The ballroom was upstairs.
The ground floor had been taken over by crooning chickens.
So many walls had been demolished that mango trees leant in.
The staircase swept up through the air.
One hundred years ago, said a mildewed notice,
a Russian grand-duke had visited the Arnedo mansion,
and written that he had been introduced to a glittering society of beauties,
and enjoyed views across Pampanga as far as the Pasig River!

The ballroom above the trees floats through my traveller’s memories.
The grand-duke selected splendour, I chose decay.

The children peering around the columns
had spread small plastic toys across the wide narra floorboards.
As I left, they were playing superheroes on the staircase,
their parents were eating rice and bagoong, watching ‘Eat Bulaga’ on the TV,
the chickens were having a dustbath,
the monsoon was over.
Home late, you called me out. From the garden, 
no crescent moon to be seen, but the sky – 
neither blue nor black, arched nor flat, 
fixed nor indefinite – was present, 
just for the price of a tilted head; stars gave 
the usual unreadable clues 
as to their provenance, their pathways.

If they, with the sky, composed a garment you could 
wrap yourself in, a state you could become, 
you would no longer, perhaps, want life. 
That page of brilliant dust on almost-dry ink 
is, suffice to say, a way of knowing 
this place, and of knowing this place as 
ininitely otherwise than we know it.
"WISHING PAPA WAS DEAD": HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON'S RECASTING OF HER TROUBLED CHILDHOOD IN **MYSELF WHEN YOUNG**

Dorothy Green, drawing on her immense knowledge of Henry Handel Richardson, remarked authoritatively that the novelist's "fantasies were always subject to control for a purpose". Subsequent commentary has borne out this dictum, though pinpointing the fantasy imbedded amidst apparent facts and its motivation has often proved difficult, especially in the case of Richardson's autobiography. Undertaken allegedly to provide emotional relief during the Battle of Britain as well as much needed detail about her early life, *Myself When Young* is a tantalising but unreliable record, whose artful mixing of fiction and actual incident seems the culmination of a creative aptitude first documented at Chiltern, Victoria. Then, aged seven, Richardson had bounced a ball against a verandah-protected wall for hours on end, making up stories to escape the stress caused by her father's declining health. This same capacity for imaginative fabrications earned her both praise and blame, depending on the supposed truth-content of her stories, and the practice of a life-time duly shaped *Myself When Young*. Critics have long recognised, for instance, that the autobiographical account of her years at the Presbyterian Ladies' College (hereafter PLC) is based more closely on the experience of her heroine Laura, in *The Getting of Wisdom*, than on her own achievements there. More recently, commentary has documented that *Myself When Young* "contains few real facts about her family background," as well as crucial biases in the presentation of her immediate family and schooling. Although few readers would expect complete accuracy from an autobiography, this high incidence of fictionalisation calls for explanation and points, I believe, to a crucial psychological subtext rooted in childhood trauma. Its enduring effects arguably underlie a number of long-standing interpretative dilemmas and are, as I hope to demonstrate, often most influential in precisely those parts of her autobiography where they are most thoroughly
disguised and repressed.

Undoubtedly the most dramatic event in Richardson's childhood was her father's death caused by tertiary syphilis. The first unambiguous symptoms emerged in February 1877 with giddiness and loss of speech, while Walter was working as a doctor in Chiltern, followed at Queenscliff by signs of increasing dementia, climaxing in his admission to the Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum on 18 November 1878. What the doctor's children, Ettie (the future novelist) and Lil, witnessed at home was profoundly disturbing, and their father's starkly worsening state at Queenscliff coincided with their mother's long hours of training at the local post office, so that she could become the family's breadwinner. During Mary's absences Ettie had to pacify her younger sister, search for her father when he went missing and spend whole days with him. From being a mere oddity at Chiltern he become a local laughing-stock, dragging one leg abnormally and being intermittently off his head. Also the girls accompanied him on walks when he was capable of anything, while at home he could swing between violence and tears and was increasingly incontinent. His daughters' ordeal continued at Koroit. There Mary held her first appointment as postmistress and there Walter joined them after his release from the Yarra Bend Asylum on 24 February, until he passed away on 1 August 1879. For five interminable months he died before their eyes - a nightmare incubus poisoning all aspects of life in Koroit and colouring their move to Maldon that August. Richardson's young protagonist Cuffy, in similar circumstances, "wished Papa was dead" (FRM 788).

Not surprisingly, this period of terror and shame associated with father's degeneration came to constitute a taboo as powerful as that which prevented Walter from confessing his own syphilis-related fears. Lil's whole childhood, Richardson avowed, was blighted (36) - complete silence about her own response suggests a comparably heavy burden, as do her later prevarications. Myself When Young echoes Cuffy's wish in a more moderate register:

I can't say we children grieved over his death. It came rather as a relief - the same relief, in an intensified form, that we had felt during his temporary absences. Children are notoriously cold-hearted in their determination to be happy - or at least to wall themselves up against unhappiness - we were no exception to the rule. (24)

With time the strategies of denial became more subtle but no less emphatic, as in her claim that, "of the many dim shades from the past, his
is one of the dimmest” (2). Richardson is similarly disingenuous about Walter’s awful decline, asserting that she “was only dimly aware” of “the various factors that led to his break-down and death ... besides that, some of the more striking have been used as a sort of scaffolding for Richard Mahony’s story” (17). True, at the time she did not know its syphilitic origin, but this vague statement allows her to side-step describing what she actually saw and its effects on her.

These disclaimers sit uncomfortably, indeed are scarcely reconcilable, with an irrepressible pride in her wonderful power of recall that is registered frequently in the autobiography. On the subject of the boat that brought them back from England, for example, she “can see as if it were yesterday the mast that came through the middle of the dining-saloon, and the roomy cabin, fitted out and made comfortable with special sea-furniture by mother” (10-11). The Chiltern home a lifetime later is “still clear in every detail” (17), much as in a letter from 1925 she had defended the mistaken designation of local grass in Ultima Thule as the accurate recall of incorrect information imparted to her younger self. Moreover Richardson, in dealing with her early years, never tires of repeating that it is the disagreeables that lodge most firmly in the mind. If this was true in her case, then of Walter she undoubtedly had ample memories – a conclusion reaffirmed by the testimony of the Queenscliff postmaster who remembered that Ettie developed “a perfect hatred of the poor old man”. As Richardson admitted in a moment of unusual candour to a close friend: the years spent in Australia were “bitten in as with acid. Nothing will ever compare with them for vividness & vitality”.

Richardson’s most effective response to this burden was to withdraw, as she had done at Chiltern, to a mental realm where events could be recast to conform to her deepest fantasies and compulsions. This was, in words applied to misfit Laura and other prospective artists, a “freer, more spacious world ... where the creatures that inhabit [it] dance to their tune,” and where, as the narrator continues, “the shadow is the substance, and the multitude of business pales before the dream” (GW 226). Here “dream” refers to the alternative reality projected by the artist – though how this worked in practice has been largely neglected. In her major fiction Richardson, like many authors, displaced fragments of her innermost self onto her main protagonists. This strategy, however, was less available in a self-focused autobiography, where instead she created life-stories which, with their repetitions, transferences and oblique references, resemble far more the work of dreams, as described by Freud and his successors, than the compilation of a standard biographical record.
Richardson was of course well versed in dream theory and occasionally drew on it in her fiction, as at the end of the first chapter of *Maurice Guest*. This knowledge and her compositional practice of meticulously rewriting individual paragraphs many times, together with the concerted manipulation I shall document, suggest a deliberate response to a traumatic burden, rather than its unconscious working out. Thus her autobiographical vignettes, far from constituting a bona fide record, afford arguably at best a ludic mirror of her existence and psychosis, which is as revelatory for what it omits or distorts as for what it describes. Nor are circumstantial details in themselves a guarantee of veracity. Rather they create an impression of truth and verisimilitude, while unobtrusively the author alters selected details that bear on her scarifying childhood.

Consistently Richardson as autobiographer buries and displaces her hurt so that her father, in a great improvement on actuality, appears or disappears in accordance with her needs. Typically he is reduced to cameo appearances when he guides his eldest daughter to realms that offer both escape and the possibility of excelling personally. He is the sole acknowledged mentor of her reading, never forgets her needs, and shows up briefly at Queenscliff to lead Ettie to the first of many liberating spheres: the sea. In each of them she will be beyond normal constraints, acting according to her own impulses and self-instructed. “We ... were soon as much in our element as a pair of water-rats. Nor have I any recollection of ever being taught to swim” (21). The girls are “set free” and set apart. The combination of floating, halo-like locks and swimsuits made by Mary from white towelling, so different from the heavy, dark-blue costumes of the day, gives them the appearance of “little angels”. And Ettie’s soaring status is confirmed by highjinks off the diving-board “half a dozen times in succession” (22).

Walter, in effect, is written out of her memoir as an actual presence but retained as a source of influence to highlight her mother Mary’s inadequacies. She allegedly had “an exceptionally passionate temper” (47), inherited also by her eldest, so that “our differences, our conflicts were endless, and went on until I left home for good” (48). Yet Richardson assures readers that, despite being often left quaking with rage, it never drove her younger self “to snatch up a knife with intent to murder”, although she adds tellingly: “there were occasions when I could comfortably have done so” (47). A major cause of this enmity was her unwillingness to accept the devolution of paternal authority upon mother, and this hostility lived on in the autobiographer’s repeated belittlement of Mary’s intellectual and musical capacities: to whom
reportedly “music stood for little more than a noise ... and at best a showy performance” (15). Outside evidence, however, suggests that this portrait is a rank calumny. Mary’s musical defects in fact are shared by Laura at PLC, and probably reflect, at least in part, Richardson’s mature judgment of her earlier self after the sobering experience of studying music at Leipzig. A juster measure of mother’s ability is that Ettie was only bested on the piano during her first year at PLC by a pupil who was six years older and had studied for five years at the Paris Conservatoire – a highly commendable result for a girl who had only received “home teaching”. Mary, then, was hardly the musical nincombop painted in Myself When Young, but the depiction underscores the depth of Richardson’s rancour as well as her compulsion to recast reality.

Even more revelatory is Walter’s absence from Richardson’s bleak account of her experiences in Victoria’s Western District at Koroit. Potentially the country town offered the possibility of a new start for the family after the debacle of Queenscliff. But six months into their two-year-long sojourn there Walter was sent home to die – leaving Richardson presumably with a preponderance of harrowing recollections. None of them, however, surfaces in Myself When Young, where the Koroit portrayed is as much a mental correlative as an actual place. Small, ugly, mean and bare, the township and surrounding countryside afford neither physical nor mental reprieve. Even the fact of a newly refurbished dwelling becomes a source of empoisonment rather than of happiness:

For our benefit, a couple of wooden rooms were being hastily added. The workmen were still hammering and painting at these when we arrived; the noise was deafening, the smell of paint made one feel sick. My mother was the chief sufferer; and had to set about her new and fearsome duties with a mouth and tongue black with lead-poisoning (26).

But was it really lead-based paint, or rather an unmentionable presence, that rendered their new house so toxic? Moreover, there was not even a wall to bounce a ball against – though Richardson made up for this years later. Then relief from the memory of moribund Walter was found in a series of apparently random anecdotes (“scrap[s] of flotsam washed up by memory” [29]), which disguise the origin of her acute sense of existence as strange, violent and intensely disagreeable. These range from a father mercilessly beating his fourteen-year-old daughter to a hideous new-born infant; all indices of her psychological unease.

In effect, overwhelming but unutterable revulsion and horror are
encoded in surrogate, often seemingly incongruous incidents, like the vivid depiction of her earliest formal schooling in Koroit. It takes place in the local rectory with the pastor’s two children. They and the Richardson girls are being taught by his second wife. To her, as to preceding governesses (“pale shades who passed without leaving a single trace either of their persons or their teachings” [16]), Richardson denies any pedagogical debt – what she remembers are two emotionally charged clashes between parents and offspring. In the first the pastor unexpectedly beats his eldest child for an unnamed offence:

One day as we sat at lessons the door flung open, he strode in, and, without uttering a word, fell to mercilessly belabouring his fourteen-year-old daughter about the head and ears. The savage blows, given with the flat of his hand and in a sort of rhythm, first on one side then the other, were so loud that they could have been heard in the road. I thought he’d never stop; and sat petrified, momentarily expecting the girl to fall down in a fit. Or at least to cry or to scream with the pain. But not she: she didn’t even try to dodge the blows, just sat there, with a crimson face and nipped-in lips, and let him hammer her. Till he’d had enough and marched out again, still without a word. What she was being punished for remained her secret (28).

The silence of the child is matched by Ettie’s, who felt “far too ashamed of what I had seen to speak of it” (29). In the second dramatic encounter the enraged teacher attempts to thrash the girl’s younger brother with a horse-whip. A pantomime pursuit ensues which leaves stepmother breathless and him victorious, thanks to a variety of evasions and obstacle-creating tactics. Both scenes are narrated with psychological insight and many circumstantial details. Yet crucially the real-life victims of these alleged outrages dismissed Richardson’s account as the result of either “excessive imagination” or a “mental kink”: “How else would all that rubbish about our parents be explained?”

What, then, is being enacted or refracted here? In this as in so many instances, Richardson’s tale functions like a dream narrative. Her situation is split between the pastor’s two children who project her helplessness and her hopes. It is Ettie who feels herself belaboured savagely, incessantly by her father for an undisclosed reason. Unable to avoid the blows or to tell her sufferings, she can only stand “with a crimson face and nipped-in lips, and let him hammer her,” while terror and shame are the predominant emotions aroused in her other self. Mary appears fittingly as the primary
instructress and, tellingly, already as a tyrannic stepmother who must be eluded and eventually bested. As in the trilogy, Richardson’s heroic counterpart is a boy, more active, aggressive and less bound by convention than a girl. This “tiresome monkey” will force the illegitimate authority figure, “red and perspiring,” to give up the chase (29).

Similarly, Ettie’s hypersensitivity is traced in Myself When Young, not to its unspeakable source, but to a credible alternative in her “abnormally sensitive” skin (12). The first acknowledged clash with Mary is over clothing, as her daughter finds intolerable “the chafing of harsh, prickly, grown-up stuffs, round my neck or on the palms of my hands” (12). This clothing motif figures prominently in her memories of PLC; however, the key to understanding its deeper association comes in her final tableau of Koroit – a visit to Walter’s grave. There her reactions are noticeably disproportionate to their alleged cause:

The sight of the mound of earth stirred no emotion in me; it didn’t seem to have anything to do with him. And then, I had two private worries of my own. One was a fear that mother, who had already wiped her eyes, would demean herself by breaking down in public – the public consisting of the cemetery-man. For I was now old enough to be much concerned for her dignity. The other was the unbearable prickle and itch of crape on my skin ... on special occasions mother felt in duty bound to put us into them [these garments]. I suffered torments, my very teeth were on edge from the contact, and I couldn’t wait to get home and out of the dress (33).

Pain has been repressed, her psychological burden displaced, as has fear of humiliation. Clothing marks both the embarrassment and demeaning circumstances attendant on Walter’s eclipse – when will normality, or clothing like everyone else’s, again be hers? – as well as Mary’s unwelcome sway over her child. The audience cannot be too small, nor the disgrace buried too far and securely away from prying eyes.

To a casual observer, however, their life in Koroit may have seemed very different, perhaps even quite normal. This is confirmed by the recollections of the postmaster at Queenscliff, who visited Mrs Richardson at the end of 1879 to see how she was managing:

I ... found them living very happily. The vicar of the Anglican church & his family lost no opportunity to help them & the musical folk of Koroit had made friends with them & included them in all their social gatherings. I spent ten days with them & came away feeling very pleased that Mary’s splendid acceptance of the position had been followed by such pleasant results.17
Here are many of the ingredients of the family's subsequent happiness in Maldon. There is no trace of the ongoing nightmare that constituted their lives until Walter's death, except that Ettie left the strong impression of being "a selfish-bad-tempered child". One measure of her deep disturbance is this eyewitness report, another her reminiscences written a life-time later.

In them the Koroit section, like a dream fugue, exhibits recurring motifs: parents who wish to whip infants, unappetisingly raw meat and grotesque children with counterparts close to home. Ettie's fictional surrogate (with a malicious cut at her medico father) is "the butcher's child, a teeny-weeny half-caste with a dark yellow skin and slitty, black Chinese eyes ... she was a notorious mischief and in constant hot water with the neighbours" (30). Again the parent is given to thrashing the daughter with a whip which she evades allegedly by "tak[ing] refuge in one of the carcases hanging in the shop". This rumour fascinates the narrator who confesses: "I never minded 'fetching the meat'" (30). The girl reflects the author's sense of being a conspicuous misfit, in constant strife with those close to her, while the narrator's insouciance masks her own troubled association with the deeply ambivalent sphere of the paternal. Immediately after Richardson gives an example of this strife with her ostensibly innocent "inquiry whether women could have children after their husbands died" (31). Apart from causing Victorian shock and consternation by touching on sexuality, it also implicitly raises issues of personal relevance, such as what does each parent contribute to the regenerative process or is existence possible without a father. The counterpart of Lil, who is depicted as an infantile cry-baby, is their neighbour's daughter. Rather than being interesting company, she "proved to be a silly thing who, though twelve years old, still went round sucking her thumb" (29). Richardson's covert logic is iron-clad. Even the actual age difference of the siblings is maintained between two of their proxies: the pastor's daughter aged fourteen and the policeman's child of twelve.¹⁸

Finally, the chilling shadow cast by Walter's dramatic decline is arguably registered in the section's preoccupation with origins and death. One day, for instance, Ettie is called on to admire: "'The youngest baby you'll ever have seen!'" (30). Mary, adoring children, effuses about its loveliness; her disenchanted daughter finds it "the ugliest thing I'd ever set eyes on. Quite bald, the colour of underdone meat, and with a face like an old, old man's, all creases and wrinkles". Is the description coloured by distaste for the paternal? The ensuing, shocking query about parentage suggests it might be. These and related anecdotes are indeed "flotsam",
though from a very specific wreck: that of her family. Pace her biographer, they do not attest to “an instinctive need to see unpleasantness and ugliness in the world” to match “the ugliness she knew within herself”. Rather they project her actual and abiding fears, as in her novels, through diverse characters and situations, and convey a terrible unease towards existence itself: it is at once something that is clung to instinctively, yet ugly beyond belief in spite of parental assurances to the contrary. Such realisations only heightened the need for a more spacious, manipulable, fictional realm where “the multitude of business pales before the dream” or, in the specific terms of Myself When Young, where the nightmarish refractions of Koroit yield to the garden-world of Maldon.

Richardson’s autobiographical depiction of Maldon is hardly less biased than her account of Koroit. When her family arrived there late in August 1880, Maldon was still a flourishing gold-mining community whose long-term future seemed assured. Store-lined streets and weatherboard cottages had replaced the tents and makeshift dwellings of the original prospectors; however, Maldon remained, as a contemporary report underscored:

[A] place of strong contrasts. The serenities and primitive beauties of nature are on the one side, on the other the unpicturesque, but beneficient [sic], activities of human industry, as manifested in the disembowelling of the earth for the extraction of the golden treasure implicated in its quartz reefs. Of these there are nearly eighty in the immediate vicinity, employing upwards of forty crushing batteries, and between five hundred and six hundred miners.29

The meandering major thoroughfares may have been lined with trees, the shire hall “embedded in foliage,” but never far away was the din of quartz-crushing batteries, as well as miles and miles of countryside completely devastated by alluvial mining. There was also local displeasure at the appointment of Mary. Her sole qualification, according to a hostile letter published in the Argus on 27 August 1880, was “having some political friend” in power – an allusion to Henry Cuthbert who had secured her this post worth £120 per annum as well as lodgings. And the Koroit Herald was even more savage about her inadequacies, particularly her incompetence in telegraphy.21 Walter’s widow had a lot to live down in Maldon, including perhaps rumours concerning her marriage.

Neither this unpleasantness nor the denatured landscape feature, however, in Richardson’s portrayal of her life there. That she knew
intimately the disfiguring results of mining emerges at the outset of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Where once there was dense timber, a “dun-coloured desert” greets the eye. Each hill has become “a bald protuberance strewn with gravel and clay”, valleys have been turned inside out, plains rendered devoid of greenery – everywhere a “strange repellent ugliness” testifies to men’s insatiable hunger (*RFM* 10). For such details the author had only to consult her memories of Maldon, whose devastated surroundings have not been fully reclad by nature a century and a half later.

But *Myself When Young* paints an idyllic realm that reflects as much the longed-for absence of Walter as actuality. Their new garden is a cornucopia of fruits and trees, at long last they have playmates and, in place of the sea, Ettie discovers a swing which “satisfied my new bent for getting off the ground” (36). Hide-and-seek, make-believe, cards and masquerades: all the amusements of happy childhood are here, together with race-gatherings, bush picnics and plentiful musical or theatrical activities.

Richardson’s remembered relief is palpable. A “jumpy, overstrung little creature” on arrival, thanks to the drain of two years of exposure to “unchildish anxieties” (35–36), she is able to unfold physically, to thrive as never before and build up self-confidence. Overall “Maldon, with its boulder-strewn hills, its far view of dream-blue ranges, and the flowery luxuriance of its gardens” approximates a postlapsarian Eden in Richardson’s memoir (46).

Signs of the serpent’s passage, of the patriarch’s disruptive legacy are, however, discernible. Richardson’s abiding “sense of the general insecurity of things” (20) re-emerges in her account of the town’s oddities, from Old Tom’s reckless driving or the man rendered dumb by some inner mystery to an unseen Chinese leper. Pronounced, too, is her subtle but insistent identification with masculine traits and characters. Her outdoor activities are those of a tomboy and her Shakespearean reminiscences are heavily gendered. The tragedy of the Montagues and Capulets is reduced as a title to *Romeo*, her preferred role, while the line she recollected delivering from *Hamlet* to a terrified Lil was: “I am thy father’s spirit” (50). And his spirit lived on, if *Myself When Young* may be believed. There one of his last recorded acts is to give Ettie three treasured works which offer potential keys to her development: Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Burton’s *The Arabian Nights* (23). The first encouraged a vision of life as an arduous journey, beset with sin and huge challenges, to a celestial end. The second book portrayed another solitary life-struggle, following a terrible wreck, and the third fed a growing appetite for escapist fiction and romance in her life.
This last strain comes unmistakably to the fore in her avowed crush on the local clergyman Jack Stretch. In the autobiography he effortlessly fulfils each of a young girl’s dreams. Handsome and intelligent, with a reputation for turning female heads, he shows Ettie small, but in her eyes significant, marks of special attention, whether on the dance-floor or in holding her hand consolingly (59). Although there was only this “one ghost of a caress” between them, Richardson asserts that her misery and anguish were unbounded. Vividly she paints these scenes and her younger self turning in a hot, sleepless bed, prey to an emotional experience so strange and shattering that she would willingly “have lain down for him to walk on!” (61).

Yet for all its circumstantiality this story is apparently an authorial concoction that liberally interweaves fact and fiction as well as disparate details. Her Jack Stretch is reportedly an amalgam of two handsome clergymen: the historical Stretch and Arthur Green, his successor who moved to Maldon late in 1885. Significantly, her encounter with this paragon is preceded by scenes describing how Ettie devoured cheap romances at every opportunity, which invite readers to see the Stretch episode as a natural outgrowth of her reading and approaching puberty. That the thirty-year-old Stretch would have noticed a girl less than half his age is as unlikely as him having shown pronounced signs of affection towards a minor only hours before his marriage. But such actions are as common in the realms of romance as the reiterated female chorus on the leading figures’ compatibility. Also Richardson’s diary of 1887 gives a far different and critical picture of her alleged idol:

Yesterday we walked over to St Marks. Mr S. had I think a lame leg. Also suffering from a cold in his head. Treated us to a good long stare during the sermon. Spoke to Mrs S. at the gate. She wanted us to go to dinner. She gets plainer every day I think.

The limping preacher with the runny nose is worlds apart from his portrait in the autobiography as a male of peerless beauty. There, too, the spite of the passed-over lover at the gate to St Marks is recast when Richardson attributes to Stretch’s sister, Grace, the wish-fulfilling remark: “Of course it was you, Ettie, Jack really admired!” (61). This claim is lent credibility neither by amiable intercourse between the Stretch and Richardson households, nor by the reverend’s “good long stare during the sermon”. What Myself When Young presents is evidently an idealised reworking of the relationship with Ettie cast in a romantic role that is sure to gain reader sympathy.
Myself When Young, then, although an indispensable primary source on Richardson’s early years at Maldon, PLC and Leipzig, must be approached with extreme caution. The adolescent given to showing off, to subterfuge and to confounding fiction with actuality produced, years later, an autobiography that is a bewildering collation of fact, fantasy and sly displacement, which serves the ends of melioration and self-aggrandisement. Her carefully orchestrated account of her teenage passion for Stretch, for instance, answered a deep-seated need for affection, for pre-eminence and for romance to embellish an either mundane or horrible reality. The future novelist in fact overlapped with Reverend Stretch in Maldon for only one month before her schooling began in Melbourne. Thereafter she would have seen him intermittently at term breaks but, more importantly, his image could grow freely in her imagination to fill the emotional void left by two parents who, after their separate fashions, had repelled their eldest daughter. At PLC this imaginative embroidering led to peer-group ostracism; by the 1930s it had become a finely honed method of composition. In the interim Richardson had learned that not all products of a restless imagination served their author well, and recast these insights as a fictional manifesto in The Getting of Wisdom. There her alter ego signalled the stunning ease with which fictitious details could be evoked, and that verisimilitude and probability counted for more than truth and honesty in writerly productions. As one of Laura’s mentors exclaimed: “You don’t need to be all true on paper, silly child” (GW 188). Despite such avowals, those close to Richardson insisted on seeing in the autobiography evidence of her “ruthless vision and fearless clarity” as well as of “passionate integrity”. A closer, more critical reading reveals that in her hands autobiography became at once an extension of her fictional impulse and the mature fulfilment of her fledgling narratives at Chiltern – reliable, as she remarked of The Getting of Wisdom, for its more diffuse and psychological truths, though “not [for] the truth of the facts represented in the book – of what I say.”
Notes

1 Dorothy Green, "Pot and Kettle", _Overland_ 74 (1979): 44.

2 Respectively when turned to novelistic ends or when branded a liar at school. Her former classmate, Elizabeth Macdonald, remembered Richardson as “a very unpleasant girl, and a great liar”, given to “romancing about every subject she mentions”. Quoted in Axel Clark, _Henry Handel Richardson: Fiction in the Making_, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 1990: 141-42.


5 Clark has documented how he was equally capable of sending off a crazy telegram or treating the staff of the post office to a demonstration of supposedly unbreakable glass, while another local witnessed him weeping on his wife's breast and exclaiming: “Mary, what is it? What is the matter with me? Why am I like this?” ( _Fiction in the Making_: 100). These or similar incidents, and worse horrors confined to the family home, were indelibly etched on Richardson’s mind.


7 On two documented occasions Walter came close apparently to avowing his early infection to Mary: on the eve of their marriage and as his worse fears began to be fulfilled in Chiltern (see letters to Mary of respectively 11 June 1855 and 17 and 24 February 1877, rpt. in _Marriage Lines_, pp. 78-9 and 326-9). But on each occasion his expressions of unease remain as nebulous as its source.


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9 Charles Dod to Nettie Palmer, 28 September 1934, Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS 1174/1/10101.


11 I am paraphrasing here a comment made on Christina Stead’s technique in Teresa Petersen, The Enigmatic Christina Stead: A Provocative Re-Reading, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001: 11. Richardson attributes a variation on this insight to her husband, John George Robertson, in the autobiography (24, 62).

12 In sharp contrast, her mother lets her taste run riot or acts as an ineffectual blocking presence – as with her interdiction of yellow backs which Ettie circumvents simply by getting up earlier (51–52).

13 On this mother – daughter rivalry see Ackland, “Not a Good Forgetter”, 229–33.

14 Mary’s phrase in a ms. jotting where she makes these very points, NL MS 133/8/7.

15 The accuracy of Richardson’s impressions is generally accepted, or seen as evidence of her unexplained desire to focus on the negatives of existence, as in Clark, Fiction in the Making: 109–10.

16 H. Rupp, son of the Koroit clergyman, to E. Morris Miller, 8 August 1949. Quoted in Green, Henry Handel Richardson & Her Fiction: 491–92.


18 Richardson was born on 3 January 1870, Lil on 28 April 1871.


21 The details of both attacks are discussed in Clark, Fiction in the Making: 118–19.

22 Prior to Maldon, childhood solitude is a recurring motif in the autobiography, allegedly because of her parents’ inveterate sense of caste – there were no children fit for their girls to associate with – but probably in addition because of Walter’s bizarre deportment and their intense shame and humiliation.

23 See Elizabeth Summons, “Ethel and Florence and Arthur and Mattie”, Overland 72 (1978): 27–30, who also outlines Richardson’s long-standing acquaintance with the Greens and describes her highly creative but malicious use of observed detail from various households in The Getting of Wisdom.

24 NLA MS 133/8/7.
Stretch also had the inestimable advantage of knowing nothing of her family's shame, unlike Arthur Green who is effaced from her account.

In Koroit, for example, poems with banal rhymes like "dove" and "love", and comparable subject matter, called forth accolades; complaints about the governess in Maldon having been lent a Bible disfigured by Walter's heretical scribblings were dismissed as another example of Ettie's foolish imaginings (48-49).

From Edna Purdie's foreword to *Myself When Young*: ix.

This crucial distinction is made in a letter to Mary Kernot of 27 April 1911: "I am ready to vouch, with my whole heart, for the truth – the ideal truth, of course, not the truth of the facts represented in the book – of what I say" (*Letters*, I: 204).
Leaning against the cathedral selling Spanish Lotto
his red jumper
wind blown and immaculate
the exact colour of a field of poppies.

Around the steeple
sparrows sprinting in a jigsaw maze
the same pattern as the alleys
splintered like veins across the town.
Death's cant colludes to befuddle
the poor twerp sitting on sixteen
to twenty-one in a landscape he can't understand.
Told to shut up by legal aid
when the gobbledygook of the coroner's
findings set all the jury a-nod.
Incomprehensible, but for the fine
detail of a stab wound seventeen
centimetres deep, one-point-nine
at the aperture, barely a speck
of blood on the sheets, covered
carefully by a band-aid.
How to translate the inconsistencies
of evidence with only a few rough tools of grammar?
The riddle of the stain along only half
the bread knife's length. Four languages he speaks
not counting the weird disease of English
that grumbles like gravel over syntax.
Four languages, but none of them as fluent,
as conclusive as this,
the sound of one hand washing.
When Dee wakes up, groggy and parched, she wonders momentarily where she is. There is a guitar in the corner of the room and a Powderfinger poster above the bed. Daniel is sleeping beside her, his leg touching hers. Dee moves away. Jesus, she thinks, he’s a child. Dresses quietly in the dark, wipes the makeup from under her eyes with spit on her finger and taps Daniel lightly on the shoulder. The cabbie will need an address.

At home she sleeps on the couch, pulling off her bra and shoes, leaving the rest of her clothes on. She is sore all over. When Martin comes down the stairs for his shower in the morning, he shakes her awake.

“I was worried about you.” He looks tired and old to her, like a stranger in the park.

“I’m fine.”

Martin watches her and waits, a white towel around his waist. From her angle on the couch, Dee notices that his feet look too big for his body. She wants to tell him this, how much it irritates her that his toes are abnormally long. She wants to yell at him that no, she is not fine, that her heart is irreparably damaged. How could he not see it? She wants to tell him this but holds it back: once the words are out there she cannot take them back. Something final will have been done.

“I said, I’m fine.”

Martin walks away and Dee closes her eyes, feeling them sink down into their sockets. There was a time when Dee found his caring endearing and, for a moment, some part of her wants to call him back. It would be easier at least, for both of them. At some level she feels sorry for Martin, for what she is doing to him. She registers it at a distance, as if he does not belong to her.

The sky glimpsed through the back window is mostly colourless, a mat of dirty sheep’s wool. Dee rolls over and sighs, reaches for one of the scatter cushions she flung off the couch last night. She hugs it to her, desperate for a shower, but she can’t imagine moving.
When Martin goes back upstairs to dress, Dee reaches for the phone on the table in front of her. Calls the Deputy, says she has been up all night with a migraine. Feels better after the call, enough to have a shower. It isn’t enough but at least the urge to vomit has passed. Doesn’t think about the night before, just concentrates on standing up.

Martin is gone by the time she gets out of the shower and Dee is relieved for it. A fight would be all right, but she couldn’t take the sulking. He left without a word. She collapses into their bed upstairs, wet hair still wrapped in a towel, and draws the blind. Sleeps in the half-light while the shadow from the tree outside makes dancing patterns on the blind in front of her.

In the afternoon, Dee walks lazy figure-eight laps around the park. The lake fountain is sprouting a curtain of water and leaves from the plane trees lining the footpath bat each other in the wind. The power walkers push past her.

Dee kicks the crinkled piles of rust-coloured leaves in her path and tries to imagine what life would be like if she were unattached. What it would feel like to be guilt-free and unencumbered, of what the future could hold for her. She imagines summer beach frolics on an island holiday, laughing over a bottle of wine with a faceless man in a flash restaurant, satisfactory love affairs.

The single girls at work wear their best gear on Thursdays and make-up in the staff bathroom before they head out. Friday they come in pin-eyed but with stories to tell. A few weeks back Fiona, from Social Studies, met a guy with a tattoo of a barcode on the back of his neck and the words “hard on” in capitals on his penis. Soft it read RDO. She grabbed Dee’s arm at morning tea the next day, whispered that she had something to tell her. Fiona described the night in detail, said she felt like shit for lack of sleep.

“What did you get up to?” she asked finally.

Dee grimaced. “Same old.” Pushing a shopping trolley around Coles. Falling asleep with a cold cup of chamomile tea on the bedside table and her back to Martin.

There was a time, when she was young, that Dee had refused to touch money. Coin money. She hated the way the smell stuck to her fingers even after it had been passed on. When her mother offered her a twenty-cent piece to buy herself a treat, she would rather go without than have to finger the coin. Her brother tormented her: chased her around the house threatening to rub the edge of a five-cent piece along her skin.
Daniel smelt like money. Last night Dee was excited by the knowledge that his hands had been all over money before her, in and out of coin trays and plastic counting bags. It had seemed somehow exotic and daring. Now, the doona wrapped tightly around her and in between her legs to shut out the air, she feels she can smell money on her breath. The thought revolts her.

Dee is lying in the bath when she hears the front door click shut. She sighs. He is home already. Listens to his footsteps on the floorboards and contemplates his movements. Expects he will hang his keys up on the rack, stick his head inside the fridge and turn on the television news. The bathroom door is closed. It is unlikely he will enter but she can no longer enjoy the soak.

She holds her breath at the rap on the door. He is coming in! Plunges her head under the water as he walks through the door.

"Dee?" Martin hangs back at the entrance.

"Martin."

"We need to talk."

"I'm having a bath."

"I came home early so we could talk. We ... there are things we need to discuss."

"What things?"

Martin perches himself on the edge of the bath and Dee is unnerved by his proximity.

"Us. This," he says and gesticulates in the air. "Last night." Martin controls the bitterness in his voice. "You didn't come home. Remember?"

She is taken aback by the simplicity of the remark. It is true, she thinks, and holds back an urge to laugh and then cry. Angry that he still has this power, she is tempted to lose her head, yell at him to just piss off and leave her alone.

"It used to be different," he says.

"We're not the same people now. You can't expect things not to change."

"I know."

Martin pulls the bathroom door behind him on the way out and Dee wonders how she would feel if she met him now. If he were the husband of one of the teachers from school, not her own. She attempts objectivity, working out what could be gleaned from his body and face, what she had picked up along the way. On a beach, she would not look twice. At a party, she would find him earnest, interested. It was something: at one point enough. Dee thinks she should have stayed with him for a couple of
months; maybe a couple of nights would have done. If she had listened more closely to his early stories she would have been able to see it coming. She thinks that next time around she will take more care.

The water is cold by the time Dee emerges from the bath and she shivers. She can hear the noise of the television in the living room, figures Martin has taken up position on the couch. Slips silently up the stairs wrapped in a towel, hoping he won’t sense the movement and attempt another conversation. At the top, she sees the flickering images down below and the empty couch. Despite it all, she wonders where Martin has gone. Wishes the place was her own. A few months ago, when Martin went camping for a week with Rick, Dee laid out candles around the bathtub and bought an oil burner to sit on the vanity. She found a book on aromatherapy in a second-hand shop and bought a range of essential oils: geranium, orange, lemon and ylang ylang. Packed them up again the night before he came back.

Martin is folding clothes into an old red squash bag when she walks into the bedroom. He tugs at the neck of his jumper, doesn’t look at her. It kills her not to ask. There are a bunch of clothes laid out on the bed. A couple of shirts, trousers, socks rolled up into balls.

Outside the light is nearly gone and Dee can just make out the woman from across the road yelling at her daughters to get inside for a bath. The girls are dancing in circles on the verge, twirling jumpers above their heads and singing songs made up on the spot. Last summer, when the night was still and the windows open, Dee heard the youngest one and her mother screaming obscenities at each other and watched from the edge of the blind as the eldest ran crying out onto the street.

She drops the towel on the floor and dresses in a hurry behind the open wardrobe door in the corner of the room. The track-pants cling to her legs. Martin could see if he turned around. It is not that she minds as much that it doesn’t seem the right time to parade her nakedness.

“What are you doing?” Dee asks. It comes out harder than she meant it to.

“Packing.” Martin’s movements have slowed but he still doesn’t look at her.

“I can see that.” It is like she can’t help the spite. Makes an effort to hold herself in. “Where are you going?”

“Rick’s. He said I could stay a few nights.”

“Why?”

Martin looks at her, eyes runny-rimmed. Dee senses he is about to say something but nothing comes out. His face is distorted.
“I thought you said you wanted to talk.” Doesn’t know where the words are coming from. She is fucking things up but can’t seem to stop herself. “Were you even going to tell me?”

Dee had wondered how she would do it. At one point, she had checked out the cost of a single Around-The-World flight and the details sat folded up at the bottom of her bag for months.

A friend of Fiona’s had been dumped by her husband of ten years over the phone. He found an apartment, moved out and then told her. The wife was stunned. It wasn’t until the settlement was finalised that he mentioned he was in love with somebody else.

Dee’s father had at least waited until she and her brother finished the school year before he left. He was considerate in his way. He agreed to continue paying all expenses and said he would come over on weekends to take care of the garden. The day before he left he called in tree choppers to remove the gum from the front yard of the house and it took all day to get it down. They were surprised when he moved to a place by the beach: the ocean had never seemed to interest him before. Six months later he was back again, sleeping in the spare room and planting agapanthus along the front wall.

Dee stares hard at Martin. “Well?”

“Would it make a difference if I told you or not?” He stuffs the socks into the corner of the bag, working them down the edge.

She doesn’t answer.

Martin walks past her, the squash bag on his shoulder. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” He says it quietly, at the top of the stairs.
EVIDENCE

The proof is in a single strand of hair: that is all that's needed to lay the blame, to name the father, victim or the thief who tried to leave no fingerprints behind.

The doctor plucked a hair out of my daughter's unborn head and held it up in tweezers. "It's a girl" he said, his party-trick, certain of scientific truth in the midwives' tale.

The white one's my mother's under glass, the DNA extract shows the fatal gene for predisposition, grim legacy for four daughters, and seven more of theirs.

And this hair, blonde from root to tip, lying on the ensuite floor, not mine or his, tells another story – no science to it, just the age-old truth.
CONTRADICTIONILY WOUNDED
(For Father Seraphim Rose)

Your eyes were beautiful,
A dazzling azure, but contradictorily wounded
– like two fractured
    brilliant diamonds –
Explain to me, I said, hesitantly.
The refectory filled with shocked nightingales
And a piece of the Johannine prologue
    suddenly spread before us
Like an expansive dark sea.
Explain to me, I said, hesitantly.
Then you smiled,
    joyful-sorrow ...
And you vanished, as the iceman vanishes
Into the snow.
Incense smoke curls in a shaft of light,
angling through the window.
I am inside a church.

Wind-caught hair brushstrokes swirl,
a cross-section of moving sandalwood stone
cut hard, filled with grey ghost-life,
shining when a cloud moves.

I wish to photograph your face
with this sacred light and smoke moment,
but I have no camera,
we are not together, you are not here,
the sun has moved,
the smoke-ghosts have gone.

Through the open Venetians
a sea of market-garden cabbages,
a tractor shed whipped by shadow,
a nothing-blue sky.
In a now often quoted article published in 1995, Graeme Turner diagnosed a distinctly new trend in contemporary Australian movies. The strained search for a “national identity”, the belaboured concept of “daydreams of our own” and “film as national self-expression”,¹ which had been championed by Australia’s intellectual élites of the 1960s and later on by no less a person than Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, simply no longer mattered to the movie directors and producers of the 1990s. This is borne out by such nineties films as *Death in Brunswick* (1990), *The Big Steal* (1990), *The Heartbreak Kid* (1991), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), the violent and controversial *Romper Stomper* (1992), or *Spider and Rose* (1994). Turner argued that twenty years of a “revival of a dated and nostalgic version of Australian nationalism” had come to an end, that the emphasis was now on Australia’s diversity.² The surprise is not the new trend, it is that it was not noticed earlier. *Strictly Ballroom* celebrates the Spanish community, and was referred to by Paul Keating in his famous “Creative Nation” policy speech (18 Oct 1994) as proof for Australia’s “unashamed enthusiasm” for “the creative life of the nation” that manifested itself in the new multiculturality.³ *Death in Brunswick* has a typically middle-aged Anglo-Aussie (played by a prominent representative of Australian maleness, Sam Neill) immerse himself in the Greek and Lebanese communities, where he is redeemed by a youthful Greek beauty and absorbed into her family. *The Heartbreak Kid* has an Adonis of a Greek high-school lad do the same to his lady teacher, though she is half-Greek already. *Wog Boy* (1999) or *Looking For Alibrandi* (2000) are more recent films in which some still existing forms of social prejudice towards an “ethnic” background are explored, but in each film a multicultural biography is, on balance, presented as desirable. The simplified message is: ethnic groups have better food and more community life.
Similarly, and to some extent overlapping with the previous category, a number of films have involved a key protagonist who is either physically or mentally handicapped: *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993), *Shine* (1996), *Angel Baby* (1995) *Cosi* (1995), or *Muriel’s Wedding* (1994). *Spider and Rose* (1994) as well as *The Sum of Us* (also 1994) address another aspect of the new multicultural awareness, the problems of the ever-growing community of OAPs and their social problems. While this group of problem-oriented films does not necessarily represent a new departure in itself, it does present an interesting metonymic pattern, pointing at the trend towards Australian diversity and signifying the need to do something about the as yet thwarted potential of the marginalised individual in Australian society. Elsewhere, I have discussed yet another new film genre embracing a theme of cultural marginalisation: gays and lesbians, cross-dressers and transsexuals (*Priscilla, The Sum of Us, Love and Other Catastrophes*). All of these films challenge an important component of the “Australian Legend”: the image of the masculine Australian man, safe in his battler reputation created by the Henry Lawson school of nationalist writing, who was heterosexual, laconic, resilient and rugged, healthily tanned, and a “good mate”. We need to remind ourselves just how strong the presence of this stock character in Australian films of the 1970s and 1980s was. All those movies with Bryan Brown, Jack Thompson, Mel Gibson or Mick Dundee, a.k.a. Paul Hogan. In the final analysis, such new films no longer offer “a singular version of Australian identity”.

One would imagine that Australia, with its long history of immigration, has a healthy film tradition of depicting, celebrating, or problematising the cultures of that immigration. Not so. What we have is not a well-trodden path of a cineastic praxis, but a number of isolated, usually low-budgeted and marginalised movies, like a string of waterholes on an outback trek. Ian Stratton finds that “by the 1960s the tendency to celebrate the new European cosmopolitanism of Australia” is established and points to the example of *They’re a Weird Mob* (1960), the first Australian film to depict an Italian migrant positively. However, equally strong is the tendency at the time to celebrate the “ocker” male with all his macho qualities, including his xenophobia. In terms of valorizing multiculturalism, the film is thus a mixed blessing. *Silver City* (1984) is a more thoughtful presentation of post-war immigration: it is the first movie presenting the story from the perspective of (mostly Polish) immigrants. Scenes in which arrogant immigration officers loudly complain to each other about “the riff-raff that we’re letting in” while treating the new arrivals with cold disdain, even confiscating personal memorabilia from their luggage, are memorable. At
the film's end, everyone seems to have adjusted to a suburban Australian existence, but melancholia at the loss of Europe, and the lingering pain of the involuntary assimilation process that started in that “silver city” of corrugated sheds are still present.

Flight, Exile, Assimilation

Escape is the leitmotif of Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997). Flanagan, winner of the 2002 Miles Franklin Award for his *Gould’s Book of Fish*, is a Tasmanian writer; his wife Majda is the daughter of Slovene immigrants. In his first novel *Death of a River Guide* (1994) one of several narrative strands ties the plot to Slovenia, but his second novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, is firmly centred on the experience of Slovene immigrants. Bojan Buloh and his wife Maria flee from the repression of Tito's Yugoslavia in the late 1940s, by a northeast escape route across the mountains dividing Slovenia from Austria. After a year spent in a Displaced Persons camp there, they are given their emigration papers to Tasmania. However, the freedom they are looking for eludes them, as they find themselves trapped in the hydroelectric projects of the central Tasmanian mountains. And in their awful memories. Their daughter Sonja is born in the DP camp, which sets the tone for her subsequent life.

As a teenager, Bojan became the involuntary – and indelibly traumatised – witness to one of the war's many atrocities. From a distance he watched as a regiment of Waffen SS, guided to a secret hide-out of resistance fighters by Slovene collaborators, wiped out the whole command, except one, who is sunk into the earth to his neck, the head “erupting from the earth at a broken angle”. The SS then proceed to kick it “backwards and forwards like some weird fixed football” until it looked “like a snapped flower stem”. Maria's traumatisation is even worse: when her father was betrayed by the local priest as a supporter of the Titoist partizani, the “SS Prinz Eugen division”*8* exacted a terrible punishment: they killed him, forcing his children to watch. In the halting words of Bojan: “‘Then they rape her sister, her mother.’ He stopped, gulped. ‘Then they rape Maria. (...) She say nothing. But the whole village know.’”(254). There is no trauma counseling for the Bulohs, there isn't even a normal social environment which might make the pains of the past
more bearable. There is only the desolation of the Butlers Gorge
workcamp and its inhabitants of Eastern European migrants, escapees
from the maelstrom of 1939–1945, all with atrocity stories of their own to
tell. One night in the winter of 1954, Maria Buloh walks out of the camp
into a blistering storm; her frozen body is found hanging from a blood gum
a few days later. Flanagan withholds this revelation from the reader until
the end of the novel.

Both novel and film are structured on three separate but interlaced
time levels. Firstly there is 1954, when the demons of the war drove Maria
over the brink. Her disappearance will forever leave the nagging question
how could she leave her baby daughter like this? in Sonja’s troubled mind. We
then witness Sonja’s childhood, which is first spent with a series of paid,
unloving foster parents. After one unhappy foster experience too many
(one that takes her frighteningly close to sexual abuse) she is taken
“home” by Bojan, her “artie”, and her teenage years are spent with an
increasingly abusive father whose despair drives him to the bottle. Aged
only sixteen, Sonja escapes in the same direction as her parents did, to the
northeast, Australia’s mainland, and to uncertain hopes invested in an
alien culture. The main story takes place in 1989/90, when Sonja,
penniless, partnerless and pregnant, makes her first return visit to
Tasmania. She stays, less because of a new-found love for her still alcoholic
father, but because of the kindness and unstinting support of Bojan’s
fellow immigrants Jiri and Helvi, who feel they owe it to Maria’s memory.
Flanagan manages to dredge a spark of hope from the bitter wreckage of
his narrative landscape when in the final scene Bojan, remembering his
previous carpentry skills, brings a handmade cradle and baby chair to his
daughter’s doorstep.

There are basically two ways to read this bitter narrative. The first
reading is that of Lucy Frost, who asks “what happened to people who
arrived in the Tasmanian forest with memories saturated in blood?” The
perspective is both on what happened to them before they arrived (her
metaphor of “memories saturated with blood” encourages an enquiry into
the European context) as well as what the Tasmanian half of their story
was like. Both queries connote a gaze on the immigrant. The other reading
examines the cultural context into which these immigrants were thrown,
and how it shaped, in pars pro toto fashion, an important chapter of
Tasmanian cultural history.

Let me begin with the historical context. Hitler invaded Yugoslavia in
April 1941. The treatment of the civilian population during the
subsequent years of occupation (the last military units were withdrawn as
late as in March 1945) was, for ideological reasons, much harsher than in France, Denmark or the Netherlands: the Slavs were considered non-Aryan and thus subhuman. As a result, irregular military units began to resist the Nazi occupation in the winter of 1941–42. Soon the resistance was so entrenched that the Wehrmacht was forced to withdraw badly needed divisions from other theatres of war in order to cope. Ruthless repression was supposed to stop the resistance. Some of the worst massacres that the Wehrmacht and the SS perpetrated in the entire war happened in Yugoslavia. For example, when in October 1941 a German military convoy was attacked near the central Yugoslav city of Kragujevac and seventy German soldiers were killed or injured, the Wehrmacht and SS rounded up all the men of Kragujevac over the age of sixteen and executed them. The official death list comprises 2324 names.

Yugoslav historians later put the figure at 7000.

But that is only half of the story. Yugoslavia (more particularly Croatia and Slovenia) was not solidly against the Germans, there was collaboration with the Nazis resulting in something akin to civil war. In Slovenia, the collaborators were called the “Domobranci”, recruiting themselves primarily from Catholics who found Tito’s communism unacceptable. In the story, it is a Catholic priest who triggers the tragic cycle of events: because of his spying, Maria’s father is captured and killed before his family’s eyes. Maria is then raped. Because of that rape, she can no longer feel at home in her Slovenian village. She and Bojan must escape, ending up in Tasmania. But the ghosts of the past follow her into exile and bring about her suicide. Because of the suicide, Bojan becomes an alcoholic, abusive of Sonja, and their lives are permanently damaged.

In the early 1950s Tasmania started an immensely ambitious hydroelectric power scheme. The great (and as it turned out, totally unrealistic) hope at the time was that cheap electricity would attract industrial investors, and that Tasmania would turn into a kind of industrialised antipodean English Midlands. This was also the time of the post-war policy of populate or perish, when the Ministry of Immigration actively sought European immigration to meet its target of 150,000 immigrants each year. As there were still hundreds of thousands of displaced persons languishing in camps all over Europe, that target was met by admitting large numbers of Mediterranean, Slav and Baltic Europeans, many of them unskilled labourers, to Australia. Australia’s population, which at that time was still solidly of British descent, was suspicious and resentful of the influx of the “wogs”, as they would be called as soon as they set foot on the continent. These immigrants were placed in workcamps like the one
described in the novel. Flanagan, who “grew up in a remote mining town on the West coast of Tasmania” (personal communication), recalls the presence of Eastern European work crews and their “extraordinary stories” in his youth. His novel is critical of the Tasmanian immigration policies of the day, which saw a strict class division in the everyday life of the immigrants: engineers and foremen were British, they had their own amenities, their own recreation grounds and superior housing. The workers had standardised two-room huts and a large, crude pub. Even ten years after, when Bojan has moved on from the Butlers Gorge camp to Tullah on the western Tasmanian coast, he cannot find – or afford – something worthy of the name “home”: “You and I have no home, Sonja. Don’t you understand? (...) We have a wog flat, my Sonja. A wog flat” (232). Earlier, Bojan finds out that the low-standard housing which the government had built in response to the needs of the immigration community went under that popular term. And no “real” Tasmanian would live in them:

“Doma” he said. You know what doma means, Sonja? It means home. In Slovenian doma means home. You know what Australians call these places, Sonja? Wog flats, that’s what they call them. That means they are not for the Australian people. (146)

In recent years, one of the public Australian discourses has been on what the economic contribution of the mostly unpaid Aboriginal stockmen and domestic servants in the settling of the West and North has been. Flanagan asks a similar question: what would the historiography of post-war Australia be like without the contribution of low-paid immigrant labour? One of the sideplots of his narrative has Sonja working as an assistant in a television archive. She is helping to research footage of industrial work of the 1950s. Quite by chance she stumbles across a film showing an image of her own father as he breaks large boulders with a sledgehammer. As a moviegoer, I associate that scene with two well-known films, *Spartacus* (1960) starring Kirk Douglas, and *Rambo II* (1985) starring Sylvester Stallone. In both films the hero is a convict, and Bojan too is a kind of prisoner in Tasmania, that former convict colony. Earlier in the narrative the same scene is told from two more perspectives. The first is that of the figural narrator who explains why Bojan’s Stachanovite labour is nothing more than despair about Maria’s suicide. Bojan, who is offered two weeks of compassionate leave after his wife’s death, rejects the offer, clinging to his work routine in order to stay sane. The second perspective is Earl’s, a cameraman who has been commissioned to record Tasmania’s
“heroic” hydroelectric projects. He notices a “crazy reffo” swinging his sledgehammer. Later in the Sydney studio Earl’s boss is very happy with the results:

The man lifted and dropped the hammer with such ferocity that it impressed even the men in the dark editing room. (...) “Look at that bugger go, Earl” said Earl’s boss. “You’d wonder what would drive a man to work like such a demon.”

And they watched Bojan’s hammer swing.

Cut to a steel frame being lowered down the inside of the dam. (...) A man waiting at the bottom waiting for the debris snare. Earl suddenly froze the frame, rewound it and played it again.

“Look,” said Earl, it’s the same crazy reffo. “Looks,” said Earl, “as if he’s being imprisoned behind them bars forever.”(69)

Earl’s opinion has the effect of dramatic irony: Bojan is indeed “imprisoned forever” by circumstances beyond his control, but Earl is as indifferent to the “reffos” as the rest of Tasmanian society. His boss, a “one time party man” (67), is only too happy to instrumentalise the footage for his own ends. He regards Bojan’s “heroic” work as indicative of the heroism of the working class.

When Sonja watches the same footage thirty-five years later, another insensitive comment occurs and this time the insult really hits home. Preston, the union man, appears in the same reel, narrating the “unspeakably sad” story of a worker’s wife whom he saw walk away into the night during a snowstorm; he remembers her “scarlet coat and beneath it a dress edged in lace” (245). Sonja immediately recognises the story and would like to hear more; she also hears her workmate, a “short red-haired woman” say, “we’ll cut that (...) pointless, unnecessary detail”. The reel is stopped and a mortally offended Sonja runs out of the building, in a kind of “postfiguration” of her mother’s flight, never to return to her job. And so we get three mainstream Australian perspectives on Bojan and Maria at the Butlers Gorge camp, all of them heartbreakingly uncaring.

Bojan’s friend Jiri has a very similar immigrant story:

On arriving in Australia as a young man Jiri was directed by the authorities to push trolleys of waste at the Hobart zinc works, a sprawling hideous establishment that looked as if it had been transported from another century. In its vast cavernous wastelands he worked a year with Germans and Poles, with Ukrainians and Lithuanians and Byelorussians, with Bulgars and Magyars and fellow-Czechs. (116)
The remarkable aspect of this litany of ethnicities is that for Jiri, try as he might to integrate himself into Australian society, there are no Anglo-Australian fellow-workers and consequently there is no access to mainstream Australian society. Later he teams up with a Polish professor of history from the University of Cracow, who, his intellectual potential thwarted, is misled to think that developing his capacity for physical labour will ingratiate him with the management and win him friends. Like Orwell’s workhorse Boxer in *Animal Farm*, the professor turns into a Stachanovite with his motto of “I must work harder”; like Boxer he receives no thanks at all for his intentions and perishes ignominiously. If we ask ourselves why characters like Jiri and Bojan fail to leave the ghosts of the past behind them, fail to march into a glorious Australian future, of which the Australian commissar conducting the naturalisation ceremony at the camp blathers, then we need only look at the company that immigrants are forced to keep:

Bojan’s friendships now, such as they were, were with strangers who without being told, knew the horror of each other’s story, who demanded no explanations, and gave no justification for their own behaviour. (...) There were horrors Bojan kept within him without even the story to enclose them ...(109)

**The land that did not welcome**

The Whitlam years officially ended the era of “assimilation”, first replacing the otiose term with the less offensive “integration”, then ushering in an official policy of multiculturalism. However, mainstream Australia was reluctant to go along with it. There was a backlash to this top-down trend in the 1980s when “I love Australia” appeared on a million bumper stickers. National icons such as the koala or the kangaroo were used as emblems on boutique fashion. National heroes (Ned Kelly, Burke and Wills) were “re-discovered” in lifestyle magazines. The film version of Banjo Paterson’s national epic *The Man from Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982) became, in terms of box office success, the second most successful Australian film. (The Australian top earner of all time, *Crocodile Dundee*, was launched only a few years later, in 1986. It too, tells a familiar macho story.
As an aside I might add that all macho stories are nationalistic.

In the opening section of his novel Flanagan confronts the issue head-on when his “figural” narrator allows us a glimpse into Sonja’s mind as she sets foot on Tasmanian soil for the first time in twenty-two years: “That land did not welcome her or care for her, any more than it had welcomed or cared for her parents who had come to live here so long before” (16). What strikes us about Flanagan’s story is that there are hardly “Anglo-Celtic” characters in it, and those who do appear (two prostitutes, a local politician holding forth at a naturalisation ceremony) don’t offer any assistance to Bojan and the other “crazy reffos”. And so, the new arrivals have to keep each other company. Sonja rents her cottage from “Ahmet”, who is Albanian. Kolo Amado, the father of her child (she breaks off the relationship) is described as half Timorese, half Albanian (102). Jiri is technically Czech, but turns out to be a Sudetendeutscher expelled by the Benes-decrees. Bojan’s fellow drinkers are Italians, Poles, Macedonians, Finns, Germans, Romas, Hungarians – “reffos” all. There is just one exception and that is a neighbouring Irish family, the Heaneys. (Ah yes the Irish, they too are wogs of a sort, as any Australian sociologist will tell you.) Resolutely working-class, rough on the outside but mild-mannered on the inside, Mrs Heaney sends her daughter Moira over to the Buloh shack with a message for Sonja: “Mum says we should be playing with you (…) cos otherwise you might think we were snubbin’ you cos you’re a wog, like” (102). The encounter is wonderfully comical and considered bearably offensive by the lonesome Sonja. Indeed, Sonja’s few moments of happiness are provided by the rumbunctious Heaney family, who offer her glimpses of a normal family life. A small accident in the Heaney home occurs (a bed collapses under the weight of six children jumping on it) and Mrs Heaney does not scream and yell but kindly asks Sonja “the main thing is – are you alright?” Sonja’s reaction verges on the hysterical:

Sonja smiled. She felt she was almost a real person [my emphasis]. She felt her face stretch so much with smiling she worried that it might grow too tired to keep going. She felt she was somebody else. Different. And that it was possible to be somebody else and still be you. And she started to giggle at how funny it was, how life could be so funny and so warm, and she laughed and she brayed and cackled and giggled and no matter how hard she tried, she could not stop laughing. (161–2)

This is powerful writing. We are glad for Sonja and enjoy her momentary relief from a life of emotional deprivation, but then we begin
to worry about her mental health. Her giggling fit is no harmless bout of laughter, it is a danger signal that her mind is stretched to breaking point. And when Flanagan writes about the possibility to be somebody else and yet herself, we read "schizophrenia".

Flanagan makes Tasmania’s environment as inhospitable as he can. The Butlers Gorge construction camp (strangely enough, this as well as other camps are totally gone now with not even a commemorative plaque telling the visitor of what teeming places they once were) is a joyless place organised on strict class lines. The huge dam holding back the waters often appears as a black, demonic character. Water is a second leitmotif of the narrative. It appears as "not only the source of cheap electrical power, but also rain, drizzle, fog, snow. It pervades the book’s imagery." 12 Tullah on the west coast of Tasmania appears as a rain-sodden place, a kind of nineteenth-century penal colony for immigrants trapped in joyless jobs. The rain “pummeling the tin roof of the bereft Tullah single men’s quarters” is personified into a “bar-room brawler who won’t give up laying into his opponent even after the poor bastard has been reduced into a pulpy quivering mass” (247). Butlers Gorge is characterised by snow and ice, Hobart by fog and drizzle, and Bojan’s drive from Tullah to Hobart takes place in such torrential rain that — it is not quite certain whether in reality or only in his imagination — one of the dams bursts, washing away all of the uninhabitated valley beneath — a symbolic reference to the unsteady ground in which “wogs” try to peg their existence.

A central episode (one that was curiously omitted from the film version) occurs when Sonja turns sixteen and wants to have a birthday party like all her schoolmates. Plans for the party are made with sandwiches, cakes and soft-drinks, and a record player is organised from somewhere. Even Bojan is helpful for a change, decorating the front room with streamers. Then, the long-awaited evening arrives: seven o’clock, eight, eight-thirty. Nobody comes. Everyone who was invited turns her down because they didn’t want to go to a wog house. Also, a nasty rumour has been going around: this wog sleeps in the same bed as his daughter. A typical “wog habit”, child abuse. The reader knows that it is neither a “wog habit” nor had Bojan any sexual motives when he shared his bed with his ten-year old daughter: the reason was poverty. There was only one bed in the flat they rented. We may suspect this is Flanagan’s swipe at political correctness. But more to the point, Flanagan argues there is something like a collective guilt in Tasmania for not welcoming the European “reffos”. Shortly after the birthday party disaster, Sonja packs her bags and flees for a second time, to Sydney. The implication is clear and political:
she could have stood her dad's drunkenness, but the rejection by her schoolmates breaks her will to endure. Indeed, Sonja's existence can be summed up in that one word, flight. The realization comes to her the first time during the car journey that leads her away from the Michniks when she knows only "that they were in flight and that it was through the night and that was enough" (90). Flight from Slovenia, from the terrible events at Butlers Gorge, from Mrs Michnik's stifling Catholicism, from the terror of Mr Piccotti, her foster father, from her father's drunkenness, from the snootiness of the Tasmanian mainstream. Because she is not a whole person, she also flees from Kolo Amado's inept advances to establish normalcy, repeating her father's earlier flight from Jean. In the end, she turns her back on Sydney's anonymity. But, as Flanagan muses, "the past will always claim [her] back like a swamp does withering hedges" (149).

Other migrant novels
How do Slovene immigrants with a literary bent describe their experience? Do they reveal "an eternity of suffering" (65) in their autobiographies? Igor Maver has looked at two such texts, by Ivan Kobal (Men Who Built the Snowy: Men Without Women, 1982) and Janko Majnik (The Diary of the Submariner, 1996), as well as a kind of historical collage by Victora Zabukovec (The Second Landing, 1993). It may come as a surprise to find that all three writers foreground their joyful assimilation into Australian society. The switch to official multiculturalism has totally eluded them. In all three texts the message is: it was a hard slog, but we made it. Several Slovene characters in Victora Zabukovec's book visit "the lands of their ancestors" but then they "are glad to be going home to Australia" - note the distinction between Europe and Australia. Kobal's autobiography is particularly interesting in this context, because like Bojan Buloh, Kobal worked on various hydro-electric projects. The way he constructs his self and that of his workmates owes much to the traditional heroic tropes of Australia's grand narrative. But these are sub-literary tales of the Horatio Alger "success story" type. As regards their genesis, they are little more than quasi-industrial products of a dominant culture which has decreed that the Australian immigrant experience was always positive. It took someone with the cultural self-assurance (and the literary gift) of Richard Flanagan to write against the grand narrative. This connects him to
Elizabeth Jolley, herself an immigrant of English/Austrian descent who has created a number of memorable immigrant characters and their painful stories of transculturalisation. None is more memorable that that of the Heimbach family in her superb novel *Milk and Honey* (1984).

**Exile and trauma**

We know that trauma victims regularly fail to communicate the essence of their experience to others. Real trauma is “unknowable”; all that we understand is there is an ocean of pain. The opening sentence of the novel actually is “All that you will come to understand but can never know”. Trauma victims often respond to their condition by senseless acts of violence, self-lacerations, or by emotional outbursts. All these acts isolate them even more, making their behaviour even more incomprehensible. Flanagan hints at this when he starts on the events after Maria’s suicide:

> It should all be told as slowly and carefully as possible, for such a thing demands explanation and understanding, but no way of telling does it any justice. Days and weeks fled by with the speed of a few seconds, and a few seconds stretched into an eternity of suffering. (...) and none of it can be understood or explained. (65)

“An eternity of suffering” may sound exaggerated, but that is how many emigrants (or more properly, exiles) have described their lives. It is also the scientific description of post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, extensive research on traumatised holocaust victims as well as US Vietnam War soldiers has revealed that trauma can be passed on to the next generation. When we first encounter Sonja, she is a “frightened child with eyes always cast sideways in expectation of the unexpected blow” (16). Sonja feels “forever punished” (175), compares herself to a “screaming insect” (234), and feels that parts of her are dead (242). In Sydney, she is part of “some huge fraternity of the fallen” (244). She is unable to give love or to receive it and the result is a series of soulless sexual encounters: “Her flesh she would feel moving in response to their thrusts (...) But within her head nothing moved. Within her soul nothing trembled”(59). The pain of having lost a country which might have been hers, might have held out the offer of what in German is called *Heimat*, the pain of having
lost Slovenia and not gained Australia is briefly hinted at when she finds a cut-out magazine picture of Dubrovnik, which prompts her to ask “artie” whether he has been there, what the old continent was like (221). And Bojan can only respond by narrating what seems a parable involving Gadarene swine rushing to their fiery deaths, a story which for someone like him, who has seen “a world dissolved in blood” (186) encapsulates the idea of Europe. One must also add the pain of not having grandparents or aunts and uncles. Family ties such as these are biographically determinant. Their absence leaves an unfillable void in Sonja’s life, contributing to her post-traumatic stress.

But we must not discount Bojan’s pain either. In one respect he is worse off than his daughter—he has lost his old language and unlike Sonja, has not mastered the new: “You find a language. But I lose mine. And I never had enough words to tell people what I think. What I feel. Never enough words for a good job” (39). It helps explain the cruelty of not writing to Sonja during her twenty-two years of separation: “My English, good for work, good for pub, not so good on paper”. To his Italian friend he explains he has never written a letter in his life but that is a lie: when Sonja was ten, he wrote home to his own mother in Slovenia, in his native language of course, asking for a package of dried camomile blossoms (in Slovene, kamilica) with which he cures Sonja’s neurodermitis. It is one of his rare triumphs, and significantly that triumph emanates from the lost old world. The incident also shows he is not a naturally bad father but a victim of cultural circumstance.

At this point one should point out a significant change that has occurred in Australia, the change from an “assimilationist” to a “multiculturalist” perspective. The latter encourages immigrants to retain their culture and their language, thereby putting a value on them. An assimilationist policy declares them worthless and encourages the immigrant to become “Australian”. It was oh-so-easy for those who were already there. However, there are confusing, even contradictory signs for the “new Australian”. The politician hosting the naturalization ceremony on that 1954 day is framed by an “Australian red ensign and a Union Jack” and speaks of “the great gift of English civilization, the English language [my emphasis], and [the] belief in justice and fair play” (42, 44). Mirko Jurak has rightly asked whether “fair play” characterised colonial Australia, when the land was taken away from its original owners. And to whom do the “new Australians” swear their oath of allegiance? The distant Queen of England, who means nothing to them.15

In an attempt to live up to assimilationist ideas, Bojan forbids his
daughter to speak Slovene with him. She is puzzled, but Bojan insists that to “learn English proper” (sic) is the only road to success in that unwelcoming land. “English is no good for jokes” Sonja protests. “English is good for money” retorts Bojan (214). He is right, in theory at least. But when jokes are lost, an important essence of our conditio humana is lost, together with a cultural identity. Hence the grim, joke-less existence which envelops both their lives. One aspect of this existence is Bojan’s futile purchase of a whole set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, a purchase – on the instalment system – which he can ill afford and which plagues Sonja’s life. Bojan, expecting gratitude for the considerable financial outlay, (“now you learn the English good. Now you don’t end up like me”, makes her read the whole of the Encyclopaedia, which she attempts to do. But inevitably she gives in, admitting one more defeat.

In the end, Flanagan offers us hope. The novel’s resolution is tender, even old fashioned: Sonja is redeemed not by external circumstances, but through her love for the baby growing within her. As in George Eliot’s famous novel Silas Marner, the child re-integrates her, as well as Bojan, into society. Aptly, the baby girl is named Maria, after the grandmother she never knew, but also after Holy Maria, the redeemer. So we have a Victorian rather than a modernist ending, and the novel is none the worse for it. Admittedly, Sonja could not have switched direction without the nurturing and cherishing presence of Maria’s oldtime friend Helvi. This shining example of an immutably caring friendship symbolises the warmth of the multicultural immigrant community, contrasted against a lack of care in the “country which did not welcome her”. There is a second aspect in that immigrant community making the happy end more plausible. It is Bojan’s re-awakened worker’s pride when he turns to carpentry once again. He does not turn up empty-handed at Sonja’s door, begging for a reconciliation: very humbly he offers a hand-crafted, hand-painted cot, baby cradle, and a high chair. At the presentation of these gifts, “with a shock Sonja realised she was letting love in” (357). The carpentered items represent the kernel of doma, the Slovene word for “at home”. More is to come. In a wonderful act of atonement, Bojan in secret weekend shifts transforms the dilapidated “wog flat” that Sonja rents in the poor north end of Hobart into a proper doma, painted walls and all. And finally he moves into a nearby house and into the natural role of granddad that he has secretly craved. It is almost too good to believe, eliciting the criticism “saccharine” from Stephen Henighan.16

Finally, a word on Flanagan the stylist – for this is no ordinary novel of lost and re-found love. Because this started out as a film-script and was
then written simultaneously as a novel (Flanagan 1998) there is a blending of the two genres. The novel is rich in visual images because a film-script writer has to think in terms of what his product will look like on the screen. And the film dazzles us by lyrical passages of enveloping sadness, which come about through the novelist’s gift of creating new metaphors. The very ambience drips with sadness: Tullah, the town on the west coast, is “a fetid swamp in which water and men festered in a bleak valley’s sag, a rotting hammock slung between high blue mountains” (338). We find a similar imagery in the description of Bojan’s relationship to the English language, a language likened to an “insufferable swamp (...) through which he had made his long, awkward way in a rude raft constructed of a few straggly branches of phrases he had torn from a scrubby tree here and there” (182). Soulless suburban homes are “houses new and raw as a gutted roo, their bloody viscera carved out of the bush only an instant ago” (281). The young people in them should at least have themselves and their sexual desire, but in many cases “the mud of their youthful union had turned into stone of sharp and flinty angles” (267). Their faces show the insecurity of human driftwood. Jiri’s face, for example, is compared to “a battered bollard that appeared permanently startled” (113). These are conceits worthy of a John Donne. And Flanagan also knows to surprise us with comical images, such as when he compares the smoke-belching old FJ Holden to a “mobile bushfire” (338).

One of the great bonuses of winning a prestigious literary prize such as the Miles Franklin is that all previously published novels by the same author are given fresh attention. The Sound of One Hand Clapping, should likewise benefit in this way. The film was well received in Australia and praised at the Berlin Film Festival of 1999, but did not get the all-critical release in the USA. The film was shown on Slovenian TV, but the novel has curiously not yet been translated into Slovene. There seems to be a lack of publishers’ interest in Slovenia, perhaps because the story touches upon the war and post-war history of the region, which is very much a contested ground.

But here is an irony. This novel, savaged as it was by many critics, has been an enormous public success: Sales to date are in the region of 155,000 copies, which makes it one of the best selling Australian novels of all time.¹⁷ The novel was put on the Tasmanian school curriculum, one more reason why it continues to sell strongly six years after its publication. Clearly, the reading public has not gone along with some of the curmudgeonly views of the critics.
Notes


5 Turner, 34.


8 The ‘Prinz Eugen’ Waffen SS division, named after a famous eighteenth-century Austrian general who defeated the Turks in several Balkan battles, was recruited from ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) of the ‘Banat’ region in NE Yugoslavia in October 1942. Since the Serbs had discriminated against the Volksdeutsche in the period 1919–1941, the members of this SS unit were specifically used against communist resistance fighters and could be relied on to be merciless with the enemy. Georg Tessin, Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1945, Vol. 1, Osnabrück: Biblio-Verlag, 1979: 396.


11 Collaboration with the Nazis and the brutal murder of anyone suspected of collaboration at the war’s end became a non-subject after 1945. Tito’s country went into denial. Only after the split-up of Yugoslavia did a discourse of all past crimes start. Coincidentally, this is also the time when Sonja returns to Tasmania from Sydney. In 2001, Slovenia for the first time acknowledged that more than 10,000 persons were summarily executed by Tito’s henchmen in the
fall of 1945 and dumped into secret mass graves. Some were murdered for no other reason that they were priests, sextons or altar boys. Their bodies are only now being given proper burials.


14 Quoted in Maver, 79.


17 Personal communication by Nikki Christer, Picador Publisher, Pan Macmillan Australia.
MY EUROPE

Though in the Gardens I laugh at the statue of Rhodes making the Nazi salute with the wrong arm
and I ignore the trekboers, their hair alcohol-bleached, on the bench near the Mount Nelson
and I bow outside the Parliament envisioning the bloodstain where Tsafandas stabbed Verwoerd
and wave at the police who’ve cordoned off the Planetarium for the filmcrew who’re shooting an ad

This is home city, tseen! and I beckon my reflection in a shop window, welcome even myself,
I sit in a Congolese restaurant in Seapoint and peruse the menu handwritten on cardboard
and ignore the hawker’s watercolours that he’s on-selling from schoolkids in Crossroads
and the skoolie outside the stripclub who just escaped the fangs of a shaggy Alsatian

And I marvel at the executive with long black hair in Goue Aker, a perfect Javanese maiden,
and I climb Platteklip Gorge hearing the scrub and slap of stone against phantom laundry
and I sail out to Robben Island to see the penguins, the kramats and the prison
not ignorant of how in the first days van Riebeeck’s buckled shoes trampled our vygies – Why?

Because I have inherited nostalgia for this, my parents’ birthplace, my Europe, the mothercity.
Standing right over the conveyor belt with her hands in the beetroot juice, she suddenly remembers her dream. He is back with her again and she wonders why he's back now but doesn't ask. It is enough that he is glowing there, in the same factory, but slightly different like dreams are, with the cannery machines not so black, and not smelling so metallic like a train with its breaks on. All the other women look up from their conveyors, to peer from their red masks up at him. They all stare as he takes her hand, fixes his eyes on her forever and whispers, "Let's go home." And she knows the home he means is not the one with thick yellow oil around the stove and the neighbour's TV too loud in the commercial breaks. The home he means is warm and full of room for carpet that tickles your feet it's so soft; a beige microwave that sings sweetly when it has finished your chores; where untidiness has been exiled from every surface by some other labourer; and there's a washing machine that cleans all the stains from her uniforms, with a lemon freshness. No, the home he leads her to, with his strong arms as he lifts her over the warehouse doorway and the other women shield their eyes looking out at the dusk sun, is a house that has no uniforms. No edges where the fishing-line thread rubs and gives rashes as blackly-red as the tins of beets. Tins of beets. And she's back. No longer in the dream but standing at the conveyor watching her hands fling imperfect shaped beet slices into the conveyor moat as the tins come out of the chute. The machine that seals the lids with a jerky lash hisses steam. An engine sound rumbles around the high walls and ceiling. A row of three LEDs flash green and beep from the chute. The tins are in pairs like they are stepping out of a church. The conveyor still grunts in the kink that hasn't been fixed in the two years since a woman passed out and thudded onto it shoulder first. She had only been in the country a month. The kink didn't make a difference, the engineer said. He was right; she could only hear a drone most days, like the ringing in your ears when it is dead quiet. And the strange silence it
brought let her think of him. That dream was her favourite. She had it five years ago. It had improved over time.

"Damn! The damn elbow’s wearing through!" the rakish woman beside her shakes the crimson sleeve of her uniform.

"It will still last another few months," she says.

The loudspeaker begins to grind out its classical music. It is the one they play on Saturdays. The piece fills the few bits of silence left in the painted over windows, high above all the women. The shift is almost over.

"Y’think?" The thin woman says.

"Yeah, they always do for me." The thin woman nods slowly, without turning her head or stopping her hands fishing into the tins of beets. The woman hasn’t asked about her new dress visible just underneath the uniform. If she asks about it she can tell her how she got it on special, or how she changed the price tag. She wants the red bricks of the walls to fly open and pound the rakish woman in the head, make her mouth hang open and be sorry for not asking. If he were here again the rakish woman’s red mouth would hang open, its lips open up with desire for him.

"You think I could patch the elbows?"

"Why not. I’ve done it before."

"Yeah?" Immediately she wishes she hadn’t let the rakish woman know that. She thinks she’s so much better now with her uniform with no patches and her dirty elbows. When the bell screeches for the end of the shift she can take off her uniform and have all the other women crowd to see how her new dress looks against her body. It is white and clean, crisp but soft too. It hangs loosely on her but isn’t fat. She wants the machines to stop now, push their weight onto this rakish woman who would fall away in brittle pieces, and there would be nobody left to care about her, no son or husband. Everything would be so red and brilliant but nobody would even notice because of the beetroot colour.

"Yeah, maybe I will patch the elbows."

"Why not. It wouldn’t be so bad. I wouldn’t do it myself anymore though."

"Why?"

"Because I’d get a new one. I like to look my best."

"Yeah, me too. My husband wouldn’t like it either."

"Oh ... does he see you in your uniform?"

"Only if he picks me up from here."

"Oh ..."

"Look ..." The rakish woman stops and strips off her gloves. She reaches into her pocket for something. The huge fan overhead makes the
light flicker on her hands, grey and dry like tissue. She holds out a photo and is grinning under her mask. The photo shows a man filling the centre of the photo. There is a house in the background, with a little garden and a station-wagon. The man is smiling and has kind eyes. His legs show through slacks and are slender, feeble. His slight arms are folded and closed up like the blades of a camera like he is shivering. She looks away.

“He looks nice.”

“Yeah, doesn’t he? He gave me a diamond ring for our wedding and we stayed in a B&B for our honeymoon.”

“Oh ...”

“I told him, we can’t afford that, and he laughed at me like a little boy. He is so sweet. You’d like him, everybody seems to. When we were at the supermarket the other day the girl at the checkout just started a conversation with him. I didn’t mind, I know that people like him ...”

“Sugar!”

“What happened?

She holds out her gloved hand, which has a fine cut and dripping with a different kind of red. The rakish woman stops to move in closer.

“I’m OK.”

“You should see the nurse.”

“I said I’m OK.” She puts her hand away and resumes packing the tins with the other hand.

The machines stutter and cackle in her ears. She tries to ignore them and glances at the rakish woman who is lost in the beetroot tins. She can only see the thin woman’s eyes behind the mask. They are brown like hers, but with crows feet at the edges. She never wants to become like that. She thinks of some song and how she wants to be forever young. Forever young – and she slips into another of her daydreams.
i.m. Father John Hawes
(Father Hawes arrived in Geraldton in 1913, in charge of the largest diocese in the world, though with few parishioners. He was an acclaimed architect who designed many churches. He returned to Cat Island in the Caribbean in his later years, dying a hermit.)

1

Emptiness is only space
waiting to be filled
and as a man of God and architect
he knew one started with stone.

So when he looked into a continent
from its western edge,
he imagined churches
carved from white stone
hearing them filled with voices.

2

You need to empty yourself
before you can know God,
a series of unlearnings,
the clearing away of debris

An excavation
those first churchmen knew,
building great cathedrals full of space
rising to high pitched roofs
where people could spool out
strings of self while still seated

In the tiny town of Mullewa
he built Our Lady of Mount Carmel
with his own hands
mixing up the mortar
carrying each stone up ramps
piling stone
  on stone
smoothing away the edges
till they fitted side by side
as if work was a sacred act

It is the solitude of stone
its cold warmth
the stillness within

that encourage
  those willing to find belief
to feel that first otherness
the numinous presence
that sculpts angels’ wings
from shapeless stone

I sometimes think that the stones
  are a part of me
each stone, each piece, like a hieroglyph
  as if the Rosetta Stone had been found again
and each stone
  as it is placed onto stone
builds another piece of me
giving me the language to read myself.
He liked that stones

came from earth
pressed together for a million years
so that parts once separate & fragile
were now indistinguishable

there was an equality in stone
a socialism in their origins
that did not need fossil to find narrative
the fable was always within

7

'There were things he would always love:
a cup of tea at first light
'a dog that was always at his feet
riding a winner at a country racetrack

and then the letting go:
the small isle in the caribbean
where a cave in the side of hill
waited his solitude
for him to imagine himself into
silence stone dust
INSIDE AUSTRALIA

We are going to Menzies to view the sculptures on the salt lake. It will be a long drive. About 800 km. We plan to get there in two days, spend a day there and then two days to get home. We are three. A couple and a wheaten-haired baby. We have an olive green Kombi, a 1976 two litre.

I, the mother, sit in the back seat next to the baby. This way I can calm him when he whinges, give him an arrowroot biscuit, his yellow stacking cup, his shiny paper. The father, Luka, drives. In the rear view mirror we can communicate with our eyes. It is hard to talk above the noise of the Volkswagen, with the sound of the road and the breeze coming through the open windows.

We travel through the wheat belt. It is after Easter and the farmers are preparing the soil for seeding. Machinery (tractors towing things I don't know the names of) makes its way over paddocks in a cloud of dust. Farmers set strips of wheat stubble alight. The largest trees are on the road reserves. They have flat topped canopies. Orange sap oozes from their trunks as if they have been wounded. Dams are nearly empty – puddles of mud.

We spend the first night on the property of an old school friend. I last saw her at the twenty year reunion a couple of years ago. Before that I hadn't seen her since Uni days. We never communicate, but when Luka and I decided to drive to Menzies, she crossed my mind. I remembered how friendly she had been at the reunion and how I had promised, like I had at school, that if I ever went out east, outback, I would look her up. I rang her a week before the trip and asked her if we could spend the night. She was as friendly as ever.

Jessie comes out to greet us when she hears us roll up. She is barefoot and wearing khaki Hard Yakka shorts. Even though her clothes are practical I notice the smoothness of her calves, the way her toenails look manicured and think how I have only had my legs waxed once in the year since the baby was born. I wonder if people look at me and think “she’s let
herself go”. We embrace like sisters. She introduces her three children, the oldest being twelve and the youngest six. They have closely shaven hair and I think of head lice. She holds my baby with confidence and we follow her inside.

The house is a 1930’s farmhouse that belonged to her grandparents. The verandahs have been closed in and the kitchen and dining room is in the southern corner. She says the house is a bit of a rabbit warren. We stand around in the kitchen, leaning back on the cupboards, while the baby plays on the floor and Jessie makes tea. Her children mix the milk to feed the baby lambs. A pink and grey galah screeches from its cage.

We eat dinner late when Jessie’s husband comes in from working the paddocks and has “dived through” the shower. She has made a dish with fish pulled from the deep freezer. We are so far from the ocean. I eat with the baby on my lap and feed him from my plate. He is beyond tired. He rubs his face into my shoulder. The twelve year old asks if we earn good money as vets. He says he would like to be a tennis player. He thinks he will be one till twenty-five and then he’ll retire and do something else. Maybe be a vet then. We all think it sounds like a fine life.

Jessie leads us over to the unoccupied workers’ house. We have a bundle of her sheets. The torch lights the way. It is blacker than black outside. At home the orange light from a busy port masks the night sky. Here the sky is strewn with the twinkling of stars.

Luka sets the baby’s cot up in the room adjacent to where we will sleep and puts the baby down. He covers the cot with a mosquito net. We creep around, making our bed. Wooden boards creak loudly despite our gentle attempts. Huge numbers of mosquitoes hang out in the toilet, attracted to the light. Moths too. We extinguish all lights and move about in the dark. We lie on the bed, its mattress old and propped up in places by spare bits of foam and wadding.

I lie there anxious. Moths, or some other flying insect keep pelting me. I pull the sheet up over my face. I smell the Rid I have smeared about my neck and arms. Luka is asleep. He can sleep anywhere. The baby too. I lie there.

We wake before dawn to the cry of the baby. Luka brings him into bed and I breast feed. He reeks of soiled nappy. We watch the light slowly infuse the house. Through the fly wire we see the reds and oranges of the sunrise. Skinny eucalyptuses surround the house. White parrots settle in the trees and seem to bounce on the branches. Luka says it’s like waking up in a Pro Hart painting.

Back at the main house we eat toast. Jessie’s husband has been gone
since three. She will take him out a lunch box soon. The kids are still asleep except for the youngest. After breakfast we follow Jessie out to see the cow. We have agreed to look at her even though we know nothing about cows. We tell her we haven’t touched one since Uni days. We are small animal vets – you know Chihuahuas and Burmese pussy cats.

She shoos the cow into the yard. A trail of foetal membranes hangs from her rear. They’re black and sandy. We agree it must be placenta as opposed to a prolapsed uterus. Surely it is too ragged to be a uterus. Jessie has tied an empty plastic container to the membranes with rope in an attempt to weigh it down and help the cow expel it. It dangles from the lining like a can from the bumper of a car. “Just married”. Strangely, or rather as is the nature of a cow, she seems unimpaired by the muck she trails. Her eyes are bright. “Give it a couple of days to see if it won’t budge on its own” has been the advice of the local vet and who are we to disagree.

Two sheep dogs strain at the ends of their chains as we pass back to the house. They whine for attention. The ground is raked flat in a circle around their stakes from the sweep of their chains. As they suck in air their ribs are visible and I think how skinny the dogs are compared to their city counterparts. We pass discarded cars and even a Kombi, vintage 1962. Split windscreen. Two side opening doors. Jessie’s husband even fashioned a cut baking tray to funnel air into the air vents. They travelled across Australia in her before they had kids.

Before we leave I show Jessie how to trim the galah’s wing, give them advice on the bird’s perches, its bung foot. Luka checks the Kombi’s oil and we fill our water containers. They give us directions back to the highway. Onwards to Kalgoorlie.

For much of the journey the baby sleeps. Luka is in his own world, driving. I am in mine. I watch the scenery and muse about it. In my head I describe it. I wonder if I could grow these eucalypts back in Fremantle in the sandy soil around my house. Do they need the hard orange they spring from? Every now and then Luka grabs my attention to point out a derelict house or an eagle pulling at a carcass by the side of the road.

I look over at the baby sleeping. I notice his feet, the wideness of them, the way how he looks as if, at a quick glance, he has six toes instead of five, and you find yourself counting them to be sure. I admire his eyelashes, the soft gentle curve of them, like a dark fringe on his milky skin.

We pull off the side of the road and switch off the Kombi. The sound of it still rings in our ears. Out here there is no sound. No breeze. As the metal settles and cools there is the odd squeak. For lunch we eat the Spanish tortilla from the day before. We have wrapped it in foil to keep it
fresh. We smell it first. Take the first bite tentatively. I don’t give any to the baby, just in case. Instead he has more canned fruit.

By the road is a salt lake. As we approach I think I see flamingoes on its surface, but closer now I see it’s an illusion. Dead trees rise out of it. Its surface has a pink hue. Salt is encrusted around the trunks of the perished trees and the fence posts that span it ... I think of what Jessie said about the water table being twice as salty as the sea. She said it was only a couple of metres below the surface. Here it has risen up. I can even smell the salt in the air, taste it.

From Southern Cross to Coolgardie the road is lined with bush. It is grey and mostly made up of scrub. Every now and then trees appear. They are skinny and a bit stunted, adapted to a life with little rain. The farms have disappeared from view. The road is endless, monotonous, stretching out in front over rise after rise, slowly undulating. I think of a bed being made – the sheet held between two outstretched arms as it is flicked over the mattress. It floats over the bed, buoyed by the air beneath it, and falls as landscape, a gentle terrain of hills and valleys.

I am dulled by the constancy of the road vibrating below, hypnotized by the wiggle of the white line, transfixed by my imaginings of bed sheets. Other cars pass us, semi trailers too. Coming the other way is a semi named INSANE. The van shudders and I see the leaves on the roadside trees shake as if blown by a heavy gust of wind. Beside us, on the right, the pipe line carries water from Perth to Kalgoorlie, a bridesmaid to the road. I think of the water inside – does it gush along or does it travel slowly? Are we competing – the Kombi and the water?

We drive on. The kilometres tick over. Luka keeps an eye on the oil temperature gauge and slows for a while. More little piggy. Petrol. Hamburger. The baby has a corner of bread, a chip presucked by his mother of excess salt.

We won’t make it to Menzies by sunset so pull off the road to a mine called Siberia. We see a dirt track and follow it for fifty metres. We set up our bed as mosquitoes invade the van. We can’t even be bothered to cook. We spray inside and wait a few minutes before climbing in. I breastfeed the baby and the three of us lie down. The baby doesn’t know what we are all doing in this cramped space. He isn’t used to sleeping with us anymore since we have moved him to his own cot in his own room. He must think this is some kind of special treat. He scrambles around on top of us and I have to bring him back to my side and turn him over and lay him down and tell him to sleep. I pat and coo and shh and hold and turn. Eventually he sleeps. We sleep too. It is hard and not that comfortable. It is not a big
We feel as if we have been asleep for ages when we wake. Luka asks me the time and with the torch I check my watch. 8.30 pm. We laugh as silently as we can. We can't stop.

We are awake before dawn. Feed the baby. Tea in the desert as the sun starts to colour the sky. Trains carrying ore snake past.

At Menzies we stop at the roadhouse to use the facilities. Key required for the Ladies. Key attached to two feet of plastic pipe. Here we have breakfast. Two eggs and extra crispy bacon. Toast for the baby. Tea and coffee. Help yourself from the table in the corner. The roadhouse is the centre of Menzies' activity at this time of day. People wait for service. Aborigines buying supplies. Truckies wanting breakfast. The owner's granddaughter takes an interest in our baby. Calls him the Bubba. Her name is Tiffany. She has a Barbie Umbrella that she puts up outside. She eats oranges cut up into wedges. “Can the Bubba have a lolly?”

After breakfast we walk the main street. The hotel is closed but it looks like it could be good. It has a garden with green lawn and a big shady tree. Across the road three Aborigines wait for a lift into Kalgoorlie.

We take another dirt road to Lake Ballard and the site of the Antony Gormley installation. Other cars are there. Silver. Windscreens reflect the sun. People are out on the lake traipsing. Near its edge is a mound perhaps a hundred metres high from which you can view the lake. People ant their way up to its apex and stand atop of it. From this vantage point the sculptures appear connected by the footprints in the muddy salt lake's surface.

Out of the one hundred and thirty inhabitants of Menzies the artist has selected fifty one. He has taken their image digitally and then manipulated it. He has reduced their mass to one third but kept their height the same so that the final shape is like a stretched out, skinny alien. The result, he says is the “Insider”. The sculptures are made of an alloy of elements like molybdenum, vanadium and titanium. They are rusty and corroded like they are in the process of disintegration, of being whittled away by the natural forces out on the lake. I touch them and they move a little – they are not rock – they have been placed here.

I move from one to the other. The going is tough. My feet wedge themselves in the sticky surface and mud coats the soles of my sneakers. Then it becomes slippery and I have to take small, careful steps. I think of my mother, the way she shuffles along. The surface is new to me and I feel a bit like a novice on an ice rink. The Insiders are connected by the footprints; they face one another but are too far to communicate, to be
really close. They are stretched out over the lake for miles and some are too far away to visit. In the distance some look like fence posts, perhaps they are.

The connecting footprints break through the white surface, exposing the ochre beneath, criss-crossing the lake from figure to figure, like the tracks made by sheep on their way to water. As I walk between them I fantasise briefly that I am on the moon, or perhaps some other planet. Mud reddens the rim of my jeans and obscures the white rubber of my sneakers.

The flies are bad. Really bad. Think 1950s documentaries of “native Australians” in the outback where flies bother the corners of people’s mouths and eyes, sticking there.

A Perth couple gets out of their sedan; both dressed in blistering white and walk out towards the first sculpture. It is perhaps one hundred metres. Their hands work furiously in the air in front of their faces, trying to ward off the flies. Their hands flick faster, like windscreen wipers on high speed, and the woman stamps her feet in irritation. They can’t bear it. They stand at the first sculpture and then turn about and head back towards their car. They get in, switch it on. I see them discussing for a minute. The flies have beaten them. They retreat. Orange dust rises.

As the sun gets lower the shadows of the skinny men and women on the lake get longer. People make their way back to their cars. The sculptures are left, standing lonely, apart, connected by their dots, but still separate from one another. Their metal cools, their colour darkens, becomes black. As night falls the visitors to the lake drive away, back to Kalgoorlie or the Menzies pub. But we stay. The flies disappear too. Where do flies go at night?

We set up the porta-cot as if we are out visiting friends for dinner. We put the baby in here and he stands up to watch us cook. We boil rice and then in a pan fry onions and garlic and tuna. We mix in the cooked rice and some powdered chicken soup. Camping Risotto. It is surprisingly tasty and the baby eats some too. Mosquitoes are out now. We cover our exposed parts in Rid.

We awake before dawn and Luka goes back out on the lake to watch the sunrise from the mound. He takes a torch with him and as the light flashes across a sculpture I catch a glimpse of a figure and my heart skips. Someone on the lake? Standing stock still. Ah the skinny men of the lake. All night.

I stay in the Kombi with the baby and we roll around. He breast feeds, dozes, plays, poos, has a nappy change, has cereal, poos again. Periodically
I check on Luka and can make out his dark shape, a silhouette on the top of the mound, watching the sky go through its morning ritual. He stands and squats, paces atop the hill. The sky does colour callisthenics. Pink, orange, blushing. The dark blue of the night softens as daylight appears. Fades to pastel. As Luka heads back to the Kombi I see him shooing flies from his face. They're up too.

By the time we leave, after billy tea, others are arriving and beginning their wandering around the figures adhered to the lake.

Back through the sleepy stop of Menzies, through Kal, back on the Great Eastern Highway heading westwards. That night we make it to Merredin and decide to stay at the caravan park. We pull in to the petrol station at the same time as a semi pulls in, changing down gears, pneumatic brakes exhaling, puffing loudly as the signs we have seen entering the town have requested truckies not to. A girl, bare foot, tight jeans, jumps down from the cab and giggling, runs to the toilet. Luka looks back at me and says “She’s bonked him six times since Kalgoorlie”. “Uhh gross” I say. The girl rushes back out, tiptoeing quickly across the gravel surface and back in to the cab. She needs to slam the door twice. The semi pulls away.

At the caravan park we get a spot away from the other campers, knowing the baby could disturb people in the night. Then showers. Baby bathed in a spotless stainless steel tub in the Women’s. Shiny hair. More Camping Risotto.

Luka speaks to a man in the communal kitchen washing up his dishes. He has a camper trailer. The man, his wife and their two young giris are on the first night of the rest of their lives. They’ve sold up everything in Perth and are on their way to Brisbane, camping along the way. They have no schedule, no job to go to. They have freedom and hope. Luka comes back with clean dishes and tells me about the family. Yes that’d be nice, exciting.

In the morning we have pancakes from a plastic bottle where you just add water and shake. They taste a little dry, a little packetty. Luka walks across to the service station for butter to improve their flavor but it doesn’t do much. I and the baby eat them anyway.

It is Anzac day and every small town has a ceremony. Bands march. Bugles sound. Speeches are made. Australian spirit. Lest we forget. I can’t help feeling cynical. I question honouring the dead from other wars when we still send people to fight in Iraq. What lessons have been learnt? Instead we have coffee in York in a book shop sadly spelt shoppe while
white cockatoos compete against a brass band.

By the afternoon we have made it back to Perth. We have felt the numbing of traffic lights. At sixty kilometres an hour the last fifty have seemed endless. We unload the car and put the tired baby in his wooden cot. He recognises the mattress, his smell and tucks his face into the sheets. He sleeps. We are home.
Tampa Proof?: Australian Fiction 2002–2003

In accepting the Australian Literary Society’s Gold Medal for Gould’s Book of Fish in 2002 Richard Flanagan made the following assessment of the current state of Australian fiction.

Australia has become a country relaxed and comfortable with a certain sort of writing, small in compass, imitative in form, obvious in its limited aspirations. It is a flabby writing that neither challenges nor confronts, that does not rub against the grain ... Do not mistake me: I am not arguing for some new nationalist literature, nor am I trying to rehash an old idea of great national novels. My suspicion is that great novels are ever anti-national, rising beyond them, opposing fundamentally the nonsense of national pretensions with the mess of life.¹

Flanagan had certainly earned the right to this opinion. Gould’s Book of Fish issued as potent a challenge to ‘national pretensions’ as any novel in contemporary Australian literature. Drusilla Modjeska recently made a similar plea for a revitalisation of Australian fiction, claiming that:

... too much of our recent fiction has become safe; our novels have lost their urgency, protected by the soft glow of ‘history’, or iconic characters, or mythologising, or a folksy downhomeness, or linguistic display, or a kind of mumsiness.²

Flanagan’s and Modjeska’s words were fresh in my mind as I read the new Australian fiction published between mid-2002 and mid-2003. I was intrigued to assess the extent to which novels published in this period might meet their challenge. Would a post-One Nation Australia, enmeshed in debates about Tampa and the Pacific Solution and engaged in the build up to war in Iraq give rise to a fiction which addressed itself to the idea of a nation in transition? Or would these circumstances simply
compound the nostalgic retreat into the historical novels about which Modjeska complained?

The period under review was, in one sense at least, a slow time for Australian fiction. The year was missing a blockbuster, the sort of novel anticipated by the reading public and the media alike as an opportunity to test the pulse of Oz lit. There was no new novel by Carey, Winton, Astley, or Malouf. Nor was there a new Grenville, Bail or McDonald. No new Garner or Hall. There was a new Keneally – but there is always a new Keneally.

It was therefore, an ideal period for new voices – the first novelist, or perhaps the developing writer seeking to consolidate earlier achievements. In the absence of established names they had the opportunity to attract additional notice and reviews, and unencumbered by the expectations of an established audience they could engage with the “mess of life”.

The good news is that there were a number of new names that did make an impression, and none more so than Gail Jones. Not that Jones is a neophyte exactly. She has previously published two collections of well-received short stories, The House of Breathing (1991) and Fetish Lives (1997). Nonetheless, Black Mirror marks her debut as a novelist, and it is a remarkable achievement.

The novel traces the lives of two women, surrealist painter Victoria Morrell and her biographer Anna Griffin. The women are connected by childhoods spent in the Western Australian goldfields, where Victoria moved as a young girl in 1910 and where Anna was born many years later. The narrative is unveiled in two timeframes, a “then” as Victoria moves to London and then Paris in the 1930s in pursuit of her art, and a “now”, as Anna eventually follows in pursuit of the aging Victoria.

The goldfields connection is a powerful element in the novel and provides many of the symbols which unite and embroider the lives of the two women. As Anna realises, “We share images... What could be more intimate? The desert. The mines. The search in darkness for gold” (35). It is also many of these same images which inspire Victoria’s surrealist visions, and Jones makes a desert childhood seem like the obvious preparation for immersion in the modernist art circles of inter-war Paris.

Some of the novel’s themes are common to recent Australian fiction; the journey to Europe married to the encounter with modernism, the secret family history, the powerful impression left by childhood trauma, and the troubled relationships between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. And in terms of genre, Black Mirror conforms to the kunstleroman (artist-novel) a common if under-examined form in Australian fiction. There is,
however, nothing commonplace in the way in which Jones handles her material. Hers is a fully developed literary intelligence, able to seamlessly mesh narrative, character and imagery (in addition to the images of desert and labyrinthine submerged worlds mentioned above, we encounter strangulation, fire, blindness, drowning and swans).

One could quibble about the necessity of the last twenty pages which serve to tie up loose ends that may have been better left frayed, but there is little in this tautly constructed novel which is superfluous or out of place. Jones also possesses that rare ability to delight with sentences or passages which seem perfectly formed – where it is difficult to imagine a word or phrase being altered in a way which would not dilute the appropriateness and power of her writing.

Saskia Beudel's *Borrowed Eyes* has several points of comparison with *Black Mirror*. It has similar transitions between different time-scapes, it also explores the power of memory and the lingering influence of trauma, and in its way offers another version of the *kunstleroman*. The central character is Vivien Carmichael, and the outline of her story is based on the life of Australian nurse Vivian Bullwinkel who was the sole survivor of a Japanese war time atrocity. As Beudel points out in her closing acknowledgments, however, “the depictions of her existence after the war, and of how she lives with the aftermath of her survival bear no resemblance to her actual life” (298). It is the way in which Carmichael deals with her survival that is the central issue of the novel, with the details of the central incident only emerging towards the end of the narrative.

The story of Carmichael’s war years and her narrow escape from death are revealed when she is visited by Martin, whom she had first met in the Indonesian prisoner of war camp where she spent the remainder of the war. Martin is Dutch, and was only a boy when they met and formed a bond after Vivien taught him to paint. When they are reunited in Australia he is working as an artist, and travelling en route to America where he wishes to settle. Together Vivien and Martin re-create the stories of their lives up to the time they met in the prison camp and their memories of their wartime experience. Vivien is keen to recall a time when she lived “more intensely, more ardently, more precariously ... so that everything else dulls in comparison” (286), and she is now consumed by a fear that her life since has become “hollow, and shifting, and coreless” (288). Martin, on the other hand has been using his art to forge a vision of the world unencumbered by the war which blighted his childhood, and he is unsettled by Vivien’s insistence on recovering the past. He too, however,
is condemned to living in the shadow of his wartime experience.

*Borrowed Eyes* is intelligent, elegant and persuasive. If at the novel's conclusion there is a sense that the ennui which has slowed Vivien's life penetrates the novel itself a little too deeply, this remains nonetheless a convincing demonstration of an impressive new talent.

Survival is also at the centre of Sarah Hay's first novel, the Vogel Award winning *Skins*. This is another novel with an historical foundation, being based on the wreck of the 'Mountaineer' off the south coast of Western Australia in 1835. *Skins* recounts the events that unfold as the survivors of the wreck, including Dorothea Newell, her sister Mary and brother Jem, come to shore on Middle Island near the present day Esperance. Here they fall in with a camp of sealers living with their Aboriginal women. The camp is led by the charismatic and occasionally violent African-American, John Anderson.

Hay explores the various accommodations that individuals make in these extraordinary circumstances, in particular the shifting personal alliances that eventuate as the sealers, the shipwreck survivors and the Aboriginal women adjust to the changed power relationships on the island. Dorothea finds herself drawn into a relationship with Anderson that is initially based on expediency, only to find that she feels an increasing affection for the island's strong man. The quiet heart of the novel, however, is with the Aboriginal women. Almost mute, with the status of chattels and attracting little more notice than the seals they are called upon to slaughter, they eventually demand attention because of their constancy and humanity in a situation that becomes increasingly dangerous and bestial.

This is a remarkable debut novel; bold, imaginative, and in its way quite challenging. It is a testimony to Hay's deft control of her narrative that it pushes on in unexpected directions, without at any point seeming false or capricious.

Kathryn Heyman's *The Accomplice* also features the aftermath of a shipwreck off the Western Australian coast, and is notable for being the second novel (after Arabella Edge's *The Company* (2000)) in recent years to be based on the wreck of the *Batavia*. Together with the recent publication of a new historical account, Mike Dash's *Batavia's Graveyard* (2002), it suggests the extent to which the extraordinary events which took place on the Abrolhos Islands in 1629 retain their power to shock and enthral.

*The Accomplice* is faithful to the known facts of the voyage and its aftermath. The narrative is recounted in the first person by eighteen year old Judith Bastiaanz, who is travelling with her family en route to the East
Indies. During the voyage she forms a relationship with soldier and
nobleman Conraat van Hueson. Despite some clumsiness in the dialogue,
seemingly born of an uncertainty when dealing with the manners of the
period, Heyman successfully builds the tension during the voyage as the
portents of evil accrue. The narrative really hits its stride, however, after
the shipwreck. The latent brutality explodes into the frenzied and
murderous reign of Jeronimus Cornelisz, to which van Hueson is a willing
accomplice. Judith’s own judgments are complicated by her affair with van
Hueson, and it is only after she witnesses his participation in the slaying
of a young boy that she comprehends his involvement in the tyranny
perpetrated by Cornelisz.

Whereas in *Skins* Dorothea submits to a relationship with a man who
she expects to be violent and then adjusts to her growing feelings of
tenderness, in *The Accomplice* Judith forms a relationship with a man she
loves only to find that she must face the truth of his murderous ways.

*The Accomplice* is not without its “bodice ripping” elements, but it is
redeemed by its drive to make an essentially serious point, in that it
provides a timely reminder of the conditions under which evil can flourish,
and the extent to which all those who do not actively resist are implicated.

Coastal Western Australia is also the setting for several novels with
more contemporary settings. The most intriguing of these is Brett
D’Arcy’s *The Mindless Ferocity of Sharks*. It is almost inevitable that a novel
dealing with Australian beach culture will boast an endorsement by Robert
Drewe, and the front cover of *The Mindless Ferocity* carries his assessment
that in this novel “the Australian collective unconscious is wrestled to the
ground and pinned down”. This hyperbolic judgement is difficult to
sustain unless you believe that the nation is unconsciously preoccupied
with the search for the perfect wave or the danger of impending shark
attack, but this is nonetheless another assured first novel.

The setting is an unspecified surfing town south of Perth. The central
characters are a family consisting of Tom (“the Old Man”), his wife
Adelaide, teenage son Eddie, eleven year old “Floaty Boy” (so called
because of his unnatural buoyancy) and baby Sal. The family’s life revolves
around surfing, low-level drug taking and Tom’s attempts to eke out a
living by dealing in surf-related collectibles. They are surrounded by a
group of Tom’s like-minded friends, referred to collectively as the Cronies.

It is, however, Floaty Boy’s story, an episodic coming-of-age drama in
which remarkably little of any real consequence happens. The interest in
the narrative is sustained by the boy’s shifting perception of the world as
he tries to establish his position within the close but strained family and
in the wider society of the Cronies and the various surfing subcultures ("sand punks" and "pool rats"). Indeed it is characterisation that is D'Arcy's strength, and there are memorable characters created in Floaty Boy and his parents, in particular the loyal Adelaide who staunchly supports her family's marginal lifestyle while suppressing her own middle class aspirations.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press has an admirable record of supporting new novelists from the West, and they have done so again in the period under review. Mike Williams's *Old Jazz* commences with the reclusive thirtysomething Frank Harmon living in his beachside house near Albany on the south coast of Western Australia. His almost hermetic existence is disturbed by two women – the Canadian girl Laura he meets working in a local bar, and Marcia, who rings without warning to announce that she is the sister whom Frank never knew he had. Moreover, she is coming to visit him the next day.

What Frank learns from Marcia's visit sets him on his path back to his native England, haunted by the memories of the mother who died when he was young, the violent father he hardly knew, the Aunt who raised him, and the mysterious man caught in a photograph playing saxophone in a London club in the late 1940s. *Old Jazz* is part mystery and part romance and part midlife coming-of-age story. The storytelling is quite traditional, but Williams lifts his narrative with his capacity to create believable and fully realised characters. Frank forms a convincing centre to the story as the man who has his sense of self suddenly and severely disrupted, and he is surrounded by other characters who are equally well realised as they attempt to deal with the grief and anger raised by belated revelations.

Fremantle Arts Centre has also given us Graham Kershaw's *The Home Crowd*. The novel has plot resemblances to *Old Jazz*, in that it deals with the story of another Western Australian – this time a resident of Fremantle – drawn back to his birthplace in England to deal with unfinished personal and family business.

Kershaw doesn't do any more than necessary in order to relate the story of George Fielden's attempt to bridge two relationships and two continents and find a way of getting to know his recently discovered twelve year old son. Along the way Fielden must cope with his emerging understanding of the extent to which he has abandoned not only a past love, but also a place to which he is instinctively drawn. Kershaw is acute in his rendering of the physical and social landscapes of Fremantle and the dismal north England setting of Whinely. There is nothing extraordinary in this novel, but it is a tautly constructed tale imbued with an understated
suspense and a mounting realisation of bleak consequences.

Australians in the United Kingdom seems to have been *de rigueur* for recent Fremantle Arts Centre novels. Tracy Ryan's second novel (after *Vamp*, 1997) *Jazz Tango* takes up the theme of the expatriate, in this case young working class Jas, who is struggling to maintain herself in London when she unexpectedly receives a marriage proposal from upwardly mobile musician Todd. Jas finds herself thrust into a world for which she is ill-prepared, the world of the educated, accomplished, soft radical, well-to-do achievers and career vegetarians of the ascendant classes of Blair’s Britain.

The story unfolds in a voice that shifts between that of an omniscient narrator and an internal stream of consciousness dialogue delivered by Jas - a generally effective means for presenting her hesitant embrace of unfamiliar circumstances. England remains a puzzle to Jas, she is uncomfortable in the physical side of her marriage, and she lacks the social confidence to embrace Todd’s friends and relatives or her own budding career as an academic. Her developing relationship with Miriam seems to be the one chance she has to centre her identity.

Unacquainted as Jas is with the nuances of her environment she fails to grasp what is an open secret amongst Todd’s friends and acquaintances - his bisexuality, the fact that he is “jazz tango” as one character puts it. Sexually inexperienced at the time of her marriage, the novel traces Jas’s growing awareness of her own sexual interest in women, which eventually leads to an affair with Miriam. *Jazz Tango* delves into the sexual politics of this situation, as Jas and Todd both deal with the implications of their wavering sexuality and the desire to maintain their relationship despite their physical and emotional ambivalence. *Jazz Tango* is accomplished writing and storytelling, although the sum impact is minor.

Ambivalent sexual identity is also at the centre of Judith Armstrong’s *The French Tutor*. Emily King, is mid-thirties, a Proust-loving Francophile who returns to Melbourne after time studying in Paris and Oxford and enjoying brief but satisfying relationships in both. Working as a college tutor she finds herself attracted to Lewis Lincoln, an elder academic economist of some note. Emily undertakes a relationship with Lincoln with a view to making it permanent, only to find that her lover leads an enigmatic and elusive lifestyle. What Emily initially believes to be a commitment phobia is discovered, through the gradual revelation of Lincoln’s bisexual relationships, to have a deeper and more biological basis.

In addition to this central relationship *The French Tutor* offers a deft study of the shifting alliances between Emily and her women friends and
their partners, and a vivid interplay between the novel’s narrative and the plot and characters of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. What seems in its early stages to be a reasonably slight and pretentious campus-comedy, eventually blossoms into a compelling (if still slight) morality tale, with Armstrong managing a provocative straddling of some of the fault-lines in modern sexual relationships.

As noted the year produced a number of novels set on the coastal fringe and offshore islands, but it also featured – as usual – others which took the journey into the continental interior as the basis for their narrative. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these – having won the Miles Franklin Prize for 2003 – is Alex Miller’s *Journey to the Stone Country*. The plot revolves around the developing relationship between Melbourne-based academic Annabelle Beck, and indigenous man Bo Rennie. The two are brought together when Annabelle returns to the landscapes of her childhood in inland Queensland while undertaking a survey of traditional sites of the Murri and Jangga people, and Bo is appointed as her assistant. Their excursions bring them in to contact with a past complicated by their intertwined families and shared histories of settlement conflict.

These ingredients promise a lot, and Miller is admirably ambitious in dealing with his challenging subject matter, but perhaps the whole enterprise is just a little too earnest and ‘by the numbers’. Despite Miller’s best efforts to shape a story which confronts the issues of race violence, government paternalism and reconciliation as they affect the lives of individuals, the promising raw material is ultimately overwhelmed by his incapacity to rid the narrative of some of the very assumptions he set out to address. This is most apparent in the failure to breathe any real life into his two major characters. Annabelle and Bo remain constrained by the stereotyped representations of white middle-class academic woman and taciturn, wise indigenous man to the extent that they remain remarkably bloodless and unengaging – a fundamental problem in a novel which retains many elements of a traditional romance. It is a problem not helped by their having been burdened with some unexpectedly clumsy dialogue.

When the novel does reach a high point, in the undeniably powerful confrontation between Bo and his grandmother’s sister, a traditional Jangga woman, it is insufficient to drag the narrative from beneath the weight of its own good intentions. This is a highly readable novel, and those who are attracted by its prize-winning status will find some reward, but the disappointment is that one would hope for a more significant achievement by a writer of Miller’s skill. It is possible to admire what this novel attempts, while regretting that it is not wholly successful.
A journey into the continental interior is also the set piece of first time novelist Stephen Orr’s *Attempts to Draw Jesus*. It is also another novel with its roots in actual events, in this case the death of jackaroos Simon Amos and James Annetts in the Gibson Desert in 1986. In the novel we encounter two young men, Jack Alber from rural South Australia and Clive ‘Rolly’ Rollins from Adelaide, at the point of leaving school and with few apparent options in life. They eventually drift together and accept an offer to do some jackarooing at inland stations. It is a choice that eventually proves fatal.

This is an engrossing if slightly undisciplined read, which would have benefited greatly from some editing. The representation of the inland deserts (place of danger, place of redemption) is a little too predictable, and the novel’s ambitions – particularly in terms of its spiritual and religious elements – outreach its achievements. Nonetheless it is a genuine attempt to further the investigation of young lives confronted by the possibilities and limitations of adulthood, and an indication of the ongoing fascination with those who surrender their lives in desert regions.

Anson Cameron is another novelist who has previously written of the continent’s further and drier reaches in *Silences Long Gone* (1998). In his latest novel, *Confessing the Blues*, however, travelling inland gets no further than Canberra. The novel follows the fortunes of would be rock-God and reluctant tyre-dealer Mark ‘Mako’ McKeenan as he faces the failure of his dream to make a living playing music in the style of a latter day Jimi Hendrix. Having trouble coming to terms with his diminished possibilities he sets out to gain revenge on the man who initially fuelled that dream, renegade radio dj Be Good. As the lives of Mako and Be Good become increasingly entwined they encounter patricide, a menage a trois, vice-regal patronage and the redemptive power of blues with a backbeat. Out of all this Be Good is eventually forced to confront the fading appeal of his own dreams and values.

Although an entertaining read, *Confessing the Blues* suffers from a series of extraneous elements (an Indian tyre fraudster, a radio station’s declaration of independence from Australia) and a self-conscious ‘smartness’ in the writing that serves to distance the reader from the material. The result is a novel substantially less appealing than Cameron’s previous efforts.

The disillusionment of middle age also underpins Graham Jackson’s *Accounting for Terror* (a novel blessed with the irresistible subtitle *The Recollections of a Retrenched Bank Manager in Rural Australia*). Although in the early reading *Accounting for Terror* appears to be a regular picaresque
coming-of-age novel with many standard elements – issues with parents and church, a tentative attempt at University, a troubled offsider, a lost love – it is eventually transformed into something much more adventurous and timely. As the unnamed narrator enters middle age he finds his gathering neuroses reflected in the disaffected underbelly of regional Australia. The only things sustaining him in the face of a rural economy crumbling under globalisation are an uncertain marriage and a waning faith in Bob Dylan.

You may wonder where a story about a failed rural bank manager with a subtly subversive past and a Bob Dylan fixation might lead. The answer is straight to the heart of post-Tampa Australia, a nation bedevilled with tainted ideologies, uncertain faiths and potentially violent solutions. As the narrator realises that the malaise infecting his own life also reaches deep in to the core of the nation, he answers the terrorist's call to arms.

In her much praised *Moral Hazard* Kate Jennings (an expatriate Australian, having lived in New York, where this novel is set, since 1979) reminds us that middle age and beyond can lead to problems other than fading ideals and disappointed expectations – although the novel depicts its share of both. The narrator Cath recalls the previous six years of her life, during which she passed into her fifties, earned her living as a speech writer for a Wall Street banking firm, and nursed her older husband, Bailey, through the terminal stages of Alzheimer’s Disease.

*Moral Hazard* tells two related stories, firstly of Cath’s struggle as a liberal-leaning child-of-the-sixties coming to terms with the rapacious and testosterone fuelled world of high finance, and secondly, her private battle to maintain control of her personal life as Bailey’s need for care becomes overwhelming. Both of these situations raise intense moral dilemmas which are relevant at a time when we find barely regulated corporate implosions and debates over euthanasia the stuff of daily headlines.

There is much to admire about this novel. It is difficult not to cheer at the excoriating view of financial markets as being “perilous, jerry-built, mortared with spit and cupidity, a coat of self-serving verbiage slapped on to tart up the surface and hide the cracks” (142). There is also an undeniable emotional tug in the straightforward and entirely personal manner in which the character of Cath describes Bailey’s decline and demise, and Jennings has fortunately resisted any temptation to concoct an all-too predictable romantic outcome between Cath and her mentor Mike.

As engaging as it is, however, there remains something essentially slight about *Moral Hazard*. Perhaps the targets for satire are a little too
obvious and perhaps the moral choices a little too stark. It is a potently spare and contained novel, but unlikely to be remembered as a major achievement.

Unlikely as it may seem, Alzheimer’s Disease is also at the centre of a second novel this year, John Clanchy’s *The Hard Word*. Clanchy is better known for his short stories, and it is a decade since his previous novel, *Breaking Glass*.

*The Hard Word* is an ambitious work, in both subject and method. It is not every male novelist who would tackle one female voice let alone three, as Clanchy writes alternate first person narratives of dementia sufferer Grandma Vera, her daughter Miriam, and Miriam’s daughter, Laura. There is a slight unevenness of tone in the novel, although this is not the result of Clanchy’s inability to manage the female voices, but rather the shifting sense of purpose which underlies the narrative. In the early pages the novel has something of a comic element, reading like a *Mother and Son* pastiche, but it gains in seriousness and intensity as the story of Grandma Vera emerges, and her battle with Alzheimer’s Disease increases the pressure on the family. Importantly, this is a blended family, where identities are already strained by broken parental affiliations and half-sibling relationships.

It should be noted that *The Hard Word* also weaves in some Tampa reflections through Miriam’s job teaching English language to migrants and refugees. The lives of her students are revealed as they are called upon to use the power of memory and their hesitant English to re-create their troubled pasts in front of their fellow learners. This is powerfully affecting material, particularly because at the same time Miriam is forced to endure her own identity being diminished by Grandma Vera’s failing memory and reduced ability to communicate. At the novel’s conclusion, however, it is shared grief for the departed Vera that allows the family to begin to restore its own fractured identity.

Grief, in this case for a lost partner, is also at the emotional centre of Richard Yaxley’s *The Rose Leopard*. Vince Daley is a would-be writer in his thirties, who is apparently blissfully married to Katherine (“Kaz”). They live a seemingly idyllic life in the Queensland coastal hinterland, with their two children who are rather annoyingly referred to as Milo and Otis. Vince’s life is changed forever by Kaz’s sudden death.

The worst of this novel is in the opening sections as Yaxley struggles to establish Vince’s wise-cracking persona: unfortunately the romantic banter between he and Kaz comes off as lame rather than spirited. The tone of the novel improves rapidly after Kaz’s unfortunate demise when Vince is
pitched into a massive grief, made more difficult when he is called upon to cope with the scheming of his wife’s erratic family.

The plot thereafter deals with a series of revelations which shift our understanding of the relationship between Vince and Kaz, and Vince discovers that in order to come to terms with his wife’s death he must also make some adjustments in his relationships with those who remain behind. Coupled with this is the parallel story of Vince surrendering his ambitions to be a writer, while at the same time re-discovering the healing and redemptive power of story. The novel’s modest success lies in its representation of Vince’s grief, and the satisfying conclusion to his journey of recovery that avoids being overly sentimental.

Grief and its convulsive effect on families is also central to Carolyn van Langenberg’s *The Teetotaller’s Wake*. The principal character is Fiona, “the errant, prodigal, self-centred, stubborn bitch, the acquisitive snob and couldn’t-give-a-fuck lesbian daughter of the decent and respectable old settler family, the Hindmarshes” (23). The novel’s opening finds her travelling north from Sydney to the coastal dairying community of Newrybar to attend her mother’s funeral. Here she runs headlong into her relatives – the uncles, cousins and particularly her sister Gillian – who provided the life and colour and interest and distress to her childhood.

The first half of the novel is set at her mother’s funeral-come-wake. This section passes as a fairly inconsequential comedy-of-manners, as relationships are re-established and memories both pleasant and painful are recalled. The novel’s second half, however, assumes a darker and more melancholy tone as it evolves into a meditation on the nature of loss. Fiona discovers that she has been deprived not only of a mother, but that her move away from the rural community of her childhood and the ensuing separation from her extended family has entailed other kinds of deprivation for which she now grieves. Against this she balances the attraction of her life in the city and the new lover who awaits her return.

*The Teetotaller’s Wake* is effective without being wholly successful. Some of the ingredients, particularly the sub-text of the previous loss of the land by the traditional owners the Bundjalung, are expedient and poorly integrated. The narrative, however, holds interest, in particular the theme of loss of innocence coupled with the surrender of a childhood identity that had seemed secure. The issue of the clash of city and rural values, and the sense of displacement shared by those who have made the transition from one to the other, is also one with which many readers will empathise.

I referred earlier to the ubiquity of Tom Keneally, a “problem” which unfortunately threatens to diminish the impact of one of our most
accomplished novelists. It is pleasing to report that *An Angel in Australia* is one of his finest recent achievements. The success of his “international” novels notwithstanding, it seems that inner-city wartime Sydney and the workings of the Catholic Church have given rise to some of Keneally’s best writing.

This tale involves a murder, an attractive and lonely wife with a husband serving overseas, a priest in conflict, a stereotyped Catholic detective and several American servicemen. Of these stock ingredients Keneally constructs a searching account of the various forms of personal and national crises that haunted the nation’s premier city in its darkest hour. It may well be that *An Angel in Australia* reads as if it were a follow-up to some Keneally’s earliest novels such as *The Place At Whitton* (1964), *The Fear* (1965), or *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968), but that is intended as a compliment.

And finally, I will admit to having found a guilty pleasure in Trevor Shearston’s *Tinder*. This novel also brings us full circle, since Gail Jones’s description in *Black Mirror* of Victoria as “an errant and lonesome young woman, a firelighter, a reprobate” (229), could apply perfectly to Kiah, the arsonist at the centre of *Tinder*. If you read it, as I did, during a summer when the country suffered more than its usual quota of bushfire crises then this tale of arson and obsession set in the Blue Mountains will seem unusually resonant. And if the subject of arson seems trite, be warned that Kiah is motivated by the erotic potential of fire, and she finds a willing partner in the narrator, Graham. *Tinder* can be read as little more than the sexual fantasies of a middle-aged man, but the story is economically constructed, with a fine feeling for character, and a trim and suspenseful plot which never over-reaches itself.

Was it then a good year for Australian fiction? Yes ... and no. In the absence of the bigger names a number of first time and early career novelists did make impressive contributions. Of the first novels noted above I would be surprised if any other than Gail Jones’s *Black Mirror* still has an important claim to attention five or ten years hence, but it would be disappointing if we do not hear more from Beudel and Hay. Of the previously published novelists, Keneally, Clanchy and Jackson have all produced important additions to their body of work.

But to what extent did the novels discussed address the challenge issued by Flanagan and Modjeska. Although I shy away from Modjeska’s assessment of “folksy downhomeness”, there is a profound note of domesticity in many of these novels, particularly those with contemporary settings. The common themes include disputed parentage, familial death, midlife crises, inter-generational conflict, and the emotional pull of
childhood places. These might be read as being indicative of the lingering identity crisis associated with postcolonial cultures. Equally likely, they reflect a retreat from a more troubling identity issue – one with contemporary origins and its roots in a politics and a public sphere that are overfamiliar, careworn and incapable of appealing to our better instincts. Whereas the media and non-fiction will be reactive in these circumstances, we should hope that fiction could break free of mannered responses and investigate new ways of conceiving of ourselves and our place in the world. These novels do include some hesitant gestures towards addressing the mounting unease shared by many Australians about their country and its relationship to the world, but – with the exception of Jackson’s *Accounting for Terror* – these remain muted and coded at best.

In closing, however, I note that there is already another new Keneally available, *The Tyrant’s Novel*, and that it confronts head on the use of detention in deserts as a means of dealing with asylum-seekers. That is some reason for optimism that Australian fiction might yet engage with “the mess of life” as it is found outside the domestic sphere.

**Fiction 2002–2003**

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


Keneally, Thomas. *An Angel in Australia.* Doubleday, 2002


Notes


1. Off-street paddocks

As the blind flares open
blank metal fence
blocks the bottom half
of the window frame.
Above is a shallow-sloping roof –
a neck of sun-lustred
dinosaur scales, bent
over rows of lime-green
froth, sucked in, unfurled
on the breath of its unseen mouth.
Behind is another
and another –
a grazing herd,
eating its way
over the orange earth.
Beyond them
is the cool blue stare
of unfettered sky.

2. Wind solo with percussion

This windy night
with the muted beat
and glissando of blind
against wooden window sill,
a diptych paints itself
in moon white
and watery black.
In the right frame, rising from quavering shadow puppet branches, one determined standard dances alone. The left frame is almost filled with a marshmallow mound of interlocking leaves, a nagging gossiping network vibrating in counterpoint to wind’s sweeping melody.
Quite a few years after I got out of New Norcia I ran into a few schoolmates and decided to go to the pub to have a few beers. Sitting in the cool beer garden, we were talking about New Norcia. They decided I should write about it. Then I asked if they remembered the nights. They both uncomfortably said, “yeah”. I told them that when the Brother used to come and tell us to be quiet and turn the lights off in the dormitory, and when I thought everyone was asleep, I would be thinking of my mum and dad, somewhere out in the bush. The ache in my heart would be overwhelming; I would let the tears run. Not a sound escaped my lips; not even a whimper, as the tears came free from my face. Turning to my mates, I felt a lot of shame telling my personal story, but I was in for a pleasant surprise when they dropped their heads and very sheepishly said, “Yeah we used to do the same thing too.” Wow, I thought, imagine twenty-odd boys in a dormitory, their beds so close together you can reach out your hand and touch the bed alongside of you; here were twenty-odd boys or more, all quietly crying for their mums and dads, and not a sound coming forth. That really blew me away. And so I started to write.

I firmly believe words have a special effect on people: through music, storytelling, in a conversation, poetry, public speaking, politics, reading and as an Aboriginal through our Dreamtime stories which I, as a child, never did get to hear. Words can be hurtful, pleasant, angry, lovable and consoling. To me as a child, words were always fascinating especially in books, comics, children’s picture books, and anything that was readable to a small child. It amazed me how the great writers of the fourteenth century could produce words from their minds and create beautiful and soothing pictures.

Growing up in New Norcia mission in the early nineteen-fifties and early sixties, the priests, brothers and nuns used very cruel words to us
Aboriginal children. Thinking back, I remember being afraid of God. They used God as an executioner. Like for instance, if you committed a sin you would forever burn in the bowels of Hell. Imagine saying that to a seven-year-old child. Instilling it into a child that young. How good the government must have felt during that era, with their pompous attitude to Aboriginal children and adults alike. For the sake of common sense: why? Why did they do this to us? Did these people of good Christian values inherit the values of murderers, rapists, thieves and liars?

As a child I was afraid of God. I would welcome the thunder, lightning, hail and the darkest night, rather than face someone coming down from the heavens to send me to Hell. Hell was made such a ferocious and evil place. I think we kids have grown up rebelling against the same God, who society says is kind, caring and loving. How many Gods are there? Did the white people get one version and we Aboriginals get another? I used to wonder if white people prayed to him like we did.

**New Norcia Mission**

**In the beginning**

New Norcia is 128 kilometres north of Perth. Its founder was the Reverend Bishop Salvado from Spain. This man was given land to care for the welfare of Aboriginal people in 1877. Coming from Perth, the highway cut right through the middle of the town on its way towards Geraldton. New Norcia was a little town that was run by the monks and nuns, and was surrounded by farms. New Norcia in the spring is very picturesque and extremely healthy, although in summer it is extremely hot.

Entering New Norcia there was a service station on the left and just up from this was a post office and shop in the same building. Up on the hill is a hotel, which stands out like a beacon with its fourteenth century architecture. This hotel was originally a hostel. Near the post office was the Aboriginal girls’ house called St Joseph’s orphanage – even though these Nyoongah girls had mums and dads like us Nyoongah boys. Next to St Joseph’s was St Gertrude’s college where the white girls were sent, and their parents paid big money so that they could all come out as doctors, lawyers or socialites. Not far from here was the cemetery and next to that was where the white boys were in St Ildephonsus college. And lo and behold, next to them was us Nyoongah boys who were stolen and dumped there.
Opposite the cemetery was THE big church itself, that catered for the whole community around New Norcia and the farming districts. Behind the church stood the monastery, which housed all the monks. As children we always believed that the devil himself used to live in there with the monks. Attached to this was a baker’s house, where the monks baked all the bread for the community and outlying areas – with the Aboriginal boys helping out. The monks used to also make olive oil as well. The children at the orphanages would pick the olives off the ground and the monks would crush these and sell the oil not only to Australia but also to the rest of the world. Next to the monastery was a great big tin shed that housed all the machinery.

Further up the hill, on the way to Moora, were the Nyoongah men, who worked for the monks and this is also where their families lived.

The monks stored altar wine as well as their own wine in the mission. They had a lucrative sideline going by selling this plonk to the Aboriginal people around there – even though it was illegal at the time. The monks sold this wine rather cheaply to the populace. It was through this situation that the monks helped to contribute to the domestic violence in the area. This friction caused the monks, God bless them, to set up a police station, not far from the big church and directly across from where they happened to be selling the plonk. This did not deter the monks from making money, and they continued to sell to the general Nyoongah community around New Norcia. When people became drunk, the monks then passed the incident over to the police, and the police would readily respond. I always found it fascinating that the monks referred to this wine as God’s blood, but every time I drank it, it turned me into the devil himself. I reckon that it was probably the devil’s blood rather than the other way round.

As a child, hurting for his mother at the age of seven, I decided then and there, I had to communicate with my mother and father on a reserve somewhere in the bush. But how? It was impossible. I grabbed a pencil and paper and with tears in my eyes, I tried to write a small poem to God, asking him to look after my Mum and Dad. I was afraid of God and some of the things that He would do to us, and me especially, but I had to ask Him for help. I was desperate. I also asked his help for the lonely and sad children in the mission. I guess we were all hurting and lonely. I asked for help for the two wonderful people who were hurting for their seven-year-old son.
Mass

While in the Mission, alcohol became the foundation of my life. I was about nine when I was told I had to become an Altar Boy, which was the greatest thing since Moses was found in the bull rushes. Wow? Me! Taylor, the greatest fuck-up since Quasimodo, was going to say the mass in Latin. Deep down, I thought whilst being on the altar that I would be closer to God and be able to make friends with him and not be afraid.

There were quite a few of us boys in the eight to ten age bracket who were on altar-boy duty. We all had to learn the Catechism before we could venture onto God’s own altar. I had always thought that the Catechism was the holy book and that it had been produced by God himself with the approval of Adam, Eve, Moses, Noah and all the disciples, maybe even Judas got a look in. I’m not too sure if any of the other boys failed but we all seemed to pass with flying colours. I passed, along with the likes of Skintback and a few more who I have since forgotten.

I had been told that I was to serve on the altar with Father Basil and assist Johnny-jack at the Boy’s House. Boy was I nervous. My knees were knocking and I felt as though 120 kilometre winds were blowing up my baggy shorts. Apprehension had been building up all week as I learnt my Latin. Mass was said in Latin back then. The day finally arrived and I went to mass scared. During the mass, I watched Johnny-jack’s every move, petrified that I would forget something. I didn’t want to stuff up in front of the boys because I would get teased. The moment came when the priest lifted the holy break a.k.a. body of Christ up to the heavens and at that precise time you had to ring the bells. I was kneeling on one knee and was able to ring the bells on cue. At that moment in time I felt as though I was sailing through the clouds and about to embrace God. It felt good.

After mass was over Father Basil told me to blow out the candles on the altar while he hook off his vestments in the sacristy. At the altar after blowing out the candles I felt close to God and could feel his presence right next to me.

“Taylor what’s taking you so long?” snarled Father Basil as Johnny-jack scurried out from behind him and headed for the exit.

“Nothing Father Basil,” I lied. I realised that there was one candle still burning and rushed over to blow it out. In my haste to complete my work before Father Basil came out, I almost knocked the burning candle down from the altar. I managed to control the candle, the flow of hot wax and blow out the candle at the same time. Quickly looking around to see if...
Father Basil was watching, I realised that he had not seen my heroic effort to save the candle and had disappeared just as quickly as he had spoken, I stood alone with God on His altar and felt His hand on my head and heard Him say to me, “Well done Alf Taylor, you have saved my altar so that other Nyoongahs can pray to me.”

With a smile on my face I knew that the pearly gates were within grasp. I briskly made my way to the door and on this day of reckoning it was a typical freezing New Norcia winter’s morning.

I lasted about a week at the Boys’ House, serving mass, before being promoted to the big Church which caters for all the Community at New Norcia: the white college boys, white college girls, Nyoongah girls of Saint Joseph’s Orphanage and the Nyoongah boys of Saint Mary’s Boys Orphanage. It still has me stumped today, why Aboriginals were classified as orphans. We had mums and dads but we were never allowed to see them or they were never encouraged to get in contact with us.

At New Norcia we were categorised into two sections, the little and the big boys. There was one long building that we were all in and the Brother had his room in the middle of the two adjoining sections. One had the big boys at the far end, away from us, and the little boys at the other end. I’m sure that there were twenty of us smaller boys in this dormitory. The beds were so close together that you could actually reach out and touch another boy’s bed. Talk about over-crowding. What the over-zealous Captain Cook Australians didn’t kill, they simply herded into missions and jails and whatever places they could fit us into.

On this particular morning, the smell of stale piss hung around the dormitory accompanied by the usual strap ripping at bare skin orchestrated by Father Basil. Those who wet the bed always got this treatment. After having a wash, I had to go in and get ready to serve at mass. I put on my red robe followed by the white vest. When this was on I felt immaculate and wonderfully clean. I felt like shouting from the heavens and yelling, “Move over God and let the little black devil through.”

I hurried to light the candles and prepare the altar wine, filling one cruet up with wine and the other with water as well as quickly ringing the bells to see if they were in sound working order. This was to be my promotion to the big time saying mass to all of New Norcia. My knees were knocking and my heart was thumping. Perspiration was seeping from my brow. I had never encountered such nervousness. This was the beginning of no end of emotional experiences, which I was about to learn. And I did very well, too.
There was another priest who took mass and his name was Father Peter. This particular Father was always in a hurry to get the mass over as quickly as possible. He said the mass in Latin with short sharp crisp words and you’d have to retaliate at the same speed he commanded. If you weren’t too sure of the Latin words, you just threw any word in that was Latin as long as it was quick. Father Peter was a short and portly man, who was greying and had a red face and a body that was accompanied by a limp. He lived at the monastery with the other monks behind the big church. The Benedictine monks always wore long black habits, with black trousers, shoes and whatever else they used to wear under those habits. Us boys would discuss these habits and whether the monks took their habits off to eat, sleep and go to the toilet. It was a major topic of discussion with the boys as those habits had us mob intrigued.

Like the mission boys who lived at St Mary’s orphanage, our clothes were a pair of baggy shorts, baggy shirt and in the winter months a khaki jacket, which was no protection against the chill of New Norcia. We were nobody’s children.

My first taste of alcohol was through mass. I had to be an altar boy for one of the priests on a winter’s morning. It was a bitterly cold winter’s morning and I had to walk to the church with just shorts and a shirt on. I had no shoes and the stones seemed to be sharper on a cold dewy morning—they enjoyed attacking cold, skinny feet. I crept along the cold, deserted street, crossed the Great Northern Highway and headed into a slightly warmer sanctuary in the Church. Shivering, I put on my red altar boy’s robe and white vest, prepared the water and wine plus the holy bread for communion and then rushed to light the candles around the altar. It always fascinated me, looking up at the ceiling and seeing all those beautiful paintings. Wandering around, admiring those paintings with my head bent back, I sometimes would bump into the pews or stub my cold toes or walk with my hands out in front of me like a kid in a dark room. I wanted to paint like the great painters of Europe.

Realising the priest was not in yet, I hurried to the back of the church, where the tomb of Bishop Salvado was. Looking down on his tomb I was surprisingly unafraid; I searched my head for something to say to him. Here were the remains of a man who came all the way from Spain to convert all the Aboriginals around Victoria Plains: my father, his father, and, I guess, his father. Rushing back for a final preparation, I found the altar wine in the cupboard. Taking off the top, I smelt it and it smelt good. *Hmmm*, I thought. I remembered the words that Brother Augustine said to
me earlier. So then and there I decided that I would take a mouthful. I coughed and spluttered as the alcohol caught my throat and waited until it had subsided. Then I decided to have another drink and within a few minutes all the cold of new Norcia slowly ebbed out of my body. I couldn’t believe it – this drink was truly God’s gift, it had even warmed my toes. It was up there with Holy Communion, prayers, holidays, Easter, Christmas, ice cream and lollies.

The priest came in, dressed himself, got himself ready and proceeded to say mass. I was nervous throughout mass, slurred my words and made quite a few mistakes that I was able to get away with. I was glad when mass was over. After that, there were quite a few occurrences with the altar wine. If I was going to drink myself to death under a shady tree when I got out, I thought, why not be the little black devil and drink myself to death here. No one really gives a fuck.

School

My friend Wardoo was always skiting about his marble skills, which were impeccable regardless of whoever played him in our age group. We usually ended up with our pockets empty and his full. Not that many of us younger boys had many marbles to play with. So to get even with Wardoo I stole some off Yuwaa. Yuwaa was a very forgetful young lad. Every time he put something down like marbles, piece of string, bottle tops, holy pictures he would always forget to pick it up again. He became easy prey to the likes of the bigger boys and myself. Yuwaa probably came from the Murchison or the Goldfields area and was placed at New Norcia at the tender age of five. Yuwaa was also very short and very dark and had been blessed with the name of Neville. But what made Yuwaa so obvious to me was his forgetfulness. I mean for a young Wongi or Yamatji kid he had it bad.

Yuwaa had left his pile of junk outside the chapel, which was near the dining room. I was the last to enter the chapel for early morning mass before breakfast and came upon Yuwaa’s trinkets. Before opening the door, I wondered what the pile of crap outside could possibly have in it. Curiosity got the better of me as my fingers took on a life of their own. My bony fingers came into contact with some cold hard marbles. This was an absolute bonus. Looking down at my fingers, I gently caressed the marbles and quickly took three before anyone came out of mass. I left a couple of
others there in amongst Yuwaa’s shangai, buttons, pieces of string and of course the usual holy pictures.

I opened the door of the chapel and very quietly made my way to my seat as mass was about to begin. I took a sly peak at Yuwaa, who was just across from me and looking very solemn. For the entire service I fingered the jewels in my pocket and thought about the upcoming marble game with Wardoo. Mass was soon over and I was one of the last to leave for the dining room. We all lined up at the door and waited for Father Basil. Brother Augustine was inside supervising the slops we would be getting which consisted of sheep’s-head broth, bread and tea – which was black and unsweetened.

We were all standing in one line waiting; some were talking, some jostling each other for a closer position near the dining room door. Father Basil still had not made his appearance and Johnny-jack, who had served at mass, was bombarded by the boys with questions.

“How long father gonna be?”
“He muss be comin’ unna?”
“Um hungry!”
“What’e sayin’ nother mass or what?”
“I dunno” replied Johnny-jack.

One of the boys leaned over and whispered in my ear, “hey bony rooster, you stole some marbles of Yuwaa, unna?”

Before I could respond, Father Basil stepped out from the chapel and in a menacing voice called out harshly, “Quieten down and go inside for your breakfast.” All the boys froze and no one breathed. Father Basil always carried a strap on his habit and it was this threat alone that meant most boys did not misbehave.

Breakfast was the usual ritual with all of the boys standing by the table saying Grace to God and thanking Him for the lovely meal. Some of the prayers, after making the sign of the cross, were sung, with words like “Bless us o Lord for what we are about to receive. Amen.” Knowing that he hadn’t and that the lavish meal we were about to eat was anything but.

After this usual breakfast ritual, I went outside to play marbles with my friend Wardoo and Johnny-jack – and as usual Wardoo was in brilliant form. God it was frustrating to watch this deadeye dick in action. In defeat I turned to Johnny-jack and asked, “You got any left or what?” he too was staring defeat in the face, again. “Um, I only got one left,” he replied in hopelessness. “You fullas open look for marbles!” sniggered Wardoo, fingering the marbles in his bulging pocket. He just stood there, wiry with his pearly white teeth glistening in the morning sun. I know that at that
particular time I wanted to nail Wardoo to the cross. Give him OUR little crucifixion with a crown of marbles hammered around his head.

"Hey bony rooster, you gotta give them marbles back to Yuwaa!" I turned around to stare at a black face threatening me. It was Skintback. "What marbles?" I asked angrily, knowing very well what was being referred to.

Wardoo laughed, "Naw, I busted dis bony rooster for all his marbles, unna." Which made me look even sillier.

"Well, dis bony rooster was da last one to come through the door for mass and 'e must've went through Yuwaa's stuff and stole 'is marbles!" accused Skintback. Well it was all over. Guilt cloaked me, coming out of my ears, eyes, mouth and nostrils. I oozed it. "I didn't take his marbles," I quivered as I boldly put on a brave face. I hissed it again, this time not wanting Father to detect that we were arguing in God's back yard. "I never took his marbles!" Christ, I thought. Father would make ad of us piss with that strap if he ever found out.

"Anyway," sneered Skintback. "Yuwaa went and told Brother on you, so look out." I looked at Wardoo and Johnny-jack for support but was given none. As they walked away from me they all cackled to themselves. I hated everything then and there. The mission, the prayers, the holy water and the hypocrisy. Skintback was number one on my hate list. His real name was Gary and he was older than us boys, maybe about eleven which almost put him in the 'big boys' bracket. The reason that everyone called him Skintback was that he had been caught sitting on the toilets playing with his yortj (penis). Hence the name which he carried through all of his school years, and as far as I know all through his later life. Skintback was very bony like me with fuzzy uncontrollable hair that just sat on the top of his head. I consoled myself with the thought that I could outthink Skintback especially when Father let fly indiscriminately with his strap. At least I had that.

"Taylorrrrrrrr" I heard Brother Augustine call out to me, rolling the r in my name, which seemed to go on forever. I felt utterly dejected and trudged over to his office, which was opposite the chapel. Brother Augustine was a tall, Spanish monk who wore little glasses. He wasn't as frightening as Father Basil but once riled Brother Augustine could be very damaging.

I arrived at his office and knocked on the double doors. Brother Augustine swung open one of the doors and asked me to come inside. He quietly closed the doors behind me and walked to the front of his room. Terror didn't stop me slyly peeking at his office, and I was intrigued by
what it had. He had an imposing wooden desk in the middle of the room, with a great big chair behind it. The room was well carpeted and gave off the aura of latent power. There was also a large sofa and a beautiful cabinet with sparkling glasses and alcohol in different hues that would be turned into God’s blood at most masses. The walls were blue and there were pictures of saints, angels, Mary and Joseph and one of Jesus showing all of his heart to those silly enough to want to have a look. There was also another picture that intrigued me beyond my imagination – a picture of Jesus on a donkey besieged by people going to some type of festival. Later on in life I often wondered if he was going to see the other messiah in concert – Jimi Hendrix. There were also pictures of late monks and even ones of living monks.

Brother Augustine towered above me blocking the final grand sweep of the room. I felt his breath on the top of my hair and suddenly my dirty toes became very interesting. I had discovered that one of them had an ugly brownish colour on it, and I tried to manoeuvre my right toe over to clean this toenail. Brother Augustine began with a low rumble and rambled on about stealing and the body of Christ. “You will burrrrn in hell, Taylorrrrr. Stealing is a morrrrtal sin.” So on and so forth.

“Taylorrr, you’rrre neverrrr going to make it in life. When you get out of herrrrre, you arrrre going to get a flagon, find a shady tree and drrrink yourrrrself to death. All of you.”

Being so young, I clasped my hands in prayer and whispered, “yes brother. I am going to do all those things when I grow up.” I agreed with Brother Augustine because I thought that God was passing those words to the Brother who in turn spat them at me.

“Arre you listening to me, Taylorrrrr?” the rumble became a bellow. “Look up at me when I speak to you. Arrrre you listening to me, Taylorrrrr?”

Slowly lifting my eyes up to his face I realized that I was looking directly up his nostrils. I had seen a lot of ugly sights in the seven years on this earth, but that would have to have been one of the ugliest that I had ever encountered.

“Arre you still listening to me, Taylorrrrr?” he raged and frothed. Nodding my head meekly and feeling sick to the stomach I could not tear myself away from the jungle that was growing out of his nose. It was huge and bushy. Truly a magnificent sight.

The thing that also fascinated me was how these Spanish Brothers, nuns and priests dumped all their Spanish culture upon us Nyoongah kids. I wanted to be a matador when I grew up, killing the bull and giving the rose to the prettiest senorita in the audience. I thought that was very
romantic. Imagination played a very big part of my life. Although I was locked away in New Norcia, my mind, especially at nights, would wander off and be with my Mum and Dad. I would imagine us all sitting around a campfire, me snuggled up on my mother’s lap, whilst my Dad, uncles, aunties and cousins took turns telling me traditional stories, not only happy ones but scary ones too. Mum would pass me on to Dad, who’d hold me tightly, while Mum and my aunties would cook the biggest feed of kangaroo meat and damper out. Then someone would get out the didgeridoo and play the most beautiful sound. I would fall asleep on my mother’s lap, only to awaken to the sound of Brother Augustine’s voice, telling us boys to hurry up and get ready for mass.

Waking up with twenty or thirty boys around you, smelling of stale urine and God only knows what else would have made the devil himself afraid if he came sniffing around us. Brother would be aghast from the putrid smells that would engulf his big nose. That was what made this Brother so obvious – his nose. It just seemed to jut out from his face and accompanied with his accent, it was a sight. Grabbing his nose and mouth with his hands he would dash out of the dormitory followed by his habit, shouting “Outta bed, outta bed!” He would then come back to the room while later reciting his favourite words, “Dicarpen de merrida – open the windows, open the windows!” Opening the windows, I would gaze at the bars that covered them and would often be bewildered by them. I had been told by Skintback that these bars would stop us running away at night.

Brother Augustine would tell a couple of the boys to take the dirty sheets down to the laundry basket and all the boys who had wet the bed were to take a cold shower. I was usually one of the boys who had a cold shower, along with the likes of Yuwaa, Skintback and Warringa. We would all shiver and moan as we made our way to the showers, knowing that it was just as cold outside as the showers were going to be. All the boys who were having a cold shower were whimpering, and I would often hear a wail come from one of the other boys and muffled voices from the impact of the water and the strap coming into contact with bare bums.

One particular morning, Father Basil was standing right behind me about to flick the strap onto my bare bum. I felt the stinging sensation explode on the side of my leg as the belt ripped at my naked leg. I squealed as loud as I could, causing Father to bring the strap back for another attack. I pushed myself under the cold water, which took my breath away and cried silently as tears, phlegm and saliva mingled in the water whilst I spluttered for air. Father Basil stood behind me and barked, “Get out now and get ready for mass!”
Brother Augustine was always the one who told us boys about his Spanish homeland and culture. He was taken away from his beloved Spain as a novice and sent forth to make Christians out of the Aboriginal people of New Norcia. Little did he know that he would be put in charge of groups of little black boys. Brother Augustine told us little black boys of the uprising of General Franco and how he defeated the rebel soldiers or anyone who was disrespectful to the King or Queen of Spain. Listening to those stories of General Franco, I think at that time, he became my hero. Fuelled by my imagination, I killed many kangaroos with my little spear and all my medals were bravely given to me by the General himself. Another fascination was the matadors. I imagined that when I grew up that was what I was going to be. I could see myself in a black hat, with a bright jacket, my black pants and flicking a red cape while lunging at the bull with sword in hand. Ole! Ole! Ole! After listening to these stories, I wanted to be the greatest matador the world had ever seen.

Brother Augustine also told us about his life in Spain before he became a monk and how as a child he wanted to become a monk in Europe. He also said that he wanted to come out to Australia to teach the “natives” about the teachings of Christ. Save us from the dark. As if I can still hear the words echoing in my head today. We were also told about the food that was eaten in Spain. I was always under the impression and often wondered to myself that he must have had sheep-heads broth too as a child, because he didn’t mind us eating that while he ate eggs on toast and hot coffee. I also thought that when you finally became a monk that was then you were allowed to have eggs on toast and hot coffee.

The best thing in my young life at New Norcia was that I learned to read and write. To me they were my weapons. I devoted so much of my time to reading and writing, I ignored the other subjects that were taught to us, like arithmetic (ugh), social studies and history – another fucked-up subject I hated, but dare not express my opinion because I’d be flogged.

During our history classes, which I hated and can recall very vividly, there were pictures in our books of Captain Cook landing on these golden shores which he claimed. I was quite fascinated: I mean here was a man of honour and good Christian values, a man of integrity. I used to look at the pictures of this man as he gallantly shot the ‘natives’ for Mother England and I thought that he was just like John Wayne shooting the American Indians (with a smile on his face). I was about eight or nine then, and this man intrigued me. This was back in the early fifties and even Elvis Presley hadn’t been heard of them.

Sister Agnes was our teacher and she was a Spanish nun. She was one
of the cruelest nuns that I had the honour of coming into contact with. She was of medium height and had a parrot nose on her face (if you call it that) and she was wrapped up in this flowing habit which covered her from head to foot. She took great pride in telling the class of how Captain Cook discovered Australia with the rebellious ‘natives’ as his opposition and was quite often outnumbered. She relished in telling the class about his conquering. I often thought that he was bigger than General Franco, William Shakespeare, Robin Hood and the roman soldiers who crucified Christ.

As we grew up we often played Captain cook and I would always be stepping off the dinghy with my two revolvers loaded and ready for firing as tribes of ‘natives’ came to me to talk of their country and to tell me they were willing to share. With my convicts as my companions, I would give the order and shoot to kill. Because Captain Cook wanted this land for Mother England, by killing all the ‘natives’ this country would be only for Mother England.

Sister Agnes also took great pleasure in telling us that our ‘native’ words were forbidden to use in the Catholic mission. These words were a sin against God and we would forever burn in the flames of hell. We were told to use proper English words that Captain Cook brought to our shores and not to defame him or God by using any other. I look back now and can say with a wry smile that Captain Cook stole this land from the indigenous people. I wonder if God and Mr Cook are really rotting in the flames of hell? To me, they both deserve it.

Those religious people really fucked our heads up. This talk about Mother England was never ending. If she farted, we in Australia would smell and wallow in it. They taught us so much about Mother England; I’m sure most of us Nyoongah kids thought we were related to this great Captain Cook.

I think, no, I am sure, writing helped me from going insane at a very tender age. I was too ashamed to cry for Mum and Dad in front of the other kids. They would have teased the piss out of me. I know I gave them just one opportunity. It was a warm summer’s evening and Brother Augustine had all us kids around him. The holidays had just finished and a few of the lucky ones, not many, were telling stories of their mums and dads, and about their holidays. I was sitting there listening to all their beautiful stories. Tears were welling up in my eyes; my young heart was aching. The hurt was so intense the floodgates just burst open. I tried to stifle a sob, but it was too late. The sobs from my heart just exploded. The boys all went quiet, and Brother Augustine tried to console me and asked what was
wrong. I just got up, took off to the toilet, locked the door and managed to quell my sobs. I managed to perfect the art of crying and not make a sound.

The next day the kids called me ‘sissy’, ‘girlie’, ‘sook’ and whatever names they could lay their tongues on. After that, even when the priest flogged me with a strap in front of the boys, I didn’t cry. Even if my legs and hands were stinging or how much pain I was in – no way. I really found a friend in the pencil whenever I went bush. I would take a piece of paper with me, get away on my own and write letters to Mum and Dad or little poems to God asking him to look after Mum and Dad; that I loved them with all my heart and that I’d be good. The letters I wrote the them, it was usually long, their addresses would be Paris, Rome, London and I think even New York.

For a kid who was very much afraid of God, writing this now, I think I’ve blown my chances of getting a one-way ticket to heaven. Well, actually, I don’t give a fuck anymore. I mean, what I went through as a child and later as a man, so-called hell would be a playground for me. Wouldn’t it be great pissing on the flames of hell and threatening the devil, “If you don’t stop and behave, I’ll send you back to some mission in Australia!” Second thoughts, I’d probably say to him, “Like fuck! I wanna stop here.”

My writing skills blossomed. I really got to master the most basic words, you know like “Dick” and “Dora” before graduating to “Cinderella” and the school paper. We received this every month from the government and this was in about 1953, we had just completed our sports day and we were all hyped up. I mean our sports day had been a week earlier. Our colour faction, which was blue, had won and I had also won one of my races. I felt quite jubilant. The colour factions consisted of blue, gold and red. Most boys and girls were all mixed together. The boys never practised with the girls until the actual day of competing. The nuns and monks took a very dim view of both girls and boys practising together. They were afraid of the sexual violation that could erupt from the closeness of these children.

We were all in class and after we said our morning prayer to God, his Mother Mary and all the angels and saints in heaven, and God save the Queen, Sister Agnes told us to write a story or composition about the sports day. Johnny-jack was sharing a desk with me, whispered, “What! We gotta write about our school sports day?” Taking a peek at Sister Agnes, leaning over and whispering in response, “Yeah.” “But I don’t know what to write about,” he whispered in concern.

“Anything you can think of, like all the boys and girls running down the
track or high jump," I replied indignantly.

"Taylorrrrr!" shrilled Sister Agnes, rolling the r's on my name in her typical Spanish accent. "Stop talking now and write about your school sports day or you'll come up here and get the strap."

Choo, it was shame, as I felt every eye on me. I heard Johnny-jack snigger. I ignored him as I got out my pencil and paper and proceeded to get my imagination to recreate the events of last week. Images came flooding into my mind, Johnny-jack was not help, "What are you gonna write about?" he kept asking. "How do you spell this?" "Help me bony rooster!" "I don't know what to write about!" By this stage I was becoming quite exasperated. All these mental images in my mind were becoming distorted because of his natter. By ignoring him, I got stuck into the story of our sports day. As I write I became aware of a change within myself. I became emotionally involved with all the athletes by just putting my pen to paper. The mental pictures I created were awesome and bewildering. Little did I know then, while writing and creating, that it would enable me in later years to rise up against the odds of God, the devil, the strap, mass, the altar, wine, booze and all the monks, nuns and brothers put together. When we finished writing out compositions, we gave them to Sister Agnes.

One week later, when the school paper had come in for the mission and all the boys and girls, I was reading it and as I turned the page I saw a title that read 'Our Sports Day' by Alfred Taylor. It was one and a half pages long, and boy did I think that Shakespeare had nothing on me. I was indeed the master of the pen. Johnny-jack and all my other classmates were pointing at my story. Everyone took notice of my story and me. I felt as though I had just booted God off this throne. When Brenda took a sly peek at me for the first time, I was ecstatic.

Later in class Sister Agnes was telling us how good we were and that 'native' children could put a school paper together if we applied ourselves. She also added that the story written by me was quite a good one. I blushed and would have welcomed a tornado coming into the classroom. Even to this day I cannot accept it when someone compliments me about something nice. The rest of the day was spent with the class saying things to me like "You think you solid, look!" or "You think you a writta, choo!" All these things were said without any animosity. But to my amazement all the children enjoyed that story. I always thought that I was going to turn out to be a great writer in Europe. But being Aboriginal and back in the fifties, it was wishful thinking.

It was about this time that I became aware that boys were very different from girls. There were some very pretty girls in the girls' house;
I think I fell in love with all the girls in my grade six or seven class. They all reminded me of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ, the one whom I always prayed to. My friends and I used to tease each other over girls, but it was no big deal. Who in hell would end up with a mission girl? Maybe a watjella (white man) or a protestant Nyoongah I would think.

There was one in particular, I couldn’t help but take notice of. She had dark skin and beautiful auburn-coloured hair. Her name was Brenda and she had the most gorgeous dimples when she smiled. To look into her eyes was breathtaking. Whenever given the opportunity I would languish in her angelic face – not that that was often. Man, I was hooked. Infatuation could be cruel. Wardoo had been talking to me about girls and their tuppy (vagina) and we stick our yotj’s (penis) inside it. It was mind-blowing! I mean there were pretty girls in the class and I could look at them and feel nothing, but with Brenda it was unique and so bewildering, she was tantalizingly beautiful to me. I had an understanding that one day I was going to marry this coffee coloured beauty and live in eternal happiness. But looking back, it was never meant to be.

We didn’t know what nuns had under their habit. So we settled for the girls.
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JOAN LONDON’S novel, Gilgamesh, was the Age Book of the Year for fiction in 2002. She gave the eulogy at Julie Lewis’ funeral.
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