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Westerly

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS
Sadly, June, 2005 saw the passing of Margot Luke, who for many years until the late 1980s was fiction editor of *Westerly*. Margot was born in Hamburg in 1925 and eventually became an academic in German Studies, but not before working as a typist, in publishing, and with Anna Freud. Her own fiction was published in magazines and anthologies, and she was a theatre critic for both the *West Australian* and *Australian* newspapers.

**P**atricia **H**ackett **P**rize

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2004:

Graeme Kinross-Smith

for his story “Where Here Is”

that appeared in the No. 49, 2004 edition.
FIFTY YEARS WITH A BLUE PENCIL

Half a century seems a fairly long time in the life of an individual, but in the life of a literary and cultural magazine it seems an aeon. The existence of such magazines is always fragile, dependent on a relatively small number of dedicated readers, the sponsorship of government arts bodies and philanthropists, and the energy of a few dedicated individuals mostly working on the magazine in their spare time. Fifty years of *Westerly* has meant many changes of individuals — the current editors were in primary school when the magazine was first published — quite a few changes of sponsors, some shifts in readership, many changes in external context and in technology, but overall a remarkable consistency of purpose and direction. *Westerly* has always been a cultural journal with a predominant emphasis on literature, particularly that from or about Western Australia, Australia generally, and the Indian Ocean region. These emphases, which have their logic in *Westerly*’s geographical location, differentiate it from other literary magazines anywhere in the world, but it does have in common with many of them the encouragement of linguistic creativity and critical intelligence without fear or favour, with underlying values to express but without any particular literary or political barrow to push. The editors encourage critical discussion, and they publish many views with which they do not agree. In an increasingly spin-driven political environment and a cultural environment of increasingly visual rather than verbal literacy, this is an activity of crucial importance. Valuable actions and valuable thoughts are not possible without imagination and verbal sensitivity. Literary magazines such as *Westerly* are made possible through enthusiasm, not through profit, and economic precariousness may even fuel their liveliness.

In this issue Bruce Bennett, for more than twenty years an editor of the magazine, reflects on its history, including the antecedents from which it grew. What began as a small, local publication has long since been
professionalised in outlook, content and method of production. It might have been expected that the original, resource-starved publication from the western edge of Australia would have been parochial but in fact that first issue of *Westerly* in 1956 included two articles about Asia. The internationalisation of Australian studies which Robert Dixon describes and encourages in his review of the year’s non-fiction in this issue, began for *Westerly* with its very first outing.

What was more lacking fifty years ago was a large amount of quality poetry and fiction. Nowadays obtaining good creative and critical writing is the easiest aspect of publishing the magazine. The creative and critical work has grown in sophistication, in line with the increasing complexity and sophistication of Australian culture more generally. In Western Australia at least, that improvement is partly due to the existence of *Westerly*; publication in a major magazine validates and encourages a writer’s work, and *Westerly* has been privileged to help the development of writers as diverse as, say, Elizabeth Jolley, Edwin Thumboo, Alf Taylor, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Philip Salom. Most writing in *Westerly* is unsolicited but for this special, fiftieth year issue, we invited a number of prominent West Australian authors who have been associated with the magazine to submit creative work. Many have provided excerpts from work in progress, so that the issue provides a snapshot of the current activity of a number of leading figures. *Westerly* has always sought to publish new writers, and the issue, as is always our policy, mixes together the work of new and experienced poets, fiction writers and critics.

For most of its history *Westerly* was published as a quarterly but with a reduction in funding to Australian universities and difficulties created by the Australia Council, in 2000 the editors decided to publish as an annual. This enabled the publication of a large issue more acceptable to bookshops because it had a labelled spine and resembled a book, and made each year’s publication an event. ArtsWA has provided unstinting support annually throughout this period, enabling *Westerly* to remain the flagship of West Australian literature and West Australian writing to be seen shoulder to shoulder with national and international work. *Westerly* now publishes work from all over the world, but it retains a special emphasis on Western Australia and its surrounding region; a recent visitor to Perth, the Filipino poet and academic Jose Wendell Capili, commented on how important *Westerly* is to the South-east Asian region. In many ways, it is easier to have the magazine noticed in Asia than in the eastern states of Australia; but it has been ever thus – a reminder that Perth is on the same time zone as Singapore, Hong Kong and Beijing but is two or three hours (depending on the season) off Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.
Apart from content, fifty years has seen enormous changes to the way the magazine is produced – but very few to the way it is distributed. It is now easier to print a magazine than ever – but distribution remains the bugbear for all serious and literary cultural publishing, magazine and book alike. This problem may be overcome in the future through the web and whatever succeeds it. Who knows? In fifty years time subscribers to Westerly may read it off their visually enhanced mobile phones or computer chips in their fingernails. It is a truism to say that electronic technology is changing faster than anyone could have imagined even ten years ago. Mercifully, the nature of imagination and creativity and the aspirations of human life seem to have a contrasting perennialness. Imagination is still a long-legged spider tip-toeing across a stream.

Readers may be interested to know of the roles different people play in preparation of the magazine. As Co-editors, Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell have overall responsibility for all aspects of Westerly. Monica Anderson, the Administrator of the Westerly Centre, prepares the manuscript for the Designer, Kevin Barnett at Media Fixation. Production is managed by Roger Bourke of Quarto Publishing Services. The Co-editors commission three review-articles for each issue, one on the fiction published in Australia during the previous twelve months (roughly the financial year), one on the year’s non-fiction, and one on the year’s poetry. Normally, other material is unsolicited. Non-fiction manuscripts, if thought worth considering by the Co-editors, are sent to one or two readers chosen from Westerly’s list of Editorial Consultants, who make a recommendation about publishing. Poetry and fiction are selected by the respective editors, who are appointed for three-year terms; the current editors are Mark Reid and Brenda Walker respectively. Writing by any editors is generally excluded from the magazine. Westerly has pursued strong design qualities more than any other Australian literary-cultural magazine, and Robyn Mundy has prepared our covers for many years. For cover images we have tried to use the work of West Australian artists, often young artists; but for this special issue we thought it appropriate to choose a painting by an artist who was working when Westerly was first published (and its covers were very spare): Guy Grey-Smith. One of the most pleasant jobs for the editors is to choose the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize, awarded for the best work published in Westerly in the previous year; the prize is normally given to a poet or fiction writer, and no regard is given to reputation: past winners include major names and lesser-known authors. Westerly receives submissions from all over the world, and is listed in the major international bibliographies, such as the Modern Language
Financially risky work generated by enthusiasm warrants a great many thanks. We would like to thank our many subscribers, readers and authors; our editors, design artist, production manager and typesetter. We wish to thank the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and Helen Grey-Smith for their generosity in allowing us to use Guy Grey-Smith's painting, and our tireless Administrator, Monica Anderson. We would also like to thank the staff of the Reid Library, University of Western Australia. Preparation of *Westerly* would not be possible without the support of ArtsWA and our colleagues at the Westerly Centre, University of Western Australia, which officially publishes the magazine.

Whether it is printed on a page or pixelled on a screen, *Westerly* is inherently a participative activity; words are inert until read and responded to. Fifty years of *Westerly* is a cause of celebration of that creative and intellectual enthusiasm which has been undertaken by an enormous number of readers and writers. We hope you find their spirit in the following pages and in at least fifty years of pages to come.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell
Co-editors
BRUCE BENNETT

WESTERLY THROUGH THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

Westerly goes back. Its past, and pre-history, link it to other magazines and journals that have shared some of its aims and aspirations. The West Australian Magazine, which stopped in its tracks after one issue in 1851, was not an ideal model but colonial conditions were inauspicious. The Leeuwin, which survived through five numbers in 1910–11, was an interesting attempt at a literary magazine which featured stories, verse and essays including A. G. Stevens's influential piece “The Manly Verse of Western Australia.” The long-running The Western Mail (1885–1955) and The Golden West (1905–49) were newspaper magazines with a rural emphasis whose Christmas numbers featured short fiction, verse and creative journalism. The Western Mail had ceased publication the year before Westerly arrived on the scene in 1956 as a junior partner to Southerly (1939– ), Meanjin (1940– ) and Overland (1954– ) but in the same year as Quadrant.

Westerly's real on-the-scene predecessors were The Black Swan (1917–39; 1945–49), the Arts Quarterly (1949–50) and the Winthrop Review (1953–55). All three were annual magazine publications. The Winthrop Review, edited by H. P. Heseltine and G. C. Bolton, Westerly's immediate predecessor, echoed Matthew Arnold's somewhat pompous phraseology in setting out its aim to publish “the best that is thought and said in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Western Australia.” When other universities appeared on the scene in the later twentieth century – Curtin, Murdoch, Edith Cowan, Notre Dame – such expressions of cultural guardianship would have seemed exclusive, or comical, or both.

In its first decade, from 1956, Westerly was edited and published three times a year by student members of the Arts Union of the University of Western Australia, assisted by academic staff. Early editors were R. W. Smith (1956–57), Warwick Wilson (1958), Bruce Lawson (1959), and Hal Nicholson and Peter Abotomey (1960). J. M. S. O'Brien was appointed "permanent" editor, with John Hay as student co-editor, in 1963, the year
in which *Westerly* gained a Commonwealth Literary Fund subsidy and commenced as a quarterly published by the University of Western Australia Press. Although the first issue of *Westerly* in 1956 had welcomed material from “other sources” beyond the university, 1963 marked the point at which the magazine went definitively “national”, with a Western Australian emphasis. O’Brien was replaced as editor in 1966 by an editorial committee consisting of John Barnes, Peter Cowan, Tom Gibbons and Patrick Hutchings, but *Westerly* continued to be published by the University of Western Australia Press until the ambitious and then expanding English Department of the university took on full responsibility for the editing and publication of the magazine in 1975.

My own close association with *Westerly* began when I was invited to join the editorial committee in 1968. A Young Writers Issue in the same year (no. 2, 1968) included stories by Michael Wilding and Murray Jennings and poems by Andrew Burke, Noeline Burtenshaw, Roger McDonald, Ian Templeman, Rhyll McMaster, Nicholas Hasluck, Hal Colebatch and John Romeril. This issue also recorded the death of Henrietta Drake-Brockman, at the age of 66, and an appreciation of her work by Alexandra Hasluck.

When Peter Cowan and I took on full editorship of *Westerly* in 1975, we attempted to further develop *Westerly*’s strengths as a publisher of quality short fiction and verse and to make a contribution to criticism and commentary in the still-new field of Australian literature. (Canberra University College, later the ANU, had introduced the first full-year course in Australian literature in 1955 and the University of Western Australia followed suit in 1973. By 1975, six of the eighteen Australian universities offered such courses.) But Australian literature was not the same menu across the country. In Western Australia, for example, we wanted to give some special attention to outstanding local writing. We also had a strong interest in developing literary links with the countries of Asia whose contemporary authors and literary traditions were little known in Australia. Perhaps such countries would take a reciprocal interest in Australia. These were some of the challenges ahead of us.

The greatest privilege in my time on *Westerly* was to work with Peter Cowan. He was a quiet, understated man with a keen sense of ironic humour. Peter was recognisable by his William Faulkner-style moustache which earned him the nickname “Mo” when he rode his International Norton motorbike to teach at Scotch College before he joined the English Department at the University of Western Australia in 1964. At university he was just “Peter”. He gradually developed a superb collection of Western Australian and Australian literature, with special strengths in the colonial
period, which I understand is now housed in the Reid Library at the university. But there was a breakaway, artistic side to Peter Cowan’s personality, which had grown wings when he was in Melbourne with the RAAF during the later war years and was often AWOL with artists and writers such as Albert Tucker, Sid Nolan, Max Harris and John and Sunday Reed. Back in Perth, his wings were clipped but he used holidays and breaks from teaching to head off, sometimes with his son Julian (“Joe”) and wife Edith, in his Toyota “tank” to remote beaches, ghost towns of the interior or the deserts of the north. These “unsociable” interests found their place in his short fiction and novels. The more harsh and forbidding the country, the more Peter seemed to relish it. He was an expert amateur ornithologist too and an informed and critical environmentalist.

On the back verandah of the house he built in Mt Claremont, Peter Cowan and I spent many absorbing hours talking about books and writing. A lean and trim figure, often in overalls from working on his car, or on racing cars driven by Julian, Peter was frugal in his tastes. Occasionally, we shared a can of beer and a few crisps. He was a genuine scholar as well as a collector who was interested in reading Western Australian and Australian writing together with other literatures, especially American. Peter was a special mentor, and so too were Dorothy Hewett and Fay Zwicky who, together with Margot Luke, contributed greatly to the cooperative endeavour of a literary magazine ensconced in a university but espousing wider community responsibilities.

None of these writers, as I recall, favoured the direct teaching of creative writing, though all of them thought wide and close reading of a variety of literary texts important. As the Australian Academy of the Humanities gears up in 2006 to reclaim for universities the capacity to communicate with a wider public, I am reminded of that period in the 1970s and 80s when this seemed a natural thing to do, before “high theory” blocked some of our vision and before universities were driven to adopt corporate management styles and modes of communication. Learning afresh to speak to the Australian public is crucial to literary magazines and to universities and we might look to the past as well as a guide to our future endeavours.

The rear-view mirror brings Westerly’s contribution to Australian literary culture from the 1970s to the 90s into closer focus. In retrospect, it seems clear that Westerly helped to foster a remarkable renaissance in the short story over this period. Peter Cowan’s example set a tone and his view of the many possibilities for short fiction was exemplary. In Australian Short Fiction: A History (2002), I had no hesitation in using one of Cowan’s statements as an epigraph:
It is the form and pattern, the style, the degree of implication possible, the whole business of technique, which gives the short story its significance as a literary form.

With this kind of approach in mind – encouraging experiment but not for its own sake, focusing on the use made of material rather than the subject matter itself – we read thousands of stories submitted to *Westerly* by many hands from all states of Australia and overseas. In a special Short Fiction issue (no. 2, 1982), we observed that *Westerly* typically received 600 to 800 submissions a year of which we selected 20 to 30 stories. Names which recurred from the late 1960s and 70s included Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding, Vicki Viidikas and Murray Bail. The 1982 issue included Beverley Farmer, Tim Winton and Julie Lewis. In 1990, writers of short fiction included Robert Drewe, Terri-Anne White, Jean Kent, Nikki Gemmell and Marion Campbell. At this time, poetry selected by Dennis Haskell and Delys Bird was also making a considerable mark.

The editors of *Westerly* have consistently emphasised the local culture of Western Australia within a broader Australian context. We have done this not only by giving space to local writers but also by encouraging a more "regional" approach to the national literature. A defining event in this regard was a seminar organised by Ian Templeman at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1978 on "Regionalism in Contemporary Australia" at which Frank Moorhouse, Peter Ward, Tom Shapcott, Jim Davidson, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Cowan and Tom Hungerford all contributed (see *Westerly* 4, 1978). The implications of a more "regional" (and less "nationalistic") approach still reverberate around the country and are evident in anthologies, bibliographies and regional literary studies from Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia to the Hunter Valley and Gippsland. As "place" is subsumed for many people in a variety of virtual realities, it is not only the Greens who wish to reassert the value and significance of place, region and community. With these kinds of emphases, we were able to persuade both the State and Federal Arts Councils that *Westerly* deserved support, in the never-ending struggle to fund quality literary magazines.

*Westerly*'s Asian orientation has often been noticed. Indonesia had been the focus of a special issue in 1966 and a Focus on Malaysia and Singapore issue appeared in 1971. Thereafter, we produced special issues on Southeast Asia (1976), the Indian Ocean region (1979), Contemporary China (1981), India (1983) and the Indian Ocean countries again (1984). In the introduction to the Contemporary China issue, I noted that
however informed we might have been in matters of trade, our knowledge of the cultures, especially the literary cultures of Asia was lamentably thin, and that this general ignorance about Australia compounded the problem. The two-way street that we wished to open up included both Asian cultural knowledge and the study of Australia in these countries. The anthology *Westerly Looks to Asia* (1993) displays an interesting selection of literary work from or about Asia published between 1956 and 1992. A number of books published by the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature (CSAL) - now the Westerly Centre - testify to this early awakening of interest in the literary cultures of the region.

Sometimes a crisis serves to focus one’s values and attitudes. This was the case when Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie following the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). These events provoked a *Westerly* editorial in March 1989 in which I tried to sum up where we stood on this matter, which stated in part:

> *Westerly* places itself unambiguously as a supporter of the unfettered imagination. It encourages its contributors to take risks, artistic risks, knowing that these may be unpopular at the time they are written. *Westerly* requires of its contributors (and indeed of its readers) membership of no religious, political or ethnic group. It will not publish literary work solely because of its commitment to a cause, however attractive that cause may be to its editors, if the writing is not lively, and freshly imagined. Even under threats of tyranny or terrorism, we hope that communities of Australian readers and writers would resist the imposition of a single belief, insist upon the freedom to doubt.

My co-editors Peter Cowan and Dennis Haskell (who had joined the editorial team in December 1985) agreed fully with the sentiments in this editorial. Artistic risk-taking and the freedom to question and doubt have been important guiding principles for successive editors of *Westerly*. Long may they remain so.
ROBERT DREWE

PRISON DIARY

*For three months Robert Drewe taught fiction writing at London's Brixton Prison. These notes are from his prison diary.*

**Week One:**

A lone face looks out from a high cell window as I approach the prison. The person yells something, presumably an obscenity. A pall of depression falls as I enter the grim Victorian facade. A grey South London day, although it's supposed to be spring. Everything is old and cold and asphalty. Only the razor wire is new. I tell myself, as usual, that I have to balance this low mood with the possibilities of "experience". The guards check my pass but not my bag. I could be carrying explosives, and there are IRA prisoners in here.

Through five checkpoints to the prison library, where the deputy-governor hosts a welcome-to-prison afternoon tea. The library's wide selection is surprising: "quality" fiction and non-fiction as well as the expected thrillers and bestsellers, all in pristine condition. They don't look read. There are even five books of mine, more than I've found in any English library or bookshop outside.

The deputy-governor gives a hearty speech about the penal life, his efforts to keep people out of gaol, etcetera, and finishes by noting that -- *ha ha* -- he hadn't mentioned Australia's convict heritage once, but wasn't my being there terribly appropriate. This goes over well with the prison social workers, and especially with the middle-class "prison visitors" and library-duty prisoners, the old camp lags serving the tea and sandwiches.

I meet my co-writer-in-residence, the striking Sierra Leone poet Iyamide Hazely. Her gentle face looks out of place. She has a nervous habit of pulling the hem of her jacket over her hips.
Week Two:

We work in the education cell, just another small cell in A-wing, in the two-hour “free time.” Of the dozen or so students who meander in and out – or are randomly snatched out by warders – three stick in the mind. (1) The young black prisoner who, after two hours, says, yes, he has a question. To Iyamide: “Will you braid my hair like yours, Miss?” (2) Peter, an architectural historian serving eight years for armed robbery, and (3) Trent, an Australian sailor on remand for “tax matters.”

Everyone wants to talk about Neighbours and Home and Away. The murderers, rapists and thieves love them. Coming from the home of these TV soaps is kudos for me. The prisoners presume I’ve already seen the current episodes and want to know what happened. “I don’t want to spoil them for you,” I say. I don’t admit I’ve hardly ever seen them. It helps being Australian. In an English prison Australians are classless.

Finally I have a core of five or six regular students, as well as ten or twelve itinerants. When I eventually get them to sit still I talk about How To Get Started.

Week Three:

Peter, the architectural historian, has a journal a foot high – a thousand tiny spidery longhand words to a page. He loves to write but says he can’t do it outside. He’s too stunned by the beauty of the sky and trees and pubs. A classic recidivist, he’s been out for only seven months in the last 12 years (he’s 38). An intelligent, sensitive, ex-public schoolboy turned armed robber, he reads Oliver Twist to an illiterate gypsy boy every night and also corrects the spelling of a dyslexic young Cockney.

Peter tells about his last time outside. He was a special guest at a black-tie dinner-conference on prisoner rehabilitation at the Dorchester, invited to present the reformed-felon point of view. After following the Home Secretary and successfully delivering his speech (“for myself, brutally hard-won self-knowledge would never allow me to offend again”), he got drunk and stole a handbag and fur coat. Both events were captured by a security camera, a hotel innovation since his last time outside.

A drum class for beginners has started in the next cell in competition with us.

I talk about Writing What You Know and Keeping a Journal.
Week Four:

Trent, the sailor, says he's only attending the writing class because I'm Australian. He's very homesick - wants to talk about beaches and football, not writing. He was a communications officer in a submarine that submerged off Sydney Heads five years ago with two naval ratings still up in the conning tower. From there his life went wrong.

Peter complains about his possessions not being sent on from his last prison in Oxfordshire. He says he “absconded” from there disguised as a vicar, using a cut-up white plastic detergent bottle as a dog collar. “Sure!” I say, so he shows me his press cuttings. He's indignant. “When you abscond they’re supposed to send all your stuff on to you in the next prison. My papers and some of my clothes haven’t turned up. But today my tuxedo arrived.” From the Dorchester episode.

Peter says he has a grant from the Arts Council of England to write a three-part musical dialogue on Henry Purcell, the 18th century composer. “Wren churches are the best places for Purcell performances,” he says. “Really?” I say. He shows me his grant letter from the Arts Council.

I talk about Plot.

Week Five:

The tension and chaos of the daily two-hour “free time.” The constant thwack of table-tennis balls outside the education cell. Not to mention the drum class. None of the drummers is improving. The VCR is also always on full volume outside - car chases, gunshots, women screaming and males swearing and threatening them. (Violent, misogynistic videos are popular in prison.) Black and white youths come and go into the class with no idea of what “writing” or even “English” is. Anything to break the monotony.

Peter enters brushing his teeth and complaining that he's still waiting to get the other volumes of his journals back from Channel 4. He says he recently wrote and fronted a series on the Victorian architecture of British prisons for them. I don’t question him this time. He’s a sort of Sir Kenneth Clark of the slammer.

With all the noise and disruption it’s hard to keep a train of thought going, much less teach. Nevertheless I’m enjoying it, if enjoyment is the right word. Sometimes we have an amusing time.

This lesson I talk about Character.
Week Six:

There’s a new student, Basil, a polite old man from Ghana, very dignified, with a sweet smile. He agrees with everything I say, nods and hums. Then he writes in the first person even though I carefully explain I want third person this time. His perfect copperplate stresses how respectable his family is, and what an important official he was (assistant treasurer) for the Lesotho Engineering Bank’s women’s netball team. He killed his son-in-law with an axe.

Also a new student, Peter’s Cockney friend. He has two rows of pointy top teeth like a shark’s. He’s a thin, sly, pink boy who used to work in a bank, he alleges, and proudly carries his criminal record around with him in a manila folder, like a CV. He shows it around during class: he has one conviction for possessing half a kilo of marijuana, 25 for handling stolen goods. The other prisoners joke that he should get into another line of work. “You’re obviously not very good at it,” says Trent the Australian. He’s still reluctant to discuss his own case. What was previously “just a taxation matter” is now “trouble with a passport.”

I try, not too successfully, to teach them Point of View.

Week Seven:

A-wing looks like a bomb has hit it. Rubbish, odd socks and ripped girlie pinups lie everywhere, following a raid in which the officers turned over all the cells looking for a missing pair of spoons. Everyone’s still edgy. There’s another near-riot halfway through our session, with shouting, swearing and thudding feet, banging of clubs, and everyone locked back in their cells. The TV is turned off, the table-tennis noise silenced. (The ping-pong table has been smashed anyway in the earlier fracas.) Only the relentless drums keep beating. Why are they exempt from the lock-down?

Another new student. An arrogant, pale-skinned Black Muslim with a wispy blond beard enters with a copy of The Qur’an and Science and reads anti-Christian propaganda for fifteen minutes until he’s stopped. He pretends he doesn’t understand English. He mumbles about coming from Lebanon but looks German or Austrian. Swiss it turns out.

People come and go from the class even more than usual. Iyamide repeatedly explains to the young blacks what “creative writing” is. They’ve all put down their names for what looks like a lurk with a pretty woman. The Swiss Black Muslim starts reading aloud from the Qur’an again.
Peter's in a state of high anxiety after being “spun” and strip-searched five times in one afternoon. He says heroin foil has been planted in his cell and he’s fighting the charge. He’s complained to his lady gaol visitor, a Dame, and informed the warders of his friendship with the architect of the new Royal Festival Hall, Sir Richard Rogers. He said to one warder: “Do you know who I am?” This didn’t go down well. He keeps asking to take a blood test to prove he doesn’t do heroin. “I’ll use cannabis if there’s any around, but that’s it.” They’re on to him for being a smart-arse. Meanwhile, I enter the gaol carrying a big computer bag every time and no one’s searched it once.

Peter’s also peeved about a Harvard graduate in A-wing who got six months for white-collar crime involving $6 million while he got eight years for stealing $30,000.

Trent’s “tax matters” turn out to be allegations of smuggling ecstasy into Britain. He says it was only one tablet, discovered by Customs officers when his yacht sailed into Dover. It wasn’t even his, he says, and even if it had been, the charge should be possession, not smuggling. The ecstasy was left over from a party on the Riviera.

I note the tension of the men on remand, like Trent, not knowing when their court appearances are coming up or if their witnesses will be there. Also the strange sight of cooks frisking each other for cutlery, all in white hats and clothes, floury-faced but menacing. No blacks on kitchen duty.

Today’s lesson is Description.

Week Eight:

A prisoner tries to hang himself. The “swinger” is cut down in time but it has made A-wing uneasy again. Wild shouts and thumps outside our cell, yelling and banging, to the frenzied accompaniment of the drums. The TV goes off again, the table-tennis stops and everyone’s locked in. Guards patrol the floor. One stands outside our room to protect us. Usually we’re just reliant on an emergency button on the wall. We’re supposed to press it if things get nasty.

More “possessions” of Peter’s turn up from the other prison he so rapidly left: a brown paper parcel of human bones and a packet of condoms. In the last gaol he was allowed to go on an archaeological dig outside and he had the bones in his cell for safekeeping. They were several centuries old. “It was all right, I used to put a Christian cross over them at night,” he says. His writing exercises are excellent. He always does the assignments.
Peter reads a story about his new cellmate, Dylan, a 22-year-old blond boy with (Peter says enthusiastically) aquamarine eyes. Sounds like Peter's fallen for him. Dylan is the son of two British drug smugglers who operated out of Turkey. His earliest memory, aged four, is of watching his mother squat on the floor while his father pushed a sausage-skin of heroin up her vagina.

When they were arrested Dylan grew up on the streets of Turkey, shining shoes and being intermittently looked after by the Turkish drug connection. Eventually his mother died of an overdose. His father was still alive in prison somewhere. Dylan himself was in Brixton for crack dealing. From the excitable note of Peter's tale, it sounds like he's fallen pretty hard. Even though I've noticed the way he takes up young prisoners - skinny, street-rat types, I'd somehow thought he was hetero. He likes the image of himself as a sort of zany Pimpernel figure.

Encouraged by Peter's revelations, another prisoner, a recently come-out gay, defiantly reads an in-your-face description of his recent sexual acts. All the other prisoners, except for Peter, leave the room.

Trent is in court today, confidently expecting to get off all charges. He's already done six months awaiting trial.

I talk about Dialogue.

Week Nine:

The pale Swiss Black Muslim is crouching by the cell door as we arrive, and almost spits with venom at Iyamide. He's asked her to intercede for him. He says he has a black friend facing execution for murder in Huntington Prison, California, and he wants her to get a message to him. She asks the head of the education unit, and she says no. Iyamide tells him this, says it's against regulations. Anyway she has no power - she's a poet. He calls her an Uncle Tom and is physically threatening. She tells him to back off. A warder has to intervene.

Iyamide is upset by the bad vibes and violence. She keeps belching, then apologising profusely and doubling over with stomach pains. She complains that the warders deliberately urinate in front of her at the prisoners' open urinals. The female warders, stereotypical chunky weightlifter types, walk in on the men in the open toilet stalls. The showers and urinals are open to public view.

Trent appears in prison uniform for the first time, having been found guilty and sentenced to nine months for drug smuggling. He's already
done six on remand. His eyes are red-rimmed and he can't concentrate. He's agitated and trying to ring his girlfriend in Holloway women's prison. They've also been convicted of attempting to defraud the tax office.

My class all read out their completed stories – understandably variable in quality. Peter's is publishable, even without editing. He reads it in a stage Yorkshire accent. It's about his middle-class (adopted) childhood, of working in his father's slaughterhouse in his school holidays. He had to shovel the lungs and innards "to show me a taste of the real world." To avoid the blood and guts he used to arrange to cut himself with carving knives and have to spend the day in the infirmary. He started thieving early. An honour scout, he'd steal trinkets from his friends' mothers' mantelpieces and bedrooms. He'd get them out at night, spread them on his bed with his scout medals, and admire them.

I talk to them about Not Listening to the Negative Voice in Your Head.
Making sense of the fictional oeuvre of Robert Drewe has not proved easy for either reviewers or critics. His first novel dealt with the notorious genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines, his next with a well-meaning, bumbling Australian who worked for an international aid agency in the Philippines. Then came challenges to local myths when he celebrated the beach rather than the bush as Australians' most crucial, shared experience in *The Bodysurfers*, and he breathed new life into the story of the country’s most notorious outlaw, Ned Kelly, in *Our Sunshine*. A similar unpredictability characterises his most recent works: *The Drowner*, a tale of an antiquated profession spanning three continents and his autobiographical memoir, *The Shark Net*, that reveals the factual basis of some of his early fiction. Confronted with such variety, with so many unexpected shifts of focus, nonplussed commentators, encouraged no doubt by Drewe’s edition of *The Penguin Book of the Beach* (1993), have linked his achievement with the Australian littoral, while, as he wryly notes, “every questioner has always been hung up on the beach.” The most impressive exception has been Bruce Bennett’s reading of Drewe’s early career as a novelist. Bennett notes how flawlessly Drewe’s experience of “newspapers, and their attempt to access the truth and then publish it,” has fed into his novelistic “quest after truths about contemporary Australia...his abiding interest in...[its] socio-political and human directions.” But whereas Bennett has drawn attention to the underlying cogency of Drewe’s early fiction and describes his subject’s conception of truth as an “elusive” and “bewildering[ly] hybrid,” the author himself has offered an alternative image, at once more idiosyncratic and commensurate with both his heterogeneous material and his experimental narratives: the ricochet. As unfolded in *Fortune*, his third novel, the term embraces a theory of fiction and of life. There the narrator argues that
investigative reporting and writing the traditional novel are “largely a matter of attaining the continuous line, of making connections...like a child’s dot-to-dot puzzle and discovering a giraffe” (F 48). This, like an over-reliance on so-called fact, inevitably falsifies reality. Instead of a one, two, three sequence or logical, incontrovertible connections, he maintains that “people and events career off each other only to remain inextricably linked” (F 48). This ricochet principle operates arguably in Drewe’s most demanding novels that juxtapose distinctive narratives, switch abruptly between centuries or locations, and refuse to make connections or provide a conventional narrative flow. At times implicit, as in the staccato and entwined narratives of The Savage Crows, or recast in terms of his interest in cartoons and photography, this flexible conception has helped place him at the forefront of local writers concerned with investigating the diverse legacy of white settlement in Australia and the Pacific region.

Both Drewe’s fiction and his celebration of the ricochet principle grew out of his experience of journalism. From a cadetship on the West Australian, he moved to the east coast and to posts of increasing responsibility with the Age, the Australian and the Bulletin. He won the prestigious Walkley Award, Australia’s equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, twice for stories in the Bulletin that showed “a strong narrative line, together with a psychological dimension and hints of mystery”: characteristics shared with fiction that pointed to a growing impatience with the limitations imposed by his profession. For journalism, in the words of Fortune, “cannot begin to tell the story,” or “cope with...the links between the characters and their ramifications” (F 18). It “shies away from psychology,” and “for all its nosy reputation it mostly ignores the private life and rarely sees the larger truth” (F 18). Drewe was becoming preoccupied with complicating and scarcely visible factors or, as he put it, with what remained outside the frame:

The idea of photographs I find intriguing, too. I’ve always been more interested, even as a child, in what was going on outside the frame. Was some kid making a face? Was there someone watering their lawn? If you look at your own family photographs you can sometimes remember what was happening, and the missing bits to me are more interesting and important than the posed bits.

The significance of the missing, banished or forgotten in his work is adumbrated here, as is his abiding interrogation of what constitutes so-called reality, and how it is constructed. A sentence later he continued:
I was also trying to show that life has a definite if irregular narrative line based on a ricochet effect. I wanted to give the impression that there are unseen forces at work all the time, call them politics if you like. Unseen forces to some extent dictate what sort of a life we're going to lead. These are things over which the individual has no control whatsoever.

Seeking a form with a longer attention span that could embrace these possibilities, Drewe left the *Australian* to write his first novel which appeared in 1976 to critical acclaim. *The Savage Crows*, which was originally entitled "The Genocide Thesis," 8 is a complex investigation of guilt, repression and local racism, as they emerged from one of the darkest chapters in Australian history: the attempted extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines. 9 His main protagonist, Stephen Crisp, is a disconcerting image of the modern, caring Australian. Reeling from a failed marriage, young and self-absorbed, his judgement is fallible, especially in dealings with his estranged spouse, but his motives are usually laudable. Having left his restricting job with "the Commission," he is researching colonial attitudes towards the indigenous peoples, as well as seeking "to understand everything, starting with himself and working up to the nation" (SC 8). All around him are indications of dark, troubling origins ignored by self-centred white society. Crisp’s apartment, for instance, is invaded every night by slugs, metonyms for a primeval, intractable underworld that is capable of adapting to European change. His dreams are haunted by the bloody corpse of an Aboriginal, brutally dissected by pseudo-ethnographers in their rush to collect key skeletal parts before the race’s extinction. Most Australians, however, have conveniently forgotten that their white forebears carried out allegedly scientific acts comparable with concentration camp atrocities, exhuming corpses, decapitating them and making tobacco pouches out of human skin. 10 Similarly, Sydney Harbour is dazzling from a distance. But viewed at close quarters it, like individual episodes of black-white contact, is marked by the detritus of laissez-faire and commercial imperatives. Crisp, on the other hand, cares intensely about the racist past and present, and shares with Drewe a belief that "the missing bits...are more interesting and important than the posed bits."

Yet privileged vision and selective blindness can exist side by side, thanks in part to an Orientalist legacy, as Drewe shows by paralleling Crisp with George Augustus Robinson, the controversial nineteenth-century Conciliator of the natives in Van Dieman’s Land. To establish comparisons,
the narrative shifts between colonial and modern times, between journal or thesis entries and the protagonists’ thoughts and actions, in a foreshadowing of the ricochet principle. As variations on the prototype of the explorer-missionary, both men see themselves as potential benefactors of an endangered minority, but both are regarded by those apprised of their projects as mad and self-interested visionaries. Robinson has a wife and social position to consider, as well as potential Crown rewards for his labours in the wilds. Crisp is seeking a personal raison d’être. Their preaching falls on unwilling ears, and they are impeded in their attempts to understand the native other by unexamined motives and stereotypes—though in Crisp the Orientalist legacy is weaker and admits nagging doubts. Both learn, for instance, that “Things don’t seem as cut and dried” out in the field (SC 49). This further unsettles Crisp, whereas to Robinson, who is imbued with white supremacist notions, it is a catalyst to more strenuous self-projection: “Here, on 29th April, I decided to take up my grant of five hundred acres and establish my civilization,” he notes proudly (SC 53). His mission is fundamentally specular and proof against inconvenient divergences from his script: “I cannot easily describe the emotions of excitement and curiosity I felt as I approached the island. I regarded it as a mirror in which I hoped to find the reflections of my faith” (SC 50). Blinded by his preconceptions, Robinson combines attributes of Don Quixote and Candide with sinister outcomes. He interprets Caucasian lasciviousness as chivalry, or the ravages of white diseases as the workings of an inscrutable Providence—misreadings that spell the potential extinction of an indigenous people. Crisp and his society have moved beyond these reassuring myths, but they still prefer their Aborigines voiceless and submissive, reducible to decorative postcard format and other clichés of the day.

The concluding section of the novel carries the reader well beyond the usual “frame” of history or media coverage, when Crisp’s misgivings inspire a “colonial odyssey” (SC 239) that takes him to an island, midway between Tasmania and the Australian mainland, where the hybrid descendants of the Tasmanians are rumoured to subsist. Here ultimate answers elude him. Motifs of deception, confusion and self-interest predominate at this “arse-end of the Earth” (SC 242), with the group’s spokesperson, the Blue Plum, confessing in a moment of climactic candour that their true business is not the daily grind of mutton-birding but the flip-side of care, that is: “Guilt, of course. Fuckin’ guilt. There’s money in it boy, and a new tractor or abalone boat when you need it” (SC 262). Being of “certified Tasmanian blood” is now a lucrative proposition, but the
remnants are still as marginalised and invisible in the whiteman's order as in colonial times – in spite of the Blue Plum’s bravado.

The narrative approach of A Cry in the Jungle Bar, Drewe's second novel, was more conventional, as if to anchor its volatile subject matter: Australia's vexed relationship with its immediate region. This is focused through international aid-workers, and so extends the previous investigation of the ambiguities of care, or disinterested action, in a postcolonial environment. Parallels are numerous between the modern nation and its main representative here, especially in their understanding of themselves as good, caring neighbours, whose well-intended advances are rebuffed unexpectedly – yet also predictably. For Australia, as a major outpost of British power and potential second Britannia in another world, had traditionally believed it was meant to rule and command respect (read subservience). After 1945, growing nationalist sentiment rendered this view untenable in the Asia-Pacific region, where economic development and mass consumerism were fast levelling the differences between East and West. But white nation states and their citizens were slow to grasp the momentous change, as Drewe demonstrates through Richard Cullen, who is a latterday version of the altruistic colonial official, burdened with supremacist prejudices. A former sportsman turned UN employee, Cullen still retains his competitive urges, but is battling unsuccessfully to keep his body in shape and to prevent his marriage from disintegrating. His sense of aging ungracefully is heightened by sylph-like local figures who leave him feeling “smelly, hairy; a ginger and white mountain” (CJB 37); while, despite being white and the biggest man in most gatherings, he repeatedly misses the erotic spoils. The clichés of the past are supplemented by those of the present, disseminated by media sensationalism, and Cullen, like elements of Australian society, has not moved on, emotionally or mentally. He is at home where “the food was English, the ambience nineteenth-century colonial, the views panoramic” (CJB 138). That is, he no more wants to be bothered by troubling detail or local peculiarities than by potentially disquieting depths: “Religion was a secret he did not particularly wish revealed” (CJB 72). Well-meaning but ill-informed, he is persistently identified with the local water buffalo, bubalus bubalis, dubbed the tractor of Asia. Both plod unseeingly in a circle, condemned to endless labour and silent suffering, in Cullen's case in part by subscription to Orientalist clichés.''

Ultimately Cullen, despite working for an aid agency, fails as a caring figure. His alienation from his wife and from the objects of his professional attention is profound. He is only able to cope with time-honoured images
of the East, its reality disconcerts and defeats him. Attitudes, which in the past afforded “benevolent” white interlopers, like Robinson, with a reassuring way of processing the unfamiliar, are now a handicap: “They all seemed to read him [Cullen] like an open book, whereas the reverse was never true” (CJB 180). On occasions he likens himself to Gulliver among the Lilliputians (CJB 129), a comparison which captures both his internalised self-image as a lofty, superior being and the distance it places between him and local actualities, as well as an abiding sense of disjunction and physical discomfort. The only jungle bar he feels truly at ease in is an upmarket Manila variant which bears that name. When confronted with an unsanitised, seedy version near the favelas he still cannot abandon his search for an exotic princess, or at least a “salacious beauty” (CJB 234). He ends up, however, with a tired mother, and his fond dream of being in a realm where “normal restrictions no longer applied” (CJB 230) is punctured by a baby’s cry, then a pimp’s knife. Like Crisp, he is a dupe of his own fantasies and ingrained stereotypes. Asia is not what it seems, or at least not what the hapless white voyeur imagines. Far from being child-like and vulnerable it has an agenda of its own – a point highlighted in the final, open-ended scene when the muddy Australian, weak from loss of blood, stumbles upon a well-armed group of MNFL “rebels.” For the likes of Cullen the region is best viewed through the gun-slits of a military helicopter, from a safe height that leaves illusory surfaces and racist platitudes intact, as did the long-range vistas afforded by Crisp’s Potts Point apartment and the publicly sanctioned culture of forgetting.  

Drewe’s apprenticeship to journalism had borne fruits. To it he attributed seminal lessons in writing short, declarative sentences, in producing lucid, highly readable prose. And it had alerted him to a fascinating variety of subjects available to contemporary writers. From among them he had focused prophetically at the outset of his fictional career on what, by the end of the century, had become the major divisive issue of racial reconciliation, and unerringly foreshadowed the difficulty, even the apparent impossibility, of finding among his contemporaries matter for a “bridge between the past and a longed-for tranquil future” (SC 248). Similarly, he had pinpointed Australia’s abiding problem of winning acceptance in its region. Although its allegiance had switched from Britain to the United States, it was still widely regarded among its neighbours as a “gauche intruder” and bastion of white hegemony.  

Subsequent books confirmed this journalistic instinct for the breaking story, for the issue that was bound to engross a nation’s attention.

With his next novel Fortune, which enunciated the ricochet principle,
Drewe returned critically to his roots in journalism and Western Australia. As he revealed later in *The Shark Net*, Perth had marked him indelibly. Spread out along endless coast-line and cradled by a magnificent river, the State capital is built not only on yellow sand but, as *Fortune* demonstrates, on local myths and intense patriotism abetted by the press, which “imposes its own form of order on the world’s, the nation’s, the town’s events” (*F* 234). Reporters are arraigned for acting like “embryonic novelists. Ordering time. Playing, just slightly, at being God” (*F* 162), as are photographers for rearranging props to create an image true to their take on events, and the illusion of an explicable pattern. Instead, the disenchanted journalist-narrator proposes that incidents conform more often to the zigzagging, fragmenting course of a ricochet. Embracing such a conception of reality involves a willingness to eschew clear-cut closure, in favour of pursuing shards that may eventually become untrackable and must be left hanging in the air.” Kundera’s theory of fiction seemed a response to similar insights, and was copied down approvingly as Drewe worked on his manuscript: “This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual sketches of a journey leading towards a theme, a thought, a single situations, the sense of which fades into the distance.” His own completed novel affirms these views with a multi-stranded, at times discontinuous narrative, that pushes beyond the known facts into realms accessible only to imaginative fiction.

*Fortune* also foregrounds Drewe’s preoccupation, implicit in his earlier books, with the effects of the media’s habit of reducing events to an easily comprehensible message. A simple instance of this are the war cartoons produced by Leon Levinson for *Life*. A drawing of the vulgar excesses of Allied soldiers is as unwelcome as one that shows a pool of urine, left by the stressed Japanese delegate who ratified his country’s surrender on board the *Missouri*. The disconcerting puddle is reduced on the cover of *Life* to an inconsequential “shadow” (*F* 194). Markers of impropriety, degradation or psychological trauma are not allowed to darken the glorious narrative of victory. They are as unacceptable as Levison’s experiments with a “chaotic skew-line which he thought better suited to detailing the anxieties of modern life and politics” (*F* 189). With time the synoptic image, disseminated by the press or other media, becomes the historical record, and even a vital shaper of actuality in two senses. First, it is the ultimate authenticator; as Levinson remarks: “Nothing was real until it was reproduced” (*F* 188). Secondly, as the main protagonists in this novel and Drewe’s next book show, their life-story gradually comes to resemble the distortions of the press:
In their overheated way it was the papers that defined us, presented us as sure things, as blocks of type. And when they declare you to be so-and-so, then you become it. Strange the way they make you famous or notorious before you are — and then you are in spades. (OS 35)

In short, Drewe’s novels repeatedly offer an expose of how “truth” is formed, as well as a recuperation of lost complexities. For the continuous line and finished sketch offer, at best, a semblance of truth, whereas existence is “like a coastline, of widely differing physical features...which while serving as the perimeter of possibilities also gave no hint as to what lay within” (F 200). To explore these invisible possibilities is Drewe’s self-appointed task and, fittingly, his third novel focuses on the misrepresented life of an actual diver.

At the centre of Fortune is Spargo, who shares many traits with the bushranger, Ned Kelly, the hero of Drewe’s Our Sunshine. Both are based on actual persons whose entanglements with the law brought them notoriety and savage death. Both books share a lively scepticism about the role of the media in reporting, or fabricating, reality. “Why did they always draw him as a maniac?” (OS 4), Kelly muses; Spargo is similarly simplified, and later traduced, by the press. Kelly, however, became a local hero, whereas the story of Alan Robinson (the real life Spargo) was lost among competing international incidents, much as the trial of Perth’s most notorious murderer, “the Nedlands monster,” was pushed off the front page of the West Australian by the unfolding drama surrounding President Kennedy’s assassination. In a synopsis to Picador, Drewe characterised Spargo as “an Australian folk-hero living in the wrong era.” A further factor in Spargo/Robinson’s eclipse was his awkward standing with both the law and the press. He flaunted convention, whether through a public affair with a millionaire’s wife or in fisticuffs with police, yet helped initiate legal reform. In addition, his unfolding story, although colourful and eminently newsworthy, overtaxed journalism because it “flew in the face of the Golden Rule. It changed tack, altered shaped, wilfully added and subtracted characters. The constants were very few” (F 29).

Spargo’s life, as Drewe depicts it, is driven by his psychological make-up and by the press. That he was alternately headstrong and downcast, malleable and unpredictable, is never questioned, but neither is the effect of his sudden elevation to celebrity status and the expectations of reporters:
But the next day he had blithely dropped all his work and domestic responsibilities to satisfy the requirements of the media. Their requirements were brutally simple: they wanted the treasure recovered, they wanted it recovered now and they wanted it recovered in front of their eyes exclusively.

But put yourself in Spargo’s place, carried along by the tide of your own quoted remarks and photographed actions. There are your malleable words, rearranged and set down for posterity. There is your likeness, allegedly brave and imaginative, “preparing to recover the Fortunyn treasure” and “studying a chart of the shipwreck site.”

It was impossible not to surge forward. (F 111-12)

Similarly, the press charts his downfall, with its carefully stage-managed or selected photos offered as incontrovertible evidence of the factual basis of its story. This process, Drewe stresses, is undermined by blind spots. Not only does the press become the author and ultimate arbiter of the accuracy of its own stories, but reporters, like the narrator, can easily be fooled by appearances. They overlook what is below the surface, in this case Spargo’s instability, and that their subjects are equally adept at using “props,” or constructing scenes to suit their own version of events:

I had badly underestimated how far Spargo was out of kilter by then. I was influenced by his props: the pregnant girlfriend left behind, the taped threats against him, the high bail money he had posted, not to mention the treasure I imagined he had stashed away somewhere. To me he had everything to lose by running away. (F 31)

These shortcomings justify reanimating this subject, and Drewe triumphs unequivocally over press constraints in depicting Spargo’s death. It came just before his impending acquittal, when he was found suspiciously hanged in his cell. Able to move boldly outside the “frame” of history and into the realm of non-fact, the novelist draws together indices in their most likely outcome – the chilling murder of Spargo by frustrated law enforcers – in scenes emancipated from the normal strictures of admissible evidence. This imagined ending affords potential illumination of the historical record and fulfils Spargo’s recurring nightmare of death in a diving bell, at the same time as it propels him towards the departed spirit of his lover who had already discharged a shotgun between her thighs.
Not all Drewe’s fiction is as experimental as these early novels, and this
is not the primary reason for his high standing in literary circles. Content
dictates form in both his long and shorter creative pieces. What sets him
apart from his Grub Street confreres, in spite of their shared “simple
declarative sentences,” is imagination. Constantly it tugs him beyond the
bare historical facts in search of more complex truths, and his later
autobiography is shot through with its bright effects. There scenes
reverberate with his fantasies, such as a lion from the South Perth zoo
roaming the corridors of his suburban parental home. Caged but
undaunted, a lion resurfaces again at the outset of Our Sunshine as part of a
purloined circus, introduced by Drewe as an analogue for the outlaw’s
situation on the eve of the fatal shoot-out at Glenrowan – out of sorts,
occasionally roaring and finally shot down by a constable crazed with
bloodshed. From the well-known but bare facts of Kelly’s existence Drewe
creates “a chronicle of the imagination” (OS 183), which brings to life the
familiar arguments that race, class, injustice and, in addition, the press
played a considerable part in Kelly’s revolt, yet illustrates as well Drewe’s
belief that existence is shaped by coincidence, complexities and actions
with unexpected and irreversible consequences: “Did I ever consider
going straight? Madam, I must say it’s not as cut and dried as that. Things
flow over into other things” (OS 65). All is told from the outlaw’s stand-
point in a racy, endearing vernacular that can liken a gin-induced hangover
to “looking at life through a black snake’s bum” (OS 84), or memorably
define “a hearty bushman’s breakfast” as “a spit, a piss and a good look
round” (OS 76). Through Our Sunshine and earlier novels Drewe has
unequivocally demonstrated that Australia need not always be “the sort of
country that gets the consolation prize,” as its regions and local figures
offer rich material for fictional exploration.

This rewriting of Australian myths and stereotypes has been continued
in his two collections of short stories, The Bodysurfers and The Bay of
Contented Men. Drewe’s beaches are not simple places of sun, surf and fun,
but the backdrop against which telling scenes in the lives of his characters
unfold. The opening story of The Bodysurfers shows the narrator’s recently
widowed father turning towards another potential partner during a
Christmas gathering in a Perth beachside hotel. In the final story the
speaker, stung while surfing at Bondi Beach, makes the transition from
vulnerable solitude to a new relationship. At one level, these and
intervening stories “fill the art vacuum for heterosexual, surf-obsessed
sensualists” (BS 140), perhaps most brilliantly in “Baby Oil,” where the
lovers’ lubricant provides an unexpected measure of his partner’s
infidelity. At another they show that, although Australia did not invent beach culture (the honour is California’s), it nevertheless is central to local self-understanding. Here teenagers gather to assert their independence and to participate in crucial rites of passage; to beaches adults return in quest of their lost youth and happiness, typified by treasured images of surfing and the beach shack. In both collections Drewe’s characters are anything but “contented men.” Often they are on the brink of, or recovering from, a breakdown, or they may be unbalanced like a homophobic pervert (“The View from the Sandhills”) or the applause-hungry Kevin Parnell, who commits incest with his daughter (“The Silver Medallist”). Whether set in Bondi or the world’s first motel in California, his stories centre on emotional turmoil and are strikingly contemporary. The account of Paul Lang’s personal chaos in “Eighty Per Cent Humidity” begins, for instance, with a list of his “bad discoveries” in “ascending order of disruption”: “they are the flat battery in his old Toyota, the lump in his penis and the lesbian love poem in his girlfriend’s handbag.” Not surprisingly, The Bodysurfers struck a deep chord and was adapted for the theatre, radio and film.

In spite of their brevity, these stories at times reveal not only thematic but stylistic continuities with his longer works, as “Life of a Barbarian” illustrates. In less than twenty pages Drewe creates a complex fiction that shuttles in and out of the past, shifts between continents and cultures, and sets up revelatory, open-ended parallels in unlikely places. Its preoccupation with dislocation, and the new perspectives this affords, is dramatically established at the outset by a Tokyo earthquake which sends Michael Pond, a recognisable variant on Richard Cullen, sprawling on the floor of his shower. Pond and his life are taking a beating; “it is,” as the narrator remarks laconically, “a long time since the certainties of his days as a mining engineer” (BCM 152). He and his wife cohabit but are emotionally severed; their son, as a convert to a religious cult, is lost to them. Has the boy’s life been ruined or saved? Instead of an answer, the story juxtaposes his sacrifice with that of the kamikazes, who chose individual death that their country might live. Pond is successively rattled by tremors as well as painful insights into his own existence. Like a lost soul he seeks solace in brothels, only to experience humiliation; in alcohol, only to fall a prey to memory, regret and recognition of his intrinsic ugliness, as when he stands naked, like a boiled lobster, before an unwilling local concubine. As selected vignettes of his business trip show, Pond’s life has indeed become that of a barbarian, by Western as well as Japanese standards. The story, however, closes enigmatically with him
addressing a kamikaze-like epistle to his family before lying on his bed. There his openness “to all the tremors and changes of the external and internal worlds” (BCM 167), as well as the gradual invasion of daylight, at least mark an advance on his befuddled and incapacitated state in the opening scene.

The possibility of transformation is at the heart, too, of Drewe’s most recent novel, *The Drowner.* Taking its title from an extinct profession that used water to spare fragile roots from deleterious conditions, the book interweaves a love-triangle with dramatisations of the importance of water and diverse Old World heritages in the antipodes. Will Dance, the son of a drowner, continues scientifically the family profession of water control, when he becomes the engineer in charge of piping water from Perth to distant goldfields hemmed in by desert. Romantically his heart belongs to Angelica Lloyd. She is the daughter of the renowned London actor Hammond Lloyd, who is determined to keep her charms and progeny to himself. Scenes involving the young lovers in Britain, Rhodesia and Perth are juxtaposed with ones that reveal the interests of three professionals on the goldfields: Axel Boehm, photographer, Felix Locke undertaker and aspiring poet, and Jean-Pierre Malebranche, a doctor of medicine determined to discover the cause of the typhoid epidemic that is ravaging their community. Their names evoke respectively a famed German alchemist, Jakob Boehme, “the founder of English empiricism, John Locke,” and Nicolas Malebranche, Locke’s renowned French contemporary who devoted his life to reconciling Cartesian philosophy and natural science with Christianity. Their antipodean reconfiguration affords a subtle commentary of these heritages, as when Locke is identified with both chilling death and a strong but covert creative impulse: unbeknown to his friends he is working on a poem about “the mysterious disguises of the private self” (D 300). Disguise, in the form of acting, is also a preoccupation in the main plot, together with humanity’s disinclination to face unmitigated actuality, as when Dance, backstage, “was romantic enough not to want to spoil the stage illusion of mystery and beauty with coarse reality” (D 86). This selective blindness hinders his attempt to gain Angelica, who embodies the mysterious female other, alternately life-giving and endangering like water itself. The object of Dance’s and her father’s desire, Angelica becomes the site of a territorial, sexual struggle that assumes imperial overtones. In the final scene which registers “a change in levels” (D 324), literally as water is pumped in, metaphorically as the narrative enters the realm of fable, Dance wins Angelica, who drowns her own father in the very water that brings the possibility of
sustained settlement to the wilderness. The promise aroused by their initial encounter in the steaming enclosures of Bath, in England. Outside the “frame” of the main plot, however, is Axel Boehm, a figure who challenges happy endings as well as simplistic notions of reality. As both his name and metier underscore, change and chemical transformation are his element. Since its invention photography has been increasingly privileged as an accurate, indeed unsurpassed, recorder of actuality, whose reliability was guaranteed by unalterable mechanical processes. Boehm, appropriating this authority, sets out to capture with his camera life on the goldfields, and ultimately to create a photographic archive. Nevertheless, as the narrator stresses, photographs are rarely unmediated “snaps” of reality:

Regarding photography: the ignorant don’t realise the extent to which the photographer is in command. Not for the first time Axel Boehm assumed control by withdrawing from the proffered subject. By calmly ignoring the potential photograph. Dusting himself off and focussing instead on pleasing static juxtapositions of machinery and skyline, camels and clouds. Whistling a bit of Mozart. Retreating under the hood. Placidly choosing his moment: “You don’t exist unless I say so.” (D 248)

These unavoidable decisions and selections render the process, in some respects, fluid and subject to manipulation, as it is again at the stage of chemical development (D 100-1). Hence, despite a commitment to documentation and “truth,” Boehm produces work in which the investigative and the aesthetic, “his sociological and experimental sides[,] converge” (D 100). He is, in short, a more artistic, self-conscious and imaginative version of the photographers exposed in Fortune: “A press photograph is a tiny frozen performance” (F 29), with favourite indoor and outdoor props. Boehm, however, has few illusions about what normally passes for truth. As a professional, “he” appreciates the considerable difference between “human vision and the camera’s monocular, unblinking eye” (D 119), and as a woman in disguise, who actively deceives in her daily dealings with others, she is fully aware of the extent to which human existence is a staged play or masquerade, and that props come in many forms. But whereas the press photographer is content with creating a semblance of reality, or an image that complements a clear-cut story, Boehm, like Drewe, seeks to use her art to bring forth “great universals,” and to raise routine, everyday scenes into “a cultural history, a
sociology of time and place” (*D* 101), or, in Bennett’s words, to bring forth abiding “truths about contemporary Australia.” Yet typhoid ultimately mows down this changeling and putative surrogate for a journalist-turned-author, with the implied verdict that no one can fully penetrate or escape the apparent contradictions and mysteries of existence.

Where the ricocheting “bullet” of Drewe’s creativity will next appear is uncertain. As *The Drowner* showed, he can tease complex fictions out of the most unlikely material, and Drewe is a many-sided author. He has written for a variety of media, edited two major thematic anthologies, opened potentially rich, new veins for exploration, and channelled his own experience into such diverse works as the light-hearted, whimsical *Walking Ella*, which purports to be the “true unsentimental ruminations of a dog-walker” who has done time with a shorthaired German pointer in Sydney’s Centennial Park, and, most recently, an autobiographical account of his early life in *The Shark Net*. Although humorously engaging and offering a loving recreation of post-war Perth and its small-town rituals, the book’s covert concern is with change, death and the growth of imagination—subjects that link it to, and challenge comparison with, other purportedly autobiographical works, such as Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. A related preoccupation with universal themes may also lie at the heart of the Australian’s forthcoming novel, entitled *Grace*: a quality that has been singularly lacking in the lives of most of his protagonists. Today Robert Drewe lives with his wife and their two children on the far north coast of New South Wales, and continues to pursue his craft painstakingly. He is at once a distant figure from, yet still in touch with, an earlier naive self who, at his twenty-first birthday party, felt he had “been an adult forever” (*SH* 357). When offered the prospect of a major shift in the form of a position on the *Age* he asked: “How could I ever leave the beach?” (*SN* 350). In a sense he never did. Hugging the coastline has been one constant among Drewe’s professional changes, just as diving below its well-known features to reveal what, before his efforts, had remained largely outside the main “frame” of Australian fiction has remained a significant feature of his art and a testimony to his achievement.

Notes

1 Letter to the author, 14 March 2005. The sentence continues: “or—in a rather patronising way—on the journalistic background (only ten years between the
ages of 18 and 28) rather than the 30 years of fiction-writing that followed it.”


3 Bennett, 10. “They [the early novels] are based upon conflicts of value and behaviour which the author has discerned at a variety of sites, both geographic and psychic and form parts of a “three-phase project,” which Drewe had earlier outlined (Bennett 8–9).


5 Bennett, 8. For more detailed discussion of this growing dissatisfaction see Bennett, 6–8.


7 Baker, 94–5.

8 See his notes on the novel, *Drewe Papers*, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

9 Although this alleged genocide is the current subject of “history wars,” or debate about its authenticity, I follow Drewe in assuming that actions tantamount to a program of genocide occurred under colonial settlers in Tasmania.


11 In the text most of the first sentence is italicised.

12 Robinson’s delusions make him an unwitting tool of imperial policy. The white invaders, having failed to eradicate the Tasmanians by poisoning, shooting, disease and co-ordinated army-settler cordons, used the trust he inspired to round up the remaining Aborigines, perceived as vermin or “savage crows,” on designated reservations.

13 For further discussion of Drewe’s use of history see Randolph Stow, “Transfigured Histories: Recent Novels by Patrick White and Robert Drewe,”
14 While researching this animal Drewe noted: “The buffalo has three magical functions: to carry the weight of the world, to make rain, and to originate earthquakes” (Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia) – magical functions which, given the role he assigned to it, were out of place in his novel.

15 A remark made by Bennett about The Savage Crows holds good for much of Drewe’s fiction: it ends with “an ironic recognition of the mixed economies of contemporary life, which must qualify any nostalgic hankering for pure solutions” (Bennett, 10).


17 This is a paraphrase of Drewe’s comments on “The Ricochet,” Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

18 This demonising is presented in greater detail later as a prelude to the fatal clash at Glenrowan:

   From city desks and drawing boards come dramatic representations, in words and pictures, of the sombre ravines and precipices, the jagged crags and scars of the monster’s territory. This is Hell’s gaseous fire lifted holus-bolus from the depths and thrust into the tender and defenceless features of Victoria. And there in the centre of the holocaust stands Satan with his eyebrows meeting in the middle, eyeteeth glistening and shotgun smoking. (OS 105)

20 Drewe Papers, Reid Library, University of Western Australia.

21 Baker, 75.

22 Baker, 91. See his assertion that “there is experience everywhere, there is material everywhere” (Baker, 75).

23 A new novel, Grace, has just been published.
Estuary/Egret

Long before I left I dreamed of returning and when I did go back it was just as I had dreamed. Having flown in from the East, I stood beside my father, now elderly, and listened for more than words. He spoke of the Egret and the boat. He knows I’m interested in the Egret – that great white waterbird. He tells me he has watched them for years. They have a rookery down on the estuary. Every year, he says, they fly away and return, fly away and return. They travel to the other side of the world but they come back to their rookery. One year they didn’t come back, he says, regret in his voice. We look up, speaking of Egrets and one comes in to land in front of us, briefly, and is away. My mother noted the significance, later, of the flutter of snowy white wings like sheets of paper falling, so feather-light, so gently, to ground.

My great-aunt Erika has left me her boat though we’re not sure, my father says, laughing, if there’s an actual boat anymore.

Balsawood

She wanted to make a boat from the moment she saw one in her father’s classroom. He taught grade Seven. He’d been teaching grade Seven for years. She was only five and not allowed into his classroom often. She watched one of the big boys trimming strips of balsa wood with a Stanley knife. She watched him pin the wood delicately either side of the prow, curving it around the frame, trimming, gluing. Transfixed, she held this moment in her mind – the covering of the frame, the shaping of the boat’s prow, the moment of becoming a boat.

Patient, she waited for years until she thought it might be possible for him to allow her to build a boat. He took a lot of convincing. She was the second of his five daughters. Was she ten or eleven?

Mostly the girls in his class didn’t want to make boats, he said. Though, he added, looking thoughtful, there might have been one once.
She was very quiet and still when they went to buy the balsa wood. Balsawood, balsawood, she'd repeated a hundred times to herself, hoarding the words.

She'd reminded him carefully several weeks in a row and now he was in the Newsagents buying a few sheets of balsa and a tin of sharp silver pins, half-laughing to his friend the newsagent, half-proud, about what his crazy daughter wanted to do.

So he bought her the balsawood and before school she would come into his classroom and in between his marking and thesis writing she would go on with her boat. He helped her lay out the pieces of the paper pattern onto the light wood. He'd have to trust her with the Stanley trimmer, he told her. He showed her how sharp it was, gently pressing the blade against her finger - the same finger with the freckle, her right index finger with the freckle he'd pointed out when she'd had trouble knowing the difference between left and right. There'd only be one warning, he said gravely, but she felt that he knew he could trust her.

Before the boat she had asked for paper to draw or write on when she was in his classroom. Sometimes she and her sister Dee were supposed to be practising on the school piano. Now she worked on the boat.

Sometimes the big boys came in early to work on their boats before school. They saw her there and knew which boat was hers if someone accidentally tried to take it down and work on it during the day. No one in her class - grade Five - said it wasn’t fair or asked to make a boat. Perhaps she didn’t tell anyone. Perhaps it was her secret.

Sometimes she was frustrated. Her father was busy and she wasn’t allowed to go on without his guidance. She would barely have begun, it seemed, when he would be lifting the skeleton of her boat out of her hands for the day and up onto the ledge in front of the high louvre windows where all the boats in progress were kept. Once, he didn’t have time to guide her and she went on anyway, pinning and curling the wood around the prow as she had seen others do.

Boats/Books

I imagine stepping into the boat before dawn, pushing off the edge with an oar, feeling the first gliding movement over the water. I’d take the rowlocks from the pockets of my old green canvas jacket and push them into place, then lift the oars into position and row to the middle of the estuary. Up ahead, the startlingly white hills of the sandbar rise out of the middle of the channel like a mirage, blocking any sight of the far shore. Behind, beyond the lights of the roadhouse, the twin grey telephone boxes and the double-lane
highway, there's a stand of peppermint trees. In its midst there's a Geraldton wax, spindly and overgrown, and the remains of a brick chimney rising out of the ashes of the blackened ground. These are all that is left of Edward and Erika's house.

It was summer. We'd have driven in the shiny black Chevrolet for many miles through the trees that lined the roads in those days. The leaf shadows and sunlight would flicker at the windows as our father drove, making patterns that shifted over the interior of the car's upholstery and fluttered sometimes across one or other of our faces.

At last we'd arrive and come inside out of the strip of hot sun between the mad avenue of Geraldton Wax and the broad, dark back veranda. We'd go over the threshold into a further gradation of dark and cool and whilst adjusting our irises the music, it seemed to me, would begin – of voices coming out of the darkness. Erika, viola, and Edward, cello. My parents weren't really the violins – they didn't have angels' voices at all but violins will do, retrospectively, for the quartet of strings.

One day when I was old enough, I noticed as soon as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, that the room was full of books. I don't remember bookshelves. Piles of books and magazines were randomly placed on the hardwood floor around the edges of the room. It was a dark and dusty room in a cold climate – much like the climate I live in now – except for the occasional blazing summer. There were black French doors opening onto the front veranda to let in a cool breeze from the estuary.

**University**

I'm seventeen and starting university. I wear a white cheesecloth dress. It's the seventies at the University of Western Australia. A number of Dalkeith ladies have come back to do degrees now that their children are grown. One in a white dress and gold sandals is the recipient of my spilt black coffee outside a marquee on the first day.

I learn logic in Philosophy and try to argue with my father when I visit but he never plays by the rules. I try to explain logical trains of thought. In class, I feel angry when people stray off the topic. My mind is quick and focused. I want some order and rules, finally, after all the arguments at home fuelled by alcohol. Outside the tutorial room windows the surface of the Swan River wrinkles like an old skin. I imagine a slipstream; a fast silver pathway.

"Reminiscent. Reverberate. I think you are having a love affair with these words." The visiting Literature tutor unkindly discusses my vocabulary in front of the whole class. He is right. I am having a love affair with these words.
I Must Go Down To the Sea Again.

The wind sings in the stays, those thin wires holding up the masts, the scaffolding to hold the sails; magic canvas, gossamer fabric to catch winds. My eighteen-year old cousin and I fell off a yacht in the middle of the Swan River in 1975. I always hear my father’s voice when I think of this, teaching Masefield’s poem to the grade sevens.

I must go down to the sea again,*

To the lonely sea and the sky,
And her much older lover showed us how to make prawn cocktails and gave me a taste for filtered coffee...
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
She said his house was full of the woman before, a woman his own age, but actually it was empty except for the silver coffee percolator and some old paperbacks. A bachelor’s house, a beach house. Only full of his dreams of my cousin. I had hopes, he told me, years later.
And the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea’s face and a grey dawn breaking.
But I won’t forget that moment of hitting the water, the slide as the yacht tipped, the shock of the freezing water. When we surfaced we looked up to see my cousin’s lover laughing down at us. He threw us tubes and ropes, hauling us back up on deck.

Now becalmed. The jib sail suddenly up, a swelter of cream. My father saying, I don’t want to leave your mother with a debt. Perhaps he should pay off the new car in full. And I don’t talk about the debt he leaves, the debt that parents leave their children and this ageing man, all gentle concern, is not the father in my memory, surely? Not the man who hammered impatiently and swore when he hit his fingers, not the sailor many years home from sea.

I remember the days spent worrying about that cousin who fitted the description of a girl who drowned one weekend on the Swan. My cousin told her mother she was spending the night with Dee and I. We were her alibi. Schooled in disaster, we feared the worst.

You look, she said as she rushed into the room on Sunday evening, as if you’d seen a ghost.

*Some lines are taken from “Sea Fever” by John Masefield.
CAROLINE CADDY

DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY

Summer late ten or eleven every night I walk to the crest of the hill
smell the air for wood-smoke
looking out over the olive trees
that seem light in their youth
against the dark of the hillsides.
It's usually still — he seldom picks windy nights
seems to be trying to avoid
too much damage —
it's the excitement the power he's after
we tell each other.
Eight times this season I've caught the orange glow —
sometimes heard it first —
the crack and surge —
the high whine of green gum leaves
engulfed by flames.
Eight times the heart-pounding rush
back to the house to alert the volunteers —
bring the lights and sirens along the highway
flickering through the trees
for him to watch as I watch
knowing he's out there with a view
much like mine.

For two years he's been at it
with his candles and his milk cartons
that give him distance.
Two years our summers edgy with each other —
roused from dreams of fire to fire —
our bodies out there like spectres we can't control
growing accustomed
to his presence
like another tradesman in the district
so that the buzz of fear the anger by day
turns at night
to the sleep of anticipation before a pre-dawn journey.
Last night they caught him
- not local but local enough -
we relax with each other.
But with ourselves it takes longer
to admit relief -
so used to standing in the olive grove
with purpose

22

and with something else
like a light recurring fever
not too high not too much discomfort -
so regular so familiar
you almost turn to greet it in the dark
as it puts you
for a few hours a night a day
at the distance that absolves -
stops you minding
whether you should or shouldn’t
be there.

FIREBREAK

Somehow she thinks it’s her fault and keeps apologizing
as we walk up and down the fence-line
with back-pack and garden spray.
Luckily it’s early in the season and the light breeze
is at our backs.
Leaf litter twists and crackles brilliant orange under the trees -
rages up a dry bush then for no apparent reason
goes around another just as vulnerable -
continues its sultry progress.
But the firebreak is wide there’s daylight left
and already tongues and peninsulas of flame
have reached the edge
where we wait and the lightest spray of water puts it out
though further back the flaring and smoldering goes on
and we know those lazy plumes
will prickle with sparks come night.
Another day this could have been a conflagration –
it's the wind that does it
and the firebugs
and the well meant burns that gauged as carefully as possible –
litter burden humidity temperature –
get out of hand go wrong.
It's late and the breeze is gone.
We talk but watch... as we would the flicker of car lights
turning off the highway
or an animal repeatedly testing a fence
and listen as we would for a child
in another room.
You are perfectly a boy
standing amidst daffodils.
Lines of energy sport
and engage you - young vorticist -
they belong to the burnish of pollen
on your cheek-bones,
and the vegetable world alone.
Your hand trails a stem
that registers the clock in you
set to bloom.
Small gusts fill the darker
green and broken swathe
you have cut away from me.
Beyond, a flowering arch
frames your father and brother.
Soon your track will turn to them.
But for this instant
I've called you back,
wedded you to the brief host
of yellow heads, the living and the dead,
that jump at your hands and thighs.
FRANGIPANIS

They are shaped as a child would draw a flower,
heady stars that were stepping stones
on trails I walked. They lit up
the way to piano lessons at the convent;
later to the door of a boy
who led me to feel, bare, edenic,
and coaxed my soul
to fling itself with shuddering force
down to my toes.
We spoke of nothing after,
only our bodies cried out
for what we had done
and did not understand —
all of it in flowers.
When I stood they fell
and I left
the rough outline
of where we had lain.

Now, the bruised gift
you carry to my lips, my hair, brings back
the scent of love before care,
any girl and boy —
you and I going bare.
I couldn’t but notice, driving the tractor in summer, that my wife’s nightie -
soft cloth
folded over - is much more interesting than oily hessian on the pneumatic
seat -
no more cushioning but pleasanter on the skin wearing shorts, like
ball-bearings
so glossy to touch, so cool in hot weather, rolling out the wrinkles of travel,
smooth
on the cheek, the lips; it being rickety in here and the dust rough
in the throat, it distracts from the harshest work, plush as eyes
looking up at my sensitive bits, chewing the crop, eyes
kept sharp for errant rock or nest of quail, the odd locust fluttering up,
the cloth
warding off plagues; I stop for smoko, but instead of jumping down onto rough
earth, stay seated in my cab-over, rolling my hips and soothing from the seat
up, a blood-red sunset saying enough is enough, and calling it quits
I smooth
out my line of cut, rest up with evening cool, soft-hard bite of fabric,
getting my bearings
from home-thoughts and satisfaction of work well-done; it’s time I changed
the bearings
in this old but reliable work-horse, time I stopped my thoughts wandering,
kept my eyes
on the goals ahead – taking the place back to profit, serving the church,
looking to smooth
out the bumps in this ride, the vibrations that are the devil's work,
the cloth
that turns me from my wife, turns me into myself; time I renounced and
took my seat
in a town desperate for remedies and confidence, ironed my own laundry
with rough
hands, hands whose lines can't be read by the fortune tellers I dream of,
hands rough
on my wife's skin kept out of the sun – blemishes as frightening as sin
– her bearings
lost to me in years of you do your thing and I'll do mine, no children
to take the seat
of power we both believe we've a right to – the farm come down from
her father, his eyes
on every change I make, every repair I carry out, hero of the Church,
crisp white cloth
still covering possessions left in his room exactly as it was when death
came smooth
and merciless out of the full moon, swallowed him whole through the
window, the smooth
glass reflecting only an image death wears on lonely outings, its essence
rough
and ready and deadly behind mirrors, the moon on your face I'd warned,
no cloth
of curtains to protect him from the madness that's ruled this house since
marriage, death's bearings
set before the vows were even made; let go of him, I say, let go of him who
only had eyes
for you, stroked the satin of your garments by the Metters Stove, fixed to
his seat

in grim determination against me, a scowl as he spoke of its softness,
screwing the seat
to the floor with his belligerence: like duck down or the upside of a red
gum leaf, so smooth
to touch, like your mother – he said it to get at me, my wife kept busy; my
wife’s eyes
are his eyes and they are tired with pretending not to see... for all her
genteel ways, she’s rough
around the edges – some days she wears nothing underneath... tomorrow,
I’ll take my bearings
from the house antennae, from the stand of wandoos, the dam... focus... the
cloth...

cloth so smooth
seat so rough
bearings for eyes.
THE ARTIST PRETENDS TO FEEL

pushing against the bark, the tip of the penknife already sticky, resisted by the viscous sap, she’s not carving her name;

she’s tapping what the thick, dead skin hides in its covered veins, and it’s not the amber, clotting as she digs,

but the empty channel, from root to branch, and the drop, then, of her own blood to fill the aridity.
THE SILVER PARCHMENT

It is as if gravity has been plucked
Like a hair from the centre of me and I
Can not flush these bells; I hear them. Their message is silence,
Silence for the earth that lends itself to the moon,
To the tailed Ophelia! She has opened up for the fourth time
Like a mouth. I believe she is noble, she is pure!
I wanted to be valuable and nursed on her breast bud
I wanted to be her child.

I can see it behind my veil
The tide pinned at my ankles as the new sand
Wove the fishes net and I shed its dead spiel.
Small blue bodies trapped
Like an infidel skin, starched scaled legs flinched.
All is prey, these rare insects
In the effigy of a window, lovers pleated into soundless knots
Dulled to the moons glare, her one eye.

How promising she hangs, if anything else
As that orb of Chinese paper untying herself from the stiff stars,
The smell of ripe children
Rising from my womb as soft dough. Seven young seedlings kneaded
Like brave corpses. They are my fence, my house door.
My patch of earth pulled back from the great sleep.
There is a box there, a bee keeper, a man, an empty seat.
Stripping me down to bone, planting the fat daddy bee and
His dark stinger into my separate room, annihilating every child.
These cells will not be kind to us! Have you had your death of me?
Planted that tree and watched every deaf leaf uncurl like a
Child’s finger from my body.
THE YEAR’S WORK IN FICTION

In her review of fiction for *Westerly* last year, Susan Lever began with the shortlisted finalists for the 2004 Miles Franklin Literary Award, who were, she said, “a rather international lot of novelists.” So they were: the winner Shirley Hazzard was born in Australia but has lived elsewhere for most of her life, while Peter Carey has also been an expatriate for decades. Two of the other finalists are relatively recent imports – “international” in the other direction, as it were: Annamarie Jagose from New Zealand, and South Africa’s J. M. Coetzee.

Lever went on to say that “the dominance of the ‘internationals’ … invites reflection on the performance of more ‘local’ writers over the past few years.” But it also invites reflection on the changing perceptions and literary constructions of Australian nationalism in the twenty-first century, and on the differences to be teased out between a writer’s chosen place of residence and his or her fictional subjects, settings and themes. Peter Carey, for example, has lived in New York for many years and not much of the shortlisted novel, *My Life as a Fake*, is actually physically set in Australia; but his subject was the Ern Malley hoax, a story about Australian literature itself.

So when is an Australian writer not an Australian writer? Or an Australian book not an Australian book? In the global twenty-first century, these questions get harder to answer every year. There was a scandal in Australian literary life when Christina Stead was awarded the lucrative Britannica Australia prize for 1966 only to see the decision immediately overruled by the award’s administrators on the grounds that neither she nor her work was sufficiently “Australian.” By these standards there is no way that *The Great Fire* by Shirley Hazzard, an expatriate for almost sixty years and most unlikely ever to return to Australia to live, would have won last year’s Miles Franklin Award.

This year’s shortlist was altogether less problematic; all five of the shortlisted writers are Australians born, bred and resident, with all of their books set largely if not wholly in this country. Two of the five, Andrew
McGahan’s *The White Earth* and Gail Jones’s *Sixty Lights*, were discussed in detail by Lever in her 2004 essay, and both subsequently won a swag of major prizes in the 2004–2005 round of awards; *The White Earth* was the favourite for the Miles Franklin, which, to no-one’s surprise, it won.

The three other novels on the shortlist, all very much engaged with aspects of Australian life, were *Salt Rain* by Sarah Armstrong, *The Gift of Speed* by Steven Carroll, and *The Submerged Cathedral* by Charlotte Wood. Not only was it an uncompromisingly “local” list but it was also an unusually and in some ways a reassuringly youthful one, with three of the five writers still under 40, Carroll at 56 the oldest by several years, and the average age of the shortlisted finalists a full ten years lower than the previous year — all of which, or so one would hope, bodes well for the future of Australian fiction.

The conditions of the award as laid out in Franklin’s will do not state that the prize must be won by an Australian writer, so no haggling need be done over what this, at least, could mean; but they do specify that the winning book must be “of the highest literary merit and present Australian life in any of its phases.” The highest literary merit is something upon which most panels of judges can usually manage to reach a compromise, if not actual consensus. But “Australian life in any of its phases”? What does this phrase actually mean? It can be argued that one of Australian life’s “phases” is travelling and living abroad, as Franklin herself did for many years. The conditions of the award have been closely scrutinised and much-discussed over the last decade, particularly after Frank Moorhouse’s *Grand Days* was ruled ineligible according to the “Australian life” criterion.

In post-9/11 times, when the expression “post-ironic” is used without irony to describe this new era, when the word “Australian” becomes more overtly and vexedly politicised by the day, and when journalists and politicians are using the expression “un-Australian” in deadpan earnest (perhaps the times really are post-ironic) — in this era the question of what is or is not “Australian life in any of its phases” will become more of an issue for the Miles Franklin judges than it has ever been before. And in the wake of the changes to the administration of the prize that were made in late 2004 when the judges’ role and responsibilities were diminished and curtailed, it’s not at all clear who will now decide, and on what grounds, whether any given novel is eligible or not.

But two of the best Australian novels published so far this year won’t qualify for the Miles Franklin Award no matter how creatively that criterion is interpreted. *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, by Australian born, bred and resident Delia Falconer, is about the American soldiers who fought under General Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn. And Geraldine Brooks, an Australian journalist working internationally who first became known on the
Australian Literature scene ten years ago for *Nine Parts of Desire*, her non-fiction book on the lives of Moslem women, has this year published her second novel, *March*; it, too, concerns itself with nineteenth-century North American race wars, this time the Civil War and the part played therein by the absent father in *Little Women*.

Like Catherine Cole’s *The Grave at Thu Le* – or as with Michelle de Kretser’s *The Hamilton Case* (2003), a brilliant, elegant and very funny book on very serious subjects which would almost certainly have displaced one or another of the books on the 2004 Miles Franklin shortlist if it had been in any way about “Australian life” – both Falconer’s and Brooks’ novels would otherwise have been well in contention for next year’s award. Miles Franklin could not have foreseen this kind of development when she made her will all those decades ago, any more than she could have foreseen that the award would last so long and become so central to Australian literary life. But we are already in an era where some of the best novels the country can produce each year are routinely ruled ineligible for its most coveted and prestigious literary prize.

*The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers* was one of this year’s most eagerly anticipated novels, after the success eight years ago of Falconer’s *The Service of Clouds*. This very different book seeks to explore the gaps and silences in written history, looking at Custer’s Last Stand from the point of view of the man who was widely blamed for his defeat: Captain Frederick Benteen of the Seventh Cavalry. Twenty years on, now a medically discharged Brigadier-General and very near the end of his life, Benteen recalls over the space of a single morning the events leading up to the battle and the company of soldiers with whom he rode and fought: Star-Gazer, Handsome Jack, Grasshopper Joe and the rest.

Benteen decides against his better judgement to answer a letter from a teenage clerk in Chicago who has written to ask him for his personal account of the Battle of Little Bighorn. “It is my fervent wish,” writes the boy, “that I may argue your case against the malicious ghost of Custer and those who would claim him as a hero.” Benteen, after reading this letter, spends the morning looking through his papers and mementoes, thinking about what to tell the boy:

He wants to write the lost thoughts of soldiers.

No, not the grand story, he has never known his life that way, but the seams and spaces in between. This is history too, he thinks, the weight of gathered thoughts, the cumulus of idle moments...If you truly wish to understand the battle and my place in it, he writes now
to the boy, you must understand the dreams and jokes and stories that we bore within us. You must see how, as we shared them, they formed a kind of landscape.

This novel is a eulogy for the lost, for lives that have disappeared amid the heroics of history. Though far shorter and less stylistically lush than Falconer’s previous novel, it is written with her characteristic and unique style and vision, for Falconer’s take on the world is so word-oriented that her style is her vision: a profoundly metaphorical habit of thought, poetic in its rhythms as well in its diction, in which ideas and things collide and blend and become part of each other, and sometimes come to a life of their own. “There is a particular blue, he says, from way down in the deepest lakes, that does not wish you good, that troubles with your mind.”

Geraldine Brooks’ *March* is likewise anchored by a real historical figure, depending for much of its material on the transcendentalist philosopher, educator and abolitionist A. Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May, friend to Emerson and Thoreau. *March* is an extraordinary feat of imagination and synthesis, using biographical and autobiographical material about the real Bronson Alcott as the basis of Brooks’ own imaginative engagement with a literary character who was closely modelled on him but who exists mainly as a potent absence: the father of the four March sisters in *Little Women*, “far away, where the fighting was.”

The action of *Little Women* takes place over a year, and it is this year of her character Captain March’s life as a chaplain in the Union army that Brooks takes as her chronological framework, though there is some important backstory. The book works on several levels: as historical fiction, as a loving engagement with a literary classic, as a kind of imagined biography, and as, perhaps inevitably, an implicit anti-war argument from a woman who in her work as an international journalist has probably seen more fallout from more wars than any other fiction writer in the history of Australian literature except perhaps George Johnston.

Even so, Brooks herself has said of *March* that it “isn’t a book about war, but about the strength of ideas that drive people to extreme action.” What is explored in this novel is a series of disjunctions: between ideals and behaviour, between motivation and action, between pure belief and unavoidable circumstance, and not least between the complex physical realities of a war zone and the idealised life of the all-female family left back at home in the unsullied domestic nest. By the time that March returns home for Christmas, shattered in mind, body and soul, his year’s experience has taken him far beyond the possibility of fully truthful communication with his wife and daughters.
There are two more novels of note that will be disqualified from Franklin Award contention by the “Australian life” criterion. Catherine Cole’s *The Grave at Thu Le*, set in the present, is about a French family’s nostalgia for its exotic colonial past in Vietnam; the young Catherine D’anyers visits Vietnam in quest of a family grave that may or may not exist, and about which she has only the word of her secretive great-aunt Lily, back home in Paris, to guide her. While the characters are French and the setting Vietnamese, the novel is more widely “about” postcolonialism as such, and in her review essay on this novel Drusilla Modjeska develops a complex argument about its status as a “very Australian novel.” Cole, says Modjeska, writes from an understanding of postcolonialism that has been developed through her own lived Australian experience, and in writing this novel has taken an important step in our thinking about this country’s own postcoloniality by moving outside the “guilt/blame/black-armband” debate loop to a less fraught and limiting position:

...she writes without the guilt that has been so debilitating to our political and intellectual culture. She doesn’t engage with debates about guilt or blame, neither fending them off nor joining the chorus of mea culpa. She brings an awareness to attitudes of mind that Australian readers will recognise. (*The Monthly*, July 2005)

From Vietnam to Tahiti, a fourth exclusively “offshore” novel to be making a bit of a splash this year – it was shortlisted in the NSW Premier’s literary awards – is *Frangipani* by the Tahitian-born Célestine Hiriuta Vaite, who lives with her Australian surfer husband on the south coast of NSW. *Frangipani* is a charming, vibrant, upbeat novel about Materena, champion cleaner and the best listener in all of Tahiti, and her wayward daughter Leilani; local customs and lore form a backdrop to the family tussles, gossip and romance in a book that more than one critic has compared to the novels of Alexander McCall Smith in its warm, good-natured humour and charm.

Between *Frangipani* and Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe* there’s a contrast so vast as to be almost grotesque: *Dead Europe* is a surreal nightmare rave, a black vision of corrupt humanity infesting a continent rotten to the core. Will this qualify as a phase of Australian life? The novel is set offshore except in memory, but it features a Greek-Australian hero (or anti-hero), which alone should be enough to get it across the eligibility line; perhaps even more importantly, the hero Isaac’s world view, like Tsiolkas’ own, is even more clearly the product of an Australian background than Catherine Cole’s. *Dead Europe* seems so far to have acted as a kind of watershed for critics: some have high praise for its energies and angers and for its highly politicised vision,
while others are perturbed by its ambiguous if not incoherent representations of anti-Semitism and “the Jews”, and/or repelled if not infuriated by its graphic depictions of degradation and abjection, in sex, violence, drug-taking and taboo-breaking of the most extreme kinds. “For me,” said Tsiolkas in a recent interview, “it is crucial that there is a space for artists to make works of nightmare.”

Critic Robert Manne, in a detailed and influential review (The Monthly, June 2005), argues that the idea of transgressive art no longer has any real meaning, with which Tsiolkas disagrees. But Manne goes to the real heart of Dead Europe in asking of it a question that in the current world order is daily more and more of a concern to, and potentially more divisive among, ordinary thoughtful people all over the world: “Are we to meant to assume that there is some direct cultural continuity between traditional Christian anti-Semitism...and the contemporary left-wing political anti-Semitism concerning the dispossession of the Palestinians and the fusion of Jewish and American power...?” The answer would appear to be Yes, we are; even readers able to tolerate the book’s violence and its torrents of blood, shit, semen and vomit might still baulk at its apparently equivocal and unstable race politics. Tsiolkas has said that he wants people to be disgusted by the racism in the book (as distinct from “of the book”) but this raises the difficult question of how to interpret any work of fiction when there’s such a dramatic disconnect between authorial intention and reader response.

On the basis of this ambivalence and lack of clarity on the question of anti-Semitism, Manne compares this novel to Helen Demidenko’s “far less accomplished” The Hand That Signed the Paper – itself a highly controversial Miles Franklin winner, in a judging decision that was far more interesting and complicated than it was subsequently made to appear in the press. Given that literature is a transmitter of ideology either deliberately and consciously or, as it were, negatively and by default, by what critical means are we to determine and locate the ideological centre of such a novel, or its moral heart? In the case of Demidenko this was ultimately a failure of technique, with the author not in sufficient control of her narrative strategies to convey a coherent authorial stance on such complex and volatile material. But in the far more mature and consciously crafted, double-stranded narrative of Dead Europe there are even more complex factors at work, and analysis of them is well beyond the scope of a survey like this.

“Foreignness” of a different kind will have more awards judges than just the Miles Franklin panel scratching their heads and reaching for the rule book: French-Australian author Catherine Rey’s The Spruiker’s Tale, set in Australia’s remote northwest, is translated from the French by the critic Andrew Reimer, and the status of a translation might be too difficult a question for some of the awards administrators to address. Rey’s novel is an
exotic hybrid, a European vision in an extreme Australian landscape: hectic and brilliant but with a heart of ice, it follows the rise and fall of a dynastic circus family in a mode whose expressionism sometimes mutates into full-blown surrealism.

Despite the fact that most of Eva Sallis’ *The Marsh Birds* is set in the Middle East, Indonesia and/or New Zealand, there will be no doubt at all in anyone’s mind that this novel addresses Australian life – however much this particular “phase” of it might be one that many of us wish we had never entered. Sallis is a refugee-support activist and *The Marsh Birds* directly addresses the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia; it follows the journey in time and awareness of the Baghdad boy Dhurgham, separated from the rest of his family after his uncle and brother fall out of political favour and the family is forced to flee across the border into Syria. Dhurgham doesn’t understand this at the time and neither do we: all he knows is that his father has instructed him to meet up again in Damascus “at the Great Mosque” if they get separated, and he waits there for weeks before he realises that the family is never going to arrive. After an interval under the protection of his “friend” Mr Hosni (for Dhurgham is a very pretty boy), the “friend” palms him off onto people smugglers after a warning from a British fellow-pedophile who says “that boy will turn on you” – Dhurgham, still only fourteen, can’t follow this transaction too well either – and he inevitably ends up, via Indonesia and a nightmare journey by sea on a leaky, overcrowded fishing boat, in an Australian detention centre.

*The Marsh Birds* shows extraordinary restraint given the passion of its commitment; Sallis firmly refrains from writing a tract and opts for narrative instead, using the skills of a novelist rather than those of a speechwriter. She tells the story through Dhurgham’s only partly comprehending eyes, and responds to a political situation in the most effective way a politically motivated artist can: by using the story of individual people caught up in a system or systems in order to demonstrate how power operates and how institutions work. There is some very powerful writing involved in this, including a virtuoso passage of beautiful, hallucinatory prose indicating that Dhurgham, dehydrated and starving on his journey to Australia by sea, has come very close to the limits of his physical endurance: “He stared at the waves. Each was different. Each was identical. He watched the light play through and over them. It was as though an altogether different light played from within the waves, and sunlight itself was the lesser, more fickle light. The deep blue far under each wave had something to say.”

Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* is set two hundred years earlier than *The Marsh Birds* and addresses the question of alien arrival in Australia by sea from quite a different angle. Grenville combines the two most bloody, dramatic and emotive strains of early Australian history – contact history and convict
history – to tell a story of settlement in which the triumph of transported convicts in recovering personal freedom, dignity and prosperity is gained at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants whose land has been invaded. Will Thornhill’s story becomes by degrees an allegorical representation of Australian post-contact history.

One of Grenville’s most significant achievements in this novel is the sane and generous even-handedness of her attention to all of the various characters’ dilemmas and injustices, and there is a powerful turning point in the story where Will is forced to choose between joining in a murderous raid on the Aborigines, or losing his wife and children and the home they have made along the Hawkesbury River. Grenville, resisting calls in recent years for Australian novelists to stop being seduced by historical fiction and address themselves to the current state of the country, demonstrates in *The Secret River* how well she understands that one way of understanding the present is to interrogate the past.

Like Eva Sallis, however, Robert Drewe directly addresses the present; one of the central figures in his ambitious, multi-themed novel *Grace* is, like Sallis’ Dthurgham, a teenage escapee from a detention centre. *Grace* is rather like a twenty-first-century *Capricornia*, full of ideas and energy and the colourful, larger-than-life characters and situations of the country’s northern coast, including an overpriced restaurant called the Hard Croc Café and a brothel called the Golden Peach. Drewe’s heroine Grace Molloy has fled from Sydney to escape the chilling attentions of a stalker and has ended up in Broome, working in a wildlife park; knowing from personal experience what it is to need to run away, she finds help and refuge for the detainee. Drewe’s material ranges over a wide and varied terrain: evolution, ecology, immigration policy, father-daughter relations, corrupt ex-cops, warring anthropologists, flight, harassment and mercy.

Both Gerard Windsor in *I Have Kissed Your Lips* and Sonya Hartnett in *Surrender* choose for their dark stories the setting of a small and isolated Australian country town. Windsor’s novel crosses and re-crosses territory he has covered before in different genres over the years: life as shaped by the institution of the Catholic Church; familial relations and their consequences; the non-negotiable disjunction between traditional Catholic teachings and the realities of desire and sexual experience. While the behaviour of the young priest Michael is by no means admirable, the punishment in store for him is disproportionate to his crimes; just when you think nothing worse could happen, something unthinkably worse is revealed.

Windsor’s appallingly sad and sometimes horrifying story has the downward-spiralling narrative shape characteristic of the classic tragic plot, as does Hartnett’s *Surrender*. The main difference is that Hartnett’s novel is about psychic disintegration rather than societal and familial dysfunction; the
young, fragile, dying Gabriel, bedridden and helpless at the novel’s beginning, is gradually revealed to be not at all what he seems—beginning with his puzzling lack of surprise at the news that human bones have been found in the forest. Both novels take a disturbing view of the mother-child relationship, both are intense visions of life at the extremes of experience, and both have moments of nightmare to rival anything in the much more florid and noisy Dead Europe.

There’s more nightmare in Peter Temple’s The Broken Shore, for me one of the real finds of the year. Temple has for some years been a highly respected writer of crime fiction, but The Broken Shore qualifies by anyone’s standards as a “literary” novel of note, still complying with crime fiction’s generic conventions but not at all limited by them. This book is a stand-alone story rather than part of Temple’s Jack Irish series, though the police detective Joe Cashin is sketched along traditional crime-fiction hero lines: a troubled loner with a lot of inner demons. But Temple fleshes out his characters and the landscapes and cityscapes through which they move in a way that puts many established “literary” novelists (and not just in Australia, either) to shame; his crime plot is likewise appropriate to the genre but at the same time a complex, three-dimensional exploration of human behaviour and motivation. Incredibly, and in a laconic-Australian-male, dry-as-a-chip sort of way, this book is also very funny.

As might be inferred from their titles, a welcomely contrasting cheerful innocence pervades two very “Melbourne” novels, Arnold Zable’s Scraps of Heaven and Steven Carroll’s The Gift of Speed. Both novels are set circa 1960 and both deal with the arrival of unthinkably exotic strangers in the Melbourne of Edna Everage and Robert Menzies. In Zable’s book the new arrivals are postwar immigrants, seeking refuge from the wreckage of Europe, who in spite of traumatic memories and miseries can still find “scraps of heaven” in the new place. In The Gift of Speed, a suburban Melbourne boy is bewitched by the magical presence and genius of the touring West Indian test cricket team—but after they have been beaten and then given a heroes’ farewell, Michael and boys like him all over the country are left with “this vague, nagging feeling that we all just might be a bit better than we thought we were.”

Tim Winton’s The Turning is one of the surprisingly few collections of short stories to be published in the last year; even here, the stories are linked after the manner of what Frank Moorhouse once dubbed “discontinuous narrative,” giving the book a half-novelish feel. There’s less joy and more grimness in this book than can usually be found in Winton’s work; the characters are his usual coastal battlers from the fishing towns of the West, and some of them are doing it very hard. While the publication of any book of Winton’s is always an event, the problems that many feminist— or even just
female – readers have often had with his work are more in evidence here than ever before; in the title story, the long-suffering Rae undergoes a religious conversion while she is being raped and bashed by her porn-loving partner Max. This kind of thing makes Winton’s work tough going for a certain kind of reader, but there’s no denying the force and conviction of his writing.

Like Geraldine Brooks’s March, Susan Johnson’s The Broken Book is an imaginative engagement with the work of another writer, and like Peter Carey’s My Life as a Fake it concerns one of the most intriguing, talked-about, mythologised episodes in the history of Australian writing. Johnson’s heroine Katherine Elgar is consciously and avowedly modelled closely on the essayist and fiction writer Charmian Clift, famous beauty, gifted stylist, much loved and highly influential weekly columnist in Sydney in the 1960s, wife of fellow-writer George Johnston and dead by her own hand at the age of 45. This novel is at its most successful not its re-imagining of Clift, but rather in the places where it comes closest to breaking free of her ghost and turning into a story of its own.

Some time during the latter half of the twentieth century, Australian novelists stopped feeling required to write the Great Australian Novel and began, one by one, to focus instead on whichever particular part of the nation they happened to know best. Some of the most readable and engaging books of the past year are those that convey with great clarity and loving detail the specificity of the region or city in which their stories are set: Winton’s Western Australian fishing towns, Zable’s Carlton, Grenville’s unspoiled Hawkesbury River, Temple’s windy, rugged “broken shore” along the coastal strip of south-western Victoria. In most of the current crop of fiction, the specificities of regionalism give anchor and focus to the more general, abstract disquiets and anxieties about the state of the nation and the political directions in which it appears to be heading.

This survey covers Australian fiction published between winter 2004 and winter 2005, so anything that seems obviously missing will probably have been published after that point, and is likely to be covered in next year’s fiction essay. But to close with a preview and to end where I began, with the relationship between literary prizes and representations of place, it’s J. M. Coetzee’s just-published Slow Man that’s most likely to dominate the 2005–2006 round of prizes and awards. Set in Adelaide where Coetzee has now lived for several years, which means that he is steadily acquiring the status of a “local” rather than an “international,” the novel is unquestionably about “Australian life” and will therefore be eligible for the Miles Franklin Award next year; so far this year, Grenville’s The Secret River is the novel most likely to give it a serious run for its money, though other promising contenders include The Marsh Birds, Surrender and Grace.
Slow Man tells the story of Paul Rayment, a cautious, prudent loner whose life is smashed along with his right knee in a cycling accident on Adelaide’s busy Magill Road, an accident that results in the amputation of his leg. As with all of Coetzee’s novels, one of its central themes is suffering and the alleviation of suffering; it is full of such luminous, painterly moments as the description of Rayment’s abandoned shopping, picked up from the road by the police hours after the accident: a tin of chickpeas with a dent in it, and a quarter of a kilo of Brie that has melted and congealed in the hot Adelaide sun.

Apropos the whole issue of fiction and place, the interpretation of the Miles Franklin “Australian life” rule at the most literal level has tended in the past to rest on how much of a novel is actually set in Australia, which is mainly how Moorhouse’s Grand Days came to grief. And it’s on this most literal level that even so good a novel as Slow Man can still feature a moment of poetic licence likely to disquiet the locals. When you are writing or reading fiction about a real place, no one would question the importance of authenticity in representation; even just one small false note can undermine readerly confidence, as with the reader who once wrote to Elizabeth Jolley to take issue with a detail in one of her novels: doves, said the reader reproachfully, never roost in a Moreton Bay fig tree. In admiring emulation of this reader and with all due respect to a man who has won the Nobel Prize for Literature and will undoubtedly win more prizes both national and international for this new novel, I would like to point out that, as any native of Adelaide knows, a cautious-minded, French-born dweller in a North Adelaide flat is profoundly unlikely to go shopping for Brie anywhere in the vicinity of Magill Road. It’s the sort of thing that just doesn’t happen.

But only we Adelaidians, in the spirit of Alexander McCall Smith’s characters as they fret their way earnestly through problems, are likely to be even remotely worried about this. The rest of the world won’t care.

FICTION RECEIVED 2004–2005

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


I wake thinking of my uncle, Zio Vincenzo, and some of the things he sometimes says to me. Shake my head, push the thoughts away. When I get out of bed my two cats begin their usual, making passes at my legs. They’ve been waiting for this moment for some time, crouched like gargoyles either side of my head, purring loudly and occasionally licking my ears. No mistaking what they want. The younger one mistimes one of her passes and collides with the older cat. He raises his paw and she backs off. After a pause, she resumes seducing my left leg. She’s so enthusiastic she’s also rubbing up against everything else in the room. When I try to walk she headbutts my knee and I nearly fall over. Zio’s had a couple of falls lately. I wonder how long he has left.

I put coffee in the percolator and put it on the hotplate, boot up my computer. Begin feeding the cats. As soon as they can see I’m getting their food they go and sit by the door. It seems they like to be assured that breakfast will be there, ready for when they get back from the day’s first patrol.

Let them out and check email. The junkmail screening program doesn’t seem to be working but when I check the mail it’s busy receiving. Percolator burbles so I pour a coffee and take it outside with a cigarette. When I come back in I’m still, apparently, receiving mail. Pull up the anti-virus program but it won’t run. Reboot, but now nothing runs. And I’d been planning to spend the day writing. I phone Anthony, the guy who usually fixes things like this for me, and leave a message on his message-bank.

I know from experience there’s little chance he’ll be able to come today so reassess my plans. Looks like being a piecemeal sort of day. First up, visit Zio Vincenzo and Zia Carmina. It’s been a while and I need to collect some legal documents from them anyway, run some errands for them. I prefer the sound of Zia and Zio to that of Uncle and Aunty, though I do sometimes call Vincenzo Uncle Vince. Shame I’ve forgotten most of the Sicilian I knew as a
child; I like the fact that in Italian there are many more words starting with Z than there are in English. *Zagara*, orange-blossom; *zigomo*, cheek-bone. My sisters still pronounce Zia Carmina as *Ziggamina*.

As I park next to the shabby old house, I’m blocking childhood memories that are trying to surface. We used to live here too, right next door to Vince and Carmina. The place is an emotional minefield, but I kind of like the challenge of trying to control what I let in and under what circumstances.

To my right there used to be large heaps of firewood. Right here on the track is where my sister badly burnt the soles of her feet on a sheet of iron one searing summer day. We never wore shoes at home, had no fear of snakes. My cousin Carlo was my hero—he told us how to handle a snake: stare at it, holding its gaze while slowly moving closer. Then, lightning quick, grab it by the neck and bite its head off. Thank Christ we never saw one. As I remember it, my parents were always arguing. Their preferred reply to criticism was, *I might as well slit me throat then.*

Zio Vincenzo appears round the side of the house. He’s holding a rake and when he sees me he raises it, threatening. “Zio, it’s me. Michael.” The rake equivocates and I duck under it to give him a hug and a kiss, left then right. I’m struck by the resemblance to boxing. As I step back Vince looks at me wonderingly. I ask, “How are you Uncle Vince? You doing some gardening?”

“Oh, I’m just... The weeds are...” Shakes his head and laughs and I join in. I’ve no idea what we’re laughing at, nor if he really knows who I am, but it feels good.

“Zia Carmina inside?”

“Yeah, yeah she’s doing...and...” Again we laugh together. With my hand on his shoulder I guide him towards the back door.

Carmina soon has coffee percolating. She offers me campari while putting homemade biscotti on a saucer. It’s only about nine am. I don’t like to refuse, although I insist on pouring it myself so I can control the amount. She tells me a long, complicated story—of which I only understand about half. It’s something to do with social workers, personal carers, and getting Zio into the shower. Her English vocab is good but her Calabrian accent is very strong—even after more than fifty years in Australia. They have to alternately badger and reward him. I’m missing the point. Something subtle about the reward system. Vince looks at me sheepishly. Zia laughs a lot and Vincenzo and I laugh with her. Every now and then he whispers something at me. This used to be my second home.

About an hour later I’m home again—with a week’s supply of figs, grapes, and biscotti. Feel disconnected from the world without email and internet access.
I have to take the legal documents to the lawyer. Her office is in the city and so is the Aboriginal Corporation where I do some volunteer work, so I decide to combine the two. At least I can check my email there.

I usually take the train into town, as parking is expensive. At the station I can't get the ticket dispensers to work. Train arrives so I board, intending to get a ticket when I change trains for East Perth. At the next stop a transit guard gets on, checking tickets. Listens to my story and I can see him wavering. Not allowed to let people off, use discretion. His jaw clenches and I resist the temptation to beg. Keep my face devoid of expression: he's just doing his job. Training overrides empathy and I now possess a fifty-dollar fine and that childlike feeling of having been unfairly punished.

At work I'm typing up minutes of a community meeting from someone’s handwritten notes. They're full of abbreviations, acronyms, and references to arcane knowledge and places I've never heard of. Those parts of the meeting conducted in the local language are simply rendered as “language discussion.” It seems a bit of a cop-out. When I check my mail there's nothing that couldn't have waited.

Mid afternoon email the work I've done to the anthropologist in the next room, leave the office, and head home. I have a carpenter coming to install some shelving. When I go to buy a ticket for the return journey, I realise that earlier I'd been hitting the dispenser buttons in the wrong order. It's all fairly straightforward, but somehow I'd mentally reversed the process.

As I try to avoid staring at the other passengers I remember how Zio Vincenzo, during breaks in the conversation, would lean toward me and whisper things like, Medicare Gold or, We decide who comes into this country and under what circumstances. These were the only times he could complete a sentence. Mostly he was quoting from politicians’ election speeches and slogans. I had an idea he might've been saying some of these things before the elections in which they were used. I couldn't be sure. But other things he whispered sent inexplicable shivers down my spine.

Dave, the carpenter, arrives soon after I get home. Computer guy still hasn't called back. I'm showing him where I want the shelves when he notices a copy of the Qur'an amongst my books. “What's that doing here, mate?”

I'm thinking about shelving, this is a distraction. I assume it's a joke. “Everything's gotta be somewhere. Mate.” I don't feel comfortable with being called mate. It's inclusive yet defining, delimiting. And no amount of ironic usage changes that for me.

“You wanna replace that with God's book. The real word of God.”
I feel suddenly weary. "Yeah, yeah. Look, let's leave the shelves for another time. Need to give it more thought." Shepherd him out the door and close it firmly before he's even reached the car. We used to be friends but that's becoming more and more difficult. He didn't notice my bible and Torah on another shelf. I don't even believe in Islam. Dave knows I don't believe in anything. Told him before: if there is a god he must be a pretty dysfunctional bastard. Dave even believes that yoga is the devil's work. Maybe I should leave another message for Anthony the computer geek.

I'm just about to begin a series of yoga poses when there's a knock at the door. I groan, thinking Dave's come back to have a serious go at converting me. Maybe with reinforcements. But when I open there's a woman standing there frowning. About my age, dark hair, big eyes. She's a former lover, now we're sort of friends. Her eyes are very red and I hope she's not stoned. When she is, she likes to talk philosophy and make love at the same time. Irritatingly pointless conversations full of portentous solipsism and faulty analogy.

She asks, "Are you okay?" Can't think what she's talking about so I just stare at her, raise my eyebrows. "I heard some moaning."

"Oh. Yeah, I'm fine. I thought you were someone else." She looks tired, has a backpack slung over one shoulder. I can't see her car anywhere. There's a pause like we're on either side of an abyss, deciding whether or not to jump across. I'm remembering that when we were lovers I never quite trusted her. I'd be just about to fall asleep when images of her attacking my sleeping body with a knife would send me into an anxiety attack.

"Can I use your phone?" Suddenly she seems nervous. Maybe it shouldn't but it puts me at ease.

"Yep, sure." I hold the door open and back awkwardly out of the way to let her in. "So what are you - ?"

"I've been walking for hours," she says flatly. "My boyfriend dumped me. My car broke down. I don't know - . I didn't - ." She clamps her mouth shut but her eyes just fill with tears anyway. I put my arms around her, pat her back, massage her head a little. It's difficult because of the backpack. But maybe that's a good thing because soon we stop so she can put it down. I offer her a drink.

While I'm making the drinks she sings a few lines of, *When I Fall in Love*. I begin to feel guilty for having dumped her myself, but then I remember that we'd just drifted apart without ever really connecting. At least, that's how it seems to me now. I remember that Echo and the Bunnymen's version of this song segues into something about a sex machine. I don't want to think about that. She has a terrible singing voice.
I'm about to hand her a gin and tonic when she asks for a cigarette, bursts into tears again. After a moment's indecision I put the glasses down and comfort her again. Both cats appear and begin tangling themselves around our legs. They seem to like human displays of affection. I suppose their movements could be rendered as algorithms. Perhaps they'd follow the same rules as objects circling a strange attractor – similar paths, but never exactly the same. I realise I shouldn't really be thinking about chaos theory at a time like this. Or should I? Maybe it's quite relevant. Maybe there's a connection with relationships and reproduction, DNA copying errors and bifurcation. Random mutation. I savour the phrase. I say it out loud and it's the cue for us to move apart. We sit at the table and drink and smoke. She asks me what I'm talking about, so I tell her. I actually see her eyes glaze over but I talk on past the limits of my knowledge. Inventing freely, improvising. This morning I'd had thoughts I wanted to write, but with my computer down I feel blocked from anything but this sort of spam thinking. I tried writing longhand but it's too slow, ideas shrivel before they reach the page. Should be called slowhand. But, of course, that has other connotations.

She says, "I wanna go out. I want to go out and drink and dance," emphasising the verbs. Whenever we went out together she got drunk and made trouble. The people she upset always seemed to think I should be responsible for her. They weren't usually amenable to reason and diplomacy.

"Nah, I don't want. Not tonight." I remember all the times I held her hair out of the way in alleyways and carparks. I became adept at gathering it with both hands, transferring it to one, then patting her back. A friend of mine claims that every time she goes out she ends up holding a drunken woman's hair out of the way while she vomits. I've noticed, though, that she only goes out with women with long hair. "I can drop you home if you like." She ends up staying for dinner. Watching crap TV while I cook. I wanted to think about Uncle Vince: about his simulacra of communication and how it seems to be enough for him. As long as we go through the motions, nod and laugh in the right places. But I can't think while she's here. Can't write, can't think. And still no word from computer boy.

I'm lying in bed now. Still awake, though it's late. I let her stay the night. She didn't want to be alone, but understood she was to sleep on the couch. The cats are bodyguards, either side of me. Mind busy with all the thinking I couldn't do during the day, while pencil and notebook lie useless on the bedside table.

Zio Vincenzo's partial sentences manage the form but lack content. Leaving us to fill in the blanks, ascribe meaning. Whatever meaning we like.
Perhaps his is a particularly postmodern affliction. Some of the other things he whispered to me this morning come to mind. *The snipers have all gone blind,* was one of them. I can't think now what it was I found so creepy about these, but another was, *I wore my best suit, only to have it ruined by the carabinieri.* My guards are asleep on the job. I envy them, lucky bastards.

I get up about sunrise. Cold grey-green, sky looks like sputum. Follow the usual algorithm – more or less – with cats, percolator, and computer. The thing about chaos theory and strange attractors is that small differences in starting conditions can develop into large effects later. It's become such a cliché it's impossible not to think of it whenever chaos theory is mentioned, but still I try not to think about the butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil. The notion of small differences reminds me about the computer. Check it, hopeful, but still nothing runs. Leave another message for Anthony.

I can smell that the coffee is ready so I pour two cups and take them into the lounge. She's sitting up in the middle of the foldout bed with quilt spiralled up around her like an inverted whirlpool, crying silently. I feel somewhat relieved when I realise I can't give her a hug because of what she's done with the bedding. I'd like to snap a photo of her. She looks like Yvette Watt's painting, *Woman in a Whirl (Hello and Goodbye).* Except for her streaming eyes. Inertia, plus the craving for coffee and nicotine, wins over my desire to imitate art. Sip my coffee. Carefully lower the other one to the small table.

About to slink out when she says, "I didn't tell you everything last night."

"Uh huh," wondering if "everything" is something I really want to know. While hoping she doesn't let this pause go on too long.

"I'm pregnant."

I know that I shouldn't pause here. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I want a child, but not by myself and not with the wrong man." I grimace sympathetically. What can I say that won't be patronising or lame?

She tenses and straightens her back. I wonder whether she's about to fart, she often uses physical humour to distance herself from serious discussions, but instead she says, "Termination. Today. Nine o'clock."

"I'll drive the getaway car," I say, heading for the back door. Feel I've earned this cigarette. I turn back and retrieve her coffee. She won't be needing it. Breakfast for one after all.

The sky looks a little less abject at eight forty-five. An ordinary grey now. We're outside the waiting room sharing a cigarette. Ignoring the nurse's prohibition. Both of us dressed in black. We laugh when we notice this, attract glass-filtered frowns from nurse. Small raindrops curve in under the
veranda and spit on our faces. We continue giggling intermittently. As well as black boots, jeans, and T-shirt, she’s wearing a black leather jacket and dark glasses.

I nearly say, “Jesus, you look like the Terminator,” but manage to turn it into, “Jesus, you look like a rock star.” I even say it admiringly. I consider mentioning a black cap and Linda Hamilton in *Terminator II*, but even that’s probably too close a reference. We’re making some fine distinctions here. I wonder how much she’s editing her speech.

In the recovery room she’s groggy, slightly delirious. We drink the tea and share the fruit. I peel and segment a mandarin. Hand her a piece and say, “Solidarity sister.” She parts her lips, pushes out her tongue to display a mouthful of semi-masticated fruit. I laugh dutifully.

She spends three days on my couch. TV, reading, and dozing. Says she’s fine. Physically. Now we’re both in my bed. I usually sleep naked but this time I keep my boxers on. She’s borrowed one of my larger T-shirts. We cuddle. I find I’m fairly good at ignoring my body’s response. I’m falling asleep when I feel her hand move from my shoulder. It glides across my chest. She removes my hand from her hip and places it where she wants it. Fingers slide down my belly. I don’t stop her. I don’t stop. I remember to breathe out.

Afterwards, she gets up and goes to the couch where the folder bed is still made up. I’m lying here with a memory, from when I was about ten years old, of Zio Vincenzo killing a goat. He and my father occasionally used to butcher a sheep and I was allowed to help skin it. I didn’t like killing things just for the sake of it, but I did like providing *mangiare vero*, real food. I was such a boy-scout manqué.

I hadn’t realised it was always my father who did the actual killing. But this time we were going to have goat and, for some reason, Uncle Vince was intending to do the killing. When it was time, though, he couldn’t bring himself to cut its throat. Neither could he back down, lose face. I remember his two hands holding its mouth shut, blocking its nostrils. Took a long time to stop struggling and twitching. I’m trying to remember the expression on Vince’s face. Even as a ten-year-old I knew this was wrong. Just watching made me want to go and wash. I’d like to think he was crying.

My immediate family have never told stories much, nor very well, but Zio Vincenzo was a great raconteur. He had a knack for turning seemingly banal events into comic narrative. I’ll always remember him as a gentle, kind man with a subtle sense of humour. He never told the story of the goat, though. I wonder if anyone else remembers it. Oh, yeah; now I remember the thing he
whispered that really shivered my spine. *We slit our throats and smile.* I’m glad the cats are here. I bring both hands out from under the quilt and cup their heads. Maybe computer boy will come tomorrow and things’ll be back to normal. Maybe I should go out to the lounge and see if she’s all right.
Since the death of his father six years ago, when he and his body guards were blown up inside their car as they left the Catania airport, Mimmo Urzi' had found himself at the head of the family's "business" empire. The many people, whose livelihood depended on the goodwill and protection of old Leone Urzi', were shocked. Prior to this disaster the Old Man had seemed invincible. He was ruthless, shrewd, highly respected and widely connected to people who could make things happen: politicians, businessmen and the enforcers, both inside and outside the law. Unfortunately, as everyone in that highly precarious business knows, you're only as good as your luck, when that runs out, all the other power props are of little use and tend to collapse with it. After the shock people were considering how to best cut their losses and change allegiance to the new guard from Cefalu'.

Initially nobody gave the new boy on the block much of a chance. He was young, just twenty-five when his father was killed. He was considered somewhat of a scapestrato by all who knew him. There was talk of him being a junkie, a gambler, a womaniser...you name it. Worse still, everyone agreed that the boy was none too bright. His own father, who had all but disowned him, was quoted as saying that his son's brain matter had all drained down to his penis, in reference to the size of that part of his anatomy.

Be that as it may, once his father was out of the way, Mimmo astounded everyone by the swiftness with which he took over the reins, pounced on his enemies and established order. Now at age 31, and after a string of successful operations that left a few corpses riddled with bullets, incinerated in cars and, in one case, drowned in a vat of olive oil, he had rightly gained respect. It seems that where Mimmo lacked in brain cells he was endowed with cunning, swiftness of action and good old survival instinct.

When Don Alfio arrived, the driver had given up on the door bell and was heading back. He stood outside the car, on the passenger's side, where he
knew Mimmo was seated, though all he could see was his own reflection in the bullet-proof glass. That face in the tinted glass made him feel faint.

“Signor Mimmo.” He called feebly into the glass.

A few seconds’ silence. Finally the glass lowered to reveal the chubby, inscrutable face of Mimmo Urzi’.

“Don Alfio, i miei ossegui.” Said Mimmo, and despite the obsequious words his face had a smirk and his voice a tone of contempt. Don Alfio swallowed hard and touched his hat.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Nothing,” said Mimmo, in his slow drawl, that made him seem even more dense than his repute, “I was going for a passeggiata to the mountains, to get some fresh air. I’ve heard that you make the best coffee.”

“Oh, signor Mimmo. It’s an honour...My family are all out, “ he said with a quick glance at his watch, “Would you honour me...over at Ciro’s...” He waved towards the Bar.

Mimmo dismissed it with a wave of his bejewelled hand.

“You know me, I’m private man, Don Alfio...” and he looked up to the balcony.

Don Alfio had no choice but to invite him up.

Don Alfio was glad that there was the coffee to be made, it gave him an activity through which to channel his tension. He poured a cup for each, lacing his with a generous drop of grappa. Normally he wouldn’t, not on a Sunday morning. It seemed sacrilegious. But he needed to steady himself. He knew that Mimmo would not be venturing out all this way unless there was something heavy on his mind.

Mimmo put three generous teaspoons of sugar in his coffee then proceeded to stir, as he did his bracelets clanged on his wrist. The sound further destabilised Don Alfio’s unsteady nerves. Mimmo loved jewellery. His Gold Cartier watch on his left wrist was augmented by a matching bracelet of thick spun gold. His right wrist sported a bracelet which strung together little silver bells, whose ringers had shapes of hearts and horns: love and luck, the two essentials in his life. When Mimmo raised his arm and shook his wrist, something he did regularly to emphasise a point or simply to fill in a silence, all those shiny trinkets glittered and jingled like decorations on a Christmas tree.

The luck theme was pursued beyond his wrist to other pieces of visible jewellery.

From his left ear hung yet another golden horn, as further bastion in his barricade against ill fortune. Mimmo felt, with some justification, it must be said, that in his profession he needed to have plenty of luck on his side. And
so far it seemed that his lucky trinkets had served him well, given that he had already escaped a couple of serious assassination attempts, by rivals keen to get their hands on his fast growing empire. But the piece of resistance of his cachet of jewellery was without doubt his chain. Chunky and solid, its reputation preceded its impressive appearance. Legend had it that it was instrumental, at least once, in the elimination of a rival, by strangulation. So many uses for jewellery.

Having drunk down his coffee, Mimmo got down to business, “Have you considered the offer on that piece of land, Don Alfio.”

Don Alfio cleared his throat, he knew Mimmo had come for that and yet, true to his old habits, instead of preparing for this visit, he had chosen instead to avoid thinking about it. Now he was lost for a reply.

“Yes, of course, it’s a very generous offer...for myself I would sell right now... I could certainly do with the money…”

“You are ready to sell then?”

“Well, no. I mean not yet. You see, the grove has sentimental value for us, it’s been in my wife’s family for...well...for ever. So, it’s not really in my hands. I mean, if it were up to me, I would sell. Times change, and one must adapt. We must be realistic, but…”

Mimmo didn’t like talk, he liked even less words that he couldn’t understand. He felt threatened by them. He was sure they had been invented by clever dicks to confound people like him and to let themselves off the hook. So he shook his wrist in a show of impatience. At the sound of all those bells Don Alfio stopped talking, but the ensuing silence felt even more terrible.

“Maybe we can wait until my mother-in-law passes away,” he ventured, in a plaintive voice, hoping to appeal to Mimmo’s sense of family, “She loves it there. She would die if she were forced to move.”

Don Alfio realised the futility of his plea. Clearly death did not have the same import for Mimmo as it did for ordinary mortals.

“Don Alfio, this is an important project, that will bring work and prosp... money into our region. With all respects to you and your family, my clients are not prepared to wait for the good soul of your mother-in-law to leave us; long may she live. The property is required now, or else my clients might take their business to Cefalu’.”

Cefalu’ was under the control of his rivals and that did not suit Mimmo at all.

Silence.

“Don Alfio, al buon inteneditore, poche parole.” (To a good listener a few words suffice.)
Mimmo looked away. Mimmo never looked you in the eye, not out of shyness, rather, so as not to deign you with the privilege of his whole attention. The effect was most disconcerting, because when the light fell obliquely on Mimmo’s eyes it highlighted the yellow specks in his irises, giving him a menacing appearance. Don Alfio sighed.

“I’ll speak to my wife. I’ll need time to try to persuade her.”

“How long do you need.”

Don Alfio did not want to be held down to a date.

“Well, if I know her, she’ll take some persuading.”

Mimmo’s hand went to his ear, he winced and pulled at the golden horn with some force. Don Alfio saw the ear rip open and the ring come clear of the bleeding ear. Fortunately it was his own imagination playing a cruel trick, but the message was all too real. There was nothing doing but for Don Alfio to cave in, which he would have done, had he not feared his wife’s reaction almost as much as Mimmo’s threat.

Don Alfio, modern man that he was, did not believe in supernatural intervention, but what happened next was so timely that, in the days following the incident, it induced to think that maybe he should reconsider his philosophical position on this point. Just as he was about to sweat out a final shirt, and Mimmo’s impatience was reaching the point of dire consequences, he was rescued by excited voices coming from the corridor, just outside the study where the private interview was taking place. Like a prisoner in a dark tunnel who has just seen a spiral of light, Don Alfio excused himself and went out to investigate. His son’s arrival was always a pleasure for Don Alfio, but now it was accompanied by a huge relief.

“Is Mamma with you?” asked Sante.

As Don Alfio replied his eyes fell on the girl next to Sante.

Seeing a beautiful woman would have gladdened Don Alfio’s heart at any time, but at this moment of intolerable distress, her appearance attained the power of a miracle. In his eyes she became a veritable Angel of Rescue.

She was, he guessed, the Australian giri, as Sante was about to confirm.

“Papa, questa e Ira-Jane.”

Gladness and admiration gelled in Don Alfio, producing an impetuous outpouring of affection.

“Ah carissima Signorina, we’ve been expecting you.”

It quite overwhelmed Ira-Jane, but there was no time to react, because Don Alfio had already his arm under hers and led her into the study, where Mimmo sat, miffed at the interruption.

“Vieni, vieni. Ti presento il dottor Mimmo Urzi.” (Please come, let me introduce you to Dr Urzi.)

“Oh hello,” said she, choosing to speak in English, even though she didn’t
have the foggiest whether the two men understood her, but in the midst of what she perceived to be a tense situation she thought she would retain the shield that speaking her own language gave her.

Upon setting his eyes on the girl a strange transformation took place in Mimmo Urzi. His face twisted and re-set itself in a painful grimace, as if he were being tortured. His brow broke into a sweat and for a moment he froze on his chair, unable to return the girl's greeting.

To fill the silence Don Alfio said, “Mamma has gone to see Nonna.”

“Ah, perfetto. Come Ira-Jane, we shall go and visit Nonna.”

Ira-Jane thought she misheard.

“Nonna? You mean my Nonna?”

“Yes, of course, our Nonna, but I cannot say that she will know you.”

Ira-Jane was dumbfounded. Just yesterday she had been told that the Nonni were dead. Meanwhile Sante was taking her hand and he started to retreat back towards the door. The prospect of the girl's departure shook Mimmo out of his paralysis. He now sprang to his feet as if a spider had stung him in his backside. He bowed very low and proffered his chubby hand. Ira took it in passing, for her mind still grappling with the contradiction of what she had just heard, (a contradiction perfectly mimicked in the fact that at one point her hands were being held by two different men pulling in opposite directions). And perhaps to compensate for her curtness, given the funny man's gallantry, she allowed him a wan smile. Never in her wildest dreams did she realise the impact that this perfunctory little gesture would have on Mimmo's heart and on subsequent events.

Such things only happen in books, thought Mimmo, or rather, he imagined they did, for Mimmo had never read a book in his life. Mimmo's eyes remained fixed on the door, beyond which that luminous creature had vanished just as quickly as she had appeared, after wreaking havoc in his heart. He wondered whether the apparition was real or whether it was one of those air-brushed things you see on magazine covers. He stared at the door, waiting for it to open again and confirm the reality of the vision.

Don Alfio noticed the change in Mimmo, how could he not? The man had been transformed by a passing spirit, though not quite spirited away, as Don Alfio would have wished. Mimmo seemed immobilised in a space of his own. This was a new situation for him, outside the realm of his experience. He turned his attention to his jewellery, hoping to find inspiration out of his state of bewilderment. But none came. Not the rings or bracelets; earring or chains provided him with a clue. So he just sat there looking at the door.
Then as his eyes scanned the room aimlessly they came to rest on Don Alfio. They were little eyes, hazel, with specks of yellow in them, lost in the ample space of his cheeks and the immensity of what he felt. They looked at the Mayor pleadingly, as if to ask, what is happening to me Don Alfio?

Of course, Don Alfio, who all his life had loved women above all else, understood perfectly well what was happening to Mimmo. He sympathised and commiserated with him, especially as his experience in these matters indicated to him that Don Mimmo was in for a long haul of suffering, as the object of his nascent passion was unlikely to requite his feelings. Nevertheless Don Alfio was also a survivor and it was this very instinct which prevailed upon him. It occurred to him that this new state in which Mimmo had fallen relieved him of the pressure of having to make a decision now. It was a god-sent turn of events to be exploited to his advantage. For a start he saw a chance to get rid of his uninvited guest and to give himself some respite. Mimmo himself gave him the opener.

“Is that Sante’s girl?”

“Oh no, Sante is merely a boy, she’s a relation of my wife’s, from Australia. The girl’s mother and my wife were very close. She carries the same name as her. Unfortunately, she’s an orphan, the poor girl, and looks to my wife as her mother.”

“She’s a Signorina then?” asked Mimmo and you could feel his heart suspended on the filament of Don Alfio’s reply. Don Alfio, paused, intoxicated by the feeling of power over such a tyrant.

“Certainly, my niece…” imperceptibly he upgraded the level of his relationship to the girl, “will not give up her independence just for any man. When the time comes, she will choose a strong man of character. I feel that a Sicilian man would be just the person for her.”

Don Alfio tried to discern the effect of his words on Mimmo without looking directly at him. Having satisfied himself that he had sown the seeds of hope in Mimmo’s heart, he got up and added,

“Signor Mimmo, I would ask you to stay for lunch, but…”

Mimmo sprung to his feet with such force that his bulk wavered unsteadily and his jewellery jingled, but this time it played sweet music to Don Alfio’s ears, for it announced Mimmo’s departure.

“No, Don Alfio, I...I am expected somewhere else. Thank you for receiving me.” Suddenly the terrifying bully was bowing respectfully. And Don Alfio thanked unpredictable old Cupid — and Ira-Jane — that Mimmo, who had marched into his living room with the arrogance of a mafioso, was now limping his way back to the door. Clearly Mimmo was a man wounded by the arrow of love.
Aloysius de Sequeira couldn't recall the first thickening of Mathilde’s long slender neck in the early years of their marriage, but he remembered pouring his urgent breath and coconut flower toddy down her throat in the evenings when the constellations fizzed in the sky and his own white stars sparkled in Mathilde’s dark bay; he remembered her calling him her Wish; and he remembered that tide of their merging waters that rocked them, sometimes to sleep, sometimes towards the world beyond.

Within a year, Mathilde’s long slender neck was discernibly thicker. Hortense Oratio the Devout snidely suggested it was becoming thickset and muscular from too much kissing.

“Dowager hump awreddy, but back to front,” she sniggered.

A few months after Mathilde became pregnant with Aloysius’s brightest star, a saucer-sized lump shaped and marked like a turtle shell appeared on her neck. Doctor Arbuckle pronounced a goiter and prescribed iodine. Hortense Oratio suggested the turtle was God’s way of punishing Aloysius for taking a divorced woman for his wife. She was also sure Aloysius’ falling for Mathilde had something to do with the influence of Hollywood movies on Malacca. Malacca’s church congregations dwindled whenever one of the new movies came to town.

“Ah yah! Off again to take smut lessons from all those itchified actresses,” Hortense said when she arrived in time one Sunday to see Mathilde departing for the movies. She ran a critical eye over Mathilde’s powdered face.

“But the censors always cut the naughty bits out,” protested Mathilde. “All those white flares on the screen.”

“Think you so clever. Still smutty, naughty bits or no. You think those actresses put all that make-up on for nothing? Like putting light bulbs on their skin! Glowing so promiscuously, ah-yah! Trap so many men like moths.
Serve the women right they get moth eaten. One man more than enough for a good woman. Some good women never get a man.” Hortense Oratio referred to herself often in this way, but she had a point about the influence of the movies on the young Christao women of Malacca. It was true that in that year, 1941, the sales of cosmetics in Malacca tripled and the centuries old churches of Malacca rang out with the indignant cries of Eurasian babies being christened with the names of Hollywood film stars.

Mathilde’s baby would be named after a minor French actress whose luscious mouth, imbued with the grainy black and white pearlescence of Paramount films, had come to Mathilde’s attention in Malacca’s Cathay Picture Theatre. The Cathay had almost enough holes in its tin roof to be considered an open air theatre. Mathilde’s nine months pregnant belly protruded from her like a globe of the world, abbreviated yet all-encompassing, as she sat sharing salted plums and sour-sop juice in the theatre with Kat Non, the Malay confinement lady and servant Wish had found her. Mathilde was transfixed by the variety of ways in which the actress’s mouth gave meaning to her silences, for Mathilde was a woman who had considered the meanings and uses of silence in the five years of her previous marriage to the precisely spoken Chinese lawyer. She counted and named the expressions on the actress’s lips in each scene.

“Amused. He is amusing her. How you say in Malay?” she asked Kat Non.
“Menggembirakan.”
“Desire. She desires him.”
“Hasrat,” concurred Kat Non with a noisy slurp on her starfruit juice.
“Shame. She is ashamed of herself.”
“Malu. Look at that man touching her! Ai-ye!”
This time Mathilde could only find the word for what was happening on the screen in the language of her parents, which she had rarely spoken during her marriage to her first husband.
“Tokah,” she whispered, pressing her fingertips against her eyelids and the pricking of tears.
“What tokah?” asked Kat Non.
“It means to touch, but it also means to cost. Christao word.” Until her first marriage was nearly over, Mathilde had not believed her parents’ dying language had any meaning that couldn’t be more adequately expressed in English. She had spoken to no-one, not even Aloysius, about what the Chinese lawyer’s touch had cost her.

The leading lady loomed larger on the screen, hands on hips, utterly silent but in full possession of herself.
“She wants revenge,” said Mathilde. “How you say like that in Malay?”
“Dendam. Revenge, grudge. He wanted to go too deep too soon ah. Like he got no shame. English man of course.” There was a sudden flare of white on the screen and a jump in the soundtrack. A murmur went through the audience.

“Ah yah! Government censor.”

“Kiss or murder lah?”

“How you say deep inside in Malay?” murmured Mathilde.

“Dalam. More than one meaning. Deep, inside, interior. You can use it for the private places in a house. Or in a woman ah.”

“Ah.” The unnamed baby turned suddenly in Mathilde, sending a jab like a needle through her birth canal. She retrieved the salt-plum stone from her mouth. “How deep? So deep that a baby doesn’t touch it? So deep that a man can’t go there? Ssphhh!” She drew her breath in suddenly through her teeth. White-hot pain obliterated further speech as the brightest star of the love she’d shared with Wish surged suddenly in the darkness of her body.


Ghislaine Evangelia de Sequeira. What a brilliant constellation of contradictory features Kat Non revealed when she wiped the vernix from her. Although the baby had her mother’s soulful eyes and full mouth and her father’s slightly perplexed expression, her cry rang with the same belligerence as Mathilde’s laughter. But no-one could agree where her pale golden skin faintly tinged with green came from, and not everyone could get their tongue around her name. Ghislaine, pronounced with a “J”. Although her name was never abbreviated, she would become used to being abbreviated by people in other ways after her mother’s death. But she would always remember her mother called her Ghislaine after the minor but brilliantly expressive actress who had imparted so many meanings to silence.

Even Hortense Oratio congratulated Mathilde for producing such a fair-skinned baby. After over a century of British government, Hortense wasn’t the only Malaccan who saw good fortune in a pale complexion. But the value of pale skin had changed in Malacca many times since its history was first recorded, and was about to change again.

On the morning that Ghislaine de Sequeira turned three months old, her father went downstairs and tuned the wireless to the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation. The British newsreader reported firm stands and strategic
retreats were being made by troops against the Japanese in the northern peninsula. Aloysius de Sequeira filled his government-issue portmanteau with strips of clean old sheeting, suture thread and antiseptic. He had worked with British doctors full of cool reserve and implacable nerve in the Malacca Hospital for twenty years. He knew a British euphemism for impending disaster when he heard one.

* 

Two British soldiers came knocking with Doctor Arbuckle on the door of the de Sequeira house early the next morning.

"We're all getting out of here," Doctor Arbuckle said, "we don't stand a chance against the Japanese. But you do. Good luck old chap." Doctor Arbuckle's spectacles were smeared with blood and his shirtsleeves flapped open at the cuffs. His greying hair clung to his forehead with sweat and the lines of his face had deepened with fatigue. He gave Aloysius his leather medical bag full of supplies and a key. "Help yourself to the dispensary. You'll need it."

"And take the stores in the hospital pantry before the Japs do," said one of the soldiers. "We're leaving everything behind."

"I'll never forget you, Doctor Arbuckle sir."

The doctor shook his hand. "Likewise, Aloysius. But now the Japanese are here. Pretend you never knew us."

By the time Aloysius got to the hospital pantry, it had been ransacked by looters. But on the backmost shelf, he found a box of unopened treacle tins from Australia and a small pile of Bing Crosby records. He carried them home to Mathilde.

"Ah yah Wish! How will all this syrupy stuff help us survive a war lah?" she cried, pushing the box under the stairs.

The next day, the decapitated heads of looters were displayed on lampposts throughout the town. The invaders had brought a new kind of justice with them. Aloysius hid the records and the treacle under the stairs, but he slept with Doctor Arbuckle's bag next to the bed.

* 

Within days of the Japanese invasion of Malacca, some Japanese soldiers noticed the dark-skinned mother holding her pink baby as she alighted from a trishaw outside the de Sequeira bungalow in the Land of the Priest.

"Your baby very pale. Who is the father?"
“Aloysius de Sequeira, the medical dresser.”
“What nationality?”
“Eurasian. We come out all different shades in the wash.”
“Liar! How can the baby’s skin be so pale if your husband is half-caste? Englishman’s whore! You are hiding an Englishman somewhere in here. Search!” shouted the officer. Six bayonets sliced the air above the threshold of the house.

The soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army tore the ceilings down and ripped the doors off cupboards with their bayonets in their search for the English man. Thick clouds of plaster drifted into the well and onto the furniture, as if a mist had entered the house. The baby screamed as the plaster dusted her eyes. Mathilde and Kat Non were unable to read the soldiers’ faces clearly, even as they loomed closer and closer.

Aloysius arrived home that evening to find Mathilde and Kat Non white with plaster from the torn ceilings.

“They rubbed it into our faces. They said it would make us paler for our English men.”

The fish in the courtyard well lay immobilised in white sludge. A boat-shaped bloodstain grew larger across the back of Mathilde’s sea-green skirt, as if the arrival of some unknown cargo drew closer by the second. Kat Non sponged Mathilde between her legs.

“The shock has opened her birth wound again, ah. Light some brand and incense in the burner.”

Mathilde shook her head. “What if the soldiers come back lah? Shouldn’t we leave just in case?”

“The Japanese Imperial Army will need medical officers like me too much to imprison us. First things first.” Wish lit the incense burner and the stove and brewed five spoonfuls of Teacher brand tea until the water was purple. He poured a whole can of Dutch Maid condensed milk and a tablespoon of Australian treacle into it.

“For the shock. Drink,” he told Mathilde. He took Ghislaine from her arms. Kat Non guided Mathilde to the burner.

“Stand astride. Like that. Ah. Dry the wound.”

“Too late. Too late lah.”

“It is never too late to heal. Even deep inside. Dalam, ah.”
Bumboat Cruise on the Singapore River

Rhetoric is what keeps this island afloat. Singaporean voice with a strong American accent, barely audible above the drone of the bumboat engine: “Singaporeans are crazy about their food. They are especially fond of all-you-can-eat buffets. Why not do as the locals do and try out one of the buffets at these hotels along the waterfront.” The Swissotel looms. The Grand Copthorne. The Miramar. All glass and upward-sweeping architecture. Why not do as the locals do. Here in this city where conspicuous consumption is an artform. Where white tourists wearing slippers and singlets are tolerated in black-tie establishments. Dollars. Sense.

How did I ever live in this place? Sixteen years of my life afloat in this sea of contradictions, of which I was, equally, one: half-white, half-Chinese; the taxi-driver cannot decide if I am a tourist or a local, so he pitches at my husband: “Everything in Singapore is changing all the time.” Strong gestures. Manic conviction. “This is good. We are never bored. Sometimes my customers ask me to take them to a destination, but it is no longer there.” We tighten our grip on two squirming children and pray that the bumboat tour will exist. Nothing short of a miracle this small wooden boat which is taking us now past Boat Quay, in its current incarnation, past the Fullerton Hotel.

To the mouth of the Singapore river, where the Merlion still astonishes: grotesque and beautiful as a gargoyle. The children begin to chafe at confinement. My daughter wails
above the drone of the engine. There’s talk of closing the mouth of the river. New water supply. There’s talk of a casino. Heated debate in the Cabinet. Old Lee and Young Lee locked in some Oedipal battle. The swell is bigger out here in the harbour, slapping up spray against the sides of the boat, as if it were waves that kept it afloat, this boat, this island, caught between sinking and swimming, as I am caught now. As if rhetoric mattered. As if this place gives me a name for myself.
That something exists doesn't necessarily mean that it's real.
That person gliding down the narrow monochrome passage of a hotel in
China Town
you are watching on the CCTV monitor needn't be me,
nor does the gaze of a young woman that lingers too long on my face
in the Lunar New Year's Eve crowd necessarily imply a future kiss.
That dusk invokes in Little India a neon yellow trident on a dim temple,
the scarlet moons of those lanterns over Desker Streets conspicuously
unattended doors as well as those Golden Arches at the corner,
and on other streets the litter in the gutters, the mangos in boxes,
the baroque sweep of labourers' hands sopping up curry with naan,
and the poet who admires the tango-closeness
of two cars edging around one another in a lane, needn't mean
that previous empires existed nor that we will see ourselves
in tomorrow morning's bathroom mirror. *Well,* you might muse,
while watching me on the monitor in your hidden office,
*I am God and he my clay* –
*Should I send him past the spruikers outside the restaurants and bars at Boat Quay?*
*Or should I force his mouth open with a karaoke microphone in a Katong dive?*
*Or bang the sky with fireworks that he won't see*
*except as trailing tinsel on the vast glass skyscrapers?*
And as those thoughts gather, this shrinking island, this tropical city-state
—as much as your poet — is something that is sung into being and exists,
though that doesn't mean that it's real, necessarily.
THE HUMBLE ADMINISTRATOR’S GARDEN, SUZhou

An ideal, distilled and contained with ink in shrinking wilderness flavour: it’s authenticity, a late Ming background for your autobiography. On lotus leaves, puddles of allusions form. Where is the tune of “Falling Plum Blossom” played? Hair unbound, gaze thoughtfully at a jagged mountain and listen. Armies of wooden slaves retreated into the countryside long ago: the Humble Administrator was certainly not a vegetable peddler.

Hear that lofty drop as the vulgar masses flood in (Beijingers say but it’s so small), see the Humble Administrator’s inky property filled with organic footnotes (déjà vu a knot of bamboo). Is it shedding references like they’re going out of fashion or metaphorically pickled in perpetual spring? In fact, the garden has never looked better except, of course, when it played a starring role in the miniseries A Dream of Red Mansions. Made stable behind a shutter which is yet another screen, the four seasons stop here:

things don’t move, you do.
Perhaps you do not know this name?
Or you think it is just another cheap migrant?
You are not right for this is the guy
Assigned the task of dealing with the Allied Forces
During their occupation of Peking in 1901
As the principal negotiator
To end the Boxer Rebellion
Li toured Europe in 1896
Among his entourage of 45 people
There was a huge decorated golden lacquer Coffin
A bei shui yi zhan tradition
In which soldiers were forced to fight the enemy with waters behind them
And the general, with a coffin beside him
Li was to go to fan bang, foreign nations
Like going into a den of tigers and wolves
Who were to devour Peking in five years
He was to be exhausted and die after the negotiation
His coffin went on show, beside him
In Great Britain where he observed the parliament in session
And commented on the senseless quarrelling as "nothing much worth seeing"
He spat on the exquisite English carpets wherever he went
And treated the dog-gift given him
By General Gordon's wife
The way a cook did: stewed it and ate it
In America, Li mixed the Chinese food and the Western
Thus creating a new culinary genre called zasui
In Hengbin or Yokohama, he vowed never to touch the Japanese soil
Not even the cement of the port
Risking a fall into the ocean
He walked the gangplank from his American ship
To get on board his Chinese

When the Xinchou Treaty or the Boxer Protocol was signed in 1901
With 450 million taels of silver to be paid as indemnity
Based on the total Chinese population of 450 million
One tael per head
Li coughed blood
And died
Ever afterwards he is known as a Traitor
Ah well, just put yourself in his shoes
And imagine how you’d deal with those wolfish foreign powers
Inside your house
If you are a loser⁴

NOT A SINGLE PRESUPPOSITION, EXCEPT MY IGNORANCE

“The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way”
— Lao Tzu

Here you are in your chimerical disposition
creeks shallow and simple to follow.

Here one cannot create, or find conclusion;
there is no system.

Though you have bequeathed all arrivistic tendencies
for omnipotent bliss and ubiquitous rest

and can dance upon snake-scale
sage-like through a honky nut,

attempts to broach your most genuine
masquerade fall in a heap.

In this human language
I struggle to see your limbs

Non omnes omnia pussumus
we cannot do everything.

Supremely patient beside rapids
I observe the clouds in me change

easy metamorphosis, easy
our only gauge of time is
itself.
You died tomorrow afternoon, fifteen time zones
And a whole day away. Like the future I saw
With you almost a life ago. I was ungrown,
Unfattened, green in my joints, raw,
And you, years older, a seductive senior.

What was it we wanted from each other
Then? Merely a moment aligned
Of sight when we mirrored
Ourselves in perfect mind,
Imperfect love scored.

I had stopped wondering, stopped asking
Why and what and whether
If, although, perhaps we could, this thing
We shared for a brief year
Would be worth the resurrecting.

And you? You went your merry way,
Madly skidding among admirers,
Thronges applauding; the play’s
The thing. Actors, authors, lovers
Hovering, you staged their day

For them, every one equal, cast
From the apron after the last call;
Each one receding behind the last
To appear, each irresistible mirror fallen, shattered when play is past.
Cremation at Sea

He would have preferred fire to cold,
Heat to dampness, and to mingle
With the open waves rather than molder
Under inert dirt. My brother
Sent me news as soon as it was flashed,
Then all sorts of friends sorry for
What never was. I cope as always
In solitary poetry. Distance
Was my choice, and I choose it, hold
It close again. Some loves live strongest
Failed, some images cast brightest
In the body’s mind.

So now I look
Out at the Pacific waiting for him
To wash ashore here where I walk
Each week, speckled in the grains
That catch at my toes and turned-up jeans
And that I will sprinkle in my garden
In California, where he had never been.