PLACE AND IDENTITY IN NEW AUSTRALIAN POETRY, 2004–2005

The “Map of Australian Verse” as drawn by James McAuley in 1975 has been subject, in the thirty years since then, to progressive re-configuration. The new collections of poetry published during the last year indicate that the contemporary pattern of growth continues to be culturally lucrative, and that the map of Australian poetics today is enriched by imaginative diversity. Thirty years ago McAuley contended that “within a limited situation...we are neither metropolitan nor strictly speaking provincial.” In relation to his reading of that binary then, our map today – our poetry’s cultural landscapes, our habitations for both local and trans-cultural identities – has extended the binary in both (opposite) directions, being more accommodating to (non-pejorative) “metropolitan” and “provincial” cultural developments and sensibilities.

To test these hypothetical assumptions let’s begin with a brief overview of The Best Australian Poems 2004 edited by Les Murray. One hundred and twenty-seven poets are each represented by one poem. In his “Preface” Murray does not address issues of place and identity nor the cultural manifestations of metropolitanism and provincialism, although he does in an aside confront globalisation by robustly denigrating the “internet” as “that wicked CIA technology.” The anthology does not have a “Notes on contributors” section, but there are plenty of familiar names to testify to cultural, regional and urban diversifications within Australian poetry which is also represented here by expatriate poets such as Katherine Gallagher, Graeme Hetherington, Clive James, and Peter Porter as well as important Aussie poets who don’t have Australian birth-certificates.

Brief mention of a few poems gives some idea of the variety and comprehensiveness of the national poetic imagination. Australia, in the broadest sense, is the subject of Peter Goldsworthy’s “Australia” in which our country’s geological place on the planet is envisaged surreally, with “many maps of Tasmania, most of them in other places,” and South Australia:
baked and gritty
crust, lightly watered, sifter dusted
and sarcastic with its hints of eucalypt.
Its thousand mile creek tastes too salty,
it's muddy waters barely moving, but
moving enough to stir a homesick heart. (66)

Ouyang Yu offers a multi-cultural perspective in “Far and Near” which is another example of how the map of our verse is being re-adjusted:

in australia
I am as far from any australians
as china is from australia

and I am as near them
as a cloud
near the sky (201)

The anthology also contains, predictably, historical perspectives, two deft examples being Anna Buck’s “Two Out of Ten” which laments the demolition of a schoolhouse erected in 1851, leaving only “stone steps leading up/to nothing” and a “whiskered lemon tree” like a child serving detention who stands “outside/for the rest of the century” (13-14); and Jane Downing’s “A True History” which presents an adverse perspective apropos the mythologisation of Ned Kelly, that of the widow of Sergeant Kennedy:

...I, Bridget Tobin that was
Bridget Kennedy but briefly married
must keen in the small corners you’ll allow
Such is the life he left me (41)

Two subtle poems - Philip Salom’s “The Family Fig Trees” and Thomas Shapcott’s “Looking for Ancestors in Limerick” - are meditations on ancestral origins. Adroitly manipulating family tree metaphors, Salom calls up the “music” of his ancestors:

...and if I cannot hear it quite
there’s a sweetness I can taste above the branches
in my chest, in this tree, this wooden cloud of names:
Mordecai and Sarah. Noah and Ruth. Shalom. (162)
Shapcott celebrates his grandmother “Who hoarded an ominous Celtic legacy” and who is the “myth” he took back to Ireland where he discovered the bardic origins of his grandmother’s “vehemence,” “exile” and “anger”: “I took a myth back with me. My senses/ Have already been infected” (165). Expatriate poets, on the other hand, tend to undertake reverse journeys, as in Graeme Hetherington’s “Athenial Wolves”; his Grecian “self-exile” is in juxtaposition to his Tasmanian/Van Diemen’s Land origins which urge him to “hunt/ My family down in packs of poems” (83).

Turning to poems of a lighter note, examples are Max Richards’ “My Wife’s Dream” which concludes with an amusing apposite pun; Andy Kissane’s portrait of a baker in “Loaves and Days” which is achieved through the elaboration of a splendid conceit; and Carolyn Fisher’s “Potato Country” in which the poet offers pastoral homage to “potato growers” and what they grow. Murray’s anthology is bursting at the seams with a heterogeneity of Australian icons and flavours, ranging from Diane Fahey’s parrots (“exotic, without condescension;/ wisely adapted, fantastically sane” 50); to two Bondi poems – Joanne Burns’ “Salt” and “Notice” by William Carney; to Alan Gould’s evocation of a National Folk Festival (“The Quick of It”) that is achieved through a clever use of registers, “curliques of sound,” and “musical unzipping” (68); to Michael Sharkey’s wonderful love-affair with the noble beverage in “Wine.” Les Murray’s own contribution, “The Cool Green,” is a polemical piece about the soullessness of materialism with the result that “we are money’s genitals” (139).

Perhaps the one poem, powerfully and morally polemical, which more than any other will haunt the reader’s memory is Bruce Dawe’s “Hang in There, Boy.” Writing back to Walt Whitman, Dawe produces a devastating satire which will probably be accorded a status akin to that of his classic “Homecoming”:

O you America,

to whom can we look but you
- voted year after year the World’s
Most Popular Enemy, brave in the field, pusillanimous often
in foreign policy, too big by far
to always get it right, although invariably sure
this time you’ll thread your bullish way
through the china-shop without the smashed porcelain? (37)

Among several books that showcase career achievements by poets, as in the case of Selected collections, two merit special recognition, being last
collections published posthumously. These are *The Sky's Beach* by R. A. Simpson (1929-2002) and *The Long Game and Other Poems* by Bruce Beaver (1928-2004). Long-time shaping forces in post-World War II Australian poetry, and mentor influences on younger poets in many ways, Simpson and Beaver contributed significantly to the poetry scenes in their home cities, Melbourne and Sydney, respectively. In his Foreword to *The Sky's Beach*, Peter Porter pays tribute to Simpson’s creative accomplishments as a poet, painter and graphic artist, and says “If I sometimes fancy myself as an honourary Melburnian, this is, in part, because Ron Simpson was such a decoration to the city” (xiii).

The title of Simpson’s book, taken from Kenneth Slessor’s “South Country,” is a tacit acknowledgement of the indebtedness of Simpson and his generation to Slessor’s pioneering influence on the shape of things to come in modern Australian poetry. The cover of *The Sky’s Beach* is graced by a beautiful still-life painting by Simpson, and interspersed among the poems are seven pencil drawings which confirm the accuracy and relevance of Tim Bass’s statement (on the back cover): “the economy and emotional density of his poems parallel the compressed space of the Cubist art he loved so much.”

The Contents of *The Sky's Beach* are divided into four sections. “1 So Much Stillness” consists of poems through which the poet steadily stares life and death in some of their many negating faces. A “mound” of a “man...sleeping” is “just breathing” (3). “The First Pain,” corollary to Original Sin presumably, is the theme of the second poem; “Window Ghost” portrays a forlorn Miss Haversham figure. In “The Chimes at Midnight,” ice images are symptomatic of the human condition. Neither Christianity nor Buddhism can appease an instinctive agnosticism. The first section offers little allegories, meticulously phrased, which inscribe a sceptical tone that infiltrates the volume. However, the scope for affectionate experiences is also affirmed in the fine elegiac tribute to Vincent Buckley, the “Music and depth” that “went into his words/with laughter” (8); and in the whimsical “Gorilla at the Zoo”:

> Instead of King Kong they have found a wise performer tasting termites picked up gently close at hand

To squat like this is rather regal (19)

The above shift to affectionate mood foreshadows some of the poems in “2 Comprehending Years” which begins with a splendid love poem that (like so
many of its companions) is so well crafted that punctuation is superfluous. "Flashbacks" and "Private Masterpiece" exemplify Simpson's mastery of the vignette-genre poem in which he often viscerally and visually marries the twin arts of poetry and painting. On the other hand "Night Flight" is a cosmological fantasy that culminates with the irresistible logic of "the universe has no end" (45).

Section "3 Life-Cycle," like certain poems in the previous sections, confronts death juxtaposed with botanical cycles of regeneration. "The Accused" is an amusing poem in which the court of law fails to put away Mr Death who raises his arm and, thus, "all are dead...heaped on the floor"; it is in a way the comic poem that Emily Dickinson never wrote. A totally different and disturbing mood is chillingly evoked in "Married Anger":

Lugging a large and clumsy gun
he climbs across volcanic rocks
shooting wild at gaga rabbits

He goes on thinking about his wife
fires again at the dying sun

Blood runs down onto the clouds

Waiting for hours in their farmhouse
sick of cutting raw lumps of meat
she stops and wipes her crimsoned knife

Mice are playing rounders in the bedroom (64)

The Long Game and Other Poems, Bruce Beaver’s thirteenth but last volume of poems, is a stunning accomplishment as well as an awe-inspiring memorial to his achievement as a poet who has an eminent place in the history of poetry written in English over the last fifty years. A first reading of the book reveals immediately Beaver’s technical virtuosity, the freedom and ease with which he orchestrates a myriad of forms, and a corresponding diversity of subjects and themes, all of which are examined and presented with intense commitment.

Identity and place are concepts which resonate throughout The Long Game, particularly with respect to Beaver’s scrutiny of poetic and spiritual identities and his attachment - not entirely uncritical as we see for instance in “Queenscliff, Manly” – to what has been the setting in which he has lived
most of his poetic life. The strong sense he has of his muse as “daimon” is intimately associated with his and his wife’s attachment to their Manly environment, a belongingness which is consonant with their devout attachment to each other. This indeed is the subject-essence of Beaver’s fine, unaffected poem “September 1st 2000.” The poet ponders the need to “affectedly/ summon up that magical/ entity I call my daimon” and force his “arthritic hand” to shape a poem, but he counters this with the sufficiency of celebrating “this first day/ of millenial spring” (7) by walking with his love along the waterfront:

So on
this fairest of first spring days
we walked the larger beach’s
length beside the worn, pocked
sandstone sea-wall that all helped
first kick-start my daimon rubbing
my nose and mind and heart in
pen, ink and paper over
fifty springs ago until
this most bounteous of love-shared days. (8)

In this poem Beaver’s dilemma is neatly resolved (having his cake and eating it) by writing a poem about not writing a poem and his personal identity is tangibly expressed through, or in conjunction with, the creation of poetry and the bounty of love. In the two-part poem “Identity,” however, self-recognition is conceived as a problematic mystery: an existential combination of “awkward entrances” and “clumsy/ rehearsals of exists,” “somehow to do with...all the paraphernalia/ of the cosmos” (62). Part Two is synthesis and synopsis of a perennial theme, one explored prolifically in the so-called “psychological novel”:

The utter incompetency of mirrors
to show us ourselves as we actually are
to ourselves and imagine we are to others.
Perhaps we come close to identities
in the eyes of others reflecting
attraction or repulsion, sometimes
frighteningly both. And even then
they may be seeing what they want to see
or one may be taking it in on sight
for better or worse. Identity
seems to be the sixty million dollar
question with not one satisfactory
answer in the erstwhile offing. (63)

The range of styles, rhythms, forms; of cryptic, conversational, simple,
complex metaphors and symbols; of metrical subtleties, whether in rhymed
or free verse; of lyricism, realism, humour, life-studies à la Lowell who
(judging by the excellent “Sonnet I. M. for Robert Lowell”) Beaver respected
and admired; of his kaleidoscopic philosophical aesthetic which is
strenuously devotional in both the secular and mystical contours of Beaver’s
work: this range, this catholicity of versification and humanism, is
breathtaking. Beaver’s eclecticism can be staunch with vibrant wit and
backbone principle as in his assaults on “all that/ understated stuff of old
world-/ weary music Empson avoided/ but his followers didn’t” and “the chill
of/ the post-Modern malaise” (50), as well as on “envenomed/ verses and
plaster of paris prose/ about the awful necessity of/ the ordinary” in “On Re-
reading Amis, Wain and Larkin” which begins with:

No more Movementese, please.
Take back all that very old
mouldy hat about tasteless
Common Sense in place of
passion fruit flowered Romanticism
Your Everyman’s Castle isn’t even
a home, it’s a house where you
sit and sulk and play Bach
without really listening to
anything but the surface hiss
of the wear and tear of mundane
“reality,” that unleavened dough
of things. (91)

It’s as if Beaver is reminding us, as Australians, of how ingrown toe-nail and
navel-gazing British cultural provincialism appears in the cross-cultural,
international scheme of things.

Beaver’s daemon, however, is both broader and more eccentrically narrow
than that. Broader because of his devotional and mystical belief systems
within which he holistically and symbolistically incorporates life, poetry and
the universe, in the poems that elevate conviction as well as risk-taking (as
did Donne’s) to new and fraught apocalyptic depths and heights (e.g. in “To the Divine Mystery” and “The Night of the Soul”). Yet it’s also scrupulously narrow to the extent that he lovingly acknowledges the mundane munificence of, for example in punningly titled “Darn”, “Holes in my sox! / The first (& last) potatoes of the season”; a poem which confirms the simple truth that “Everything has its life-span” (93).

Beaver is a poet with a redolent intense sense of vocation, within which the marriage of art and craft is sacrosanct (as in Dylan Thomas’s “craft and sullen art” paradigm). His creative sensibility is polymorphous: he respects the emotional intelligence of Romanticism, affirms the necessity of sober realism, endorses the oeuvres of modernism, and in interludes of mysticism (when he sees “eternity in a grain of sand”) embraces a devotional and metaphysical aesthetic. His poetic theory or faith, as outlined in “To the Divine Mystery,” is in search of “a tentative dispensation” (133) and incorporates a humble credo:

To leave children or
poems behind us
are two ways of trying
to serve the ineffable. (138)

That artistic and religious ideal of service – for he does assert that “the only true wisdom is the knowledge/ of the truth of God” (141) – becomes by the end of Beaver’s last book his culminating aesthetic of poetic truth and beauty. And in “The Long Game” – the last poem in the book – that truth and beauty is enshrined in a Blakean vision of innocence (in keeping with the subtitle: “a poem about children”) in which the rhyming dexterity along with the circular magical game trope is sensuously and Edenically appropriate in a then-unfallen world:

He’d run and rest and be in her sweet company
and that of all their friends under the magic tree,
the tree of all the earth, of heaven’s height and girth,
of forests made of stars, of wonderment and mirth.

Their laughter in the game rose high as any flame
consuming every woe, beyond all praise and blame.

With or without the sun it rose in joy upon
the long ecstatic dance, the circling marathon. (172-3)
Beaver’s last book, of course, is sumptuously and honestly concerned with Last Things (as is Simpson’s farewell Volume in which he identifies with Yeats’s stance regarding old men), and in writing poems in old age that focus on aging he invokes poets such as Brecht, Wallace Stevens, New Zealander Louis Johnson, Peter Porter, Robert Lowell, Christopher Brennan, and W. H. Auden.

As Australia is a physically huge country there is a corresponding amplitude in its literary and artistic endeavours, and so even when the map of Australian verse is demographically represented, it becomes evident that there is a meaningful correlation between geographical and creative amplitudes which is a feature of our collective culture. The present brief review of the year’s poetry amplifies the above generalisation, especially when you attempt an overview of regional dispositions in our all-encompassing cultural and cross cultural nationalism, subject as it is to neo-colonial ideologies.

It seems logical therefore to encompass as many as possible of the poetic voices in the new publications within the paradigm of regionality in which patterns of identity commensurate with place are identifiable. Les Murray’s anthology has offered an overview, while Melbourne vis-à-vis Sydney artistic autonomies have been acknowledged in the dual homage above to the posthumous collections by Simpson and Beaver. Poetic loyalties to place and identity, notwithstanding those notable achievements, are not confined just to patrician Melbourne and trans-cultural Sydney.

Secondly, the poetic coteries of cultural urbanity are well represented in Les Murray’s anthology, so that we can proceed to acknowledge a fraternity of established poets who in the same period have produced “Selected” editions which represent a notable seniority of poetic accomplishment. Melbourne’s Peter Rose’s Rattus Rattus (“New and Selected Poems”), WA’s Rod Moran’s The Paradoxes of Water (“Selected and New Poems 1970-2005”), Canberra’s Alan Gould’s The Past Completes Me (“Selected Poems 1973-2003”), and adoptive Tasmanian Andrew Sant’s Tremors (“New and Selected Poems”) admirably confirm this potent trend. These poets, two of whom (Gould and Sant) are British-born, comfortably embrace both metropolitan and provincial stances and styles of perception.

The title of Rose’s collection Donatello in Wangaratta (1998) symbolically exemplifies the subtle ease and complex grace with which his sensibility unifies metropolitan and provincial dimensions of identity. Encompassing childhood in country Victoria and adulthood in Melbourne (latterly in Adelaide also), Rose’s poems are complemented by others that call Australia home but are also imbued with a cosmopolitanism acquired through reading
and travel across cultures. Such comprehensiveness is reflected in the fact that *Rattus Rattus* is published from Cambridge in the Salt Modern Poets series.

Among the New poems that confirm the validity of these judgements are three marvellous Italian poems (“Rattus Rattus,” “The Calling of St. Matthew,” “Hospital of the Innocents”) and “Homage” with its twice-fold reference to Cavafy who many of us first encountered, translated, in Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*. “Homage” recalls a meeting with a Spanish sculptor in an “obscure inn we liked”:

> you began extolling the poetry of Cavafy,  
> which we’d just been reading....  
> At first she said nothing, moved,  
> then she placed one hand on her breast,  
> impressing you with her dignity  
> and understatement....  
> Some time later, the poet’s name  
> again being mentioned,  
> I repeated her gesture, thinking  
> you would have forgotten its provenance...  
> Immediately the gesture felt false, wooden,  
> not even Spanish. Either you were  
> too tactful to remark on my faux pas  
> or failed to notice, but I knew,  
> lowering a foreign abject unavailing hand. (12)

The poem thus becomes a parable about how we may learn humility as well as enlightenment from encounters with “foreign” cultures.

The New poems also include celebratory salutations to our rural- river- and seascapes in, respectively, “Sheep at Dookie,” “Murray Drift” and “Balnarring Beach.” Also appealingly resonant with social reality is “Morning Bias” in homage to the Saturday fraternity of the elderly who play lawn bowls at clubs where, frequently, “A new hip is welcomed/ to the brotherhood of joints” (4).

One of the powerful poems in Peter Rose’s first volume, *The House of Vitriol* (1990), is “I recognise My Brother in a Dream” which leads us forward and back to an outstanding family poem in the “New Poems” section in *Rattus Rattus*. This is “Ladybird, For my brother,” an elegy-within-an-elegy poem which has an esteemed place in a great tradition of modern poetry in English beginning with Yeats’s eloquent “In Memory of Major Robert
Gregory” which ends with the paradoxical recognition that “thought/ Of that late death took all my heart for speech.” Rose’s commemoration of his father, in relation to the latter’s illustrious career as a Collingwood footballer and coach, is complemented by the specific memories of the Wangaratta childhood shared with his brother – in particular when, playing under a bridge, they collected ladybirds. This memory in a poem of doubled sorrow succeeds in accommodating that grief, adjusting to it, with an image of shared ecstasy:

Teasing each other, we’d compete
to find the most ladybirds,
rapt, jostling each other, ecstatic. (9)

Rod Moran’s *The Paradoxes of Water* presents visions of myth, history and spirituality rising out of Australian landscapes. In “Silos” a northern hemisphere iconography is invoked for his evocation of that ubiquitous rural symbol of the wheat harvest, the silo:

Druid priest to ghosts of wind,
the moon performs its ritual rise,
a forest of fossiled trees in array,
like monks strung in procession.
There, above the green-black gums,
this moment forever in silhouette,
silos rise like Stonehenge. (20)

An example of sensitivity to the sacred and sombre beauty of wild coastlines juxtaposed with European intrusions and impositions in the “Bass Strait Poems,” “Wybalena Chapel, Flinders Island” recalls a notorious episode in Van Dieman’s Land history:

The tribes trekked centuries
of ice and rock to arrive, far south,
make fire, camp, and together
dance between gums scaling
cliffs of sheer light.

Instrument of God’s love,
Robinson, entrepreneur,
harsh hand of History
and invented fate,
hurried them deathward:
graves mapped, named,
a bucolic Belsen... (10)

The final section in the book of *New and Uncollected Poems 1990-2005* is, in various ways, a sequence of meditations about life at home (the “pure ecology of our love”; family; “South Perth Dreaming”) and away (“Kosovo,” “The Moon Over Baghdad,” “Yugoslavia 1992”). One endearing poem that arrests the reader’s attention is “My Daughter Reading,” written from the point of view of a father anxiously observing his child acquiring knowledge.

Other volumes by Victorian poets, mainly from Melbourne, are: Justin Clemens’ *The Mundial*, Jack Hibberd’s *Madrigal for a Misanthrope*, Sandy Jeffs’ *The Wings of Angels*, Alan Loney’s *Fragmenta nova*, Shelton Lea’s *Nebuchadnezzar* and Patricia Sykes’ *Modewarre: Home Ground*. Clemens’ mock-epic in heroic couplets, written back to the *Dunciad*, is conceived as an antidote to the manifold poisonous influences of modern life and their impact on Australian identity. Hibberd’s book is a cornucopia of homiletic verses, of which “Terra Cognita” is a good accessible example, while his penchant for satiric wit pervades many of the pages of this happily eccentric collection. Rarely does autobiographical poetry explore the condition of madness with such clinical precision and emotional integrity as does Jeffs’ book, subtitled *A Memoir of Madness*. Reconfiguring, as it were, D. H. Lawrence’s vision of love’s duality as “the heights of heaven and the depths of hell” Jeffs’ psychic ordeal occurs “Where God is Only a Word” (83-4) “…and the Angels are Mad” (85-6); ‘Here heaven is hell/ and all the angels/ trudge naked to their cells.” An epitomising example of Jeffs’ uncompromisingly courageous and lucidly detached revelations of the psycho-pathological conditions she knows all too painfully well is “Where Everyone is an Informer,” which deploys a powerful image of the shredder machine to expose the submerged treacherous depths of paranoia, where “everything has been erased in haste/ collective memory lost to a systematic amnesia” (59). Loney focuses on his pages’ diverse technical representations of form and content, physically construed, to embody what he refers to in “Acknowledgements” as “the intricacies of the poetic craft, right down to our respective and changeable commas.” In his ninth book, Shelton Lea is a poet of the street who asserts and celebrates his poetic and social identity as “nebuchadnezzar...the king of Fitzroy” (7). Sykes’ collection deserves much more reviewing attention than there is space for here. The poems reverberate with socio-political commitment as they address “acts of identity” (4), “the identity tag” (24), indigenous ancestral
histories of “Location and dislocation” which, as Jennifer Strauss says, are “personal/historical and political/historical” central concerns in the poems.

In our present-day map of Australian verse Tasmania is well represented by Andrew Sant’s *Tremors*, Tim Thorne’s *Head and Shin*, and Adrienne Eberhard’s *Jane, Lady Franklin*. Sant’s book reveals to us a writer who finds poems in many, often unexpected, places, situations and experiences; who systematically and chronologically interrogates his double heritage (English/Tasmanian); and who deploys a rich variety of tones and registers to portray the insularity, beauty and provincial mores of Australia’s island state. His respect for the traditional tools of the poetic trade – “full ink bottles,” “libidinous pens,” “promiscuous Quink,” “calligraphy,” “wet cursive script” – in “Blotter” pays genial homage to the compositional foundations of his art (88). The volume’s title poem “Tremors” takes a wary look at the mining industry which has been a prominent aspect of the history of Tasmania and, in Western Australia, produced the disaster of Wittenoom, the tragic repercussions of which are felt to this day. This relatively early poem (1985) envisages that the “energy” of industry (presumably hydro-electricity schemes as well) “will unleash tremors, potentials; the future, harnessed/but a wrong move and the outcome could be lethal” (54). The geological and colonising history of the island is also featured in relation to tectonic and metaphorical “tremors” (225-6).

By the time Sant’s *The Islanders* was published in 2002 he had indeed contributed greatly, as had Tim Thorne equally, in putting Tasmania on the map of Australian poetry. Being left off the map (for example in a logo for a Commonwealth Games in Australia) had become a legitimate island obsession, one which Sant turned into a witty poem (“Off the Map”):

Identity deleted,  
close to the Continent,  
who wouldn’t make a fuss?

There have been wars for less…

Something had to be done  
on the cartographic front…

So it happened, the absence  
was flagged.  

News of this island:

bolshy inhabitants, often mad. (191-2)
Head and Shin is Tim Thorne's ninth collection of poetry and confirms his reputation as "a poet of cynical verve, daring introspection and erudite verbal audacity" (Giles Hugo), and a "wry and perceptive observer of human folly, greed and self-deception" who "assumes the role of smiling surgeon" (Heather Cam). A poet of prolific consistency and in a bardic sense Tasmania's Walt Whitman, Thorne is notable for his spontaneous cultivation of distinctive voices, including the argot of the people, and a tenacious appetite for creating poems bulging with narrative and thematic detail. This can be achieved with an intelligible compression, "Writing the World" being an accomplished example, a credo poem stipulating that "The problem always/ to live the meaning, when to write/ only is at best to catalogue/ or preach, cop out at worst." Thorne's self-advice concludes instructively with "Avoid the easy paradox.../ Respect what you re-use/ and sing innocently," ending this vision of his craft with:

take the estuary's voice
and the sour cloud's script;
be a consultant to the air,
amanuensis to the earth. (50)

One of the consequences of this commitment to his vocation is the amusing "Road" which catalogues the vicissitudes of being a "wandering minstrel" whose travel itinerary consists of poetry-reading gigs up, down and across the country which always end "when the show's over/ leaving me with just the barman and a pile of unsold books" (103).

Adrienne Eberhard's Jane, Lady Franklin contains an amazingly tactile, detailed and comprehensive evocation of Tasmania as astonishing natural world and site of a history of colonisation and its consequences, a penal colony established in an environment in which catastrophe was commonplace. This book offers us an authoritative introduction to the island's geographical, historical and cultural landscapes through the sensuous imaginative medium of vivid paintings and sketches rendered with rare poetic skill. Eberhard surely, adroitly and passionately, fulfils Thorne's ideal of the poet as an "amanuensis to the earth."

Unfortunately there is virtually no space left in the present essay to complete the map of current poetry by paying comparable attention to those other regions of creativity so far unaddressed - specifically Western Australia, South Australia, A.C.T. and other New South Wales localities. But we can at least note in passing that Andrew Lansdown from W.A. continues to enhance his reputation with the beautifully crafted, subtly imagistic poems in
Fontanelle, including haikus which indeed justify in “Journey” Lansdown’s homage to Matsuo Basho, “my mind his staff,/ my heart his companion” (92). Michael Heald’s *Focusing Saturn* redresses various forms of “theft” – of meanings, identities, land, prosperity, etc., – through asserting the mystery of the landscape and its identity that is ulterior to human ambition and industry. South Australian Martin R. Johnson’s new collection, *the earth tree*, is a celebration of work that is wholesome in poems that alert us to the rhythms of country town life, low-income standards of living, and a simple-life-style with its positive attunement to nature.

Lizz Murphy’s *Stop Your Cryin*, Jill Jones’s *Broken/Open* and David Brooks’s *Walking to Point Clear* delineate landscapes in relation to which they sensitively explore the potentiality and meaning of various forms of identity, notably in Murphy’s book through the visual imagery of pastoral landscapes and social activism; in Jones’s book through the “still wild/ rough glitter in a country of words” in the last section “Ecstasy on a Verandah” and through the deeply “earthy” sense of the places Brooks writes about as well as the rhythms of nature and the hope we find in everyday work. The atmosphere of Brooks’ collection is almost medieval in its focus on time, ritual and a talismanic vision of nature. Four other books that warrant positive appreciation (unfortunately not included in the present overview) are Alan Gould’s *The Past Completes Me*, Ian McBryde’s *Domain*, David McCooey’s *Blister Pack*, and Morgan Yashmcek’s *firelick*.

The new poetry we have been perusing is undoubtedly a demonstration of the relevance and wisdom of sustaining identity and a meaningful sense of place in conjunction with reverence for the natural world. This being the case we should ask a provocative and leading question: *Where then are the indigenous voices?*

### Poetry Received 2004–2005

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


*Beaver, Bruce. The Long Game and other poems.* St Lucia: UQP, 2005.


Owen washed Pa’s feet in a bowl of water. The old man got to his feet, dropped his trousers, and made Owen understand he wanted further help. Owen adjusted the shower taps. “Hotter, hotter,” the old man insisted as the steam rose around them.

Towelling the shivering body dry, Owen marvelled again at the swirling colours of scarred flesh. How skinny the old man was; like a skeleton draped in such strangely beautiful skin.

On the back step, in the warm sun, Owen sheared away at the old man’s toenails with a great big pair of scissors. Small half-pipes of what looked more like ivory or bone fell to the cement slab at their feet.

It was habit, a routine wordlessly completed by Owen replacing the old man’s socks and shoes on his feet. Pa creakily stood up, leaned on his walking stick, ran the palm of his other hand over his hair.

“C’mon,” he said, setting off with those brisk, short steps of his, and Owen paddled behind him.

A TV blared sickly and bright in the curtain-drawn gloom. Someone was asleep on the lounge; a mattress on the floor held another sleeping adult, and the small child leaning into the curves of his elder momentarily shifted its eyes from the screen and smiled at them.

Aunty Heather was at the kitchen table, just the other side of a door. “Mmm, lookin’ deadly Dad.”

Another woman in the kitchen laughed, and the child on her lap studied Owen, before pushing its face into the woman’s shoulder.

“You get paid tomorrow, for the gardening, unna?”

“I think so,” Owen guessed.

“Yes, you do,” she said, “they wrote it down.”

She went to a drawer, brought back a slip of paper. Owen saw the names, Peter and Corry Wright, an address and series of dates.
“Yell out when you’re going,” she called as Owen followed the old man from the room. “I’ll walk with you.”

Pa was lowering himself onto a single bed, his shoes neatly placed beneath it. The walls of the tiny room were dull with the grime of years, and stacked along one wall were layer upon layer of paintings and drawings on paper, bark, plywood, glass, and even a few on canvas. Owen thought of his own dishevelled room, the litter of paper there.

He began browsing through the top layers of paintings, and was suddenly within a landscape; not looking down at an image, but within it, part of it. Bewildered, he looked up to the sky, and became merely a viewer again, outside, looking down upon.

Quickly, he turned to the next painting.

“You been there,” the old man said. “Remember?” The bush was full of energy, colour, scents. Owen heard the humming drone of bees, felt the warm sun, the cool shade. The freshly rained-upon earth. “You been there,” the old man said again, “but never like that. See, all the flowers coming up together, all the seasons at once.”

Many of the paintings – a paddock of sheep, a large rock among trees, a bitumen road cutting through mallee – had a trail of footprints in them, sometimes wandering across, sometimes away from the foreground, out of the frame altogether, or appearing in the distance. There were other drawings of odd, hybrid creatures: various combinations of machines, plants, animals, humans. There were animated skeletons, skyscrapers crumbling in weak sunlight, a telephone booth leaning at a crossroad...

“C’mon,” the old man said. “One of our stories. Give it to me in lingo.”

Owen took the empty chair from beside the bed and, reversing it between his legs, leaned his arms across its back and dropped his eyes from the old man’s. Pa closed his eyes.

No words came to Owen.

After a few minutes he exhaled his relief. The old man was asleep.

Naatj Nitja

Corry paused at the nursery doorway, savouring the backyard before entering it. Our home, our office, our lab and garden, she thought. Our skills. It was as if they – Peter and Corry – were fated to care for the amazing creature they’d found. Who better?

She and Peter had left the creature in a hutch by the balga trees and a clump of granite rocks, hoping to provide shelter, familiarity, even a degree of emotional and psychological comfort, voicing such words and concepts without hesitation.
Now Corry saw that the stem of one of the balgas lay on the ground some distance from where Peter crouched with his back to her, studying what appeared to be the remains of a small fire. There was no sign of the creature. Peter turned, startled at the sound of her footsteps, and grinned weakly.

“What’s wrong?” she mewed.

Peter’s hand waved across the broken balga stem, the fire and the set of tracks leading to a hole in the soft soil between granite rocks.

“I think it must’ve burrowed in there.”

“We’ll have to get it out. If it can dig that far...”

“It can’t escape. The mesh of the fence goes right down.”

“We don’t even know what this is, Peter. We can’t lose it, not now.”

“But you’ve seen it. I’ve got as much chance of digging out of here with my bare hands.”

“But look, that hole. It’s like a burrow. How far...?”

“We’ll dig it out. Shovels.”

Suddenly they were wrapped in smoke, each isolated and utterly alone. Coughing, blind and befuddled, they dropped to their hands and knees. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the smoke cleared. Eyes streaming with tears, grateful for those first few breathes, they helped one another to their feet. What had happened? Where did that smoke come from?

Peter thought it was the grass tree.

“Must’ve been smouldering, sparks from the campfire,” Peter suggested. They looked at a tiny pile of ash.

“And the wind.” Corry was workshopping this latest phenomenon, trying to help. “The wind must’ve fed it. Thick though, wasn’t it, that smoke?”

They dragged their fingers along gummy, charred flakes of wood. “You know how this stuff burns.”

How fragrant it is.

“When it’s dry, anyway.”

“But it went out so quickly.”

“Lucky for us.”

“Yeah, just as well.”

“We’ll still have to dig it out, check anyway.” said Corry, and went to get a shovel.

She called out to Peter only a few minutes later. And then a second time, louder. Did she sound distressed?

“What now?” Peter went to her. How strange, he thought, slowing as he saw her at the entrance to the shed. How strange that she should stand so motionless, slumped and with her head down like that. Then he saw the red eyes, the creature staring from beneath Corry’s armpit.
Corry had still not lifted her head. “It’s hurting me.”

The creature’s face – smeared with yellow pus, eyes foggy and dim – was almost unrecognisable from the day before. Breathing heavily, phlegm clicking, it muttered something which was, initially at least, incomprehensible. But then Peter and Corry heard, so clear it might have been their own voices, “Let us be,” followed by what seemed echoes, other voices whispering, “Allow us,” and “Listen.”

It grabbed Corry and yanked her to her knees, but as she dropped Peter lunged and caught the creature by the neck. Immediately it slumped, passive in his grasp, and Peter easily hauled it across Corry’s back.

Yet when Corry turned the creature was sitting on Peter’s chest with its hands at his throat, and Peter was gurgling, his legs kicking fitfully.

Corry swung the shovel.

She helped her husband to his feet, and they stood holding one another, looking at the creature she had knocked unconscious. Neither of them mentioned what they’d heard. Each, as they brushed themselves down, adjusted and pulled themselves tighter, dismissed what they may have heard as a fantasy, something heard only inside his or her head, some product of individual imagination and stress.

There were some things you had to do. Just got up and did.

The creature stirred and, silently operating as a single unit, Peter and Corry roped, buckled, shackled the creature so that when it regained consciousness it would endanger neither them or itself.

“Umm...”

They turned around.

Who?

Ah yes, the gardener: a doughy, soft young man, and his grandfather: dark, all angles and sinew and shabby, formal cloth. The younger held up a hand; in it the key they’d given him to enter the yard, but both he and the old man were staring, their eyes large in their heads and their mouths agape. The old man took a step back.

“Naatj,” he said.

The creature turned its head to him, struggled. Peter and Corry tightened their grip on it. They’d have to give it another sedative. Get the dose right.

“Back in a minute,” muttered Peter and, bundling the creature in his arms, he left the garden.

“What did you say? What did you call it?” Corry asked, like when someone has hidden the answer you seek.

Pa looked at Owen, Owen at him.

The old man grinned. “Oh, ‘Naatj,’ I said, ‘Naatj nitjak’.”
Its Head

“Naatj?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you ask him what he meant?”

Corry’s mouth tightened, her face twitched.

“Sorry,” Peter said, hands up to fend off her anger. “But...”

“Of course I did, but he wouldn’t say.”

“What were they doing here anyway?”

“It was his day. I forgot, didn’t ring him to cancel. The old man often comes along with him, sits in the garden. He knows the language names of all the plants, what you might use some of them for, what lives in them. He’s his grandfather.”

“Grandfather? You wouldn’t think it, not by the look at them.”

Owen and Pa were long gone. They’d turned tail; not a dignified exit, what with the old man being so creaky and stiff, so clumsy in layers and layers of clothing and Owen bobbing around him like a balloon on a string. They kept putting their hands on one another, pushing and grabbing, turning in circles. Corry swept past and opened the gate for them. Their motor wouldn’t start, but they’d parked on a hill so they let it roll, and with a yelp of its tyres the car jumped to life, snarled and coughed.

The old man’s head nodded as the car jerked, the motor stammering and coughing, gathering its rhythm. He’d turned away from Corry, hunched his shoulders and withdrawn into his clothing yet as he was swept away Corry, waving goodbye, saw his dark, almost skeletal hand emerge from the window, flapping, rotating at the wrist as if caught by the wind, by the car’s momentum.

Owen’s eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

Tjanak. Balyet. Mambera, or mammari. Djimbar. Woodartji. The old man intoned the words, his voice almost disembodied, emanating from a bundle of cloth, listing the names of supposedly mythical and spiritual creatures. Owen leaned into the steering wheel, worked the gear shift.

The structure of his own life was returning: him and the old man, the business of driving a car, the gardening job, navigating here and there, the pleasure of being in that garden... There was a pattern to it, and he found comfort in settling into what must be habitual activities. But it was small, there was not much substance to it, and this talk of tjanak, of djimbar and balyet and woodartji and the old man’s consternation threatened to unravel it, to pull it apart.

“None of them but,” the old man said. “Course some people get ‘em all
mixed up; tjanak can be any kind, balyet is sort of like a man but not. Mambera – mammari them others say – is the little one. Woodartji too.”

“But it’s not none of them, is it?”

Nope, it wasn’t.

“We talked about this on those tapes, unna?”

Owen would have to search the tapes to discover that memory.

“Tjanak, some people called wadjelas that early days, cause how they didn’t know nothing, or how to behave properly. Some tjanak, they got spears sticking our from their knees, or funny feet, all kinds of tjanak... Might be like a big dog. Cannibals some of ’em.

“My old girl, my wife (rest in peace), she woke up and a mambera sitting on her. On her hip, she said, she was lying on her side, see. She didn’t open her eyes, but put her hand out and it was like, like a hairy thing but been shaved. Prickly, stubble you know. She couldn’t walk properly for months after that…”

Of course Pa was wondering what they’d seen, that strange creature, tied up and unconscious; if it hadn’t struggled he wouldn’t even have seen it. He was sure it had responded to the sound of his voice.

“Lots of Noongars,” the old Man’s thin wrists and neck, twigs and stems held in layers of cotton and wool, in shirts and jumpers and coat, “they’re frightened. You know, get back home before dark or mambera’ll get you.

“But not me. Lots of times you could say things to ’m if you know the right way to speak, know the language. When I was a little boy, mambera tried to get me to follow him, but I wouldn’t go. So you know what? He followed me home. Woke up, and he was sitting just outside our tent. I didn’t tell no one. No one else saw him. He was sitting on the bedroom windowsill when I woke up’n other morning at my wadjela friend’s house. Little fella, hairy – not the wadjela, the mambera I mean. I just ignored him. He went away after a couple of days. Never seen him again.

“Not like this one, but. Different from this one here…”

They’d stopped in traffic, a line of cars before them waiting to move across the intersection. Pa lowered his window a fraction, and breathed deeply.

“I never seen nothin’ like it, ‘cept maybe one time – I told you, unna – when I was getting gilgie and I saw its reflection, looking at itself same as I was in the water. Standing behind me.” He laughed. “I took off that time, same as anyone would. Didn’t look back. Wish I’d stayed now.”

“Go there tomorrow, do their garden, unna?”

“Mmm.” They moved slowly now, only metres at a time, stop and start, caught in traffic. They halted again. Nice car, thought Owen, glancing to one side, changing radio stations, studying people though a series of windscreens.
Owen made two large papier-maché figures, and left them in the sun to dry. Apparently, he'd planned this; Aunty had said as much, and he'd seen his sketches and notes. The lifeless figures slumped now just outside the circle of firelight enclosing he, Pa and Aunty Heather.

"When I was a kid," she was saying, stroking the hair of the sleepy child on her lap, "there was a TV show, 'The Magic Boomerang.'" She mimed throwing a boomerang, and indicated its spinning flight with her hand. "They musta got the idea from Aboriginal people, 'cause someone would throw a boomerang in the air, and time would stop. No blackfellas on the TV, though, not then anyway. Not our kind."

Owen remembered, in a story the old man once told him; a boomerang, spinning in the air, otherwise motionless in the air and just out of reach, looking like a pool of water in the sky.

Memories, thought Owen. I feel so far from home.

He tilted his head back. The moon commanding the sky, clusters of stars at a distance, and all around him the dark pyramids of roofs.

"She rung, said yeah come tomorrow."

Pa poked at the fire with his walking stick.

"Naatj," I said, "Naatj nitjak, nitjak naatj" like saying "What," you know, "What's this," 'cause I didn't know, and I don't know, and you may as well say "Little shit-stirrer," for all I know, "'cause as for me..."

"Well, but mammari and that, you think they're real..."

"Mambera - mammari - and yes, well, true. They're real."

Peter hoped Pa would continue, but muffled in clothes and with gloves covering his scarred hands Pa just repeated "True," and looked at them all, one at a time. Owen dropped his gaze. Aunty Heather and Corry smiled, to show all was well.

"Well, there's no doubt about this, this one is real," and Peter gestured through the observation window recently installed in the wall shared by laboratory and office.

"Naatj."

Barely conscious, wedged in cushions and blankets in a corner, the creature suddenly looked up, and Owen felt himself recoil a little from the intensity - even from within a veil of drugs - of the creature's brief glance.

"It's real," Peter repeated. "We can care for it, help it. It's not just research for us!"

"Fair enough anyway," said Pa. "It's a free country, they reckon, since whiteman found it."

"It's real, but we can't make out quite what. First, we have to heal it."
"It's my country," Pa was adamant, "where you got this, and you don't need to talk to anyone else; no government, no other Noongars, nothing. They know jack shit. I'm the Native Title Claimant down there. I'm the Traditional Custodian."

Peter and Corry appreciated the convenience of dealing with one man. They'd tried before to establish Indigenous reference groups for their projects, and had consulted various Indigenous bureaucracies, only to be met half-heartedly. However, just as soon as something tangible came up they'd suddenly find themselves swamped with countless and competing claimants and custodians. So yeah, there'd be other stakeholders. Eventually. Sometime.

Peter insisted, "We want to do this right. You've got your rights, and we want you involved."

"But just now," said Corry, "we need to give ourselves time, keep it sedated, find what it needs to be comfortable. Find out, really, everything we can."

"And we need to keep it quiet, that it's here, I mean" Peter added. "That's part of the fee, the consultancy fee. Confidentiality."

Pa nodded. Aunty Heather said, "Yeah, well... That's right, we can do that. And the boy keeps up the gardening, and maybe you can let him help you out with..."

"Naatj," said Corry, quickly.

"Good a name as any right now," Peter laughed.

"Naatj," said Owen, to himself really, as he left the room. Unobserved, the creature lifted its head.
I glanced up and noticed a lone shadowy figure emerging through the misty clouds. Then I realised it was none other than the Master Cock Crower, Peter, the Keeper of the Black Pearly Gates. I froze instinctively and also thought quickly “the Jude, the Jude, where is he?” looking for him frantically. He stood only a few metres away in brazen courage, to confront the shadowy figure before him and when I looked again, they were metres apart. No words were spoken as they eye-balled each other. I could feel the heat radiating from their glare at each other. The electrifying impulse between the heads began to get quite warm and I began to shiver and perspire involuntary as the electricity began to dance between the two heads, and I thought “what will happen next?” Immediately there was a gigantic crack of thunder and the lightning flashed around their heads. Neither took a step forward or backward, each still glaring at the other and still no words were spoken as the lightning and thunder cracked around their heads, with me trying to burrow myself in as deep down as I could, into the soft heavenly floor. Trembling violently I took a peek at the two fearsome heavenly warriors and prayed silently to God, asking that they do no harm to each other physically. My prayers, I noticed, were answered immediately. I began to slowly stand upright awed and mesmerised for I could not believe my eyes as I watched the lightning fizzle out to a mere spark popping away harmlessly. I had to burst out laughing at the sight of these two holy disciples...all their hair was sticking straight up and their beards were sticking up and covering their faces. I grimaced at the sight of the rope burns around the Jude’s neck. What made me laugh more hysterically was that they were both trying to pull their beards down. Their beards only sprung back up to smack them on the face! What made it more hilariously funny is that they had these great burns around their heads caused by the lightning bolts and I could see smoke smouldering from where they had struck.
Managing to control my laughter, I thought “Wow, they’ve got to be bigger than the Lord Jesus himself.” I could see they were just itching to tear each other’s throat open and this caused me to gulp nervously as I stammered at the two fearsome heavenly warriors. “Let’s...sit...down and...talk” I almost choked. I could see the holiness come flowing back through their veins, as they both looked at me embarrassed, holding their beards down. They both dashed off...

I was startled when I saw the two figures emerge through the misty clouds that softly swirled around their ears and I was in for a shock for they had got together and really cleaned themselves up. They really looked like two dignified gentlemen and I applauded their approaching faces which had great big smiles. Being a soon-to-be thirteen-year-old boy I was quite impressed by the two men I had admired most in the fairy tale book called the Holy Bible: the ruffian Alcoholic Peter, and the supposed betrayer, Judas Iscariot, or Chariot or whatever name he goes by. I had a laugh to myself. I was indeed in awe of these two great men, who indicated for me to sit down. I also noticed there was now no animosity between them.

I began to scratch my head as I sat down and hoped that my little native brain wasn’t going to explode. I looked at their smiling faces across from me and wondered what to expect. I had for one who was so young, so bewildered, imaginative thoughts that flashed imagery through my mind at an incredible speed. One tends to forget the most basic things in life.

My mother and I spoke in hope:

This dream that has  
Captured my imagination
I wish it would last forever  
But in real life
I long for the hug  
Of my mother.

I felt shockwaves shoot through my body as I saw the two maestros across from me stand up and clap me most fervidly and, boy, was I in for a surprise, when they both shouted “bravo, bravo” enthusiastically.

We sat and I felt guilt and shame sweep over me because the other boys were not there to see my performance on the greatest magical stage on the highest. Peter, sensing that I went quiet, was bemused and asked:

Peter: (with concern) “Why are you letting the candles go out in your head? If not for the candles which are burning very brightly, you would have never made it into heaven.”
Alfred: (grabbing my head) “Wouldn’t the candle flames burn my brains out (with a smile). Not that I have got any in there.”

Peter and Jude looked at each other and laughed uproariously and continued to laugh and point at me until The Jude said.

Jude: “That’s what they want you to think and what I mean by they, is your Government and all these followers of Jesus Christ.”

Peter: (controlling his laughter, shaking his head) “I must agree with the Jude here.”

Alfred: (in surprise) “Hey, how did you know his name was The Jude? Everyone knows that the Bible called him Judas Iscariot.”

Jude: (looks at Peter questioningly) “Yeah, Peter, how did you know about that? (pointing to me) I know young Alfred here referred to me as The Jude or Judo Judas.”

Peter: (bowing his head in remembrance of denial, speaking softly at first to the Jude, then to me) “When we all first got together, I don’t know where it was but I think it was around Galilee somewhere, and the peasants were giving us a hard time and Jesus, he was no help at all to us, for he was nothing but a blithering idiot.”

Jude: (sensing that Peter is trying to deviate from the question) “What Alfred wanted to know, and of course I do, is when did you or the rest of the Funny Farm Members refer to me as The Jude?”

Alfred: (defending Peter and looking at Jude) “You can’t talk to Saint Peter like that, as we all know, or mainly us native boys, know that he is the Boss of the Pearly White gates. (Laughing) But I know different, why the gates are black and of the most beautiful pearls that I’ve ever seen.”

The Jude: “How many pearls have you native boys seen, be they black, white, pink or purple?”

Alfred: (this made me snigger at him) “Okay, Okay, we, or should I say me, wouldn’t know a pearl from a kangaroo’s tail but I know they are beautiful.”

This got The Jude and Peter again laughing hysterically, when Peter asked:
Peter: "What, the kangaroo tail or the peari?"

I was incensed with his remark and responded back in a normal soon-to-be thirteen year-old native boy from New Norcia Mission, very subdued.

Alfred: "Of course I know nothing of pearis and of course I can't remember the taste of a kangaroo tail stew. I may have had a feed of it a long time ago, but the teachings of the monks and nuns, tell us not only that our native tongues are a mortal sin but also our culture...so I guess kangaroo tail stew is also a mortal sin in their eyes."

With this The Jude applauded vigorously and shouted "bravo, bravo", causing Peter some embarrassment. He knew he wasn't up against that servant giri of the High Priest who asked him if he knew Jesus, which he openly denied, and so said sombrely.

Peter: "Look Alfred, I am sorry. I didn't mean to ridicule you. I guess I am no different from your Government or the missionaries who control your lives."

The Jude: (sneeringly) "So the Master Cock Grower admits that he is no better than Alfred's Government who steal children away from their mothers and let them rot in some hell hole."

I could see this was going to be one hot argument as Peter scowled at The Jude, which was very intimidating... I stood up trembling violently and speaking above the thunder which was about to explode, I said a prayer hoping this would get rid of the thunder.

Alfred: (hand clasped in prayer, eyes closed tightly) Dear sweet Jesus, don't let these two holy men fight. For they are the doves that nestle in your heavenly rafters. For they are your king doves, who spread peace and holiness with each flap of their wings, not only to Heaven, but to Earth as well. And we mission boys, mainly, feel peace and holiness with each flap of their wings. Amen."

Opening my eyes slowly, I heard both say Amen. And looked to see they were both seated and had very embarrassed looks upon their faces. And there was no lightning or thunder to be heard. Sitting down I smiled at both and got a feeble smile in return.

Alfred (saying fervidly): "You (pointing to Judas) fascinated me. You had everything. Women, I mean beautiful women, and heaven, but at the
moment I don’t know where you are. It’s just that my imaginativeness has got you here and I guess it got me here (pointing to Peter) and you. You do remind me of an alcoholic. Maybe I saw a holy picture of you somewhere. Your eyes intrigued me. They look to me like you needed a drink of altar wine, like me. I love altar wine. All I asked when we all sat at the table was ‘how did you know he was The Jude?’

Peter (smiling): “Like I said I think it was Galilce and you were wandering off, or as Alfred’s Government would say, you know, ‘gone walkabout’. It was Paul, John and George used to go looking for you and you know how silly they were. I’d send them looking for you and they’d always wander off shouting ‘Hey Jude’. No big deal.”

Jude (laughing) “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place, instead of nearly ending in a fracas and here I thought that young Alfred was the first to call me that.”

We all had a good laugh together and I’m sure I caught a glimpse of the sun’s rays beaming through heaven’s ceiling and the gorgeous angels playing a soft melody on their harps. If this was heaven I wanted to stay feeling contented.

Alfred: “Why did Jesus always have men around him and why in the Bible, when Jesus was arrested a young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following him and when they (the soldiers) seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”

Peter (with a knowing laugh): “Well, I mean the pictures on your chapel shows him (Jesus) to be a dashing tall, blue-eyed, white skin blonde but in real life he was very effeminate and small.”

Alfred (questioningly): “What’s that mean…”

Jude (interjecting): “Well, Alfred, later on in life as you journey you will pick up on different words and some will go deep into the cellars of your mind and others will skim across the top of your mind.”

Peter: “It’s better you learn now and understand the words that are spoken to you. But remember it’s up to you to learn. No one else, but you.”

Alfred: “I want to learn a lot of things in life but the most important part of my life is that I want to see my Mother again.”
Peter: “You will see your Mother again. It will take patience but the love of your Mother will reunite you. But first you’ll have to obey all the teachings of the Monks and Nuns at New Norcia. Although locked away in pain, you will have sunlight and laughter. That will be your saviour in your advancing years.”

Jude: “Amen to that Brother Peter for you talk in honesty and wisdom. I could see great sunlight and roses, for you are the Chosen One Alfred. It is but for you to suffer in the name of your ancestors.”

Jude: “Not the barbaric treatment your ancestors suffered on the landing of the first Englishmen who stole your land away from you, all in God’s name I might add. But the trials and tribulations of the 1905 Act of the Assimilation did bring chaos to a tribe that has roamed and guarded your boundaries for thousands of years and all in the name of peace.”

Peter: (carrying on where Judas left off) “So, true Brother Judas, as you said before, honesty and wisdom was with your tribe long before the birth of Jesus Christ but when the Englishmen arrived on your shores they brought Christianity and different church people of the highest order to confuse and disrupt your peaceful existence and each church of different denominations did carry one message from the King and the message was but to us, who are being saved. It is the power of God for it is written:

We will destroy the wisdom of the wise
The intelligence of the intelligent
We will frustrate them, like dry reeds
That break on the onslaught of the wind.”

Jude: (clapping enthusiastically) and of course Myself “Bravo, my Brother Peter, Bravo. To the Cock-Crowing Champion, Bravo.”

After they had settled and taken their seats and the angels played their soft music, I was quite overwhelmed by the joy that these two great men had given me and I knew, once back in the Mission of the Damned or Depressed, I would miss all of this...presenting questions and receiving honest answers, not the strap we received when given half-hearted answers. But the sole purpose of my young life was to see my Mother again and the only way out was to get back to Father Basil and the bus, where I belonged - an ugly little black devil, who was never going to make it in life and drink himself to death at a young age.
“Glory be to God in the highest” I shouted with all of my might. I could see I startled not only the Jude but also Peter and, again, shouting with a full voice “Bring on the altar wine, for it has been written in the scriptures – the blood of Christ is for you to consume heartily and let the altar wine flow freely down our gullets.”
In several recent papers I’ve recommended that Australian literary studies—and Australian studies in general—should now move beyond the national paradigm that was a necessary part of their original disciplinary formation. Since the watershed of the Bicentenary and increasingly since the new millennium, I think we’ve begun to see Australian studies as a discipline whose origins lie in a period of cultural nationalism that in certain respects we no longer feel to be contemporary. This has to do, among other things, with our changing attitudes to issues of nation, race and gender, and with the effects of globalisation. These nation-based studies began—let’s say very roughly—in the 1960s; the peak of their growth was probably the decade from 1977 to 1987, which saw the establishment of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) in 1977, the Australian Studies Association (ASA) in 1983–4, and the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (CRASTE) in 1984–7; and we can sense their active transformation into new forms during the years between the Bicentenary in 1988 and the end of the twentieth century: in 1993–4, for example, the ASA became the International Australian Studies Association (InASA). In particular, we are coming to see that the concept of the nation, which was needed to establish Australian studies both intellectually and institutionally, can also prevent us from exploring the connections that exist outside of—or in a complex set of relations to—that space.

Since the early 1990s, and in a number of disciplines, there have been signs of a growing unease with the idea of the nation as an organising category in area studies. I’m thinking, in particular, of American and German studies, where important journals have published special issues on this topic. Here, for example, is the historian David Thelen on the challenge to American studies:
people, ideas, and institutions do not have clear national identities. Rather, people may translate and assemble pieces from different cultures. Instead of assuming that something was distinctively American, we might assume that elements of it began or ended somewhere else. We may discover that what people create between national centers provides a promising way to rethink many topics in American history.

What we are seeing is an impulse – and here I allude to the titles of some recent books – to feel once more “at home in the world”; to “think and feel beyond the nation.” One way we might begin to achieve this is by what Amanda Anderson calls a “situated cosmopolitanism.” This is not to abandon the category of the nation, for it remains a fundamental unit of domestic policy and affect, and of inter-national relations. But it does mean imagining new types of cultural history that are concerned with the traffic of people, capital, practices, ideas and institutions within but also beyond the conceptual space of the nation. It would involve types of cultural history that accepted rather than left out divided affiliations and multiple identities. It would mean inquiring into the way different forms of internationalism – vernacular and elite – affect Australian lives both positively and negatively, and within and beyond Australia. And it would involve different ways of thinking about the comportment of the Australian studies intellectual as someone with multiple interests and affiliations, centered in but also reaching beyond the nation.

A number of the books published in 2004–2005 provide some idea of what this new, international Australian studies might look like. Many, of course, continue to examine the national culture, albeit from new theoretical perspectives and with a heightened awareness that it exists in a wider field of relations against which it has always struggled to maintain its own logic and density. They include Christopher Lee’s City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination, Paul Genoni’s Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction and Tania Dalziell’s Settler Romances and the Australian Girl. Others, though, have been concerned to fold Australia and Australian studies into broader international contexts; many have editors, authors or contributors working outside Australia; and some even carry the imprints of overseas publishers. Broadly, this internationalisation takes several forms: there is work by Australian scholars of Australian literature published locally that rediscover the cosmopolitanism of Australian culture; there is work that projects Australian studies offshore by its association with non-Australian institutions, scholars and publishers; and there is work that
“mainstreams” Australian material by putting it into dialogue with non-Australian material or with explanatory models that circulate internationally.

Thinking Australian Studies: teaching across cultures, edited by David Carter, Kate Darian-Smith and Gus Worby, is a collection of essays that both exemplify and reflect upon these trends. It had its origins in two conferences organized by InASA: the first, in 2002, on the development of Australian studies both “at home” and internationally since the publication of the 1987 CRASTE report, Windows on to Worlds; the second, in 2003, on “Teaching Across Cultures: Australian Studies in an International Context.” Contributors include InASA members who have taught in Australia, the Asia Pacific, North America, Britain and Europe; diplomats and former policy makers with experience in Canberra, London, Tokyo and Washington DC; and former overseas students who now pursue careers in Australian studies in locations as diverse as Japan, Taiwan and Denmark. Collectively, they reflect on a series of key questions. How might Australian studies contribute to new international perspectives and alliances? How can new conceptual and pedagogical approaches help scholars and students to think beyond national boundaries and across cultures? What is the future of Australian studies in an increasingly global educational environment?

Whatever the legacy of Windows on to Worlds has been, it was, as Anne Curthoys remarks, “a document of its times” (71). In retrospect, she suggests that its cultural nationalist emphasis may have gone too far and now requires “something of a correction” (69). In their essays, Susan Ryan, the former Labor Education Minister who commissioned the report, and Bruce Bennett, one of its three co-authors, also wonder if Australian studies have since become too self-referential. Curthoys now believes that “Australian studies needs to reconnect to other stories, to diasporic histories, post-secular histories...histories of transnational organizations and political movements, histories of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and cultural context and exchange” (108). David Carter also speaks of a new “creative Australian (inter)nationalism.” His own essay is a SWOT analysis of Australian studies abroad, drawing on his considerable administrative experience over many years. He believes that its future beyond Australia is bound up with its relations with government, both “working with and working on government” (92). Among the possible opportunities, Carter looks to Australian studies' role in what he calls “cultural diplomacy”; that is, “the process whereby government deliberately...as a matter of policy and with specific objectives, supported by funding and infrastructure, ‘re-purposes’ Australian cultural products and practitioners as a means of telling the rest of the world something positive about Australia” (93). For those of us who are
“institutionalized intellectuals,” this means learning the language of government and adjusting our product to suit the market’s diverse and changing requirements. As several of the book’s case studies indicate—including those about Australian studies in Japan, Indonesia and Europe—the character Australian studies takes abroad will depend on the particular country and institution where it is being located, each of which will have its own established interests and agenda. Carter concludes, “We need to project Australia as belonging in a network of potential points of comparison, of bodies of knowledge and theory, and of cultural, economic and political exchanges which transcend the nation” (98–9).

One area where the international approach Carter foreshadows first emerged in Australian studies was in work on popular entertainment by scholars such as Richard Waterhouse, Veronica Kelly and Katharine Brisbane. Jill Julius Matthews’s *Dance Hall & Picture Palace: Sydney’s Romance with Modernity* is an important contribution to this field. Taking as its time-span the thirty years between the depressions of the 1890s and the late 1920s, it studies Sydney’s embrace of modernity and the impact of new entertainment technologies on everyday life. Sydney, Matthews argues, “was always cosmopolitan” (12). From the beginning, its economy and its culture were “outward-looking, constantly adapting to international movements” (10). Its people embraced the pleasures of moving pictures, as well as radio, the gramophone and cheap magazines, “confidently and joyously forging their identities” as modern citizens of the world. For this reason, Matthews breaks with cultural-nationalist histories which treat the international context as antagonistic rather than enabling. The stories she tells “do not fit neatly within the boundaries of the nation continent but flow into and merge with the great international movement of things, people and ideas that was at the heart of the newly modern world” (2).

In her account of cinema as the exemplary site of vernacular modernity, Matthews moves from textual analysis to the study of corporate structures, architectural styles, and marketing and management practices, then on to case studies of individuals involved in producing, marketing, consuming and even objecting to the new film industry and its products. Through archival research, she rediscovers the pleasures Sydney shop girls, factory workers and union organizers found in the new American-style dance-halls and picture palaces that sprang up around the city and its suburbs in the 1920s. But Matthews declines to see Australia’s as merely an import culture, characterising it instead as an active, if not always equal, participant in the international circulation of products and personnel. “International modernity,” she argues, “was gradually adapted and Australianised in Sydney
then proudly performed to the rest of the country and returned to the world" (1-2). This “return to the world” is especially clear in her case studies of show-business entrepreneur Hugh D “Huge Deal” Mackintosh, cinema production and distribution companies Union Theatres, Australasian Films and Cinesound Productions, and cinema magnates JD Williams, Stuart Doyle and Stanley Crick, all of whom pursued successful international careers.

There is a good deal of overlap between Dance Hall & Picture Palace and Liz Conor’s The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s, which draws upon Matthews’ earlier work. Conor focuses on modernity’s production and privileging of the visual, on the way its spectacularisation of women allowed them access to public space and, at the same time, to new modes of subjectivity. There are three aspects to her argument. First, the changing historical conditions of women’s visibility and the perceptual fields in which they appeared: the metropolis, the “cinematic scene,” commodity culture, beauty culture, “the late colonial scene,” and heterosexual leisure culture. Second, within these spaces there circulated an expanded repertoire of representations of the Modern Woman, “types” upon which individual women might model their subjectivity. These include the Screen Star, the Beauty Contestant and the Flapper. Third, Conor is concerned with the possibilities of female agency within these visual fields. These are similar to the issues that organise Matthews’ book, but Conor’s is at once theoretically denser and empirically more wide ranging. The spaces of modernity she examines include the dance hall and picture palace, but also the department store, advertising and print culture, especially the newspapers and illustrated magazines from which many of her examples are drawn. She also demonstrates more profoundly the product tie-ins that linked these spaces, and her case studies are drawn comprehensively from all of Australia’s metropolitan centres.

Like Matthews, Conor points out that the spaces of modernity were international – that Australian cities shared these “scenes” with other industrialised Western Nations, particularly Great Britain and the United States. It is therefore appropriate that she puts the Australian case in its international contexts while also deploying a wide range of theory and scholarship. This has the effect of placing Australian, British, American and European scholarship on something like a level playing field. One example comes during her critique of modern theorists of visuality and commodity culture, from Siegfried Kracauer through Walter Benjamin to Guy Debord. In his essays “The Mass Ornament” (1927) and “Girls and Crisis” (1931), Kracauer uses the Tiller Girls, an American dance troupe that toured Europe in the 1920s, to demonstrate the supposedly objectifying effects of mass
spectacle. Conor’s photograph of the troupe is drawn not from a European or North American source, but from the Melbourne *Sun-News Pictorial*. The moment perfectly captures the internationalisation of the Australian city in the 1920s and of Australian scholarship in the present. Conor’s critique of Kracauer and Benjamin relates to her main argument: that their suspicion of commodity capitalism and its visual economy arose from an unquestioned opposition between the roles of subject and object, as if women could not be both at once. She replaces the opposition with a coupling, albeit a conflictual one, which she calls “appearing”: that is, “the syncretic moment of the subject experiencing itself as object, or the object experiencing itself as subject” (178). Modernity’s spectacularisation of women did not make them into passive sex objects – or at least not only. It simultaneously offered a range of possible modes of “consumerist subjectivity.” Like Judith Walkowitz, on whose work she draws, Conor argues that women’s spectacularisation allowed them to become actors in the metropolitan scene, to become “self-possessed” as well as possessed by others (255). And like Matthews, she illustrates these arguments through the careers of Australians who were mobile along the routes of international modernity, including the Australian-born Hollywood star Lotus Thomson and the swimmer and physical culturist Annette Kellerman, “the Australian Venus,” who became America’s first pin-up girl.

Although Frank Van Straten is not concerned with the theoretical issues that exercise Matthews and Conor, his *Huge Deal: The Fortunes and Follies of Hugh D. McIntosh* is a richly researched show-business biography whose wealth of detail both speaks to and allows us to challenge some of their general arguments. In focusing on the modernity of the 1920s, for example, Matthews and Conor exaggerate the case for an historic break, underestimating the extent to which modernity’s own claims to radical innovation conceal the way it folded within itself many technologies, performance genres, stage practices and modes of affect that were pre-modern. McIntosh’s career is a reminder of how closely the cinema was linked with earlier forms of popular entertainment. Having worked as a chorus boy at the Tivoli, and then as a caterer and tour operator, he promoted his first boxing match in Sydney in 1901 between two visiting Afro-Americans. In 1908, coinciding with the visit of America’s Great White Fleet, he opened the Stadium at Rushcutters Bay, boasting that it was “the Largest Open-Air Hippodrome in the World.” On Boxing Day 1908 he achieved international fame by staging the World Heavyweight Championship fight between Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson. Billed as “the Greatest Fistic Event in History,” it was promoted as a contest for “Racial Supremacy.” Covered by more than two hundred American
journalists, Johnson’s victory provoked an extraordinary response in the United States, including lynchings and race riots in southern states. As tie-ins McIntosh sold postcards of incidents from the fight and staged post-match exhibitions at the Tivoli theatres. He also had the fight filmed and negotiated exhibition rights in Europe, Great Britain and the United States, where he lectured to the silent film. He used the wealth and celebrity generated by the tour to establish himself as a promoter in the US, Paris and London.

McIntosh had also used the Stadium for vaudeville and “outback” or wild-west shows but in 1912 he sold it to buy Harry Rickards’ circuit of Tivoli Theatres in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Kalgoorlie and Brisbane. The Tivoli circuit specialized in traditional vaudeville repertoire and had brought to Australia some of the world’s finest performers, including Carl Hertz and his cinematograph, cockney comedian Marie Lloyd, escapologist Harry Houdini, strong man Sandow, and silent comedian WC Fields. McIntosh boasted that “nothing in the shape of money will stand in the way of our importation of artistes” (74), and he travelled the world using the networks – and the fortune – that he had built up as a boxing promoter to sign the leading international artistes. After the Great War, he diversified his theatrical interests to include revue, musical comedy and cinema exhibition, and even dabbled in film production. The Sydney Tivoli became famous for its special effects, which were claimed to be “the acme of modernity” (125).

If Australian studies are to become truly international, however, we need to find ways to publish case studies of, say, print culture, cinema or theatre not just in Australian journals and with publishers located in Australia, but with the best international journals and presses in these fields, otherwise our new “internationalism” remains a conversation amongst ourselves. By virtue of their local publication, it is ironic that books like Dance Hall & Picture Palace and Huge Deal may not enjoy the same international distribution as the mobile careers and commodities they describe. By contrast, its publication by Indiana University Press makes The Spectacular Modern Woman a leading example of today’s internationalised Australian studies. Also carrying the imprint of a prestigious North American publisher is Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World, edited by Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe. Originating in a conference sponsored by the Harvard Committee on Australian studies in 2002 and published by Harvard University Press, it includes essays by leading scholars based in Australia, such as Susan Martin, Stephen Muecke, Tony Birch and David Carter; Australian scholars currently working overseas, such as Meaghan Morris, Simon During, Judith Ryan and Kevin Hart; and British and American
scholars with long-standing interests in Australia and its literature, such as Paul Kane, Brian Henry and Graham Huggan.

Another instance of the kind of international scholarly conversation I have in mind as a goal here is Playing Australia: Australian Theatre and the International Stage, edited by London-based scholars Elizabeth Schafer and Susan Bradley Smith. This collection of essays characterises “Australian” theatre history as a multi-directional traffic in people, practices, texts and intellectual property that is reflected, in turn, in the conditions of the book’s own production. Most of the essays were presented at a conference in London sponsored by the Drama Department at Royal Holloway, the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, the Theatre Museum and the Australian High Commission. Published by Rodopi in Amsterdam, the book is part of the Australian Playwrights series edited by Veronica Kelly, director of the Australian Drama Studies Centre at the University of Queensland. As the editors point out, their contributors can be situated at different points along “a continuum of experiences of Australianness”: “Some have lived in Australia most of their lives, some in Britain. Most have alternated between the two countries [and] have experienced expatriation for long periods” (4).

In charting the currents of “theatrical exchange” around the Anglophone world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, life narrative and the concept of the career are again useful analytical techniques. Peta Tait examines the international career of Ella Zuila, “the Australian Funambulist” and “premier gymnast of the world” (82), whose high-wire career flourished in Australia, South Africa, Britain and the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Katherine Newey uses the British career of Australian May Holt to question cultural-nationalist histories that value “radical nationalism” and “anti-Britishness.” Susan Bradley Smith’s essay on Inez Bensusan, an expatriate playwright, producer, actress and suffragette, and Elizabeth Schafer’s essay on the British careers of Australian playwrights Haddon Chambers and Gilbert Murray, lend further support to one of the larger claims that the editors make for the collection as a whole. It is that to be properly understood Australian theatre history must be ‘mainstreamed’ into broader considerations of the development of western theatre over the last two centuries. This was and remains a two-way traffic, and “Anglo-centered theatre histories that claim to be universal...will have less credibility...the more they ignore global experiences” (8).

These case studies also reveal the limits of expatriatism as an explanatory model. They suggest that it is not a neutral tool of historical analysis but an implicitly derogatory label of the mid twentieth century that potentially distorts our understanding of la longue durée of cultural exchange. Perhaps this
is why Peter Conrad's version of Australian history in his 2004 Boyer Lectures, *Tales of Two Hemispheres*, seems so tired and familiar. Conrad writes from the perspective of the expatriate generation of the 1950s and 1960s, projecting what Patrick White famously called "the Great Australian Emptiness" back on to the early decades of the twentieth century, and then further back into the nineteenth. The "proof" of this generation's vision is that Australians have only recently been invited to join "the great world" and now turn up everywhere: a Tasmanian has become Princess of Denmark, Jacobs Creek wines are sponsoring *Friends*, and "Hollywood" films are shot at Fox Studios in Sydney where, in Conrad's day, Australia paraded its agricultural produce at the Royal Easter Show. Confirming the new internationalism from personal experience, Conrad recalls, "The first thing I saw in Las Vegas, after getting off a plane earlier this year, was an assortment of my muscled compatriots preening in Y-fronts...a troupe of male strippers resident at one of the casinos" (88). The point is, of course, that "The Thunder from Down Under" were following the route across the Pacific pioneered by earlier generations of Australian entertainers like Ella Zuila and Annette Kellerman, while the Sydney Showgrounds were not far from the Stadium, where in 1908 "Huge Deal" McIntosh staged "The Greatest Fistic Event in History."

Although Australian entertainers were always internationally mobile and made important contributions to the globalising entertainment industry, this was also a space subject to the forces of colonialism. The circuits of people and intellectual property around the British and European worlds were not an even playing field, especially for their subaltern peoples, a point brought home by Roslyn Poignant's *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*. In 1882, the impresario Phineas T Barnum instructed his agents to assemble "a collection...of all the uncivilized races in existence...to astonish, interest and instruct" the American public. It was to include "a number of the finest specimens of Australian Aborigines." Within months, the Irish-American showman and "man-hunter" RA Cunningham, who was then working in Australia, had "recruited" nine North Queensland Aborigines—six men, two women and a boy—and shipped them to San Francisco. They were subsequently displayed on the international exhibition circuit as "RA Cunningham's Australian Aborigines, Tattooed Cannibals, Black Trackers and Boomerang Throwers," appearing at the Midway Plaisance of the Columbian World's Fair in Chicago, Coney Island in New York, London's Crystal Palace, the Folies-Bergere in Paris, Berlin's Panoptikum, St Petersburg's Arcadia, and the court of the Turkish Empire in Constantinople.

Cunningham himself was a typical late nineteenth-century showman,
belonging to “a cosmopolitan, even international, culture of show people who were versatile, worldly and attached to the traveling way of life” (63). Yet however much the lives of his Aboriginal performers appear to have been expanded by their travels overseas, they were restricted by their containment within “the show-space.” The term refers not just to the houses at which they performed but to a collective cultural space in which “historically specific relations of power between colonizers and colonized were made visible.” While cosmopolitan modernity was liberating for some, it also deterritorialised cultures and peoples. As Liz Conor argues in her analysis of modernity’s exclusion of women of colour, “appearing” – the experience of being both subject and object – was not uniformly enabling. Within their performance roles, Cunningham’s indigenous entertainers were “simultaneously themselves and reflections of the ‘savages’ of Western imagination” (8).

Although all of these books about the popular stage and screen deal to some extent with print culture, this is one aspect of colonial modernity that falls largely outside the scope of their analysis. In Marcus Clarke’s Bohemia: Literature and Modernity in Colonial Melbourne, Andrew McCann seeks to clarify the relationship between literature, commodification and settler-colonialism by locating nineteenth-century Melbourne bohemia within a burgeoning cosmopolitan print culture that extends beyond national borders. This ambitiously conceived and densely argued book is perhaps the most theoretically sophisticated and critically insightful study to date of Australia’s colonial modernity in the period before 1890. Yet it takes a particular line. At first sight, McCann’s work has much in common with previous studies of urban entertainments by scholars such as Richard Waterhouse and Veronica Kelly, whom he cites in his introduction, and with the concurrent work of Jill Matthews and Liz Connor. But it is ultimately driven by a very different view of popular culture.

For McCann, colonial modernity is hollowed out from within by its own belatedness, by “colonial lack” (25). The cultures of settler colonies, he argues, are formed by the affective consequences of colonialism and global capitalism – migrancy, relocation, dislocation, itinerancy and vagabondage – while lacking the “lingering” or “residual” consolations of the old world, such as the Romantics’ nostalgia for an organic culture grounded in the essence of the nation and the folk. In colonial Australia, “the nation functioned as a foundational absence in critical debate” about the possibility of a vigorous local literary culture. The Victorian colonists may have listened to the latest music, read the latest novels and news from Europe, and worn the latest European fashions, but this only reinforced their state of “chronic
homelessness and displacement.” “The colony reproduces the metropolis,” McCann believes, “but in the urgency of its desire to do so, it also reveals its own distance from it” (8). Belatedness returns in the empty and deceptive form of the commodities settler colonies consume, including literature, which is “beholden to” and undermined by its dependence on the marketplace (11).

There are perhaps three reasons why McCann’s account of colonial popular culture and its place in transnational flows is so different to those by Matthews and Conor. First, he is concerned mainly with production rather than consumption, with writers rather than consumers. While local readers’ demands for metropolitan publications were met by importation, there was little or no market for Australian writing and too little institutional support for its local growth – as Christopher Lee’s discussion of Henry Lawson attests. Second, McCann is concerned with literature’s ambivalent relation to the marketplace; his subject is the relation of elite to vernacular forms of cosmopolitanism. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it derives from a different theoretical tradition. What we are seeing here is the difference between the Frankfurt School’s understanding of consumption as a mode of subjection, and the more optimistic view to be found in certain forms of cultural history and cultural studies – especially the work of Michel de Certeau and his followers – that commodities can be actively appropriated by their consumers; that local meanings can be pulled from international commodity forms; that they can be used, as Matthews puts it, to “joyously forge an identity.” This is what Conor means by “consumerist subjectivity.” McCann’s understanding of the commodity derives explicitly from the theoretical tradition Conor critiques. He cites Adorno and Horkheimer on “the delusional solace of bourgeois culture” and “the false promises of the culture industry” (17). His account of colonial Melbourne as “an avatar of global capitalism” is modelled on Benjamin’s excavation, in the Arcades project, of “the delusional, fetishistic quality of cultural forms under the sign of the commodity” (19). These influences produce a theoretically motivated account of the nineteenth-century’s “fall” into global commodity culture.

Marcus Clarke’s Melbourne is also the opening setting for Michael Ackland’s Henry Handel Richardson: A Life, which begins with the career of Richardson’s father, Walter, in the 1860s and 1870s. Ackland depicts the new colonial city as prosperous, precociously self-confident and culturally up-to-date, the equal of any British city of the same size. Yet his analysis of Richardson’s years at the Leipzig Conservatorium complicates our understanding of Australian internationalism at this time. By examining reviews of the public concert that was part of her Hauptprüfung, he establishes
that she failed to live up to the high standards of the European music world. If we are to understand colonial internationalism fully, we need to know what effects it had — both positive and negative — on Australians who aspired to be citizens of the world. While Richardson’s education at Melbourne’s PLC led her to seek a European career, it had failed adequately to assess or to nurture her talent in relation to the highest international standards. Years later, in recalling the Prufungs Konzert, she would write, “Had I been born a Hun...I would have...learned the things one has to know in early youth. But Australia — what can be hoped from that! When I was eventually sent to Leipzig, I found the fight too hard...It was a bitter disappointment” (106).

After Leipzig, and following her husband’s appointment to the Kaiser Wilhelm University in Strasbourg in 1896, Richardson began in earnest the cosmopolitan’s difficult self-fashioning, transforming herself from “a provincial colonial to a European intellectual” (138). In allowing us to understand this process, Ackland perfectly demonstrates the skills of cross-cultural analysis required of an internationalised Australian studies. His research, conducted in both English and German, reveals how narrowly Anglophone so much Australian scholarship has been. To understand this most cosmopolitan of Australian writers, we need to move beyond both the national and linguistic boundaries that have circumscribed Australian studies in the past. Paradoxically, the decade of the 1890s, the originary period of Australia’s nationalist mythology, was also the period of Richardson’s immersion in European culture. Guided by her husband’s immense erudition and with access to the finest libraries, she worked her way systematically through modern European literature, averaging more than a hundred books a year. By the end of 1902, Ackland observes, “Ettie was thoroughly at home on the Continent” (153).

Ackland speculates at some length on Richardson’s final sense of her national identity, which he describes as “contradictory” (264). On the one hand, she remained homesick for the sights and smells of the bush and the sea; on the other hand, the experience of two world wars had deepened her bond with England. She complained to William Norton of her weariness at being “always branded as the Australian authoress,” and it is likely that her choice of the Wagner circle as the subject of her last published novel, The Young Cosima, was a deliberate attempt to disassociate herself from Australia after the Mahony trilogy. Yet it is possible to see her relation to nationalism as more than “contradictory.” It is likely, too, that her hatred of German militarism and fascism had made her suspicious of nationalism per se, and that she had come to see herself as an artist and a cosmopolitan intellectual, and therefore above national affiliations of any kind. This is implicit, I think, in
her distinction between the timeless spirit of German culture and the contemporary barbarism of the German military machine. She reiterated to Norton, "I have no desire to be marked for life as an 'Australian writer'" (265). What she was, this seems to imply, is simply a writer.

While the books I have discussed here all reflect the internationalisation of Australian studies – or at least Australian studies’ aspiration to become more international – they do so in different ways and to different degrees. At their best they rediscover both the complexity of Australian culture and the mobility of its people, while also allowing contemporary Australian scholarship to take its place in international conversations. But they also reveal contrasting and even conflicting interpretations of Australian internationalism. This is perhaps a consequence of the four different parameters that organize them: the specific time period under consideration – the 1860s, say, versus the 1920s or the 2000s; the particular art form being studied and its social status ("literary" writers, for example, do not see the world in the same way as actors, producers, entrepreneurs or audiences); the particular theoretical approach taken toward commodity culture; and finally, the difference between cultural production and consumption. The work of Andrew McCann, Michael Ackland, Jill Matthews and David Carter, for example, suggests that it felt very different being a “cosmopolitan” man of letters in Melbourne in the 1870s than it did being a “cosmopolitan” intellectual in London in 1910, a “cosmopolitan” cinema-goer or magazine reader in Sydney in the 1920s, or an Australian consumer of international “good books” in the twenty-first century. What these differences suggest is that we need more highly nuanced, multi-disciplinary accounts of Australian internationalism that are sensitive to its various forms and registers across time and social space. They also suggest that we should be wary of any theoretically-driven interpretations of Australian cultural production in its international contexts that are not supported by detailed empirical research into specific historical periods and cultural practices, and on the individual cities, careers and national cultures through which inter-nationalism is expressed.

**Non-fiction Received 2004–2005**

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


Notes

Halfway up, we’re within sight
of the summit, and I watch
your determined back
forge on, pushing its way stubbornly
through rock and through sky.

That stick you bought
at the gift shop, counting out notes
too rapidly to believe in it yourself
ploughs reckless into stone.
It’s not that steep, but by god you’ll use it
rather than have your tourist self
brought home to you here, exposed
on the edge of our world.

And here is where I’ll stop,
I think, this too-imminent cresting catching
in my throat:
once you’ve stepped up
into clear blue sky,
there’s nothing left
but descent, the sure, sharp
plunge toward earth.

All I ever wanted
was the promise
of a long, slow climb, to share
somehow the pleasures
of an endlessly deferred summit –
nothing ever coming home
to roost.
So this is where I’ll stop
and watch your dogged upward push
towards our end.
His lanky hair and limbs, acned frown and bristled smile have outgrown me. Just when I'd done sufficient work experience to apply myself more easily to the job of mothering, he stopped advertising for my services. The Help Wanted sign disappeared from his door. Do not enquire within. He finds his own clothes and bandaids, relegates toothpaste to weekends and upgrades deodorant. The right to remain silent is invoked when I wonder why a nice girl no longer calls. That's as far as it goes, classified for restricted audience. I'm off the A list for All and Always but still on the B list as Bedtime hugger and Backstop. After all the nappies and grazes rescued, tantrums diffused with solitude and patience, relays from work to crèche, from school to training, I'm the one consigned to ‘Time out!’ When stories once rolled on a launch-pad pillow his eyes reneged on suspense halfway through. No surprise for me tomorrow. Happily-ever-after was sought before once-upon-a-time began. Now he owns endings. No sneak previews to ensure the all clear. In the dash to provide returns there has been a quiet coup, a manifesto written. A young man, set to run the business, is certain to make changes and expand from the parent company. Retrenchments are likely so I'll start buying the paper and update my résumé.
TRAVELLING WITH THE WRONG PHRASE BOOKS
(For Martin)

Last Days on Our Usual Littoral

Sunset into the shipwrecked house tracks spiders' glittering seams. The quilted air pads lightly round us this winter

as we pack and prepare for farewells. I almost forget this peninsula we have beached on, this tongue of land with its lazy phrases of house and garden, its exclamations of jetties over a lake.

But now, when all our surfaces have been tableclothed with maps and passports, bills and wills, as I go out into the neighbourhood

I hear the Esperanto of end-of-winter walkers ahead of me. Three men by the bottle shop clutch their beer. In seeding grass nearby, seven magpies just as eagerly sipping. A woman hurtles over the hill, about to take off in pink lycra – and cockatoos & rainbow lorikeets flap up, screeching news of foreign invasion: "A flamingo at Lake Macquarie!"

Below our house, the water is calm with cloud. Over this mute surface, swallows flash – then swoop around me as if I could be stitched here, appliquéd forever into this space. I skip place names

over my mind and watch them sink: England – Scotland; Germany – Lithuania; Queensland Canberra New South Wales . . .

We have imagined ourselves all around the planet so much how can we believe this is where we belong? As the scars of the day
are smoothed over, as the water waits for mullet underneath to leap up neat as needles, restitching a doona big enough for all the landscapes of our lives to sleep under,

the edge of this world is littered with memories of its history: sponges of thongs and mussels; chips of coal and amber-shimmering beer-bottle glass . . . Through a rip in the sky, sun slips to claim them and immediately out from under jetties swallows are swooping, threading themselves with light and looping it, from land to water and back — so many webs which should hold us to this littoral — so many lines of connection and abandonment . . . streamering me now like an ocean liner as I turn to leave, the hulls of my shoes collecting a last home-crunch.

On the Plane to Paris

On the plane to Paris, is it too late to learn French? The child of migrants — and now a global adult — you don’t think so. Un deux trois . . .
mercì, mercì. . . s’il vous plaît . . .

Confident as a cockatoo, you sprout these comical crests while I wonder: speechless for six months, what mercy could you beg for?

War spun your parents’ globe and slid them down to the end of the ocean. You grew up on their island, lapped by three tongues. Feel quite at home now with none of them.

So, as yet another culture threatens to swamp you, only at the last moment do you peg your nose, try for three minutes to take the senseless plunge . . .
Too late, our seatbelts clicked, Australia beneath us — all around you suddenly you sense an embryonic lap, a language before thought, easy as baby talk and bubbling toward the sky

because yes, this jumbo belly is full of Germans, hungering home. The Lufthansa hostess after a quick identi-kit scan guesses you’ll speak her language — *und “Ja, danke schön”, you do.*

Those other sounds which snorted out of you are gone like blue-bottle pops. Saliva runs over their stings as you burst the foil round your pretzel, close the lesson with a sniff. Well, isn’t the whole world multi-cultural now?

The plane, at any rate, speaks universally. Screeching louder than the cockatoos unfed in our garden tonight, it launches us into limbo ... while I rehearse new ripples introducing us at our far-off touchdown — the hostess pearls pure nonsense three different ways into the displaced oyster shells of my ears — and you go up into clouds as calm as the bubbles in your beer trancing into *Tract 1* in the Guide Book for Word 6 safely settled in our laptop.

*At Photo Station, Boulevard St-Michel*

What language does it need, the cheeky bird which is this Photo Station’s logo? At home in Ad-Land, flying under a rainbow and sticking its beak through a camera lens, it welcomes us.
Snapped for the album now, we’d be forever on this footpath, glad-mouthed as Christmas bells. But while I’m ringing with mind-music of pellicules and négatifs, the ropes which keep this commerce chiming turn your tongue to felt. This language love pre-dates us: a cobble throw from the Sorbonne, it takes me back to sandstone and gargoyles at St Lucia – to grit in my mouth and the scowl of cigar smoke in a tutorial where, to be seventeen and shy and female, stranded me strange as a bellbird in Quasimodo’s ear.

“Today we will discuss L’Étranger – the alienation of Camus” Aah oui, agrees the tutor’s djellabah of young men, pleating their voices earnestly around him, we will, we will.

In my Pierre Cardin/Vogue Pattern dress, I am bare-shouldered, shivering in the heat and silence of Algeria – as I hear the French, the French I thought I slept in like a stream, slither over sand, a sinister ripple no longer to be trusted.

That was 1969. The Paris pavements had already been overturned. At lunchtime forums under poincianas in the Brisbane swelter, while pamphlets printed Apathy and People’s Power in roneo ink on our not-yet met fingers across the Great Court in his laboratory your Lithuanian father was safely translating symbols for catalysts, warning of the dangers of Communists, forgetting his student nickname ‘Bon am’. Your mother, under lorikeets at Mt Cootha was at home, cooking in German.

Their shadows were not there in that stifled room. But today on the Boulevard St-Michel, spelling in French our shared Anglicised name,
mouthing beside you sounds as odd
as formulae for a bomb –

as a narcissus-pale girl in this Photo Station
reels before my Antipodean breath,

over all of us

the pall of difference falls. I hear how any tongue
flung into foreign air can strike, reptilian –

while our thoughts are still

kind chimes in our clanging heads.
Tess Williams

The Black Shoes

My mother collects antiques but doesn’t believe in history, so I keep her madness in much the same way she hoards crazy china. They are both family heirlooms in that they were here before me, they have a precious if somewhat mysterious value and they will inevitably be passed on. What they also have in common is they are not complete. Pretty china and my mother’s madness are fragments by which to try and read the past and present. She was born in a Yorkshire slum on the same day as Elvis Presley. That much is certain. She was the daughter of Millicent Stone and the Irish drunk, Charlie O’Brien. That much is also certain. Other tales that could be true or could be misunderstood by me are these. My great grandmother had an exceptional ability to curse people. Nobody ever loves a tall person. A bicycle is an evil invention that can ruin both a face and a life, and girl children need to be careful of grave dirt.

Betty Boo was my aunt, my mother’s older sister. She dropped in on a skinny ray of hope five years after the end of the First World War. Millie and Charlie brought her home to Feldspar Street in a pram and left her outside to catch uncertain sunshine and certain admiration. Baby Betty was utterly beautiful and smelled of the very best things in life – survival and young, hot love. She was an exquisite talisman against the stinking obscenities of mustard gas, blood and French mud. She inspired a generation. When young women danced, their dimpled knees flashed below petal skirts and they had little Betty Boo pictures in their eyes. Young men, on the other hand, leaned in doorways wearing baggy trousers that covered the tilting hungers they felt for the girls with Betty Boo longings.

Six days a week Charlie O’Brien caught a tram from Feldspar Street to the copper works. He stayed there for ten hours at a time so he could keep bread and meat on the table, milk powder in the cupboard and buy silk stockings for Millie’s birthday. Millie and her mother took in washing and ironing, spending their days grating lye, scrubbing shirt collars on rippled wash boards...
and heating irons on the stove. At night Charlie relaxed with a pint while Millie fell into exhausted, milky dreams of her husband and daughter. Charlie and Millie were good people in a brief moment of happiness doing their best to care for infant dreams of peace, but national trouble and family history had a firm hold of them and their innocence couldn’t last.

Gnawing on their future like rats in wainscotting were new envies, old spite and a gathering war. The war was, in some ways, the least of their problems and it came on slowly and at a distance. It is probably enough to say that during the decade after Betty Boo was born there was trouble in the Rhineland, and a young man with infernal fire in his belly set out to become the Chancellor of a Republic he was hell bent on destroying. So, in some ways it was business as usual across the world, in other ways it was the worst of times. Consumerism, on the other hand, was more immediate. The New World fed inadequacies and jealousies in the unlikely shapes of toasters, shoes and Millie’s mother, Grandmother Stone.

The electric lights of America could almost be seen in the night sky from the east coast of the British Isles and Millie and Charlie desperately hoped jazz would come to Feldspar Street. In anticipation, Millie bought one of the new pretty low waisted dresses off the rack and a long wool coat to wear with the silk stockings Charlie had given her. Despite spending twenty-five days a month in flat brown lace up shoes, with baggy floral pinnies tied round her slim waist, she lived in the sort of hope that could just possibly have withstood a world-wide depression. Unfortunately it could not survive Grandmother Stone’s glittering mica eyes and bitter tongue.

Grandmother Stone was a needed pair of hands at Feldspar Street, but she was impervious to the charms of Baby Betty and downright hostile to Millie and Charlie. As her only child, Millie knew much of what life had dealt the old woman but she never got round to seeing it through her own eyes. Grandfather Stone had been an industrious worker in a textile mill. His little daughter was an unexpected gift for his autumn years but before Millie’s birth his left hand was crushed in an accident with a power loom. A sense of indebtedness to his wife who dealt with the festering poverty and pain of the subsequent decade hollowed him out absolutely. By the time he died, a sack of pale skin on white hospital sheets, he’d been invisible to eight year old Millie for most of her life. He never even saw the start of hostilities in Europe. Compared to other husbands in her acquaintance, his was an ignominious death, one that left Grandmother Stone with no medals and no pension. It was hard for her to forgive her husband the extra suffering she had to endure because of his injuries, so she didn’t.

Millie took over where her father had left off. An only child, her mother’s
welfare and happiness were her mission in life. So, as they worked together on the bag washes, she shared what was joyful to her with her mother – Baby Betty’s softness and Charlie’s crooked Irish charm. Millie was not a strong woman, her biggest ambition was to be the first in the street with a shiny silver toaster. However, like a watercolour sun, she brought a little brightness into the industrial grey and brick sepia of Feldspar Street. She trod the bumpy cobblestones lightly as a young wife, and for her the smoke curling above the popping, hissing gaslights even held a certain poetry. Grandmother Stone’s heart was devoid of such flummery and she found her daughter’s generous vision of council housing suspect. Protestant by birth, the old woman had a natural, grim Catholicism about her. To her, pleasure and sin were easily confused and she resented Millie’s soul being endangered by love. Millie’s salvation required an eye sharpened to the injustices of daily life. So Grandmother Stone did her best to educate her daughter. Her bitterness was a pianola scroll of discord that ran like ghost music through their days. Beer and butter became measures of love and distress in Feldspar Street, as did Mary McCardle’s shoes.

Mary McCardle had been at school with Millie, and Grandmother Stone had cordially despised both the girl and her parents. Mary, however, had since married a foreman by the name of Evans who worked at Fairbairns Mill. He was an Englishman who provided his young wife with good shoes to wear every day of her life, a fact that both appalled and titillated the old woman. They were not the sturdy brown lace-ups most women did their shopping in. No, Mary McCardle had more than one pair of soft black leather pumps with thick crossover straps and a button on the side. While Grandmother Stone believed the girl to be as spoiled as a Sunday dinner on Monday morning, she found her strategically useful when dealing with the inhabitants of Feldspar Street. Sometimes Mary’s shoes were the reward for a beauty Millie did not possess, an observation truly crushing to Millie’s spirits if she became too contented. Sometimes the foreman’s pride would never see his family going without. Charlie’s eyes would darken at the insinuations, but it was not her fault, the old woman would say, that he took her nattering so seriously or that he was so sensitive about the Irish having no pride. When it came to Betty Boo, the old woman appointed her Mary McCardle’s successor – one bound to do well for herself. After all, she would say, one look showed how Betty Boo never went without while her mother’s brogues were quite worn through. Yes, Grandmother Stone got great mileage from Mary McCardle’s shoes.

Like frogs sitting in a slowly heating pot, the extended O’Brien family endured the next few years. It wasn’t all bad. Little Betty grew with the speed of a sapling in compost. By the age of six, she was tossing thick, black
hair as she hopscotched down Feldspar Street and rehearsed a blue-eyed Irish charm on the local priest who was preparing her for her first communion. She delighted her father by being saucy behind her Grandmother’s back, and she was her mother’s pet, able to coax odd ha’pennies from the budget even when Millie was having to choose between lard and soap at the corner shop. Grandmother Stone disliked Betty Boo intensely. However, as she said, good discipline was wasted on pert children, so she settled for despising Charlie.

The old woman forbade Millie from serving Charlie his dinner. Not directly, of course, and not all at once. Only if he wasn’t on the first homebound tram. If Charlie went down the pub for a pint, he more often than not came in to an empty table. Food packed away and dishes done. The fights followed like clockwork. As the brass door knob turned, Millie would suddenly pay great attention to her knitting. There would be reproach, coldness, harsh words, heat, tears and regrets. In the night there would often then be confusion and more hardening of feeling. Charlie would mutter in their bed that the old witch should watch herself, and Millie would never see how her mother had anything to do with Charlie’s practice of spending drinking hours with Seth McCormack. In the morning the unacceptable bread and cheese that had been raged over the night before reappeared, softened with a small jar of homemade marmalade and a large pot of stewed tea. At first it only happened on a Saturday. And then, chances were, things could be tolerable for a while.

Though she despised Charlie, Grandmother Stone had no sympathy with Millie. She’d wanted a daughter with pride, not a girl with silly romantic notions in her head. A late baby, the old woman often suspected Millie was weak in the intellect as well as weak in her dealings with her husband. Saying that, she’d look sideways to assess the effect of her words on Betty Boo, but Betty Boo saw beyond her grandmother. On every count she refused invitations to despise her parents. While the child recognised that Millie and Charlie were imperfect, she knew full well there were worse parents on Feldspar Street. More than that, still generating a post-war glow, she lived with the compassionate knowledge that her life would be better than theirs. That led her into a natural kindness.

From the age of ten, Betty Boo bleached her own socks and underwear spotless, she cooked while her mother did bag washes, and she went to the fish markets at sunrise on Friday mornings with her father to buy the evening dinner. She even fetched her grandmother to the doctor. The Doctor said Grandmother Stone’s heart was her problem. Betty Boo was impressed with the accuracy of the diagnosis, but she wondered why it wasn’t obvious to everyone that Grandmother Stone’s heart was Charlie and Millie’s problem.
too. By the middle of 1934, things were bleak. Coal was expensive, bread and dripping served as a main meal at least two days a week and people were washing and drying their own clothes on the settle. The O’Brien marriage was just over a decade old and fights had settled in like a daily drizzle that had the Roman Catholic priest visiting once a fortnight to talk of Irish duty and Irish family.

Charlie turned to fortifying ales at lunch as well as tea and no longer looked Millie, Betty Boo, Grandmother Stone or the priest in the eye. Millie relentlessly scrubbed the front step, until it had a dip like a saucer in it, and her knuckles wrinkled and split like old fruit. Charlie’s black hair quickly became as white as his daughter’s smalls. Millie steamed tripe while the love of her life staggered home singing songs of betrayed love, and at night they fell into a cold bed. Indeed, the O’Brien bed was so chilly it surprised everyone, even Millie and Charlie, that a second babe could be conceived in it.

Betty Boo’s sister, Nellie, could not have been more different from the blessed child herself. Betty’s first decade had been one of plenty. There’d been no shortage of meat, potatoes and adoration, and in that time she had grown rosy as a milkmaid. Her blue eyes flashed, her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders when she wore it down, and her limbs were rounded and dimpled. She was the queen of Feldspar Street, with a mouth on her that was both beautiful and foul. Coming up twelve, lips like crushed strawberries she dropped casual obscenities in front of the gangling boys and turned them resentful and warm in one sentence. However, perhaps because Millie was on the depression diet, Nellie was thin and angular, and her colouring was disappointingly English. Her hair never achieved the rich black of Betty Boo’s and her eyes were a mongrel hazel. She was a needy baby who was left to cry herself to sleep and got in the way of her entire family just by breathing.

It wasn’t right, but it was an accident of history. Not that Millie did not care for her new daughter, she did. But Millie was tired with beating endless coppers, pandering to her dying mother and propping up an alcoholic husband. Europe was deeply unsettled and every day brought bad news to the city. Wages only went so far. Eating well became a luxury and many things were hard to get. Betty Boo walked three miles a week for just a few fresh eggs. Then she wore her young legs out running up and down for her grandmother’s drops, shawl, slippers, and chamber pot. Eventually, Charlie was let go from the copper works and the O’Brien’s and Grandmother Stone faced a second big war.

A paper twist of condensed milk in a mug of stewed tea kept a man looking for work for an entire day in these times, while in tiny grey kitchens women performed economical magic with offal and scrubbed themselves and
their children in the sinks where they washed vegetables. It was sad, but there was just no place in Feldspar Street for a mauny toddler in this time. What was cute and hopeful the decade before was now an exercise in futility and a burden. Nellie could have been just as charming and glossy as Baby Betty, it would have made little difference. She was born at the wrong time. Charlie was too full of self-pity and booze to be any good to his new daughter, an exciting mix of fear and independence was waking in both Millie and Betty as they turned their eyes to the new industries in the city, and Grandmother Stone directly competed with Nellie for care in the family. It was a competition Nellie could never win.

Little Nellie became a bit of a favourite with one of Millie’s old school friends. Ada Robert’s household was louder, dirtier and in many ways happier than Feldspar Street. Ada and Arthur had married later than Millie and Charlie, as Ada had nursed elderly parents. Ada was destined to care. There were two children already there. Derek was four years older than Nellie, destructive and difficult, and the baby was not yet walking. Ada had her hands full because Arthur spent a lot of time in the sanatorium and, when he was home, was either down the pub or laying on the couch hawking bloodied sputum into a handkerchief. Little Nellie was useful in the same way a puppy would have been. She kept Derek amused as his mother doted on the demanding husband and a grizzling infant. At Grandmother Stone’s suggestion, Millie and Charlie, who had another job now making uniforms, paid Ada seven shillings and sixpence a week to rear their daughter. This worked out well for everyone except Nellie, who had to straddle the rather peculiar gap of years and streets between her family of origin and the family who shaped her in key ways.

By the time the conflict came to that part of Britain, Little Nell was seven years old and she’d grown as rapidly as Betty Boo had at that age. However, she had none of the roundness or sass that had endeared Baby Betty to the world. She was long and thin and resentful with a sharp tongue to boot. She didn’t exactly go hungry, but her joints poked through her clothes as a testament to the pared meals of the depression. Her earliest memories were of crouching under kitchen tables as planes flew over the blacked out city. The bombs never came to either of the houses she lived in, but she could sometimes hear them whistling. Having read the story of Chicken Little, Nellie tried to imagine the bombs as large acorns, but the craters that appeared in the earth let her know the sky really was falling. Nellie had been robbed by history of something that had been Betty Boo’s birthright – hope. While Betty Boo’s spirit was imbued with the cheerfulness of a bright morning, Nellie’s was infected with fear and loss.
Nellie’s realisation that, though she might be loved, she was not thought fondly of by anyone came just before the war. The Shirley Temple rage meant her hair was tied in thick fingers of rags as she shared the fireside with Ada and the other two children. Derek leaned indolently against Ada’s legs while the baby, now three years old curled into her mother’s bony chest. Nellie stood by and watched them. The fire lit their faces from underneath, softening features. It gave the three of them an almost holy, golden glow. Ada breathed a deep sigh of contentment, then realised that Nellie was looking longingly at the child in her lap. As much to wall off her own guilt as Nellie’s need she brusquely told Nellie she was too tall to be cuddled.

How words pierce spirit is certainly one of the mysteries of modern life, but there is no doubt that they do. Nellie continued to stand by the chair and then she later went to bed as normal, but she was mortally wounded. Like the child in the story of the Ice Queen, something cold had lodged in her heart and her very well being and future were endangered from that moment. She was too tall to be loved. Tall girls could not be loved. It was a simple and rather strange truth, but one a child had no difficulty believing, and it explained a lot. It explained her absence from Feldspar Street, her difference from Betty Boo, and her failure to graft properly to Ada’s family. So much that was puzzling and painful to the little girl made sense when seen as the result of a physical flaw. In the firelight, Nellie had wished quite violently she was a boy like Derek, so it didn’t matter how tall she was. That night she went to sleep curled up into a ball, crying almost the last tears she would ever cry.

If the matter of her height stirred deep feelings of rejection, the matter of the bicycle sealed them. Every Friday, she returned to Feldspar Street after school to have fish dinner with her parents and grandmother and to silently envy Betty who was now working in a munitions factory and stepping out with a young man from the university. To say Betty was beautiful was an understatement. She was ravishing. Her dark hair was a silky undulation of richness and her Irish skin was unflawed. With colour on her eyes and lips, she looked like Dorothy Lamour. Nellie adored and hated her sister and was desperately self-conscious about her own angles when confronted with the rich curves of Betty Boo’s eighteen year old breasts and hips. If Betty’s boyfriend spoke to her, she squirmed and blushed and stumbled over her words. It was all reasonably normal, and Nellie might have moved through this stage without permanent damage, but her parents were ignorant of their own darkness and the peculiar fragility of a child’s mind.

Charlie O’Brien had been unhappy for a very long time. Too young to fight for his country in the first big war, he’d decided to still make it a safe place for women and children. Using the rhetoric of battle, Charlie had set up a
family. Too late, he discovered while he might want to save women and children, he didn't really like living with them. His needs were simple and their needs seemed deeply complicated. When he was first married, Charlie had found contentment in a pay packet, a full stomach and a pint with the lads. Satisfaction, however, was a shifting goal post for Grandmother Stone and, in a world of art silk underwear, perfume, newspapers and suffrage, it became elusive for Millie and even Betty Boo. Charlie grew bitter and angry with the women of his family because they never seemed to be satisfied. His personal nation building strategy had failed. He really didn't believe it was his fault and he resented his shortcomings being reflected back at him in the eyes of his wife and older daughter. If it had been possible, he would have hit them but that would have destroyed his own hero myth. Besides, fifteen years of drinking had made him almost impotent. There was only one person left Charlie could even the scores with – little Nellie.

Charlie was cruel, and didn’t bother to think about why. His story was that the drink made him a bit nasty, but he actually spoke out of vicious weakness when he told Nellie she was an “ugly bairn.” An ugly baby. Betty Boo was beautiful and Nellie was ugly. Once Charlie had said it, Friday night fish dinners became a trial for Nellie. She loved being at Feldspar Street getting small doses of true family, but she hated the humiliation that was her lot with her father. Like wine fermenting into vinegar she slowly brewed her sense of injustice as she sat at the table with the preoccupied women of her family and her bitter, unpleasant father.

The day she fell off the bicycle, the authority of Charlie’s story crystallised and she understood it much better. She’d been to the shop to get flour, butter and sugar, and coming back she misjudged a kerb. As she went over the handlebars she protected the precious groceries and failed to protect her face. Her chin hit the raised cobblestone and her slightly crooked upper teeth pierced her lip. The initial blood flow was impressive and she limped through the doorway at Feldspar Street with a large patch of crimson on the front of her white school blouse.

Betty Boo was out with a friend, Charlie was down the local. Grandmother Stone greeted her with vexation – the stain, the lack of consideration for others, the (last) despised tears. It was classic Grandmother Stone. Millie was more gentle, but a little distracted. She put the blouse into soak in cold water then helped Nellie clean her face. She was worried when she saw the hole in Nellie’s lip went through to the outside. It needed repair. By the time they reached the doctor there was no more blood. More to keep Millie happy than anything the young man decided two stitches were in order. This did not make Millie as happy as he expected. There would be a scar. Any marks
were bad for girls. They could ruin appearances, ruin any chance of a good marriage, and ruin a life. The doctor understood this to be mid-life fretting from a woman on the brink of losing her own beauty. Nellie understood this to mean that now everyone would see what her father had seen in her. The tumble off the bicycle made her officially ugly to the whole world.

In the months following this incident, while her young understanding struggled with Derek’s desire to pull her knickers down all the time and her mother’s anxiety about her being disfigured, Grandmother Stone died. Cantankerous to the point of vile, the old woman finally began cursing the family that looked after her. She turned Charlie yellow with bile and he vomited out his rage for weeks. Finally he gave up drinking, but not before being fired again. The old woman told him he would beat her to the gate of Hell and she knew all along he couldn’t do an Englishman’s job. Millie became spiritless with Charlie out of work and sick, her own long hours at the factory where she now worked wore her down almost as much as her mother’s gloating. Grandmother Stone had been determined that Millie would not have a better life than her, and except for the small aberration that was Betty Boo, here was a twin destiny. Millie was simply taking her turn looking after a useless man and being the mother of a girl child that simply could not be cherished. Poor little Nellie. Grandmother Stone did not need to curse her particularly as the child’s life was clearly presided over by a certain malice. And she didn’t bother to curse Betty Boo either. What was the point when Betty simply sidestepped the old woman’s rancid heart with her adorable feelings of entitlement.

The rancid heart finally collapsed in on itself like a piece of moulding fruit. And in the end there were only a few abrupt hours in which to say goodbye. Millie and Nellie witnessed the whole thing and were spat upon for their pains just before the death rattle. Charlie fell off the wagon and got plastered. He never saw the inside of the hospital, never smelled the disinfectant and never spoke to the sallow faced man in the pin striped suit who obligingly took his mother-in-law’s body away. Betty Boo would probably have said her farewells to her grandmother, but things weren’t critical when she went off with her friends on that Thursday to learn the jitterbug, and by the time she’d mastered the new steps it was all too late to ever speak to the old woman again.

Betty did, however, go to the funeral. She had to support her mother who was collapsing under dreadful grief. Millie’s fitted cap had a veil that hid her swollen eyes, and her navy blue suit bespoke her bereaved status but words can never describe the despair that sat on her like lead ballast. The weight
came from a life time of never having being good enough and facing a future without the one person who could relieve her of that feeling. Millie went to great lengths to settle the old woman’s spirit unable to realise it was her own that needed appeasing. Once a week she took caught two trams and walked a mile and a half to the cemetery to lay flowers, weed and weep. And she took young Nellie with her.

It was there that everything fell into place for the girl. At the end of the visit Little Nellie had to step on her grandmother’s grave to pull up her prostrate mother. As she did, she unexpectedly realised the advantage of being tall. She had become the big person, while her mother had shrunk to the size of something almost contemptible. Seeing her mother in this way established a deep kinship between the living and the dead. Nellie drank in her grandmother’s spirit as if it was ambrosia. To be small was to be needy, to require the touch and kindness of others. To be tall was to be beyond those needs and even able to deny them to someone else. Given those options, Nellie couldn’t see the advantage in being small. The end of the war was close to the British people, but Nellie was just getting ready to fight her way through life. She had to find ways to deal with the drunk and cruel Charlie O’Brien, the sad and lovely Millie, the beautiful and untouchable Betty Boo and the demanding and lecherous Derek. She assisted her mother to her feet, but she did not offer her even a second of compassion.

As well as immunising Nellie against unwarranted tendernesses, Grandmother Stone’s magic included practical attack skills. Nellie had an exceptional talent with language. Years of witnessing unkindness meant words fired from the little girl’s cooling heart with the accuracy of sniper bullets. At first she practiced on school friends. Girls with bright eyes and shining hair flinched when she noticed their foolishness, fingering their self-conscious anxieties with truth. Nellie took that glad knowledge home to Betty Boo. Pretty but stupid, she said to her sister and held her ground. Betty lost control first, then Betty’s tears had another name. Weak. Now that Nellie could see what Grandmother Stone saw when she was alive, she knew that her whole family was riddled with weakness. That made her the strong one. Betty was bonny, but vain. Millie was loving but couldn’t see why any one would ever really care for her. And Charlie was unable to say no to liquor. The scar from the bicycle witnessed her own initiation into cruelty, but in her view it also marked her as a survivor. The worst had already been done to her. She had been expelled from her own family, but found somewhere else to be. She had been mocked as a pale, thin child of the depression but Derek’s fumblings showed her she could still be desired. Bombs had been literally dropped around her but she was alive.
Just after entering secondary school, my mother turned away from the family that didn’t deserve her. Much was happening beyond Feldspar Street and the two up, two down house was just too small for a girl who read a book a day. Bright and prepared to move on in whatever way she could, she turned her young and blistering gaze on the world and wondered what it would offer her. Her rather strange psychology was deeply synchronised with history. She was a child of empire, and she and her kind had just won the biggest war ever. She’d also seen the women streaming from the factories tucking their pay packets into their bags. Fluent in human weakness, she firmly believed she would never have to rely on anyone else to make her way in the world. So, at the age of fourteen she got a job in the local greengrocers and bought herself a pair of patent leather pumps, black with a fashionably high heel and a featured button on one side.
“True! – Nervous – Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?”


A flicker. “Why do you use other people’s words when you talk about yourself?”

“If I made up my own words, you’d think I was crazy.”

She doesn’t laugh.

“There are no books in here, so all I can do is remember stories I’ve read, repeat them to myself, like someone out of Fahrenheit 451. I’m starting to feel like… what’s that Borges story about the guy who decides he’s going to write Don Quixote from scratch, without having read the original?”

She writes something in her notebook, but doesn’t answer.

“Of course, in the story, he manages to make it word-perfect: in fact, the critics rave about it, say it has levels of meaning that Cervantes didn’t manage. But that’s just a story. The only version of Don Quixote I know that was written like that is pretty fucking spectacular, because it was illustrated by hand… no, that’s not the right word… it’s illuminated, like one of those medieval manuscripts. You can see it in the Collection de l’Art Brut.”

She raises an eyebrow at that. Maybe it was my accent. “What’s that? Or where?”

“Lausanne. Switzerland. It’s a gallery for art created by psychiatric patients. It translates literally as ‘Raw Art’, but in English it’s usually called Outsider art, which I always thought was a bit perverse, because the people who did it were Inside. Schizophrenics, bipolars, psychotics. Maybe I should send them something when I get back Outside.”

“Have you been there?”

“When I was a kid. It’s near the headquarters of the Olympics committee.
Now that's a fucking scary building. Looks like it was designed by Albert Speer - you know, Hitler's architect. I went to the Collection to get away from it. There's some scary stuff in there, too, but on the whole, it's actually quite wonderful.

"Do you feel at home there?"

"More than I do here, that's for fucking sure," I say, looking around her office. It can't be her real office; unless she's bureaucrat Barbie, born in a box, she must have a place somewhere with her certificates on the wall, photos on the desk, books on the shelves, Far Side cartoons on the calendar. This box is as bare of personal touches as the inside of a pill bottle with the label removed. The whole fucking place is like that.

"What about your real home?"

"It's my parents' home, not mine. I'm not saying that they're not my parents. I don't have, what to they call it, Kapsbrak, no, that's that kid out of the Stephen King novel, the one who, uh... Capgras syndrome. That's it."

"Capgras syndrome?"

"Thinking that people around you have been replaced by doubles. Like Invasion of the Body Snatchers. I read about it in Scientific American. Or Tourette's Syndrome. I just swear sometimes when I'm upset. Fuck, all teenagers swear. Sometimes I lose control of it, but Jesus, they're just fucking words!"

"But you do get depressed."

"Fuck, yes! Doesn't everyone?"

"You get depressed a lot."

"Maybe."

"And you write when you're supposed to be studying. They caught you writing a poem during your biology exam. But you won't take medication."

"The fucking pills stop me writing," She doesn't say that that's the point, but I can tell she's thinking it. "You didn't answer my question," I remind her. "Why can't I have some fucking books?"

"We can't provide books for everybody, and the ones you've chosen aren't going to help cure your depression. Other patients might find them even more disturbing. Anyway, there are magazines - "

"Doctor's waiting room magazines. Sometimes I think they're a major cause of illness."

"- and the TV..."

I snort. "Reality TV. If people want to see reality, why don't they look out a fucking window? Why don't you feed your closed circuit cameras here into everybody's TV instead, and let them vote us the fuck out of here?"
"It could be worse," J whispers, as we sit at the furthest corner of the room from the TV, bent over a chess board. Big Brother may be watching us, but he's not a good listener. J has her eyes half-closed and is touching her eyelids lightly to make a kaleidoscope. She says she read that Dali said he'd do that if they tried to stop him painting.

"How?"

"We might not be white. Crazy people who don't look white get shipped overseas. Don't you watch the news?"

"Not any more. They say it makes me depressed." It's just like reality TV, except that we don't get as many chances to vote people out. "Did you try asking for some books?"

"Yes, but I thought I'd better make up my own list. They'd get suspicious if I gave them yours."

"Why?"


"They're all on the school's recommended reading list," I say, and cringe at how defensive I sound. "Okay, can you ask them for La Passe-Muraille?"

"They know I don't speak French. What is it?"

"It's about someone who can walk through walls. I suppose they might think that was escapist."

J looks around at the walls and up at the ceiling. They could also pass for white, at least in bright sunlight, but in this weather they're the same dull grey as the boiled potatoes we had for dinner. J, I know, sees them as a blank canvas, as she does most walls. That's sort of why she's in there, for painting graffiti. When they took her paints away, she went back to drawing on paper, but that seemed too flimsy, too temporary, so she started turning herself into a work of art instead, using her skin as a canvas. They tried taking her inks away from her, but she managed to find needles and razor blades, and when they tried taking those, she used fire. It sounds as though her parents weren't so distressed by the methods she was using for decorating her body as they were by the way she was exhibiting her work, but maybe that's just the way she tells the story.

She took her medication for a while, and was briefly fascinated that it turned her urine purple. The staff thought she was hallucinating, but the doctor said it was a common side-effect. After that, she grew bored with it. She asks me to tell her again about the art galleries I visited when I was in Europe. I do my best to describe what I saw in Paris and Milan and London, the d'Orsay and Brera and V&A, but as always we ended up back at the Collection de l'Art Brut. This time I tell her about Henry Darger, whose work
I first saw in a room there. Darger was sent to an orphanage at eight, diagnosed as an habitual trouble-maker, and kept in various mental institutions until he escaped when he was sixteen. He spent most of the next sixty-four years cleaning hospitals, attending mass daily, conversing with the voices in his head, and writing. He started writing his autobiography until it turned into a story of a tornado named Sweetie Pie on page 207 and continued in that vein for the next four thousand or so pages, but he’s best known for his 15,000 page epic titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion.* The Vivian Girls were traced from pictures scavenged from Chicago’s rubbish bins, and the manuscript is illustrated—no, *illuminated*—with hundreds of paintings and sketches and collages, some of them three metres wide. Darger was better at drawing incredibly realistic clouds and brilliantly coloured landscapes than he was at the female form, but he did draw the girls’ penises himself. The work remained his secret until it was discovered by his landlord after his death. Darger’s death, that is, not the landlord’s.

“Hundreds…” J breathes.

I nod. “And 15,000 single-spaced pages. But over sixty-four years, that’s not even a page a day. I’m doing better than that now. Most days, anyway.”

***

“Why do you feel the need to write so much?” the interrogator asks.

It’s a wet day, as grey outside as it is inside, one of those times when I think we might be better off if no one had ever invented windows; I feel cold even though I know that it really isn’t. The room’s empty bookshelves remind me of a skeleton, a rib-cage. When I was dissecting a rat in biology class, they accidentally gave me one that had been pithed, its brain burnt out by an electric current. I opened the skull only to find it empty. I shiver. “Why do people write?” I ask. “Something to do? A way of being somewhere else? A way of making sense of the world?”

“Do you feel happier when you’re writing?”

“Happier’s not the right word.”

“Your work seems rather bleak. Do you think that’s healthy?”

“I don’t know. Is lying healthier than telling the truth?”

“You think this is the truth?”

“It’s my truth.”

She nods at that. “Do you want to be somewhere else?”

“Fuck yes!”
“Where?”

I look at her suspiciously. “If you’re thinking of sending me overseas, my ancestors came from Europe. Bin gar keine Russin, staumm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.”

“I know about your background,” she says with a good imitation of patience. “I’m just reminding you that if you take your medication, and we observe a positive change, you’ll be free to leave.”

“You’ll see a positive change if I can get out of here, but I can’t imagine it happening before then.”

“You were depressed before you came here.”

I shrug.

“Why won’t you take the medication?”

“It makes me feel slow and stupid, and that’s about all I can fucking feel when I take it! It stops me writing! There has to be something better than the fucking pills!”

“Not yet,” she says, and for a moment I look at her face and it’s like an epiphany, like looking at one of those trick pictures where you suddenly see a beautiful woman’s profile so clearly that you can never look at this again and not see it, never see only what you saw before... I realize that she does understand. Worse still, she believes what she’s saying. She might even be right.

Maybe the writing isn’t about being somewhere else. Maybe it’s about being someone else. No, that can’t be right. I don’t want to be someone else. I don’t.

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J and I sit on her bed and stare through the window at the clouds, then turn to face the wall. We’ve decided that if we work together, we can do something worthy of being hung in the Collection de l’Art Brut. “Are you ready?” I ask.

She nods, and holding hands, we walk through the wall.
QUIETLY DEAD. QUIETLY BURIED

The first phone call came shortly before midnight. Old Kim’s voice was feeble and distressed, and in retrospect I think he was already dying.

“Somebody’s creeping about in the backyard,” he said. “I’ll observe the protocols, don’t worry about that, but you’d better know.”

We had always been concerned about the size of the garden areas at the safe-house, but it had to be located in a semi-rural area so that the neighbouring houses were out of sight and earshot. Besides, the house itself was supposed to be as secure as the Perth Mint.

I opened my wall-safe and selected identity papers, double-checking that I’d taken the right ones. I was now old Kim’s son-in-law, still keeping in contact long after the death of his daughter ... and just hoping that Kim could still remember the agreed name for the daughter.

There’d be no traffic this late at night so I knew I’d reach the far fringe of Wanneroo within fifteen minutes.

The second call was diverted to my mobile as I drove.

“Two of the bastards...” He was breathless, agitated. “Young louts. Tried to jemmy the back door ... ran off when they saw me. But I’m not feeling so good. No doctor, though; I know the protocols.”

I winced at his loyalty to us, obeying safe-house protocol to the end. No calls to doctors, police, or public utilities; ASIO handled all of that, through me, so that nothing could ever get out of control. Project Kipling must not be compromised, especially after so many decades of operating successfully. It was strange for a man once accustomed to being in charge to be so obsequious, but I had come to understand that it was Kim’s form of loyalty to play strictly by our rules; it was his way of expressing his gratitude to us.

That’s why I had come to like the old bloke. He was straight and direct. I still couldn’t stomach or justify the way he’d abandoned his family and his responsibilities, but over the years I’d seen that this made good sense to him, given the choices he’d faced. Now ASIO was guardian of his dark secret and...
he candidly accepted that his fate lay in our hands.

The safe-house was situated at the far end of a No Through Road. In the 1990s, as Kim grew more frail, we had instigated intruder scares in the street in order to encourage people to buy guard dogs. That had worked well, and barking dogs had become Kim’s early warning system when strangers entered the street. They barked at my car now, and I wondered why they hadn’t warned off Kim’s intruders. Local lads, perhaps?

The gate to Kim’s driveway was padlocked as always; that deterred visitors and was entirely credible for a codger in his nineties. The worried son-in-law parked at a reckless angle out front, then seemingly cursed and fumbled with the padlock on the front gate. A watching neighbour wouldn’t have noticed that he also sent off a coded signal to his headquarters in Canberra, warning that Project Kipling had opened a new page.

We all knew that any new page was likely to be the last page, and that wasn’t wrong. Old Kim was dead by the time I entered the house.

I felt a deep, deep pang – far stronger than I had ever expected the moment would bring. As if to shield myself from that surge of emotion, I turned away from the form on the sofa and ran a quick check on the house. There were no signs of entry, but the main back door was open and someone had bashed at the flyscreen on the locked security door. They’d have been surprised to discover the old pensioner was protected by state-of-the-art security mesh, but I doubt if the scum who’d done this had the brains to spot anomalies.

I went back to the living area, closed the eyes of the old man slumped on the sofa, and sent off a coded alert. Project Kipling was winding down.

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The ASIO Regional Co-ordinator arrived twenty minutes later, and by that time the devastated son-in-law had phoned for police and ambulance and had opened the driveway gates for their arrival. In his distress, he had not thought to turn on any porch lights; that minimised the likelihood of alerting the neighbours.

“So he was dead when you arrived? But no intruders got inside?”

I nodded.

“And he made no calls – no cops or ambo – he just rang you? And you’ve made the triple-0 calls from his phone?”

I nodded again, and now he relaxed.

“Ron,” he introduced himself, shaking hands. “So why was it called Project Kipling?”
That rocked me. Was he testing me, trying to see if I would be careless now that it was all over? No; he was a younger man, probably late thirties, so it was more likely that he simply didn’t know the early background. But I decided to step carefully.

“Well, you’re aware that Kim was only his nickname?”

“Yes, I know all that. Real name Harold, and when he was asked to choose a new identity he settled on ‘Kim’ after Kim Philby, whose real first name was also Harold.”

“It was just a joke,” I explained. “He was being ironic, because Kim Philby was the last person he’d be linked with – but he loved the idea of two Harolds from different political sides both sheltering under the name Kim. And it stuck. Then they had to dream up a code-name for the operation, and you know how these things work: some deskbound wit sees that the name Kim is a ninety-degree tangent from reality, and he decides that the name for the operation has to lie at a further tangent. So they connected ‘Kim’ with the Jungle Book rather than Philby – hence Project Kipling.”

That answered his question but gave little away.

“Clever if you go in for that sort of thing,” he murmured, also giving nothing away.

Stalemate.

He began to look at the pictures on the walls, the books, the few meagre decorations on shelves.

“You can see clues here if you know what to look for,” he said. “The well-thumbed books are on politics, see: biographies of Menzies, Fraser, even Gough. And the paintings – so many beaches and seascapes. There’d have been a protocol that he couldn’t go to beaches or swim; he must have missed that part of his life…”

No more than he should have missed his own wife and family, I thought. No more than he would miss the endless round of dinners and decisions that he had sacrificed everything to escape. But I didn’t like where this was headed, not at all.

“Look, I like the old bloke,” I said, peeved. “He became a friend – I’m not going to betray him. The bloody secret is safe!”

“I wasn’t testing you,” he said, “sorry if I gave that impression. It’s tough for you because you’re burying a friend as much as ending an assignment. It’s tough for me because this is the biggest thing I’ve ever handled for ASIO. What do I do if one of the cops says, Hey this guy looks like Harold Holt?”

That was what I feared. It could all fall apart so easily, right at the point where it would otherwise be finished.

“They made him grow a beard, you know – from the ’70s right through to
the '90s.” The thought made me grin, despite the tension of waiting. “He
ing and shaved it off a few days after Howard was elected in '96. No one
would’ve recognised him by then – too aged.”

We both resisted the urge to glance at the shape on the sofa. Where were
the damn cops?

“I’ve never known the full story,” said Ron, “only what I needed to know,
and I’ve only been the Regional since '99. Apparently they found him in
Darwin two years after Portsea?”

I suspected that he knew, but we both needed talk to mask the tension.

“Two years and two days! There was TV publicity on the night of the
second anniversary of his disappearance – 1969 – and the next day a Darwin
schoolteacher told the local police she thought she’d seen him at a bus stop.
The cops passed it on, and ASIO found him living in a beachside caravan
park.”

“And banged him into a safe-house, poor bugger.”

Old Kim had never talked about that time. In his later years, after his wife
had died, he reminisced guardedly about the way he had planned his fake
drowning and plotted his escape-route to a simple, uncluttered life. But he
never mentioned that moment when the system reclaimed him. What must
it have felt like? – freedom, but on our terms. Protocols until death.

Headlights brightened the front of the house – first police, then the
ambulance.

We eyed them off as they stepped into the light of the hallway. A tanned
young female and a fresh-faced rookie from the squad car, two hunky
workout fanatics from the ambulance. All four of them born long after Harold
Holt disappeared at Cheviot Bay on December 17, 1967.

For them he had never existed, and we answered their perfunctory
questions with our well-planned lies and muttered gravely as they offered
condolences.

But I felt only loss as they trolleyed the frail body down the front path,
headed for cremation under a name chosen in jest.
Curriculum Vitae

What are her weaknesses? Well, she’s a writer, and writers will always place their art above any other career, so don’t expect her to put the job first.

– A referee (who needs enemies?)

Go back to school and get some nous.

– Angry first boss, who was also a poet, and pronounced it to rhyme with “louse”

Sessional, part-time, casual, fixed-term, adjunct, freelance, substitute, Temping, cobbled, stretching, relieving, resting
Only ever euphemistically. In residence, meaning
Soon leaving. It never seemed real to me
But kept biting till I learned to stand back.
Narcissism, egotism, think the world owes you a living,
God’s gift. Can’t stick at anything. It rolled by
Like an in-flight movie, in snatches
Repeating and edited for a general audience,
With the sound dropped out, the invisible captain
Always interrupting: the race, the course of a life. Le train-train
Quotidien that made her stop eating. Métro boulot no go –
If she’d been a poet, she could have justified it.
A series of workshops each winter, don’t list the dates
It looks better when there are no gaps, though the one
Advantage of sexist assumptions
Is the woman can say, I was raising children.
Home duties. Self-employed. I was working, I just didn’t have a job.
Of diminishing economies:
Each week she returned
To the place, there was less
Of everything: the boys’ clothes
Gone to that place only boys’ clothes go
Like dogs’ heaven, hopeful but never provable,
The iron burned out, the fridge
Reduced to one thawing lamb-corpse-lump
And she supposed to spin gold from straw.
Started bringing the veggies with her,
Spending her pay to earn her pay, feeling sorry
For the place she couldn’t supply, the runaway
Mother who sent presents from exotic locations
But never a note. When the glass broke
On the panel by the front door, the dad said,
“Just reach through the hole to let yourself in.”
In the café La Madeleine du Proust
everything is precious as it should be.
We, the only customers on a moody afternoon,
decide on tea, share cakes, two between four
(the unnecessary sweet confection)
earning the disdain of les homosexuels
who perform an expensive ballet;
every task is mime or gesture
for maximum proprietorial effect,
washing dishes, laying plates, preparation
of coffee we are led to understand
is work of the highest order, an art form
waiting to be discovered, while we
the philistines scoured the walls
their black and whites of Sartre, Gide
and Hemingway, les immortels,
until the Madeleines arrived.
A mere taste, should make the word
death disappear, Proust says or snap
open the synaptic paths of memory,
but nothing happened, not even a wistful
image of Maddy, my first beloved,
sugar and butter not powerful enough
to conjure that dark girl delighting
to shock with her dangerous expletive.
No, we were left, polite ironical,
four friends savouring time together,
practising the demotic craft of conversation,
cultivating a casual _sang froid_,
knowing the moment won't come back
however hard we try, and is the more
precious for that, as the dark angel beckons
instinct in each sip and bite.
My father tells me
that he has just come back
from killing pigs at old Vern Brewster’s place,
bleed like bejesus,
and he looks at his hands
surprised they are so clean.

My sister had encouraged us
to tell him, No Dad, you’re in a nursing home,
but that’s long ago
and we know he would have preferred
to have died in a bar-room brawl,
been abandoned in the forest
than this soft finish.

So I ask how many pigs Vern has?
their weight, ask if it’s true
that they will kill you if you finish up
arse-over-tit in the dirt?
and he brightens up,
as happy as a pig in shit,
as if no one has asked a sensible question
in the last month.
ANDREW LANSDOWN

WHITE-FACED HERON

By the river the white-faced heron –
geisha refinement and deportment,

Buddhist reflection and detachment,
ninja readiness and commitment,

haijin restiveness and engagement
– carries on like a white-faced heron.

RISING UPRIVER

During the night the sea
closed up the sandbar we
dug open in the day.
Now upriver a way

water’s slowly welling –
covering and filling

the prints a heron left
impressed on the mudflat.
from *The Witness.*

It's the love of the manifest world
that makes you an unreliable witness
– Rumi

**The Poets**

Let me speak plainly:
let these lines be the *Prakrit*
to your poets' *Sanskrit:*
no more making the foolish beautiful.

**The Metaphor-spark**

Perhaps you think
that the metaphor-spark
gives a glimpse of depths
cavernous, intricate, *profound.*
But could it equally plunge us
into our own gaudy darkness,
lurid ignorance: down in distorting waters,
that exhilarating breathlessness
starvation, not plenitude?
The Burmese poet Minthuwun (actual name U Wun) was one of the foremost poets of Burma of the twentieth century. Indeed I feel privileged to have read a photocopy of a poem, in his own handwriting, which he composed when he was nearly ninety-one years old. The poem was written in January 2000. A poem of his first appeared in print in the year 1926. His literary products spanned about seventy-five years, from the second decade of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century: an achievement virtually without parallel in the Burmese context and perhaps also internationally.

Minthuwun was born on 10 February 1909 in the town of Kunchangoan in Irrawaddy Division in Burma. He graduated from Rangoon University with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) with a distinction in Burmese literature in March 1933, then obtained a Master of Arts in Burmese language and literature in March 1935. In September 1936 Minthuwun obtained a scholarship to study at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. He studied Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan languages as well as general linguistics at both Oxford University and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He was awarded a B.Litt by Oxford University in July 1939. Back in Burma before the Second World War broke out, he started work on a Burmese dictionary: a task that he intermittently – together with other scholars – was involved in for the next thirty years or so. In the year 1952 Minthuwun was, for about six months, a visiting scholar of linguistics at Yale University in the United States.

Starting from the early 1930s Minthuwun, together with two other writers, the late Zaw Gyi (real name U Thein Han) (1907–1990) and the late Theikpan Maung Wa (real name U Sein Tin) (1900–1942) spearheaded the *khitsan* Burmese literary movement: “*khitsan*” means (literally) “testing the Age.” The *khitsan* movement was initiated under the tutelage of the then Principal of Rangoon College the late Professor U Pe Maung Tin.
(1889–1973) who had been the teacher ("sayā" in Burmese) of all three writers. This khitsan literary movement makes a shift (perhaps in the context of the times it can even be called a radical shift) from the florid style of writing which previously was the trend in Burmese literature. There was a shift not only of the style of writing but also of the substance. Instead of dwelling mainly on the sentimental, the romantic and, on the other end of the spectrum, religious themes, the poems, belles lettres, essays and short stories written, mainly by these three khitsan writers, from the early 1930s onwards began to cover wider human themes and concerns.

In one of his poems, first published in February 1982 (when he was already 73 years old), Minthuwun acknowledged that he had been named or perceived by the general public as a “romantic writer/poet.” In that poem, which can be translated as “So I am called a romantic poet”, Minthuwun draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the time when he was growing up during the colonial era under British rule, many people – especially the Burmese rural poor – were in debt. During the winter season, wrote the gentle poet, the plague was rampant, affecting segments of the population, and in the dry season cholera regularly ran its course. In the rainy season too, wrote Minthuwun, malaria played havoc in his native village and other villages of Burma. “Besieged by these multiple troubles” wrote Minthuwun “I might have become eccentric” and “to allay my mental despair and tiredness I might have grasped whatever came my way” and “wrote romantic literary pieces.” The gentle, self-effacing poet wrote that readers could well consider his excuse a lame one, given by “a less-than-mediocre person.” As a human being with foibles, wrote Minthuwun, his “explanation” for being a romantic poet might amount to a “deception” for which he “craved the readers’ forgiveness.” Minthuwun also exhorts his readers “to search for the truth for themselves.”

The truth is that Minthuwun was not only a romantic poet (in a complimentary sense) but a great one. He was also a marvellous human being whose life and rich contribution to Burmese literature and humanity we can only be grateful. One of his earlier romantic poems reads in translation:

**Roses**

*(Translated by U khin Zaw, adapted by Dennis Haskell)*

Her ladyship fancied star-flowers
We saw on the wild-wood way;
I cut them for her, those forest flowers;
Alas, today
In her hair are rose petals, roses!
Very beautiful she looks with roses!

_Saya-gyi_ ("Revered teacher") Minthuwun wrote this poem on 30 or 31 December 1932. I had the privilege of meeting the poet once on 11 December 2003 at his house in 16 Tun Lin Yeik Thar, Kamayut Township, Rangoon, Burma. In January 1999, I had published an article "Burmese Poetry: Three Poems by Minthuwun" in the *Unit News* of the Deakin Law School in Melbourne. I tried to send this article to Minthuwun in Burma, but was not sure whether it had reached him. On that December day, nearly five years after my translation and commentary on three of his poems were published, I sat beside his bed and read them to him.

One of these poems was composed by him on 1 November 1961. When I mentioned the date of the composition of the poem he humorously commented that it was not "that long ago." Then "mischievously" I said I could recite to him a poem that was even "less distant" in time of composition. As soon as I began to recite the first few words of the above poem (in Burmese) he raised his hand gently and recited it himself twice. And then in yet another illustration of the poet's humanity, charm and indeed lovability the then ninety-four year old poet said he wrote that poem (nearly seventy years earlier in December 1932) not "because he was angry but because he was glad" (that his "love with the roses in her hair looked beautiful").

Yet, it would be inappropriate to "box in" Minthwun's contributions to Burmese literature as mainly that of a romantic poet. On 4 January 1938 while studying in England Minthuwun wrote a poem which was political and also eerily prophetic. The last lines of the poem include the phrase (which in translation reads) "while the rooster crows in the early morning, and the dawn's red rays appears over the horizon, and the drums are played in triumph let us rejoice in the wide fields" (for the forthcoming independence of Burma). Exactly ten years to the day after Minthuwun composed the poem on 4 January 1948, Burma regained her independence. The independence ceremony was – in accordance with astrological advice – held at 4:20 am just before dawn. During the ceremonies there was also the ringing of drums as the "red rays of dawn" appeared over the horizon.

Among the numerous literary accomplishments of Minthuwun, one more deserves mention. In 1973 he embarked on a Burmese translation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Minthuwun worked on the translation
intermittently for over ten years before it was finally published in 1984. This Burmese translation of *King Lear* won Burma’s national literary prize (translated literature category) for the year 1984. In the preface to this translation Minthuwun recounted how he struggled, indeed agonised over the translation of the phrase “Nothing, my Lord” said by Cordelia in Act I, Scene I of the play into an appropriate Burmese phrase.

Some of the academic posts the late poet held during his life time include his short stint as Professor of Burmese language and literature at Rangoon University from March 1961 to May 1962. From 1975 to 1979, Minthuwun was also a visiting Professor of Burmese at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Osaka, Japan.

Even a “romantic poet” – indeed in the most complimentary and all-inclusive sense of the words a humanist poet – like Minthuwun could become “entangled” in the political affairs of Burma of the past few decades. As stated earlier, in the early 1970s Minthuwun played an important role in the work of the Burmese Dictionary Commission. In a rambling speech given at the closing day of the First Congress of the then sole ruling political party, Burma Socialist Programme Party on 11 July 1971, Party Chairman and then “strong man” of Burma the late General Ne Win (1910/1911-2002) stated that he was not satisfied with the work of the Burmese Dictionary Commission including that of some “Lecturers in Burmese.” These persons, General Ne Win averred, are like “half-baked loaves of bread” who thought much of themselves just because they have had “BA, MA and ‘big’ Ph.D degrees.” (In a speech given more than ten years later in November 1981, Ne Win also proudly boasted that he did not have “any degrees from universities” and did not have “any tail behind his back”).

Though Minthuwun was not named in the speech, broadcast nation-wide over radio and reproduced in the front pages in the original, and in English translation in all of Burma’s State-controlled newspapers, it was clear – at least to the sophisticated Burmese – that Minthuwun was probably the main target of Ne Win’s outburst. Later, in another speech given in August 1971, Ne Win did apologise to those who were more “learned than him,” “greater in age and prestige” whom he had attacked in his speech. Ne Win stated that he should have used the word “some” when he categorised the Burmese language experts and compilers of the Burmese dictionary as “half-baked.”

Minthuwun was nominated (and elected) as a member of Parliament in the May 1990 general elections, as a representative of the main opposition Party National League for Democracy (NLD). The “Parliament” or the “National Assembly” was never allowed to be convened by the ruling State
Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). As a result of Minthuwun being elected as member of the NLD some references to Minthuwun in Burmese magazines came under strict scrutiny. Indeed in July 1995 the now-defunct Sarpay Journal ("Literature Journal") was about to publish a commemorative issue devoted to Minthuwun's literary works with a photograph of him on the cover. Every book, magazine, and pamphlet that is published privately in Burma can be published and distributed only after the approval from the censors is given – and after initial approval was given, the literary censors withdrew permission to publish the entire magazine. And sometimes references to and about his poems and literary works are "censored", although at times his name and reproductions of his previous work do "seep" through the censorship process.

In a poem Minthuwun composed on 1 November 1961 entitled "The Cyclical Continuity of Regrets" saya gyi (revered teacher) Minthuwun wrote that "while pining whether and when I will reach the peaceful bliss in which there will be no regrets, the majestic sun has gone down and I grope and falter in the dark." Indeed one of the great "suns" of Burmese literature is no more with us but Minthuwun's rich majestic, and continuing legacy will thrive.

When the late saya (teacher) Zaw Gyi died in September 1990 Minthuwun (who was only two years younger than Zaw Gyi, but who happened to be Zaw Gyi's student when Zaw Gyi was a tutor in Burmese at Rangoon University in the late 1920s and early 1930s), wrote an affectionate poem about his saya whom he missed and who had a "good heart."

When both Minthuwun's and Zaw Gyi's teacher U Pe Maung Tin, who had translated works of Buddhist literature from a (non-native) language (Pali, the lingua franca of Southeast Asia Buddhism) into a (non-native) language (English) died in March 1973, Minthuwun wrote in admiration, reverence and in awe of his late saya gyi’s "perseverance, determination, skills and wisdom."

But perhaps the best epitaph or fitting message regarding Minthuwun's legacy can be extrapolated from a poem he wrote in tribute to Shakespeare around 1937 after visiting Stratford-upon-Avon. As a result of giving obeisance, to the "The Renowned Sage" (the title - in translation - of his short poem) Minthuwun wished or prayed that his "mind be as wide as the sky." All Burmese literati recognised not only his wide vision and great literary gifts but also his gentleness, his humility, his humanity. Though all of us are indeed impoverished by his passing, we can take solace in the fact that his life and vision have also enriched us in a way "as wide as the sky."
Minthuwun was a very special person who was disgracefully treated by the official Burmese establishment because, as Myint Zan writes, he happened to incur the displeasure of General Ne Win in the 1970s. He was a scholar, a linguist, a lexicographer, a literary critic and historian and first of all a greatly loved poet. Some of his rhymes for children are known and recited by all Burmese kids.

It was courageous of him to stand for election in 1990; he suffered having his house watched for this. He was never restored by the government to his rightful position of respect in the Burmese academic world. Writers in Burma never ceased to love and respect him and there were large gatherings at his house for his every birthday. His translation of King Lear is a magnificent labour of love. Undertaken I think because the government had treated him like Lear treated Cordelia. He truly loved Burma and his language and his culture but was officially shunned and ignored. He may not have been aware that that was why the story of Lear and Cordelia appealed to him.

This is my translation, from 1993, of an anonymous poem from 1988–89 (actually by Minthuwun):

**Wake up, rise up, people of Burma!**

Our wealth destroyed, morality destroyed
Our spirits in despair – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Those on top – rotten, those beneath – rotten
All rotten to the core – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?
Stealing and dealing to get our money,
Always trying for profit – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Only lying gets you on, deceit is smart,
Competing to be cunning – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

Always flattering, with good cause or not,
Resorting to false words of praise – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?
Harbouring resentment, bearing grudges,
So much hatred for each other – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

“I know all the answers, he’s no use”,
Smug, self-satisfied – people of Burma,
How long, how long till we are saved?

Boasting, bragging as we sink in the mire,
Go on and drown – people of Burma,
How long, how long till we are saved?

Thinking good to be evil, all evil to be good,
Turn virtue on its head – people of Burma
How long, how long till we are saved?

“The squandered wealth we shall restore,” they say
But too much corruption, too many vices
Will hold them back and block the way.

Too much corruption, too many vices,
For all of these there is no easy cure,
The harm may live on for too many years.

Ceaseless whining, endless whingeing,
Once and for ever, we must finish with all this,
To reach the right road again, for the future.
Wake up, rise up, all you people of Burma,
Let us try our best for our sons and daughters!
A Very Pale Meat

The manager of the Hotel Jakob in Brussels watched through round brown eyes from under his black toupee as Rose unfolded the wire. He raised his plucked eyebrow as if to ask what it said. Rose looked directly into his face. Merci Monsieur, she said. She sat down on the oak and burgundy satin chaise longue next to Alison.

GOT A HOUSEKEEPER IN FOR THE WEEKEND STOP THOUGHT WE'LL PUT THE VAN ON THE FERRY AND DRIVE ACROSS FROM OSTENDE TO MEET YOU STOP LOVE GREGORY

Her hands were shaking. “Oh pet. Don’t just sit there. You can go and play Scrabble or cards with Dave. I’m slipping out for cigarettes.”

Alison watched through the interlocking garlands of the lace curtain. Under light, almost horizontal drizzle, Rose’s frizzy cropped hair and olive green jumper wove between the cars. Then there it was, framed by a tilted navy umbrella: the shiny dome — Gregory with his gap-toothed smile. And there was Mink, leaning into him, saying something behind her blue gloved hand. Were they glad to see Rose? There was Rose again, from under the red Bar Tabac awning, sucking on the cigarette, already lit and glowing. He would be cross at that cigarette, now cocked and smoking between her fingers. Mink was carrying a slim-lined clutch in patent leather. Rose looked sort of frowsy now with her great big shoulder bag, into whose yawning belly she dropped the cigarettes and telegram.

Alison and Dave came straight down in the tiny cage of the lift to throw themselves at Mink and Gregory. They were fresh faced and chic. Gregory was all muskiness and after shave; he didn’t seem out of place in Brussels; it was like he could be part of anywhere.

At the bistro he ordered a Campari for Mink and Rose and a Dry Cinzano Vermouth for himself, lemonades for the kids. He shaped Alison’s outline with his hovering hands. “You’ve done some growing behind my back, Not So Little Miss Alison, and so has the young fella. But I can see that our dear
Rose, has been burying herself. Rose, I think we'll have to get Mink to take you shopping when we get back to London and fit you out. You've no need to hide like a mouse! What you need is colour, my dear, colour to embrace life so that life will embrace you in return! You don't want to disappear in your biscuits and olives and your taupes and beiges."

He made them sound like diseases. “With your skin you can carry all the colours of the rainbow, and more, and more! A strong slash of lipstick, for a start. What happened to the colour? Did you stop over in Perth long enough for your Tyrant of a Mother to knock it for six?”

Rose’s voice caught. “Seems Mum is a victim of the colour fiend. In her kitchen every cupboard panel a different one from the Walpamur range.”

“My God, don’t tell me! Are the Australians all discovering they’re Mondrian, now! No, but seriously, I remember, in Sydney you were starting to step out in colour – that jacket, geranium red, I think you called it. Even that hat, the perky one, flower pot style, that’d do the trick.”

The fire climbed up Rose’s neck, setting her chin and cheeks aglow. “Speaking of red, Gregory, let me say one more thing about my Tyrant of a Mother. I found her – must have been three a.m. – in her big red armchair, rocking like a distressed child, those blue eyes wide in horror. Not a moan, not a whisper. Her tears standing. And then I saw it, the ulcer she was attempting to dress without my seeing. It had carved her ankle to the bone, Gregory! And the gangrene had begun to blacken her toes. She had made not one sound because she wanted us to enjoy this trip. And here I’ve been, heartlessly listening to these heartless jokes about my Tyrant of a Mother.”

Rose’s whisper was savage. Gregory’s eyebrows puckered and he gave an appreciative gasp. “Well, this may be so, my dear Rose but I only came to my admittedly rather cheap caricature from what you yourself had told us. Now you’re rewriting things in your distress. What awakened you one morning late in your stay at three a.m? The little scene you stumbled upon might well have been staged for the very effect it had.”

“Come off it, Greg,” Mink said, over the menu. “Do you think Rose’s mum contrived her ulcers and gangrene with stage make up?”

When Rose stood up to go to the Toilettes, Gregory used his ventriloquist’s voice to Mink, “And yet here she is! And yet here she is!”

Alison might have told him that Rose had organised for Grannie Stasia’s skin grafts to be done at St Joseph’s Hospital and they’d delayed their departure for long weeks to make sure those grafts had taken but she felt it wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted to know.

“Go easy on her, Greg. You elevated her to Goddess in your anticipation and now you’re taking it out on her for letting you down.”
“She owes it to herself not to be drab. I mean, what kind of friend would I be not to try... You’re not going to pretend you’re not disappointed?”

At eleven p.m., after the veal, sauté’d potatoes, and spinach, which Alison and Dave slipped into their serviettes and after Gregory had gone through another bottle of rosé, Alison was drifting off when there was a rustling at the door. She looked across to see a white sheet of paper sliding across the parquetry.

“This is a Continental Breakfast because you are on the Continent, Alison, so there are no Weeties here.” They were sitting in the tiny dining area tucked away behind Reception. Rose had quickly folded back the typed sheet into her wallet, but it still stuck out.

“So you got your midnight delivery?” Mink’s profile was pearly against the lace curtains. “It’s his Poetry Phase. Since he’s had that portable Olivetti, it’s come everywhere with us. Must have driven the people in the next room mad. Even on the Channel crossing, rough as it was, he had to perch it on his knee, narrating the crossing, snatching bits of conversation from around us, putting it all in. He’s tapping away right now up there on the unmade bed! Don’t let it worry you; it’ll pass like all the rest. You’re looking radiant,” she added softly, as if she was trying to make up for Gregory.

“Incipient belly,” Rose said with a little laugh.

“Oh we’re all incipient something. Incipient... corpses too! Anyhow, he thinks we should all be as flat as boys. That’s his problem. But I agree with him on one thing, Rose. You should flaunt your good looks more. You’re rubbing yourself out. What a difference a little colour would make! It would celebrate you. Gregory can be maddening, I know. But I agree we should sack the Mouse!” She looked closely into Rose’s face, “I must say you manage better than most of us without make up. Scrubbed clean!” Alison felt the inspecting gaze crawl across Rose’s skin. There were tiny beads of perspiration forming on her mother’s top lip. Perhaps it was the central heating. “But I wear my foundation,” Rose said, “a touch of powder from the compact. Lipstick.” “Oh, it’s a thin line between subtle and invisible then!” Alison saw in the pearly light as Mink’s laugh gurgled musically, that Rose was a bit...of a mouse. She saw that Rose’s suitcase had been from the start packed with mouse clothes and now she saw that the Mouse had lost her voice. Rose always used to say she couldn’t understand the hysterics some women had over mice. Mice were sweet, delicate little things with their quivering noses and beady, vulnerable eyes, she said. She rather liked them.

“Well, let’s hear it,” Mink said. Rose’s voice came out reedy, and like the page she unfolded, it shook.
Through that drizzle, above the fat-rumped Citroens, 
between the Belgian citizens in gabardine & a canopy 
of post-impressionist umbrellas, your face 
 snap-shot my nerves. Your gaze was floating 
objectless and luminous before it stopped 
on me. I dropped my hand, let traffic pass 
and saw you, not quite forty, test the moment 
like a peasant woman at the market turning 
the fruit, looking for rot, while for my part I saw 
your box-pleat plaid, your neutral tones, your incipient belly 
your Hush Puppies but especially 
your patent leather bag, slung huge like expectation 
gave you to me, undeveloped. So Australian! Mink said 
You could pick her out a mile...

Alison remembered Rose eyeing that Sportscraft skirt in Homsby, saying 
it allowed endless mix and match. The olive top caught and deepened the 
green of her mother’s eyes.

“Gave you to me could mean anything. Couldn’t it, Mink? A sacrifice, an 
offering – slit and splayed open, like a bird for augury? Gave me away, more likely? Skewered for his satirical reading? Typical tourist? Oh surely he 
doesn’t mean...”

“You’re reading far too much into it. He likes creating that sort of 
anxiety... But really he’s just pushing words about! You could just as easily 
read it as a love poem, Rose. But I hope you don’t believe I ever said such a 
thing about you?”

But Alison heard a put down in it, whether or not Mink had said it. “Slung 
huge like expectation... So Australian!” There was an image of Rose packing 
their bags there and then, whispering to her and Dave, her voice burred and 
urgent, that they must leave, right now. Bag stuffed huge like expectation... 
Passport and travellers’ cheques, stuffed wallet. Rose hadn’t got the right 
colours. Undeveloped. What did that mean? Her mother had breasts. Did he 
mean like a photo negative? Did he want to develop her?

Mink was warm, beaming at Alison now. “Gorgeous croissants, aren’t they, 
Sweetie?” Talk about changing the subject. Mink was in the right colours. It 
was a pencil slim skirt, in an electric blue and black pattern, “You like it? 
That’s called houndstooth, Alison.” Its hem was just below the knee, and she 
wore a topcoat, short with three huge round black buttons and a stand up 
collar. She could have been in Vogue. Electric blue, the coat brought out her 
vividness. If you had money, like Mink, you wouldn’t have to worry about mix
and match like Rose. You had all the colours; you need not be a mouse; you could be bold all the time.

“What’s veal?” Alison asked Gregory, pushing down into the breadcrumb crust with the blade.

“Veal is suckling calf, Alison. And it has its throat slit so that the heart keeps beating all the blood out. Thus it is a very pale meat that you’ll find inside your scaloppini.” Gregory watched her, his knife poised, his serviette dabbing his bright lips, his eyes a twinkle. Maybe they both mock us; maybe it’s all a game for them, Alison thought and now she was trapped into this suckling calf eating and felt herself moving with dreadful inevitability – teeth... tongue, throat muscle – to send the bloodless pulp of the suckling calf to splashdown, while he talked and roared at his own funniness and Mink quietly tinkled and twinkled. Alison saw the suckling calf hanging, stunned and live, its round eye turning to white, to pump out its life blood for her bloodless meal, to become the tender load on the rolling conveyor of her tongue. She caught Rose’s eyes on her then, soft, soft. Not glare now. Rose felt the same, Alison could see, as she swilled and swallowed her wine, nodding to Alison’s water glass, that she do like her, that she swill and swallow.

Gregory had poured Rose another, and Alison tracked his endless attentiveness to Rose. He watched each and every plate-to-fork-to mouth as if that gave her to him... undeveloped! What did he want of her mother? He might be a grown up, but sensing he might have a tantrum any minute made them all very careful. Mink’s forehead would knit and crawl, and then there was a quick twitch around the eyes to unknot that tension. Alison prayed that Rose would not reach for a cigarette. Gregory had them all playing up to him, being his audience, laughing at his jokes, cringing like Kaos when the laughter died and the look of the bully came into the shining eyes and you’d almost be relieved when the flare came, with wide, extravagant cruelty, like a Sydney electric storm, twisting Madison’s ear, bellowing its rage, then flinging her aside like some flimsy, trivial thing that should never have been in the way. Then Alison knew she must look sheepish, and she forced herself not to seek out shelter in David’s eyes.

“No, Rose,” he was saying. “Three years now, Rose, since Rory? Hmmmm but you’re still, sort of... clutched in somehow! And what is that mass of memory or resentment called Rory but a... corpse blocking new ways into your life? My dear we’ll just have to help you expel that dead beast once and for all. It’s still parasitng you!”

“Gregory, you’re mixing your metaphors again!” Mink said flatly, her eyes a smarting blue.
“Ha, better than mixing my drinks. Shall we go another bottle of rosé, dear, dear Rose?”

Alison saw that Gregory’s torrents of talk left no place for Rose to answer back, no place for her to gasp out that she couldn’t see herself in his picture of her, of this Mass of Memory she called Rory, that it left Rose no room, no room to breathe at all.