats, roiling around, far below, while above its still surface glints in the moonlight.

Kashmir, 1987. We have been climbing steadily up the rocky slope towards the ridge for what seems like hours. The others are way ahead of me. This trek has drained me, emotionally and physically. It was foolish to attempt such an undertaking – even the young ones are finding it hard going – at sixty-two I should have more sense. But the last time, in Nepal, I had found the whole thing so exhilarating I thought I could repeat the experience. And anyway, I don’t feel sixty-two.

The others, up ahead, call to me, “Come on. The view is spectacular.”

“I can’t,” I murmur and flop down spreadeagled on the rock. I feel as if my heart will stop.

The tour leader picks her way through the scree back to me. “Try, Julie, you’re nearly there,” she said. “It’s worth it.”
"In a minute," I say. "Let me rest for a while."

As I lie there trying to breathe deeply, slowly, I am overwhelmed by a conviction that there'll be a price to pay for this. That either I have reduced my life expectancy by several years or that some other penalty is in store. It's a powerful feeling, that I will recall seven years later.

No More Deadlines

Early morning ... almost five o'clock. The subdued chatter of the night staff increases a few decibels. Those patients who have spent the night tossing restlessly reach for their buzzers. There's a prolonged buzz as a determined finger holds the button ... or an impatient series of buzzes, as if to say - it's urgent, bring a bedpan quickly.

I'm one of the lucky ones - still able to cope with bodily functions, and shower myself, so there's no need to get up for a while. I'm in a hospital to have my medication changed: the doctor wants my reactions monitored. This ward is part of the Restorative Unit. You're supposed to get better in here. The nurses are very cheerful. Sometimes it's hard to be jolly when you think about what's ahead. I don't mean dying. Of course I don't want to die, but it's going to happen some day. It's better to carry on as if you're going to live forever ... maybe I'll even get to India again.

Five years ago I was in India trying to piece together details of an Australian woman, Mary Martin, who made a home there for the last ten years of her life. She established a daytime bookselling business and by night she worked in a voluntary capacity with an Indian doctor, caring for local tribal people who lived in the jungle.

My husband was travelling with me, "to carry my bags", as he put it. For months we travelled through Tamil Nadu by public or private bus or in non-airconditioned railway carriages, staying in guest houses or modest Indian hotels. It was not through penury or bravado, but because I wanted to be able to see India as far as it was possible through her eyes, the better to tell her story. I had a deadline for the proposed biography of July 1995.

It was a punishing trip physically. Up early and to bed late. Gear grinding around hairpin bends with sheer drops beside, chaotic traffic, non-existent toilet facilities in villages, and little obscuring bush cover. But in every other way it was exhilarating. The warmth of the villagers, and their hospitality, the magnificent temples, the music, the religious rituals.

Most significant of all was my meeting with Shivaram, the Indian dancer whose performance in Adelaide in 1947 so inspired Mary Martin that she first visited the country that she was to make her home. For Martin, seeing Shivaram dance had been a “religious experience”, but very different from the religion she was accustomed to, with its frugality, reserve, asceticism and restraint. India’s mystery and exoticism were implicit in the intensity and vibrant sensuality of the dance. Shivaram became the embodiment of Shiva – the Lord of the Dance.

It had taken me months to track him down. I believed that he held the key to my understanding of Mary Martin and I was not mistaken. I visited him in his home in a village north of Cochin in Kerala, finding him, at almost eighty, as charismatic as Mary had when he was in his early twenties. He had come back to the village of his childhood to live out the final stage of a Hindu’s temporal life, in contemplation and meditation. He had become a guru. His skin was flawless, silky in texture and yellow ochre in colour, the result of a mixture of coconut oil and turmeric habitually applied during his dancing career. I managed to resist an overwhelming impulse to stroke his face. He had an extraordinary quality of stillness. His shining eyes belied his age.

For someone whose role models had always been women, and who regarded herself as a feminist, I couldn’t help wondering what was happening to me. Was I, like Mary, looking for a guru?

I returned home ready to start writing.

Sentenced

The streets of Perth were strangely quiet as our taxi sped north through the suburbs. Where was everyone? The place was deserted. The silence after the constant sound of car horns and voices and music, the drums beating faster and faster, was overwhelming. The car purred along smoothly, cocooned in its own hum and we were insulated from anything disturbing. That, for me, at that time, was in itself disturbing and unfamiliar.

First I had to write a report to satisfy the conditions of the travel grant I had received from the WA Department for the Arts. Unwisely, I sat at the
computer for hours at a time. When I finally posted it off, I went to bed. Next morning when I tried to get up my back refused to co-operate. The doctor came and prescribed strong painkillers and bed rest. Nothing helped. I blamed it on the bus rides, all the bumping and lurching. I remembered how I'd been flung forward in my seat, rocked like a ship at sea. It was a month before I was on my feet and the first thing I wanted to do was have a swim. The sun was still holding its summer heat though it was well into autumn and as I walked down the limestone track to the road the cat joined me with a purruup as if to say “good day”, and rolled over. But my euphoria was misplaced. My right foot would not behave; it didn’t quite flop but the tendency was there. With hindsight, I suppose, that was the first indication pointing to what was in store. But when I reached the beach, the salty tang to the air filled me with such joy that I forgot my flopping foot and my month’s incarceration and ran headlong into the water. It was limpid and cool. I lay there just stirring my hands in the water. I felt restored and wonderful.

Over the next year my handwriting deteriorated to the point where neither I, nor anyone else, could read it. I put it down to arthritis and adjusted my diet. But I became increasingly lethargic, lost interest in social activities, and felt altogether frustrated and depressed. I sought advice and was referred to a neurologist.

John and I had always been self-sufficient. We didn’t live separate lives but parallel lives. We didn’t have the same philosophy. My father died when I was not quite two and I was brought up in a household of women. My grandmother was the boss – the managing director; my mother was the breadwinner – the CEO. Naturally I thought women could do everything. So I didn’t see anything odd about going alone to see the neurologist and I was quite breezy as I walked into the consulting room. He looked at me seriously and got over the niceties. He asked me to walk and do some exercises. He got straight to the point.

“I don’t believe you have arthritis, Mrs Lewis. I think you’ve got Parkinson’s Disease.”

I was shocked. My stomach felt as if it had received a blow, but I didn’t show any sign of distress. I just sat there asking rational questions. He told me to go down to the pharmacy at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital because there was a special medication that was only supplied by them. I got in the car and drove to the hospital in a daze. All I could think of was the trembling hands, which was all I knew of Parkinson’s and I didn’t want to know any more. I looked around me when I reached the pharmacy of Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, realising that I was now one of the vast number
of the population who comprise the statistics relating to chronic illness.

All I wanted was to be reassured. I rang my daughter. She was at work at the gardening centre and I drove there with tears running down my cheeks. When I got to the centre there was no one in the shop, so I went outside and found her watering plants in the garden. She greeted me with a smile. I told her briefly and her face changed. She came and hugged me and then said, “It’ll be all right. I’ll look after you.” It was a promise which she amply fulfilled.

Then I went to see my son who lived nearby and he was sympathetic and I could feel I was getting in control. I needed to see my younger son and then I could go home to Quinns. He was home with his wife and newly-born daughter. They made me a cup of tea. I was full of tea. Every time I walked in another door I got handed another cup of tea.

When I got home I prepared the meal and sat down on the verandah and waited. It seemed a long time but it was only a short while until John walked in the door and I could see by his face that he knew. He has a funny way of tightening his upper lip when he’s under pressure. I was quite calm. I’d got myself together and I greeted him with a smile. We had tea. It was a fairly silent meal.

Designer Disease

I couldn’t quite take it in at first, but appeared to accept my diagnosis. I found alternative ways to do the things I wanted to do, like a micro-tape recorder to replace my notebook and pen for note-taking. I learnt to “compose” first drafts on my laptop. It seemed that having a name to put to my increasing slowness and co-ordination difficulties had taken the pressure off. Medication helped.

As if to reassure, I’d been given the message that Parkinson’s was not a life threatening disease – merely degenerative. Thanks very much, I thought. Who wants to live to ninety-four minus hair, teeth and friends, languishing incontinent in a nursing home.? I avoided meeting others with the disease and I didn’t want to hear about those confined to wheelchairs, people with uncontrollable tremors, or frozen, unable to initiate movement, or with speech defects.

Did I say I was depressed.? That’s wrong. I was angry and defiant. Parkinson’s might become the focal point of some people’s lives, but it
wasn't going to be mine. My focal point was my family and writing. Parkinson's was an unwelcome intruder who couldn't be turned away – but he was going to be accommodated on my terms.

Looking back, I can see that I was going through the classic first stage of grief. At the time I would have denied it. Six months went by in a flurry of work. I met my deadline and after the editorial process, the book was published. It was later short-listed for two prizes, one a national award. I felt I was still part of the real world.

Perhaps it was a reaction to all the pressure and excitement, but after the early positive response to the medication I began to have side effects that bothered me. I developed chronic insomnia. I suffered four weeks of debilitating and socially embarrassing colitis. I was told that neither was connected to Parkinson's but could be due to stress. It crossed my mind that while stress might not be a direct symptom of Parkinson's, it could well be part of a reaction to its diagnosis.

Some days were good, others bad. I still resisted talking to others with the disease. It was suggested that I was going through a denial stage. Denying what? Oh I knew all right – not the complaint, but some of its nastier manifestations. Particularly the tremors. I asked myself why. Of course I knew the answer. Tremor was visible evidence of loss of control. Instead of being in control of my body, it was controlling me. And I didn't like that one bit. What was I going to do about it?

Tentatively at first I talked to others with Parkinson's. Then I sought a second opinion. That proved to be a mistake. I was patronised, stripped of my identity and not listened to. The advice I received went against all my instincts, everything my body was telling me. Common sense told me I should not abandon conventional medical treatment, but at the same time I need not accept it blindly or without question. I'd shop around until I found someone compatible.

It took a while, but patience paid off. Not only did I find a doctor who listened, monitored my progress and was up to date with every new piece of research, but through him I was able to access a team of experts – physios, OTs, speech therapists, dieticians, home visitors, and eventually a network of carers.

There have been times in the past when I've resisted change because I've felt threatened by it, but I've found that adaptability – being prepared to adjust – means being open to new experiences. Of course I'd rather I didn't have Parkinson's, but there are compensations. I've become more tolerant and more patient; I'm no longer compulsively punctual. At times I may lack confidence, but I've become more frank when expressing how
I feel. I've discovered a new kind of world, where suffering and compassion go hand in hand. I've found people who care, not only in the physical sense, but emotionally and spiritually, and I thank God for my family and friends.

There's nothing routine about Parkinson's, that's why it's called the "Designer Disease". No two patients react in quite the same way, or present identical symptoms. There's another thing about it: while it's frustrating and unpredictable, it's never boring. It's impossible to become complacent - just as you get used to coping with one symptom, another demands attention. Of course there's time when I get depressed, and times when I envy people who can do the things I can no longer do, but these times pass. And you find strategies to make life more bearable. When my self-esteem hits rock bottom, and I find myself shuffling and shaky, I say to myself, I'm invisible, the real me - the one that matters - is buried deep inside this old woman. There's nothing wrong with my spirit.

That year I turned seventy and had a party with my writing friends. I sent out letters of invitation asking them to bring each one dish of Mediterranean food. I would supply wine and other drinks. We gathered on the terrace, all eighteen of us. One came by public transport from Spearwood. She took two trains and two buses and was the first to arrive. Another missed the turning off Marmion Avenue and ended up beyond Yanchep. She was late. The food was magnificent. We sat at a big table, fixed drinks and renewed our friendships.

Discarding Pride or A Matter of Physics

I grew up with good verbal skills, a vivid imagination, a tendency to self-dramatise and a passable singing voice, the legacy of those female forbears. But I had absolutely no inkling about mechanics, mathematical equations, chemistry or the laws of physics.

The first time I fell, I saw no connection at all between the physical properties of matter and my striking my head on the pavement - it was an unfortunate mishap. One moment I was in full stride, the next I was plummeting, but in a fascinating way, as participant and observer. It happened in a sequence that seemed to stretch time from the actual fraction of a second to a long, slow motion replay. People gathered round, some wanting to lever me up instantly, others unsure, hanging back,
curious. One man took the initiative, wisely asking if I felt all right to be moved, and slowly I was righted.

I soon learned that falling was to become a pattern of behaviour that was a curse, a matter of balance. I realised when you go just too far there’s a point of no return and you tip over the edge, and no amount of determination will save you.

This was unfamiliar territory. At times you think you recognise landmarks but you must be wary, be vigilant, always on guard. The moment you relax concentration you are at risk.

After a fall that left me with a cracked rib and a lean to the left so that I resembled Lurch in the Munsters, my daughter suggested I think about a walking frame. I wouldn’t consider it. I’d seen too many dear old souls shuffling along, stooped over their bent metal frames. I didn’t see myself as a dear old soul, and I regarded my lean as a temporary thing that would soon right itself.

But after I fell one evening, a bad fall, pitching forward and striking the bedside cabinet, I decided to get a walker, not a bent one, but more sophisticated with wheels and a basket and a seat. They can be used to sit on and to shop with, and I never looked back from that time. My daughter was right. That didn’t mean I didn’t have another fall. In fact I had more falls because I got too cocky.

One day I got my walker and went outside to the rubbish bin. The brake slipped, it was on a downhill slope and I sensed I was going to fall. I levered myself off the walker and let go. I rolled down the slope and then a tree stopped me. I was trapped by a rock in the ground which locked my forearm beneath me. I had an alarm monitor on my neck which I couldn’t access because my arm wouldn’t reach. I had to think of some way to get the alarm to alert my neighbour over the road. She was the first contact on the Silver Chain list. I shifted my shoulder slightly and found I could case my arm over the rock a bit. I did it again. And again. Finally I grasped the alarm and pressed. I was exhausted and I lay there with my cheek in the dirt, waiting. I waited five minutes, the longest five minutes I’ve ever known. Then I heard footsteps and my neighbour exclaiming, “Oh Julie! What have you done to yourself?”

There was a time that I had a near-death experience. I was walking from the kitchen to my chair at the dining room table. I was eager to sit down and lost concentration and fell heavily, my head hitting the wall and my feet jammed up against the legs of the table. I was winded. All the breath left my body and I couldn’t initiate breathing. I temporarily lost consciousness but only for a fraction of a minute. The relief I felt when I
finally drew breath was incredible. I felt as though I'd been born again. Not in a religious sense, but for the sheer joy of being alive.

Marking Time

I am lying on the lawn in the sun, day-dreaming, when a shadow masks the sun, making me uneasy. It feels ominous, threatening. There is tension in the air. Someone or something is about to take off over the fence, and I am in the path of the trajectory. With great effort I lever my body sideways, uncertain whether I have moved completely out of the line of flight ... of a horse and its rider.

Pandemonium breaks out. Total confusion. I am hurtling in space; there is a splintering of wood and the sound of water cascading. A blow to my head and my legs are trapped. Where is the horse and where is its rider? And what is the bedlamp doing on the floor, its wooden base shattered? Fragments of glass... and water dripping from the edge of the bedside table? Where am I?

Momentarily I am trapped between dreamscape and reality before it dawns on me I have fallen out of bed. Gradually I reorient myself and take stock. My head is wedged between the bedside cabinet and the bed. I have found my torch. That’s better. Now I face another dilemma. How to extricate my legs from beneath my body?

Have I really been day-dreaming? Or hallucinating? Time and place right themselves. I am in hospital and I have fallen out of bed. A nurse comes eventually ... they are short-staffed ... she checks me out for broken bone, bruises, abrasions, declares me sound and whole, and tucks me back into bed.

When I was admitted I was told that patients were asked to have lunch and the evening meal in the dining room, to keep up their social contacts. Although I would have preferred to be left to my own devices, I complied. I joined the slow procession and waited. Everyone else took their customary seats. A nurse came and found me a vacant seat at a table for four. Three women were sitting patiently waiting with large white plastic bibs attached to the necks of their blouses with clothes pegs ... did I want a bib? Oh well. When in Rome ... Yes.

Mrs Doherty took charge, introducing me to the others. She was a large woman who seemed quite confident – a bit like a schoolteacher. Mrs
Hawkes sat with her head bowed and seemed beyond caring about food, company or conversation. Her skin was sallow and there were deep lines etched on her face. Every few minutes she would sigh. Mrs Green, on the other hand, was a chirpy woman who kept up a running commentary about the workings of the hospital, mostly quite irrelevant. I felt as though I was play-acting, in a world that I didn’t belong to. And yet I knew I no longer belonged in the world I was once familiar with. It’s strange being part of, but separate from, a scene, both observer and participant. The Indian god Shiva recommends affection without attachment, and demonstrates this bit of wisdom by looping an untied rope over one of his multiple arms.

At lunch the next day there were only two of us at the table – Mrs Hawkes and me. She looked so different, calm, serene, the lines that had creased her forehead the previous evening erased. Are you feeling better? I asked. Yes, she said and smiled. Her face was transformed. She seemed to be free of pain. I left the table feeling strangely moved.

That night before going to bed I went for a walk. There was a commotion in the corridor. Nurses were rushing in and out of the rooms. One was at the nurses’ station on the phone to a doctor ... she’s passed two clots ... (I strain to hear) ... I’ve tried that ... and resuss ... no ... no good. It’s Mrs Hawkes they’re talking about. Dear God, what’s happened? She was looking so well, surely nothing’s gone wrong ... deep down I knew, but wouldn’t admit it. Everything soon returned to normal, snores, coughs, sighs.

Next morning I was unsettled, my conviction of the previous night challenged. I had felt an overwhelming sense of privilege to have witnessed the bestowing of grace, but at the same time I resented the implied finality. A team of nurses descended, to make my bed, do my obs – temperature, pulse and blood pressure – shower me, get me ready for breakfast. But first ...

“How is Mrs Hawkes?” I asked. Everyone began talking at once, but no-one said anything. How is Mrs Hawkes? I repeated loudly. A pause, then a non-committal reply ... Just the same ... Communication ceased. A conspiracy of silence. Why? Did they think we were so vulnerable we couldn’t face reality? Or had Mrs Hawkes let the side down by failing to be restored? I wanted proof. Three days later I had it. There in the death notices. I wasn’t being morbid or macabre. I felt uplifted. Mrs Hawkes had shown me a different way of facing the unknown.

I don’t just mean dying. It’s what lies after that’s intriguing, if there’s anything ... that’s the great overwhelming tension ... what? And if there’s nothing but damp rot or flame, you won’t be any the wiser. But before that
you’ll always have something to think about. If thinking scares you, just carry on as though you’re going to live forever...

Being No More

For some reason lately, I’ve been thinking a great deal about my mother, who, as my Indian friend Shivaram would say, “is no more”. She appears in different guises, sometimes hardly distinguishable from my daughter, sometimes I see myself in her and sometimes she is unmistakeably my mother. Mostly she appears in dreams from which I awaken feeling disturbed, wondering if it is an omen. When I first heard Shivaram say softly with downcast eyes that his father “is no more”, I thought he was being a bit coy about voicing the word “death”, like some people here say in hushed tones, “passed away”, but then I noticed that he placed the emphasis on the “is” – the fact of his father no longer being. That was a revelation, and offered a completely different perspective. I wondered too whether he saw being as the mere physical manifestation, part of the whole, but incomplete with the invisible soul floating somewhere waiting to join a reincarnated body.

These are the kind of thoughts that preoccupy me when I awaken at 4 am, that nadir of the night when hobgoblins and gremlins swoop their shadowy presences about my bed. By morning they are gone and the fears and concerns that loomed so threateningly are dissipated with the light.

Last night or rather, early this morning, I awoke to the sound of voices... conspiratorial voices. I couldn’t get my bearings. The filtered moonlight from the window was misplaced. The doorway too was disoriented. Where was I and who was talking? Then I remembered. I was not at home, but in a hospital bed. The nurses must be doing the talking. But there was a man’s voice too. An alarm sounded. A fire alarm! Doors opening and closing! More voices, less subdued. They are drowned out by male voices... hectoring. Gradually the tumult subsides. The ward settles and a sporadic snore breaks the silence. But I am wide awake.

A child again. Wanting reassurance. I lie rigid in my bed, straining to make sense out of the silence.

Soon I’ll be going home again, to that house on the hill that looks out over the ocean through a leafy screen of trees. At dawn the birds start. Their chorus fills the air, rising, swelling until the whole world seems filled
with sound ... then suddenly there is silence. Everything is still. The early morning haze clears and already there is warmth in the sun ...

_A prayer_

I am a body –
frail and old and
almost past my use-by date

I am a mind –
strong stubborn
who resists your bargain basement offer

I am a soul –
three in one and One in three
trinity oh Trinity reserve
a place for me

with a raincheck ... please?

Compiled and edited by Joan London
JOY HOOTON

“PUTTING THE PAST IN PERSPECTIVE”: AUSTRALIAN NON-FICTION 2002–2003

In “Your Space or Mine?”, in his Reliable Essays, Clive James reflects on Australian historiography, concluding that our historians “suffer from having too little history to work on”:

But there is plenty more coming up, and although we can’t be sure what will happen, we can be sure we won’t like it, unless those who take on the task of putting the past in perspective are thoughtful and disciplined enough to give us a reasonably clear account of how we got this far.

“Putting the Past in Perspective” is a challenge that most Australian non-fiction writers have already taken up, to the extent that re-exploring and revising stories of the past might be described as a national preoccupation. Contemporary historians and biographers may be less confident, however, of recovering a clarity that has uniform appeal as “reasonable”. They are likely also to be extremely alert to the shiftiness of the past and the instability of meaning. Indeed, some particular corners of Australian history are currently subject to such acrimonious contests between historians that they have strayed into the popular media. It is possible that at this moment in the nation’s history the imaginative search for the “knowable past”, to use Raymond Williams’s definition, has become almost as arduous, troubled and intense as the physical searches of the early explorers.

In this context Nicholas Rothwell’s Wings of the Kite-Hawk might be seen as the central text, tuning into themes and preoccupations that underlie much other work. Retracing the steps of Leichhardt, Sturt and Giles, and interweaving their stories with those of such figures as Cecil Madigan and Carl and Theodor Strehlow, and with his own emotional journey, Rothwell reinterpretst their responses to the interior as inner imaginative journeyings. The desert in this text becomes virtually a
historical and personal metaphor; elusive and fascinating, it frustrates meaning as powerfully as it frustrated Sturt's quest for the inland sea.

Elusiveness also characterises two brilliantly researched biographies, which are particularly relevant to a historical understanding of the national culture and black/white relations, Tim Rowse’s of Nugget Coombs and Barry Hill’s of Theodor Strehlow (see below). Other historians have attempted to re-explore what appeared to be well worn tracks. Klaus Toft in The Navigators: Flinders vs Baudin undertook research in France where he read Baudin’s original Journal de Mer held in the National Archives. Bringing together the fruits of recent research and drawing on material from Flinders’ and Baudin’s original journals, private letters and documents, Toft unveils an enormous historical injustice as far as Baudin is concerned. Cassandra Pybus and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart in American Citizens, British Slaves: Yankee Political Prisoners in an Australian Penal Colony, 1839–1850 recover the story of Americans transported to Van Diemen’s Land in the 1840s after they had taken part in incursions into Upper Canada. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart has also collaborated with Lucy Frost in editing Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives, a collection which offers a fresh and lively perspective on convict life. Writers from a variety of disciplines, including one novelist, have come together here to interpret documents and texts with some convict origin, relevance or focus. A combative history which attempts to reverse previous accounts of black/white relations in Tasmania has generated at least as much heat as did the fictional The Hand That Signed the Paper, that is, Keith Windschuttle’s The Fabrication of Australian Aboriginal History. It is a debate which goes to the core of contemporary historiography itself. Another history which has had a quieter reception but is a significant revision is John Gascoigne’s The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia. Integrating the stream of Australia’s history from 1788 to 1840 with intellectual currents in Britain, Gascoigne offers a fresh perspective on numerous issues. One omission from Gascoigne’s study is medicine, but the discipline is central to Warwick Anderson’s The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia. The first comprehensive history of Australian medical and scientific ideas about race and place, Anderson explores the ways in which science and medicine have been cultural enterprises as much as literature and art. Ostensibly treating diseases, doctors were in fact contributing to the way in which colonial society defined its civic identity. Another book which tilts relatively gently at established ideas is Dynasties by Julie Browning and Laurie Critchley. Generally perceived as a classless society, Australia has nevertheless
fostered a series of dynasties from colonial times to the present. *Dynasties*, which complements a six-part series screened on ABC television, recounts the histories of several powerful families: the Macarthurs, Downers, Duracks, Myers, Murdochs and De Bortolis.

If the national history remains enigmatic or capable of various versions, the same holds even more forcefully true of the personal pasts of many of the memoirs and autobiographies considered here. Challenging, mysterious, foreign and fascinating, the past slips through a writer’s hands like water. It may be for this reason that many writers choose to anchor their memoirs in place, a feature reflected in some of their titles: *The Facing Island*, *Roundabout at Bangalow*, *The Many-Coloured Land*. Tasmania has provoked the inner journeyings of both Christopher Koch and Martin Flanagan and for both the island’s convict history is as intricate a part of memory as personal experience. Koch’s *The Many Coloured Land*, mingles travel book, family history and personal memoir. One step behind Tasmania there is Ireland, the troubled nation which has had a marked, if unacknowledged, cultural and psychic influence on the lives of several generations. For Koch, the recovered story of his great-great-grandmother, Margaret O’Maera, who arrived in Tasmania in 1845 aboard a convict transport, is keenly interwoven with his impressions of contemporary Ireland and his response to its history. Flanagan’s *In Sunshine or in Shadow* is more sensitive to the island’s indigenous history, if his memoir is less poised and resolved. Brilliant in sections, the narrative fails too often to achieve a firm flow. Jan Bassett’s *The Facing Island*, however, is a magnificently orchestrated memoir which mingles personal and social history to great effect. A skilled historian, Bassett wrote her story as she suffered from an illness which proved terminal. Personal mortality is as inevitably sewn into the text as is Bassett’s passion for Australian history, achieving a mix which is strikingly original and subtle. In the way that life sometimes reflects art, Phillip Island literally and imaginatively provides the germ of her writing just as the place had earlier seeded her childhood. Shirley Walker’s *Roundabout at Bangalow*, set largely in northern New South Wales, focuses on her own experiences and those of four generations of her family, combining personal and social history. More self-consciously feminist than Bassett’s, her narrative is remarkably revealing of the barriers which women faced within recent history. Walker’s memoir is sometimes compared to Jill Ker Conway’s *A Woman’s Education*, but there is a large gulf between the inwardness of the former and the latter’s story of a public administrative self in action. Place is also a significant character in Nancy Phelan’s *Writing Round the Edges*. Readers who are familiar with her
earlier *Kingdom by the Sea*, will not be surprised that Sydney features strongly in this memoir, but the Blue Mountains are also a dominant presence. A beautifully paced narrative, *Writing Round the Edges* moves from Phelan's childhood in the 1920s and 1930s to wartime and post-war London, to later years in the Mountains. Packed with revealing descriptions of numerous literary personalities and some hilarious encounters, this memoir is also strikingly inward and open about the self. Ireland is indirectly a powerful character in another frank autobiography, John Hanrahan's *From Eternity to Here: Memoirs of an Angry Priest*. Exposing the inhibitions imposed on his life as a priest within a primitive Irish Catholic church as, if anything, more stultifying than those experienced by women in the same period, Hanrahan writes openly and courageously about his struggles.

Fortunately for readers, autobiography continues to be a favoured medium for Australian writers and artists. Two particularly fascinating memoirs are those by Barry Humphries (*My Life as Me*) and Bernard Smith (*A Pavane for Another Time*). Returning to some of the same material as he explored in *More Please*, Humphries tries once again to negotiate the treacherous years of childhood and youth before writing about his later career, failed marriages and encounters with other artists and the famous. Here he does not often defer to prudence, giving full vent to his gift for satire. Smith's rich, complex memoir, also has much expatriate experience, though his relationship with England is more ambivalent than that of Humphries. Quieter in tone and more probing of relationships, it is a book to read and re-read.

War, as always, is a thick thread in the fabric of Australian life-writing. Two particularly remarkable memoirs of experiences in the Second World War are Colin McPhedran's *White Butterflies* and Ian Denys Peek's *One Fourteenth of an Elephant*. McPhedran was eleven and living in Burma with his family when the Japanese invaded the country in 1941. His mother decided to flee with her children to India, a journey which cost her own life and that of McPhedran's brother and sister. The sufferings endured on the trek are vividly described, while the lasting emotional damage inflicted by such horrific experiences is only gently implied. The avoidance of self-pity in this narrative is also a feature of Peek's memoir. Both writers have achieved the distinctive feat of distancing the self from a terrible past in order to record it dispassionately. Written as a tribute to those who died on the Burma–Thailand railway from 1942–45, Peek's memoir is an inspiring story of bravery, friendship, determination and resourcefulness. Extremely detailed and written virtually in the style of a
daily journal, Peek’s book takes its title from the time when he worked with elephants, animals he came to love and admire. If I had to select two books from this selection of a year’s non-fiction which lingered long after reading, it would be these two.

Several other memoirs also deal with war, if indirectly. The Thirteenth Night by Jan McNess is the moving story of a mother’s response to the death of a much loved son in a flying accident. Trained to fly the F111 aircraft, Jeremy McNess and his navigator were killed on 13 September 1993, when their plane dived into the ground. Beginning with Jeremy’s birth and his difficult early childhood, The Thirteenth Night is a frank exposure of the devastating experience of grief. In the latter part, Jan McNess gives an inspiring account of her struggle with institutional barriers in order to get justice for her son. Lily Brett’s Between Mexico and Poland is as overshadowed by the Jewish holocaust as her other memoirs and poetry. More than 400 pages long, the narrative moves between Mexico, New York and Poland, simultaneously mingling past and present, the holocaust and the catastrophe of September 11. Peter Singer’s Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna is both more and less personal than Brett’s memoir. Singer, who never knew his grandfather, David Oppenheim, made several surprising discoveries when he researched the phases of his life. A colleague of Freud and later Adler, Oppenheim was an influential writer and teacher as well as a decorated soldier, though he was eventually to die in the Nazi camp at Thieresenstadt. Although it does not deal directly with war, Grahame Harrison’s Night Train to Granada: From Sydney’s Bohemia to Franco’s Spain is conscious of the lingering effects of war in the Spain that he knew in the 1950s and 1960s. Growing up in Newcastle in the Depression, Harrison became a “libertarian” at Sydney University, eventually siding with anarchism rather than socialism. He was influenced by the Sydney Push’s discussions about the Spanish Civil War but found himself in Spain in 1952 almost by accident. He was to stay there for a decade, somehow negotiating the gulf between libertarianism and Franco’s fascism. His closest friends were related to Garcia Lorca, whose poetry he had revered as a member of the Push. Interleaving his memories of the Push with his experiences in Spain, this memoir will recall much of the 1950s for Harrison’s contemporaries.

Death is said to be a taboo subject in our culture as sex was taboo for the Victorians, but to judge from three memoirs here, besides The Thirteenth Night, Australians may be becoming less inhibited. Sonia Orchard’s Something More Wonderful is the story of her experience as witness
to the suffering and death of her greatest friend, Emma Burdekin. As Sonia’s story opens, Emma, aged only thirty-one and the mother of a four-year-old boy, is diagnosed with advanced secondary liver cancer and given only months to live. Tracing the steps in Emma’s physical and emotional journey in detail that is often searing, Orchard also describes the phases of her own encounter with grief. The dark aspects of this story are thankfully relieved by the author’s rich recollections of her friend’s vivacious personality and their warm relationship before her illness. *Mother Lode: Stories of Home Life and Home Death* by Susan Addison deals intimately and sensitively with her experience of a series of deaths of near relatives but centrally with the death of a teenage son. Robin Bowles’s *What Happened to Freeda Hayes?* gives an account of the background to the first trial in Australia of a doctor accused of murder for helping a patient to die. A detailed, balanced account of the effect Freeda Hayes’ illness and death had on her family and medical carers, the book is finally open-ended on the issue of voluntary euthanasia. Bowles skilfully dissects the many contemporary legal and popular confusions complicating the matter, concluding that “the issues of today are being debated around laws that are hundreds of years old, overlaid with a biblical morality”. Pat Jalland, meanwhile, has written a scholarly, cultural study of Australian attitudes to death, *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840–1918*. The product of intensive research, the book describes how past Australians came to terms with death within the changing prescriptions of their culture.

Several political memoirs and biographies have also been published in the period under review. Two of the liveliest are Mungo MacCallum’s *The Man Who Laughs* and *How to Be a Megalomaniac*, the last with cartoons by Patrick Cook. *The Man Who Laughs* focuses at first on MacCallum’s early years and family. Descended from the famous Wentworths as well as the MacCallums, he is predictably irreverent about both families, while ultimately finding some affinity with the Wentworths’ traditional obsession with politics and with “the wilder shores of politics at that”. The chapters accounting for his younger aimless self are tinged with irony and a wondering distance, but once he discovers his vocation as a political journalist, the public political story takes over, as it took over in fact until the Whitlam dismissal expunged his “burning desire to push down the barriers”. The earlier chapters are also illuminating on Australia’s changing mores from the 1950s to the 1970s, and on those crucial years when so many subsequent celebrities emerged from Sydney University and the Sydney Push. In many ways the nineteen years MacCallum spent as a
member of the Canberra Press Gallery replaced the earlier equally lively time as an undergraduate. Written in the form of advice to a young politician and bolstered with numerous real-life examples from past politicians, *How to be a Megalomaniac* claims to cover “everything you ever wanted to know” about the machinations of politics. Chris Masters’ *Not for Publication* makes an interesting contrast with *The Man Who Laughs*. Whereas MacCallum is frank about his own political allegiances and perceives journalism as a means of furthering them, Masters is more interested in the inherent difficulties and flaws of journalistic research itself. Intrigued by the stories that never finally go to air for whatever reason, he critically examines the practice of investigative reporting itself. A book which should be read alongside *The Man Who Laughs* is *Party Games* by Bridget Griffen-Foley. Impressively well researched and informative, *Party Games* provides numerous insights into the relationships between the media and Australian federal and state politics from 1945 to 1975. The Murdochs, the Packers and the Fairfaxes are all subject to scrutiny, as is the politicians’ fertile use of these media moguls.

Official biographies of politicians or memoirs by politicians once they have left office are becoming commonplace and four of this order are Ian Hancock’s *John Gorton: He Did it His Way*, Cheryl Kernot’s *Speaking for Myself Again*, Franca Arena’s *Franca: My Story* and Malcolm Fraser’s *Common Ground*. Well researched and apparently less restrained by his subject’s sensitivities, Hancock’s biography of Gorton presents a well rounded, reasonably “warts and all” portrait. *Common Ground*, a collection of recent speeches with added commentary, will impress those who are convinced that Fraser has changed political spots and incense those who are not. Kernot’s self-justification might qualify for an award as the most adversely criticised political text of the year, both on grounds of content and of style. It was certainly the one which provoked the most shocking aftermath for its author. *Franca: My Story* describes in evocative detail the difficulties of Arena’s early life in Genoa which was followed by a period in the late 1950s at the Bonegilla migrant camp near Albury. The suffering and powerlessness which she witnessed there was the genesis of her political life, while her descriptions of her experiences as a parliamentarian in New South Wales from 1981 to 1999 are richly illuminating. Dorothy Horsfield’s tribute to the late Paul Lyneham, *Paul Lyneham: A Memoir*, which includes Lyneham’s lively but unfinished autobiography, is also incidentally revealing of television media.

The public appetite for biographies of contemporary celebrities has been partly met by the series of *Brief Lives* published by Duffy and
Snellgrove. Two recent studies in the series are Louis Nowra’s *Warne’s World* and Tess Livingstone’s *George Pell*. I have never been greatly interested in cricket and my knowledge of Shane Warne has been deliberately cursory, but I found *Warne’s World* to be a compulsive read. Nowra’s biography is both a wide-ranging appreciation of Warne’s great gifts as a cricketer, and a convincing analysis of his personality. Setting Warne in the context of his time and place (Bayside Melbourne), and frankly charting the ups and downs of his extraordinary career when the downs were most of his own making, Nowra gives an engrossing picture of both the flawed and skilful man and his demanding sport. Once the reader has accepted Nowra’s conclusion that Warne seems to lack an awareness of the consequences of his actions, cause and effect being to his mind “as mysterious a notion as the chaos theory”, much of his erratic behaviour becomes explicable. Cricketing fanatics will flock to this book, but it will also be of value to anyone interested in what makes Australia distinctive and the links between national identity and sport. Livingstone’s book is based on detailed research into the earlier lives of Archbishop Pell. As controversial as Warne for very different reasons, Pell is presented here sympathetically as a complex but not complicated individual, combining “the rugged good humour (and vocabulary) of a star athlete with the intellectual edge of an Oxford-trained historian and the piety of a convinced Christian disciple”. Livingstone gives little credence to criticisms of Pell’s autocratic style, presenting him mainly as a heroic figure, even apparently surpassing Mannix in Christian muscularity. Two other popular biographies, destined to feed Australians’ admiration for energy and physical courage, are *Rex: My Life* by Rex Hunt and *With Spirit and Courage: The Extraordinary Life of Paul Featherstone*.

One of the most intriguing autobiographies published this year which also focuses incidentally on a celebrity is Renee Goossens’ *Belonging: A Memoir*. Born in 1940 Renee is the youngest daughter of the composer and conductor, Sir Eugene Goossens.

Devoted to her father and in awe of his talent, Renee knew him only at intervals and presents him as a shadowy individual. The most important figure in her childhood, he remained baffling, along with nearly all the other adults in her life. Renee Goossens was born into extraordinary privilege, but she was also subject to extraordinary neglect, secrecy and imposed alienation. If the past remains baffling and resistant for many autobiographers, it is literally so for this writer.

The history of Australia’s black/white relations continues to stimulate much fine writing. One of the most impressive studies in this field is Barry
Hill’s biography and intellectual history of T. G. H. Strehlow, *Broken Song*. Strehlow was one of the most complex and influential anthropologists of his time, but finally deeply flawed. As one reviewer has put it, his life “was nothing if not full of egomania, drama and pain”, fuelled no doubt by his ambivalent relationship with his Lutheran father, Carl Strehlow. Hill uses his skills as a literary critic and scholar to expose the imperialism at the core of his enterprise as a collector and his underlying social Darwinism. Another monumental biography which seeks to analyse, in this case, one individual’s massive contribution to Australian culture is Tim Rowse’s *Nugget Coombs*. Public intellectual, public servant, economist, social reformer, Aboriginal advocate and Governor of the Reserve Bank, Coombs was more the quiet achiever than the public personality and hence Rowse’s lack of resolution about Coombs the man, notwithstanding the density of his study. Marilyn Lake’s biography of Faith Bandler, *Faith*, written in close consultation with Bandler, is not only illuminating about her life, but particularly informative about the earlier history of peace campaigns and coalitions.

Literary and cultural histories have proliferated in the period, many representing solid research. Julian Meyrick’s *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave* is a detailed, analytical and sophisticated study of Nimrod from 1970 to 1985. Charting the fortunes and internal politics of the company from its energetic beginnings to its third bankruptcy and the departure of John Bell, Meyrick bolsters his study with useful appendices on seasons, attendances and the company’s historical chronology. If definitive is not an adjective which might be applied to any of the books reviewed here, this is perhaps an exception. John Bell’s autobiography *The Time of My Life* is a natural complement to Meyrick’s study in terms of Nimrod’s history, as well as illuminating Bell’s other contributions to the Australian stage. Australian drama is also the subject of Michelle Arrow’s *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last*. Although women wrote profusely for radio and later for television, their efforts and achievements have been largely overlooked. Arrow gives a comprehensive account of the work of numerous women playwrights as well as analysing the connections between politics and writing drama and the impact of developments in Australian theatre in the 1970s on women playwrights. Meanwhile Robert Jordan’s well researched history, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia 1788–1840*, the result of assiduous sifting through government records, newspapers and diaries, gives a new perspective on early colonial culture; far from the preserve of gentility, thespian activity apparently flourished equally among the convict class. Two cultural fields
are brought together in a massive companion volume, the *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*. Edited by John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell, this is an encyclopaedic reference work which is extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the music and dance of indigenous peoples to the technology used in Australia for creating, recording and performing music and multimedia in dance. Another collaborative, innovative study which will prove a useful reference work, is *A History of the Book in Australia 1891–1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market*, edited by Martyn Lyons and John Arnold. A study of book production and consumption from the 1890s to the Second World War, this useful history includes articles by a range of contributors on such aspects of print culture as authorship, editing, design and printing, publication, distribution, libraries and reading habits. *Farewell Cinderella: Creating Arts and Identity in Western Australia*, edited by Geoffrey Bolton, Richard Rossiter and Jan Ryan is a collection which is regional in focus. It brings together essays on theatre, dance, music, literature, art, radio and television, architecture and religion, which celebrate the diversity and energy of cultural life in Western Australia.

Australian literature continues to stimulate criticism, biography and interpretation. Ann Pender’s *Christina Stead: Satirist* is a corrective study, focusing on Stead’s narrative perspective as a political satirist, which, Pender believes, has been overlooked by previous biographers and critics. Presenting Stead as deeply influenced by the 1930s Depression, the disappointments of the postwar Labour government in Britain and the trials of the McCarthy period, Pender establishes fresh interpretations of her novels. Sean Monahan has courageously taken as his subject one of Australia’s strangest authors, Xavier Herbert. His *A Long and Winding Road: Xavier Herbert’s Literary Journey* is a perceptive study of Herbert’s work, which is indebted to Frances De Groen’s brilliant biography, but which depends mainly on close reading of Herbert’s style. Patrick White has provoked fewer studies recently, although Helen Verity Hewitt has provided a useful book, documenting his interest in painting and painters in *Patrick White, Painter Manque*. Her account stops short of rigorously analysing the inter-relationship of painting and writing in White’s work, however, leaving the field open for further White studies. Ivor Indyk has recently lamented the contemporary neglect of White, but it is possible he is being ‘rested’ pending fresh interpretations. Indyk himself, of course, makes a steady contribution to Australian literature as editor of *Heat*, but he is also one of our keenest critics. Ken Bolton’s interesting collection on the life and poetry of the late John Forbes, *Homage to John Forbes*, is
enhanced by Indyk's critical essay and Indyk also edited the National Library's celebration of David Malouf. Les Murray's poetry continues to stimulate interpretation and criticism. Steven Matthews' *Les Murray* is part of a series *Contemporary World Writers* published by Manchester University Press and is particularly valuable as an overseas perspective. *The Poetry of Les Murray*, edited by Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross brings together essays by Australian and European writers to make up a rich diversity of approaches.

Often, though, creative writers themselves are the best commentators on their work or the work of others, and this is certainly true of Drusilla Modjeska whose *Time Pieces* is richly revealing of her own creative journey. Clive James, on the other hand, has a remarkable facility for all kinds of critical appreciation. His *Reliable Essays*, a selection from three decades of his literary journalism made by his publisher, Peter Straus, is a book to relish for its characteristic Jamesian energy, diversity and sheer talent. Particularly rewarding are his analyses of the poetry of Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Edmund Wilson, underlining perhaps the centrality of poetry to his own creative writing. I began this review with a quote from James and have come back to him by a circuitous route, partly because more than any other Australian commentator, James has a huge interest in books and a gregarious appetite for debate. There are signs that his own work as a critic is receiving more of its due recognition recently, but he is still, to my mind, one of our most unappreciated writers. Too prolific, too much the droll television host, too much overseas, he has had more recognition in Britain as a literary critic and cultural commentator than in Australia. We can count on this collection to do him justice.

I would like, nevertheless, to qualify that Jamesian prescription for Australian history, which is quoted above. All purveyors of the past, whether biographers, historians or autobiographers, do not remember alone. Their stories are of their place and time and are necessarily temporary to some degree, subject to time's rapid erosions and to the shapings of the contemporary culture. However "reasonably clear" any account of the past seems to contemporary readers, it can never remain stable. Perhaps too we should be grateful for a short written history. Less troubled by the unresolved issues that dominate some nations, Australians are free to debate the communal past with robust energy, open-mindedness and even humour. We still own our past, rather than being owned by it.
Non-Fiction 2002–2003

All titles are referred to either directly or indirectly in the review


As for the South Seas ... I was sick with desire to go there; beautiful places, green for ever, perfect climate, perfect shapes of men and women with red flowers in their hair ... RLS 1887.

June 1888

Landfall

there is a true hung door in the heart that holds back awe for fear it should ill place or else overwhelm i never thought to open it in case all those months at sea might flood through and I should be washed clear overboard like our unfortunate camera all the reserve in the world however doesn’t prepare one for certain sights why they call it landfall i cannot imagine from the deck of the casco there rose this heaped swelling nuka hiva as if a ginger beer plant had fermented all through the months of our journey and only now was breaking through its own sheer skin to unveil these cliffs a single eagle etching a sunned air current with the quill of its wing more phantasmagorical colours than a seamstress with bundles of sateen could weep for pearl olive barley sugared bronze that particular fervid rose a baby blooms in its cheeks when running the slightest fever it was the heaven and haven louis dreamed of or so he said as he stood at the railing of our new life and whispered how hard things would be for him now his cynicism was gone.
Tattoos

louis his dear wife fanny and i have gone positively native all barefoot he in his pyjamaed get up (he still has unwell episodes and after coming out of one of these simply did not get dressed again) fanny and i in missionary nightgowns and baggy drawers loose garments are just the thing with our wonderful sunburns i daresay all three of us would appear like down at heel entertainers or half breed mexicans should we turn up on the streets of london we are right at home here the native men wear barely a loincloth some even less than that and the women are no more decently attired than when we first met them paddling out to meet us laden with cocoanuts oranges bananas for sale they swarmed over the decks like wasps the most fantastic ornate tattoos on their bare legs appearing like open work silk tights and no undergarments at all i found one lady below deck mu mu lifted to her waist crying with wonder and delight as she rubbed herself bare breeched upon the velvet cushions i was about to scold when she turned on me such large and melting eyes as one sees on horses and italians sometimes i could do no more than laugh.

Long pig

some practices surely unmortar any society louis is writing his big book on the south pacific and determined to research he has already seduced the chief and his cohorts by printing their names on pieces of paper with his typewriter then presenting them ceremoniously to soften the poor unfortunates for interrogation i fear one old fellow when asked about long pig explained the hand was his favourite morsel because he could accommodate each finger one by one in his mouth suck the flesh from the bone you can imagine i am more interested in what the women have to say at least they are discreet about their pleasures teaching fanny and i how to make hats this afternoon after which we all sat down to a feast of roast boar on thick green leaves small green onions water in beer bottles the local grain offered spoons we declined as we wished to show we could be true kanakas plunging our two forefingers into the bowl as we ate greedily of the kau kau that in truth tastes like grey glue it seems we have been adopted by the family who provided this meal and we must now produce presents to consolidate the bond fanny offered the casco ribbon off her hat
which pleased our new mama no end and louis produced a pen knife to appease our new papa take note under no circumstances shall i turn cannibal to fit in with our newfound relatives.

Sickness and Health

got out your big atlas and imagine a straight line from san francisco to anaho the n e corner of nuka hiva imagine three weeks there and then one days sail to tai o hae followed by a five day junket to farakava then onwards to tahiti back in edinburgh (which had his lungs skipping from ill to ill like a mossed stone over a pond) louis said he would be happy to visit the islands like a ghost and be carried by the natives like a bale in reality he rails at how his constitution slows him down his cold has taken a turn for the much worse and as often happens so has his temper consequently he doesn’t much like tahiti seeing it as a halfway house between civilisation and savagery and the land crabs are bothersome the ground riddled with their bunker holes what’s more he didn’t come halfway round the world to still be a poorly specimen etc he calls himself the old man virulent even as the little girls play a native form of hopscotch beyond his window to amuse him chanting their charming songs and princess moe cooks dishes especially for his invalid dinner while in comparison (and i fear this may be part of the problem) fanny is hale and hearty having a jolly old time quite une femme tahitienne as she lays on a pillow in the chief’s smoking room taking a whiff of native cigarette each time it is passed her way.

What Falls Away

on our visit to molokai louis had gloves but refused to put them on saying it would be offensive to the lepers to don them every hand was offered every hand refused i was cowed myself with fear and disgust at the sight of those poor souls one girl crying quietly under her veil i too cried a little so ashamed of my own abhorrence louis said loudly it was a sin that a child should be so unhappy he announced that god himself was present to say hello which sounds terribly arrogant but it did seem to cheer her up then
we met the rest of the great crowd of faces hundreds of pantomime masks melting under the too hot light of this dreaded scourge beyond kalaupapa there is no landscape as such just drystone dykes outcrops one sick pandanus the odd desultory chirrup of a bird a sickly gods country indeed (perhaps louis is their messiah after all ) most of these people so brave and cheerful i must say i have never yet admired my race so much nor unreal as it seems valued life so fiercely in all its running forms gorgon and chimera i have spent the morning seated on a low bare stone promontory earlier the weather opened a small crack to let out such a mist as would riddle the features of any angel then suddenly just now turned tumult what is sea rising what is sky falling I do not know i merely sit at the edge of the midst of it.
LE PETIT HAMEAU DE LA REINE

At Versailles, in this
toy hamlet,
Marie Antoinette,
Queen of France –
daughter of a queen,
granddaughter of a queen
mother of daughters
who would die princesses –
played at being
milkmaid.

In the same petit hameau
my daughter Magdalena,
plays at being Queen –
her mother a professor
who wants to be a poet,
her grandmother a teacher
who wanted to be a doctor;
her great-grandmother a wife
who wanted to be loved –
Why do humans
have such unhappy
aspirations?

Around us, sheep decorate
the long meadows
of the hamlet – sheep
whose mothers were sheep,
whose grandmothers were sheep –
back into the woolly
mists of time. Sheep 
who wish for nothing else, 
ewes and lambs 
who, unhurried, 
crop the grass.
BAMBOO MEDITATIONS

i
Despite emptiness,
the bamboo is oblivious
to every sadness.

ii
Encapsulated
in the Buddha bamboo canes –
only emptiness.

iii
Bamboo reflections –
pondering again the canes’
hidden emptiness.

iv
Today I could teach
even the Buddha bamboo
about emptiness.
A long time ago in a remote part of China, there lived a man in a forest so far and so deep that, for years, nobody saw or visited him. The people in his clan village forgot all about him until one day, years later, they were shocked to hear that the man had a son, and his son had passed the imperial examinations and was appointed the judge of their district. When the man’s clansmen heard this piece of great news, they were filled with pride. At last, Heaven has honoured us, they exclaimed, and they flocked to the city, hoping to catch a glimpse of the young judge, their fellow clansman. Those who saw him went home and told their families that the young judge had a handsome pointed face with large intelligent eyes.

Meanwhile, the man, now old and bent with age, was overcome with great joy and happiness. His son took him to the city to live in the judge’s official residence. Not long after that, the young judge had a strange dream. In his dream, a dog had looked at him with such sad and intelligent eyes that he had awakened with tears in his own eyes. He asked his aged father what the dream could mean, but the old man shook his head sadly and said nothing. That same night, the judge dreamt about the dog again, and again he woke up with tears in his eyes.

After the third night, the judge could not take it any more. He consulted a monk who listened to his story very carefully. “Set up an altar in the courtyard of your residence,” the monk said. “Offer incense and burn joss papers. Kneel and kowtow three times to whatever you see in the fire.”

Puzzled yet determined, the young judge did what the monk had instructed. He offered incense and ordered his servants to burn large quantities of joss paper. True enough, there it was again! Seated in the heart of the fire was the sad-looking dog! His servants were amazed. The young judge was speechless. And his aged father was sobbing.

“That is your mother, my son,” the old man confessed.

On hearing this, the young judge knelt down at once, crying out in a loud voice, “Mother!” He knocked his head on the stone floor and kowtowed three times. The sad-looking dog smiled as the fire died out. That night the young judge slept peacefully.
Strange story, eh? Some stories are like this, right or not? Like a pebble. You fling it into the lake. Its ripples spread in ever widening circles as it sinks to the bottom of our unconscious. There it stays forever. That’s why stories are dangerous, right or not? They mould our lives.

A long pause. We sip our tea. I can’t take my eyes off this woman in front of me.

Mummy told me the story when I was three. Always honour your mother no matter who she is! That was what she used to say. For many years, I could never see any other meaning in that story. It’s always what Mummy said it meant – respect your parents. And that’s it. No other interpretation entered my head. It was only after I’d found out that Mummy had betrayed me that I began to see other possibilities.

That’s how an indoctrinated mind works.

Scary, isn’t it? Look at the judge’s father in the story again. The old man was a nonconformist, right or not? He lived his own life in the forest. Took his own suffering like a man, and the storyteller rewarded him with a gifted son. A son who passed the imperial examinations. A son who became a judge. What more does a parent want? That’s the highest blessing in imperial China! And look at all those villagers. They were the conformists. But, ahh, did they get a son who passed the imperial exams? So there you see! That’s why this story is never found in your schoolbooks. D’you think the authorities would let such a story run loose in school? They hate this story. Ah-ha! Not what you’re thinking. No, no, they didn’t hate it for that. Not because it’s dirty. Don’t think dirty. Dirty minds see dirty things. If you ask me, I can tell you all about dirty men and dirty minds. No, the authorities, they don’t like nonconformists. They hate us. And in this story, the nonconformist was blessed with a successful and filial son. This story is subversive! Think about it. The nonconformist was rewarded and blessed. Don’t you like it when you see it this way? Oh, do say you like it!

I nod and smile at her.

You’re looking at the name card I gave out at the Story Seminar. That’s right. It just says Ah Nah. Just call me that. Surname? No. No surname. I’ve no family name. Who’s my family? My roots are in the
rubbish dump. That’s where my own flesh-and-blood mother threw me when I was born. You look shocked. Nothing should shock you by now. That was where Mummy found me. At the dump. She’d heard scuttling noises, she said. She’d spied some rats crowding around something. At first she thought it was just a dead kitten. But it turned out to be a newborn baby. Me. There! Look. I’m not ashamed. These pink welts above my breasts are where the rats bit me when I was a newborn. What you read in the papers is real. Teenage girls pregnant with fear are fiends. They turn against their own flesh in the womb. Sometimes when I go to the shopping malls, I look at their unlined teenage faces. They cling to their boyfriends’ arms and I fear for them. But that lasts only a moment, you know? After all, what’s there to be afraid of in life, right or not? Life is a mud pond. You mess around in it. You fall. You pick yourself up and learn to walk again. Then you fall again, and you rise again. That’s how we survive, right or not?

When Ah Nah laughs, the whole living room sparkles with her laughter. I never thought a white-haired woman could be so beautiful. She has left her hair uncoloured. A bold and rare move. Every Chinese woman has black hair these days, even the seventy-year-old grandma. But Ah Nah wears her hair white, looped into a simple chignon, held up by a few hairpins. She looks simple yet so elegant in her loose-fitting qipao. Relaxed and confident with the feline grace of my Persian cat. Her face lights up when she smiles, and the wrinkles curl around her eyes. I make a lightning pencil sketch of her in my notepad. I just have to capture this spirit of intelligent inquiry. We’re seated, facing each other in her apartment overlooking Hong Kong Bay. I can’t seem to take my eyes off her.

When I was twelve or thirteen, a strange scene took place in our neighbourhood one day. I can still remember that afternoon. I was doing my homework when the phone rang. Mother answered it, and I heard her exclaim, “Are you sure or not? So? Oh the gods!”

The moment she put down the phone, she rushed into the kitchen, grabbed a broom and dustpan and went out into the blazing sun. I followed her, and to my amazement, the aunties and grannies were out in full force, all pretending to sweep their driveways and water their plants! It was four o’clock in the afternoon. The sun was still blazing! They seemed to be waiting for something. Every now and then, one of them would look across the road at our new neighbour’s house. But Madam Chan’s door was firmly shut.

“Taxi coming!” someone called out.

A yellow-top taxi swung into our lane and stopped right in front of
Madam Chan's house. Out jumped an amah, dressed in a white samfoo top and black silk pants. This elegant maidservant opened a black cloth umbrella and used it to shield a teenage girl emerging from the taxi. The girl's head was covered with a red cloth. The front door of Madam Chan's house opened, and the amah and girl hurried inside. The taxi sped off.

"Did you see that red cloth?"

"Did you see her face?"

"No, lah! How to see? Her amah is so smart. Covered her up with a red cloth."

"She has to. The red will ward off evil and bad luck. It's been barely two days since the old man died on her."

"It's bad. Very bad! No man will ever want her again."

Everyone was talking but no one was listening to anyone. Then seeing us, children, standing around, listening avidly, the aunties and grannies trooped into Mrs Lam's house. My mother didn't come home till it was time to cook the evening meal. That night when Dad reached home, Mother gave him a blow-by-blow account.

"She was a pipa girl since she was fourteen," Mother said.

"The papers here say sixteen."

Dad stabbed at his copy of the Chinese tabloid, which featured a black-and-white photo of a girl with a cloth over her head.

"Sixteen sounds better than fourteen. Anyway don't believe all that the papers say. We should know better, we live next door."

"So after that, what's been happening?"

"Nothing so far. The door's been shut all day, and the curtains are drawn. The poor girl must be still in shock."

"She should be. An old bugger had died on top of her."

"You watch your words."

"Nah! What's to watch? It's an ugly world out there. Children should know."

Encouraged by Dad's comment, I asked, "What's a pipa girl?"

There! I told you so, my mother's face said as Dad answered my question.

"Pipa girl is a pretty term for pretty girls who work in old men's clubs in Chinatown, especially in Keong Saik Street in the old days. My own grandfather was a member of one of those clubs, I remember. Now when I think about this girl next door, and I think about Grandpa, my imagination dare not go any further."

Mother glared at him. While my parents argued about the merits and demerits of talking about such things in my thirteen-year-old presence, I
quickly flipped through the evening tabloid and read about the seventy-three year old man who was found dead on Ah Nah’s bed in Kuala Lumpur. His family had thought that the old man had gone for his morning constitutional when, in fact, he had gone to visit his pipa girl. Unfortunately, his exertions must have been excessive, for he had collapsed and died on top of her. The teenage girl was so petrified that she went into a state of catatonic shock. She lay under the corpse for more than an hour before Lan Chay, her amah, sensing something was wrong, burst into the room and screamed for help. The other residents and clients in the brothel managed to lift the dead weight off Ah Nah. Then, someone called the police. Ah Nah was taken to the station to make a statement, and that evening, the tabloids hit the town. Since then, the scandalmongers and bloodhound press had been pursuing her. Overnight, Kuala Lumpur was no longer a safe and anonymous place to work in. She fled south and came home to her adoptive mother. But the scandal had reached Singapore even before she did, and that was how our neighbour, Mrs Lam, knew of her arrival. As I read the papers that evening, Ah Nah’s name was on everyone’s lips and our neighbours, including my parents, were placing bets on certain numbers on account of her.

“So you took down the taxi number?” Dad asked, his eyes glinting with greedy dreams of big bucks.

“What do you think? That was the first number I looked at.”

My parents’ enthusiasm over the numbers that night was downright disgusting. It was the only time that I was ever ashamed of them. Was that all they could think about? A girl with a red cloth over her head had felt the icy touch of death. And all they’d thought about was of winning the lottery.

“It’s blood money, I know. If I touch the 4-D and win, I won’t feel good. But everybody’s doing it. I’ll feel worse if her number comes out and we didn’t bet.”

Mother lit three sticks of incense and stuck them into the urn of ash before the Goddess of Mercy. But I was feeling unmerciful. The Goddess of Mercy heard me. Ah Nah’s numbers never came up.

—you asked if I think about my mothers? No. This is the first time I’m talking about them. Here! Let’s drink to the two of them! To the one who gave birth and the one who gave life! I kowtow three times. Like Na Cha, the Lotus Boy, I shred and return my flesh to the one who gave me birth. I break and return my bones to the one who gave me life. I am now free! You smile and think this is childish in a sixty-seven year old woman.
But fairy tales like Na Cha are powerful. That’s why this version of the boy who shredded his flesh and returned his bones to his father has never been in the textbooks in Singapore. Interpretation shapes meaning. The official interpretation of Na Cha is that of a filial son who saved his parents from the wrath of the Dragon King. And the unofficial interpretation? Aah, that’s the subversive one. To his stern father, the boy returned his bones. To his pleading mother, he returned his flesh. What was left was his own. An untouchable soul to do as he wished! And that he took with him up to the mountains to begin a new life. Freed at last from the chains of his father’s authority. Look at you! Chained to your seat. Come over here and sit beside me. You’re amazed, aren’t you? That I, a former prostitute, can talk like this?

— My heart is beating fast. My pulse is racing. I am a grandfather, I tell myself. I am an old man. But darn it! You only live once! I lumber over and sit beside her. Her hair smells sweet. Will she let me hold her hand? The skin on the back of her hand is loose and mottled, but her fingers are still long and slender. I can still remember the first time I came upon her. I had wandered into our backyard one Lunar New Year. She was standing alone near the wire fence that separated our two houses. She saw me. So there was no avoiding her.

“Happy New Year,” I mumbled.
Her eyes lit up.
“Your roses, they are lovely.”
Her voice was soft and shy.
“I planted them,” I managed to croak.
I was fifteen then, and so choked up with pleasure that I could feel an embarrassed heat rising to my face. My ears were burning. I knew that I was turning beetroot. So I bent down quickly, and picked a pink rose.
“There! For you.”
I thrust the rose through the wire fence. Ah Nah stepped back, her eyes wide with fright like a young trapped animal’s.
“No, no, I can’t. Mummy won’t like it.”
“It’s just a rose, just a rose,” I assured her as calmly as I could. I regretted my own boyish boldness. My god, did I do something wrong? My insides were shaking as I pulled back my hand through the wire fence. I flung the rose into the bushes. Ah Nah shook her head, and quoted a Cantonese saying.
“Owe a debt of gratitude, repay a thousand years of remembrance. Owe a debt of flowers, repay ten thousand years of fragrance.”
“I didn’t know that,” I muttered, crushed by the weight of her Cantonese proverb. The English proverbs I had learnt in school were like a stitch in time saves nine or don’t count your chickens before they are hatched. Light little sayings that we had rattled off during English Language lessons.

“I owe others a lot already. So I don’t want to owe any more.”

Her voice was soft like the whisper of a breeze so I wasn’t sure whether she had said it or I had imagined it that afternoon as we stood under the clear blue sky with just the wire fence between us, and I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and that was why I had blurted out, “Run away. You don’t have to be a pipa girl.” You should have seen Ah Nah’s face. She looked as though I was mad.

“It’s not Mummy who forced me into my line of work. My Mummy loves me very much.”

With that, she had vanished into the house and we never spoke again.

— There must be a God somewhere, you say right or not? But sometimes when I look around at the world today, I ask God, where are you? I also know I am a rare old bird. You smile. How many former prostitutes attend seminars? Ha! See! You laugh. But it’s sad. Your academic seminars will be enriched if more of my kind attends. Even Jesus Christ seeks our company. He knows that we know what filth and dirt are in our hearts. Do you know how many children my organisation saves each year? In Vietnam alone? How many we lost or fail to save? Now, that I don’t know. Many are sold into slavery by their own dead bitch of a mother. I was lucky. I was not sold. I was pleaded and begged into slavery. I was enslaved by gratitude and filial piety, fed on a diet of stories like the young judge and his bitch-mother. My own bitch-mother threw me away. My adoptive mother picked me up and fell on her knees, begging me to save her children. Save your brother and sisters. Help me, she begged. Their own father is dead. Help me put food on the table. That’s all I ask of you, Ah Nah. I was fourteen at the time. What choice did I have? It never occurred to me to say no to the woman who had saved me from the rats. Mummy was kneeling before me with her hair down and her face streaked with tears. And all I could think of was that the Lightning God would strike me dead if I said no to her. Not one cent was I worth. That was how I saw myself. So I gave Mummy all that I earned. I swear before the gods that I did not keep a single dollar for myself. My stupidity lasted an incredible twenty-four years. You say can die or not? That we can be stupid for twenty
over years and not know it. I was already thirty-eight when my brother sold my house to pay off his gambling debts. That was when I woke up. That three-storey house was my retirement money and he squandered it in the casinos in Genting Highlands. And he could do it. The house was in his name and Mummy's name. Not mine. How was it that I didn't know earlier? How could I know? I couldn't read then. I couldn't read! My sisters all went to universities overseas and I couldn't read.

— She’s crying softly. I hold her hand in mine. Down in the Bay, the water sparkles and dances in the light from the boats. I sit closer to her and close up the space between us. A cool breeze comes in through the window, and ruffles her hair. Oh God! God! God! How you work in mysterious ways. Here she is white-haired and still so beautiful. At sixty-five, surely I am free to answer the whisperings of my heart? Or am I just a dirty old man? Ah Nah is right. Interpretation governs meaning. But how did an ex-prostitute learn that?

— Heaven never blocks all our paths. When I came to Hong Kong, KS came into my life quite by chance. I met him at the airport. He was a big and important professor of the university here. He engaged my services. I pleased him well. In return he got teachers to teach me. I thought it was a fair exchange. I sought learning and he sought a secret pleasure, away from his wife and family. I had to be very discreet, but at least I was using my talent here to work for myself. It was much much later that I formed this Save the Children organisation after he'd passed away.

— That's all I need to know. My heart is racing. I don't trust myself to speak.
setting up my residence in the madding crowd
i don't bother about the noise of traffic
if you ask me why i can remain so unperturbed
it's because my heart is far and the place feels remote
i gather chrysanthemum by the eastern fence
and see the southern mountain with pleasure
the mountain air becomes good towards the evening
as flying birds return in pairs
there is a lot of truth in this
but i forget what it is when i open my mouth

(translated on 31/12/02)
my father was an accountant
my mother was a statistician
I'm not a good mathematician
my mother used to scold me
for not being good at doing my sums
she said: look at Han Qiao next door
who's much quicker than you
we grew up together
but he ended up a criminal
& I end up a poet
we were both not very dissimilar
my father & my mother are dead now
they were born in the early 20s
I was born in the mid-50s
I lived with them until 18
they left me when I was 39 and 45, respectively
I have two younger brothers
but not a single sister
there are 16 grandfathers on
my mother's side
there are 10 aunts on my father's
my father used to chastise me
for being too muddle-headed

to work out who is who in our big extended family
this is not funny
this is all true
much as I am
against autobiography
I still need to do my sums
before I sum my own life up
as I said to my only son:
"you want to spin the world with numbers
not bind it with lines as I do"
nor would you, I'm sure
Wading out a little way, you plunge into the lake, submerged for a few moments. To me, glued to the shore by two small feet, it's all too reckless – what if you don't reappear? How can you even play at absence, pretend to be leaving me stranded?

Next moment, my doubts dissolve: you breaststroke strongly away from me, then circle and return – a tiny Red Sea parts for your arms, you shape a trough for your face; the water polishes solid shoulders, and the head, though worked to melon smoothness, is recognisably yours – still, what I see is an alien body, inexplicably claiming me as its own.

You step ashore, done with the water, and the last of the weights falls from my shoulders, sinks unnoticed into the murky wash. One more day when I won't be learning the skills you want for me. And you, after unsuspected struggles, too wise to force me or to mock me – my proxy swimmer, slayer of demons, taking my hand up the sandy track.
I have to think of you, this weather you hated, bringing you back again – the more it swelters, the more I can see you, dabbing your forehead, wilting, exasperated, acting out the ‘desperate European’ – totally authentic – stoic in the face of your discomfort, resisting the slide into bitchiness, just playing straight man to your comic accent, native gentleness winning the day. How I wish your good humour had rubbed off on me, steaming at the end of another summer – if I could just dip into that well when I feel the temper, the black impatience, come seeping up from under my skin like so much unwanted oil.
Some people really like Council House. It's a thin rectangular building in the main street. It's got park land on all sides. Out the front, large but springy bronze kangaroos drink from a pool with a fountain in it. They get the tourists' attention; few take the building's portrait home with them. Yet that angular right-hand corner would be there, a little ominous, in the background of the holiday snap; kids and mum behind the kangaroos. It seems to rise up more vertically than most of the buildings in town. Perhaps it's the jaunty capital T's that pattern the green glass exterior and push upwards and outwards. It looks square-shouldered and self respecting. It wears its structure on the outside. An honest building. Form follows function. One floor exactly like the next. Yet the impression is not militaristic or obsessional; on the contrary, the coloured glass gives a relaxed, cool, even vacation look.

But I was against this modernist formula. I said the building was like a school prefect, probably more admired than liked:

'The thing about modernist buildings is that they have no regard for locale. They ignored the needs of the place and, particularly, the people. Function, not aesthetics or context, dominated the design. What a dreadful time when boxes were fashionable. The endlessly repeated office or apartment block. The Mies van der Rohe block; function with attitude. If you wanted to work or live somewhere in town in the fifties, chances were; Perth, Brasilia, Toronto or San Francisco, you'd have got one of these. Architecture that did not care. I hadn't really questioned this.
Every story has to have a catastrophe. Okay, but how big does a catastrophe have to be? Your geological catastrophe is big. San Fransisco had one just months after I visited it last. The freeways that click under your tyres were shelved and skewed. Three levels became six levels. Some pointed upwards, a freeway to heaven. There was a news picture that burnt into my mind, a car with half its body and the back wheels on the shelf of road; the front wheels in space. The car tilted downwards at forty degrees. It hadn’t fallen the hundred and eighty feet. They had got out. That would have been a turning for them. How did they get home? When did they start feeling hungry again? Do any of their friends not know the story? Some things are turning points ’cause they’re big but some small things are turning points.

My friend Malcolm had a small thing that was a big turning point, though not a catastrophe. He came down stairs from bed one night. He was thirsty and wanted a drink. The light was still on in the lounge. The door was mostly closed. He could hear his father’s voice. He was talking to Uncle Mike. Malcolm stopped and listened unseen, unheard. “Malco’s the best kid I know. I’m not just saying it because I’m his Dad, he really is. He’s smart and good at school; he’s popular with the other kids; he’s good looking; he’s good at almost any sport he turns his hand to. I don’t know where he gets it all from, I don’t reckon I was half as good as him. He’s simply terrific.” His father stood up to pour a drink and Malcolm crept upstairs again with his. He said it changed his life.

I never really saw Council House until the day she told me it was her favourite building in Perth. At first I thought she was being contrary. It was one of her standard ways of arguing; she did it often with her husband and children. But when she described it, I saw that she really did like it. Her sentences glowed with enthusiasm, even love. The public space, the bold horizontal lines, the self-possession, the floating lightness, and yes, the coloured glass. She persisted. She was just mad about cantilevering. She’d always found it such an optimistic building. Such an optimistic style. There it was, below the surface; her history. This was her city and her memories of the building were of pleasure and intrigue. Of outings to town as a girl in the afternoon. And, at eighteen, barefoot in the fountain at 2 am. Her mother was alive then and so was her young head, alive to all the possibilities of the new. To her, the latest was the most exciting. Council House was still like that in her mind.

On my way home that night, I stopped and took it in. I could see why I’d overlooked it. It was my associations. They weren’t happy ones. They made me look away from structures like these. I said it was because I
thought modernist architecture paid no regard to the needs of real people and local interests. But that wasn't the full story, just a neat cover to lead people away from the sick feeling in my stomach. I'd put all such buildings in the same category. When I saw them, I kept driving; didn't even register. So if she hadn't said she liked it the best I wouldn't have had to deal with it. Wouldn't have had to go digging for the turning point.

I sifted through some possibilities. Modernist buildings. In my memory they were places where poor people begged and a black child, born without legs, was held up for pity. After Johannesburg, I'd edited them out of my vision of any city in which I found myself. But there was a personal memory. I could feel it in the periphery of my backward glance. It was the sort that starts with a feeling and only later gets some narrative detail. The impulse was to turn away and let it slip again so easily from the margins of my consciousness.

Those first five years are all but entirely missing. Sometimes a photograph or an anecdote will stimulate a dim recollection; a feeling really, not a story. It seems brave to go looking where some events are barely a sequence at all. I'm sure she was wearing a skirt, a tight business suit skirt. I'm sure she was pretty, with a sharp angular face I might, even then, have associated with illustrations of girls in Children's Annuals of the fifties. Those line drawings with their single line of text I took pleasure in poring over with imaginative longing.

My father didn't disguise anything.

It was, after all, the same year he'd directed me to the slippery rock at the top of the small waterfall for a picture. I presume the photograph was never taken. If it had been, it would have shown a small boy in a headlong dive. The still camera was packed away and the sixteen millimeter brought out to film the more interesting story of the events after the fall. A lot of blood and a few tears washed in the ice-cold stream. A makeshift bandage from my mother's scarf, tied at the top of my head to get the bleeding of the chin to stop. Sips of water from cupped hands. A brave smile to the whirring camera; what else could he do? There are pictures, too, of the homeward journey, on horseback, which must have been painfully bumpy.

When he introduced me to the line-drawing-in-the-skirt, he said they were very good friends. He said I was his little boy. Because I thought she was lovely, I wondered why she didn't come over to our house sometimes like other friends. We had been coming back from the markets with the warm, earth-sweet smell of celery and apples in the car.

Was it because I spent a long time alone in the car looking up, that the towering apartment block is so clear in my mind? A broad, grey car park led
right up to the base of the building. It was cheap-modern without flair; eight or ten stories; red brick, except for the lines of plastered balconies painted cream. There were swinging doors into a lobby where lines of little post boxes stood between the lift and the big, red, wheel of the firehose. The stairs disappeared into the building and then emerged into the air again at every floor. You could chart your upward progress. She lived at the top, I think. I went up the stairs with my father. Then I spent some time in the car. I guess I might have misbehaved. It feels like a time one might have misbehaved.

Council House isn’t nearly as drab, but until she mentioned it was her favourite building I’d have put it in the same category and tried to ignore it. Now looking at it on my way home I felt the vague familiar nausea. I wonder if, the small boy alone and agitated in the car park, had vomited. Or perhaps he did when his mother gave them tea on their return.

Style is such a personal thing. Nobody’s story is quite like that of another. Small catastrophes can be lonely. I saw her the other day and she said, “tell me about the latest story”. I said, “it’s called The Trouble with Council House.” She looked at me quizzically, her head slightly to one side. Her hair was so stylish I took her picture in my mind. “There’s no trouble with Council House and I do hope you’ve been nice to it.” Then she gallivanted on with a story of her own. We weren’t having an architecture tutorial.

So I snuck out and had another look. I didn’t glance at it this time. I didn’t have to. I looked straight in the eyes of that most uncompromisingly contemporary building. Damn it. I’d grown to like it myself. The blue mortar board, the rectangular ponds like swimming pools and the excessively long cantilevering of the stair canopy. I found it all quite delightful on this spring morning. I was off guard, was I looking through her eyes or in her eyes? She was, after all, handsome, sparing, no tizz, confident and stylish. She was dependably modern. Perhaps things had turned again.
This is one of those grainy box-camera scenes
I am in the picture although at first
you might not see me

the house has an iron roof and steps
behind it is a hill and tall trees
some of the trees are broken
others are dying

there is no sky except that windows reflect the sky

in front of the steps is a row of white flowers
a man and a woman are standing apart
it is hard to see their eyes

try looking at the window with the reflection

I am there if you look carefully you may find me
Tom Hungerford is in his eighty-eighth year and still writing. He is a handsome man, with the remnant good looks of an arch-typical Aussie drover of the 1950s. He moves more slowly than he’d like, because of an ankle broken at the start of his war service, that he walked on for the duration of the war. That resulted in a limp and a dicky hip, which does not prevent him from marching on Anzac Day. His mind has slowed not at all; the direct and opinionated but witty style of his delivery is still the Hungerford trademark. It’s entertaining to his friends, and perhaps still confrontational to those who don’t know him. Where he lives, in a small retirement unit at Bentley, he maintains his life-long home routine of reading and writing, gardening and cooking, making marmalade, bottling fruit, and socialising (somewhat reduced from earlier years). In his spare time he lends a hand to his less active neighbours.

After the war, Hungerford lived first in Jubilee Street, South Perth, the location for his Stories From Suburban Road. It was there that he stored the treasures acquired from a lifetime’s travel – paintings, sculptures, his books. He later moved to his dream house at Canning Vale where, for twenty years, he entertained the writers and artists who were household names to the cognoscenti – Randolph Stow, Robert Drewe, Hal Porter, Bill and Diana Warnock, to name just a few. His present home still shows off some of his favourite artifacts. Each painting and carving means something to him. His dining table is piled with manuscripts competing for space with the elderly typewriter, which has produced the stories that continue to flow from his store of reminiscences and experiences. Outside, the flowerbeds are glowing with bright colours and the vegetables are doing well. Hungerford continues to live a simple life to the full.

His story commenced with a golden youth, growing up in a semi-rural Perth, and progressed to his part in Australia’s fight for survival against the Japanese. His life as a journalist climaxed in the boom days of the 1960s and 1970s, when Western Australian mineral exports came to be a mainstay
of the Australian economy and Tom Hungerford was there to record it. For most of his life he has made a living as a journalist, a novelist and short-story writer and is still at it. In 2002 ABC’s Radio National broadcast a radio documentary *The Ambush*, his dramatised account of a typical operation in the jungle of Bougainville in 1945, mounted against a Japanese patrol. The piece was last repeated for the third time on Anzac Day this year, reinforcing the iconic status he has enjoyed as an Australian war chronicler. Hungerford particularly wanted to reproduce the soldiers’ actual speech, the colloquialisms and obscenities, as a true record in what had been desperate times.

This year, he has been busy on another film script of his prize-winning first novel *The Ridge And The River*, a fictionalised account of his war service behind Japanese lines in Bougainville. Over the past fifty years he has been responsible for nine books, some thirty published short stories on an astonishing variety of topics, half a dozen radio plays, films scripts, and at least two anthologies of poetry and prose.

It is interesting that Hungerford sees himself primarily as a “writer’s writer” of short stories, and not a “people’s writer.” He is probably right: current readers’ tastes are not inclined towards the traditional and realistic short story, which should enjoy a wider audience than it does. However, the evergreen *Stories From Suburban Road* is due to be re-published by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press in September 2003, as part of an autobiographical trilogy *straghtshooter* incorporating *Knockabout With A Slouch Hat* and *Red Rover All Over*. As for posterity, historians will most likely best remember him for *The Ridge And The River*. This classic still sells steadily, but is unknown to many young adults. They don’t know what they are missing. The flavour of his writing is warm and humorous, generous, lucid in just a few well-chosen words, with an unselfconscious use of the colourful expletive, adding emphasis to his utterances.

This is best illustrated in a brief extract from a letter Hungerford wrote to the author, following on a trip to the Yemen:

Thank you for making the Yemen trip such an unforgettable experience for me. Since then, it’s been a bit of a mish-mash – a severe cold in London and bronchitis in Seattle and a general stuffing of the mood and morale. Well ... getting over it, but feeling once more I’d battled up those fucking 98 steps at that last-night dinner at that sky-top restaurant.* Also I twisted my ankle on a bit of inferior Pommie paving – as well as losing my reading glasses somewhere in Kent: but on one of the most beautiful, halcyon Spring days I’ve ever experienced.

* Hungerford, in his 80th year, had been asked to climb large stone steps to the top floor of an ancient Yemeni citadel.
The Hungerford story from its earlier roots contributed to his love of history. It is an exotic tale. The first records date back to the twelfth century, in England. Hungerford with an almost child-like freshness combines adult humour and factual observation:

They were very shrewd cookies, apparently, because having established themselves there, in the succeeding five generations, a Hungerford married a vast heiress, vast in estates – not in size; to the point of which it is written they could ride across the south of England, without going off their land. They were immensely wealthy!

For the next four hundred years his ancestors prospered:

The Hungerfords fought at Agincourt, at Crécy, at Poitiers. As a matter of fact, a very interesting little feature: a Sir John Hungerford actually captured the Duc d’Alegon at Agincourt and, because all prisoners actually belonged to the King, he had to hand him over. The King ransomed him for some immense amount but he permitted Sir John to include on the family crest – the family crest is a garb of corn, two sickles alongside, surmounting a ducal coronet and I used to wonder what the ducal coronet was about. I knew there were no dukes in the family, but it appears that as a reward for capturing this bloke, Sir John was allowed to assume the ducal coronet, as part of his crest. At the right hand end, a little figure hanging on a hangman’s rope, a gibbet, represented the Duke, but he wasn’t hanged. That stayed there until my great-grandfather’s time.

After some amusing interchanges, the story continues:

Anyway, they were quite a power in the land for two or three hundred years. One of them, my direct ancestor, Sir Thomas Hungerford, was the first Speaker of the British House of Commons, and another, Lord Lawrence, was the Lord Chancellor, in Henry VII’s reign. Another one shared with the Duke of Essex – I think it was – guardianship of the young king, Henry VI. He made a packet out of it, and of course he would!

Another bloke in the 15th Century, Lord Robert, he had married an heiress and had decided to assume control of her entire estate, which, I thought, would have passed to him normally, but it didn’t. He decided to starve her to death and he locked her up in a dungeon, in Farley Castle, just outside [the present village of] Hungerford, but foolishly allowed her the services of a Catholic priest, through whom she got a letter out to the King. Later on, Lord Lawrence was hanged and quartered – this always worried me –
for treason and “unnatural practices”. I used to console myself that “unnatural practices” might mean having a bath on Saturday night.

There was one murderess, the Lady Agnes, who in the 14th Century, connived with two of the villeins on the estate to murder her husband, which they did. She was caught and hanged at Tyburn.

In the seventeenth century a branch of the Hungerfords moved to Ireland, probably with the backing of the ‘Lord Protector’, Oliver Cromwell, having become good Protestants at some stage after the Reformation. The English Hungerfords eventually died out, having been reduced to penury by the splendidly named Sir Anthony the Spendthrift, a favourite of Charles II. Tom Hungerford is therefore descended from the landed gentry of Cahermore in County Cork. In his account:

A Captain Emmanuel Hungerford (a military captain) came out to NSW in 1828 and, from I can gather, virtually single-handed populated the eastern seaboard. He was a very busy bugger – no, not a bugger, of course!

My father was half-way through a medical degree in Cork, when he was diagnosed as, ‘going into a decline’ which, in those days, meant getting TB. He was sent out [to NSW] to a distant cousin to recoup, with the intention of going back to his medical studies. [He was] a young man, delicate, brought up with a silver spoon in his mouth, had never been outside that lovely circle in Ireland – he became a jackaroo and drove virtually more than half-way across Australia [from northern NSW to the Gascoyne].

After some successful gold-prospecting, Hungerford’s father managed a camel team that hauled supplies to construct the rabbit-proof fence through the Pilbara, where he met the young daughter of a Busselton publican, whom he married. Years after, Tom came across a letter written to one of his uncles from Tom’s stiff-backed old grandmother in Ireland, lamenting that her favourite son had married a servant.

His mother was a remarkable woman in her way. She was not atypical of the times, running a household, ensuring that there was always food on the table and that the children were properly clothed, all on limited means and, in the early Murchison days, under frontier conditions of heat and isolation. When the family settled in South Perth, it took frequent funding from Hungerford’s grandmother to set up her son, first in a carrying business and then in running a small shop on the corner of Jubilee Street and what was then Suburban Road (now Mill Point Road).
Hungerford provides brief portraits of his parents. His father was forced to look for more substantial employment:

He cut quite a dash, I think, when he first arrived in Perth as a young man. He was a very good-looking bloke. He used to attend what he termed 'soirées' at Government House. So he knew a lot of people and [later] someone got him a job as Protector of Aborigines at a place called Jigalong.

[But] my father – and it's a horrible thing to say about him – he had no guts. He was defeated by life, he had no fight in him. He always had a severe pneumonic problem. I remember so vividly the clothesline in the back garden. Mother used to make him red flannel belts, to go around his kidneys area, and they were stitched backwards and forwards. They were about six inches wide, and very thick.

On his mother:

When I was a tiny kid – again, before I was five – I used to be playing down the bottom of the garden, with the cows or the ducks or something, right down the back of the yard, and I 'd think, Where's Mum? I can remember it: I'd run up to the house and throw myself at her! She used to cuddle me, and I could smell my mother – womanly sweat coming out of her dress – and that was my refuge, you know? That was what she was like.

My mother was the quintessential mother. She was backstop, refuge, she was the one who disciplined us, she was a tremendous cook, but not of fancy dishes. Good solid stews, bakes and roasts, wonderful rice puddings and custards – God, we ate well.

He has always enjoyed his food and inherited an ability to prepare good, plain food:

I'll tell you we had the most beautiful little Jersey cow and the milk was remarkably good, you know, because she was fed plenty of green grass, and the milk that wasn't used, Mother used to make great bowls of junket. They don't make it now – never heard of it. That's why we were all so healthy, we got such wonderful food, something terrific! I remember those bowls of junket with nutmeg scraped over and, if I was good, I was allowed to scrape the nutmeg onto the junket – you know. We had the porridge with sugar and – Mother used to put the milk in a shallow settling pan, on the back of the wood stove – in the morning, the cream had risen to the top. It
was that thick, a beautiful clotted cream, onto our porridge.

I had to go down to the shed when Dad or Mum would be milking and I sometimes would take a mug, and get a mug full of fresh milk straight from the cow. Sometimes, Dad used to say, “Open your mouth,” and he would squirt the tit in my face. My mother used to go mad seeing milk all over me. I thought it wonderful, Dad squirting the tit in my mouth. That was breakfast.

Lunch was usually what we used to call ‘a piece,’ a piece of bread and butter and jam, or bread and butter with something. We did eat dripping – oh, still I could eat dripping, but I remember it was the brown earthenware crock, and that was what the dripping was kept in. The good stuff went down the bottom and I remember we’d get home from school and oh! A piece of bread and dripping! I can remember my sisters saying, “Mum! Tom – he’s taken all the brown!” A slice of that real dripping with salt and pepper. But you see, we used to work it off. We were never still. Kids come home now and they go and sit in front of the television, and they have their dinner and sit in front of the television again – it would be fatal!

It was Tom Hungerford’s antecedents that gave him his love of history, literature and of writing. He has his father in particular to thank for that:

Someone had conned him, poor Dad, into buying a whole swag of books, which he set up as a little library, his lending library for 3d a book or something. It was in a corner of the shop and I used to sit on the floor under the shelves of books. I can’t have been more than five, seven, eight – something like that – and I used to sit under the bottom shelf, in the corner of the shop, and just read. I didn’t care what I read. [His favourites: *Tarzan of the Apes* which he read later again in the States and thought rubbish – *Nomads of the North* (set in Canada) *Tiger Tim* and *Chums*. His father disapproved of comics].

My father pointed me to books: “Read that! Here’s a good book ...” He was a great admirer of Zane Grey, who wrote a lot of books about the non-existent cowboys and the non-existent West. That imaginative period. He loved Edgar Wallace stories and he directed me to towards all sorts of books and spoke to me a lot about literature. God, I still yearn for things like King Solomon’s Mines – ‘Gagool’, the terrible old witch, and the beautiful little girl, the one who saved all of them by being under a rock. What a wonderful book! Conan Doyle – Sherlock Holmes. For some reason, when I was very
young and I read a book (I hardly understanding what I was reading) it was called *The Cloister And The Hearth*. It was a very difficult book for anyone to read, but I remember it now. I just ploughed through it, knowing only a little of what I was reading, but I read it.

There was his schooling:

They taught us to read and write and it was damn good tuition, particularly later on when I was sort of in my early teens, I had two or three teachers who used to, say, give us a quote and say, “Right, five hundred words on that.” We used to call them compositions. I’d do a composition on a storm, or a battle, a something to write about. They were corrected and the good ones were read out, and mine was always among them. It was the only thing I could do.

These are the roots from which Tom Hungerford grew. They provided the basis for the subsequent collection of writings that saw him recognised in the 1950s as one of the foremost Australian fictional writers of the post-war generation. His four novels are all based on first-hand experiences of the period, while the flow of short stories started with his first piece in *The Bulletin*, in which he was regularly published from 1942. Each short story was based on his eye for incidents that stuck in his imagination at the time.

Perhaps the most vivid of these were his wartime experiences as a commando behind Japanese lines in Bougainville. It was “kill or be killed”.

We crossed the river and started walking very, very slowly, first of all, I thought, what’s the danger. It was the first patrol I had gone out expecting to be shot up. We were really into Jap territory, by this time. We knew now they were there waiting for us. We had gone quite a distance, very slowly, watching every bloody step, never taking an eye off the side of the track. The Japanese ahead of us – we of course, couldn’t be seen – let go a fusillade. I don’t know what was wrong, whether their ammunition was crook, whether they were such bad shots. Of course I didn’t know how many Japanese there were, even, but if there were four, five or six they must have been able to shoot four, five or six men.

The patrol lost only one man, fortunately only wounded. He continues:

All you saw, really, was a quick flitter – you know what the jungle’s like! We had quite a battle, we threw a lot of lead around in the hope of hitting
someone. They fired, hoping to hit us, because once we got into cover, we were as safe as they were, but I remember sitting in cover, looking around for any sign of action, looking for something to shoot at, and thought, Jesus I'm hungry! We had a very early breakfast, round about 6 or 5, must have been getting on towards lunchtime, I thought, oh, I've put that piece of Christmas cake in my little bag. So I took it out and was sitting there with a piece of Christmas cake!

The Ridge And The River (first published in 1952) was the result, winning The Sydney Morning Herald prize for that year and the Crouch Gold Medal for Literature. It has been in print ever since.

After the war ended, Hungerford was a member of the occupation forces in Japan. He had sailed from Bougainville with a deep hatred for the Japanese, a sentiment shared by everyone at the time with the knowledge of Japanese atrocities. But once he had settled into his role of supervising the distribution of Allied stores, his attitude changed:

I went up there hating the Japs' guts, and by the time I had been there just two weeks, I found they were just people. I began to like them, I made some very good friends among the Japanese. My top Japanese storeman, Yosh, a middle aged really good bloke, was a wonderful guy and we became very, very firm friends, and he was heartbroken when I left, I think.

Hungerford also enjoyed the most tender of relationships with a young Japanese widow who loved him fiercely in return:

She was middle-class, maybe a little more than middle-class. Her grandfather and father had been in the Japanese navy and she had been married to a young man who was in the navy too, and who, she believed, had been lost in a submarine at Singapore. I don't know whether the Japanese used submarines at Singapore. That was what she said, anyway. 'Submarine, Shonan ...' (Singapore, 'City of Light.') That was a very happy period of my life.

Hungerford has never married: his total absorption with writing has allowed no room in his life for a lifetime partner. Sowers Of The Wind, based on his time in Japan, was published in 1954. It too had taken The Sydney Morning Herald's prize for that year (1949).

After the war and a period working in Canberra during which Hungerford was President of the local branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, he obtained a menial position at Eastlake, one of the
migrant labour camps in Canberra, established to service the Snowy Mountain Scheme. There was bad feeling and violence between the post-war migrants from a shattered Europe and the local Australian labourers. He said to the man who organised his placement:

I've heard some terrific things about what goes on in the Migrant Camps here. A very dangerous situation is arising. I'd like to write a novel about it.” He said OK and picked up the telephone, “Oh Bill ...,” he was calling the Top Banana in the Migrant Centre, “... I have in my office a Mr Tom Hungerford. He’s an outstanding soldier and also an outstanding writer, and he wants to get a job in the kitchen at Eastlake Camp.” What this bloke thought ... a job as a kitchen hand? That was where I'd see the life, you see. So they fixed it up. In two days I was down there, went in early one morning and started at 6 o'clock. I stayed there for seven or eight months.

*Riverslake*, published in 1953, is the fictionalised account of his experiences there, an important commentary on Australian attitudes of the time, towards the wave of migrants into the country.

From 1951 to 1967 he was working as a professional journalist for the Australian News and Information Bureau (ANIB). During this period he visited Antarctica with the 1954–55 expedition. Ostensibly he was there to write up human-interest stories for the ANIB: But the expedition cook was disabled: Hungerford had cooked in his pre-war days for his mates out at Scarborough Beach, so was appointed temporary cook for the expedition’s twenty-five men. His culinary approach was carefree:

I had two blokes to help me in the galley. We had Christmas at Macquarie Island and I cooked six chooks. I didn’t know what I was doing, half the time, because I had been used to knocking up a very rough meal for four or five blokes who didn’t care what they ate, as long as it was food. I made this immense fruitcake for Xmas. I put half a bottle of rum in it when I mixed it. I put half a bottle of rum in the icing, which I didn’t know how to make, and I forgot to put eggs in it, and I thought as it was a pretty thick mixture I’d better have a pretty hot oven. Right down in the tail of the ship there was a great big oven, heated by an enormous blowtorch. So I got this piping hot and I put the goo in it. I remembered what my mother had done, really. She used to put in a piece of brown paper in and put the stuff in on it. So I put it into the oven and went back to the galley to get something else ready for the Christmas lunch. After a while I thought I’d better go and have a look at the cake. It was on fire! The paper was burning and the top of the cake was flaming, so I dragged it out and beat the flames out. I
thought I didn’t know what to do, really, so I turned the blow torch off and put it back in. It was pretty well cooked, but like a pudding.

Then it came to making the bloody icing: I had no idea – you put icing and milk or something, but I never thought of mixing it with butter, like I know now. I had no idea of the affinity of icing for water; I’d get a nice mixture and I’d think it mustn’t get too thick, so I’d better water it and all of a sudden it got watery. It needs some more icing – and I finished up with a bloody great bowl of icing that you could whitewash the chook-house with. I had put in half a bottle of rum and I just kept ladling it over the cake until I got a reasonable thickness. It went as hard as bloody iron but I can I tell you, mate, there wasn’t more than a little wedge of that cake left. The blokes loved it – because of the rum, I suppose.

In 1957 the ANIB sent Hungerford to New York for four years as Federal Press Officer.

When I got to New York, I was also working fiendishly hard there, but I started a novel. I met that boxer Madigan, who said why didn’t I write a story about him, which I did. I wrote the book *Shake the Golden Bough*, largely to put in focus the generation of Australians, at that time pervasive everywhere in the world, who just went around the world like early sort of backpackers, expecting people to put them up, drive them round, feed them. They were locusts. So anyway, I wanted to do that and also to talk about New York, what it was like to live there, in a way, and also I brought in the black/white confrontation in New York. I wrote that and Angus and Robertson published that too, when I came back. It didn’t get much of a run.

On his return from the USA Hungerford was posted to Perth, to open an ANIB office. There, he became involved with the Perth literary scene, and was known for his generous support of aspiring writers. His work as a journalist took him all over the state, which was experiencing the minerals’ boom that became the foundation of WA’s wealth. Exhausted by his non-stop schedule, that included handling the constant stream of media and dignitaries anxious to see for themselves the giant iron-ore mines and the opening up of the million of hectares of marginal land for agriculture, he was only to produce one book during that time. This was *A Million Square*, in conjunction with Richard Woldendorp the celebrated landscape photographer. This first coffee-table book on the state was published in 1969 and sold 10,000 copies in nine months.
Hungerford took a year away from the strains of Perth, living on his own in Macau. *Codeword Macau*, a thriller, was based on his time there, but not published until 1991. On his return to Perth he served two Premiers, John Tonkin and Charles Court, as a press officer until 1975, when he retired to full-time writing. By then he had relocated from South Perth, to his property at Canning Vale. A stream of short stories followed, one of the most enjoyed being *Wong Chu And The Queen’s Letterbox*, an iconic interlude on Chinese market gardening in South Perth. His charming anthropomorphic novel *Swagbelly Birdsnatcher And The King Of Siam* followed in 1989.

Hungerford travelled widely, observing the vagaries of the USSR with a sardonic and witty eye:

I had been told by this idiot in Perth, “Don’t ever try to tip a Russian, a servant of any sort. They don’t like it,” and he said the best thing to do was to buy a few little presents, like handkerchiefs, ties for the men, perfumes for the ladies, which I did in Singapore on the way up. Anyway, when I opened my case for the customs man, he said, ‘Vat is dis?’ This was my trade goods. I said I was told I shouldn’t tip Russians and I thought I’d just give them a little present when I left the hotel. He just looked at me and he closed the case up like that, and pushed me on...What sort of nut is this? That was my move into Russia.

His friends have always enjoyed Hungerford’s naiveté:

It was a very nice hotel, nicely designed on a circular motif, but they had run out of money and tourists I think, everything, and we were the only people there. There were lights, but I couldn’t see a switch anywhere. I went all over the fucking room looking for a switch and I got onto the reception desk and I said, ‘Would you please send a boy up?’ I should have said, ‘here’s the light switch.’ I don’t know why I said to send a boy up. The manager was aghast. He said, ‘Oh, no, no! We are not allowed to do that! This is against the Law! Oh no, we never do that here!’ He went on, and I thought, what’s up with this guy? I thought he’d gone mad. And he went on, ‘It is the Government Order No. 755325. We may not do this!’ I put down the receiver and thought the bastard’s mad.

Tom Hungerford was made a member of the Order of Australia in June 1988, for services to Australian literature, and in 2002 was presented with the Patrick White Award for Services to Australian Literature. He has waited a long time for this national recognition. This is an author who
could perhaps have been so identified many years earlier, but at least the honour has demonstrated that he is not regarded as one of “Yesterday’s Men”. Rather, he can rightfully be applauded as Western Australia’s Grand Old Man of Letters, whose prodigious output is matched by a determination to write until he drops.
Laurie Duggan’s new book, Mangroves, contains this observation: “Most poetry exists as a kind of memorial for its lost self; it inhabits the realm of the cultural artifact ‘poem’ like a tramp in a condemned apartment building”. Poetry exists, in other words, in a post-poetic age. So how does one write? For many, just as one ever did, in memory of poetry. But poetry need not merely be elegiac for its lost self as the books discussed here will show. To begin, though, it’s worth noting that Duggan is less apocalyptic than might appear. The comment is consistent with Duggan’s modest claims for the status of poetry. His description of his work in “Living Poetry” includes this from 1979: “My poetry – a life watching curtains flutter – and what kind of story is that?”

The fragility of such poetry became manifest when Duggan abandoned poetry for some years. If poetry seemed untenable, Duggan didn’t stop writing. His doctoral thesis was published by the University of Queensland Press as Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901–1939. Returning to poetry, Duggan seems to have made the fragile note even more apparent. At the same time, his writing is more assured than ever, and it’s fitting that Mangroves recently won the poetry section of The Age Book of the Year Award.

While Duggan has not suffered from obscurity (The Ash Range and Epigrams of Martial were also prize winners, for instance) he hasn’t always received the recognition he deserves. This is partly because of the work’s variety (which ranges from the squib to the epic) but also because it isn’t showy. Duggan’s plurality and documentary aesthetic make the usual terms of criticism almost redundant. Mangroves may be difficult to account for, but its power makes it clear that Duggan is a master poet.

Mangroves begins with the latest in the ‘Blue Hills’ sequence, works that bring together Duggan’s interest in place and visual art. The mix of the delicate and brute reality, so conspicuous in Duggan’s poetry generally, is seen in the book’s opening lines: “Sunlight on a west wall lights up brick...
At the mercy
of what I’m given
to work with
radiant windows
dust hanging
in the atmosphere
morning radio
city mythologies.

Duggan is like a painter — "At the mercy / of what I’m given / to work with" — dealing with ephemera, shifting light, nuanced effects. "Louvres", a sequence in verse and prose, mixes "pure" observation with theorizing about poetry and shows how important visual art is to Duggan’s thinking. Like an artist, Duggan relies on the transitory: "Marks on paper, gradations on screen / as ephemeral as the factory light oscillating / upside down in the river".

It would be wrong, however, to use these lines to characterise Duggan’s work as "weak". They might concern the fleeting and intangible, but they are powerfully rendered. Mangroves is notable for its power, its multiplicity, and its wit. Humour, as ever, is important to Duggan, and Mangroves is lightened by many great jokes. "Darlington 1974" (from "Sites", a kind of discontinuous and ironic “growth of a poet’s mind” poem) begins: “I stood outside the poetry reading / waiting for the mushrooms to work”.

Mangroves is an ambitious book. It is not only large and varied; but it also takes the idea of poetry to its limits. This is both ambitious and consistent with the condition of poetry. As the American poet Robert Pinsky put it:

First, only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not been made poetry already by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no new use, the art rots. Second, the habits and the visions of the art itself, which we are responsible for keeping alive, can seem to conspire against that act of use or witness. The material or rhetoric that seems already, on the face of it, proper to poetry may have been made poetic already by Baudelaire, or Wordsworth, or Rilke, or Neruda.
Any age, in other words, is potentially post-poetic. If such thinking sounds Bloomian, it is because it is more properly Emersonian, a recognition that poetic power cannot only be found within what is considered proper to poetry; that one must respond to the aggression of "tradition" with an aggression of one's own. The books discussed here all renew poetry in some way by writing against the "the habits and visions" of poetry itself.

Poetic renewal is found everywhere in the two most important *Collected Poems* of the last year: those of Les Murray and Gwen Harwood. Harwood's *Collected Poems: 1943–1995* is notable for the exemplary editing of Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann. The edition is complete, textually authoritative, and includes numerous elegant and extremely useful notes. The poems are also returned to their pseudonyms: Walter Lehmann, the farmer, Miriam Stone, the frustrated housewife, and so on.

Such pseudonyms are consistent with the fictional characters and personae that Harwood used to write her satirical and elegiac lyrics. Like the work of her peers, especially James McAuley, Vivian Smith and Rosemary Dobson, Harwood's work is intense, well-fashioned and memorable. Even amongst these poets, Harwood's poetry is notable for its concern with the intersections between the world and the world of culture, from the Bible to Wittgenstein. Significantly, Harwood and her peers are or were elegiac poets. In Harwood's case her work became more personal (and as the previously uncollected work shows, more occasional), no doubt in part because of the illness that she images in a number of later poems. Harwood was ultimately a poet of honesty. The haunting last lines of "Andante" suggest this: "Hunger, music and death. / And after that the calm / full frontal stare of silence".

Les Murray's *Collected Poems: 1961–2002* shows little obvious anxiety about the status of poetry. Its large size is testament to a career marked by immense facility and originality. But this activity is itself a response to the problems of being a poet in a post-poetic age. Murray reacts powerfully, sometimes belligerently, to renew poetry as cultural practice. If, because of this, Murray's career seems unduly marked by the torsions of ideology, his poems more often attend to the redemptive power of language.

While there are plenty of pugilistic moments here, there are many of praise, humour and wit. These are in his attention to the domestic scene ("We've reached the teapot of calm"); his love of puns ("Y chromosomes of history, apologise to your Xes!"); his unparalleled descriptions of the animal world (a bat's face is "one tufty crinkled ear"); and his genius for juxtaposition (bikies are "Santas from Hell").
What is most notable about this edition of Murray’s *Collected Poems* is that it comes with an audio CD (something also found in Craig Powell’s *Music and Women’s Bodies*). Murray’s reading of fifty-five of his poems is revelatory, showing that if there is a key to his poetry it is rhythm, the most ancient source of poetic power. Murray’s readings and introductions are surprisingly illuminating. The lines about the music from “farty / cars that goes Whudda Whudda / Whudda” show that Murray hears the world as much as sees it. The CD is more than an adjunct to Murray’s book: it is essential to it.

Missing from Murray’s *Collected Poems* are his verse novels, *The Boys who Stole the Funeral* and *Fredy Neptune*. Narrative poetry has become consistently appealing to Australian poets trying to renew their art form, especially since the success of Dorothy Porter’s *The Monkey’s Mask*. Porter’s new verse novel, *Wild Surmise*, shows that she herself continues to find that form compelling.

In *Wild Surmise*, as in Porter’s earlier verse novels, short lyrics effortlessly combine to produce a narrative. Different here, though, is the shifting narrative viewpoint, a technique that Porter uses with great finesse. Characteristics of Porters’ other verse novels remain present here: hyperbole, intense imagery, and an interest in the relationship between sex, power and death. *Wild Surmise*, while cinematic in its use of montage, is really operatic in its aria-like lyrics, extreme emotion, and grand gestures. And like opera, literal-minded approaches are not helpful. (It is perhaps not surprising that Porter has written a number of libretti for operas with Jonathan Mills).

The narrative centres on Alex, an astrobiologist searching for extraterrestrial life who is married to Daniel, a jaded literary academic and poetry lover. Alex is pinning her scientific hopes on Europa, a moon of Jupiter, but meanwhile is having an affair with Phoebe, an astrophysicist who mocks Alex’s “feminine” search for life. Porter isn’t interested in science fiction for that genre’s usual concerns (technology and exploration). She works instead within the minor tradition of “domestic” SF, being more interested in human relationships than alien ones. The space travel is imaginary, and intellectual discovery parallels sexual discovery. Like Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* grieving for his family, or Kelvin in *Solaris* grieving for his dead wife, Alex (mentally) travels through space only to discover what she has lost.

The importance of loss points to a surprising negativity at work, seen in the images of nothingness, stillness, death, infinite seas. *Wild Surmise* is a space oddity: its negativity is strangely baroque, its narrative curiously
undramatic. But it is affecting because of this. Poetry, like astrobiology, is one big wild surmise (the title comes from Keats), and to be faithful to poetry one has to be unfaithful to it. The book’s overwrought style, for instance, makes the quiet ending all the more effective. Light years from Jupiter’s moons, it is a kind of love poetry. As ever in Porter’s work, there is much to discover.

Also strange, but less convincing, is John Jenkins’ *A Break in the Weather*. This centres on scientists, too. Together the weather scientists Bruce and Miko must, as the press release has it, “go into battle against the carbon fuel lobby”. Okay. Not quite comic enough, the narrative labours under the digressions that seem to be this book’s *raison d’être*. At times they seem a little out of control, as in the seven-stanza account of a lost weather balloon.

While not a verse novel, Zan Ross’s *En Passant* is more akin to Porter’s poetry than Jenkins’. Her sequences are often concerned with the drama of sex and sexual difference, often characterised by a pop sensibility attracted to the mock romance of Hollywood icons. Alicia Sometimes, whose *Kissing the Curve* is from the latest Five Islands Press “New Poets” series, is also interested in the dialectic between language and identity, though her poetry tends to be both more self-reflexive and humorous. Sometimes she has a marvellous sense of camp: “like a cheerleader I turned to you / with ice cream all over my chin / & said / my favourite star is 47 tuchana”. There’s something irresistible about her po-mo whimsy, seen in poems like “the history of evolution through small sketches” (complete with sketches): “Large animals ate / smaller one, then / looked to the skies & / agreed: boo to comets!”. Meanwhile, “the trick to masturbation” must get a big laugh at poetry readings.

Where Sometimes eschews grand gestures, Anna Kerdijk Nicholson’s *The Bundanon Cantos* is notable for its ambition, an extended meditation on Australia. This may sound more programmatic (and dated) than it is. But poems such as “Simple Sex Sonnets” show Nicholson searching for a language as wide as possible to discuss her topic, often making it a rare and impressive work. Where landscape and history are central to *The Bundanon Cantos*, Louise Wakeling’s *Medium Security* attends to politics in a work that, implicitly, gives a picture of contemporary Australia through often-searing portraits of violence and power.

While also attending to such concerns, Sudesh Mishra’s *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying* shows a poet unafraid to write it up rich. His long, lyrical lines pulse with extraordinary imagery (and can’t easily be quoted briefly). “A Bilimbili for Madelaine” is exemplary:
Wherever I go now, I see my likeness
Lulled in teacups, in dead pools, in green bays –

Except when the light, rid of its harness,
Glances off the surf, glances off the sand
Kingdom in which your childhood is empress

Levying shell tariffs on both sea and land,
Drifting in and out of the haze and draught
To distract with a delicious command

Your master ship-builder plying his craft
In the madder shade of an immortelle,
Who must now draw on a digressive art

To stay your vast impatience, who must tell
Of sirens and fisher-kings, of thatched druas
That swallowed up the sea like muscatel

And retched up our sailor gods, of terrors
That trailed my mad itinerant fathers
To the grail of themselves, to ask: ‘Who endures?’

Mishra’s terza rima is remarkably assured (not to mention his use of caesura and enjambement) and one of the extraordinary features of Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying is the way it eschews preciousness. In part this is because of Mishra’s technical facility, in part because of the authority and richness of his imagery (“The phone leaps to unthread / The rosary of sleep”). But it is also because of the intellectual strength of these poems. At times this calls to mind Wallace Stevens, as in “Our donnee’s the sun”, but as the sequence from which this comes (“Ephemera”) demonstrates, Mishra can attend to both the exuberance of poetry and the difficulties of ideology. The eponymous prose poem is a fitting climax to an exceptional work concerned with the intricacies of identity and diaspora.

Altogether different but equally powerful is Kevin Brophy’s Portrait in Skin. This work is deeply rooted in experience, though Brophy’s poems are neither realist nor confessional. The domestic – moving house, going to the laundromat – often occasions his poems but it is never a source of banality.
Brophy’s poetic imagination powerfully transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Brophy’s work is open to both fragility and the need for laughter. The former is seen in the achingly beautiful poems, “Turning Fifty” and “Horizon Lines”. Laughter is found throughout, as in “A Redemption Tax” in which the poet is ordained by the Australian Tax Office. Sometimes Brophy’s eye for the nuances of experience is artistry itself. This can be both utterly familiar and profoundly moving, as in the description (from “Morning”) of the poet walking his children to school:

At school they kiss me, business-like as birds,
and leave me by the school fence
with other parents also suddenly at a loss
but wanting not to show it. I want to shout a last message –
some kind of reminder to them.

Such small losses are shadowed by larger ones. This collection is deeply marked by loss and death, seen in the book’s masterful centre pieces: “Why I am a Poet” and “What to do When You’re Told it’s not Cancer”.

“Why I am a Poet” is an extended prose poem that shows the ambivalent condition of the life of words: “dead in the endless life of words, it was not easy to know what to do with my life”. The poet, as altar boy and then novitiate, learns the sacred power of language, but also its connection with death, and its inability to redeem the real world, as the death of the poet’s sister so poignantly shows. Portrait in Skin is a superb book. It powerfully illustrates the strangely antithetical conditions of life – the shadowy life of things.

Life and its shadows haunt Jordie Albiston’s The Fall. The title poem centres on the woman who jumped from the Empire State Building and was made famous by the Life photograph of her on the crumpled car upon which she landed. It is a beautiful poem and its falling imagery resonates throughout much of the rest of the book. But The Fall is not portentous. It shows, like Brophy’s and Duggan’s poetry, the strong relationship between lyricism and wit. Albiston’s catalogue poems are especially witty, but they are underwritten by darkness, as seen in “Numbers of Reasons to be Grateful”: “Four seasons turning: the taste of a ripe peach or pear. / Thoughts that the Trinity many not be enough to redeem. / Twice bitten, always shy, but still willing to dare / to awaken to morning – first time – without despair”.

Where the Wye river poems might have bordered on preciousness, they
are saved by an intellectual toughness, seen especially in the theme of self-denial. Albiston is also a discreet formalist, commonly attracted to chain structures, seen in poems like “The Fall” (the ghost of a pantoum, perhaps), “Dark Souls Swept Out Far too Far for Saving” (a villanelle), “Numbers of Reasons to be Cheerful” (in terza rima), and “Chained Letter” (a sestina). Yet such formalism is defined by a cheerful eclecticism when it comes to voice and approach. The poems of this excellent book are occupied by letters, the Bible, advice, lists, and instructions, all of which show how the poetic comes from the unpoetic.

The poetic world of Emma Lew is a little like Albiston’s made strange. The poems in Lew’s astonishing second collection, *Everything the Landlord Touches*, are populated by figures from an imaginary Europe: there are sentries, women wearing silks and crinoline, wells, manors, the “Trieste dialect”, snow, wagons, and wars. Strangeness is also seen in Lew’s genius for unexpected shifts (“She opens the window / and lets in the dark flowers”), striking metaphor (“The moon happily displays its scars”), and teasing obscurities (“In the sonnets they pray for rain / with beautiful fists, / with beautiful thirst”). Like traditional tales or allegories, Lew’s gothic tableaux are disturbing but obviously factitious. Her images are simultaneously precise, nostalgic and suggestive of the inner depths of the psyche.

Lew’s poems imply damage: “fallen women”, girls “rehearsing melancholia”, characters fearing that “the dead / will jump up to settle accounts”. “Nettle Song” could stand for any of the damaged figures in the book: “What’s in your heart? / Glaciers, glaciers, / a strange, cruel starvation, / the smallest storm”.

Such lines show Lew’s gift for versification. Her use of repetition and her sense of rhythm are superb (especially when varying an iambic beat). Often her poems are like collections of individual lines that magically go together to make a poem, as in “Famous Vexations”: “Water, wind, morning. / It is fragrant. / Just think, I again dream. / All words become pale. / There are treasures to be taken / away from this country. / The palette darkens. / Here is my plan”.

The mixture of precise musicality and semantic obscurity makes these very late Symbolist poems, attending to mood and creating states of mind. But unlike the Symbolists who were (despite their modernity) kinds of Romantics, Lew has seen the twentieth century, giving many of her poems a profound, knowing edge. This book is evidence of a major poetic talent.

The titles discussed here are those that strike me as the most powerful, those that are not simply elegies to poetry’s lost being. It is
extraordinary that one year should produce such work. (And renewal is also seen in the excellent journals Salt-lick Quarterly, Blue Dog and – on CD-Rom – Papertiger). Duggan and Lew show that the most rewarding poets are often those who make response the most difficult. The final poem in Duggan’s Mangroves is the last piece he wrote before his years of poetic silence, and it is utterly unique. “The Minutes” takes poetry to its limits. An extended prose poetry sequence, it is made up of diaristic observations of the world. But that is a totally unsatisfactory description of the poem. For while the poem represents the quotidian, the world of memory, and the material facts of living, it is intensely aesthetic. It is elliptical and allusive, a kind of music, like a long Coltranesque solo on what would otherwise be the most banal of themes. Were it not so suspicious of such terms it could be called a small masterpiece.

The title is a pun, since the poem notes the passing of time, and is also a record of something. The poet is taking the minutes of his own life. (There is also a pun regarding size.) But in taking a record of the small things that pass, “The Minutes” shows that for all his humour, Duggan’s documentary aesthetic ghosts an elegiac one. As “The Minutes” shows, poetry is elegiac not only because the world that it is recording is always disappearing, but also because poetry itself is always disappearing. It is apposite, then, that “The Minutes” should be so allusive in its rendering of reality: “What I have written I have written. Pink buds, white flowers, over the fence. Intermittent rain on the dead leaves”.

**Poetry Received 2002–2003**

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


Notes


And has done so for decades. Not because he doesn’t love us, it might tether him to this earth.

In his apartment for seniors – four naked walls, a light bulb burning.

Silence white as a folded note.

Father, I will save you from subtraction, clean-swept days that drop like stones into the great river.

Here I give you what you cannot throw away.
Catch the elevated train. Wind through Chicago's serried towers past gargoyles and students eating lunch who stare back at your face sliding by. Walk the shore ... Lake Michigan a silver key, self awake to itself. Hoarse workmen hoist a Christmas tree slowly up, boughs exhaling mountain-cold air. And little rubble pieces of history, Lincoln's pew in church or the water tower that survived the Great Fire, drink it all in, isn't this what you came for – to love your own life more? Ravenous after the party, how guests go home by taxi, softly singing, and in the unlit foyer feast upon each other.
I turn up Elizabeth Street. On the sidewalk there's a penny. Lincoln, great emancipator. I decide to kick him rather than pick him up. There's enough Honest Abes in my pocket. I drain my Pepsi, letting the caffeine hit, while the sugar seeps into my teeth, and zigzags up my nose. I shiver. Someone's tossed a soda can into the lilac bushes where the scentless buds are hard as BBs. It must be 90 degrees today, but I'm in an ice pocket. The air's getting colder, and I can feel the chill of these rich houses. I'm on my way to a new job as a live-in housekeeper. What could be easier than helping some senior citizens swallow pills? I can make people like me. Any flavor. Old folks. Tough kids. Everyone in Harris County Jail was always saying, "Jelly, your eyes remind us of a Thai girl's, your skin's a hot gingerbread, you're the kind of girl the basketball players like to date. Jelly, what do you play? Your arms and thighs are tight." I kept to myself, lifting barbells. "Jelly, why are you trying to be so big?" I have to laugh when I think of the question the quivery male voice kept asking me on the phone when I called about the job: "Are you strong?"

That's it. A Spanish-style house with low pitched clay tile roof and white stucco walls. I breathe in the salt cedars; the bushes pearled with skin petals that seem to sweat. I knock at the back door like the man told me to. "Come in, come in. It's not locked." A young guy in jeans and tee shirt opens the door and waves me into the kitchen. He's blond and well built.
Ciz

I soap myself with the last of the yellow bar. Today is soap making day, and I'm known in a few shacktowns for my recipes. Honeysuckle and cinnamon, dogwood and toffee. Humming, I run the cloth over my underarms. Sometimes I wish I could adorn myself in leaves, the dirt and stains of wood, not reach for my mended calico. I don't bother with drawers or stockings. The ninety degrees are crowding me as I push my head through the dress neck, and pull the comb through my wild hair that needs three hands to tie it back. I press the tin mirror close to my face, and hunt for the light in my eyes, like once I searched for my son's father. I was thirteen then. Now I'm twenty-five. Brightness is what the mirror gives back, gold flecks in each brown iris, and a nose that fits nice between eyes and cheeks. My lips are full but not to bursting. “Sweet Ciz,” my grandpa used to say, “you weren’t there when they passed out the feet. Only the inches.” But he was wrong. I stand four feet eight inches tall.

“Alp, rise and shine, my sweet potato pie.” I sing to my son still asleep behind the curtain that divides the room. “Fried cornmeal mush.”

Beautiful heat, already a green steam in the leaves when I cross under the chestnut. Not a whiff of breeze in my bottle tree. Alp and I hung the branches with root beer jugs and bud vases—each filled with colored water to protect us. It's July, so the cook stove is out in the summer kitchen. The embers glow when I stir them. Suddenly the hairs stiffen on my upper lip. The eyes in the back of my head see the dog on the stoop. A white bloodhound. His tongue hangs sideways from his muzzle, and he's panting. A scream knots my throat. I need a griot woman to tell me what this means. Maybe old Sally Joy. The good medicine would keep an evil spirited dog away. This one must be a benefactor; come to bless my soap making.

Jelly

It's a heat I've never walked into before. I almost swoon. Copper pots hang above the stove where a kettle of applesauce simmers. The sink and counters glow avocado-green. Sun slants in from a dormer hitting my silver platform shoes. The blond squints like they hurt his eyes

“I'm the new live-in,” I say, wishing I had sneakers on. To run if anything goes wrong.

He gives me a long look that takes in the leather fringes that lace up the sides of my jean bellbottoms, my midriff purple top, my dreds tied back in a rubber band.

I don't tell him I picked the clothes out of a pile because they fit, I don't tell him about my arrest, sitting in the Texas Street Greyhound bus
depot next to this Mexican woman who had three kids – two boys and a baby girl. She asked if I’d hold the baby while she took her boys to the bathroom. The next thing I knew the cops were arresting me for kidnapping. I did two months in County, before a judge threw the charges out. Two days ago I said goodbye to Houston. I told my mom and baby brother I’d phone from Arkansas. My lucky number is two.

Look what the dog dragged in, he’s thinking. I can’t believe the old ashes plan on hiring this one. A black Elvis backup singer in her karate jumpsuit. He grins to mask himself.

“Who are the old ashes?” Sometimes I can hear inner speech, that’s my gift, my one specialness, to pick up sentences now and then, and the voices people talk to themselves in.

His chin jerks. “Natalie and Nathan, the twins.” He picks up the spatula from a spoon tray and stirs the applesauce. I’m Roland. I come Sundays only.”

He’s friendlier now that he wonders if I can see inside his mind, and shows me the bland diet menus taped to the cupboards, the sea salts and sugar substitutes, the lower cabinet with a Lazy Susan filled with vitamins and medications.

“Why Sundays only?” I edge my shoulder against the sub-zero refrigerator, feel it hum. I’m high on having gotten a job with no questions asked, no lies having to be told.

“I’m not a slave.” He daubs his pinkie into the applesauce, and then licks. “Definitely more cinnamon sugar. That’s how the old ashes like it. I’m surprised diabetes isn’t one of their many afflictions.”

“Bring him in, Roland,” a man shouts in a papery voice. I hear slippers making a sandpaper scuff over tile, and then a thumping sound.

“Her, Nathan, it’s a her.” Roland rolls his eyes. He holds open the salon-style door.

Ciz

“Shoo,” I say to the bloodhound. “Shoo.” I’ve never seen such whiteness as this hound with his droopy ears and blue eyes like pieces of the sky were cut out and forced into his head. “What do you want with me?” The grease in the skillet is sputtering, crackling and popping like it’s angry. I run to stir it. When I turn back to the screen the dog is gone, and Alp is rubbing his sleepy face about to set himself down on the step. His irises have tiny flecks of yellow in them. Like caught bits of sun. He’s a big boy, almost six feet tall and just going on twelve.
"Boy, bring me some creek water, and then you'll eat." Before I send him off, I ask him about the bloodhound.

He shakes his head, brushes off a fly that mistakes his reddish purple lips for plums. "If the dog comes back, can we keep him?"

I tell him no. "Now go on. Get the bucket." He goes. Sweet natured with dimples, give him a white peach and he's happy for a week. Alp likes to carve soldiers out of soap ends. He gathers blackberries and blueberries and mashed cypress bark to dye uniforms with. Then he scratches battlefields in the dirt with a stick, and puts his Battle of the Somme between the sweet gum trees. I don't dare interfere with Alp when he's making a battle. I watch him disappear into the boxwoods and acacia.

Old Sally Joy comes by borrow some lard. From her dogtrot cabin someone is playing a banjo and singing. Her daughter has a new fine brown man. Blue jays try to stick in their own verses. I get an old newspaper and wrap her up a cone of lard. It's high noon before I get time to fry up some kale and bacon. Alp smells food, and comes running to me.

"The soap needs rainwater. Tend to it," I say straight into his face. He takes after me. The main reason my soap's so fine is that I boil my lye in rainwater, and then add it to the creek water along with sassafras oil, and left over bones.

"Ma, it's too hot to carry water."

"And stir the water in slow, Alp."

"Ma, if lightning struck a tree I was under; would it electrocute me?"

"Not if you weren't standing up."

"Ma, if I was swimming and a water moccasin bit me, would I get sick?"

"Alp, you're going to wish I was a snake if you don't get that water."

It usually takes three times of telling Alp to do something before he does it. But for some reason it tires me today more than usual. The heat is flat-out, and the handle of the fry pan seems heavy in my hand. That feathery shade near the creek starts to call Ciz Ciz and almost puts me to sleep.

Jelly

The old man thumps his cane. His hair is messed like he slept in it. He's tall with a handsome gray face, and dressed in a beige terrycloth robe with brown slippers. He ushers me down a hall. Rounded doors, and grillwork windows. Burgundy throw rugs.

We stop next to earth-colored pottery jugs set in a cluster "You'll be preparing our meals, bathrooming us, doing laundry, lifting if needed. And I am Nathan. You're answerable to mainly me." The old man's eyes squint like he is trying to squeeze a tear from them. "You'll get room and board,
and four hundred dollars a week. You look muscular enough to lift us. We weigh hardly anything at all. We’re old house cats and our bones stick out like grasshoppers.”

I listen to the oars of the ceiling fan stirring the air. He motions me deeper in past the end tables that burgundy pillows sit on. The living room is almost bare except for a wide screen TV, two hospital beds, and an oxygen tank. A woman lies propped on pillows, absorbed in a talk show.

“We’ll have a few words with Natalie. It’s just the two of us. We’ve tried the home health aides sent by the state. Abominations!” His slipper hooks the edge of the burgundy rug, and he catches his balance by grabbing my arm. “You’re a sturdy well-built girl, exceptionally strapping.” He trips again. “Hell cat, I’ll cane you flat,” he says, striking the rug with his cane. “Natalie, this is ...” he falters.

“Cozetta Clark. But I go by Jelly,” I tell him, thinking of my mother throwing up her hands when she found me yet again hiding in the curtain with a jar of Welch’s grape jelly, almost empty.

He bows. “Cozetta, how lovely. Yet Jelly has its beauty too. Unlike my twin.”

Ciz

Midaftemoon. The banjo goes quiet, making more room for the heat. The lye-hot sun smolders above the white dogwoods, the blooms curl and suck in their scent. It’s that trembling dwarf nectarine time when the heat ripens inside you. I can hardly see for the sweat in my eyes. I force the ladle through the bubbling soap. It feels like a journey. The summer kitchen screen snaps, meaning Alp’s going for more cornbread. And then I hear a choking sound – an animal trying to draw breath, like gasping through soggy cheesecloth. I raise the ladle. It’s that bloodhound again. The albino. He’s barely crawling, dragging himself by his front paws. Did you get into my caustic soda? If you did, you’re a goner. He’s whining, his mouth foams red-flecked spittle. If he ate caustic, his throat will swell, and his esophagus will burn inside him. I run to the rainwater barrel and fill the dipper. Here, hound, let me clean your mouth. He scratches his nose in the dirt like he is tracking a squirrel; his neck arches in a fantastic snap. I freeze. Suddenly I am more frightened of the dog’s death than he, worried over the heart beating so fast I can watch it through the pale belly and rib cage, the heart beating like a drum. The in and out frantic panting stops. Head now clumsy crashes to the ground.

“Alp!” He’s sure to have his finger in the molasses can. “Alp, come here.”
Nathan laughs, “My dear twin.”

Two plastic tubes curl into her nose, and a hose connects her to the oxygen. Natalie’s eyes are more violet than blue, and she must have been blond in her day, but now the only light hairs left are the ones that grow in the wrinkles around her mouth. I think of de-silking sweet corn. She scowls at the huge TV at the foot of her bed where a car growls, turning turns into a jaguar.

“My sister has emphysema. Sixty cigarettes a day, a waterway of smoke, for forty years creates what you see.” He sits on his bed, sliding off his bedroom slippers. “Could you pick my legs up and swing them in?” I think of coffee stirrers when I lift his legs. “Ah, such nice hands.” He lies back with a groan. “We’ll enjoy the use of them. I’m quite satisfied. Roland will acquaint you with the house. Choose either of the master bedrooms to sleep in.”

“I can’t take the light,” Natalie complains. “Would you close the drapes?”

Arabesques of grillwork. I pity the burglar who chooses this window.

“Oh, Jelly,” Nathan calls. “After you settle in, would you look for something for us? It will be in my old closet. At the back I have a bookcase and on the middle shelf, a box with a tiger on its lid. Since you’re such a muscular girl, I have no hesitation in asking you to carry it down.”

Where is a dog in his mind when he dies? With his prey, digging their bones up from shallow graves, the mice and coon whispering his name. Should I bury him in the garden where the dirt is musky and soft, cover him with the curling squash vines? He’ll bring bad luck to my sweet corn. I for a gunnysack. “Alp,” I keep calling. I’m panting by the time I get the dog in the burlap. And just then to see fifty town people walking in the sun through the black walnuts and buckthorn and crab apples, makes your heart stop, and then pick up again hard. What do they want? They must be going after someone. Maybe Sally Joy, maybe the banjo player, maybe one of the croppers stole something. “What can I do for you?” I call out, thinking don’t you come out, boy. I’ve been calling you and you didn’t listen, so now you stay where you are, make yourself small.

“I recognize Sheriff Garner. His deputies have regular redbone hounds tugging at leashes. The redbones sniff their way to the gunnysack. “We’ve found the dog,” the
square-headed deputy shouts. He nudges the dead hound; its muzzle expels a clot of blood like a well-fleshed blackish strawberry. Things go on in a dog’s hell. The deputy is shaking his head. “Know who this here dog belongs to? R. E. Lee Wilson.”

My blood ices. Mr. R. E. owns the air I’m breathing.

Sheriff Garner walks toward me, rocking the upper part of his body. He’s known to visit shack women. Has a girl by one of them in Judsonia. “This dog was trailing the boy who molested his mistress. A nine-year-old girl. Happened this morning!”

“My boy’s been with me all day. The folks around here can tell you.”

Alp steps out of the summer kitchen, and three or four town men in suspenders and straw hats hustle him over to where I am. The coals under the soap kettle glow sweet potato-orange. “Listen whatever he done, whatever you say he done, I did it. He didn’t do anything.”

“We’re going to make us a trial. This animal took down his pants in front of a nine-year-old girl.”

They dunk Alp’s hand into the scalding soap. His scream rises to the treetops. First time he ever pees himself since he was a baby.


Jelly

I choose Nathan’s old room for my own. I plop down in the oak chair, put up my feet, and look around. There’s too much of something, but I can’t figure what it is until I spot the decorative wooden boxes on the dresser top. A box takes every flat-surfaced space: bee boxes, dragon boxes, a lady box, the hair for ring storage and compartments behind her breasts.

“Jelly,” Nathan’s watery voice rises up the stairs. “Remember the box I asked for.”

It’s a struggle to climb to my feet.

The closet runs almost the length of the room. I switch on the light. Hanging in a row are three piece suits in blues and grays, tuxedoes with long coat tails, and shoes in racks, so many man’s shoes, brick-brown Oxfords, and black wingtips with such lustrous shine they seem on fire. It doesn’t look like Nathan walked far in any of them, let alone danced. Smell of cherry tobacco clings to the dry cleaning bags like the inside of a cold pipe stem.

I find the bookcase in the far back, and on top is a flat ebony box with a tiger panel. Next to it is another of those decorative boxes, this one in the shape of a screaming man. His head is hinged and I open it with my fingernail. What do I expect, a diamond stickpin? Figures I would find a
piece of dirt. It feels greasy, tarry, not like dirt at all. Could it be opium? Maybe that’s the secret of all these boxes. My baby brother’s mother-in-law sews Percodan in the hem of her housecoats. Each of the compartments has a different piece of dirt in it.

I carry the tiger box carefully down the curved staircase and set it on the tray table next to Nathan’s bed. The TV is slowly nursing them to sleep.

Ciz

Onlookers shout. Their yells move the road closer, twist and push it around my plot. The steel-spectacled deputy hits my boy in the mouth. Alp shudders like a dog shaking off ditch water. “That’s it.” A baby shrieks. Here with its mama. Mewling so loud I can’t hear what the faces are saying, just see mouths moving up and down.

Men push through the deputies, a bunch of cotton shirts, old-fashioned neckpieces. “Make the bastard talk about what he did to R. E. Lee’s girl!”

I jump between them and Alp, cover him with as much of me as I can muster. A boot picks itself up, heel banging my hip. The flat of another lands solid in the small of my back. I think of my mother’s hair, her eyebrows that we combed for fun with a toothbrush.

“Leave the woman be,” Sheriff Garner bellows.

A kick to the ribs knocks me to the ground. Mother had an amber ring.

“Who’s he calling a woman?” A boy’s shrill voice. A yellow fog of words. Color of my soap. If I blink and wish hard enough, he’ll disappear. Soap’s almost ready to pour into tins. “I wouldn’t take that not even in pitch dark. How ‘bout you Oscar?”

Laughter. “Not with a barge paddle.”

A female cries, “Cleanse the sin from R. E. Lee’s child.”

Not even a regular child, but that man’s prize. I crawl to Sheriff Garner’s pant leg. “Let my son be. I swear he’s good.” My heart’s rasping. “My boy’s been with me all day. He can’t fly.”

The spectacled deputy takes off his belt. “Let’s tend to the boy.” One after another the men come, taking turns whipping. None hide their faces. My son’s eyes swell shut. At least he’s saved from seeing. The deputy dunks my son’s other hand in the soap. This time Alp’s scream digs a hole in the ground.

Agwe, Aizan. I mouth the names of ancient givers. The dirt road has filled with cars. Like corpses. A covered hack stops at a distance, inside are two women wearing feather and veil hats.

“Let’s take them to the river.”

They push me after my son. Red water’s leaking from Alp’s forearms where the
skin is ripped I scream. They ball a handkerchief and stick it in my mouth.

It's not to the river they take Alp, but into the trees. They shove him toward the sweet gums where his soap soldiers wrestle with twigs. I jerk, almost break from their grip. Let me go with him. He's afraid of when the weather changes too many times in one day, he's afraid of ladders and birds. They hold me back.

The mushrooms grow big as fists where they tie him up and pile on the kindling. Fifty, now there's a hundred streaming past me. Laughers, jerkers, spitters. They crash into the woods. A newspaperman takes out his tablet. "We're just swatting a few mosquitoes. That's not news."


Jelly

Nathan gives off mustiness, like those mansions of oil tycoons filled with rosewood music boxes that once played ragtime, old from not being touched except by cyclones of dust. "We were brought up rich, Jelly, but Daddy didn't spoil us."

"Shut up, Nathan," Natalie hisses. She takes love from the TV; laps up her stewed tomatoes when the actors eat their phantom meals.

"She talked like that to Daddy. Can you imagine?" Nathan's eyes brighten. "As a child her skin was smoother than petals. Her face, a breathing flower. Daddy sometimes just stared at her."

"That's it!" Natalie throws her Centrum Silver vitamins at him. The bottle strikes his chest. "Take a walk in the hall or I'll break your head and shit on your neck."

Nathan dutifully sits up, grips his cane, and struggles to stand.

"Now cut it off, cut it off," Natalie orders.

I turn off the oxygen, and take the tubes from her nose. The Pall Malls are next to her nasal spray. This is the holy moment when I light her cigarette, and her mouth sucks in smoke as if it were silk. Afterwards I sponge her underarms where the hairs are frail as cobwebs. "Never had a baby, did you Natalie?"

Her belly is smooth as a girl's, no stretch marks. Just a scar on her buttocks like the glistening ripple a trout makes running under a full moon. I powder her, and she rolls onto her back. Her violet eyes go to the ceiling like she's in a staring contest with it. The sheen of her on my fingers is like dust from a moth's wings.
Ciz

I’m not afraid anymore. Hickory is king of the woods. They’re burning my son. I hear his screams. They must pull him from the fire to savor him. For thirty minutes my baby howls. Alp, it’s your mama, honey love. You’re named Alp after those cold tall mountains far away. Go there in your mind.

They burn him slow. The fine thigh pieces.

I say goodbye to my arms, feel a yank as they cord my wrists behind my back. Someone rips my apron. “Let’s go swimming, sweetheart.” They walk me to the bridge. Last sun ripples in the sluggish current. This is the river Alp was baptized in. Burning water. Three times the Methodist preacher took him under. Sweetish smoke. I wanted Alp to have as many safeguards as he could get.

The sun is a honed blade that gouges my heart out. It isn’t thumping, and I don’t feel it hit the side of my ribs. My heart is gone when they push a charred thing past me in a wheelbarrow. The thing has no legs. It raises up on its haunches, reaching out, no hands on the ends of its blackened wrists. Give me my smoke baby back. I’ll plant him in the garden. I’ll lie down beside him in the squash blossoms.

A man with a whiskey nose croaks, “I’m going to write the boys down there in Delight. Tell them about the barbeque we had this afternoon.”

Townspeople crowd both sides of the river. There’s a bunch behind me. Someone is playing an accordion. Someone is selling rock candy. Voices of rumbling earth and burrowed cicadas. Soon I won’t know what a cicada is. My own mother will die again. Along with water, corn mush, son.

“Make way, make way, R. E. Wilson’s on his way.” And then I see the man who owns the dirt where they make me set my feet.

“This is the boy who done it R. E.” They push the blackened thing in the wheelbarrow at him. A burnt offering. He has a golden boy and girl with him, a twin set. Made out of cornsilk, sunlight, heavy cream, and wedding rings. When the great giver is angry it is hard to calm her. But her price is only that of a chicken.

Jelly

Natalie’s room. They’ve sent me to look for their stereoscope.

On the dressing table there’s a chrome-plated cigarette case too perfect to have been used much. Not like things in my family that have been touched and touched. You can feel back taxes and second mortgages on the hairbrushes.

The card box sits on the messed bedspread where Roland must have been kicking back, and the stereoscope stares up from the nightstand. I
used to fight with my baby brother over who got great-Gran's stereoscope first. You could disappear behind the eye squares for a few minutes, and when you looked up Sunday would be gone, along with the pork chops. My favorite card was of a Forbidden City girl's bound feet, her toes curling under to meet the heel. Lily feet.

What kind of pictures do the twins have? I lift the stereoscope to my face. True old-timer amusement. I feel that drop in temperature again, like when you're swimming and you hit a pocket of deep chill that takes you all the way back to the ice age.

The card photograph is of a barefoot corpse. Hanging from a bridge, a pretty woman in a calico dress. I can see the ripples in the brown river, and almost hear the sluggish gurgling. A postcard. Etched into the corner "copyright 1934 - Arkansas - "unmailable."

The calico skirt seems to take the wind and still it. Hanging with her head to the side, the woman is graceful like a ballet dancer at rest. Her toes point downward, tiny feet, like lilies below her hem. The trees crowd together. At the edge of the photograph is another hanging body, smaller than the woman's. Badly burned, too burned to tell what sex it is. Like the greasy dirt in the boxes.

Faces on the bridge. A handsome man stands out; his starched trousers set to shine for all time. His children are too pretty to be alive. The girl in a dress of magnolia petals, and the boy her impish double. They are staring, not quite solemn.

I breathe deeply, take the card out of the stereoscope. Who is she? Why did they hang her on this afternoon? No, she wasn't a stunt actress of the day. I shrug, and slide the card into my pocket. Who can care about a still photograph after all the moving blood and dismemberment on TV? Maybe it's the silence that makes it so haunted, the subdued brown color like everything is drying leaves - the faces, the bridge, the water, the rope - ready to crumble but when you try to blow the leaves away they end up back in your face.

I'm about to cut the light off when I see the studio portrait on top of the dresser. A heavy brass frame encloses the twins holding hands in a mock apple orchard. It's supposed to be summer, the long hot American summer. They must be eight or nine. Too blond skinned. Like things from comets or the Milky Way. Nathan, in a miniature three-piece suit, a handkerchief in the breast pocket, smiles at Natalie, whose hair hangs in sausage curls to her waist. Her dress is chiffon. The dog would catch anyone's attention. A white bloodhound. Its leash - a charm bracelet around Natalie's wrist. They are the same children as those inside the
stereoscope card.

“I saw the dog you had when you were kids,” I say, setting up a TV tray table beside Natalie’s bed to hold set the stereoscope and card box.


Five minutes is all their strained asparagus and turkey meat loaf take in the microwave. I smell cinnamon as if the ghosts of apples are boiling on the stove.

Nathan holds forth while Natalie gobbles meatloaf as if it were rare filet. “I can still see that noon when Daddy told us. ‘Hurry dress, wear your old shoes. Blue has been found!’ We expected a picnic on the river. Tongue sandwiches, a feast of wild strawberries and grape peaches.”

The twins stay up pouring over their stereoscope. When they are asleep, I walk enough from the house so that it is not their ground, and then I get to my knees and bury the card.

Ciz

Devil is the name the old griot women give the evil hounds. Devil is the name I give the one who puts a rope around my neck. A man ties my torn apron. For an instant I think kindness. Then his hands fill my pockets with pebbles. I want to think about the rock doves singing when Alp and I played with our chessmen all through the slow part of the day. Alp, they’re going to hang you too, even if you’re already dead. A stone hits me in the stomach, then a stick. Wrens winding down, day almost done. Luscious dusk. I raise my face, even as a peach pit hits my forehead. Alp, there’s still so much corn meal mush left, I should have let you eat every whisper of it.

“Let the woman go,” someone shouts, but is drowned out.

Where could I possibly go now that I’ve been here? The cypress roots are whispering my name, be strong the river bottom calls. Ciz, Ciz, your boy is safe.

It’s Mr. R. E. who decides what to do with me, who nods his head.

Sheriff says, “Okay, Ciz, let’s get it over with.” He pulls his pants up, takes a hop as he adjusts the belt. A habit. He’ll get to do that ten thousand more times before he dies. A rope has been tied to a joint, the noose end coils in the dust.

My ashy son hangs over the water; my son who has no hands is buried in the air on the summer vines. A breeze twitches through the silver maples, their naked undersides shine. The photographer is moving closer, his camera like a box lunch at an ice cream social. “Let’s see you do a jig, Ciz.” Is it true when they take a photograph at the moment of death, that’s where your soul stays?
Jelly

I’m late with their breakfast, but when I serve them their toast burnt black, neither complains. They smack and ask for more. In the kitchen I find the bread that has green in the middle, toast it and cover the mold with grape jelly. I can hear them fighting.

“I’ll throw this plate at you, Nathan, I’ll really bean you. I don’t know where your stinking card went. What do I care? You have a box full of them.”

“But that one. Natalie, that was our history.”

When I bring them their toast which both find delicious, I hear myself asking about the dog.

Nathan looks at me thoughtfully as he sips his decaf coffee through a crazy straw. “Blue was from the medieval white Talbot Hound, who died out as a breed around 600 A.D. My father was amazed when he came upon a Talbot birthed in an Arkansas sharecropper’s lean-to. An immaculate conception. Poor Blue.” He pulls his terrycloth robe around him. “We saved the bastard’s ashes to mix with our own.”

“So that’s what all that dirt upstairs in those boxes is?” I ask.

“I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.” Nathan’s waterless blue eyes follow me as I carry the tops of the TV trays into the kitchen. Does he know that I know? What is it I know? That he witnessed something? That he keeps it with him, worships it, relic of a lost place and time? That he’s enchanted by a calico dress? A sluggish river? I don’t worry about that old filthy rag of a world that he comes from. Whatever he and his kind thought was the cat’s meow has been chewed under. There’s even worst things to be afraid of these days.

Ciz

I drop. Ripples of heat rise from the trees. I’m listening to the leaves turn over, tinkling, showing off their silver undersides.

“Does it hurt, Mama?” Alp asks. I spit the handkerchief from my mouth, a honeydew voice flows through my tongue – we’re the angels, not the murdered ones.

The blond children play on the riverbank while the limbs of the black walnuts drift in the current. The girl looks out from behind her brother, half smiles, and ducks. Peek-a-boo I see you. Wind caresses. A sickle moon waits in the sky. Barn swallows offer up pitifully glad songs.

I blink and walk out into air. Giver, let me live.