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A Noongar Voice, an Anomalous History

Introduction
Researching the archives to understand the perceptions of historical Aboriginal (specifically, Noongar) people can be frustrating, since they are not the ones doing the recording and their voices are rarely heard. However, there are occasional instances of archival Noongar language, and as part of the research for an historical novel based along the south coast of Western Australia I asked myself what rewards might be gained from researching such material as a means of better appreciating Noongar perspectives. Of course, there is a paucity of such texts. Additionally, the crucial importance of language to the identity and heritage of the Noongar community today, the endangered state of Noongar language and my own position as a member of that community, obliges me to do more than just research that material as part of the process of writing a novel. My interest in Noongar language began long before this research project, extends to more than its use as a “research tool”, and is connected to my sense of self and my vocation as a writer. That interest is further stimulated by a phrase like, “he who has taken up the language of the coloniser has accepted the world of the colonizer and therefore the standards of the colonizer,” words which surely sting any indigenous person who has English as their first language, let alone a writer of what’s labelled “literary fiction.” I am one of a community of Wirlomin Noongar people descended from coastal country to the east of Albany, and whose history and circumstances are partly described in Kayang and Me, a book I wrote with Noongar Elder, Hazel Brown.

History: the friendly frontier
My research began with what is often referred to in Western Australian history as the “friendly frontier”: the ten or twenty years from 1826 at King George Sound, now known as the town of Albany, here described by historian Neville Green:
The social confidence and friendliness of the King George Sound Aborigines are unique in the history of Australian exploration and settlement. They were prepared to accept the transient European visitors without confrontation providing their conditions regarding the women were acknowledged … It was a sharing relationship, without fierce competition for resources.2

Explanations for this “friendly” situation vary, but are consistent on these things:
• the isolated and tentative nature of the military outpost
• its small population relative to the indigenous (Noongar) population surrounding it
• very little land was claimed for agricultural or other purposes
• the garrison shared its resources with the local people, recognising them as owners of the land it occupied
• local Noongars had had decades of experience with visiting ships
• the sensitivity of leading personalities – black and white – in cross-cultural matters.3

It is not only historians with the benefit of hindsight who comment on the “friendliness” of this situation; people even said so at the time:

“Aboriginal natives [are] … more numerous in this district and better disposed towards Europeans than any other part of Australia and are anxious to be employed as servants … [and can] speak English well …”4

And:

“… the good disposition of the aboriginal (sic) blacks … quite willing to work and make themselves useful …”5

The above comments by Governor-resident Sir Richard Spencer and the visiting Charles Darwin in the 1830s suggest that by “friendly” they meant something like “preparedness to be of use,” but other colonial journals show Noongar individuals as active participants in a developing society of Noongar and newcomer, freely adapting and appropriating new cultural forms.6

Recent research of indigenous/non-indigenous encounters has begun to make greater efforts to consider historical Noongar perspectives. This can
sometimes make inconvenient reading for those of us who might prefer to emphasise indigenous “resistance” in colonial encounters. Bob Reece argues that:

accommodation with Europeans was something for which Aborigines strove … the European presence, particularly during the early period of settlement, was an important new variable in the politics of Aboriginal intergroup relations … 7

Inconvenient perhaps, but at least such research recognises forms of Aboriginal “agency” other than “resistance”.

Reece’s research applies particularly to the Swan River colony, whereas Tiffany Shellam’s 2007 thesis *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World At King George’s Sound* focuses on the Albany region and, taking inspiration from Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers*, wants to include indigenous perspectives:

I want to investigate how individuals like Mokare understood and used the British presence … How did Aboriginal people use the British presence to advantage through strategic actions and how did these Aboriginal people improvise to appropriate aspects of the British world into their own? 9

Shellam’s work is insightful on alliances between Noongar and non-indigenous people and her discussion of the possibilities that ships (for which she uses a Noongar word taken from the archives, *caibre*) offered Noongar people is particularly interesting. Discussing two south-coastal Noongar men, Gyallipert and Manyat, who – remarkably – offered to mediate between the colonists and Noongar people at the distant Swan River Colony, Shellam says:

They travelled beyond the fringe of their world and became outsiders as they engaged cross-culturally at Swan River. This voyage signalled a shift in the symbolism of the *caibre*. Once a signifier of intense trading opportunities, the *caibre* began to represent experiences for those who wanted to voyage; it symbolised a transforming diplomatic mission and for others … a boat was also seen as a utility. These opportunities included trade, not on board but onshore in the distant new world of Swan River. *Caibre* were used as vehicles for significantly extending kin networks and enhancing geographic knowledge and perspectives of country … 10
Shellam, relying on colonial writings – particularly those of Major Edmund Lockyer, Isaac Scott Nind, Captain Collet Barker and Alexander Collie – shows that Noongar people were more than ready to innovate, and appropriated a range of cultural forms and technologies, including guns and boats. Shellam emphasises the strategic thinking of certain individuals, but the colonial journals excite me most of all with their revelation of the confidence, inclusiveness and wit of Noongar individuals: Mokare singing a Scottish song by way of questioning his Noongar brother and thus including the soldiers around him in the conversation; Manyat mimicking the form of the expedition journal in one of his recitations. There are many examples.

Historical research has considered the context for the remarkable situation of the “friendly frontier”, but I wondered what it was in their cultural background that allowed these Noongar individuals to be so confident and innovative, and fostered their talent, inclusiveness and wit. It is hard to find answers to these questions, particularly when one only has the historical archives.

**Methodologies**

Shellam and Clendinnen share my curiosity, and understand the difficulty of “grasping something of the ways in which past people made sense of their worlds: that is, their cosmology and its pragmatic enactment in actions and behaviours.” This is particularly so when we are:

Using European (observers’) texts to re-construct the meaningful past actions of Aborigines (the observed) and their interactions with the newcomers can only be achieved by the meticulous scrutiny of such texts, by paying sharp attention to the author’s tone, emotion and rhetoric.

Similarly, although discussing a different region, Clendinnen argues that with:

... patience, attentiveness and sufficient testing of the ground it is possible to penetrate a little distance ... (into) ... what the Australians around what became “Sydney” thought about the white incomers, especially when we are effectively limited to the journals written by those same incomers.

As Clendinnen notes elsewhere:

The “trick” is to cultivate double vision: to retrieve from British
descriptions clues as to autonomous Aboriginal action, not the simple reaction to British actions the British naturally assume occurred.\textsuperscript{15}

Obviously, this is challenging work, and I’m grateful to Clendinnen for both the work she has done and the inspiration and guidance she provided to Shellam, who is researching in my own region.

Of course, their method is not without its flaws, notably its reliance on the interpretive skills of the researcher. Nor is their method the only one. Many would advocate oral history, for example, as a valuable resource for understanding the motivations and thinking of indigenous figures in the past. I’m not so confident of this, and tend to agree with Shellam’s dismissal of oral history and her reasoning that the:

... great distance in time from the present and the subsequent dispossession, disruption and dispersion mean that modern Aboriginal memories of particular events during the period in question are fragmentary or non-existent.\textsuperscript{16}

To this I would add that the pressure on Noongar people to provide such material only contributes to its unreliability. However, given that even “fragmentary” memories can be helpful and add material unavailable elsewhere it seems foolish to dismiss oral history altogether, and I would suggest that combining the two sources, particularly by “workshopping” relevant archival material with those people who carry oral histories, can be a useful way of “value-adding” to those archives.

Additionally, the investigation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interaction may well benefit from having a descendant of both those groups, rather than just a non-Aboriginal researcher. Some may even argue that a descendant of Aboriginal people will have some form of special access to their thoughts. Clendinnen, in typically no-nonsense style, discounts this by recounting her experience with an Aztec guide: “He was proud of his descent, and the unstated premise of all his fluent talk was ‘I am Aztec, so I know.’ He didn’t.” 17 Clendinnen continues:

... the cherished stories of a particular ethnic, religious or national group (do not) have a truth-status equal or superior to post-Enlightenment historian’s criteria for evidence and probability.\textsuperscript{18}

I agree, albeit reluctantly, but while membership of “a particular ethnic group” (Noongar, for example) may not in itself grant privileged
knowledge, it can bring a sense of obligation and responsibility, not only to ancestors, but to a contemporary “community of descendants” and a shared, sometimes frail, traditional heritage. It may also oblige one to be accountable, and make one sensitive to criticism from that community; even, perhaps, overly-sensitive.

Shellam’s work on the “friendly frontier” is really impressive, and I’m very grateful for what she’s done. However, at the risk of joining her discussion only by opposing her conclusions, there are two points in her thesis I wish to discuss further; firstly, her discussion of what name to give to the Noongar people she is discussing and, secondly, her questioning the role of the ocean in Noongar people’s “spiritual and cultural heritage”.

A member of a community believing itself descended from Aboriginal people living along the south coast of Western Australia would find it difficult to be so removed and innocent as Shellam appears when, after asking “First and foremost, who am I writing about and what will I call them?” she continues to discuss a range of alternatives before finally deciding on the term *King Ya-nup* as the name “relevant to a very specific period of time and to a particular group of Aboriginal people.”

Although:

> It is impossible to know the origin of the name, but it sounds like a pidgination of “King George” … and a native name that the Aborigines gave to their country before the British arrived.

Certainly “King George Town” is the name given to the place in an old Noongar song, or specifically: *Kin-joor-town*. Shellam is correct in saying the suffix *up* means “place of.” However, this game of linguistic forensics can take us in different directions: the name could as easily be derived from *kiin*, meaning nothing, and *n(y)gaan* to eat, or possibly *ngan* me, or mine: the place where there’s nothing to eat, or nothing for me. Other commentators have rendered the name for Albany, or a particular location within the Albany region, as ‘*Kiangardarup* defining it as “place that has nothing”, or “pertaining to nothing” or “poor man’s place.” Shellam demonstrates that the Noongar were clever traders and strategic thinkers; so perhaps they saw benefit in allowing a tiny group of people to remain camped on a cold and relatively barren shore, particularly if they were ready to share their supplies of food and other resources.

Many people living in Albany today would claim connection to those early Noongar, but not the name *King Ya-nup*, and so by selecting it for
the people she is researching Shellam effectively distances them, and herself, from the contemporary situation; convenient for her, but not for a Noongar community living in Albany today and wanting to see itself as a continuation of that earlier one.

Yes, perhaps it is “impossible to know the name” and what is offered here, based on limited knowledge of Noongar language, is of course mere speculation. It is worth noting however, that Shellam’s method here involves using Noongar language as a means of determining something of the nature and motivations of historical Noongar people.24 Perhaps this could yet prove a profitable area of research.

The second aspect of Shellam’s thesis I would take issue with is her suggestion that the “spiritual and cultural heritage” of Noongar people does not include the sea. I say her “suggestion” rather than “conclusion” because, after citing historical reports of the reluctance of Noongar people to enter the water, their apparent inability to swim, and their lack of watercraft, she appears to tentatively agree with other commentators’ conclusion that Noongar’s “spiritual and cultural heritage” does not include the sea.25

However, I believe there is considerable evidence to support a contrary view: namely, that the ocean is very important to the spiritual and cultural heritage of certain Noongar people. There is ample historical evidence, for instance, of Noongar people “singing” dolphins to deliver salmon slapping onto the beach sand, and people still remember Freddy Winmir and Henry Dongup singing out to calm the sea.26 Daisy Bates identifies some Noongar people along the south coast as Wadarndi and Didar – “ocean” people – and writes of a south coastal “whale-dreaming”.27 Contemporary Noongar Elders tell me that Doubtful Island Bay – some 180 or so kilometres east of Albany – is a Whale Dreaming site. Bearing in mind both Reece and Shellam’s references to strategic alliances between immigrants and Noongar people, it surely is no coincidence that Doubtful Island Bay was leased for whaling as early as 1837 and that Noongar people at one stage of the nineteenth century comprised some 40% of the south coast’s shore-based whaling workforce although I was surprised to learn that many of them, like other workers, also received a percentage of the season’s profit.28

In the early 1840s there were hundreds of American and French whaling ships along the south-coast of Western Australia and Cape Riche – even closer to Albany than Doubtful Island Bay – was both whaling base and an unofficial port competing with Albany, the latter handicapped by its exorbitant pilot fees and prevailing easterlies either side of the narrow entrance of Princess Royal Harbour. The resourceful George Cheyne had
moved to Cape Riche, having sold his prime real estate at Kendenup and Candyup. Cheyne had strong networks in the Noongar community. Who can say what advice he received?

Noongars knew the beaches whales visited and – as the experienced, strategic traders Shellam’s research shows them to be – whaling would have been yet another opportunity to form alliances with non-indigenous people, to share wealth and gain prestige. Additionally, since in pre-colonial times a stranded whale provided occasion for significant gatherings, we can speculate that a whale – even with its blubber melted away – would still been reason for people to gather together. Thus, individual Noongars gained status in their home community and, to an extent, in colonial society as well.

It would appear that Noongar people did not limit themselves to involvement in shore-based whaling, or to working only with British immigrants but also worked on American and French whaling ships. Such alliances with foreign whalers created some concerns for colonial authorities:

… [Noongars] are made companions and associates of by a great many of the lower classes and sealers who reward them not badly for their services, and it should be also remembered that at this season of the year the Aborigines come from remote districts and considerable distances to share and partake of the food permitted them by the whalers, at this port and on the coast. Besides the refuse of the whales on which they feed largely they obtain large supplies of biscuits and bread in barter for spears, fire wood …

The late Bob Howard, a researcher of long-standing association with contemporary Noongar people in Albany, claimed the singular Noongar knife (or daap) is specifically designed to cut whale flesh, and contemporary Noongar Elders tell how its use enables a dying whale’s spirit to escape and be reborn in the baby of some woman nearby. The sea and its shifting boundary since the last ice age is part of the spiritual and cultural heritage of south coastal Noongar people.

Finally, some of the stories Noongar people told to the linguist Gerhardt Laves in the 1930s reveal a very strong spiritual and cultural association with the ocean, and the language used for the sea reveals a possibly unique perception of it.

My reason for discussing these two points – the name of the people, and the sea as part of their spiritual and cultural heritage – is that there is potentially much to be gained from engaging with a contemporary
“community of descendants” and working with their ancestral language as part of researching historical situations. Shellam herself hints at the value of using language as a research tool:

People in the past – British and Aboriginal – had different mentalities, different cultural systems, different motivations and therefore different behaviours: different from each other and different from present day Australians, whether indigenous or not. Nineteenth-century Englishmen and Aborigines are both foreign to me though not equally so, given that I share a degree of linguistic familiarity with the British.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{Inevitable: no more friendly frontier}

The “friendly” period degenerated in the 1840s and 1850s, and the consequent breakdown of the local Noongar society is often described as “inevitable”.\textsuperscript{34}

A significant moment in the relationship between Noongars and their non-indigenous companions at the “friendly frontier” occurred in the 1840s when Noongar men openly challenged colonial authorities after being arrested for a series of break-ins and thefts. Bob Howard in “The Minang and the Destruction of the Southern Right Whale” argues that Noongar men were simply insisting that the colonists share their food resources after many years of teams of kangaroo hunters and whalers plundering the region (whale products and seal and kangaroo skins were the port’s main exports). The Noongar individuals enacting and articulating their protest had been close to the colonisers yet the governor-resident describes them as a “Gang” and a threat:

\begin{quote}
... I hope His Excellency will see how desirable it is this Gang of Natives should be broke up more especially as they are those who know our habits, and are more civilised for having been so much with the Europeans ... \textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Why was it so important to break up a group of Noongars who knew colonial habits and had come know some of the colonists as friends? Did their successful “appropriation” and familiarity with the colonists make them more of threat? It occurred to me, thinking of what sort of historical novel I might write, and the pressure of political imperatives upon me, that a historical story that concluded just before this point – the shift in power at the “friendly frontier” – might allow the ambivalence so often necessary to fiction, yet make a political point simply by its discordant resonance
in the context of the conventional history of colonial Australia; that is, the
disempowerment and marginalisation of Aboriginal people.

The governor-resident’s words about “this Gang of Natives” shows that
such an outcome was, of course, anything but “inevitable.”

**History and the novelist**
The historical archives gave me some ideas for the plot for my novel, and
historical figures like Mokare, Nakina, Manyat, Collie, Barker and Lockyer
inspired ideas for characters.

In her essay “The History Question: who owns the past?” Clendinnen
contrasts the “aesthetic purpose” of novelists with the “moral purpose”
of historians and, despite having “flinched” from the “opportunistic
transpositions and elisions” of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, continues
to quote her:

> History for a greedy novelist like me is just one more place to pillage …
> What we’re after, of course, is stories … Having found them, we then
> proceed to fiddle with them to make them the way we want them to
> be … I’ll do my usual smash-and-grab raid on history. I’ll research only
> until I find something juicy, and then I’ll run off with it and turn it into
> something else.36

It’s sobering to see Grenville demolished in Clendinnen’s essay, especially
if one has some sympathy with her working method. I had sensed plenty
in the “story bank” of the “friendly frontier” of the past: characters,
events, and aspects of plot including – as I’ve mentioned – “resolution”.
Clendinnen’s argument was chastening, and I admit to being one of those
readers who think that what she calls the:

... ravine – the gulf between writing imaginative fiction and writing
evidence-bound history – is no more than a dent in the topsoil, or
possibly only a line scratched in the sand by historians desperate to
defend their territory37

I think that the work of novelists and historians can sometimes seem very
similar. Shellam, strongly influenced by Clendinnen, certainly sounds as
much like the former as the latter:

... it is important to find the right words – in meaning and in sound
– in the construction of our narratives and important to find the right
structure and rhythm for our stories ... narrative construction in
everyday life and how our daily stories – internal and collective – shape our history and ultimately our culture, are particularly pertinent when thinking and writing about a group of people whose culture circulated (and in some ways relied on) stories constructed and told ... the best way to read and understand how cross-cultural relationships began and developed is to discover and try to reconstruct close-up stories of a day-to-day nature ... 

And I think she sounds most of all like a novelist when she writes: “... more time on imagining people’s motivations is a worthwhile activity; we see possibilities and choices rather than inevitabilities.”

Oh yes, that was my concern, researching a novel: not what was, but what might have been, and even what might yet be ...

I say she sounds like a novelist. Perhaps I am wrong, but even Clendinnen, having dismissed novelists as “entertainers” whose function is to “delight” and therefore not possessed of the same moral imperatives as historians, says that certain novelists aim “at transformation, not replication of the past or reformation of the present.”

The sort of intense, close reading of the archives modelled by Clendinnen and Shellam can help accomplish, and certainly prepare for, such a writing task. Cross-referencing the archives against the views of members of a community that has relied on oral rather than archival history can, if nothing else, help “shake up” and “unsettle” the surety of the archives. And I wondered if Noongar language could help us see as Noongars did way back then, if it might help us appreciate different perspectives of history and its passage as anything but “inevitable.”

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, if “linguistic familiarity” improves our access to and understanding of people in the past, why not investigate Noongar language as a research tool? And if we believe that our daily “narrative construction” shapes our “history ... and culture,” why not research Noongar stories and songs for what they can tell us of the motivations of our predecessors?

After all, a language – especially one which is relatively “pure” and carries very little evidence of the influence of other languages – can “represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history.”

Obviously, Noongar language would be a wonderful research tool! Unfortunately, it is an endangered language, and the quote above, in revealing why its loss would be tragic, demonstrates a more pressing
need than its mere enlistment as a research tool. Yes, Noongar language and stories would provide a wonderful resource in understanding the “friendly frontier,” but for some of us such research would be of limited value unless it can also contribute in some way to the well-being of the community descended from its first speakers, and – best of all – to keeping the language alive.

Notes

3 See, for example, W.C. Ferguson, “Mokare’s Domain” in Australians to 1788, ed. DJ Mulvaney and Peter J White (Broadway: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987); Paul Mulvaney and Neville Green, Commandment of Solitude: The journals of Captain Collet Barker 1828-1831 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992); Donald S Garden, Southern Haven: a history of the port of Albany, Western Australia (Albany: Albany Port Authority, 1978).
4 Richard Spencer, Sir Richard Spencer’s Correspondence, (Battye Library, MN 533, 16/7/1837).
6 The writings of by Alexander Collie. See Neville Green, Nyungar – the People: Aboriginal Customs in the southwest of Australia (Perth: Creative Research, 1979) - and Collet Barker.
10 Shellam, 249.
11 Mokare’s singing is in Mulvaney and Green, Commandment of Solitude, p. 281; and Manyat’s recitation in Green, “Aborigines and White Settlers,” 95.
12 Shellam, 38.
13 Shellam, 37.
16 Shellam, 35.
17 Clendinnen, The History Question, 40.
18 Clendinnen, The History Question, 40.
19 Shellam, 49.
20 Shellam, 52.
21 Daisy Bates introduces a text she calls “Southern Song” by writing, “… following words sung by a woman whose husband was taken prisoner … conveyed to King George Sound and kept in prison … wife … bewails her desolation to … mother-in-law …” Bates continues with the following words and a translation:
Ngua ngunna demmardung
Geejena mel
Boorneen war-a-bin
Kin-joor-town
(“Oh mother-in-law my husband is gone. I straight look until I shut my eyes and I can’t see anyone. My husband is gone to King George town.”) Daisy Bates, 6193a, reel 5: XI 1a-5 part 2.
22 Kiin, ngaan, ngan. Words from my research with Lomas Roberts, Hazel Brown and Members of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Story Project. See also sources such as Peter Bindon and Ross Chadwick, A Nyoongar Wordlist from the South-west of Western Australia (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 1992); Wilfred Douglas, The Aboriginal Languages of the South-west of Australia (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1968); Rosie Whitehurst, Noongar Dictionary (Cannington: Noongar Language and Culture Centre, 1992); C. G. von Brandenstein, Nyungar Anew, (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 1968); and the word lists of Daisy Bates.
24 There are other occasions. See pp. 49–50 for another example: “black fellow ta paluk (live upon the grubs which form on decaying grass tree).” Collie wrote: “for by the word ta here he [Manyat] evidently meant that the natives gained a chief part of their Subsistence by this food, which he confirmed by comparing the King Georges Sound tribe eating Meen (the red root) to the tribe (Will?) of this part eating the grubs in question.”
25 The aversion some Noongar people may have had to the sea is understandable, from one perspective at least. As I write this (early May, 2008) there are reports on the news of a 4 metre white pointer attacking someone at Ellen Cove, Middleton Beach in Albany. Madjet, Noongars sometimes say to refer to that powerful spirit in the ocean. Collet Barker’s journal describes a shark surfacing next to their whaleboat as they enter the harbour; its fin rising higher than the gunnels of the boat! (Madjet is also sometimes used to refer to a water snake.)
26 Lomas Roberts, Hazel Brown and Audrey Brown, personal conversation.


28 Gibbs, 129.

29 See Gibbs, and also Howard, “The Minang and the Destruction of the Southern Right Whale,” (2005), 2, http://www.kiangardarup.blogspot.com (accessed July 2006). George Cheyne’s port at Cape Riche is described in page 5 of the *Perth Gazette*, 18 November 1843. George Cheyne sold his Kendenup land to Hassel, and his Candyup property on the Kalgan River to Patrick Taylor. Cheyne also organised a large group of Noongars to dance for Charles Darwin’s visit, and then recompensed them afterwards with rice and treacle as described in Darwin, 411–12.

30 Gibbs, 438. There are numerous colonial references to Noongar people gathering to celebrate and feast on whale.


33 Shellam, 38.

34 For a recent example of this see Murray Arnold, *A History of Contact between Aborigines and Europeans at King George Sound prior to 1860* (Murdoch: Honours Thesis, Murdoch University, 2006): 8.

35 CSR V 130/62, 20th May 1844.


37 Clendinnen, *The History Question*, 34.

38 Shellam, 39.

39 Shellam, 40.

40 Clendinnen, *The History Question*, 32. She is speaking specifically of Peter Carey in this instance.

Did the clock radio say, Your time starts now?
If I could get through to the end of the day
without losing it, what would that prove except
that the inevitable can be delayed?
The day, this microcosm rounded by sleep:
the fundamental building block of a life
(what can you make with say 25,000?)
Like somebody said: Where can we live but days?
Sufficient unto the day et cetera.
Except that each is continuous with all
our yesterdays and everything we scribbled
before the ancient dream-invigilator
said, Stop writing now, and snatched the magic bloc.

Still I wonder, Does every day have to fall
from the promise and energy of morning
into the grumpy fatigue of afternoon,
from Room for improvement: unlimited to
Nothing more can be expected of you now?
More or less, except that it doesn’t stop there:
the block of day coming undone as it sinks
into sleep like a sugar cube dissolving.
Polarity

“Where could I live better? Below, the brothel caters for the flesh. And there is the church which forgives sin. And there is the hospital where we die.” – C. P. Cavafy

It is a matter
of getting the proportions right:

a touch of sin here (who will see you smile in darkness or dare the god to respond?) a plea for redemption there (there is always time to be good, to say your prayers and chop the wood … )

You must wage the battle
and ensure neither side
suffers too much hurt,
too much loss.

Wherever you touch the past
there will be damage.
Stare blindly into the sun
that just as blindly
stares at you.

Consolation: the white ceilings
of hospitals, someone’s hand holding yours, the fact that it is never too late to die.
and sea breathes louder,
out in creeds of spume, gulls in
squabble for full stops.

you wish you were up there, all
warm updrafted and
weightless. oceans – who draws the
dotted lines? found a
bottle once, flung off Cape Town,
read the message but

scrawl of weed said more. does sand
tire of this rush then
suck? “flottle” – best word for it,

while tonight, moon brushed orange,
in no mood for rhyme
ANNA RYAN-PUNCH

TEN CARESSSES

He has not held a new baby before.
Gawky and eager, he negotiates the balance.

A golfer plucks her tee from the wet grass.
Pronged fingers curl to swoop, one knee bends.

An old cat rubs his knobby head on my lowered face.
His nose is a wet stripe on my cheek.

A man tucks his bookmark inside a paperback cover.
The tram corners sharply, he is unwilling to waver from the page.

The toddler styles her mother’s hair.
Those confident fingers, she smiles and winces with pleasure.

Hailstones melt below the surface of the sea.
Spiraling bullets tremble in the bulge of a wave.

She tucks in his shirt tag with a leathered finger.
He turns, neatened, and kisses the sun on her face.

A feeding goldfish gathers in an air bubble.
Surprised, his rubber mouth ogling for food.

A magnolia tree blooms at night.
Linen blades point through the dark.

A man’s hands hover too often around his new lover.
He does not know how long he will be allowed to touch her.
I lost my virginity at 10:30pm, on a Wednesday night, in a park a couple of streets over from the house my family was renting at the time. In the weeks leading up to this event I had been secretly amassing a hoard of sexy underwear. I had previously taken no interest in undergarments. While I was a teenager obsessed with the way I looked – I straightened my hair, waxed myself raw and held frequent screaming matches with my mother on the subject of clothes – I didn’t care much about underwear. It was under and thus unseen. My mother bought and chose whatever she thought appropriate and every Christmas I was given innocuous daisy-patterned knickers to go with the white crop-tops that supported my non-existent breasts. But once he started to make his moves on me, I knew what had to be done. Someone, some boy was going to see the unseen and so the unseen better look good.

We were living in California at the time and I used my birthday money to buy racy underpants from stores with names like Miss Sixteen and Forever 21. Me, Miss-Fifteen-Not-Yet-Sixteen, bought black lacy g-strings and bejewelled underpants that spelled out lurid suggestions in diamantes across the crotch.

Around the same time my mother started buying some new things of her own. Her underwear had always been ancient and tent-like, sensible beige and white, the elastic gone, the material almost see-through it was so thinned with wear. But now, searching in my parents’ bedroom for evidence of their imminent breakup, I found lacy bras and knickers. Not black or bejewelled, certainly, but instead in shades of dusky rose, delicate mauve and ivory. They were neatly folded at the back of the drawer next to one of those scented sachets.
My mother was having an affair with a German man, slightly younger than her, who made wildlife documentaries for cable TV. My father had already been having an affair of his own for several years with a fat woman who he had met in an internet chat room called *Forty Something*. So in her defence, my mother’s adultery was really just a retaliatory strike. The affair with the German documentary maker made her girlish and distracted. Perhaps it was this affair that prevented her from realising what I was up to. For doubtless if she had known what I planned to do in that park on that Wednesday night she would have done anything in her power to stop me including harming, possibly seriously, the boy involved.

I do not need to tell you who he was, only that from a parental point of view he was a gravely inappropriate choice of lover for a multitude of reasons. However, even if my mother had tried to stop me, it would have done no good. I was determined. I had tunnel vision. It was a matter of life or death. I would have found a way somehow. I was like a dog in heat who chews through a wire fence to get out to the male company. I was primed and ready to go.

It had started when he sprayed me with water in the produce section of the local supermarket where he worked. I was grocery shopping with my mother and he squirted me with the hose that was used for keeping the lettuces moist.

“Hey,” he said. “You go to my school.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“You’re the Aussie, right?” He pronounced it with an s sound rather than a z.

“So?” I said.

He sprayed me with the hose again. “So your shirt’s wet,” he said and grinned.

I started going over to the supermarket by myself. I would walk over in the evening, cross the parking lot and meet him coming off his shift. We would sit out the front of the store and flirt with one another. Sometimes, I would get in a shopping trolley and he would race me around the parking lot as night time fell. He had broad shoulders and a squareness about his face that no Australian boy could match. He would tickle me through my shirt as an excuse to put his hands on my waist and I would feel a lemon-lime squeeze, a sort of pull on my insides that would make its way from somewhere in the region of my underpants up to my belly button. It felt divine. It reminded me a little of when back home in Australia us girls would sit in a circle at lunch time and play a game called ‘Blood Running Up’ where you stroked the back of the person in front of you, while
someone behind you did the same. Then they would crack an invisible egg on your head and make you shiver. But this was better.

We would walk to the park, poking one another in the ribs all the way and then when we got there we would play-wrestle on the grass. Walking down the darkened streets with him afterwards, I felt incredibly light, like I was actually gliding across the pavement, my feet just skimming the ground, but anywhere he touched me, my waist or my shoulder, would instantly turn heavy and tactile.

He wasn’t a big one for compliments, but one time when I was teasing him asking if he thought I was pretty, he sighed and said, “You know you’re attractive.”

You know you’re attractive. I repeated it over and over in my head.

It was not an entirely spontaneous thing – that Wednesday night. We had built up to it over several weeks, sitting in the park for what used to be called necking. At some point, he put a hand up my denim skirt and asked in his teenage west coast drawl that always made me feel like I was in a movie what colour panties I was wearing. Panties, the word seemed indecent.

“White,” I replied.
He pulled up my skirt to have a look for himself.
“Oh,” he said. “You weren’t lying.”

I wondered what colour he wanted and so the next day I began my secret shopping missions.

But when we finally did it that Wednesday night, it was a little bit disappointing and a little bit painful. After all those nights of instinct and grace, the act itself was slow and uncomfortable. We started off on a bench under a tree and then moved onto the grass. The grass was wet and my jeans and t-shirt got damp. It hurt, but I expected it would.

Afterwards, he looked down at me and smirked. “Was that good for you?” he asked.

It was the only time I disliked him and it was only for a moment.

In the morning there was a brownish, rust-coloured stain on my underpants. I put them at the bottom of the laundry basket and then I went down to the kitchen for French toast.

My parents did break up and we moved back to Australia shortly afterwards. For a while, I held on to the hope that he might come and visit me or I might be allowed to visit him. I counted the number of nights we had spent together – twenty nine, and then I counted the number of days
since I had last seen him. I stopped counting after a year and a half. My mother also had to say goodbye to the German documentary maker. We moved into a small apartment, just the two of us, and we watched a lot of television together in the evenings.

When I think about that period of time in California it is not like a dream in the way stupid people say important periods in our life are like. It is the opposite. Those nights I spent with him seem sharper and clearer than anything I have experienced since then. It is the realness of these memories that bothers me, being so far removed as they are from the banal daydream I have inhabited since.
Bill Ashcroft’s claim that “Francis Webb is possibly the most remarkable poet in Australian literature” prompts my argument that Francis Webb is the most remarkable poet in Australian literature to be out of print, the most remarkable poet not to be taught (despite critical attention), and finally, by disappearing from bookshops and undergraduate courses, the most remarkable poet to have in a sense become Oz Lit by embodying both the stunning proficiency and stifling neglect which have characterised Australian poetry since Charles Harpur lamented in 1848 “I am a bard of no regard in my own Australia.” As Paul Kane points out, Harpur enjoys a posthumous role in the Australian strain of “negative romanticism” he also identifies in Webb. Yet unlike Harpur, Webb was recognised and published from his twenties, broadly influenced the subsequent generation and has only lately suffered pedagogical and commercial neglect.

One way to resist Webb’s ongoing relegation to “bard of no regard” status is to chronologically and geographically locate him during his three-week visit to Perth in 1951. His “famous trans-continental do” is chronicled by the poet himself in three letters dated 10th, 25th and 30th November to his sister Leonie and brother-in-law Peter in their Francis Webb: Poet and Brother. These letters provide valuable insights into Webb as tourist, poet and correspondent at a frenetic stage of his life between his first breakdown and period of institutionalisation in England (1949–1950) and his third, more devotional collection Birthday (1953). In the process Webb also offers a vision of post-war Perth through the eyes of a prodigious twenty-six-year-old ex-Sydneysider who had already befriended Douglas Stewart and seen his first collection A Drum For Ben Boyd (1948) illustrated by Norman Lindsay. This article seeks to resist Webb’s “bard of no regard” status by investigating how his Perth experience locates and informs his engagements with the region in “The Canticle” and “Vlamingh and Rottnest Island”.

Toby Davidson

Francis Webb in Western Australia
First Impressions and Explorations

The first letter of 10th November 1951 is dominated by Webb the tourist as he cheerfully recalls “the progress of events” from his room in the Terminus Hotel in Fremantle after arriving from Melbourne on the “comfortable little steamer” M.V. Kanimbla. The South Fremantle shoreline is “rich coastal scenery … a very broad lie of water curiously blue in the sun”; Perth is “well laid out and easily navigable” and a trip up the Swan “saw the sailing season open at Claremont, and again there were spinnakers and ballooners and so forth, amid some truly superb river-scenery”; the “Westralian Uni” is “beautifully situated” and Fremantle appeals with its cosmopolitanism and convict-era architecture. Yet Webb’s enthusiasm as scenic tourist contrasts sharply with his frustration as cultural tourist, for [Perth] does fall short in one sphere of human affairs, the cultural. Perhaps this is an off-season, or something, but, barring newspaper-advs. of a solo piano concert and of the arrival of the Jubilee Art Exhibition here, I’ve seen no intimations of art-stirrings – nothing in the way of plays, concerts, ballet, etc. Oh yes, there was one small exhibition of paintings at a gallery in the Newspaper Buildings; some of those were very fine. But, by and large, that difficult word “culture” seems simply not to be worried over.

Webb’s brief second letter of 25th November, written in the knowledge his sister is away, records his (unfulfilled?) desire to “take a look at the jarrah and karri gum forests” and visit Albany, where his explorer epic “Eyre All Alone” (1961) would later conclude with its bold Christological vision (“I am truly alone … But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves”). The poet has also discovered one redeeming aspect of West Australian society on his trips to Rottnest and Mandurah:

Actually, I can’t lay claim to anything like an “exploration” (your [Peter’s] own term) of the west; but the little I’ve seen has been thoroughly enjoyed. Moreover, though anything approaching generalization with regard to peoples, etc., is always suspect to [sic] and disliked by this bloke, Western hospitality and camaraderie really does exist in livelier forms than eastward … That weakness mentioned earlier, a rather general disaffection with cultural pursuits, remains, but it is gradually being rectified a bit. And it’s offset to some extent by a chance ramble along, say, the Fremantle waterfront, will show you ancient buildings
and things by the half-dozen. And those prevalent eastern symptoms – the high fence, ticket-collection, and black and white notice – pop up with absolute rarity.⁹

Webb’s rejection of “anything approaching generalization” serves him well in regard to Perth “peoples, etc”; he does not seek to judge them, but craves stimulation. His “general disaffection with cultural pursuits” is quantitative rather than qualitative (when he discovers an exhibition he enjoys its “fine” work) and the cultural inaccessibility is ameliorated somewhat by the dynamism of the land and people.

**The Working Poet**

Webb’s “trans-continental do” is anything but a break from poetry. In the first letter of 10th November, he reports “I’ve been going in to Perth, most days, to pick up some notes at the Public Library” for what would become *Birthday*, his radio play about Hitler.¹⁰ Furthermore, he has made a “few retouches” to “Port Phillip Night” (later collected in *Birthday*) and another unidentified poem, which he sent his sister and brother-in-law to type and send to Vincent Buckley’s *Melbourne University Magazine*. Meere and Meere note that Buckley published “Cross Country” and “The Leper”, suggesting that Webb may have substituted “Port Phillip Night” for “Cross Country”.¹¹ This strongly implies that “The Leper”, later retitled “A Leper” (the first of two leper poems in Webb’s Francican sequence “The Canticle”) is the unidentified poem and thus “The Canticle” was composed either side of Webb’s Perth trip. This is confirmed by the subsequent annotation: “‘The Canticle’ which he [Webb] had commenced in 1950 and developed during 1951 was finished in July [1952].”¹²

Whether Webb’s time in Perth directly influenced the composition of “The Canticle” cannot be proven or disproven from the letters nor from Webb scholars such as Michael Griffith, Bill Ashcroft, Andrew Lynch and Bernadette Brennan who have all written on the sequence.¹³ Of these, only Brennan could have accessed the Perth letters and editorial notes of 2001, but does not seek to do so. Webb’s New Norcia trip could not have influenced “A Leper”, yet Webb’s recollection of the trip in his third letter of 25th November contains several points of thematic convergence with the second leper poem (“The Leper”), which at very least represents a case of life imitating or pre-empting art, subject to date of composition.

The final two pages of Webb’s third letter from Perth are devoted to his trip to the Benedictine settlement at New Norcia, to which he intended to
hike – a distance of one hundred and forty-five kilometres! After covering some eighteen miles on the first day, he refused two offers of lifts only to take the third under conditions analogous to the leper’s “almost living ulcer”:

The temperature of the district that day reached 106; a hot wind blew and blew. But the flies … [Webb’s ellipsis] In the W.A. bush their numbers, their unscrupulous rapacity, their fantastic orchestration, are beyond civilized belief. Let the traveller have uncovered scratches or sores – my dial and mitts were knocked about in a tumble at Mandurah – and he receives special attention; as many as a dozen will fasten upon one small breach of the flesh, dining blindly … Well, two hours of this, together with a number of gathering blisters, each camped with exquisite precision upon a most delicate area of the foot. And now a truck pulls up – before God I didn’t hail him – and the driver will take me to New Norcia. Temptation too great, I succumbed, and so lived to see the place.

For a correspondent who was diagnosed in 1957 with “persecution mania and strong tendency towards violence” the “tumble in Mandurah” proves disconcertingly elusive; should it have involved any form of psychosis then Webb’s quasi-leprous state is even more deeply implicated on the road to New Norcia. The leper character features in Griffith’s observation of an autobiographical dimension in Webb’s turn towards a religious poetics at the time:

Webb’s comment on the poem “A Leper” as “type of my guilt” is the strongest indication that he saw his involvement with the St Francis story as a personal quest for grace, and “A Leper” is one of the most graphic self-portraits we have from this period.

“A Leper”, composed prior to the Perth visit, is given a broader national significance by Lynch as “the first of many instances of social exclusion in the poem, which clearly relate to Webb’s radical attack on the official image of post-war White Australia as a land of freedom, welcome and equal opportunity.” Yet Webb’s experience of “Western hospitality and camaraderie” clearly runs counter to this. His literal deliverance via the truck driver’s act of charity is hauntingly echoed in the leper’s redemption by the fearless humanity of St Francis in the second leper poem:
Forgiven, forgiven.
Forgiven by the road.
Grey obdurate flint
Under all lights; the goad
Of sunstone and hailstone; glint,
Colder than the eyes, but nearer.
Of mile, mile; and the driven
Whittlings of day, day:– […]

Forgiven by the road, forgiven
By and man and many lands.
I too have forgiven.
(“The Leper”) 19

Webb continues in a similar vein regarding his New Norcia guide Father Cave, who exemplifies “the spirit I’ve been referring to: after having been my guide for at least an hour, he happened casually, led thereto by a turn in the conversation, to ask me whether I was a Catholic,” the inference being that charity precludes all other considerations. 20 This is not to suggest that the truck driver was the model for St Francis, or indeed that Benedictines are Franciscans. Rather, Webb’s frenetic rate of composition and heightened receptivity to his surroundings in 1951–1952 combined with thematic parallels support the proposition that Webb’s encounters en route to and within New Norcia cannot be extricated from the creative process which completed “The Canticle” only seven months later. New Norcia also serves as a prelude to Webb’s visits to a Franciscan monastery at Wahroonga in 1952 21 and his remarkable inclusion of the voice of Brother Sun to conclude the sequence (“wonder if you’ve heard about, in Melbourne, the accredited solar phenomen [sic] observed there at the close of the Jubilee Peace Novena, about a week ago?” 22). Future directions for Webb the working poet are likewise signalled in his failed attempts to “sell (spiritually of course), G.M. Hopkins” to the Benedictines. 23 “Hopkins and Foster’s Dam”, part of the “Galston” sequence, was composed north of Sydney at around the same time as “The Canticle” was finished.

Perth as Subject: “Vlamingh and Rottnest Island”
While Webb’s poetic engagement with Western Australia in “The Canticle” can be textually and chronologically supported it is not, on the current evidence, assured. By contrast “Vlamingh and Rottnest Island” is explicitly
set in the Perth region, draws upon Webb’s visit as described in his third letter of 30th November and was first composed during his three-week “do” with subsequent revisions in Melbourne, Sydney, or Adelaide.24

To locate Webb as tourist and working poet on Rottnest prior to the composition of “Vlamingh” might at first seem a simple task, but there are deeper, shifting layers of history, biography and poetics at play. On the face of it, Webb’s Rottnest trip is postcard-perfect: despite “stomach auguries” on the “tiny little” ferry there and a hangover from the first night which “alas, was a bit beery”, he provides a glowing account of the island itself:

A superb place. Old buildings, relics of convict days, are found here and there, and a tiny old cemetery; the old graveyard has always a special beauty. Then one has a finely-built lookout-cum-memorial giving a grand view of the rolling hills, crags, and sea; to reach it, one climbs up a steep little hill and, on the way, feeds tame wallabies [quokkas] with bits of biscuit, etc. Wallabies, by the way, gave the place its name: the Dutch discoverers thought they were rats. And then a stroll round the coastline – more of a scramble, actually – means tiny beaches, rough cliffs and caves, projecting granite elbows, and reefs to left and right. Finally a tall lighthouse surmounts the tallest central hill; on climbing the hill one sees the whole island ranged beneath him, from bushland acres chequered with the purple Rottnest daisy, particular to the place, to the glittering salt lakes which lie inland. Sorry if this has school-essay characteristics; I did like Rottnest.25

Rottnest in 1951 was transforming from a World War Two artillery post designed to protect Fremantle into its more popular image as a holiday isle. Although most service personnel had departed, the army retained Kingston Barracks and the battery itself was not dismantled until 1953.26 While this particular incarnation of Rottnest may have been evident to a poet who had experienced his own army and air force training, its prior incarnations were not. Stephen Mickler notes the Rottnest Museum was not opened until 1999 and the “potted history delivered by a smooth pre-recorded voice” of later ferries was not in operation in 1951, though a tour guide equivalent may have provoked Webb’s interest in Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh (1640–1698).27 Missing altogether from Webb’s account of Rottnest is any acknowledgement of its role as an Aboriginal prison from 1838 to 1931. Blaze Kwaymullina notes that even in the twenty-first century:

The brutal history of Wadjemup [the Noongar term for Rottnest] is glossed over in tourist brochures. On the island itself there are only two
visible signs of its dark history: one is the Museum and the other the Aboriginal cemetery.28

Neither the museum (1979) nor the cemetery (1985) were available to a visiting poet in 1951 (Indigenous graves were unmarked, unlike the “old graveyard”). Nonetheless, this does not prevent Webb from including a latent Indigeneity in “Vlamingh” where the island’s “newborn navigator” deals the explorer a black swan, “queer-shaped trees” and smoke “the pennmanship of a man’s hands.”29 The poem’s conclusion “Fallen kings, wreckage – but never a word of our quarry” can also be read in a pre-colonial context in light of Kwaymullina’s observation that “once connected to the mainland … Noongar people traded its limestone for goods from other areas.”30

However marginal, Indigeneity in “Vlamingh and Rottnest Island” also represents the shift in Birthday towards a melding of Indigenous and religious, where the former usually relies upon the latter. The two were closely intertwined in Webb’s epiphany just before his 1949 breakdown, recalled in his Hospital Confession (c.1964):

I had a terror of cruelty, of the concentration-camp. And I knew now that my poetry must acknowledge God and the Redemption. Question followed question. What of the love of the heroic, which had made my name? Worse, what of such friends as Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart: would they not … forsake me altogether if God came stumbling into my poems? And race-hatred. Accounts of the concentration-camps filled me with panic. Did it not flourish in Aussie?31

Beneath Webb’s postcard tour of Wadjemup-Rottnest is lies his own quest to redeem both himself and the leprous state of humanity (“Hitler was a human being!” [“Birthday”])32 Yet buried further, literally in the land itself, is Noongar elder Clarrie Isaacs’ “place like Auschwitz,”33 Mickler’s “early Australian Dachau,”34 or poet Graeme Dixon’s “Holocaust Island”35 – horrors Webb imagines as Australian in general but cannot contact beneath his feet. The religious and Indigenous meld differently at New Norcia where Webb is enthused by the assimilative example of “orphanages” for Indigenous children,36 indicating that perhaps the tourist is more easily enchanted by the exotic West than the poet by the familiar East with its “aboriginal’s shark” and pre-colonial holiness.37

Webb’s conviction that he must “acknowledge God and the Redemption” and its remarkable effect upon his “love of the heroic” dominate “Vlamingh
and Rottnest Island.” Bernadette Brennan observes in regard to Webb’s (anti)heroic St Francis “Like Webb’s explorer poems, “The Canticle” is a poem of quest, of searching … No longer is the incarnated Christ a felt absence.”38 “Vlamingh” represents a new type of explicitly Christian explorer poem as distinct from the decreasingly implicit style of “A Drum For Ben Boyd,” “Leichhardt in Theatre” and “A View of Montreal,” the last ending with Mt Gaspé’s cross catching fire.39 “Vlamingh” begins “Christmas – always, forever, a Morning and a Coming” and persists with nativity imagery:

Christmas and three ships, tokens of far places.
The sea-grain’s fruitless fastening
On our numb timbers, all the sea like a stylus
With its bickering passport-motion at our faces.

Christmas, past dawn. It is not the Ridderschap Van Holland (Errant star of our search) that is born on water,
Shepherded by coarse cloud with an eastern smile.
But with gulls galore it bears itself well, this island,
As a small craft, and every fulfilling mile
Brings closer to us some newborn navigator.40

For a Catholic poet who had previously shrouded his religious “Someone” in mystery (“Images in Winter”), Webb’s synthesis of an eternal Christmas (“Magi of a kind?”) with the search for a “newborn navigator” reveals his determination, mid-composition of “The Canticle”, to add God and the Redemption to his explorer poems. Though not as fiercely biblical or liturgical as the blending of Exodus, Nullabor and Albany in “Eyre All Alone” (1961) or “Sturt and the Vultures” (1970), “Vlamingh” explicitly unites Christological presence and the explorer search in a similar manner to that detected by Brennan in “The Canticle”. Vlamingh, unlike Boyd, Leichhardt and Cartier is not feted with bluster and hyperbole, but rather withered by adjectival hardship—“groggy”, “fruitless”, “numb”, “bickering”—until he renounces his “errant” search in favour of Christ Incarnate.

From this watershed period of 1951–52 until his death in 1973, Francis Webb remained an explicitly devotional poet. His religious impulse, while tied at crucial times to Indigeneity (including in “Eyre All Alone”), remains the more represented. It also overrides his initial poetics. Recalling Webb’s Rottnest account, the crow’s nest view from the memorial over rolling hills and sea are conducive to the island’s as vessel-like image complete with ship’s “rats”; the “reefs to left and right” surely inspired the “reef
logging / Fallen kings for us”, and his impressions of the coastline and salt lakes can be seen in “two leagues of gull and glitter” and “spray canvas from the silver navigator” in the original, Bulletin version published by Douglas Stewart in March 1952. Dutch and Christian themes increased as Webb re-drafted and edited, melding his experience with Vlamingh’s own discovery of water, quokkas, sweet-smelling trees and the wreckage of an unknown ship. In the Bulletin version, the “Two leagues of gull and glitter sing us this island / As a small craft”, the trees release their “penmanship of smoke” and the reef logs fallen kings – the island activates the poetic imagination and the navigational “other” is the silver sea. In the later Birthday version the island becomes a small craft, the trees’ smoke is the “penmanship of a man’s hands” (not just the “omen” of it), and the island, as “he”, “the other”, the “newborn navigator” opens the tattered log of the reef – the poetic imagination activates the island, and the navigational “other” is the Incarnated Christ, “Face to face. Midday.” At the same time the gulls, for Ashcroft Webb’s symbol for the journeying self, diminish from singing the island as a small craft to abundantly attending the island- ship on its way to the newborn navigator. Like Vlamingh, the symbolic self as searcher-singer must relinquish its active role to turn from “Christmas to midday – closer–” in the Bulletin version to “Face to face” with Christ. Ultimately, there may be few sheerer examples of Webb’s paradigmic and poetic shift from his Perth trip to the publication of Birthday. Locating him creatively beyond this point finds our “bard of no regard” with Christ, God, or other, notably female, saints and mystics, while physically hospitalised or on day-leave.

Epilogue: Fremantle, 1953

In 1953 Webb returned to Fremantle en route to England, where upon his arrival on English soil “in a bit of strife again, no doubt thanks to the fun and games of the mob … on board the P&O cruise” he was promptly arrested and institutionalised until his transfer back to Australia in 1964. Webb makes no further reference to Fremantle or Western Australia, but this episode does lend greater credence to the possibility of something more than a harmless “tumble” occurring at Mandurah. Yet if “truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps” (“A Drum for Ben Boyd”) then it is more prudent to address my own stops and gaps, the most glaring of which is my marginalisation of Frank’s tenderness towards Leonie (“Doll” or “duckie”) who rescued him from England only fourteen months prior to his Perth trip. His last words from Fremantle allow his brotherly affection to receive its due regard:
Well, above is some account of my major excursions. Sorry it’s so adjectivally profuse, but you quite literally asked for it. Only about 5 days of the boundless West remain to me, and so, sister mine, your next news of me will likely consist in the warped apparition of my snout. And after this reaches you, duckie (all right, I’ll try to remember your marital dignity), write nothing and send nothing. Except that little prayer sometimes, please.

So-long, and it will be grand to see you again. My thanks for absolutely everything, and please don’t forget to convey them to Pete. God bless you, and every conceivable good wish from.

Your loving brother,

Frank.

Francis Webb did not intend his letters to be critical sources and his friend and fellow poet Rosemary Dobson (1920–) suggests well before Poet and Brother that “what went into his correspondence … was simply what was left over from the remarkable achievement of his poetry.” Yet in resisting Webb’s slide towards “bard of no regard” status, the letters offer crucial insights into the compositional basis of multiple poems while chronologically and geographically locating him. It remains impossible, however incrementally, for Webb to completely be a bard of no regard when one can walk around Fremantle, gaze from the memorial at Rottnest or visit New Norcia while regarding Webb’s poems or letters in the full sense of the French regarder, “to watch”. But the past, despite Webb’s protestations of timelessness (“1210 A.D. – too much of that”) is also to some degree inaccessible: one cannot accompany him step by step, only locate his poetics of presence in the streets and regions of a post-war Perth which, like the poet, remains and is gone.

Notes

5 Meere and Meere, 33–34.
6 Meere and Meere, 34–35.
7 Meere and Meere, 37.
9 Meere and Meere, 38.
10 Meere and Meere, 34.
11 Meere and Meere, 35.
12 Meere and Meere, 62.
15 Meere and Meere, 43.
16 Meere and Meere, 125. This was later diagnosed as schizophrenia. Craig Powell, “Francis Webb – A Memoir” in *Poetry Australia* (Francis Webb Commemorative Edition, ed. Grace Perry) 56 (1975): 83.
17 Griffith, 169.
18 Lynch, 50.
20 Meere and Meere, 44.
21 Griffith, 208.
22 Meere and Meere, 38.
23 Meere and Meere, 38.
24 Meere and Meere, 45, 246.
25 Meere and Meere, 41–42.
26 For a visitor’s introduction to military operations at Wadjemup-Rottnest, see http://www.rotnestisland.com/en/History+and+Culture Military+Functions.htm (accessed 7th July 2008).
29 Webb, 90–91.
30 Kwaymullina, 109
31 Griffith, 89.
33 Kwaymullina, 118
34 Mickler, 11.
36 For an Indigenous perspective on the New Norcia “orphanage”, see Alf Taylor, “From God, The Devil and Me” in Those Who Remain Will Always Remember, eds. Anne Brewster et al (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press, 2000). Taylor, a poet, was removed from his mother and later told she was dead.

37 Webb, Collected Poems, 92, 98.

38 Brennan, 8-9.


42 See www.voc.iinet.net/vlamingh.html (accessed 7th July 2008) and related sites. Webb had researched Vlamingh enough to add to his notes in Collected Poems, “In the late 17th century Vlamingh, a Dutch seaman under the command of the East India Company, came upon Rottnest Island, W.A., during his search for the ship Ridderschap Van Holland” (Webb 250). While Douglas Stewart published “Vlamingh”, their friendship only fared marginally better than that of Webb and Lindsay, who did not correspond again after 1949, in part due to Lindsay’s anti-Semitism. Griffith, 107.


44 Ashcroft, 142.

45 Meere and Meere, 109.

46 Meere and Meere, 44–45.


LES WICKS

THE TABLE

Thrift is treason.
The more you eat
the more you grow. Junk economics.

Broadsheet liftout sections parade –
business, cars, travel …
a new career from slave yard
to auctioneer. We need our dreams
but why dress them
in trash Armani?

A fortune. Cloud Nine – no humans, motorways
sleep in the park beneath a teeming sky of continuous fireworks.
Spacious as friends,
our pinion of harvest …
the lazy or the ride.
Every man should have his lily …
we set sail from the Cape of Storms
too ardent.

I’ve aspired to
but did not try
nothing left.
Perilous absence makes the heart grow
pure. Black simpletons,
the bereft adepts howl in their shelter
as we shake loose coins like cold wet dogs.

I understand less each year
and cannot rise to judge.
Rain drums on the window. 
He turns toward it 
and there is her face, 
its intense, unblinking stare. 

He turns away, blinking, 
and opens a beer. 
He pours it in haste; the foam 
takes its time settling. 

He takes his time watching it settle. 
Then crackles of sound follow streaks of light. 
The overhead bulb dims, brightens, dims. 
With two hands, he lifts the beer to his mouth. 

When he looks again to the window, 
there is no image. 
The panes have been scrubbed clean 
by barrages of rain. 

But he knows it will be there again. 
Or else at the bottom of his beer glass. 
Or else in the passenger window 
as he makes his compliant approach

for the daily drive to the grave 
in spite of the weather.
At their second world convention
those Shakespearean scholars
fight for seats in Washington's Hilton
just for the privilege of hearing
Jorge Luis Borges speak.

After several minutes of standing applause
they quieten, sit
as Borges’ lips begin to move
then lean towards the old blind master
hoping to hear the riddle revealed.

Although they strain, all they hear
is a susurrus, with Shakespeare
the only word audible, but distant.
The microphone is too high.
Nobody steps forward to adjust it.

Borges speaks for an hour.
Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare.

No one leaves that vast room – Shakespeare.
When Borges finally finishes
the scholars give him a stirring ovation
their hands hot, eyes glistening
on their feet again, for several minutes.
MÉRIEL GRIFFITHS


“I had not thought there were so many / good poets in the States,” writes Geoff Page in a poem from *Seriatim*, one of this year’s new poetry collections. The poem is a response to an anthology (*Poetry 180*, edited by Billy Collins) by American poets Page has never heard of but whose poems, about ordinary lives and events, elicit an unexpected emotional response from him as he sits reading in a café: “I have that tightness in the throat / I get at funerals.” The poem makes clear that these are not “Great” poems in any sense of the word; they are quiet discoveries of the poignant in the ordinary and everyday. Their remarkable achievement lies in their ability to make the imaginative leap of sense and feeling which connects these poets and the reader across distances of geography, culture and experience:

I hope to visit them again …
and pause with them beside a field

to watch a pair of horses graze
or small birds in the stubble. (36)

It’s a fair question to ask of any poetry how far it’s able to travel beyond its own borders; how far beyond the specificities of locality and experience it’s able to make this imaginative leap in consciousness. To apply this question to the abundant crop of Australian poetry published this year, how far do these anthologies, selected poems, retrospectives and individual collections transcend the limits of the merely personal or the boldly public? How extensive is their vision and how inclusive of other voices and perspectives are they in their engagement with the world?

The concern with bridging distance is clearly evident in the collaborative Australian and Singaporean anthology *Over There: Poems from Singapore and*...
Australia, edited by John Kinsella and Alvin Pang, which seeks to establish an ongoing dialogue between poets in the Asia-Pacific region. The list of poets whose work is represented illustrates the cultural diversity both editors have sought to reflect and neither editor has chosen to limit their selection to poems about Singapore and Australia, ensuring a broader dialogue than cross-border reflections of each other. The anthology draws attention to the existing cross-cultural connections between the two countries, through writers’ festivals, publishing and university study as well as through migration and travel. Several of the Singaporean poets live and publish their work in Australia and some of the Australian poets have read and published their work in Singapore.

The two sections of the anthology, the Australian and the Singaporean selections, are bridged by Miriam Wei Wei Lo, an Australian poet born in Canada and raised in Singapore. Her poems are an exploration of the cultural hybridity of language, place and identity. “Bumboat Cruise on the Singapore River” navigates a path between cultural contradictions and ambiguities – the American rhetoric and accents of Singaporean tourist promotions, the taxi driver unsure whether she is a tourist or a local, and the duality of her own history: “Sixteen years of my life / afloat in this sea of contradictions, of which I was, equally, one: / half-white, half-Chinese” (168). The in-between spaces of identity and the intersecting spaces of cultures and languages are explored in both sections of the anthology. Chinese idiograms, dialect and cultural references run through many of the Singaporean poems, though only Alvin Pang’s poem “Candles” is written entirely in dialect. The poem is a poignantly realised dialogue between brother and sister about the “borrowing” of votive candles from a nearby Catholic Church:

oi, ah pa know you take candle from the church
again, you going to get it
nevermind i bring them back when you study
finish. you dont say he dont know, so dark how to read, how to study?

The siblings’ literal interpretation of Christian ritual renders it strange and illogical beside their greater logic for stealing the candles. This external perspective on Catholicism is a reminder that Christianity, as well as English, represents a colonial presence in Singapore.
jesus also like government what, he where got care whether you blind or not, house got light or not, he just hang up there all day for people to see, put money in box, give him so many candles for nothing. he also not taking exam … (237)

The use of dialect has political significance in both of these postcolonial societies; in the Australian section indigenous poet Lionel Fogarty writes in politically charged dialect in his activist poems about broadcasting and bureaucracy:

but we should consider advocating
a hurray wireless playing,
Blackfella media, not political
foot-balling loudmouth, perturbed. (64) ‘No Grudge’

As well as the activist urgings of the poem, the dialect is itself resistant to the dominant culture of English and addresses an indigenous audience not represented in the mainstream culture of Australia.

The inclusion of dialect poems as well as some poetry in translation – by Yahia al-Samawy in Australia and Enoch Ng Kwang Cheng in Singapore – illustrates the linguistic and cultural diversity the anthology seeks to represent. The editors’ internationalist focus is evident in their commitment to this cross-cultural project but also in their selection of poems that reflect the intricate complexities of cultural identity. Individually, not all of these poems make the imaginative leap beyond their own cultural perspectives but the international context of this anthology provides a forum where they become part of a much broader cultural dialogue.

The committed internationalism of many of this year’s Australian poetry collections is apparent from even a general sampling; many of these collections engage imaginatively with other literatures and cultures and make valuable connections across the distances of culture and language. There is also a strong engagement with global events and concerns and an evident resistance to the confines of regionalist and nationalist perspectives. Many of the collections convey a sense of the multiple identities and dislocations of global citizenship and constant travel. The internationalism of John Mateer’s collection Elsewhere is a case in point; this retrospective collection brings together an impressive volume of poems previously published in South Africa, Sumatra and Japan. These poems range across three continents but are frequently overlaid by images and memories of the poet’s native South Africa, creating complex layers
of language and imagery. The perspectives of overseas travel are threaded enticingly through many of the collections represented here, but it is the poems most grounded in a sense of place that provide some of the strongest perspectives. The close observations of the local and the specific are where some of the most fertile imagery emerges.

The two anthologies *The Best Australian Poetry 2007*, edited by John Tranter, and *The Best Australian Poems 2007*, edited by Peter Rose, demonstrate the astonishing range of Australian poetry published here and overseas (Rose has included poems published overseas). The continued presence of both anthologies testifies to the wealth of good poems and poets in Australia and implies a nicely ironic approach to the superlatives of their titles. The value of these anthologies is that they represent a diverse sample of recent Australian poetry and introduce lesser-known poets alongside the established names. From next year UQP will include online journals in their scope for the first time, which will broaden the selection further to include forms of poetry unlikely to appear in the more conventional print journals.

Peter Rose’s selection includes the finalists in the 2007 *Australian Book Review* competition, ensuring a broader readership for finely crafted poems such as Ross Clark’s “Full-Bucket Moon”, a luminous and sensuous poem which brings a sense of the divine to the rituals of the milking shed and lovingly evokes the procession of bovine goddesses in attendance: “at last / Polyhymnia or Euterpe or / Erato, the nine offspring of / memory’s lord to my tender / -ing, stripping hands” (16). Kathryn Lomer’s poem “The Fencer and His Mate” is another particularly accomplished poem, with a strong sense of place and humanity constructed through a series of finely observed images of the fencer and the natural world: “The lyrebird’s taken up / the fencer’s grunt, the noisy saw, / and will continue for weeks after the fence is finished” (61). John Tranter’s selection contains equally strong poems, such as Pam Brown’s “Darkenings”, a complex and haunting poem where images of death and terminal illness intersect with evocations of pollution and environmental disaster: “no further treatment nothing to lose / man with cancer carries his son / to lay him down in the contaminated ground, / nowhere left now, / moon ripple on the tailings dam / where he used to skim stones” (7). These anthologies present a valuable overview of Australian poetry, attesting to its vibrancy and diverse concerns.

Les Murray’s new *Selected Poems* and David Malouf’s *Revolving Days* bring together poems from recent collections and many of the finest from earlier ones. Les Murray’s new *Selected* brings it up to date with the inclusion of poems from *The Biplane Houses*, which contributes the fine textual detail of
“The Shining Slopes and Plains”, with its Alpine grass, “root-woven, fine as fur / that has grown in our metal rain gutters” (264) and the elliptical imagery of “Bright Lights on Earth” with its satellite mapping of regions by their light emissions: “tofu detailing all Japan, … dazzling cobwebbed Europe”:

The past
is fuel of glacé continents,
it rims them in stung salt,
Australia in her sparsely starred
flag hammock. Human light
is the building whose walls
are outside. It bleeds the planet
but who could be refused
the glaring milk of earth? (178)

The new Selected might just ensure that the timely question this poem poses reverberates through schools and colleges across the nation.

David Malouf’s Revolving Days divides his poems into four sections corresponding to the stages of his life they relate to rather than the order in which they were written. This brings together some wonderful poems which have previously appeared separately, adding for instance to the store of richly sensuous poems arising out of the poet’s childhood and its intimate world evoked so intricately in “The Blue Apron”, a poetic exploration of the ties, and the untying, of that most symbolic of maternal objects: “clothes-props hoisted / a bellied sail – my mother levitating. / …Inside it, sky-hung, pegged to the line, a sullen angel / scowled, shook off wet wings, took on the world” (9). These selected poems include many from Typewriter Music, published last year. From this collection comes ‘Moonflowers’, a sensual and elusive love poem:

The moonflower lingers
in its fat scent. We move
in and in and out of
each other’s warmed spaces,
there is
no single narrative. (155)

These selected volumes represent a valuable addition to the highly
acclaimed recent collections and established work of these mature poets, allowing readers to make their own links between the poems as they read across the themes and phases of many years’ fine work.

Of the individual collections published this year those which stand out are most frequently the ones working at the level of suggestion rather than overt statement. The subterranean tensions of John Kinsella’s collection *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful* are a powerful evocation of his conflicted relationship with the Wheatbelt where he lives. Throughout the collection the imagery conveys tensions between surface appearance and what lies beneath. In “Gradual Variation” the contradictions between the tourist façade of York and the brutal history it conceals are succinctly caught in the epithet “boutique town of horrors” (65). The poem unpeels this façade to reveal a site of ongoing conflict between environmentalists and destructive land management practices. ‘Of the Effects of Tragedy’ is a darkly poetic exploration of Yenyenning Lake as environmental warning – ‘farmland sinkhole / laced with sheep skeletons worn down to interiors / by heavy-duty salinity’ (19) – and as another covering surface for layers of violent history, of massacre and denial:

Yenyenning partially seen after enduring rains
is ghostly turned inside out, a mass of defeated
photons glittering about the dead …

…

They talk about seepage from cemeteries,
but when the dead have been scattered and denied rights,
they drain slowly from the surface, welling in an arterial
layer not far below the growing soil, and move even uphill
down towards sinkholes like Yenyenning … (20)

The imagery of the lake’s concealed bodies, while evoking a specific history of racist violence in Australia, also becomes linked to the London bombings. Local and global experiences overlap to reflect the international and regional identities the poet continually moves between, which are a source of creative tension in the poems. The poet’s conflicted sense of identity in relation to this place is evident in “Joy and Grief”, in which his “self-myth of belonging” is countered by a sense of alienation. The unresolved tensions of “this inside-outside / paradox” (12) are central to this poem but also to the collection as a whole: he is paradoxically a local “red-neck”, an insider, while remaining at a critical distance from such an identity.
The poet’s intimate knowledge of the history and ecology of this specific place provides the solid ground for this exploration of identity. The poems work outwards from the specific and the local, to the global implications of environmental degradation; the humans in the landscape are evoked as destructive but also as vulnerable, at the mercy of larger forces. The sense of threat and the menacing undercurrents running through the collection reverberate beyond the specificities of place to convey the precariousness of the global environment and the humans in it. The collection as a whole reveals a unique sensibility and a passionate commitment to the local and the global environment.

The exploration of identity and the complex relationships between individual and group identity, whether at the level of nation or otherwise, has provided some rich poetic material in two particular collections, Two Kinds of Silence by Kathryn Lomer and Scar Revision by Tracy Ryan. Lomer’s collection weaves an intricate pattern of connections and disconnections, oppositions and doubles. The poems follow a sequence of exits and entrances; her own comings and goings in “Flight Lines” and her relationships with others which follow a pattern of coming together and falling apart. The poet’s multiple roles as mother, daughter, lover and writer also follow a tidal pattern, advancing and receding at various times. The constant switching between identities and the poet’s attempt to reconcile them are poignantly evoked in “The way the world sleeps”, a lyrical exploration of duality and paradox. The diurnal rhythms of the natural world provide the poem’s images of divided identity: “I know that out there somewhere, / dolphins are sleeping the way the world sleeps – // one hemisphere at rest, / the other alert”. The poet’s further image of the rhythmic blinking of a marine navigation light adds to the poignancy of the lines that follow:

I understand these on-off things,
knowing myself mother, not-mother,
mother, not-mother,
my identity a code not yet cracked.

In another house my son will be saying I love you
and snuggling down for the night.

I am one-half awake, one asleep, (24)
The corollary to this pattern of connection and disconnection comes in the joint perspectives of poems where the personal worlds of mother and son combine, as in “Foot prince”: “To me it is where my ancient /meets my now; / to my son it is the place / where we search for the foot prince/ in the wet sand.” (18) The intricacy of the poet’s patterning in this collection is illustrated by “Omphalos”, itself a rhythmic pattern of duplication and succession which also explores patterns of female identity:

Daughter, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, connection stretches into history like dolls cut with pinking shears from the same sheet of paper. (55)

Ryan’s Scar Revision is a subtle and lyrical exploration of identity through the motif of inscription. The title poem traces scars on the body as markers of experience and personal history, indelible inscriptions on the skin. The poet’s mapping of the body through its scars creates a sustained metaphor of the skin as an encoded text whose mysteries are never fully decoded,

proffered like fossils
or runes
inscrutable without context
without gloss (9)

This poem also explores the subliminal spaces of disjuncture, finding the gaps between intention and action, as slips of the hand and self-sabotage reveal a hidden agenda:

Like automatic writing
so much of us is involuntary … (15)

The involuntary, as well as revealing the hidden intentions of the body and subconscious mind, also relates to the genetic inscriptions of heredity through physical predisposition and replication; in “Snow baby” the poet reads her child’s face, finding the imprints of family likeness: “you are the stamp / of features covered over / long since & uncannily / brought home, brought back” (18).

The central motif of inscription creates important correspondences between poems about naming and labelling, identifications and definitions,
landmarks, genealogy, handwriting and keyhole surgery, as each poem explores facets of how identity is inscribed. The poems’ stitching together of these different facets creates a complex and rewarding collection.

The body and its hereditary fault lines are explored elsewhere, in the first part of Judy Johnson’s collection *Navigation*. The poems of “Ties”, about family and relationships, have an undercurrent of malignancy through the imagery of cancer and terminal illness. In “Cannas”, the lilies are imagined in terms suggestive of medical symptoms; they arrive as “knobbly growths” and spread through the garden, which is soon “malignant with cannas”: “The flowers arrange themselves, it says, / in terminal clusters” (20). Terminal illness is a poignant motif in the beautifully crafted love poem “The Owl and the Pussycat and the Dying”, in which the grieving lover and the dying one are embodied as the Owl and the Pussycat, a cast added to by the secretly harboured Hope, with whom the Pussycat sails triumphantly away:

Only when you have gone,  
this bed becomes a pea-green boat.  
With a deep breath  
I cast us off –

Then till morning  
– which is a year and a day –  
Hope and the Pussycat sail away,  
and we dance by the light of the moon. (18)

The poet’s lyricism and dazzling imagery are sustained through the four sections of this collection, two of which, “Whale” and “Reason” are impressive sequences and extended poems based on separate historical accounts of a whaling captain’s wife at sea and the extinction of the Tuniit. The collection as a whole is richly imaginative and finely crafted.

The imaginative realm of “The Owl and the Pussycat” invoked by Johnson is the realm Kevin Brophy enters with his collection *Mr Wittgenstein’s Lion*. Brophy takes an obvious delight in language and the creation of imagery stripped of familiar connections. The poems are frequently whimsical and surreal, looking out from unfamiliar perspectives and creating a world that is newly strange. Many of the poems portray a childhood world, a consciousness recaptured, or turn a child’s perspective on the adult world, conveying the puzzle and mystery of phenomena observed with no understanding of how they are linked. These perspectives are frequently stripped of causality or
create new conjunctions, such as the connections made by the poet’s son in “The mental life”: “Are there idiot cats? he asks us / As if a question can be real once it’s posed” (44). The detachment of these perspectives creates space for unexpected connections; in ‘Jamieson hills’ images of the natural world and drought affliction are rendered with a fresh vision:

– this country in its tenth year of drought
becomes pencilled in, scribbled on brittle paper.

…
kangaroos float over paddocks. They move like fish through the air. (16)

The stripped-back imagery of a funeral poem, “Monument”, is particularly effective in conveying a sort of detached wonder at the world and our part in it, at human impermanence and the procession of time:

We filed into a chapel much like any chapel.
Six men lifted the box up like an ark.
Afterwards we stood round trays of biscuits in a circle. (51)

The simplicity of the language of these poems is deceptive; they are finely crafted and sharply observed pieces whose constant shifts of perspective serve to defamiliarise the world. The poems are joyous, poignant, humorous and revelatory in their curiously accurate but unexpected logic; here are the shifting adult and child perspectives of ‘after rain’:

… after rain the birds around here have much to say.
They’re out there now like children let out of a classroom,
shaking themselves on Anna’s roof and in the bottlebrush
where there must be mouthfuls of insects like lollies in the air. (70)

Jennifer Kornberger’s debut collection I could be rain also reveals the poet’s delight in the felicity of language and image. In many poems she captures an oblique perspective, almost catching things unawares. This results in some startling images and connections, such as those in “Eve”, in which the poet’s imagery of suburban gardening, in the planting and storing of bulbs, overlaps the mythology of the Garden of Eden:

If I entered your garden
I would dig you up like a bulb
thinking at first you were a stone 
but no, tea coloured and tapered 
by Spring you would lie in the palm 
of my hand, the dirt still clinging 
to your hair. (18)

Her poems about her children are, like Kathryn Lomer’s, an honest exploration of the conflicting roles and demands of parenthood. In “This child” the conflict between individual identity and motherhood is strongly evoked through images of physical invasion as the child demands space in the mother’s body:

Then he wants to sleep 
in the crescent 
between my heart and 
my liver, 
he’s knocking on my organs 
wailing to be let in 
butting like a bully calf … (15)

This image of the mother’s body and its appropriation by the child is explored in “Bright thief” through the reversal of this image:

The girl that I gave birth to 
is wearing my skirt 
in the kitchen late at night 
is wearing my jeans around Fremantle … 
she’s been pregnant with me 
for sixteen years 
and now she wants 
a flat belly and a mobile phone. (45)

The perspectives and images of these poems are consistently inventive and unexpected, a feat the poet achieves throughout this collection.

While most of these collections explore important aspects of Australian life, Mike Ladd’s collection Transit strongly reflects on its public values. Ladd’s strong sense of social values is evident in his examination of the collective social conscience in relation to issues of injustice, land clearing, car worship and “the supernova of real estate”. The poems range across topics as diverse as high-rise dwelling, the rituals of junior football and
the politically charged topics of the Howard years and the war in Iraq. The poet’s dexterity is evident in the variety of language and imagery he employs. Many of the poems are also intimate and acutely observed; the family dynamics of “That Christmas”, for instance, are finely rendered through the poem’s surfing imagery:

Murmur of family voices, explosions of jokes,  
little hurts.  
Their conversations swim on  
trying to get somewhere in the surf,  
old patterns pulling them back.  
There are rips out there. (19)

The imaginative language of poems as diverse as “Junior Football”, with its lovely image of “Sweet oranges that grin from plastic buckets” (29) and “Bat in a Pantry”, with its sharp visual accuracy, indicate the range of the poet’s skill:

You’re home at last from the night shift,  
hanging from the handle of the coffee grinder  
by your micro grapple-hook feet.  
...  
You are a beautiful baby buggy,  
leather hood folded down, (59)

The wry and ironic observations of Australian life in poems like “Sky People” and “Junior Football” are much more nimble and light-footed in their inventiveness than the overtly satirical poems of “Housing Estate in the Howard Era” and “Night and Darkness”, the latter a direct response to the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The poem deals with the habituating effect of media images of torture while indirectly raising a different question, of how poetry deals with important contemporary political and moral issues:

“Our enemies do worse than this,” they say,  
night and darkness seep out of the TV,  
the shapes of Abu Ghraib come round to play.  
Wired in the lounge, they prance and leap,  
your moral code boils slowly like a frog,  
til torture without trial seems quite OK. (57)
The question of how to adequately address the great political and social issues of our age is a fraught one, but one that many Australian poets have chosen to engage with in recent collections. A number of poets have addressed issues of social justice and the war in Iraq, some taking a direct approach while others take a more oblique angle, working through allusion and suggestion rather than through statement. Two particularly striking poems work in disparate but richly imaginative ways, avoiding the well-worn language of polemic. Geoff Page’s poem “2001”, in *Seriatim*, approaches John Howard’s political statement on asylum-seekers as a poem to be deconstructed, in the process exposing its rhetorical artifice and its insidious echoes of Winston Churchill:

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We will decide
Who comes to this country –
And the circumstances
In which they come.
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How like a piece of poetry it was,
the roughening iambics,
those sharpened c’s, like angled pikes … (7)

Jennifer Harrison’s poem “Doves” in *The Best Australian Poems 2007*, is an indirect but suggestive evocation of the war in Iraq. The poem’s lyricism, honesty and poignancy is remarkable, conveying the psychically overwhelming impact of the war viewed through the fragmented and nuanced images of television:

```
Reporters have embedded feet to granite-stop the door.
Hostages stare bruisedly off screen.
...

I have lost
my part in this perspective and it’s easier to run my hands
through his hair, thinking: this is not enmity. (37)
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The poem is grounded by the poet’s shift of perspective, stepping back from the screen’s images to encompass the immediate and the domestic and finding strength in a located vision and the tangible realm of relationship. Each of these poems represents a courageous engagement with a subject whose sheer scale threatens to overwhelm. The strength of the poems lies in their ability to communicate beyond their immediate subject and to encompass a broader vision of the world.
The question posed at the beginning of this essay asked how far the new Australian poetry is able to travel beyond its own borders, whether geographical or otherwise, and to make the imaginative leap of sense and feeling required to make a connection with readers across real and metaphorical distances. Each of the poets and poems discussed make this leap to communicate and engage with readers outside their magnetic field. Many more poems not included here for reasons of space also make this dynamic leap, forging creative connections far beyond the limits of the poets’ own personal and cultural perspectives. That so many poets are able to generate and sustain this dynamic energy field is a remarkable achievement.

**Poetry Received 2007–2008**

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


Cronin, MTC. *Our Life is a Box. / Prayers Without a God*. Brisbane: Papertiger Media, 2007.


HELENA PASTOR

BROKEN GLASS

Mum used to let me walk to the pool by myself, but ever since the bikies started coming to town she makes Johanna come with me. When we left the bakery this morning, I said: “Aw Mum … I’m twelve years old! I don’t need my big sister to walk with me.” But actually I don’t mind because the other day my friend Tracy told me a scary story about what some bikies did to a girl which gives me the shivers every time I think of it. So even though I complained this morning, I feel safer with Johanna walking beside me. I don’t want any bikies snatching me off the street.

Johanna doesn’t swim at the pool. She just sits in the shade under a tree and reads her Bible. It’s covered in all these psychedelic stickers – JESUS LOVES YOU! PEACE! JOY TO THE WORLD! LOVE! She’s become real religious since she finished high school and started going out with the drummer from the Methodist church band. He’s about five years older than Johanna and has his own car so they’re always at Bible study meetings or having fellowship camps at Eight Mile Beach.

“Hey, Nell!”

Tracy’s already in the water so I pull off my t-shirt and shorts and dive in. We practise doing hand-stands, counting the seconds we can stay under, or else we see how many somersaults we can do in a row. I like to duck my head under and make my hair hang over my face, then flick it up in a big roll so I look like Mozart or Beethoven. We thrash around in the water, playing Red Rover with the boys, but they always try to pull down our togs when we swim past. I hate that.

At lunchtime, Johanna and I walk home, taking the shortcut through the showground. In the park there’s a pole with iron rings hanging down on chains that you hold and swing on. I run around the pole so fast that my legs fly out behind me. We walk past the School of Arts and the doctor’s surgery, then up to the main street. The first thing I see is the motor bikes
parked along the gutter, like a line of mean black dogs defending their territory. They seem to go on forever but there’s probably only about thirty, maybe forty. It’s like Broughton becomes their town whenever they’re here, not ours. I feel stiff and really self-conscious walking down the street to the bakery, which is crazy because I’ve lived here since I was two years old. That main street is like my front yard.

Johanna’s friend Sally and another older girl that I don’t know are standing with two bikies, talking and laughing in that flirty way that boy-crazy girls do. I don’t know why they’re bothering – these guys are so ugly with their dirty-looking scraggly beards. They look like they haven’t been near soap and water for a long time.

I like Sally. She’s got freckles, smiley eyes and red hair. Today it’s hanging loose over her shoulders and it has that crinkly look from being tied up wet in plaits. She’s wearing tight black jeans, boots and a skimpy purple tank top. Just like a bikie chick. She never used to dress like that when she was best friends with Johanna.

When I get closer, I see that she’s got heaps of blue eyeshadow and black eyeliner around her eyes, like a possum. The other girl isn’t as pretty as Sally. She’s a bit fat and her hair’s half-blonde and half-black from being dyed ages ago and her jeans are so tight they look painful. Sally hardly looks at us when we walk past. That hurts a bit. She and Johanna were always together until Johanna went all churchy and started carrying a Bible everywhere. Whenever Sally came over to our house, I’d pretend to be a hairdresser and do all fancy things to her hair, like French plaits or chignons. I wish they were still best friends.

The two bikies give me and Johanna the once over and I feel my face burning red. The way they stare, slouching against their bikes in leather jackets and torn jeans, makes me feel dirty inside. It’s even worse because my wet togs have soaked through my tee shirt which has ‘No Two the Same’ written on the front.

“No two the same!” one of the bikies laughs, nearly losing the rollie hanging out of his mouth. “You’re right about that, darlin’. You’re right about that!”

My face burns even more and I squeeze my arms tight against my sides as I walk on past.

There are more bikies sitting on the footpath in front of the bakery, foil pie-bases and paper bags all around them. Johanna and I can hardly make it through to the door. I don’t know where to look as I step through legs and boots, following blindly behind Johanna. The bikies stink – a mixture of old sweat and petrol. It feels like we’ve reached another world when we
walk through the plastic strips of the fly-curtain into the cake shop and the warm smell of bread and cakes makes me feel like I’m home. Inside, Mum and the shop girls are busy sweeping the floor, wiping counters and cleaning the pie heater. On Saturdays the shop’s usually packed. Not now.

One time, when the bikies first started coming to town, Mum saw one of them take a honey roll off the counter and walk out without paying. She went after him. “Ja,” Mum had said, “I saw that you are taking it but if you are that desperate I give it to you.’ And he said to me, “No, I was going to pay for it” and I said, “Alright, fair enough” and he gave me the money! I didn’t go into it anymore.” Later we heard that the bikies took over a whole shop in the Valley, elbowing local customers aside, helping themselves to biscuits and ice-cream, and nearly giving the shop owner a heart attack.

Mum looks out the window at the bikes lined up along the street and then at the empty shop with the counter still stacked with bags of cakes and rolls. She sighs and says: “Godverdamme! This is not good for the business. Everyone is too scared to come in and we will be stuck with all this stuff in the shop! I have to do something.” She goes outside to the black-jacketed crowd sprawled on the footpath.

“Mum …” I call after her, but she doesn’t stop. Pup’s out the back in the bakery – too far away to help if anything happens.

I crouch down behind the shop window, daring myself to peek, scared and embarrassed at the same time.

One of the bikies stands up, puts his hands on his hips. “What’s the problem?”

Mum sounds nervous but tells him: “Ja, of course we appreciate your custom here today but we made a lot of cakes and pies and people aren’t coming in to the shop with all of you sitting here.”

The head bikie looks at Mum for a minute before calling over his shoulder to the others: “The lady wants us to move, fellas! We’ll head down the pub … let’s go!”

And they do. Leaving all their rubbish on the street, they slouch on to their bikes and roar off down the main street, turning into the parking area of the bottom pub two doors down. I can’t believe it. When Mum comes back into the shop we all cheer. She laughs and says: “Heh heh! I was shaking in my boots but at least they’re gone! Nell, come and help clean up the rubbish.”

Later that night I wake up, heart thumping like crazy. Outside I hear glass smashing, people shouting.
“Fuckin’ footballer cunts! Ya wanna fight, do ya?"

I’ve never heard anyone swear like that in Broughton. People say bloody and shit, but not fuck or cunt. And no one ever shouts it out loud enough for the whole town to hear.

Standing on my bed near the window, I can see part of the car park of the pub. One bikie, staggering back and forth, is swinging a chain around his head, shouting: “Come on ya fuckin’ weak bastards!” His mate waves a beer bottle with the top smashed off, its jagged edges gleaming in the light. More bikies start coming out from the back of the pub, snarling and ready to fight.

I can’t see who they’re shouting at but I say a quick prayer to God: “Please make them stop!”

Some girls stumble out of the pub, arm in arm with their bearded boyfriends. I hear one call out: “Forget about fighting ... let’s go to the beach and party!” From far away it looks like the girl Sally was with earlier. “Those bastards wouldn’t know how to fight anyway!”

And then I see Sally, pashing one of the bikies. It looks like he’s trying to eat her face and his hands are all over her, moving from her bum and then sliding up under her tank top. How can she let him touch her like that? I feel sick watching them. They stand there kissing until one of the bikie’s mates grabs his arm and yells: “Let’s go, Mick! The fuckin’ cops are comin’!” Sally’s boyfriend searches for his keys and then hands Sally a black helmet. “Don’t go with him, Sally,” I whisper. But she settles in behind him on the seat, her arms tight around his middle, and the bike swerves wildly as it thunders out the pub’s back driveway, following the others.

It takes ages for things to quieten down again, and even after they’re gone I’m shaking so much I can’t sleep. I keep seeing that swinging chain and broken bottle in front of my face, thinking of how much they would hurt, about the story Tracy told me, and wondering how Sally could have kissed those filthy stinking bikie lips.

The next day, while I’m eating a sausage roll at the back of the shop, Mum’s talking with one of the shop girls about the fight at the pub. “Ja, it was lucky that no one was killed last night,” Mum says. “They spent the whole morning picking up the broken glass in the car park. Gus from the hotel called the police he was so worried. But by the time they arrived all the bikies had gone, to camp at the beach I think. My God, I hope they don’t come back today again.” Mum shakes her head from side to side, looking worried. I don’t want them to come back either, no one does. It’s like the bikies have poisoned our town.
On Monday morning when I go to the paper shop, there’s a huddle of women standing near the door talking in low voices. I listen in and hear a few whispered sentences: “What in heaven’s name did they think they were doing? Going out there with those bikies … it’s a terrible thing … with the police and everyone knowing.” Then the women notice me standing there and change the subject. At the milk bar, it’s the same. Johanna always says that Broughton is a town full of whispering gossips, and today it sounds like they’re really on to something. I walk back to the bakery with a bottle of milk and the newspaper tucked under my arm, wondering what’s going on.

At the back of the shop, Johanna’s packing rock cakes, six to a bag. “What’s happened?” I ask her. “Everyone’s talking about something to do with the bikies.”

Johanna looks down and ties a twisty around the end of the bag of cakes in her hand. “Sorry Nell, I didn’t hear anything.”

I don’t believe her. I used to trust Johanna and think that everything she did and said was right. But she’s changed. She’s lying … I know it. “Aren’t Christians supposed to tell the truth?” I ask her, my eyes wide. She doesn’t answer.

All week there’s a feeling of secrets around the street. But no one tells me anything, and even Tracy hasn’t heard. On Friday, Johanna takes me to the park. As usual she sits on a bench reading her Bible, but I play on the rings, my feet flying from under me until I’m breathless and dizzy. Then I see Sally at the swings. It’s a hot day but she’s wearing a big grey sloppy joe and jeans, just sitting on the swing and staring at the ground. I walk over. “Hi, Sally.”

She looks up and nods at me, but the sides of her mouth barely move. Up close I can tell she’s been crying. Lots. Her possum eyes are gone and now she looks like one of those old farm dogs that have been kicked too many times. Her hair, which crinkled in the sun last week, hangs in greasy strands over her face. It’s like all the colour has faded from her body. I don’t know what to say. She looks down at the ground again, scuffing her feet in the dirt under the swing. I walk back to the rings, take one in my hand but then let it drop and it clangs against the steel pole.

I sit next to Johanna on the bench and whisper, “Sally’s over there on the swing and she’s been crying. She looks really sad … maybe someone died. You should go and talk to her.”

Johanna puts her finger on the page she’s reading so she doesn’t lose her place and looks over at the swings. “Nell, me and Sally don’t talk much
these days. She probably just wants to be on her own.” She crosses her legs and starts reading again.

I can’t stand to see Sally on the swing, her feet dragging back and forth in the dirt. “Please … just find out what’s wrong.”

Now Johanna looks annoyed. “Just leave it. Sally will be okay.’

I’m nearly crying from frustration. “But isn’t that what Christians are supposed to do? Help people when they’re sad and lonely?” I look over and Sally is heading through the back gate of the park into the showground, moving in a heavy, joyless way, as if it hurts to put each foot down, like the mermaid in that story who feels she is walking on broken glass when she trades her tail for a pair of legs.

I think of Tracy. Her horrible story. She told me that a girl was picked up by some bikies and they took her to a deserted place somewhere and ripped her clothes off and had sex with her. Then later one of the guys put a bottle up her fanny and jumped on her tummy, making the glass break inside her. I feel sick even thinking about it. At first I didn’t think it could be a true story so I asked Tracy some questions like, “Did she die?” Nah. “What sort of bottle was it?” A Coke bottle. “How did they find her, then?” A dog smelt all the blood and sniffed her out. I reckon Tracy was too quick with her answers to be lying. I think I believe her. I watch Sally hobble away, my breath all choked up in my throat, praying.

Turning to Johanna, I’m surprised to hear myself shouting and feel tears rolling down my cheeks. “You sit there and read your stupid Bible all the time but you know what you are? You’re a … a … a hypocrite!”

I run, my gut churning. I’m gasping for air by the time I reach the main street, and hang over a patch of grass near the bakery, worried that I’m going to vomit. Then, outside the bottom pub, I see the bikies getting ready to leave.

They take it slow, revving their bikes till my ears hurt, and the whole town feels like it’s shaking from the vibration. I recognise the bikie I saw Sally with that day, the one who laughed about my t-shirt. He gets on his bike and downs the rest of the beer he’s drinking. I’m close enough that I can see his throat moving up and down as he swallows. Then he looks straight over at me and throws the beer bottle on to the street at his feet, smashing it in the gutter.

The broken glass sparkles in the sun, drops of beer glistening on the edges.
ANDREW LANSDOWN

REAM

i
Solid as a brick –
five hundred sheets of paper
bound up in a ream.

ii
Intimidation –
the whiteness and the blankness
of the opened ream.

iii
Drawing a sheet
from the new ream of paper …
drawing a blank.
ROLAND LEACH

PUSHING

You can only know the world by pushing against it. Feet placed flat, leaning into it, just a touch at first so it knows you exist. Despite what you hear it is not indifferent, just needs you to make this first act of touch. It may still slip you into a crevasse wipe you out by a rare virus, or may smile allowing you to know its contours, hidden clefts, back rows.

Do not take it personally. Just take these as lessons in the world where you learn what you will put up with, and if the moon is sufficiently inclined, perhaps discover something extinct alive which refuses to bend with the wind, to nod when spoken to, or be pleased with the sheer gratitude of being left alone.
**Kent MacCarter**

**Twenty-five Unbroken Bottles of Champ**

[After *The Australian and New Zealand List of Vessels Lost, Missing or Taken from Active Service 1874 – 1949* by Peter Taylor]

7 *Alerts* in 38 years / wrecked, foundered or broke-up/ 1 cutter / 2 ketches / 1 brigantine / 2 of 3 S.S.-es sunk / 3 years apart off Nambucca Heads / the other off Cape Schank / 2 schooners / tonnage capacity mutual at 47 / both ports of registry / Melbourne / shared birthyear / 1876 / each dubbed *Glengarry* / both wrecked in Vic / even the good grace of 16 years between glubs / *Marco Polo* / a wonder of Launceston / condemned / age 32 in it’s name-sake slip / 29 tonnes this cutter hauled / never did it wander / afar from Launceston / 1848 / Sydney / the *Lass of Gowrie* nimble her tonnage max a firm 17 / aged 49 / in the registry / her only noted particular … “missing for years” / of the 5 *Hercules* / number 3 in age / dismantled in Brisbane / also at age 47 / sold as parts / register closed / 895 tonnes it could threaten / no more / 6 *Magics* / registered Kiwis / or loyal Sydneysiders / 5 broke or wrecked / here or there / in 25 years / the tiniest Magic / an entry / final in registry / cancelled / 17 tonne lugger / June / 1920 / another Brisbane gal in straights / built, 1853 / torched alive / *Louisa Maria*
/ natives of The Whitsundays / aged 25 / atypically warm that
/ August /

the Mystery / dynamited / 1906 in Lyttleton / a ketch
/ of little importance save that it took 2 years to blow / still
registered active / 1908 /

Adelaide / cutter Surprise / sunk in
collision / 1917 / location unknown /

Erected to proudly move
81 tonnes of what-have-yous / at 21 / Auckland / wrong turn /
disgracing itself into houseboat / S.S. Pitoitoi / 52 tonnes the
lesser a craft / 1939 / erased from the books / gone
CHRISTOPHER KELEN

MEMOIR OF A STROLLING PLAYER

after all these years
drifting in rivers and lakes
drunk and debauched
loveless, alone
just two strings
and the endless track

the flower fairy comes again
drops her skirt
to see me stand
unfastens
unveils
but I’m a spent man
can I live up to her passion?

I wake in a sweat
but soon forget
the moon dissolving
yellow sky
her chamber
a vine grown loose

I climb through the upper floors
into the starlit air
the nymph’s still there

tears track through her powder
like foxes in snow
their prints unseen
no dawn
to take us from this night
“The Australian Way”

Vaguely, I think this is the title of the inflight magazine that I read or rather flipped through on my way from Melbourne. I was eating this like-meal consisting of a brown cake with nuts too hard to chew until they melted themselves in my mouth, of a plastic bag containing dry banana and melon seeds, among other things that I scarcely noticed, and a tiny mug of mineral water, trashed undrunk. I say “like-meal”, remembering the new words, actually old, that I came across in the nineteenth-century Chinese fiction that I am obsessed with at the moment, to the exclusion of any fiction written and published in English. A concubine is euphemistically referred to as a “like-wife”. A man who swears allegiance with you as a brother is referred to as a “like-brother”. They have long gone out of currency in contemporary Chinese language but I am sure a like-wife or a like-brother is infinitely better than a like-meal which, to put it crudely, is a load of crap, and to put it betterly, makes you hungry and wish you had had your lunch before you boarded the plane.

When I typed “betterly”, my iBook kept changing it back to “bitterly”, for three times, proving that this Western sense of righteousness is at constant odds with my own sense of willful wrong.

Unashamedly, I am reading Brian Castro and think I made a good decision to bring Looking for Estrellita. On the first page, you can see my handwritten notes, “Ouyang Yu’s copy, 24/5/03, gouyu xini zuojia jie.” The last bits that you don’t understand were written in Chinese and mean, “purchased in the Sydney Writer’s Festival.” I spent the morning doing three readings of it and have now reached p. 50, the first reading coinciding with my first session of opening my bowels, the second reading with my breakfast in a café from across the street, and the third, with the second session of re-opening my bowels, this time more successful than the first. I don’t know if you share this feeling with me but lately it has come to my notice.
that whenever I pick up a poetry book to read over bowls being opened
the reading seems to have a disastrous effect on the bowl movements.¹

Here, I check my inbuilt Dictionary and found, a little shame-facedly, that
I should have used the word “bowel”, not “bowl”. It is almost as if my
bowels has become a bowl, which is quite a fitting metaphor except to the
contrary, containing the night, the night nourishing soil.

My bowel-opening session is usually long, I have to find something to
read or else I waste too much time. So, I go to Chinese books, of poetry,
of fiction, of anything from how to name names to how many Western
prostitutes there were in the early days of Shanghai as a result of Chinese
prostitutes refusing to cater for the desires of Western males, regarding
them as “red-haired monsters”. For your comfort, the trend has now been
reversed entirely. The most beautiful Chinese girls will fall for white
Westerners, almost any Westerners. It’s not surprising to see a nineteen-
year-old marry some old crap in his sixties. Ah, well, that’s the Chinese way
if ever there is one.

I am trying in vain to recall where I saw this “The Australian Way”.
Was it around the corner when I went into the Great Union in downtown
Sydney last night? No idea at all. As I’m flipping through the pages of
Castro’s book that I have covered, I find some pages earmarked. I have two
ways of earmarking, top earmarking and bottom earmarking, the bottom
for more important things than the top. This is because I found it hard to
retrieve some important information in a heavily earmarked book if I only
top-notched it. With bottom earmarking, I can safely and quickly locate
anything significant that I want. Up to p. 50, I’ve bottom-holed two.

Apart from earmarking, I also sidelined some sentences where I either
put a “Δ” next to them or a “?” Or I underlined certain words with a
question mark to indicate my ignorance, e.g., “anodyne” and “covey”. I
find I am fascinated by words that I do not know and I do not want to
check in a dictionary for definitions. It’s like meeting a stranger by the
name of Anodyne or Covey. Suppose you meet with a guy by the surname
of Covey. You’d be intrigued by his nationality. Years ago, I was taken by the
name of Rollo the banking officer signed on my document.

“Are you Italian?” I said.

“No, Scottish, actually,” he said.

I am tempted to think that this guy by the name of Covey originally
comes from a cove. But I’m sure you’d be appalled by my linguistic
ineptness.

I’ll stop here for lunch as well as a trip to the city to do some
shopping.
Back at my desk with my iBook open in front of me, accompanied by the buildings around me outside the hotel, I find that it is 11.06am on Monday. After I wrote the sentence above about going to lunch yesterday, I spent about half a day, about twelve hours, out and about, going as far as Campsie. When I got back to my like-home, it was midnight. For some reason, I don’t feel particularly like writing about it. I know it sounds better if I wrote “I don’t particularly feel like writing about it”. But. I am not in the mood. After reading a bit of Castro in bed and drinking my own tea that I brought from Melbourne, originally mailed from China by my friend in Shenzhen, I feel better. The Chunghwa also helps me calm down and I settle for fiction instead of poetry as I can swallow clouds and spit fogs. To talk about poetry, I haven’t written a line since I came to Sydney a couple of days ago although I think I am writing poetry here. Last night I met a woman philosopher who kept talking about one becoming two and two becoming three and three becoming wanwu, ten thousand things, an original idea from Lao Zi or an idea originally from Lao Zi. I sat there in her home, tongue-tied, for the first time, lost for words, for thoughts. Many a time I wanted to say I knew nothing about philosophy but I pretended that I appreciated her thoughts, her philosophising. The noise again, someone drilling something next door. An hour earlier, the drilling noise came from overhead, now on my right-hand side, beyond the wall. Hotel rooms, if you care to know, are never quiet. On the first night, I had to ring downstairs to ask them to switch off my too cold air-conditioner but long after I switched off the lights I listened to something else, a mechanical noise constant in the air, and wondered if I was ever able to fall into sleep.

Misunderstandings are helpful to creation. Yesterday I rang this guy, let’s say his name is Lumpen or Lambent, two words in Castro’s writing that I did not understand and did not bother finding out about, and was extended his kind of hospitality. “Come to my place for dinner by train and when you arrive I’ll pick you up at the train station. I have invited two friends for the dinner, too.” That started me wondering. Last time when he was in Melbourne and last time before last and last time before last before last, he rang me and I did nothing like this. I went to the town on the day he rang me and treated him to a dinner by driving to the city to meet him personally. Why has it to be different when I come to Sydney? Why do I have to spend nearly an hour on the train out of my way to meet him in an unknown suburb just for this “dinner” that he has already invited two friends to? I ended up not going yesterday and I decide on not going today, either. Therefore, you see, I am here writing, about myself and
perhaps for myself, listening to this vibratory drilling next door.

We are helplessly confined to ourselves, incapacitated by our own busi-
ness. If I ring a dozen familiar names I know, I know the answer: “Oh, sorry
but I’m busy” or the message, “please leave your message and I’ll ring you
back”, etc. Sydney, in fact, Australia, is a voice-recorder. So, till death do us
join when we have nothing else to do but meeting and talking.

Ah, I see, the second time I saw “The Australian Way”, it was in the
air, but I have got no more interest to go on about this save to say that
Aks needs to stay because it reminds me of the book I’ve just finished
translating, *The Story of English*.

**Notes**

1 While writing this story the author made a typographical error in writing “bowl”
instead of “bowel” but, as the story proceeded, decided to keep it rather than
correct it.
INTERVIEW WITH OUYANG YU

The interview was undertaken via email between the dates 23/4/08 and 5/5/08.

SB: What does Australia look like to you at the moment from where you are in Wuhan, China

OY: Personally, I can only talk about Oz from a personal point of view; I can’t represent anyone else – it’s where my home is currently based, a strange sort of home, where you tend to stay for a while before you get restless again. Being a freelancer, I guess, that’s the condition of life. Right now, it just hovers somewhere in a corner of my mind, relevant in the way that I would begin a poetry class with a poet or a poem from Oz, not USA or UK.

SB: How does the contemporary Australian poetry scene appear from China?

OY: The recent collection of contemporary Aussie poetry that I translated into Chinese alone and edited with John Kinsella has caught much attention in the media, online or paper-based, but that’s as far as it goes. In daily conversation, you don’t hear people talk about Aussie poetry; you don’t hear any talk about poetry, of any kind from any country. You don’t see poetry books on the book stands in small bookshops, a fact of life. And where I’m teaching at this university, with the bookcases in my office filled with poetry, Aussie or otherwise, few students, either postgraduates or undergraduates, have ever borrowed them despite my encouragement. Still, if you mix with local poets, you of course talk about it. So it seems that poetry has become a special kind of treat, a specialist area that falls outside life, so to speak. Still, if you do a keyword search for shige (poetry) online,
as I’m doing now, you can find 41.7 million items on it or related to it. The reviewer of our collection found much of it obscure, “hard to understand”.¹ The copy I got here at Wuhan University has three poems ear-marked by an unknown reader, a poem by Dorothy Porter, one by Dennis Haskell and the third by Dipti Saramanamuttu. Still, one does what one can, to make do with what one can find, for example this afternoon in my two poetry classes on women’s poetry to second year English majors I’m going to talk about Gig Ryan’s “Love sucks” and Judith Wright’s “man to woman”. I have yet to see how my students respond to Gig Ryan’s “If I had a gun” when they submit their assignment.

SB: Quite a big deal was made in Australia about Kevin Rudd’s recent visit to China. You were there at the time. How was Rudd perceived during his visit?

OY: Kevin is okay. I’m not a politician and am not into politics but I like Kevin and Chinese people I’ve bumped into all seem to be impressed with his command of Chinese and his sense of humour.

SB: Does the fact that we now have a Prime Minister fluent in Mandarin have any impact on your own sense of identity as someone who lives and travels in-between Australia and China?

OY: Even Chinese people realise clearly that being able to speak Mandarin does not mean that the speaker takes the Chinese position, as revealed over dinner by a colleague of mine. His point was Kevin was firm in his political position even though he could speak good Chinese. So, there you are: an Aussie speaking Chinese is still an Aussie; nothing much changes. For us, though, an Aussie speaking Chinese is certainly better than an Aussie not speaking Chinese because at least he or she could appreciate the culture better. As for my own sense of identity, or identities, I think I have transcended the old struggle with it or them and am comfortable with anyone regarding me as one of many things: an Aussie, a Chinese, an Asian-Chinese, an Aussie-Chinese, a Chinese-Australian, all of them together or only one of them. It suffices to say I live the two languages artistically and creatively as few can and I’m proud of that.
SB: I’ve always enjoyed reading your footnotes in both essays and poems and I think that the “pen-notes non-fiction” genre you have coined in your recent book On the Smell of an Oily Rag works particularly well. Could you please talk about the cultural differences between the use of footnotes in Chinese and English literature and also the origins of the “pen-notes fiction” style?

OY: Anyone who has read tang shi san bai shou (Three Hundred Tang Poems) in Chinese will immediately notice the editor’s close attention to detail by annotating or commenting on each line, sometimes to the extent of each word. It is posterity’s way of living with previous generations of writers. There is no sense of death. There is the continuity of one eternally living community. I’ve never cared much for the much quoted Anderson remark about the so-called “imagined community” but here, if one must use it, it’s a “lived community” or “mutually lived community” (which is not quite possible in Oz as people could live next to each other for years without even greeting or wanting to) in notes and footnotes as part of the whole. What is good about literature is that it breathes life into things across the pages and sometimes a simple remark made by an unknown person matters much more than a lengthy article by an emeritus professor. For example, I once overheard a remark from my students in Chinese that goes, xiaoshuo chule renming doushi zhen de; lishi chule renming doushi jia de (“fiction is all true except people’s names; history is all false except people’s names”). And this is where the power of tiny little things like footnotes lies: speaking it briefly and speaking no more. If you ignore it, you are at your own peril. In terms of the pen-notes fiction style, what struck me when I first read Ji Yun’s yue wei cao tang bi ji (“Pen-notes at the Hall of Reading the Minutae”) was the succinctness of things narrated, with absolutely no concern for characterisation, thematic concentration, with no pretensions to fit into any prescribed theory for such things as theory always come after, not before. The other thing that impressed me was it is fiction that reads like un-fiction, not non-fiction, or un-fiction that reads like fiction. There is a fluidity that is like a river that does not stop flowing because people accuse it of not being like anything they’ve read. It gives one the courage to create things beyond recognition, beyond prescription, beyond artistic and literary suppression as we so frequently witness in Oz. Contemporary Oz as we know it still very much lacks the
courage to do so, exactly why we need to inject such energies into it to make it more alive instead of otherwise.

SB: You argue in your introduction to On the Smell of an Oily Rag that “what is pre-modern in classical Chinese literature is like the postmodern in general Western literature, without its pretensions”. Could you please expand on this?

OY: What are the trappings of being postmodern, post modern, post modern and, indeed, postmortem if it is not what is after, life? All the signs of compartmentalisation by providing infinite restrictions and categories except life. What we are into now, things like fragments, pastiches, parodies, insertions, mergings, transwritings, listings, were all there without proclaiming they were there, without trying to put themselves in a named box. You only have to read some chapter headings in Miles Franklin’s My Brilliant Career (1901), such as “Yah” (Chapter 11), “He” (Chapter 13), “Principally Letters” (Chapter 14), “As Short as I Wish Had Been the Majority of Sermons to Which I have Been Forced to Give Ear” (Chapter 18), to realise how postmodern they were without pretending to be so. From memory, some titles of ancient Chinese poems are so long that they read like essays. It’s tradition and anti-tradition; it’s what we’ve got that you haven’t; it’s freedom that even wants to be free from freedom itself. There’s nothing arrogant or mysterious about postmodernity. It is a freedom to break through any amount of theories, a freedom to be a law unto itself, a literary law, a freedom to claim: I’m the first to do it, everything else to follow, theories, theorists, academics and the whole bunch of them.

SB: Have the language or post-language poetry movements had much of an impact on contemporary Chinese poetry?

OY: The end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and the gradual opening of the gate of China towards the outside world means an introduction en masse, among other things, of waiguo shige (foreign poetry), covering such major poetry nations as the UK, the USA, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland and others. Few Chinese poets can be said to be ignorant of what’s been going on outside China and their poetry kind of shows traces of foreign influences. For
example, Wang Jiaxin was heavily influenced by Boris Pasternak, Yi Sha by Charles Bukowski and Cai Tianxin by Jorge Luis Borges. And at the same time there were internal influences from the classical Chinese poetic tradition, e.g., Tang poetry on Yu Jian. The West based language or post-language movements, as far as I know, do not have much of an impact on Chinese poets because they are very much English-language oriented. The kind of poetry as written now is directed more towards its contents than its linguistic forms, which is why one school follows another in quick succession, such as xia ban shen pai (the lower half of the body group), la ji shi pai (rubbish poetry group), li hua ti (pear flower style), and now, di shige yundong (low poetry movement), et cetera. In a way, Chinese poetry takes its own course even when it sucks nutrition from translations of Western poetry.

SB: I think your anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry, In Your Face, is one of the most exciting poetry anthologies to be produced in Australia. One thing that appeals to me about the poems is their immediacy and raw emotion, truly in your face. This is also characteristic of much of your own poetry, in books such as Songs of the Last Chinese Poet, Moon Over Melbourne, Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes and the New and Selected Poems. While the poetry is immediately accessible at one level, it also resonates with deeper philosophical and theoretical insights. Are there parallels to be found here with Tang dynasty poetry, immediately accessible on one level, while each line carries its own footnote with historical and literary references?

OY: After my brief romantic period in which I wrote imitating the style of William Wordsworth, John Keats and Lord Byron, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, I moved away from that and wrote in my own way. The poems collected in my third book of poetry, Two Hearts, Two Tongues and Rain-Coloured Eyes, were mostly self-translations of poems written in that period, more than 20 years ago, whereas the more direct ones were written in English after my arrival in Oz in 1991; this means we can’t look at published books in an easy chronological manner. Interestingly, the poems I wrote before I went to Oz were all rejected in China but were published in late 1999 and the early twenty-first century. This is the thing: a poet working in his element and his own
way regardless of the time and the spirit of the time finds the world a few decades too late for his work. ‘In your face’ is not quite the expression. Being direct, right out of one’s heart, is a much ignored quality of poetry. We find it ‘in your face’ because we are never able to face it ourselves, never willing to face it in our poetry. We twist and turn, trying hard, trying to be clever, trying to mean too much with too little, but we forget one simple fact: poetry is a humble thing about humble things that can be described in humble words. Tang poets knew this supremely well and did it accordingly. In approaching poetry, one must understand that writing difficult poetry is much easier than writing simple poetry that speaks to the heart and the mind.

SB: In contrast, a lot of poetry being published today in Australia is more “upper body” and appears to target an academic audience. How do you account for these different trends in contemporary Chinese and Australian poetry?

OY: Sadly, much of what we see as Aussie poetry, as you say, targets an academic audience because it is profit-associated: for fame, position, wealth, international travel, invitation to literary festivals, opportunity to be placed on university teaching syllabus, awards, and etc. – boring. The best reward is not a multi-award winning poetry book but an ordinary person who never reads poetry. I once had an old white person in his eighties coming up to me after a reading and telling me how much he enjoyed reading my Moon over Melbourne and other poems when he found it in a local library. He said that he found himself sitting down and reading it from cover to cover because he had never read anything like that being a non-poetry reader. I once had a Sri Lankan man coming up to me after a reading and pointing out to me that the Moon over Melbourne book was his “favourite” book. Why do we write poetry if we can’t express ourselves in a way that moves others, not academics but ordinary people who are part of the world we are living? What’s the point of trying to impress the academics and of being so calculating that poetry’s only function is to win awards and other associated things? The concomitant problem of being into the “upper body” is hypocrisy, conceit and calculation, whereas for poetry the ultimate is honesty and freedom to be yourself.
SB: In your introduction to *In Your Face*, titled “Poems as Illegal Immigrants” (also reproduced in your recent collection of essays, *Bias*) you identify with the “intellectual poets” as opposed to the more sordid poetics of the *minjian* poets. I would observe that much of your writing is both “intellectual” and *minjian*, engaging with postcolonial theoretical insights while being written in a non-academic style and often concerning the “lower body”. Could you please talk about your relationship to the *minjian* poets?

OY: You are right about this combination of intellectual and *minjian* qualities in my poetry. Indeed, in the late 1999 Changping poetry conference in Beijing, I gave a talk in which I said I was both *zhishi fenzi* (intellectual) and *minjian*, which was confusing to the poets of the *minjian* camp because they wanted a clear demarcation line between the two, not something that was both this and that. But that is exactly where my strength lay: being someone with a PhD degree that Oz eternally denies academic job opportunities to and someone who has seen so much of the seedy side of Aussie life, I can’t possibly pretend I’m some middle-class hypocrite whose aspiration is to win a place with the people who have rejected me. I very clearly know that I am a migrant from China who is not much liked, not much accepted, not much valued, not much preferred, who is not content with fitting into the white stereotype of being a mere economic animal, who is an artist as good as anyone but has less chance of winning a place in a country originally not his own. Hence my poetry that pours, both from the upper body and the lower body. I have no pretensions, thus no inhibitions. Interestingly, I wrote my *cunt sequence* in Chinese in 1999 and it served as a great impetus to the *xia ban shen* group in late 1999 and the early 2000, a fact that is often deliberately ignored by the Chinese poets who want to keep the name entirely to themselves. Over the last decade, I’ve come into contact with many *minjian* poets in the country. These are people into *chi he wan le* (eating, drinking, fun-having, pleasure-seeking) who directly write their life experience into their poetry in sharp contrast to intellectual poets who write with one eye on the critics/academics/international attention and acceptance.

SB: Could you please discuss the significance of the web as a vehicle for publishing poetry in China, and the different approaches to web based and print publishing in Australia?
OY: Oz is still quite uptight about things when it comes to the internet in comparison to what is now happening in China. The fast developing internet has now become a major channel of expression for mainland Chinese. In terms of poetry, there are dozens of poetry websites where, once registered, you can post your poems on a daily basis and, if your stuff is interesting enough, get a following of responses. You put your stuff out there online, which is the current counterpart of the previous underground. And it has become almost mainstream in that if your stuff is interesting enough it’ll catch attention from the publishers of poetry magazines or collections. It’s now a fact of life that so much poetry published in paper-based media has originally come from online, an unignorable reality. In Oz, though, there are websites devoted to publishing poetry, but not as free as their Chinese counterparts. They are middle-class, middle-brow, middle-everything, in that they still go through a tightly controlled editing process as if a work could only be deemed publishable if agreed by three or five or ten people. It’s lack of confidence. In publishing stuff and featuring it on my website, I alone decide what I like, not giving a damn about the so-called democracy that consists of multiple mediocrities. Or I get people like you to decide on your own.

SB: Songs of the Last Chinese Poet is one of your first books of poetry and is a particularly original and powerful work. Could you please talk a little about your life at the time you wrote these poems, having recently arrived in Australia?

OY: I wrote two books while working on my PhD thesis at La Trobe University in Melbourne (early 1991 to late 1994), the first being Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems and the second being Songs of the Last Chinese Poet. The first one was a collection of the poems I wrote and the second a book I just wrote on a daily basis. I originally titled it Songs of the Last Chinese Poet at the End of the 20th Century. When I told Alex Miller about it over a cup of coffee at La Trobe University, he said: why not just Songs of the Last Chinese Poet? Which I thought was a good suggestion and accepted. Still, the part that was dropped had a strong suggestion of sentiments associated with fin de siecle or, to put it more dismally, those of death, as noted by a Chinese scholar in his PhD thesis written in Chinese. It was an intense time of acculturation and identity changing when I wrote Songs as these
things visited upon me for the first time in my thirty-five-year life: living in a completely foreign country with few connections to the outside world, working on a PhD thesis that had little positive about the object of representation – the Chinese people – and reaching a stage where one began contemplating whether one should give up on one’s own nationality as Chinese. Indeed, in late 1994, I had acquired my PR, Permanent Residence, taking my first step in renouncing my Chinese citizenship in favour of Australian citizenship. It was also the first time I truly engaged in a dialogue with an unresponsive partner, Australia, and took on a project entirely by myself in an acquired language, acquired since I was a secondary school student in the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, a language that was my enemy’s language. I’m reading a history of the Chinese–British relationship written in Chinese and am once again amazed at how the English forced open China’s doors in 1840 with opium. Back then, the English language was *hong mao hua* (red-haired speech) that no one thought would have been so widely accepted in China and in the Chinese-speaking world. There was shame associated with the acquisition of this language. For example, when we write the way we do we still face criticism from native-speaking critics that our kind of English is not quite right. They’ve got to stop that arrogance. English is a changing language that is now being changed by people like me. Simple as that.

SB: You have published a number of self-published works, including poetry and essays, and also made your own books. There is often a stigma associated with self-publishing or what is sometimes called vanity publishing. As someone who has published widely, do you find it liberating to self-publish? Or do you self-publish more out of frustration?

OY: There are many self-publishers in the world, among them William Blake, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Anaïs Nin, Virginia Wolf, e.e. cummings, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Benjamin Franklin. There are many factors associated with self-publishing, not just “vanity”. Sometimes there is experimental stuff one writes that defies publishing by the mainstream publishing houses, like my *Wo Cao* (fuck). You have only two choices: wait till you die when someone comes along and
publishes it, which is extremely unlikely, or publish it yourself while you are alive. It’s really not out of “frustration” as you put it; it’s out of a will to give life to things that should exist on record, not wiped out without a trace if not published by others. Sometimes I suspect there is a conspiracy between publishers, critics and academics to demonise self-publishers because they (publishers, critics and academics) are not good enough and do not recognise the worth of things that have to be self-published to gain an existence. For authors themselves, they have to be perceptive enough to know their own worth and courageous enough to publish themselves by paying no attention to rejection from publishers, critics and academics. One wonders why all those quoted above had to publish their own work that was ignored by the blind but managed to survive to this day as masterpieces. As writers, we’ll refuse to be killed by publishers, critics and academics, but have to insist on self-publishing as a way of living, a way of gaining a life, and a way of continuing that life. You only have to look at In Your Face to realise this. If I didn’t do it myself, do you think any Aussie publishers would take any pity by publishing it? Do you think any academics would give a damn? No way. In this cold cruel callous world that is centred on money, an artist has to save his self and his own arse by self-publishing and self-doing things. Besides, there’s a special kind of pleasure in self-publishing, that is, you can publish the way you want to, any size, any number of copies, from a single copy to multiple copies of limited edition, hand-made and bound in your preferred manner. Self-publishing, in a word, is self-empowerment. Most poetry books in China these days are self-published and there’s no “stigma” attached to it; it’s the way to go. Editors in China now go online in search of work self-published there. I met a poet born in the 1970s who told me that he had never sent any stuff to any so-called established literary journals. All he did, he revealed, was post his poems online in one of dozens of poetry websites. Even my Cunt Sequence ended up published in a China-based literary journal after it was self-published online. Why wait years for someone to realise that there is value in your work if you can get your stuff published by yourself? You only have to read my poem, “Self publishing”, in Overland (118, 2007, p. 93) to know what I was talking about. By the way, I wrote the poem when the batch-load of copies of Bias arrived in my workplace. I love self-publishing and would like
to have the privilege of publishing all my works by myself and not giving others the pleasure of publishing me and distorting me in publishing me. At least that was a thought I had at one stage of my life. Our problem is that we let others run roughshod over us without self-autonomy; we’ve lost the ability to judge and must surrender ourselves to the judgment of a so-called authority who applies outdated literary standards to things written beyond their imagination.

SB: You seem to have an ambivalent attitude toward theory. On the one hand, you have used theory in your academic work and it suits your situation as someone writing from the margins and facing the identity issues that arise from cultural displacement as you move between China and Australia. On the other hand, you find theory oppressive and also limited in so far as it fetishises characteristics of pre-modern literature. You also described postmodernism earlier as a freedom to break through any amount of theories. How do you negotiate these creative tensions in your thinking and writing?

OY: One never had to worry about theory or the need to theorise till one had to do a PhD, a degree that led to a cul de sac in Oz for a migrant like me. That’s the first point to make. The second point is that sticking to theories is dangerous. Unless you want to turn yourself into a machine or an automaton run on theories of machinery you don’t want to follow a theory in living a life. Academics need theories because that’s their fan wan (rice bowls) with which they make a living. Without that rice bowl in Oz, I don’t need theories to make a living, at least not that kind of living. I read theories that interest me but feel no need to adhere to any. They exist for me to go beyond, not into. If I can make use of them I’ll make the use. Otherwise, if I feel they are hampering me or obstructing the way, I’ll clear them off. Creation overrides any theories. You look at Derrida, you look at Foucault, you look at all those names that once were theoretic warriors, worriers, the very reason they were not good poets or creative writers is the dry brainy stuff that filled them stopped creative energies channeling into other things. When I say theory is dangerous I had China in mind, too. The nation as it is now was founded in 1949 entirely on theory, the Marxist and Leninist theory or theories. What China ended up with is one disaster after another, millions of deaths as a result.
A personal anecdote. In late 1999, when I was Asia-Link writer in residence at Peking University, China, I had brought with me a number of theory books by Derrida, Foucault and a French guy whose name escapes me right now. But I did not read a single page of any of the books I had bought in Melbourne. One of the reasons is that in a Chinese situation they were so out of place, like some useless dysfunctional killing weapon, that I found them cumbersome and boring. Another reason is that their concerns were not our concerns or their (Chinese) concerns; a Chinese poet would write much better poetry without knowing them. Besides, the kind of obscurity was time-consuming and, in the end, time-wasting. I took them back to Oz without reading a page and wished that I’d spent the money elsewhere.

NOTES


Ouyang Yu

Digging

In 1851 I would not have come to Victoria to dig
Looking at these photos of those people
I would have been one of those fictional characters
Smoking opium by day
Whoring around by night
Or smoking and whoring by day and night
I would have squandered my life away that way
For someone else to dig should they like to dig
After they made good and came home in brocade robes
It is even less likely that I would have bothered coming to any parts of Australia
Which is why I didn’t come and my name was never recorded
In any parts of that country’s history
Looking at the sign showing the routes to the goldfields
I told me once again that I would not be bothered
If I had not bothered in 1851 or subsequently
Digging is a beautiful thing
But not digging for gold
Not for me
OUYANG YU

HANGING BRANCHES: LYRICS FROM THE MING DYNASTY

Feng Menglong (1574–1646) is a well-known man of letters in the Ming Dynasty, whose outstanding contribution to Chinese literature is his collection of folk songs and folk lyrics popular in the Wanli Period (1573–1620) of the Ming Dynasty. Titled, gua zhi’er (Hanging Branches), these were lyrics of songs sung by ordinary lovers in a way that was described by Feng Menglong as “the most shallow and the most slangy but also the truest.” (See the article in Chinese on this by Ah Ying, at http://www.guxiang.com/wenxue/pinglun/dushu/200203/200203120026.htm)

Years ago when I first came into contact with these songs I was deeply impressed with their frankness about love, sometimes to the degree of obscenity, but it’s never vulgar, and it has a contemporary touch and urgency in it, too. People love and make love and they tell their love stories in the simplest way they can.

Feng Menglong, trans. Ouyang Yu

Stealing a Look
Who is it that licked my window till it broke? Brow comes and eyes go. Hidden autumn waves delivered. How can I not return your kindness? I want to hug you but there are too many eyes. I look at my dear and my Dear looks back at me.

Note: “window” refers to the lattice window covered with rice paper, used in ancient China. “Autumn waves” refers to amorous glances cast.
Impatient
I am getting excited when I see you happen to go past. Happy at heart. A coincidence. Waiting for my brother after my own heart. I’d love to hold you in my arms and sit. I want to call you but am afraid of being heard. I want to pull you but there are too many eyes. My eyes fixed on you, my sweetheart yuanjia. This impatience is killing me.

Note: yuanjia means “foe” or “enemy” but is an endearment for one’s lover or sweetheart.

Hugging
Handsome sweetheart yuanjia. I miss you so much I die. You’ve only just arrived today. I’m overjoyed, hugging you with clothes. Heaps of handsomeness on you, from top to toe. One hug dispels all my sorrow. Another hug all my boredom. Even if we can’t share the pillow in one bed, it’s good you can stand before me for a bit.

Meeting
They all say it’s endless when lovers meet. When we meet, though, it’s quite sad. Crying and talking. And then day breaks in the east. You get dressed and leave in a hurry. I lie alone in bed wrapped up in my bedclothes. Don’t know when we shall meet again. All I can do is tell of tonight’s sorrow.

Flowers Open
Appointment with my lover, for when the flowers are open. I’m intending to prune peony and herbaceous peony, and wait for the flowers to bud; I would then be lucky. It’s close to Qingming Festival now but not a stamen or pistil has grown. Last year I thought the flowers would be open by this season. Why is there such a delay this year?

Flirting
Lovely person. I really do like. I’d love to swallow you up, like a bowl of water. Missing you daily. Trying to get by each day. In the end, it doesn’t work. Now, I pick up my courage and come forward to kiss. Thank heavens. Thank earth. You don’t resist. If I had known you wouldn’t resist, I would not have waited till today.

Another version:
My sweetheart yuanjia pulled me outside the window and took my fragrant cheek in one bite as his hands tried to loosen my pants. Brother: Just wait! Someone might come. Wait till there is no one around and I’ll let you take off my pants whichever way you like.
THE MAN WHO WROTE

VERT

The sad Sunday comes floating through the space beneath the door. It is painted blue, the door. Sally had done it many years earlier, wanting a new start. Vert called them sad Sundays, but it wasn’t so much a sad feeling as a lazy pining for the fun that had been had the night before, and a certain blue tinge to the shadows, and a smell of cold outside and warm within. But Vert called them Sad Sundays. They hadn’t had sad Sundays here often, because there wasn’t enough to be glad about.

Vert didn’t share in this particular sad Sunday, he only got the left over feeling of it, which was good enough for him. It was something he would write about, after he’d finished what he was writing now. Downstairs, a couple of left over teenagers from Chris’s fifteenth were cultivating silence over toast and vegemite. Vert could smell the toast, and he could hear the very occasional murmurs of his son’s fourteen and fifteen-year-old friends. He tucked his head down again, and continued to type away, vaguely enjoying the thin mid-morning light that brought in the smells from the kitchen, under the door to his study.

When Vertigo was four or five, he went to visit his grandmother in Launceston. It was a long way from St Mary’s. Almost five hours. They went, Vertigo, and his parents, in the Kombi. The back of it, where Vertigo had to sit, smelt of hippie vomit, which was even more sour than the normal type. Mum, Sand, reached a hand back, and felt around on the seat next to him, brushing his leg occasionally with her tobacco stained fingers. Sand had been very beautiful once, before Vertigo S. Fall had even been born, before he became the man destined to write the longest book in history.

The small, five-year-old Vertigo had known what his mother, Sand (who had changed her name by deed poll from Felicity), had wanted, and, since she was driving, and since poor bloody Vertigo didn’t want to end up in a fucking mess in a ditch at
the side of the road, with the echidnas ripping through his belly with the heavy, root breaking muscles in their backs, Vertigo handed Sand Fall the small zip lock bag, the same kind as he took his sandwiches to school in when he could be bothered to make them. Thanks honey, Sand told him, and threw the bag into her sleeping husband’s lap. Vertigo wasn’t allowed to open the window, as the smoke filled up the car. He hoped a policeman would pull them over, so he could get out of the car and run and run up that embankment on the side of the road, and disappear like that wallaby over there, behind that anthill.

SALLY
“Can we eat the cake in the fridge, Mum?”
“For breakfast honey?” I ask my newly-fifteen boy.

Chris doesn’t ever seem to want to impose structures or rules on himself, but it is his birthday, and I’m tired. Night before last I had a longer shift than usual, because two of the other nurses were on maternity leave. Six days on, one day off. Time is just work and sleep, and days off. Time is three minor injuries, one dead child. A car crash, a bungled surgery, overtime.

Some days I look at the bank account, and the bills, and smooth my eyebrows down, again and again. I used to pull the hairs out, but I stopped doing that.

“Do you want some too?” My son – that baby I was so afraid would turn out like his father – the son with leftover black paint under his eyes, which he will reapply before leaving the house, automatically hands me the only different plate, from my favourite Wedgwood set, the one with the china blue flowers.

“You gave me a smaller piece,” I tease him, happy that he’s including me.

“So cut another bit,” he says irritably, and wanders off to the lounge.

I stare at the cake, then put the plate in the fridge. Vert will eat it tonight, when I’m at the hospital, when he comes out for food. I won’t get to taste the cake if I don’t eat it now. But knowing that no one in this house would have the courtesy to leave it for me makes me want to eat it even less.

VERT
Vert can’t remember what it is he’s written the day before, so he reads the last line, gets the gist, and moves on. You should never edit, is his motto, or would be if he had a motto.

Mostly Vert only sleeps six, maybe seven hours during the day. The
nagging worry that he won’t finish his book in time wakes him. Sometimes his head hurts. Sometimes he wakes up breathing through his mouth because when he lies on his side, mucus runs into his nose. Some days he takes a shower before he starts writing.

Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the day, three hours into his seven hours sleep, and writes down a line or two that has come to him in his sleep, on his arm. Those are the days he doesn’t shower. At least, not until the words are committed to something more secure. One day, maybe, he’ll go back and read it all. Read it all. Read it all.

Sometimes there are things outside the book, but I have to ignore them. There will be this buzz inside me until it all comes out. “Nervous Tension. Traumatized. Vestiges of self harming rage.” It’s what he said. The white coat with the buckles and bootstraps came to life on the hanger and pulled me inside it. It was father and it was me. Think of Sally’s face. This is what I dreamed. I dream. I write. Things happen. Sometimes the same things.

It should make me feel cramped, that the book is all I am. I understand that. That I’m not a real human, just a bunch of words on a page.

It should make me feel like I did when I was in their car, in their house, bursting from the inside out, because there was nothing to do, nothing to change, helpless. But it’s more like a road, and every new page is a new tree, or sign, or landmark I have passed, and I want to keep going. To find what’s at the end of the road, and wave at the trees and signs on my way by.

The point is, I don’t stop. Can’t. Won’t.

SALLY

Chris hadn’t wanted to have his party at the house.

“No fucking way,” had been his phraseology.

“I thought it would be nice,” I’d said weakly.

He laughed. “Or we could have a teddy bear’s picnic down by the river, and invite everyone in the town,” he had said, and then in case I hadn’t got the message yet, “I don’t do nice.”

I just really hadn’t wanted him out on the street, drunk, lost in the middle of Launceston and the night. There had been kids over the past weeks coming into the hospital at two or three in the morning, some to have their stomachs pumped, more because they’d been in fights. One boy, only nineteen, had been riding around drunk on his bicycle, tailing a ‘hottie’ in the back of a car, and had gone through the back windscreen when the car stopped. He’d been cut so close to his jugular vein and death,
but thought it was all a hilarious story to tell his friends. I hate working at night.

“Vert won’t even come out,” I’d said.

“I’ve told most of them my dad’s dead. There’s no way … ”

So they all went out instead. As a concession to me, Chris brought them all back to the house at three am to sleep. They still think Vert is dead. Maybe I should try that trick with my family.

VERT
I remember the first time. They tried to make me stop. The air in my room was still thick and smoky. What was I? Eight?

Vertigo had been excited at first, all the eskies appeared, early in the afternoon, and their owners gave me soft drink, and one gave me a sherbet lollipop that I dipped in the fizzing liquid. I loved the taste of sugar. There had been an attempt at a barbecue and I made everyone laugh by dipping my half cooked sausage in the soft drink. I kept doing it, because people kept laughing. The adults went inside.

Vertigo was sent to his room; Daddy locked him in, and told him he should go to sleep, and ignore anyone who came to the door.

The strange smoke smell came, grass, a lot of it. I think they must have had the whole house shut up, because it began to pool under my door. I was starting to feel sick. I’d eaten the sausage, even though I could taste it was slightly raw, because I’d been hungry, and we never had sausages. Sand and Brack didn’t have meat in the house.

The bubbles from the fizzing drink had given me an upset stomach, and I began to burp. My gut was twisting itself tighter and tighter, even though, at the same time, it was being forced and stretched out with gas. “Mum.”

But I didn’t really want her to come. I didn’t like seeing her when her eyes got big. I never knew if it was still her.

The music started then. It was loud, and the smoke was still flooding under my door. I thought the house was on fire. Fear and sausage and fizzing lollipop soft drink were expelled from my stomach all at once, into my bed sheets.

Vertigo was sick until he was throwing up bile, but the sharp pain in his belly went away a little. The thick strings of saliva ran down his cheeks. He had no energy to wipe them away. Vertigo fell asleep.

He had strange dreams. The house was on fire, and he knew it was on fire, but he didn’t really mind very much. Though he did feel hot. Sweat was all over him, and it cooled him down. He was too cold now, in an igloo. He was floating above the igloo inside it, and there was a circus horse inside. The horse was him, but he was floating above the horse, and all he had were his eyes. He couldn’t speak because he had no
mouth. The fire swept toward the igloo and chased it down, and burnt all the flesh off the horse, leaving a dark globule of chaos, and the droplets of melted ice were burning hot, and Vertigo woke up to screeching laughter outside his door, and sweat all through his hair.

The smell of vomit on his sheets made him feel sick again, so Vertigo crawled out of bed, and over to the far wall. The far wall was near the door, and the thick cloud was puffing like train smoke underneath it. There were crayons in my hand.

A yellow one, but I didn’t like that one because it didn’t show up on my wall. Blue, and red, and scrawling handwriting that I’d learned three years before at school. And on the floorboards I tried to write smaller so I’d have enough space. And I stood with one foot on one post of my bed head to reach up higher than before, and I’d never felt so wonderful in my life.

There were tinkling bottles in a rubbish bin and daylight, and when Vertigo’s father opened the door, unlocked it from the outside with a key, and tried to find his son amongst all the writing, he could not. Because his son was under the bed, hiding from the horse, and filling up the only space left in the room with beautiful, wonderful words.

SALLY
Vert once wrote me a love letter. Or rather, he wrote it about me, shyly, and I found it. Back in the days when he could still notice me. It should have warned me off. But it was so beautiful. He can write well. He used to write well. He wrote me into loving him.

She has a heart that beats beneath a silver chain that holds a clockwork
She has tiny invisible downy hairs beneath her chin that move when she’s cold
She has lips that bunch into crevices, like a cherry tomato left too long in the sun
She has a mind of steel, of marzipan, like her wiry body, that could be strong or fragile, depending on whether it’s working today.
She has cold hands. I have cold hands.
She has something.
Something.
Everything that matters. She is the world made corporeal.

I can’t tell you.
So I will write;
I love you, I love you, I love you.
And burn it.

But of course he didn’t burn it. He could no more destroy a piece of his
own writing than I could euthanize a patient.

How could he have written it if he hadn’t felt it? I push his hand off my leg. Well done Mustang Sally. You kept the poem. You married the madman.

And if I leave; “We told you so,” my family will say.

VERT
It is time for something to eat. Vert hates to be distracted from his novel, but when he doesn’t eat, the words don’t come so well. He checks his hands against the sunlight coming through the window. Shaky. Snaky, nasty hands that are like the little girl’s red shoes. Won’t let him stop dancing, dancing, dancing across the keys.

Vert exhales slowly, and kicks himself back from the computer screen. He takes a disc from the drawer, and backs up all that he has written. Once the computer crashed, and all of him had crashed with it, and he saves it all now. He removes the disc when it is done, and goes downstairs, tapping it on his hand. He nestles it gently in its place in the shed, ranked ahead of all the other thousands of CDs. They throw rainbow smiles at him, but he doesn’t see them because he’s shaky and hungry.

He finds a piece of chocolate cake in the fridge, takes it out, and wonders what the occasion was. Yesterday seems like 3000 words ago.

SALLY
I had a romance with a patient last year. I had a romance. It was not a sex thing. He was older, by a lot. But he loved me, and I him, with the deep affection I sometimes have for the people I know are dying. Some days I’d take him flowers or liquorice straps. But I stopped. Because I knew it wasn’t going to make him well. And the only reason he enjoyed them was because I was there. It was better without the well wishers.

Some people, when they’re dying, all they’re doing is dying. But there are others, for whom dying is a slow ritual, a mystical thing that makes all the bathing, feeding, and bedpans irrelevant. I hope I die like that. I used to be one of those people, I think.

I started writing my own stories. I used to write things about Lance, or the others before him, or about Christopher. Sometimes things at work ate at my own mortality, or something glorious would happen. I’m not sure why I did it that first time. Maybe spite. But now it’s a habit. Every morning before I go to sleep, I write about my day, and what’s been going on, like a journal, pick a random spot in my husband’s ravings, and type away. Every morning I lie down next to him, and hope that one day he’ll read it, and wake up.
They arrested me, and took Grandma back to the hospital. But they were too late. She’d already gone to her tea shop. They let me out. It was a misunderstanding.

They buried her in St Mary’s, and at night, I took a bucket of the earth, and walked to Falmouth. The frogs followed me all the way. At dawn I threw the earth off the cliff, and filled the bucket with pink shells. The pink shells were for Sand.

SALLY
We don’t talk about Sand, Vert’s mother. He cut off all contact years ago, when I first met him. Every time a letter came to his late grandmother’s house – our house now – addressed in that shaky junkie handwriting, he’d go down to the Esk and stand there, looking at the water for hours. I think he might even have jumped in once, just before I left to go back to England to finish my degree. He must have dragged himself out again. He came home all wet.

Vert used to do strange things, before I came. There are scars all over him. Twenty-one-years-old and lying in bed, I asked him about them. “Ravaged by tigers,” he’d joked unhappily, and started twisting the sheets.

Which is why I’m hiding the letter now. I should burn it. Watch the black edges turn blacker, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

VERT
Dad, Brack, spent three months in the house on his own when Vertigo was very young. He kept telling Sand he was a robot. He’d been reading Kurt Vonnegut stories while he was high. So Sand and Vertigo went to visit grandma for a little while. Sand had to smoke with her head out the window in the bathroom, with the door locked. She told grandma she was burning incense, that grandma smelt like mothballs and old people.

She didn’t, though. Grandma smelt like rosewater. It didn’t matter whether she’d applied any that day or not. Her skin had absorbed the smell. I remember being scared to hold her hand, because it looked like rice paper. I thought it would rip right off.

SALLY
Tonight it’s just Chris and I at dinner. I eat before work. Mostly it’s just me. But I look forward to eating with my son every day anyway.

“Remind me I have to go and vote on Saturday,” I say.
“I’ll probably forget. It’s not worth it anyway.”
“Of course it is!” I don’t realise how patronising I sound.
“No it’s not. The government’s fucked up. The alternative is fucked up, Australia’s fucked up. But no one will admit it. It’s all a downward
spiral, greenhouse, uranium, drought. I can’t see why anyone’s worried about education.” A sneaky attempt at leverage – I’ve been getting calls from his teachers. He looks from the corner of his eyes to see if it has worked.

“Education’s important in fixing those things, Chris, perspectives are…”

“Perspectives are concepts. You can’t fix those things. It’s too late for that, you know? Our time is pretty much over.”

“Oh, Chris. Is this what you talk about with your friends? You can’t worry about that stuff.”

“No, we … they aren’t into that stuff.”

He glares at his half demolished pie. His words scare me, more than his black clothes and lined lids.

“We’ll talk about this when I get home from work.”

“I’ll be very asleep.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

He gives me an ironic look, mocking himself, “Tomorrow the world ends. And I’ll be out.”

VERT

Sometimes I can get inside my mother. Sometimes I am other characters.

Sand isn’t like the other mothers. She knows this. When she comes to pick her son up from school, she walks barefoot from the house (it is a matter of minutes), and when she gets there, sometimes Vertigo has picked her a flower. The other mothers look at her strangely, jealous because she has flowers and bare feet and freedom, and they have dishcloth hands, and aprons, and repressed sexuality. Sometimes she forgets to pick him up. But it’s ok, because Vertigo just picks more flowers on the way home. He knows she loves flowers. Before she realised she was a sea hawk in her past life, Sand had thought of changing her name to Peony. But Sand suited her better. One time she’d forgotten, or was distracted from picking Vertigo up, and he arrived, hand full of white petals and yellow centres and aphids, to find Sand with her skinny breasts exposed, and her skeleton hips clicking as she rode the British hitchhiker she’d met. She’d seen the sticky green stems drop on the Indian rug, and had heard Vertigo slam the door as he ran out. Goddamit. She would take her pleasure where it fell. Her son was so selfish sometimes.

SALLY

I worry about Christopher. My son ‘hangs out’ at the mall, when he isn’t at school, or in his room. I once joked I’d have his door removed if he didn’t come out. He started locking it after that.
Today I found a kitchen knife in his school bag. He told me he liked to cut his food. I told him surgeons like to cut up people, but that they don’t do it away from the surgery.

If I give Vert the letter, life in this house will go to hell. I’ll be confiscating kitchen knives from my husband.

How did they tell Oedipus his mother was dead? Did they tie up his hands lest they gouge out his eyes?

VERT
Vert sits at his desk for three hours before he notices anything digging into his leg. He jiggles his pocket experimentally. There’s a card inside. He thinks at first it’s a playing card, but it’s too big for that. The edges are black, the card dirty with a shoeprint.

Notification of Death
Sand Fall (Felicity Elyever)
Died
At St Mary’s Community Health Centre
On the 19th of May 2004

Then some more words. Vert tosses it away, looks about for his mug of tea, and hunches back over his computer, not comprehending.

“You should try it,” Vertigo’s father said, his face in disarray, wielding the tube of toothpaste.

“The toothpaste?” Vertigo, fourteen, old, ventures.
“No, the … ” his father says, “the … ” his brain in disarray.
He’s sitting on the swing on the porch. The view is disarmingly writable. The swing is yellow and brown, patterns of flowers. More of a seat that swings from rigid, inflexible arms from a frame. It does not have hands. It cannot let go. It cannot let go the frame.
There is a patch of foam on a corner of the cushion, interrupting, interrupting the yellow pattern flowers.
St Patrick’s Head pokes up behind Vertigo’s father’s head. The swing squeaks.
“It’s organic.” The toothpaste tube is held out like Excalibur.
“It’s not.”
“Well it should be,” he squints at the fine print.
“You’re not right.”
“Yes I am. Here, it says so on the tube,” holds it out for inspection.
“There’s nothing.”
“Well then I’m not fucking using it.”
Vertigo leaves him there. He runs down to the field at the back of the house. Rests
against the fence. There is blood through his hand. Vertigo laughs and laughs. You have no idea how funny it all was. I laughed and gripped that barbed wire until my face was wet.

I was still giggling when I went back up onto the deck.

“Don’t take it in there,” my father said, looking at my dripping hand. “The thermometer wasn’t broken this morning.” He shook his head sadly, “You shouldn’t do that with that stuff anyway. Don’t you know it’s fucking poisonous?”

But I was laughing too hard to say anything back. I think that’s how I got the hernia.

That hand scarred up nicely. I told the girl I’d been fighting tigers.
He thought my blood was mercury.

He wakes up in the middle of the day after a long, exhausting dream. For a while he lies there, trying to remember what it was about. Something about some typed out words. They didn’t mean anything really. Died. It is a common word, below him. Four letters, boring. They can’t disguise that with their squiggly musketeer writing.

But oh.

The card. Where is the card? There was a name on it. One name remembered, bony hips and an Indian rug. The other name bathing the bony hips in the remembered light of youth, cheery cheeks, grandmother, a picture in a frame.

Grandmother, is his grandmother dead? Vert has a sudden fit of panic, and scrambles through the door of the study and rakes his fingers about the floor. Before he even finds the note, he stops and starts laughing. At himself. Bitterly. Grandmother is already dead. This is her house. Who else? St Mary’s.

The word printed there, surrounded by all the other sorry mundane words. Sand. Sand. Sand. Felicity.

This is sad. That Sand is dead. Vert Elvery shrugs and throws the card in the bin, while Vertigo Fall howls, howls for his mother.

SALLY
When I came in, Vert was laid out like a plank on the bed, arms by his sides, toes pointing at the ceiling. His breathing was not regular, but he was asleep. I felt a thrill of fear, shrugged it off with my uniform, and showered to get rid of the hospital smell. That smell always makes me somewhere between hungry and nauseated. When I went to bed I could still smell it, but it wasn’t on me anymore, but on Vert. Exhaustion hammered and pulled and pressured right inside my head and I ignored it. When I dreamed, I
dreamed of sharp colours, jagged, launching themselves at me. I found comfort in a white room, made of cushions, a nest. Speakers played me Mozart, softly. It grew louder, and I sought the source of the annoyance. The sounds were voices, scratching, yowling voices, shrilling in my ears. I tried to rip out the cords with my beak, but they grew back, and the voices mounted against me. “Let me out,” I cawed, but the cushion walls curled down around me, bringing the noises right against my ears, and I was naked and human and drowning in feather pillows.

Of course, I woke up with my face pressed into the pillow, and a hollow of emptiness beside me.

VERT
He just goes down to the river to see. To wonder if it still has the pull for him that it did years ago. It is dark when he gets there. For a time he just stands at the top of the cliffs and watches as the river below carves itself deeper into its chosen passage. Then he climbs down because he has the undeniable urge to scoop the water, even though it is cold, or perhaps because it is so.

There is the moon above him, and he sees himself in the water. He wonders what this means. That he has joined with the water? His atoms will become those of the water. He bends very slowly on his knees, and squats on the tiny bit of flat, dry earth by the water. If he loses his balance, he will be gone, and he knows that this time, unlike that other time, he will not resurface. Tonight the Esk is calling for his soul. The top is shiny translucent like a cataract. Underneath there is a terrible pull. He focuses on the water, not hearing the approaching voices.

Suddenly Vert stands, and points to his reflection.
“All that you are is a lie. All that you are is a word. You turned yourself into a word.” Vert tugs off his shirt, and holds the sleeve, letting the rest fall into the water. The Esk gives a hungry, lapping splash, and pulls the shirt under, almost pulling Vert off his feet. But for some reason, he pulls the shirt back out. Then puts it back in again. Testing, testing.

“Hey! There’s a dude down there.”
Not now, Vert thinks, for the love of all that is holy, don’t let reality intrude now.

“Yeah, what the fuck? I see him.”
Vert freezes, hoping it’s not him they’ve seen.

“Hey!” They are calling to him in their young, strong voices. But so is the Esk.

There is a sudden bout of laughing as Vert pretends to wash his shirt in the river.
“It’s just some bum.”
“Here take the gun.”
“Why? What?”
“They’re only rubber bullets. Let’s see if you were cheating at the shooting gallery.”
“I can’t just shoot some bum.”
“You were cheating! I fucking knew it, Chris.”
“Jesus, Mike.”
“No, shut up, Trent. Chris thinks he’s fucking hot stuff. Shoot the fucker, Chris, and prove it.”

Vert turns around, at the sound of his son’s voice. It is deeper than he remembers it, but he knows it is Chris, his Chris, because it sounds exactly like Vert did at fifteen.

Do it, Vert thinks, but the moon is not his friend like the Esk is.
“Oh shit! That’s my … I mean … Oh shit.”
“Stop stalling, Chris, you little emo, and take your shot.”
“Fuck off, Mike.”
Chris is scrambling down towards him, and for some reason, Vert holds out his arms to his son.

“Hey, what the fuck, man? We’re outta here.” The other two boys leave, mumbling things about fucking.

“It is you.” Chris stands a little above Vert, unable to fit on Vert’s little patch of dry earth. Vert looks into his eyes and sees the light fluff on his son’s cheeks, and holds out his arms again. Chris’s eyes go glassy and hard. The kind of fury and hatred that children reserve for their parents lurks in them. But the corner of his mouth jerks down, and his nose turns suddenly red just above the bridge.

“What are you doing?” Chris says softly, shaking his head. “Were you going to jump in you stupid old man?”

Vert glances at the flow, then back up at Chris. “I don’t know.” He is unsure if he says it or not.

They stand there together for a very long time, feeling the song of the Esk.

Chris has to tuck the gun into his back pocket so he can help Vert scramble back up. Vert feels the boy’s burning hot hand, and feels the strength in him as he hauls him up. Chris brushes the sleeve of his hoodie over his face before he turns to face Vert, whose shirt is drifting away downstream.
“I wish I was … ” Vert says, struggling with emotions he hasn’t got the paper and pens to say. He wants to tell Chris that he is terrified of him. Terrified that he will end up like him. He has been hiding. Hiding so that Chris won’t know him, won’t know the terrible insanity he is capable of. But nothing ever expresses itself that simply in his mind anyway.

“Let’s go home,” Chris says, and takes a deep breath.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CHRIS ANDREWS has published a collection of poems, Cut Lunch (Indigo, 2002) and translated books of fiction by Latin American authors, including César Aira’s How I Became a Nun (New Directions, 2007).

LOUIS ARMAND is a visual artist and writer who lives in Prague. He is the author of two volumes of prose fiction and has authored and edited numerous volumes of non-fiction, including Contemporary Poetics (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007). His most recent collections of poetry are Malice in Underland (Textbase, 2003), Strange Attractors (Salt, 2003) and Picture Primitive (Antigen, 2006).

ERINN BATYKEFER is the author of the collection Allegheny, Monongahela, which won the 2008 Benjamin Saltman Prize from Red Hen Press. Her poetry and essays have appeared in numerous publications in the US, Canada, and Britain. She is the Stadler Poetry Fellow and Associate Editor of West Branch at Bucknell University and is currently at work on a memoir.

ROBERT JAMES BERRY lives and writes in Auckland, New Zealand. His work has been published widely since his first collection Smoke appeared in 2000 (UPM Press, Serdang, Malaysia: 2000). He has published Stone, Seamark, Sky Writing and Sun Music (all Ginninderra Press, Canberra, Australia: 2007). Robert has just completed his sixth collection Mudfishes.

RON BLABER is Head of Communication and Cultural Studies in the School of Media Culture and the Creative Arts at Curtin University. He has a background in Australian and Postcolonial Studies and is interested in popular expressions of post-national identity and how they relate to formations of community and citizenship.

ROGER BOURKE has an MA from the University of Cambridge and a PhD from the University of Western Australia. His book Prisoners of the Japanese: Literary Imagination and the Prisoner-of-War Experience was published by the University of Queensland Press in 2006. He works as a freelance editor.

STEVE BROCK lives in Adelaide with his wife and daughter. In 2003, Steve completed a PhD in Australian literature at Flinders University. His first collection of poems, the night is a dying dog, was published in Friendly Street New Poets 12 (Wakefield Press) 2007.
Andrew Burke is an Australian poet who has been writing and publishing since the 1960s. He is currently teaching at Edith Cowan University and conducting workshops for writing groups. In November 2008, he was Writer In Residence in Broome, holding writing workshops on the theme of Place.

Toby Davidson is an Associate Lecturer in Literary Studies and Professional Writing at Deakin University, Warrnambool. His research seeks to address the existing gap in Australian scholarship regarding Australian Christian mystical poetry in line with the literary criticisms of other traditions. He is also a published poet.

Bruce Dawe is one of Australia’s best-known poets and holds the Order of Australia. Among his many awards, his most recent was the Centenary Medal in 2003 for “Distinguished Service to the Arts Through Poetry.” The collected edition of his poems, Sometimes Gladness, has sold almost 100,000 copies. His work is studied widely at secondary and tertiary level.


Diane Fahey’s eighth poetry collection, Sea Wall and River Light, was co-winner of the 2008 Judith Wright Prize, awarded by the ACT government. Her seven previous collections variously engage with Greek myths, fairytales, visual art, nature writing, and autobiographical themes. The Mystery of Rosa Morland, a mixed-genre novel, was published by Clouds of Magellan in 2008.

Kevin Gillam is a West Australian poet with two books of poems published, other gravities (2003) and permitted to fall (2007), both by SunLine Press. He works as Director of Music at Christ Church Grammar School, Perth, and as a freelance cellist.

Meriel Griffiths is completing a PhD in a contemporary English-language Welsh poetry at the University of Western Australia and has a lively interest in poetry from Australia and the UK.

Jeffrey Guess teaches poetry at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE. He is currently a writer in residence at an Adelaide secondary college. His ninth collection of poetry, The Silent Classroom, will be published in December 2008.
GRAEME HETHERINGTON is a Tasmanian poet who divides his time between Australia and Europe. He was formerly a lecturer in the Classics Department at the University of Tasmania and is the author of four books of poetry.

PAUL HETHERINGTON is the author of eight volumes of poetry, most recently It Feels Like Disbelief. His poetry awards include a 2002 Chief Minister’s ACT Creative Arts Fellowship. He was founding editor of the journal, Voices (1991–97) and edited and introduced the final three volumes of the four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend.

TONY HUGHES-D’AETH is a Lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia. His book Paper Nation: The Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia, 1886–1888 (Melbourne University Press, 2001) won the Ernest Scott and Keith Hancock prizes for history. He is currently writing a literary history of the Western Australian wheatbelt.

HEATHER JONES is a West Australian artist who has painted professionally for over thirty years. She has held fourteen solo exhibitions since 1978 in addition to lecturing in art and design. She studied Fine Art and English at the University of Western Australia. Heather’s main interests are painting, printmaking and jewellery.

CHRISTOPHER KELEN’S most recent volumes of poetry are Dredging the Delta (book of Macao poems and sketches), published in 2007 by Cinnamon Press (UK) and After Meng Jiao: Responses to the Tang Poet, published in 2008 by VAC (Chicago, IL). Kelen has taught Literature and Creative Writing for the last eight years at the University of Macau in South China.

LEE KOFMAN is an Israeli-Australian author of three books (in Hebrew). Her English publications (in Australia, UK, Scotland and US) include short fiction, non-fiction and poetry in Best Australian Stories 2007, Griffith Review, Strange, Island, Cordite and more. She holds an MA in Creative Writing (University of Melbourne) and has been awarded numerous grants, fellowships and writing residencies.

ANDREW LANSDOWN’S most recent books are: a collection of poetry titled Fontanelle (Five Islands Press); a collection of short stories, The Dispossessed (Interactive Press); and three fantasy novels, With My Knife, Dragonfox and The Red Dragon (Omnibus Books/ Scholastic Australia). Picaro Press has just republished his poetry collection, Waking and Always, first released in 1987.
ROLAND LEACH is the proprietor of Sunline Press, which has published ten books by Australian poets. He has had two collections of poetry published and is a past winner of the Newcastle Poetry Prize.

KENT MACCARTER is a poet based in Melbourne. His work largely focusses on place and sound, though all facets of landscape writing appeal to him immensely. 2009 will see the publication of his first book. It has been said that reading his poetry is akin to reading jazz.

SHANE McCauley was born in England but has lived in WA for most of his life. He has had five books of poetry published, the last of which was Glassmaker by Sunline Press in 2005. He co-edited an anthology of WA poetry, The Weighing of the Heart, also published by Sunline in 2007.

BARRY O’DONOHUE lives in Brisbane where he writes and is interested in gardening, bridge, and his dog “Hunter”.

MARK O’FLYNN’S stories have appeared in a wide range of journals and magazines. His third collection of poetry What Can Be Proven was published last year, and a novel Grassdogs was published by Harper Collins in 2006. He lives in the Blue Mountains.

MEREDI ORTEGA has had articles, short stories, and poems published in various newspapers and compilations. She was a finalist in the Maj Monologues Competition, 2007 and winner of OOTA’s Spilt Ink Short Story Competition, 2008. She lives in Fremantle, WA.

OUYANG YU has published forty-three books in English and Chinese in the field of poetry, fiction and non-fiction as well as literary criticism. His latest collection of English poetry, The Kingsbury Tales: A Novel, is forthcoming in 2008.

HELENA PASTOR is currently working on a collection of short stories centred on the experiences of a young girl and her Dutch migrant family in 1970s Australia. She is also engaged in a creative writing project which documents the Iron Man Welders, a dynamic youth work initiative for teenage boys in rural New South Wales.

RON PRETTY has recently retired from his roles as publisher of Five Islands Press and Director of the Poetry Australia Foundation Inc. He is now concentrating on his writing.

JENNIFER ROBERTSON’S fiction has appeared in Meanjin, Overland, Griffith
REVIEW, UTS Writers’ Anthology, Best Australian Stories and Westerly 2007. Her stories have been broadcast on ABC Radio National and 2SER. She lives in Sydney and enjoys community radio and BBC costume dramas.

GRAHAM ROWLANDS is an Adelaide-based poet who has published very widely in Australian magazines, newspapers and anthologies since the late 1960s.

ANNA RYAN-PUNCH is a Melbourne reviewer and poet. Her published poetry includes work in The Age, Quadrant and Wet Ink. She is a regular reviewer of children’s/YA literature for Viewpoint and The Australian Book Review and was Convening Judge for the Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards YA Prize in 2008.

KIM SCOTT’s most recent book, Kayang and Me (2005), was written with Noongar Elder Hazel Brown, and is based upon her oral history of their community. His second novel, Benang, won the WA Premiers’ Literary Prize 1999, the Miles Franklin Award 2000, and the RAKA Kate Challis Award 2001.

KNUTE SKINNER lives in Ireland. His most recent collection, Fifty Years: Poems 1957–2007, from Salmon Poetry, contains new work collected along with work taken from thirteen previous books. His collection The Other Shoe won the 2004–2005 Pavement Saw Chapbook Award.

IAN C. SMITH lives near Bairnsdale with his wife and four sons. His work has been published in the Weekend Australian, Best Australian Poetry, The Age, Heat and Meanjin. His latest book is Memory Like Hunger (Ginninderra).

KATE SUNNERS grew up in Bundaberg by the neatly combed lines of a cane farm. Now in Brisbane, she still misses sweeping the cane ash from the patio. She works at Riverbend Books, trying desperately to stop her eyes from sweeping the words from all the pages.

LES WICKS has toured widely and his poetry has been published across eleven countries in seven languages. His seventh, most recent book of poetry is Stories of the Feet (Five Islands, 2004).

MIKE WILLIAMS writes both poetry and fiction and has two novels published with Fremantle Press, Old Jazz and The Music of Dunes, and he is currently working on his third novel, The Driftwood Chair. He also has poems and short fiction published in various Australian journals. He works in a bookshop. Music and landscape inspire his writing.
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