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#### EDITORIAL

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The three short essays published here were first given as papers at a colloquium held at the National Library of Australia on 24–25 October 2008. The colloquium, convened by Paul Eggert, was held in honour of Bruce Bennett; it was an Australian version of the German festschrift, a yarn rather than a book, to mark Bruce Bennett’s retirement from the Chair of English at the University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy. The theme, reflecting Bruce’s interests, was “Home and Away: Writing about Place”.

Bruce Bennett continues to have a distinguished career in the promotion and study of Australian literature. A long time staff member of the University of Western Australia, he was an editor of Westerly for many years and remains an Editorial Consultant. These essays provide a small selection from those presented at the colloquium, and are published here as a tribute and thanks to Bruce Bennett for all his work on behalf of Australian literature.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, Co-editors
Michael Wilding

Expatriation, Location and Creativity

David Lodge once asked me in perplexity, or maybe even in exasperation, “So what are you? Are you an Australian writer or an English writer?”

I suppose I wanted to be both. Or maybe neither. Transcending mere nationality. A citizen of the world. A writer. That was my youthful ideal. Nationalism as far as I could see had caused an awful lot of suffering. A slogan beneath which politicians and arms-manufacturers could send young men out to die for them. Women, too, these days. Internationalism seemed a good thing. Globalisation has taken the gloss off that a bit lately, though it’s not what I had in mind.

So when Nicholas Pounder, a fellow expatriate, set up a web-site for me recently, he recommended <Michael-Wilding.com>. You don’t want au or uk, he said. Not really a question. He does a lot of his business in the USA, and Americans are suspicious of foreign places and any suffix to the dot com. So if you want to be international on the world-wide web, you present yourself as an American. Up until recently that was the idea, anyway.

Well, my grandfather was born in America, after his father had jumped ship, running away from the English Midlands. The Wildings were a family of runaways and escapees, as their surname readily implies. “Ten ruddy Wildings saw I in the wood”, Dryden wrote. Great-grandfather had run away from home after his mother had got the village schoolmaster to beat him. This was after he had left school, so he was particularly indignant. He met a girl in America (from the next village in England) and they married. But after he’d seen American troops shooting down striking Carnegie ironworkers, he decided this wasn’t quite the land of the free, and returned to England. Then his son, my grandfather, came to Australia in 1908. Didn’t stay, of course; a restless family.

Apart from Imram Khan, the most famous pupil of the ancient grammar school I attended, RGS Worcester, established in 1292, is Adam Lindsay Gordon. Adam Lindsay Gordon, National Poet of Australia, a plaque on
the old school hall declares. He was there only briefly, having already been summarily removed from two other schools. Relationships with his father, “the Governor” as he calls him in this letter I’m about to quote, were fraught. It dates from 1853, and shows a mastery of idiom worthy of P. G. Wodehouse.¹

I was breakfasting with the Governor when a row began in a curious way rather. I’ll relate it.

“You don’t seem in a mood for breakfast this morning,” says he, when I refused some eggs and ham.

“Not much,” says I, “you ought to have seen me a week or so ago, eating cochin china eggs.”

“Was that when you stopped a week in the country?” says he.

I stared at him a bit and said yes.

“You’d got a good-looking lady to make tea perhaps,” says he in his sarcastic manner.

I was a bit surprised, but keeping cool assured him, as he was so inquisitive, that he was right or thereabouts.

“Ah,” said he in the same tone, “I suppose that was the farmer’s daughter your uncle says you’ve been hanging after.”

This pulled me up and I felt myself getting a little warm, partly with surprise and partly with annoyance, however, I made answer in this form.

“I don’t know,” says I, “what gammon my uncle may have swallowed, but at all events she’s better than your precious son-in-law that is to be. I think,” I said, “you’ve studied my sister’s interests nicely by letting her have her way.”

“Well,” said he, with his usual coolness, “I suppose I’m to thank you for a daughter-in-law soon of another stamp.”

“Never you fear, Governor,” says I, speaking loud as I do when I get angry, “you may make your mind at rest on that score, for a damned good reason why, even supposing I wanted her, she wouldn’t have me, tho’ I am the Honble. Capt. Gordon’s son, so,” says I, “write and thank her for it. You ought to be much obliged to her, if I’m not!”

And I walked out and shut the door.

It put the old boy in such a rage that next opportunity he set to to abuse me about a bill which came in for me, and gave him an excuse, and we had an awful row – worse luck to it.²

The final straw seems to have been Gordon’s liberating a horse impounded for debt in order to ride it in a steeplechase,³ at which his father finally lost what little patience remained.
“I’ve had some talk with the Governor, and seriously he means packing me off in a month if he can, but I’m not quite sure I mean going... I suppose he thinks I can’t be kept quiet here, and he’s about right. It will be the best thing I’ve no doubt, and I don’t dislike the idea. I long to begin the world afresh as it were... The Governor has got an offer of an appointment as officer in (what should you think?) the Mounted Police in Australia, devilish good pay, a horse, three suits of regimentals yearly and lots of grub, for me, of course, I don’t mean for himself, and he wants me to take it. I think I shall, in fact it’s no use mincing the matter, I know I must, but I must do something before I start to make my friends remember me, rob somebody or something equally notorious.”

My own departure was less dramatic. My tutor at Oxford, Wallace Robson, said there was a lectureship going at Sydney, why didn’t I take it, better than being a junior bottle-washer at Sheffield.

“Quite extraordinary,” said Elsie Duncan-Jones, a colleague at Birmingham University where I ended up after returning from Sydney. “He tells everyone you were the best pupil he had ever had and sends you off to Australia and then forgets all about you and leaves you there.”

Yes, well, Wallace did have a reputation for absent-mindedness.

But back in the English Midlands, after having spent three years in Australia, I couldn’t settle. Much like my grandfather, who soon went off to Canada after returning to England from Queensland.

So back I went again. Or came. Not quite sure whether it’s a matter of coming or going, now.

The writers I admired were most of them expatriates. Lawrence Durrell, Christopher Isherwood, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. It seemed the way to go. The future looked bleak in England. Three years at Oxford had made it clear to me that if you came from the working class, you were never going to be accepted by the ruling elite. And the ruling elite ran the cultural show. Oh, you might find yourself a niche, as long as your politics were conformist, as long as you basically accepted the order of things and said so. But you’d always be a sort of upper-servant. Well, my mother’s family had been upper-servants. Or a licensed fool. And my licence looked like getting endorsed.

Once again it was Elsie Duncan-Jones who made the point: “I do wish you would write your campus farce, Michael, instead of living it all the time.”

And then there was the other possibility, that expatriation had always been preordained. Not so long ago, I was looking through some old diaries I kept as a teenager. I discovered them when I was clearing up my parents’
house after they had died, and I thought, ah, I might be able to use something here for a novel. I couldn't. Use anything. It was all teenage despair, even less interesting than the mature aged despair I had ready access to. But on one page there was a doodle of a map of Australia. This was when I was fifteen. And beneath the map was a note. “I seem to have drawn a map of Australia. Why is that? Does that mean I am going there or something?”

In my fiction I have never explicitly addressed the issues of expatriation. No doubt subterranean themes can be detected. And in writing critical essays about Lawrence and Conrad and James and Marcus Clarke and William Lane and Jack Lindsay and Christina Stead, no doubt at some level I was drawn to the expatriate. But strategically it seemed to me a bad idea to get into the business of comparisons. You can lose a lot of friends for a joke, as was said of Oscar Wilde. H. M. Hyndman tells an anecdote of “the brother of Bernal Osborne, who held some British appointment in the metropolis of Victoria. Asked how he liked Melbourne he replied, with the drawl that was habitual to him, ‘Immensely. But don’t you think it is a little far from town?’”

But being a Midlander, I never had much acquaintance with town, anyway.

Dame Leonie Kramer, launching a book of mine not so long ago, compared me to Byron, which I thought was jolly nice of her. “Shaking the dust of England from his feet,” she elucidated. Well, it was rather like that. As Gordon wrote in “An Exile’s Farewell,”

I shed no tears at quitting home,  
Nor will I shed them now!

So, that’s expatriation. Next, locality. Gordon deals with that succinctly in his poem “Doubtful Dreams,” which fellow expatriate Marcus Clarke published in the Colonial Monthly, 140 years ago in December 1868.

I have changed the soil and the season,  
But whether skies freeze or flame,  
The soil they flame on or freeze on  
Is changed in little save name.

As for creativity, it has always seemed to me you just sit down and do it. Write. Wherever you are, about whatever you know, whenever you can. Where you’ve been, where you are. Like Clarke and Gordon, at times I’ve turned back to writing about England, at other times I’ve written about Australia. No regrets.
No escape, either. The Friends of Adam Lindsay Gordon contacted the old boys’ association of my school last year. The president, Flying Officer Packman, Retd., dobbed me in. The Friends wanted somebody to address them, and as I’d been secretary of the Adam Lindsay Gordon society at school, what could I do but accept? A bit of local loyalty, a bit of piety. A chap who shot himself the day his last book of poems was published because he couldn’t afford to pay the printer has my sympathy.

But we won’t get onto the topic of publishing in Australia. I’ll let Gordon have the last words, from “The Sick Stockrider”:

I’ve had my share of pastime, and I’ve done my share of toil,
And life is short – the longest life a span;
I care not now to tarry for the corn or for the oil.
Or for the wine that maketh glad the heart of man.
For good undone and gifts misspent and resolutions vain,
’Tis somewhat late to trouble. This I know –
I should live the same life over, if I had to live again;
And chances are I go where most men go.

NOTES

1 Bertie Wooster’s name is taken from Worcester, of course, with which it rhymes. Wodehouse’s fondness for Worcestershire is documented in Robert McCrum’s Wodehouse: a Life (Penguin, London, 2005) 12, 18, 20, 93, 174, 176, 204. Last time I was in the Faithful City, the Star Hotel had a Jeeves bar.


3 I tried to establish the facts of this episode in “Adam Lindsay Gordon in England: The Legend of the Steeplechase,” Southerly, XXV (1965) 99–107. But a report of the race in the local paper of the time records that the riders and horses were all entered either anonymously or under false names.

4 Adam Lindsay Gordon, 404.

5 The full story is told in “Among Leavisites,” Southerly, 59, iii–iv, (Spring and Summer 1999), 67.


8 Gordon’s poems are quoted from Douglas Sladen, Adam Lindsay Gordon: The Life and best Poems of the Poet of Australia [the Westminster Abbey Memorial Volume], Hutchinson & Co., London, 1934.
In this paper I want to suggest that the trope of place has been used in Australian literary criticism either to connect particular writers and their work with the idea of a national project and a national canon, or to exclude them from it. Consider, for example, Joseph Furphy’s injunction to the young Miles Franklin on the eve of her departure for the United States: “stay among the eucalypts, Miles, and earn the adoration of your countrymen by translating the hosannas and elegies of the bush into vernacular phrase.”¹ More broadly, as advocates for Australian literature, the cultural-nationalist critics of the 1920s and 1930s, including Vance and Nettie Palmer, Miles Franklin and P. R. Stephensen, often opposed the idea of a national literature to what they called “Bohemian,” “expatriate-minded” and “cosmopolitan” writers – the terms were interchangeable and uniformly pejorative – writers who worked and lived abroad, and absorbed international trends such as literary modernism. This was a spatial representation of the literary that assumed an agonistic relation between what Pascale Casanova calls national literatures and world literature.² In particular, I will focus on two classics of the cultural-nationalist period, Nettie Palmer’s Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923 (1924) and Miles Franklin’s Laughter Not for a Cage (1956). In these two pioneering attempts at literary history and canon formation, all-pervasive images of place and landscape play an important role as metaphor and synecdoche, connecting Australian writers and Australian literature with ideas about Australian cultural identity, Australian nationalism and the idea of the nation.

Nettie Palmer
In 1901, Australia became a nation and the first Federal parliament sat in Melbourne’s Exhibition Buildings. Looking back on that great national
occasion, Nettie Palmer connected the rise of distinctive national cultures with the rise of national literatures: “Perhaps the chief possession of Australian writers in the year 1901 was this consciousness of nationhood. ... What [Australia] was to mean ... lay in the hands of her writers, above all, to discover.” Palmer was the most important cultural-nationalist critic of the 1920s and 1930s. Though fluent in French and German, and widely read in European and American literatures, she and her husband Vance energetically promoted the idea of a distinctively national Australian literary culture. Believing that many Australians were either indifferent to art and ideas or else subservient to overseas cultures – the old high culture of Europe and the new mass consumer culture of the United States – Nettie believed that “the future of an Australian literature depends on ourselves as critics and readers and enthusiasts.” She was committed to bringing into being through her literary journalism a vibrant national literature, albeit within a framework informed by her own profound knowledge of world literature.

Palmer wrote a remarkable body of reviews and essays that are now little known because they were published in newspapers and periodicals – there were rarely more lasting outlets for publication. Believing that a literary tradition is made rather than given, her idea of a national literature was in part material and institutional, in part idealistic and organic. In “Our Own Books. Do We Evoke Them?,” she describes the national literature as both a nascent industry and “a living culture,” a community of writers and readers. Her view of the relation between national literatures and international literary space is more complex than Franklin’s. A national literature must not be allowed to become provincial in the negative sense – it must be in vital contact with the standards set by other national literatures – but at the same time its health depends on its internal well-being and integrity. It must attain a sufficient material infrastructure and scale of operations, a sufficient density, to survive on its own terms, and this requires dedication, even a deliberate “narrowness,” on the part of its advocates. Hers was a strategic provincialism:

Any of us who support the development of Australian literature as a necessary and healthy part of life are said to be narrow. People see us knocking the one nail on the head, and suppose we are not interested in other nails. Personally, I knock that nail because I know, as an Australian, that only an Australian is likely to do it. All my life I have cared passionately for overseas literature, but they are not depending for their existence on what casual Australians may write about them.
These were the main arguments of Palmer’s pioneering book, *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923* (1924). Without a systematic critical, historical and bibliographical apparatus, there was no other record of Australian literature than “the scattered books themselves;” there was as yet no Australian tradition, for “in our literary history ... promising movements tend to run into the sand;” and “the facilities for ordinary publishing hardly exist,” leaving Australian literature vulnerable to imported culture.⁸

In her reviews, Palmer ranges widely in her references to Australian, European and American literature, creating an impression that the national literature exists in the same time and space as international writing, and that it can and should be judged from that broad perspective. The effect is generous, inclusive and dialectical: it is, in a word, cosmopolitan. To create this effect, Nettie often begins her reviews with a comment that places her Australian readers “naturally,” as it were, in an international context, as in her essay on “Marcel Proust,” written for the *Bulletin* in 1928: “It is good ... news that the publication of Marcel Proust has now been completed ... by the appearance of the last volume in French. The English translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, is following steadily.”⁹ Her aim is to establish the broadest context in which Australian books can be considered and, when appropriate, valued highly in that company. Here, for example, she recalls reading Proust on the veranda of her home near Caloundra in South East Queensland:

The place is Southern Queensland on the well-watered coast. ... The Queensland houses seem – what do the French call it? – *a joure* – lace-like, full of trellises and louvres and screens, breaking the walls. I was sitting, then, on the veranda, which is like a living-room whose fourth wall goes only three feet up. Reading Marcel Proust, with perhaps more eagerness than if I had been in his Paris. ... Suddenly I noticed that a hatter had come up the steps, and was looking into the veranda.¹⁰

The point of the anecdote is to illustrate how the word “hatter,” as used by Tom Collins in *Such is Life*, can evoke an entire culture for an Australian reader in the way idioms in Proust are so familiar and evocative to French readers. In this seemingly effortless way, she locates herself as both a cosmopolitan and a provincial reader: she reads both Furphy and Proust from a local perspective, but also in dialogue, as a lover of what she calls “overseas literature.” Her provincialism is real and heart-felt, but strategic in the sense that she locates it deliberately in relation to her profound knowledge of world literature. She locates Furphy’s distinctiveness not in
isolation, but precisely in relation to Proust’s Frenchness; she locates herself as a reader of both national and international literatures: as cosmopolitan but also, strategically and deliberately, provincial. For Palmer, the act of reading takes place on the veranda of her home in Southern Queensland, but it “knows” the wider world. Her aside in French – “the Queensland houses seem – what do the French call it? – a joure” – perfectly captures this sense of being both home and away.

*Miles Franklin*

The work of establishing a cultural-nationalist canon begun by Nettie Palmer in the 1920s was taken up at mid-century by Miles Franklin in a series of lectures for the Commonwealth Literary Fund, published after her death in 1954 as *Laughter Not for a Cage* (1956). Her outline of Australian literary history in the first half of the twentieth century summed up the cultural-nationalist project while also reducing it to its most polemical form. There had been a great flowering of Australian fiction in the 1890s, culminating in the works of Lawson, Furphy and Franklin herself, followed by a period of relative quiet and then a dramatic re-birth of the Australian novel in the late 1920s – this was the “break through” heralded by K. S. Prichard’s *Working Bullocks* in 1926 and confirmed by *Coonardoo* in 1928–9. Franklin attributes the hiatus of the 1910s and early 1920s to the rise of a cosmopolitan and expatriate sensibility, represented by Henry Handel Richardson, above the determined provincialism she admired in Furphy.

Franklin distinguishes between writers who are rooted in their native soil, who write from “authentic” Australian experience, and “expatriate-minded” writers who have lost touch with their native culture and fallen victim to international fashions. This is illustrated by a comparison of near-contemporaries Joseph Furphy and Henry James. Both were born into new English-speaking communities; both experienced the difficulties of cultural transplantation. James responded by cultivating “cosmopolitanism,” Furphy by grounding himself more deeply in his native culture: “One was a man who ran away, and one a man who stood his ground; ... James forsook his native country, Furphy never set foot in another.” Without mentioning her own sojourns in the United States and Great Britain – or her sexuality – Franklin condemns James as “a foot-free bachelor of means” who “coddle[d] his sensitivity ... in drawing rooms and exclusive clubs, ... or in cosmopolitan Bohemian haunts.” James doomed himself to a “double exile.” He betrays no commitment to “the ... [American] experiment in national building,” but “turned his back on this mighty new departure” and remains “haunted by his desertion.” He became “a literary master”
but also “a man astray.” Furphy, by contrast, neither sought nor gained recognition overseas. “Rooted to his native soil,” he is “in every sense antipodean,” “a founding father of the Australian novel.”¹¹

This contrast between James and Furphy is the benchmark for Franklin’s dismissive accounts of Richardson, Brian Penton and Christina Stead as writers who also “turned their backs” on their own culture while never quite becoming British, European or American. Maurice Guest only received good reviews because of Richardson’s “absorption of the Continental approach to her theme.” The Mahony trilogy was written at a time when “psychology, derived from hearsay and garbling of Freudian theories, was sprung like a blight on society,” and “the misfortunes of Richard Mahony caught this wave.”¹²

Franklin’s unbalanced assessments of Richardson and Stead, in particular, reflect her own refusal of the cultural authority of Paris, London and New York, and led her to adopt a defensive provincialism that expresses itself through metaphors of place and space, and of cultural regulation: “Then, too, like a very big toad into our backyard puddle plumped Christina Stead’s Seven Poor Men of Sydney.”¹³ Her scorn for Stead reflects her own rejection of modernism, not only for its stylistic pretensions but also for its “unhealthy” themes. Stead’s characters “cerebrate in analysis of the proletarian upsurge, are introspective self-expositors touched with the brush of the coteries of the Latin Quarter, or Greenwich Village, or Bloomsbury.” She even criticises Penton’s Landtakers (1944), suggesting that in contrast to her own “Brent of Bin-Bin” novels he tainted the Australian pastoral saga by “aping” European trends, which seem belated in the hands of Australian writers:

Australian novelists have a time-lag in jargon and patter that sometimes heighten and more often becloud thought among the quidnuncs of Bohemian cliques in the big capitals abroad. ... but the use of jargon merely to be in smart-alec vogue gives them the air of wearing a chapeau which is not le dernier cri from Paris. ¹⁴

In a back-handed compliment, Franklin acknowledges that Richardson and Stead were “rewarded by approval as being modern.” Finally, too, her diatribe against cosmopolitanism was a response to what she saw as an emerging academic deference to Europe. “The Australian,” she believed, “needs to dismiss from consciousness the bugbear of any necessity to be “universal” or to strain after “world standard” with which misguided academics have saddled him.”¹⁵
To sum up, Nettie Palmer adopts what I have called a strategic provincialism: as an advocate for Australian literature, she identifies herself as a reader with a local sense of place – as provincial – but also as one whose judgements are formed dialectically in relation to world literature: as cosmopolitan. Franklin’s provincialism, on the other hand, is defensive, and she uses the relation between literature and place polemically to exclude “cosmopolitan” or expatriate writers. Thinking about Australian writers as belonging not just to the nation but also to an expanded field in which national literatures come into being in relation to world literary space provides a way of understanding different kinds of career without denegrating the “expatriate” writer. As Laughter Not for a Cage demonstrates, this has not been a neutral concept in literary history but is an artefact of the period’s own cultural nationalism. For Franklin, we might say, it is a choice of either home or away. For Palmer, on the other hand, one’s affiliations can – indeed should – be with both home and away.

Notes
3 Nettie Palmer, Modern Australian Literature 1900 to 1923 (Melbourne: Lothian, 1924), p. 5.
4 See Deborah Jordan, Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1999).
7 Brisbane Courier, 11 August 1928.
8 Nettie Palmer, Modern Australian Literature, pp. 55-59.
9 Nettie Palmer, “Marcel Proust,” (Sydney) Bulletin, 1 August 1928.
12 Franklin, pp. 147–8.
13 Franklin, p. 172.
14 Franklin, p. 179.
15 Franklin, p. 225.
This is not so much an essay as a kind of rumination on two different ways in which place (especially the natural landscape) seems to have mattered to Australian poets once they had recovered from the initial shock of “otherness” or “awayness” and entered the phase of claiming possession. It is therefore probably recklessly speculative (a privilege of retirement that I hope Bruce Bennett will also enjoy) and also remarkably free of scholarly references, thanks to the fact that I had to “seek a theme” while myself away in exotic places like Tonga and Argentina, where library resources on Australian literature are not to hand.

These two ways might be summed up as “Emblem of National Identity” versus “Country that Built My Heart.” The latter phrase is of course from Judith Wright’s “Train Journey” and that poem forms, for my discussion, an exemplary pair with Alec Hope’s “Australia.” In the following passages, the difference is not so much in physical perception, considerable as that may be, as in the attitudinal stance that colours and determines the evaluation of what is “seen:”

Glassed with cold sleep and dazzled by the moon,
out of the confused hammering dark of the train
I looked and saw under the moon’s cold sheet
your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart;

and the small trees on their uncoloured slope
like poetry moved, articulate and sharp
and purposeful under the great dry flight of air; …

I woke and saw the small dark trees that burn
suddenly into flowers more lovely than the white moon.

Wright: “Train Journey,” from The Gateway (1953)
A nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey
In the field uniform of modern wars,
Darkens her hills, those endless outstretched paws
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

They call her a young country, but they lie:
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry…

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the desert prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.

A. D. Hope: “Australia,” from The Wandering Islands (1955)

The assumption that the poet’s task included defining an identity for Australia as place/nation was something of a commonplace until the 1950s, and continues into the present, if less insistently and at times in a revisionist mode that actively resists earlier identifications. A glance at the “Index of Titles” in the Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature (a national identity anthology prepared for an international audience in 1990) shows a substantial number of poems called “Australia,” including one of the five published under that title by Mary Gilmore, between 1917 and 1932. Hope’s poem, quoted above, is very much an idea of the identity of Australia, with an abstractness also found in O’Dowd’s sonnet of the same title. But its oppositional structure – its reversal of the home and away terms to make Europe – “over there” – the place of “awayness” links it (although I’m not sure Hope would be pleased by the comparison) to the strategy of Dorothea Mackellar’s much-quoted “Australia” (first published in 1908 as “Core of my Heart”). Very few of us remember that her poem starts with a stanza that acknowledges cool green England as the conventional home of poetry before swinging defiantly into “I love a sunburnt country” – people, however, infrequently read that line with the right emphasis.
Actually Mackellar is something of an obstacle to my premise that it’s male poets who are more likely to be interested in poems where landscape is correlated to national identity, whereas women poets are more likely to write about their affective connection to particular places. But – quite apart from literary quality – there’s a striking difference between the two poems. Hope’s terms are very general: drab trees and tedious cities are not the competitors against Europe: in a pre-emption of Patrick White’s _Voss_, it’s the desert that matters (and it’s a very biblical desert). Unconstrained by naturalism, Hope feels no obligation to bring, for instance, the specifics of regional variation in vegetation into his poem (no hint of rainforests there): MacKellar does feel the need, and is consequently driven into amplification of detailed references which only prove that, in poetry at least, more is often less. Perhaps MacKellar’s was one of the poems that convinced Judith Wright that the attempt to “do” Australia as a whole had brought poetry to a dead end, and that it was time for it to be rooted in regional specificity.

I don’t want to push the gender divide: Robert Adamson’s Hawkesbury poems immediately come to mind as complicating it, as do poems by Les Murray or Robert Gray, but nonetheless I intend to devote myself on this occasion to considering the importance of particular place (or places) as the imaginary home and the foundation of creativity for three women poets: Mary Gilmore, Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood, as well as considering how the historical context of the experience of place can intersect with, and sometimes disrupt, a writer’s psychic trajectory.

None of these poets were to get what Yeats wished for his daughter, to be “rooted in one dear perpetual place” (“A Prayer for my Daughter”), and each deals with the loss of the original space and place of childhood differently, while knowing that there is no literal way back into that time. Wright’s wish, in “Two Dreamtimes” (from _Alice_, 1973), to “go back to that far time” must yield to the reality that “we are grown to a changed world;” Harwood must discover in the ironically-titled “Return of the Native” that, however vivid the memory, “You cannot come as a child to your father’s house.” (_The Lion’s Bride_, 1981).

There is a considerable risk that a strong sense of a lost place and time can produce little more than nostalgic denial of the present: the elegiac strain, too, is ever at risk of sentimentality. Harwood’s defence against this is in part the sharpness of her intelligence and the precision of her language, but also the aesthetic she builds around memory and its role in bringing lost places and persons back into the light of the present,
although it will only be able to do this if the poem has a power beyond that of mere reminiscence: so it is “Sing, memory, sing” that she commands at the beginning of “An Impromptu for Ann Jennings.” Whether light (and its absence) would have been so dominant in Harwood’s symbolic repertoire if she had not experienced the physical shock of losing Brisbane’s brilliance to the more subdued tones of Tasmania one really cannot say. What we can glimpse in the concluding line of “1945” (“With the world that was the case already fading”) is a context for the adaptability that enabled her to grow into having an equal if different attachment to Tasmania’s landscapes. “1945” reminds us that there are different geographical as well as historical fields. And in one sense, Harwood’s poetry seems almost impervious to Australia’s socio-political history. A shadow of what was done to Tasmania’s Aborigines brushes the surface of “Oyster Cove,” but it certainly doesn’t send her back to scrutinise (at least in her poetry) whether Queensland was similarly tainted. It is the history of ideas, of Wittgenstein and Ayres and Heidegger, that comes into play in Harwood’s writing.

Gilmore and Wright are another story altogether. Apart from both being activists in social movements, both found that their sense of past rural Australia became inextricably affected by the history of the dispossession of the first people of the land, and by the knowledge of the ecological consequences of a settlement within which they were implicated by ties of ancestry. In one sense, Gilmore weathered the consequent storm better than Wright, if only because her passions were more diffused and her tolerance of inconsistency very much higher – to the very end she could praise the “pioneers” (and use the term without irony) with one breath, and decry their slaughter of Aborigines or their destruction of habitat with another. Once Wright had moved from the The Generations of Men (1959) to The Cry for the Dead (1981) such havering was largely impossible: if a “marginal sort of grace” is conceded to the Wright clan in “For a Pastoral Family” (Phantom Dwelling, 1988), it is no answer to the awakened sense of complicity that drives the questions of the final line of the sequence: “Keep out? Stay clean? Who can?”

One could say that a sense of history gave Gilmore a voice, but – in the end – silenced Wright. When Wright pays tribute to Gilmore in “To Mary Gilmore” (Alice, 1973), it is not so much the overlapping of their Aboriginal and ecological interests that is central, as Wright’s admiration for Gilmore’s refusal to give up in the face of discouragement, her persistence in keeping “the ink running” rather than yielding to the temptation to “sit and grieve.”
I find it incontrovertible that Gilmore’s return in 1921 to Goulburn and the Riverina area of her childhood, with its consequent re-contact with stories of the settlement era, gave her poetry (as well as the two much more profitable prose books of reminiscences in 1934 and 1935) a focus and force she would never otherwise have achieved. The poems of *The Wild Swan* (1930) are among her very best and since space is limited, I’ve privileged the ecological over the Aboriginal – although the two are often intertwined – in choosing to exemplify their power by quoting the concluding stanza of “The Wild Swans.” The first three stanzas celebrate a remembered natural plenitude embodied in the migratory swans, only to conclude:

Never again as of old shall we know the flight
Of the swans in their going; like petals they fell,
They are gone, they are dead; they have passed in the blight
Of our being! Never again will the day, or the night,
Hear, as they fly, the sound of their trumpeting bell
On the air till it dies like the lapse of a swell!
Never again shall the moonlight gleam on the wing!
Like a blast of the desert we came, and we slew;
We burned the reeds where the nestlings lingered, till Spring,
That sang in the bird, came in like a dull dead thing!
Now only the dreamer dreams of the hosts we knew,
That trembling died in the flame of our passing through.

As I just said, Gilmore’s passions were more diffuse than those of Wright and one thing that marks her out from both Wright and Harwood is that she really enjoyed urban living in her flat at King’s Cross (and a completely different essay could be written about the affirmation of the city as the place of Australia’s history – think of Furnley Maurice’s “The Towers of Melbourne,” Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s suburbia, Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (no wonder Miles Franklin hated it!). I’d like to draw attention to Gilmore’s late poem “The Flower Stall” (*Fourteen Men*, 1954). This expresses her delighted reaction to the sight of a Kings Cross flower-stall where bees are swarming around the brilliantly-coloured flowers that they have followed “from Wahroonga down.” I cite it not because it’s her best city poem, but because it illustrates not only her at homeness in the city but also, in the concluding stanza, something of Gilmore’s apparently incurable optimism about life, a quality that attracted her to the vitalism that informs much of her poetry in the 1920s:
Now, though it sat in each cut stem,
I could not think that, there,
Death was triumphant over all
That sweet and scented air,
Where life exploded, colour mad,
With pollened hope to spare!

Wright, on the other hand, notoriously distrusted the city (think of “The Typists in the Phoenix Building”), and while she was able, like Harwood, to adapt her love for one form of natural environment to another, to transfer appreciation from the New England tableland to Queensland’s rain forests to Canberra’s high country, she became increasingly outraged by what she saw as environmental violation. I cannot think of a poem by either Gilmore or Harwood that exudes the unmitigated rage of Wright’s “Australia 1970” (from Shadow, 1970):

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
dangerous till the last breath’s gone,
clawing and striking. Die
cursing your captor through a raging eye.

Die like the tigersnake
that hisses such pure hatred from its pain
as fills the killer’s dreams
with fear like suicide’s invading stain. . . .

I praise the scouring drought, the flying dust
the drying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still;
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.

It’s a poem that has always divided critics, with only a minority initially defending it. I have tried, not very successfully I fear, to convince disaffected students that it must be read (and responded to) in a different way from a more artistically-draped ‘protest’ poem such as the earlier “Nigger’s Leap, New England,” more as they might read the hammer-blow rhetoric of Blake’s “London.” They say crossly “But ‘London’ is better” and I refrain from asking whether it isn’t just a bit more comfortable, because distant in time and place.
Curiously, “Australia 1970” seems to me to be related to Hope’s “Australia” in the generality and the emblematic nature of the imagery, and in the value it places on wilderness/desert against city. But it speaks out of a different historical context as well as a different personal history. Provided properly and used properly, knowledge of something about both place and time will not smother the poem, but help us understand it.

There is one other aspect in the work of these three poets that interests me, and that’s the way they exemplify the twentieth century’s interest in language and changing attitudes to the relationship between word and world. Gilmore retains a kind of evolutionary confidence in language as the supremely human achievement, worried perhaps about her own capacity to make it work, but untroubled by postmodern doubts about its representational reliability, its slippery, even disconnected, relationship with the world of objects. Harwood, who established herself for much of her career as a mistress of playful, sometimes strenuous, language games, and who sometimes wrote as if music was the only divine language, surprised her readers in the late Pastorals with a kind of dismissal of human speech in favour of “the pure, authentic speech/ that earth alone can teach.” “Threshold,” from which these lines come, is, however, a complex poem: is it simply accepting an irreconcilable difference between that “pure authentic speech” and human “words and thoughts” that are “ground like pebbles in the stream of time” or is it in fact trying to demonstrate that the former is the speech that Harwood has now learned/ is learning?

In either case it seems a light-filled, somehow hopeful, poem compared to Wright’s “Summer.” For much of her career Wright held valiantly to an ideal of the expressive powers of language to unify poet and place. If the shadow of history intervened in poems like “At Cooloolah,” it was not a failure of language that was the issue. But in the late (and final) poems of Phantom Dwelling she abandons the possibility, registering language as the cause of an unbridgeable distance between the human and the natural world. In a landscape wounded psychically by the shed blood of its first people and physically by the past activities of miners, she reflects that she will “never know” the natural “inhabitants” she briefly evokes before concluding:

In a burned-out summer, I try to see without words
as they do. But I live under a web of language.

As do we all, writers and their historians together.
MARUTS: STORM DEMONS
In India storms are caused by the Maruts, demons who run wild alongside the god, Indra.

Afterwards, like new lovers telling stories
we talk of all the storms we’ve ever
witnessed, all the storms

that have touched our lives. Stories making
sense of our new state of existence
in the post cyclone world.

I tell you about the dust storms of
my childhood, the afternoon when
the sky died, went dark, red with dust.

We run to every window, bolt shut,
pull down the blinds, tie in a
figure-of-eight, our mother calling

out each place, Is this checked?
What of that? The doors closed,
with dust-jamming snakes.

A cold wind runs over the roof,
blasting us, and later we roam the house,
drawing stick figures in the dust.

You trump me. Tell me of the
sandstorm in Tunisia, getting caught
out in it, not listening closely enough
to the locals’ warnings. Ant-watching
you miss all the signs until it’s
almost too late. Diving into

the car, you plug every gap, every millimetre,
but still the sand comes in. You say,
*It’s the roar of the wind that is the same.*

I remember the snowstorm on
Mt Kosciusko. It is nearly summer and
we leave the resort after lunch,
dressed only in shorts and T-shirts, walk,
compassless, we follow the snowpoles
losing our place on the map, not really
knowing our course. By sheer luck, late
afternoon we stumble on Seaman’s Shack
a stone hut above the treeline. As dark
falls I go in search of firewood. One
fallen pole is all there is. We cook,
eat half-warmed food and pull the
sleeping bags over our heads. Midnight
the roar comes, the wind blizzarding
the walls. We lie with our bodies
curling the stovelegs, our ears filled with
the resounding echo of storm demons.
With each storm story, another

ricochets through our brains, our
startled synapses in overload. The
flood of ‘74, the fires, the snowstorms

in your home country. You say,
it’s like being in a washing machine,
tumbled, thrown, strewn like driftwood.
Mark O’Flynn

Night of the Big Wind

No stone lasts so long
that it completely runs out of prayers
though whether the prayers find welcome
is another matter entire.
It is a testament to ignorance
how history can forget
the seed potatoes full of blood
or the knocking of a bunch of bones
at the wind’s first breath.
Other mysteries besides.
The dawn stillness of the air,
the impenetrable cloud.
On Inishmore the clink of stones is favourite
conversation as, assembled into houses,
they face the horizon’s bleak grey.
Whitewash peels as soon as it is slapped.
Not a hill disrupts the view,
but a stoic, imprisoned donkey
fed on kelp and legends left by drowning.
What bereaved mother
would not walk away from that stormy ebb tide
with its prospect of fish,
a warm, amniotic whiskey at the end of it.
Strange beginning to a day like any other.
Rooks flying high and rooks flying low
both foretelling trouble ahead.
More is revealed by wind than just myth.
Meanwhile a son sits on a barrel and repairs his nets
fortified with the knowledge of a watcher at the cliff top.  
The tarred skins ready for another sea voyage. 
The island never so large  
as when it is a speck at the curagh’s stern  
glimpsed from the heights of waves. 
At Gortnagapul cairns stand for the moment,  
black as seals, backs to the rising wind  
testing the brunt of it  
like monks with pagan hearts  
casting empty prayers against the weather. 
Miles of dry-stone maze still stretch to the island’s  
edge, coiling in patterns like oubliettes for cows. 
There is nowhere for so much rock to go but up.  
Up the desolate slope to Dun Aonghasa  
where two thousand years of emptiness  
fill the void. The ancient ramparts ended  
only by the air that drops from the breach. 
At the precipice the question  
of this empty auditorium,  
the rostrum’s forgotten purpose  
with its swirling proscenium of sky. 
Below, the day’s fresh toiling waves,  
the vertical honeycomb of fall.  
On the night of the Big Wind  
not a thatched roof remained in all the land,  
indoors became out, all was brought to light.  
The holed walls shrilly whistled,  
blown stones tumbled to ground and tasted of salt. 
Windmills caught fire they turned so fast. 
Herring fell six miles inland, sheep  
flew out to sea, not a pipe was dry. 
Heaven’s closing gates shrieked.  
Plucked slate became the only language,  
the mute boats of never to return.  
What bereaved mother would not believe  
in the future of one stone balancing perfectly on another?  
Once to barter  
twice to build  
later to bury  
declare to all the world – keep out.
But on this howling day of Judgment,
the future usurped,
if she were to leap after him in her red shawl
what is left of sacrifice?
A moment for the tide.
Food for fish and paperwork aghast,
for the never-ending threnody of the wind.
After the storm, beyond the sea,
by the crumbled walls of mainland churches,
uprooted by gale-flung trees
some several knocking skeletons
dangling in the air as from a gibbet.
Who were they, waiting for the dawn?
Unearthed like anonymous stones,
no less tangible than a mother’s grief
or this sundered monument
of potatoes rotting at the laneside.
CAROLINE CADDY

GREAT SOUTHERN

Driving between Lake Grace and Lake King
the land takes on the light or darkness of its sky
so quickly so easily
marginal country
parts of it had to be named “lake” so the rest could be
ploughed and harvested.

Out here in the tail-wind
like a feint leftover tilting of the earth
that blows the thin film of water all one way
and calls it full
then blows it back
I am blown on a millimetre wave of life
between towns inches deep.

I’ve met blokes out here
who will attempt anything and it’s nothing
fix a gate with a piece of wire kill a beast for the table
build a boat.

They are the ones who guide the juddering harvesters
through blistering days dusty nights
till everything they reach for
a glass of beer a dinner plate
is stippled with wheat.
They are the ones who turn to speak in a roadhouse
and bring those paddocks
right up to the counter

and after harvest the hot winds push south
to Hopetoun on the coast to fish and visit grandfathers
retired on three thousand acre
“hobby farms”.
They are the ones who when I say what I do don’t flinch
but turn the idea over
like an oil sheened tool
and the handing back and forth between us of the warmed metal
is a thesaurus
so that I feel I’m being given a kind of permission
to be out here in my car blown between
Lake Grace  Lake King  Lake Varley  Lake Cam
on the long reflective straights
where life is so thinly spread
and words must work.
I lift the hood of the aquarium and sprinkle the pellets in. The slow swimmers and the quick sift through the grasses and floating plants. There’s a baby drifting in Hannah and it’s making her sad. She’s sitting in the shell chair, all eyes and long dark hair. Her false left eye made of blue glass sees nothing, but her right, a blue lake, sees everything. Both are overlooked by Siberian pine eyelashes.

“Something stinks,” Hannah grumbles.

More pellets, their odor nauseates my best friend and she covers her nose while I sprinkle them in. I place my finger on the tank, just as a white spotted fish with threadlike fins swims by. Since the pregnancy I’m trying to become a tropical fish expert. Touching the glass is a no-no, but she doesn’t notice.

“That’s a pearl gourami. You’re pointing to Pamela. She’s peaceful and shy,” Hannah says, reaching for her empty glass on the coffee table. Hannah’s beginning to show, her green dressing gown with gold trim bunches around the tummy. “The male Pushkin turns bright red in mating season. Would you fill this up? There’s more protein shake in the kitchen.”

“I know. I’m learning all their names,” I say, wishing I could live here too.

“Why bother,” Hannah grumbles, “you’ll just have to forget them. They belong to the baby people. You should worry a little more about your appearance. Aren’t you cold? White legs, blue cut-offs, red hooded sweatshirt. I can’t believe you let everyone on the street see you in those bummy clothes. You could be pretty, you know.”

I shrug. “We have different standards and I’m feeling patriotic today.” She’s a visionary seamstress, concocting her own wardrobe and those of her friends, yet opening a business (Hannah’s Gladrags) takes capital. That’s the long and short of it so she’d had to rent out her womb or become a
gestation surrogate. At twenty she’s a Russian beauty with swan skin and cheekbones, a Manhattanite since age ten when she and her mother moved into the same building where I lived, age eight. Inseparable ever since. Hannah lied, claiming to be twenty-one, her birth certificate lettered in Cyrillic. You think they will write Moscow? Besides she was born Zhanna, which became Hannah.

The kitchen gives off a fruity odor. Raspberries and blueberries mingle on the cutting board in little pools of purple blood. A banana in halves. A basket of nectarines and apples. Lovely edibles. And a row of vitamins. The international surrogate agency paid for the kitchen and everything in it.

“Here you go,” I say, handing her more protein shake. Then I take off my glasses and clean their lenses on my sweatshirt. They’re non-prescription, the ugliest pair available and I value that. I used to be short but then I sprouted into long legs and reddish-brown hair, which I braid to keep out of the way. I prefer dour in any reproduction of my face. I don’t smile.

Hannah takes the glass into her puffy hand. The only ring still fitting on her swollen fingers is a silver band on her thumb, my gift. “Take those misfit spectacles off,” she snaps at me. “I’m sick of them.” She sniffs the smoothie. “It smells funny. They’re insisting I eat meat. Protein, protein, that’s all I hear. I can’t sleep. Do you see my dark circles?”

“No, you don’t have dark circles.” I let out a sigh. “What about the cottage cheese and protein powder?” Hannah’s been a vegetarian since sixth grade. “Is meat in the contract?” Half the money down, half the money upon delivery. A miscarriage cancels the final payment. Assisted reproductive technology made it all possible. Ovulation. Egg retrieval. Masturbation. Sperm collection.

She slurps from the glass, a blue moustache forms on her upper lip. Her face scrunches, “What did you do to it? Spit in it? It smells like a sponge. I’ve been thinking I need to eat meat. I feel teeth growing in my stomach. The baby is definitely an alien in there.”

I like the idea of stomach teeth. And that she feels no bond with the baby seems unquestionably for the best. “How’s Osip?” I ask, pointing at the celestial goldfish. Osip’s eyes are rolled to the top of his blunt head and forever staring up.

“He’s a little sad,” she blurts out.

“Why?”

“The lamp broke. His moon and stars. But he’s lucky because it’s cleaner in the aquariums than out here. Do you see the black grit on the windows? All that car exhaust coming in and what I breathe the alien breathes too.”
She rubs at her cheek – white and smooth – yet frothy like the first bubbles of her banana creams. “I don’t feel like sewing or designing frocks. That’s not like me. What if the baby is stealing my talents from me? Do you think that’s possible?”

Hannah, so organized and always groomed beyond perfect, does seem to be letting go. She’s been messier the more months deeper into this thing she goes. I went along, thinking it a fine idea, except for the stretch marks, and, of course, that’s why the client isn’t carrying it herself. But the money, Dalloway, money is elasticity. I run the hot water into the blender, unscrew the blades. Scouring her protein shake from the blender. There’s a bacterium in there. Who are the egg and sperm donors? A married couple, actor/actress, corporate biggies? A Russian couple, an oligarch and his wife. Infertile. Hannah’s got her Farm Sanctuary catalogues, shows me gestation cages, the sows are constantly impregnated and the piglets taken, fattened, sent to slaughter. How was his sperm prepared? Frozen, stripped of inactive cells and fluids? Quarantined, thawed? Kept alive along with the egg in a culture? All that yuck injected into Hannah.

I curl up on the floor near the stool where Hannah sets her feet imagining how it would be if I were a fish or a fish lice or a devil ray or a Sausage Maker, a Car Jockey, a Caribbean Sautee Person. The tanks bubble, little words. I take Hannah’s foot and give it a squeeze then I massage it. Back in the pre-pregnancy days she wore a silver ring on the middle toe of each foot, now rings don’t fit. “Keep squeezing. That’s helping my headache,” she says, leaning back into the black suede cushion. “Dalloway, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” A shiver passes through me and I press my thumb against her instep. Then I kiss her foot. “Dalloway, stop that,” she howls. “My feet are dirty and besides kisses tickle.” Her toes smell slightly of fish food. “I haven’t bathed or gotten dressed in two days. Like a beautiful table that isn’t so pretty when it’s cluttered,” Hannah bemoans, her eyes closed. I sneak another kiss. This one she doesn’t notice. “What’s wrong with me? I’m lucky to be getting fifty thousand dollars. In India women take four thousand and are happy.”

“Pathetic,” I grunt. “I hate them.”

“They’re going to bankroll Hannah’s Gladrags. What will you do? I know your parents pay for you to live in their old apartment but what about actual money? They’re going to demand you go to college or cut you off.”

“At the end of next month the apartment lease is up and neither Mom nor Daddy is renewing. I’ll stay with you, Hannah. I’ll get a job. Let me take care of you.”

She twists a strand of dark hair around her finger, her glass eye staring at
me. “You can’t stay here unless you’re gestating. They mentioned another fertilized girl might be moving in to keep me company.”

My head goes hot. “I’m your company.”
“You are, Dalloway. My only true friend.”
“Best girls together.”
She smiles crookedly. “Yup.”

I love her smile. When they impregnated her with another woman’s fertilized egg Hannah wouldn’t let me travel with her to the screener at the clinic where it didn’t look like they did anything medical. After they transferred the embryo a two–day rest period followed. She had to keep her feet elevated. For a month afterwards I helped with her injections. Hannah didn’t have to fill out a two–page application giving the entire genetic history of her biological parents or declare that she’d already given birth. “Oh,” Hannah had said, “it’s ad hoc. A private surrogate agency for Russians émigrés. We Russians do nothing by the book.”

I used to believe in the book, but no more. I graduated high school at seventeen, but now I am firmly eighteen and refusing to go to college. My mother, a junior high teacher married to the world’s most disgusting man, Brad Boonshaft, a sales manager at LeiLei Fashions, has no authority to give advice. And my father, a former Treasury employee, now a transgender woman partnered with his electrolysis technician, also female, is blowing hot air into a wind tunnel. I don’t call my father by her girl name Kim or Mom 2, just Daddy. They’ve hired someone to fill out the application to NYU. You won’t have to leave your precious Hannah. What do you think you’ll do without a degree? Sous Chef for Cruise Line? Auction Appraiser? Oil Burner Technician? Chinese Cable TV Director? There’s nothing nothing. The better question might be what you can do with college, a four–year Bachelor’s degree, and then a Masters because without that you can’t do anything. 60,000 dollars in debt, the Student Loan Association police after you. No thank you. No thank you, very much.

Hannah’s cell phone rings. It’s one of them, I can tell. Her chin thrusts out and her lips pucker. I always disappear when one of the baby people comes so likely I’ll duck out to the Jukebox Café for an hour until she calls to tell me the coast is clear. The KGB, we like to tease, come at scheduled and unscheduled times. Her face flushes, “He’s almost here. Dalloway, go to the window and see. He’s got medium length hair and dresses formally like someone pretending to be a pre-revolutionary Russian aristocrat. A hat, look for a hat. Janko’s supposedly his name. I think he told me he’s Yugoslavian.”

“I didn’t think there was a Yugoslavia anymore. It’s Bosnia, Croatia
and Serbia, isn’t it?” I ask, crawling to the sill and trying to see the street through the grimy window.

“Humph,” Hannah snorts, “I wasn’t in gifted and talented like you.”

She likes to bring up the fact that I skipped a grade, etc. The last of the sun smears the cab roof stopping in front of Kankahan and a youngish man gets out wearing a black fedora over loose brown curls. Fall is in the air and his jacket seems to be soft tan calf. Some animal had to die so that he might slide his arms inside those sleeves. He turns off into the deli.

“Wrong one. This one disappears into the caverns of Kankahan.”

“At first I was attracted to Janko. I believed in his Brit accent and then it slipped. I heard something infinitely coarser. He adores his De Pio silk mid-calf socks. Definitely yuck,” Hannah laughs, “Look, there they go.”

When I lift my face I gaze at the larger of the two tanks. Pamela, the pearl gourami with her iridescent spots and Pushkin who waits for her, swim to the top of the tank. He has turned bright red. And in the smaller tank, red metallic veil tails peer out with their red eyes, their forked tails swaying behind them like wedding trains. Movements of music in water. Feed us, those eyes say. Don’t you hear us? I get up and cast a generous number of sectioned worms over the surface. In a fan dance they swim.

Then without warning a key slips into the lock here. “Hello, hello,” a male calls out and in he flounces carrying a Kankahan sack. The man with brown hair waves. So this is how it works. For fifty thousand dollars they own the keys and locks. Not even a knock required. It is their apartment, their aquariums, their Pamela and Pushkin, their belly.

Grudgingly, he takes off the calf jacket, removes the fedora that could have flown here from a 1930s movie. His brown hair parts on the side over his small ears. I’ve read that a small eared man is usually a cheapskate. On the plus side he has full lips and large greyish blue eyes. He’s of medium height and slender and better looking than most normal people. On the minus side his nose reminds me of a hawk’s beak with prominent nostrils and he has no lips, only a slit between his chin and nose. A baby pimp. A good quality embryo transfer man.

His eyes go swimming about the room. He grimaces and his pointy teeth show. “You didn’t bathe, Hannah. Whole apartment stinks.” He flounces to the window and opens it. “You smell seventy years not twenty-one. What is that rag you have?”

“I call it a bathrobe.”

“I call it gunny sack.” He marches in and sets down the bag in the kitchen, the water goes on and I hear him washing his hands. “Let’s take the temperature, Hannah, and then review your food diary.” He’s got the
thermometer, the same as they use at the Beth Israel walk-in clinic. A few seconds and they snatch it from under your tongue.

Hannah pipes up: “Janko, this is Dalloway. My friend.”

He ignores the introduction and instructs Hannah to open wide. He starts to pontificate. “You’re pale anaemic. You’re not feeding baby enough protein. All changes start today.”

I bristle, resenting the way he’s talking to her. How could Hannah have mistaken that accent for a Brit’s? I stand in the kitchen entryway watching him count the milks and cottage cheeses, replenishing the protein powder and the fruit concentrates, the healthiest preparations on the planet.

“Are you same age as Hannah?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” I answer.

“You look younger.”

“That’s because you’re so old.”

“You’re crazy. As soon as I walked in I knew.” He aims his greyish stare my way. “You look crazy like pre-Raphaelite girl painted by Dante Gabriel.”

“Not really,” I say, thinking of my stringy hair. However, I’m slightly impressed. Pre-Raphaelite isn’t a common word, although girl singular is incorrect. Girls, Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted lots of them. They were called stunners, all petal skin stretched over thin flowing bodies with small breasts. Lizzie Sidall, tall, red-haired, and anorexic i.e. the first supermodel, an 1865 artists’ model who Rossetti married.

Janko’s lifting one meat or fish entrée from the bag after another. A bag of dismemberment and decapitation. “You’re not nice, I think. Not like our Hannah.”

“Is that so?” I say, giving him the middle finger when I push up on my glasses. “You’re the one toting around a sack of death. Disfigurement and pain.”

“You’re the one filling Hannah’s head with garage.”

“You mean garbage?”

“No, I mean shit. I was born in Niš near the Niš Fortress. We have superb education there.” He removes an herb-basted pre-broiled chicken from its Thanksgiving container and sets it on the counter. From the bag he lifts out treasures: raw chicken breasts, turkey thighs, halibut, tuna steaks, shrimp. Does this mean no more filling the blender with soymilk and a purple powder and bananas, a scoop of flax? His nose distracts me. The left nostril sneers. And he doesn’t lift his feet when he walks, as if he’s afraid of them leaving the ground for an instant. He busies himself in the kitchen. “Young woman, come here,” he commands.
“I don’t answer to young woman.”
“Miss.”
“I don’t answer to miss either.”

He strips the chicken of its holiday wrap, carves white meat and a drumstick onto a plate. The more I study it the more the cut up meats resemble not pale mushrooms but musky toadstools – greyish-purple suffering fungus. “Okay, you. Would you carry this?” he snaps, shoving the plate into my hands.

I back away, asking, “What is the magic word?” I refuse to be the bearer of bad tidings.

He pushes past me carrying the platter of corpse delight.

Hannah throws up her hands, fluttering like pale doves. “I can’t, I really can’t force anymore down me,” she protests. “I’ll throw up.”

“They find that unacceptable. Now eat,” he insists, sniffing. He reminds her that the Russian couples who have hired out their pregnancy are firm about pre-natal care of the highest condition and nutrition. Plus, he is not leaving until she eats protein.

“I feel like a wrecked veil tail trying to swim,” she says between hiccups.

He brightens, but the smirk stays. “Are they spawning there?” Turning his back he loses interest in Hannah, who is meekly cutting the chicken into smaller and smaller pieces, pausing to sniff and catch her breath, and to sniff again. Janko fusses over the tanks. “Look like we need cartridge filters and pellet food. Oh, here comes the little mister.” He bends over the tank with the skimmer. “Greetings, my Osip.”

Janko can’t be all awful if he dotes on the nicest fish in the aquarium. The celestial goldfish, his air bubble eyes forever wide. I’m already envisioning the Janko past. His father, a Serbian criminal, not upper crust by a long shot, but all the same dressing in white shirts with boned collars and fitted slacks. Father manages to pay for son to legally enter the United States, but getting here isn’t the great deal it once was, as opportunities are drying up except for the exceptionally bold. Perhaps that’s why too thick an ambergris scent clings to him. In a certain light, his skin appears like the blue gourami, a hazy, blue bordering on white. His father, I suspect is bluish too.

“Who’s feeding the fish? I am only allowed,” he snaps, his body stiffening. “What’s going on? Hannah, confess, did your friend toss in fistfuls of pellets? Does she know these are not cats but ecosystems? Ladies, join me beside tanks.” Hannah lets out an enormous sigh when getting to her feet. I roll my eyes. He instructs us about the miniature
fish culture. The male is usually smaller and skinnier than the female. “The glassfish is Anne. Yes, transparent with inside organs visible.” He pivots, rocking forward and back on his heels. He jingles the key ring. His hair hangs wispily around his face like the dorsal fins of the veil tails and now his grey eyes go blue – a chilling azure like the turquoise rocks in the bottom of the tanks. “Now a demonstration. The bleemies Catherine and Eugene are elongated. Big eyes, yes. Watch, how they know me. Hannah has witnessed before.” He cups his fingers in the water and before long one of the bleemies rests in his hand. An instant and the second bleemie chases the first out. “You see they love me. They are fighting for my affections.”

Would I have fallen into his trap the way the bleemies do or Hannah for that matter? Six months ago she was walking the five avenues from her receptionist job to home and passed Bryant Park. Models from the fashion show were sliding into limos or trying to hail cabs. They looked like hearses with big eyes. A young guy exited one of the tent pavilions and caught her attention. He was shining, taking the stone steps in one jump. She had to stop to let him go by, otherwise they would have collided.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said in a voice mixed with some accent, “but your hair is in my mouth.” Her mistake was laughing. A mosquito stung his cheek. “I predict,” he said, slapping it, “malaria in this city. Dengue fever, also.” He seemed to be amused by the horror of it. Then they walked. The Prudential sign where Broadway split into two traffic streams seemed to have grown mightier. The Chock-full-of-Nuts coffee cup released puffs of steam that rose like miraculously filthy night clouds. On the U.S. Army/Navy Recruiter Island, a diapered cowboy strummed a guitar. This was what the bald eagles died for. The Iroquois. This rot. 42nd Street heaved its arcades and theatres, its souvenirs and the eternal Lion King, and its people, people, people. Yet more people, more birthing, happened to be his stock in trade, along with egg retrieval and ultra-sound guided needles.

“Now go back to your plate, Hannah. Protein, no excuses.”

Hannah lets out another sigh and shuffles back to her chair. Her life takes place in the sunlit corner of the apartment, between the shell chair and coffee table. Her sewing machine she brought with her sits untouched, her laptop’s screensaver, a field of ten foot daffodils, stares at her. I know she’ll be happy again, she’ll sew madly bright costumes. I don’t dare leave her.

“Next week I bring company,” he announces, “another expectant mother.” Janko marches to the open window. The street breathes in a mixture of diesel fumes from the Hess gas station along with urine and
fruit. He yanks the window down, shutting it.

Another expectant mother. Those three words send a shudder through me. Hannah might grow close to a girl going through the same experience and become best pals with her. Another mother might separate Hannah and Dalloway, friends for life.

“Who opened window?” Janko asks, forgetting obviously that he was the one. “I don’t want the cold air circulating. You hurt the fish. You hurt Hannah.”

“Listen, you did it when you rolled in. First, you insulted Hannah by telling her she smelled seventy years old, and then you opened it,” I grouse. “I would never hurt Hannah. I’d cut off my hands before doing that.” And I mean that. Isn’t an alcoholic father who froze along with his dog on the streets of Moscow enough? And a mother who shampoos rich women’s heads and cleans their houses and cooks for them ceaselessly, a bit more than enough?

His feather of an eyebrow rises. “Not me who opened that window, you,” he accuses. “Hannah, your friend is unacceptable. A danger.”

Hannah struggles to raise her voice. It’s an even low voice with only a tiny bit of an accent. Like a thin gold chain on a white wrist. Really she’s unhappy here and sorry her body is incubating some Putin ass-kissing oligarch, KGB bribing, arms selling, gas sucking pipeline owning bastard and his wench’s eggs. Her blood feeding this alien being. Now she’s stuck and this Janko fruitcake is trying to banish her best friend from her side.

“Stop berating her. I need Dalloway here so don’t make me do anything stupid.”

He throws his arms into the air. “Oh, God of Greater Serbia. She kill Osip. This girl overfed him. The prize fish. Bratislav not like this.”

The celestial goldfish with his bulging eyes lies on his side. A fist clenches in my stomach and I swallow a lump in my throat. Sweet Osip. Did I overfeed him? That’s not possible. Or was he mourning for his lamp? The sun and moon. Seconds ago he was alive and now he’s not. My eyes burn.

Janko scoops Osip into the skimmer net. “You chilled little one’s swim bladder. You killed most precious fish in these tanks. Hannah,” he practically shouts, “she can’t stay, unless she’s gestation too. Those are new rules.” Then he marches with the skimmer net into the bathroom and flushes.

“Did you flush Osip?” I ask, trembling, my knuckles going white. “How could you?”

“I gave him burial at sea.”
“A fecal sea.”

“Your head is full of garage.” Janko marches into the far corner of the apartment where a blue couch rests. “This is where we shift some furniture for other mother.”

No way. I shake my head and drop to my knees beside Hannah, whose lower lip trembles. Shreds of chicken stick to her chin and in an eyelash. How did it get up there? “They won’t be shifting furniture over for the other mother. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll follow you, Hannah. Two wombs are better than one,” I blurt out.

My friend for life wipes her chin. “My tongue tastes funny. Like it’s chicken too. Dalloway. What if some giant hen chewed on us?”

“Hens have beaks, not teeth.”

“Worse to be pecked. To feel the beak in your chest. In our eye.”

I let out a gigantic sigh. “Hannah, are you listening? You have to talk to Janko and vouch for me. I can be a gestation surrogate too. I had a 4.0 grade point average. You can tell them I’m of age.”

She pulls a crumb of chicken from her lashes. “You’re a virgin, Dalloway.”

“Remember Alberto? I’ve been with a boy once and that was enough. I can rent my womb. We can pool our money and become entrepreneurs.”

Hannah taps the coffee table with her sewing scissors. “Janko, we have to talk.”

After a thirty-minute long discussion Janko huddles in the bathroom with his cell phone. Hannah and I try to catch every word and luckily the apartment walls are thin. “She’s risky. Very risky indeed,” he ejaculates.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted his Lizzie brushing her hair. He wanted to see her hair down in cascading waves and a tortoise shell comb above each temple. Lizzie took an opium overdose and Rossetti buried his poems with her. A few years later he wanted them back and hired gravediggers to open the coffin. They reported that her hair had grown more lovely. Yes, the hat shop girl Lizzie became an artist’s model who once lay in the water while she was painted dead. Ophelia floating among the water weeds.

After Janko gets off the phone he announces to the room that he told his superior about Hannah’s friend. Many barren couples retrieve eggs and store sperm and need a girl to gestate their baby. The wet nurse of the new century. There is an interest on the part of a wealthy art dealer. But first his boss Bratislav and his wife Eva would like to meet Dalloway tonight.

Forty-five minutes later I’m wearing a long dress of tarnished silver with a plunging back. It’s the hostess dress Hannah once took home to dry clean and then didn’t take back. A ring on my thumb, I draw markings
on each cheek with glitter like kissing gourami. I hate dressing up but
Hannah is giddy with excitement. I have to look sophisticated. But why
meet at the Marriott? Why not the Organic Grill for carrot juice? They’re
in town for the egg retrieval. I fold my glasses into my gym bag and sling it
over my left shoulder.

“Dalloway,” Hannah sighs, “you look beautiful. Call me, let me know
everything.”

Even in front of Kankahan there are beauties. A Ukrainian girl with
lantern orbs for lips and breasts of shucked wheat. A Latina with large
bovine eyes encircled with black pencil like dark equators, two spots blush
on each cheek. I wave at Mrs. Kankahan, shrouded in grave-dirt black
head scarf and outer garments, sitting astride a crate next to a stack of
newspapers. Her five children surround her, fresh-faced and giggling, her
oldest girl in jeans and teeshirt. The two little ones run after me until their
mother shouts them back. My nose prickles with Sand & Sable. Dollar
store scent.

Janko offers to hail a cab, however, he prefers to power walk wherever
possible. Fine. We bypass the moneyless, a few actresses flit by in their
dresses of champagne peaches. A stringy haired girl and a boy and a collie
with a red bandana sit on the corner by the garbage can. PLEASE, their
sign reads beside the collection kettle. Yesterday, a balding hippie begged
from that corner, the collie with red bandana beside him. Different street
beggars plant themselves there but the collie is the same. A snakeskin arm
reaches from a sleeping bag made from Hefty garbage bags, the dark suited
and pale skinned, the dark skinned and cocoon gowned.

A young guy in burgundy corduroy pants and bright white sneakers taps
by with his cane. “I wasn’t always blind. Please help me.” His cane hits the
mailbox and he pivots. “A blind good day to you. A blind good day.”

“Vermin, you’re not blind,” Janko blurs out. “No more than I.”

“Fool. I’m blind and I ain’t trying to prove it to you. I’m not on your
payroll.”

Janko stops directly in front of the white sneakers.

“Move sucker.” The white sneakers halt and the cane swings out.

Janko jumps back. “So how you know I was there?”

“I can hear you, fool.”

“I don’t believe that, no,” Janko barks. “You are sighted person.”

After we walk away the blind man shouts out. “Hey, sucker, where’d
you get the beanie? That hat, man. Idiot thinks he’s Humphrey Bogart.”

not fooled. My country provides world one-third of all raspberries.”
“I didn’t know that,” I say.

He smiles widely and shows his skin colored teeth. “Crazy girl thinks she knows everything. My country is very big in frozen foods.”

“And ethnic cleansing.”

“You are stupid,” he grunts. “You USA know nothing. Do you know of Jasenovac Concentration Camp? No, I see you shake your head. Croats killed 50,000 Serbs there in WWII. Indeed, Serbs and Croats no friends.”

Now he power walks in earnest, swinging his arms. My long legs keep me apace with him. We look idiotic. Well-dressed and terribly-dressed people are staring. One of them I recognize. A red-haired guy who shits himself then passes out on the sidewalk. His name is Orangie. I’ve seen him holding the door open to Ninth Avenue ATM’s. He’s been exceptionally personable and smelly. “Friends, can any of you kindly souls spare quarters, dimes, nickels, anything?” I dig for a Susan B. Anthony dollar and drop it into the cup of his palm, careful not to touch his skin. “Sweetheart, you always take care of me. I know you always do.”

“This is future USA,” Janko declares at the spectacle of sleeping bags and pallets lining the streets. “Beautiful.” The homeless are growing and spreading out in tent-like heaps. “I will go back to the Balkan Peninsula.”

He speeds up and slows down. I think of Osip, the tiny bubbles of his perfect eyes down in the sewer system of this monster city. I am mourning him. My chest heaves. Like that other sadness I once felt when my father told me explicitly how he would transition from man to woman. We were splurging on dessert. “Do you know how it’s done? Sex reassignment?” Daddy had asked. I told him coolly I’d read a few books. One about Christine Jorgensen. More cheesecake went into his mouth. “She was the first male to female,” he said, pleased that I wasn’t totally ignorant. “First you live as a woman for a year, then you begin hormones. A series of surgeries. I’d get my Adam’s apple shaved. More cheesecake?” He held out his fork. I shook my head. “The bridge above my eyebrows goes. They grind it down and reduce it.” I rolled my eyes. “Oh, boy. You’d really do that?” I asked. “You’re the man who doesn’t take anything stronger than aspirin.” He laughed, showed me his trick, where you twist and snap a cloth napkin and make a bra out of it. “Then I’d have my eyes opened up. Women have larger eye orbits.” I remark that I didn’t know that, but he doesn’t seem to be listening. “A face lift to give me a totally youthful look. Breast implants if the hormones don’t make them full enough.” He ordered another cheesecake. “Have as many desserts as you like. The key lime looks good.” For a year after I wrapped my chest in packing tape and Ace bandages. I prayed for flatness.
Now I wonder if my father would approve of my decision to follow Hannah’s example. I could add my fifty thousand to hers and we could truly become entrepreneurs. He surely wouldn’t argue with that sum for nine months work. It’s best to think of my father in a crowd. After he broke the original news to me and I took it calmly, he’d share or ask advice whenever Mom wasn’t around. And it was all the sharing that started to bother me. He kept remembering this and that and all the recollection would spill out of him whenever he caught me alone. “I remember the first time I dressed up. I had on my mother’s slip. I was thirteen.” It was a brownie pie that time. He scooped up whipped cream and nibbled at it. “We lived in Marlborough. I showed you that nice stone house. Well, behind the garage there used to be a grist mill. One of those old stone mills with a waterwheel and I changed into a slip there. I was scared but I followed the creek way back into the woods and I kept walking in the water. Everything felt so soft, the slip and the water. Like hot fudge.” Then he clapped his hands in a jumping jack and leapt to his feet. “I have a few lunges to do. I’ve got side laterals to work on and my rear deltoids. Work off the brownie.” Daddy’s antics always made me happy and I laughed. Months before Mom stopped talking to him. Divorce lay around the corner.

The Marriott. On the eighth floor we leave the escalator and get into the elevator, a glass bubble that travels on the outside of the hotel to the top. I put my face to the curved glass. Everything drops away. I want to walk out into air. We are far above Times Square. I feel the motion, tiny jerks as the hotel is tugged on its axis over the city’s black towers filled with unblinking sequin eyes. We ascend to the rotating restaurant. I watch the waitresses in cobweb dresses and rhinestone shoes drift with their trays. A piano and player revolve along with the rest of us. A tall light-skinned black waitress with hair braided into cornrows swivels toward our table.

“What would you say my friend’s skin is?” he asks her. “Calf leather? Custom bucket seats?”

The waitress looks surprised at his cloddish question. “She has fabulous skin.”

“Would you like to eat it?” he snickers before ordering two strawberry daiquiris. “Drinks only. No dinner menu.”

She laughs, “I’m going to need to see your friend’s ID.”

I open my bag and show her my ID. Not mine but one I found in a purse in the garbage can outside Hannah’s building. It often happens that stolen purses are dumped with ID in them. I mailed everything back to the girl except her driver’s licence. The bad photo showed a young looking
twenty-two year old brunette. I saw that I could pass for her. To older people, the young all appear the same age.

She turns on her high heels, leaving a hole of silence between Janko and me. When she brings the drinks, two goblets filled with red slush and topped with ripe strawberries and plastic swords, Janko doesn’t pay with plastic, he folds a twenty and a ten onto her tiny tray and asks for change. “If you use credit card at a tavern, you will bleed white.”

Is he stupid or smart? How would I sound if I were airlifted into Serbia? There’s frost on my glass and I hold it to my cheek.

His eyes reflect the candlelight. His hawk nose hovers as he bites into a strawberry. “You have the Lizzie face. No question.”

“How do you know about her?”

His grey gaze fastens on me like it did earlier by the fish tank. “I’m artist. I paint big colours, big canvas. In Serbia I’m doctor too. Here doctors from Baltic countries drive taxi or home health aide.”

“So you got into the gestation business?”

“Absolutely.”

The restaurant takes another sluggish jolt. A woman in a green spigot dress, really tall and classic, leans over the piano and requests a tune. I suck the drink through my straw. The daiquiri tastes like medicine. The slit in Janko’s face is moving up and down. Yes, Serbs make art too. You’ve never heard of The White Angel, from the 1230s, Byzantine art. You, USA, think you know everything. He comes from the city of Constantine. At the next table, a tiny woman is bawling a huge man out, “I know you didn’t have a dad and your mother was rough, but Christ you even wipe your hands on your pants like a jerk. Then you lost your 401k. No early retirement for us.” The husband hisses at the woman. “Ssssh, we’re in a public place.”

Janko runs his finger through the frost on the outside of his drink, listening intently. “Sad,” he says, smiling. “Now about crazy you.” He spoons more ice crystals into his mouth, his tongue a glob of cherry pink. From his tongue some of the pink slush drops onto his calf jacket. “I am not sure you have correct personality for this. Are you reliable? What is your age? How do I know? References we need. Background check we need.”

“I don’t remember you doing any background check on Hannah,” I say.

“Oh, yes, but since Hannah has fine background we have nothing to check.”

I roll my eyes. If they’d done any checking, they’d found out her age. Or maybe they didn’t care. The restaurant rotates toward a view of the city, black rocks and flickering torches. “Look, there’s Chrysler Building.
"Empire State Building!" he booms, excitedly. It’s the couple at the next table’s chance to stare. I thrust out my chin at the empty sky. The ghosts of the World Trade Center. Bodies somersaulting endlessly through the air. “There he is, Mr. Bratislav,” Janko announces in a shout. “He’ll make decision whether to use you.” If you were deaf and missed that, you’d be sure to notice him pointing to a tall man with silver hair moving through the crowded bar. Like the glint from a large spoon. The man’s hair brought to mind Hannah’s story of being fired. Is he the same silver man?

Hannah remembered the silver man (the sperm) who came to the office where she answered the telephone, the one who smelled slightly of orange blossoms. Yes, for almost six months she sat at the reception desk and tried to brush away the sun filtering in through a thick pane of glass. It tried to caress the back of her neck by placing a warm hand there. The phones kept ringing, first one then another and another, with callers requesting to be held or transferred and the sun’s hand grew heavier and hotter on her neck. All day packages came and went in the arms of elderly messenger men. Women with first names like Vinton and men called things like Chambers arrived for appointments. She smiled at the tall couple in expensive suits, their heads silvery and their elongated noses with tear drop nostrils and thought of gray foxes, the idea of them. She thought of Marina Tsvetaeva, her verses. “Where does this tenderness come from? here on the ribs of the singer.” A woman of genius who put a noose around her neck. All of bloody, poetry-devouring Russia in opposition to this. Yet she needed money to make some.

Hannah tells me everything so I can be her and she me. The silver man sat and crossed his legs and the woman got up and vanished into the glass conference room where the sun was. He stared at her, kept looking until her face went red. The man, more silver than white, lifted his right hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles, sniffing traces of his orange blossom cologne, and then he opened his fingers and flicked his tongue over his palm. The phone rang and her finger went down the sixty names. At the end of the day right before she keyed the phones into their overnight mode and locked the glass door to the conference room where the dusk muffled the long mahogany table, she was called into the managing partner’s corner office where she rarely went, only sending disembodied voices down that corridor. Now the partner, who constantly cleared his throat with “aaahhhhh’s” afraid of losing the podium while he collected his thoughts, told her they were downsizing and voicemail would replace her. She strolled home. The ova of the female. The male need only be present.

The man with the shiny head is strolling ever closer. I hear him before
he sits and the slippery sound of his trousers making contact with the seat. The scent of orange blossoms sits too. No words of introduction.

Bratislav examines me. I smell orange blossoms. His silver hair cradles his head nicely and a few wrinkles but none around his eyes, as if he spent no time at all smiling. Reek of a hedge fund under the orange blossom. Michael Douglas plucked of hair and dipped in glitter. His fish scale eyes appraise my face. “Extraordinary. It’s as if Ophelia in the Morris painting has come to life.” He continues to stare, his eyes lingering on my face. The fingers with manicured nails do a tap dance on his chair arms. I detect the lightest clearest coat of fingernail polish.

I miss Osip. Shy Pamela and sweet Pushkin. My head feels like a red cloud.

Bratislav crosses his leg under the table, pointing his toe. “I didn’t want to waste my wife’s time if the girl was unacceptable. Let’s go to your place, Janko. It’s midway between us and Eva. We’ll talk there.” He blows on his fingers again. “You are serious about this, Dalloway? This is a nine month commitment but it’s more than that. You are incubating life. This requires a healthy body and mind. If you’ve had a tattoo in the last five months you’re ineligible. If you’ve ever had a sexually transmitted disease you’re ineligible. We look for stability and a relaxed manner. Do you think this is something you might be interested in?”

It feels like a Sunday, whatever day it is. Hannah and I are exercising – out for our walk on a quiet side street. A Latina wearing a stocking hat and two coats sorts through garbage cans, separating little mounds of egg shells from melon rinds, clumps of kitty litter from cartons of take-out fried rice. “See, I told you so,” She plucks from the garbage a still wrapped fortune cookie. “Good for you,” I laugh.

Hannah and I both have bellies, only she is in her ninth month and I’ve just started to show. Ahead, an old woman of not more than four feet four inches pushes a wire cart, two steps, a step, a pause. Bent over, her shoulders, neck and head are horizontal and view only her feet. When she comes to a stop at the corner she has to corkscrew her neck and head to see the Walk/Don’t Walk. She gives us the most beautiful smile. “I will design clothes for women like her,” Hannah bubbles. “There is no one I can’t attractively clothe. And maybe after this is over we should make a baby of our own.” I squeeze her hand, I agree. “Who will the father be?” she asks. “The sperm bank? How about Janko? He’s a doctor after all.” There’s a street fair going on, the homeless have unfurled blankets and pebbled them with paperbacks and soiled exercise videos. It can’t help being sunny.
ROB WALLIS

TO NO AVAL

Mario Stefani: *Loneliness is not being alone; it’s loving others to no avail.*

The glass pinning your note down on the kitchen table is a knife thrust through the paper-thin layer of my trust, the words like crackling static on a faulty line and all I decipher, or rather intuit is the horror story about finding somebody else. I search for signs that you were here, your smell tangled in the sheets, a hair wired to a bathroom towel, your handprint I imagine on a half-empty mug of tea all arranged in the shrine I’ve created in my mind where I pour libations and pray your new lover will vaporise and you’ll rush back to me. The screen has gone blank, the phone is dead and something deep inside me rolls over and hides in an empty corner keening like a dog.
To a child of five, the sun glints gold on the slopes and coins hang on trees. Some nights I’d watch the mask by the wall open its mouth, roll out its tongue in a column of fire, goggle eyes swirling.

How the child’s eye quickens, pictures beget beasts and gods. Then the wonders passed. The puny gods she prayed to, Clara, her god of the turned-up nose and bulbous eyes, pot-bellied torso sprawled in the closet dark. Still in my Catholic uniform, she took me out one day to a house in the fields where she said a woman could leach the pustule out under her tush; if I were nice, she said, she’d call the rain down for me as well. Feet splayed, haunches shadowing the kerosene light where coffee brewed, the woman moved like a deity in her world of grain and thunder gods. Chatter didn’t wax into spells, so after a drink of melon sap, I tracked a goat to a grove of jackfruit trees. Not long they flung their banners up to breach the sky, beat the drums as they guzzled rain – jackfruits and cascades breaking on the ground. The trees have turned to hags with bad backs, long-limbed straps lashing me down a shack half-sunk, a ghost ship buckling out of sight. Oh, how a child howls!
Fish balls on sticks consoled me on the way home. Clara’s sweetened tamarinds warming on my tongue. I’d lie to mother for her, Clara of her fried smoke and soap-smelling hands, squatting beside my saints.

She’d do as much for me had she known how I forsook Her – she of the Immaculate Heart of my medallion; how from the wobbly pit of faith, I'd called out to the unholy names in the storm, darkly gleaming thunder gods.
SUSAN MIDALIA

THIS YEAR’S WORK IN FICTION 2008–2009

In her essay “The Conscience of Words”, Susan Sontag describes literature as “the house of nuance and contrariness against the voices of simplification.” In this view, literary form is a way of posing questions rather than providing answers to the complex business of living; it is a means of “help[ing] us understand that, whatever else is happening, something else is always going on.”

I have used Sontag’s model of literature to select and review the past year’s Australian fiction; for the works I have most admired are those whose ethical circumspection and emotional resonance have complicated and enriched my understanding of human experience. These are narratives which remind us that there are many different ways of seeing and being in the world; they offer what David Malouf, in his new novel *Ransom*, calls *this otherwise*.

It’s been a wonderful year for complex new works by established writers. Joan London’s second novel *The Good Parents* – highly intelligent and immensely readable, formally and linguistically assured – is one of my favourites. It uses a central trope from Australian colonial fiction, that of the lost or missing child, to explore the concept of the modern family as both a changing social institution and a complicated emotional experience. Its skilfully crafted plot charts the lives of three generations of families engaged with issues of ownership and independence, alienation and rebellion, estrangement and abiding love. With compassion and wry humour, London reveals the pain of loveless marriages, the compromises of middle age, the youthful longing for freedom, from the repressive rectitude of the 1950s to the hippie idealism of the 60s and 70s and through to the confidence and confusions of Generation Y. The novel’s use of shifting and multiple perspectives allows for the ebb and flow of characters’ memories and subtly suggests the continuing power of the past: as something to escape, to come to terms with and, finally, to honour. London is also very
good at depicting the different social milieux inhabited by the characters: the textures, rhythms and atmosphere of Perth, Melbourne and Western Australia’s south-west are vividly imagined. Impressive in scope, *The Good Parents* is also beautifully suggestive in its use of detail to evoke interiority. Here, for example, is the middle-aged, married Jacob, yearning for his daughter’s housemate – a woman, as the cliché has it, young enough to be his own daughter. In a vignette of less than 200 words, London conveys the pathos of the injured Jacob’s longing, fretting that his “naked, swollen and purple foot … exposed in rubber thongs” might “repel forever” the lovely Cecile. The comic-pathetic description – hyperbolic and vaguely sexual – suggests Jacob’s return to the distress of an adolescent boy struggling with the fear of rejection. *The Good Parents* is also a philosophical exploration of the tension between free will and determinism, choice and chance, in the formation of identity and the shaping of a future. Some characters, for example, plan their lives carefully, while the lives of others are radically changed in a moment. A chance encounter on a rainy roadside propels the schoolgirl Toni into an elopement and a world of sexual glamour turned nightmare; Jacob is haunted by the knowledge that staying a few minutes longer at a party might have saved the life of a friend. Here as elsewhere in the novel, the sense of *what if, if only*, hovers uneasily on the edge of consciousness. And whether read for the various strands of its intriguing plot or for its psychological, social and philosophical concerns, *The Good Parents* also offers the pleasure of precise, incisive and rhythmically deft language. It’s been seven years since the publication of London’s first novel, *Gilgamesh*; *The Good Parents* – psychologically and morally astute and elegantly written – has been well worth the wait.

It’s been even longer – ten years – since the publication of Murray Bail’s last novel, *Eucalyptus*. His new work, *The Pages*, is more properly a novella, and centres on the tension between philosophy and psychoanalysis as interpretative models and the source of happiness. The clash is established at the outset, when a Sydney academic philosopher Erica Hazlehurst, accompanied by her psychoanalyst friend Sophie, attempts to appraise the work of the deceased amateur philosopher and recluse Wesley Antill, after pages of his writing are discovered on the family sheep station in western New South Wales. Several other oppositions underpin the characters’ search for meaning: the contrast between Sydney and the bush, Australia and Europe, male and female, mind and body, language and silence, drives the plot and shapes Bail’s conception of character. But *The Pages* never feels schematic or programmatic; on the contrary, it suggests that no schema yet constructed can adequately convey or explain the randomness,
the gloriously messy particularities, of life. Thus, while philosophy is privileged over what Bail regards as the narcissistic pseudo-science of psychoanalysis, its practice is also represented as a possible evasion of the challenges of human intimacy. The punningly named Wesley Antill is both an indefatigable seeker of truth and a pompous, self-absorbed bungler in his personal life. In the tradition of Sterne’s eighteenth-century comic novel *Tristram Shandy*, seriousness and parody co-exist in *The Pages*. The resistance of Bail’s novella to categorisation is formal as well as thematic and tonal: the novella is part romance (city academic meets taciturn farmer); part lyrical evocation of the bush – its spaces, its beauty, its solitude, the integrity of manual labour; a philosophical disquisition on the value of silence; a satire of intellectual pretentiousness and self-obsession; and a self-reflexive text about the nature and functions of narrative. And all this in a novella of less than 200 (small) pages. *The Pages* is the work of a skilled miniaturist, at once funny, melancholy and artistically satisfying. It is also a beautifully produced hardback: a lovely object to look at and to hold.

It’s also been ten years since David Malouf’s last novel *Conversations at Curlew Creek*; and like Bail’s *The Pages*, Malouf’s relatively brief and allegorical *Ransom* is structured on a series of oppositions: between the maternal and paternal, youth and age, earth and water, fixity and fluidity, the realm of myth and the world of the novel. Set in the mythical world of ancient Greece and narrating the story of two male adversaries – the legendary Greek warrior Achilles and the ageing Priam, king of Troy – *Ransom* is an anti-war novel, a critique of the destructive spiral of violence which Malouf sees as the inevitable, futile trajectory of war. And while the novel considers the role of the gods and fate in the behaviour of its characters, it is distinctively modern in its concern with masculine psychology – men’s desire for power and immortality – as the origin of war. The note is succinctly sounded early in the novel, when Achilles, staring across the Gulf at the eternal recurrence of the waves, sees that “in the long vista of time he might already be gone. It is time, not space, he is staring into.” In opposition to the militaristic, vengeful Achilles is the figure of Priam, who represents the possibility of escape from war through the process of negotiation. Priam’s journey to meet Achilles is impelled by a belief in an essential, common humanity through which the two adversaries might speak to each other “man to man”, as a father and a son. The journey can also be read in metatextual terms, as a movement from the realm of myth – what Malouf represents as a world of hollow ceremony, hierarchies and a profound indifference to the other – to the humanising world of the novel, expressed in the tales told to the king by his peasant
mule-driver Idaeus. Listening to these stories of ordinary working-class life, increasingly enchanted by their sensorial and emotional intensity, Priam also comes to value the teller, Idaeus himself, as a particular and irreducible individual. *Ransom* is thus an unashamedly humanist narrative, affirming the possibility of transcending social categories through the transformation of individual consciousness and the affective power of realist literature. Malouf’s consummate skills as a storyteller are evident in the novel’s structure, which counterpoints the circularity of ancient Greek determinism with the linearity of a modern sense of choice and change; and, expressed in lyrical, often luminous prose, *Ransom* is a broodingly elegiac and deeply moving expression of masculine vulnerability and the healing power of forgiveness.

It’s been even longer – some sixteen years – since the publication of a novel by another established writer, Helen Garner. Garner’s much anticipated return to fiction, the novella *The Spare Room*, is characteristically and deliberately provocative. As a book about the difficulty of caring for a terminally ill woman, much has been made of its blatantly autobiographical nature. Is this indeed fiction? And what are the ethics of writing intimately about the suffering of real people? There has also been much praise for the book’s honesty, as the narrator, Helen, confesses to feeling overwhelmed by a range of shameful responses as Nicola’s carer. She feels impatient with the woman’s demands, contemptuous of her patrician attitudes, frustrated by her refusal to face the truth of her condition and angry at her gullible faith in the medical charlatans keen to profit from her desperate search for a cure. And most courageously of all, perhaps, are Helen’s admissions of self-pity, when caring for the dying surely calls for an effacement of the self, an ability to put one’s own relatively trivial concerns into their proper perspective. But *The Spare Room* is more than a litany of a carer’s complaints, however authentic. In its public exposure of quacks claiming to have alternative cures for cancer, the book is driven partly by Garner’s zeal as an investigative journalist. It is also a story about the limits of empathy when confronted with the terrible, sorrowful opacity of the other – the friend who, once spirited, independent, generous and open, is unable to accept the imminence of her death and who wears what Garner calls “the horrible mask” of stoicism. For just as Helen’s resentment and anger threaten to alienate the reader – where, we might ask, is the dying woman in all this? – Garner provides a moment of transcendence, in which Helen expresses for the first time what she really feels: “We can’t find you anymore”, she tells her old friend. “We miss you. Where have you gone?” What follows is Nicola’s willingness, however fleeting, to accept the reality of her condition and the gift of love:
Nicola rested her shoulder against mine. We looked each other in the eyes and away again, open and free. It was like being submerged to our chins in calm water. Our limbs were weightless, and so were our hearts. I looked at the clock. It was only half past eight.

The spare but resonant language creates for the reader reflective spaces about the nature of friendship, responsibility for others and the “trackless forest”, the “place of darkness”, into which the dying enter. The Spare Room – highly compressed, tonally varied and beautifully paced – works as both stringent social commentary and a thoughtful meditation on the “echoing spaces” of dying.

While readers have waited some time for new fiction by London, Bail, Malouf and Garner, Kate Grenville’s most recent novel, The Lieutenant, comes relatively hot on the historical heels of her highly successful and controversial The Secret River, published in 2005. Both novels are informed by what Grenville regards as the historical novelist’s obligation not simply to record or even to imagine the past, but to ethically examine it, in this case to judge the actions and ideology of white “settlers” in their first contact with Aborigines. While The Secret River is about a closing down of possibilities for communication and understanding, The Lieutenant is less pessimistic; refusing to erase the barbarism and destructive ignorance of white culture’s treatment of Aborigines, the novel also allows for the transformative possibilities of interracial contact. The Lieutenant is centred on the character of Daniel Rooke and the increasingly unbearable disjunction for him between the public marine – the man of duty and obedience to authority – and the private man, the lover of stars and language who discovers the ethics of relationship through his friendship with Aborigines, in particular the nine-year-old girl Tāgaran. Grenville has avoided the historical controversy which beset The Secret River by insisting that her construction of Rooke is based entirely on historical documentation, thus pre-empting criticism that she has superimposed a modern ideological perspective onto past figures and events. One of the main strengths of The Lieutenant is its gradual development of the relationship between Rooke and Tāgaran – the importance it conveys of the extra-linguistic, of touch, facial expressions, gesture, as the Aboriginal girl learns to trust the white man and he discovers his own capacity for reciprocity and understanding:

Everything in his life had come down to the sensation of her fingers against his. The person he was, the history he carried within himself, every joy and grief he had ever experienced, slipped away like an
irrelevant garment. He was nothing but skin, speaking to another skin, and between the skins there was no need to find any words.

There is an ethical poise to this epiphanic moment and in the novel as a whole. Such writing is never easy: it involves tireless re-drafting and polishing to create this kind of artless art. The linguistic and moral integrity of *The Lieutenant* is the mark one of our finest novelists.

The prolific Sonya Hartnett has produced another dazzling novel: *Butterfly* is another one of my picks for the year. Centred on Plum Coyle, a thirteen-going-on-fourteen year old sister and daughter, *Butterfly* conveys the savage self-abasement, piteous vulnerability and marvellous resilience of adolescents, as well as their inclination to cruelty. The scenes detailing the bitchiness of Plum’s “friends” are anguishing reminders of the thoughtless humiliations and calculated malice of which teenaged girls are capable. And above all *Butterfly* is a novel about loneliness, not only Plum’s but also that of her much older and sporadically affectionate brothers, Justin and Cydar, their parents Mums and Fa, and the next door neighbour Maureen, a mother with a largely absent husband. Glimpsing her own mother’s loneliness, Plum knows that she

will never ask her ... what she thinks about when she’s alone in the house and it’s raining, those cold afternoons when [she] arrives home to find Elvis gazing up from record sleeves shuffled over the floor.

There is much to praise in Hartnett’s latest novel: the use of vivid detail to create an emotionally charged world; the arresting figurative language (Cydar is “a hawk whistled down from the sky”, while Plum’s father is distanced from her by “an obscuring fog of softness”); a skilfully constructed plot which seems to meander like life itself while often threatening to erupt into calamity. *Butterfly* is also a fine study in character: Plum is a wonderfully layered construction; intense, peculiar, edgy and self-absorbed, she is a girl whose heart “fattens” with love when shown even a hint of affection and who learns about the adult world’s capacity for exploitation, vindictiveness and betrayal. And there is a heartbreaking glimpse of a four-year-old child, Maureen’s son David, a plaintive, unsuspecting instrument and victim of selfish adult passions. *Butterfly* is an exhilarating, sobering, utterly absorbing read, and a welcome addition to Hartnett’s impressive body of fiction.

*The Slap* is Christos Tsiolkas’s fourth novel. Published three years after the difficult, some would say impenetrable, *Dead Europe, The Slap*
is highly accessible. It’s a hefty but engrossing read, structured on the reactions of eight different characters to the slapping of a three-year-old child by a family relative at a barbecue. Tsiolkas uses this wonderful conceit – the emotionally and morally loaded action of an adult slapping a defenceless (if highly obnoxious) child – to explore the changing social mores and conflicting value systems of those who witness the event. Set in Melbourne’s multicultural northern suburbs, the novel’s use of a range of perspectives is arguably an attempt to represent a cross-section of contemporary Australian society. Characters from different classes, races, ethnicities, religions, generations and sexualities attack one another and defend their positions in homes and on holidays, in pubs and bars, the work place and the courtroom, with arrogance, venom or self-righteous indignation, with the blow of a fist. What characterises this novel is the energy of the writing and its refusal to judge the characters: in allowing them to speak for themselves and in cleverly complicating our responses to most of them, Tsiolkas ensures that his text reads as much as we read the text. So how does one read a novel in which many of the characters are singularly repellent – racist, misogynistic, selfish, duplicitous, irresponsible, complacent, violent, superficial and sleazy? At one level, The Slap can be interpreted as a critique of the national myths of egalitarianism and the “fair go”, a descent into ruthless individualism and constant anxiety about wealth and social status. This is “aspirational voter” country and the effects are morally ugly. It is also a novel about narcissism, in which a shallow preoccupation with appearance and sexual performance suggests an inability or unwillingness to confront mortality. Its view of heterosexual relationships is dispiriting and cynical, its bleak vision of marriage expressed in the words of the old Greek patriarch Manolis: “Had [his wife] forgotten the long, poisonous years in between youth and age, the years of argument and spite and disillusion and despair?” At the same time, Tsiolkas gives us the unquenchable optimism of the adolescents Connie and Richie – wonderful portraits of excruciating self-consciousness, of loyalty and tenderness. The Slap is also a deliberate assault on bourgeois sensibilities and values, shown in the casual proliferation of expletives and obscenities; the relentless (and to my mind distorting) sexualising of experience; and by the fact that the few sympathetic characters exist outside the heteronormative confines of the nuclear family. As contentious and provocative as the slap itself, the novel will no doubt add to Tsiolkas’s reputation as one of Australia’s more confronting writers.

While reading new novels by established writers is a pleasure, it’s an especial thrill to read quality work by debut novelists. The year’s
outstanding works for me are Amanda Curtin’s *The Sinkings* and Jacinta Halloran’s *Dissection*—very different in mode and scope but both intelligent, skilfully crafted and beautifully written. *The Sinkings* counterpoints and gradually interweaves a contemporary and historical narrative, as Willa, a free-lance editor, researches the life of a nineteenth-century convict, Little Jock, shipped to Australia for a series of petty crimes. The narratives are connected by, among other things, the fact that Willa’s daughter and Little Jock are intersexed; and Curtin uses this link to examine changing attitudes to sexual ambiguity and to explore more general and important questions about human rights and dignity, victimisation and courage. The historical section of the narrative, set in northern Island, Glasgow and Portsmouth, is both meticulously researched and sensorially, at times viscerally, immediate; and Curtin is excellent at using a nineteenth-century prose style without ever falling into empty pastiche or arch mimicry. Nor does she sentimentalise or demonise the poor; her depiction of life in the slums shows its hardships and brutalities but also its capacity for resilience and its sense of community. Life in Western Australia is also wonderfully realised: Curtin’s sense of place is vivid and unerring. Little Jock makes a decent life for himself in the new country, but we are also shown the cost of always having to pretend to be what he is not and to forego the emotional intimacy he craves. The novel’s contemporary narrative also deals with loneliness and victimisation: Willa is a mother shattered by grief and loss, while her intersexed daughter Imogen suffers under the “well intentioned” but violating medical attempts to normalise her anatomy and identity. But here too we witness the courageous struggle to remake lives in the face of overwhelming trauma. *The Sinkings* is ultimately a plea to move beyond destructively rigid gender binaries in particular and to embrace ambivalence, ambiguity and difference in general. This ambitious, thoughtful and very moving work by a prize-winning short story writer is a stunning achievement for any novelist, let alone a first-timer.

Jacinta Halloran’s highly impressive debut novel *Dissection*, as its title suggests, is also concerned with the practice of medicine. Its narrative focuses on the experiences of a female GP, Anna McBride, who is facing a medical negligence suit because of her delayed diagnosis of a rare form of cancer and, as a partial consequence, the breakdown of her marriage. While Curtin’s *The Sinkings* parallels past and present societies, *Dissection* is starkly contemporary in its use of form, located as it is in the isolated consciousness of the central character struggling to deal with the disintegration of her professional and personal life. A GP herself, Halloran is excellent at conveying the burden placed on doctors by public
expectations for perfection, and she examines with moral intelligence and urgency the professional ethics of responsibility and care. She also offers a psychologically astute examination of consciousness itself, as Anna “dissects” her conscience as a doctor, wife and mother. The use of a third person limited point of view is highly effective in creating a sense of Anna’s self-scrutinising, tortuous isolation, as this once rational and conscientious woman is gradually corroded by self-lacerating guilt and self-doubt. She even begins to reconstruct her virtues as inadequacies or failings: she fears that her calmness may be coldness, her capacity to reason an inability to feel. If “hell”, as Sartre famously described it, is “other people”, then Anna’s hell is surely herself: almost inhumanly stoic, demanding impossible standards for herself, she cuts herself off from the possibility of support or consolation. While this kind of material might sound rather grim, Dissection is ultimately an affirming story; Halloran never allows her character to become maudlin or self-pitying, and Anna’s fundamental goodness, fully realised rather than simply asserted, is expressed in her commitment to her vocation and in the value of enduring maternal love. There is a kind of grace to Halloran’s doctor and mother in this humane, thought-provoking and thoroughly readable debut novel.

Other first novels have been welcome new voices in the Australian fiction scene. I admired enormously Sonia Orchard’s The Virtuoso. Orchard is the writer of a memoir, Something More Wonderful (200?), and The Virtuoso, loosely based on the life of the gifted Australian pianist Noël Mewton-Wood, has the tone and texture of a memoir: a first person retrospective account by one of Mewton-Wood’s lovers, as he looks back with longing, regret and despair at his past passions and failures. Melancholy pervades this intelligent novel about romantic obsession and its relation to musical creativity, the anguish of jealousy, the emptiness of casual sexual encounters and the decadence of artistic circles in post-war England, particularly the homosexual sub-culture. I especially liked the minor but very haunting figure of the narrator’s father, with his nurturing love of music and his unspoken sadness. The Virtuoso is also a gift for anyone interested in music: its informed and lovingly attentive descriptions of works of classical music will return you with renewed passion to some great compositions for piano.

Sofie Laguna, a writer of young adult and children’s fiction, has created a chilling first novel for adults about the intellectually impaired child of reclusive religious extremists. One Foot Wrong, told from the perspective of the child through to late adolescence, details the damaging effects of psychological and sexual abuse, but the overall effect is less harrowing
than might be expected (although be prepared for the horrific climax.) The novel is rescued from unmitigated bleakness by endowing the child Hester with a creative imagination through which she constructs a world of kind, interventionist objects, including a door handle, broom and axe, to help her survive, and by showing her capacity for empathy and enduring friendship. Claire Thomas’s *Fugitive Blue* is another fine first novel about the search by a young art conservator to find the origins of a fifteenth-century panel painting. In narratives about different historical periods, from Renaissance Venice through to post-war Australia, Thomas suggests parallel stories about love and loss, female creativity and unrealised desire. Polished and poignant, expressed with incisiveness and resonance, *Fugitive Blue* doesn’t miss a beat.

There have been other excellent works of fiction published in the last year that I want to commend. Amanda Lohrey’s novella, *Vertigo*, which charts the move of a “tree change/sea change” couple from the dilapidated gloom of a Sydney apartment to the natural beauties of the country, is one of my favourites. In this exquisitely lyrical narrative, Lohrey’s evocation of place is masterly: the flora, fauna and atmosphere of the bush are inventively described and used subtly to suggest changes in the relationship between husband and wife. (I might add that the extended description of a ravaging bushfire, apart from being eerily prescient, is the best on the subject I’ve ever read, and alone is worth the price of the book!) The minor characters are drawn economically and persuasively, showing Lohrey’s skills as a short story writer; and the use of symbolic details – birds, water, ash, books, an item of clothing – is always striking without being heavy-handed. A novella about our relationship to the physical environment and to each other, a story about stoicism, friendship and love, it’s one of the best things Lohrey has written. And like *The Pages*, its production is superb: the cover design, the quality paper and the inclusion of beautiful images by Lorraine Biggs add to the pleasure of this memorable new work.

Sophie Cunningham’s second novel, *Bird*, is the story of a daughter’s search to understand the mother who abandoned her. Based very loosely on the life of Zina Rachevsky, a co-founder in the early 1970s of a Buddhist monastery in Nepal, *Bird* takes us through the life of Anna Davidoff, a wartime refugee in America, a ’50s movie starlet and a ’60s party girl, covering the Beat era, AIDS, hallucinogenic drugs, the siege of Leningrad and ending with a kind of peace in the monastery. Cunningham creates an impressive range of voices in the narration of a daughter’s journey, from snappy one-liners to deeply affecting accounts of the siege. The deferment of Anna’s own voice is highly effective in constructing her as
an ambivalent figure, a woman who changes from political engagement to political quietism and who is both narcissistic and selfless, desperate and joyful. *Bird* is an intriguing and well-written novel, a convincing portrait of an individual and an insightful depiction of different cultures and historical periods.

Tracy Ryan’s third novel, *Sweet*, is her best yet. It charts the struggle of three women to find meaning and affirmation in a religious fundamentalist community in 1980s rural Western Australia. The novel is pervaded by a suffocating sense of the moral claustrophobia of that community – its small-mindedness, its sense of certainty, its oppressive good intentions. But *Sweet* is no simple or shrill anti-religious diatribe. The church leader, the Reverend William King, is a fascinating study in moral ambivalence, a man who is both genuinely compassionate and psychologically manipulative, benevolent and vaguely sinister. The three women whose lives he dominates are all drawn with compassion and a shrewd understanding of feminine susceptibility to the influence of a powerful man. I particularly enjoyed the character of Kylie, a young working-class mother whose inarticulate fumbling after faith is neither patronised nor sentimentalised. Uneducated, self-doubting and anxious to placate, Kylie is a touching portrayal of the emotional vulnerability lying at the heart of this intelligent and affecting novel.

On the short fiction scene, there have been several anthologies offering some of the best from established and emerging writers, including Delia Falconer’s selection in *The Best Australian Short Stories*, Barry Oakley’s in *Families* and Aviva Tuftield’s in *New Australian Stories*. Writing effective and memorable short stories is an aesthetically exacting business, and *New Australian Stories* in particular offers wonderful examples from thirty-five exponents. Among its many pleasures are Cate Kennedy’s “Flexion”, a poignant narrative about marital estrangement and the healing possibilities of touch (Kennedy, as always, is superb at evoking “the unsaid”); Mark O’Flynn’s laugh-out-loud monologue “Iago”, in which Shakespeare’s villain offers a diabolically clever, self-indicting justification of his duplicity; and Brenda Walker’s moving and wonderfully suggestive “That Vain Word No”, a beautifully crafted story about maternal love and loneliness.

The outstanding single-author collection is Nam Le’s much lauded *The Boat*. What links these stylistically and tonally diverse stories set in a range of locations is a concern with history – political, familial, cultural – as burden, guilt and responsibility; and what distinguishes them is Le’s gift for evoking the pathos or tragedy of individual selves fractured and buffeted by forces beyond their control. For me the finest
story in the collection is the last one: “The Boat” should be mandatory reading for xenophobes fearful of or hostile to asylum seekers. In this era of increasing anxiety about boat people “swamping” our shores, Le’s heartbreaking story is a timely plea to understand the traumatic histories and the desperation of such people. His stories are also distinguished by their length: at 8,000 to 10,000 words, they are considerably longer than most Australian readers are accustomed to and depend on duration for their effects. While the contemporary short story typically tends to use a spatial rather than temporal aesthetic and represents experience in terms of suggestive glimpses or moments, Le’s stories rely for their ethical and emotional power on the development of characters and experiences over time. “The Boat”, for example, works because the hazardous journey of the Vietnamese boat people is represented as hideously protracted: “Time”, we are told, “has distended every moment on the boat.” The journey, in which 200 people are crammed into a boat intended for 15, lasts for two weeks, but what we experience is its seeming endlessness, the ghastly daily replication of disease, dehydration, festering skin, acute malnutrition, delirium and death. The story works, too, because its quiet insistence on the preciousness of individual lives – its humanising of an enormous and growing social problem – depends on gradually developing the relationship between the young girl at the centre of the story and the little boy for whom she cares:

In the middle of the night, Mai woke to find Truong half draped over her stomach. His weight on her so light as to be almost imperceptible, as though his body were already nothing more than bones and air. “Everything will be fine,” she whispered into the darkness, her thoughts still interlaced with dream, scattered remotely across space and the grey sea.

Le has used the scope of these relatively long short stories to create thoughtful, subtly crafted and highly affecting tales about displacement, memory, identity and desire, in which personal experience is used to explore wider and often urgent social dilemmas.

Reviewing the year in Australian fiction has suggested a number of possible trends: the continuing viability of the historical novel; the popularity of the present tense, first person narrative; a preoccupation with loneliness and religiosity; the resurgence of the novella (although, it must be said, restricted to those by high-profile writers offering what publishers would regard as value-for-money). But above all I have been
impressed by and grateful for the moral intelligence, social awareness and stylistic poise of new and established writers alike. To return to Susan Sontag, the year’s fiction has provided compelling answers to her question: What should a writer do? “Love language, agonise over sentences. And pay attention to the world.”

NOTES


FICTION RECEIVED 2008–2009

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


ANDREW HEATH

ON THIS LAST MORNING

1
On this last morning, she made breakfast
Gliding easily between the bench and the stove
With a grace befitting a ballet dancer
While I smoked a cigarette and drank Kenyan coffee
As she sat to eat her breakfast
She flaunted her nakedness beneath her silk dressing gown
That she had rescued from the local opportunity shop
She’s trying so hard to create an impression on this last morning
But all she revives is a memory I hold from months ago
Making love with her on the beach at Mallacoota
Before the sun grew too high in the sky
This was my memory, taken with my eye’s camera,
Distant now, like a dream I had months ago

On this last morning, she wants me to take another picture
A picture of what I can no longer have but I’m focusing instead
On how bad the coffee tastes
Then the telephone rings, insistent like the plague,
She runs for it and grasps the handpiece carefully
Ensuring that she doesn’t ruin her carefully manicured fingers
When she speaks, her tone is slightly shrill, almost forced –
Perhaps it’s her latest beau –
Wanting to make me feel hurt and rejected
Even her laughing is fragmented and
I have trouble hearing myself think
On this last morning, my thoughts are with her
Far more deeply than she or I realise,  
Me not anticipating that maybe I really loved her  
Loved her more than I had known before  
I made another coffee, black this time,  
Briefly intoxicated with my brilliant theory,  
While she showered, singing softly to herself  
Then my mate stopped by to have a cry  
About his latest lost love and I empathised  
Misled him into thinking that I was happy and free now  
He left, better in the knowledge that I was no better,  
Probably far worse than he, having lost a gem of such beauty  
A brief intermission, then our final words,  
Barbed like fish hooks into soft skin  
Our mouths moving far too fast for our brains  
Everything on the surface and nothing of substance  
I’m thinking that we are so much better than this,  
Just not better together, but it’s these final sentences  
That will write our memory of this last morning  
In the end, she simply picked up the last of her bags,  
Slammed the front door, and the photograph I took was of the sun  
Glistening on her newly shaven leg as she got into the taxi

2
On this last afternoon, six months later,  
Not a word has passed between us  
I am resolutely hidden from public view most of the time  
Occasional excursions to the one pub she hated  
My social outlet  
Today, though, I’m feeling good and walking down Main Street  
The world is in balance for a moment and I feel myself  
Coming back slowly from my submerged state  
Ah, ying and yang,  
My balance is soon shattered by the vision of her  
Not twenty feet away, arm entwined in another man’s-  
I want to hide, want to dissolve straight into the ground  
But I have no time and she is upon me  
Kissing me extravagantly upon the lips and  
Pulling herself close into me  
Her eyes are electric and her body writhes  
Underneath her winter coat and she breezes
Through me as though that last morning never happened
Was not even a memory she could regain under hypnosis
Forgotten like a friend
You used to play cricket with at primary school
Hundreds of years ago
But no sooner does she appear than she departs again
Leaving me shaking on the footpath
Like a zombie in need of a fix

3
On this last evening, a further twelve months have passed
It’s Saturday night, the vaudeville of football season upon us
I’m in the middle of it all
Drinking my brain into submission and happy to do it
People around me think I’m pissed but
I’m sober, stone cold sober,
And there she is at the bar ordering a drink
Is it really her, I ask myself,
The same electric eyes, though the face is slimmer somehow,
No greeting this time, barely a cursory glance in acknowledgement
My grog-found balance is rocked again and I can’t speak
I get another shout and return it to my mates
Then keep walking straight out of the pub
As I hit the street, the cold air
Straightens me like a crow bar
She’s there again and I’m in her arms
And she says that I can have her, well, have her for fifty bucks
And I want to, but I can’t touch her and she goes
I fall into the gutter and vomit my guts out, spewing out every
Single molecule that ever knew who I once was

4
On this last morning, the air is heavy with rain and disbelief
The casket is mercifully closed and I can’t think of her dead
Let alone look at the lifeless form of the woman
I held naked in my arms
Some inadequate words and blessings and she is gone for good

On this last morning, we can finally stand the truth,
My love and I,
That I loved her, needed the life in her eyes and
The warmth in her body, far more than she loved or needed me,
Though she loved me in her own way
No one else is present
I walk home alone in the rain
Five long, wet miles with no hat or raincoat

5
On this last morning, she makes breakfast and I eat with her
We laugh together and make plans, talk about friends and family
Eat until we are both satisfied with food and
Now long to hold each other
She falls into my arms and I carry her away to our bed
Where we spend the day under the covers and get up late
To drink wine and talk all night until every light in our street
Fades into blackness
JEAN KENT

NATIVE JASMINE FOR JENNIFER

The white star-flowered *jasminium suavissimum*

which tries to tendril

through my kitchen door

has a scent like lily of the valley ...

Two months before you died, you detected this,
angling toward the surf of flowers by your sick-bed’s
giddy peninsula.

Tides of visitors threatened to swamp you –
but you were afloat on perfume, on fleur de lys and my photos
from Paris: gifts from a foreign place
you had tickets to only in dreams now.

“Is that lily of the valley?”
briefly you hoped,
bending to native jasmine,

sniffing from it a whiff
of the life you’d always wanted.

While the wardrobe mirror held
giraffe necks of your garden’s spotted gums,
you morphed above the star-snuff

into a girl, just out of school in Mary Quant dresses,

owl-eyed with mascara, the only dust ahead of you

lifting benevolent as blusher from the library books
in the Queen Victoria Building’s bowels.
It was so cool, back in 1966,  
to inhale,  
to dabble in gold  
holding the Benson & Hedges pack,  
your fingernails, as you flicked away ash, pink pearls.

Perhaps the luxury of long life was not in your genes,  
perhaps you were right to ring your throat  
in smoke, lunch on Bodega, dress in black for a decade  
and then, divorced, go white.  
In your forties, flashes of happiness  
coloured your life –  

a blue budgerigar circled your walls  
as we ate your white meals, your new house  
had ruby-fruited tamarillos by the drive  
and windows which held a cobalt-blue lake. Too late. Like the lily of the valley  
coming up to flower from dark earth under snow,  
your perfect time was brief.

After the eulogies, after the racked back  
of your partner in the front pew and Joe Cocker croaking  
*I get by with a little help from my friends*  
we comfort ourselves with this:  
fierce froths of flowers  
whitening the grave’s slicked pit.

*Jasminium suavissimum,*  
that tough native creeper, stars the dark skies  
of your memory now. I hold the fallen constellations,  

sniff them –  

remember you leaning towards  
your lilies of the valé …  
Our shared lake shushes its tidal grief.
MARGARET RIVER

The organic camembert from the market is so real I can’t eat it. It smells like the stuff we had in Singapore in the 80s. Imported from France. I used to pretend that I liked it. I wanted to be different.

Like the man who comes walking towards me, all chemical dreadlocks and piercings, ethno-patterned tunic flaring out with each booted stride, trying so hard to be different that laughter comes coughing out into my cheeks as I push past with the pram; as if I were laughing at myself, trying so hard to be like Jesus.

Trying so hard that I fish out a smile at Coles when the check-out chick dangles my scruffy cloth bags between two fingers. Look at these, she mouths, rolling her eyes to her teenaged friend. No reply when I ask about her day. Look at these. I go to the car, unpack the shopping and kids, sit down in the front seat and cry. It’s no use pretending. I want to strike back.

You’re so real I can’t eat you, Jesus. Even if I put you in the bin your words smell up the house: Love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you. Do you have to hang about, reminding me of my pretence? Asking me questions that I cannot answer, like: What does it mean to be different?
For the past twelve years, the subject of Eddie Burrup has been a looming presence (rather like a phantom elephant) that everyone – when I’m around, at any rate – has neatly side-stepped. It’s most refreshing to see the subject out in the open at last. Admittedly, the phenomenon addressed by Louise Morrison in “The Art of Eddie Burrup” is complex and would account, in part, for a reluctance to explore its diverse facets.

In all the hullabaloo that followed Elizabeth Durack’s revelation (in Art Monthly Australia, March 1997) that she had created an Aboriginal persona and was producing work in his name – it seems to me that most observers became lost in the woods; few stood back sufficiently to look a little more closely at the trees. Had they done so, they might have conceded that, first and foremost, the invention of Eddie Burrup is an ingenious work of art – one that combines paint, pen and performance. Some observers, rather than focusing on what the artist had the effrontery to do and concocting wacky theories about it, might have looked at the quality of the work itself and considered what it was communicating. Still others might have detected an experiment, a device – in the centuries-old tradition of pseudonyms – to obtain objective assessment of work and ideas.

Be all that as it may, the spin in Art Monthly’s sensational media release about Elizabeth Durack reincarnated as an Aboriginal male, producing and exhibiting paintings by him, set the tone for what followed, and ensured that whatever had happened, it must be denounced. With few exceptions, arts media and academic commentators dubbed Elizabeth Durack a “colonialist” (as if this explained everything) and sanctimoniously proceeded to impute base motives to her assumption of a black male alter ego. To their credit, the general public saw a witty side to it all. Studious analysis of The Art of Eddie Burrup – “whatever can Elizabeth have been thinking of …?” must await another day. All there is space for now is a few general comments and a brief response to some points Louise Morrison raises.
The remarkable thing about *The Art of Eddie Burrup* is that, whichever way one looks at it, there’s no denying the work is powerfully redolent of Aboriginality. How this came about is a long story and a crucial one. Sufficient now to say that at the end of a long working life, Elizabeth took the calculated risk of producing work in the name of Eddie Burrup. And she entered paintings by him in two dedicated Aboriginal-only exhibitions in order to have the work noticed on its merits, for its own intrinsic worth. In this goal she succeeded. As the work of Eddie Burrup, it moved people to tears; it was applauded and hailed as that of a genius. The irony is that, for the very same work, Elizabeth Durack was vilified, ridiculed and defamed ...

From the outset Elizabeth Durack’s artistic motivation had been shaped and influenced by art, and by experiences far removed from the well-documented sources of inspiration in leading metropolitan centres. It was the land and people of East Kimberley – a remote region of northern Australia – where Elizabeth found fiat and stimulus to develop the style and singular vision that places her work in a category of its own.1

In the last decade of Elizabeth’s life, when her beloved sister, Mary, was dying, and when she was deeply concerned by the turn of political events occurring on Australia’s “rim,” she was producing a series of paintings she was calling “morphological” works. They had evolved from earlier work, notably the big series *The Rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world*, yet were different, a breakthrough from what had gone before. When she first showed me the morphological works (it was a day or so after Christmas, 1994), they had no titles, they were not signed and, familiar as I was with her work, they bowled me over. I said: “These are ‘Aboriginal’ works ... how are you doing them? Why are you doing them? You can’t show them. They won’t be looked at, never accepted, as works by Elizabeth Durack ... under another name, perhaps – any other name – particularly an Aboriginal name, they’d be highly acclaimed, but you’d never come at that.” Elizabeth agreed – a nom de brush was not on the cards – and no more was said.

A day later we were walking along the edge of the Swan River when, out of the blue, Elizabeth said: “You know, Perpetua, I might consider signing those morphological works under another name.” From that precise moment Eddie Burrup appeared, fully formed (as it were), before us. The subsequent development of this character and of his art proved extraordinarily liberating. Paintings poured out. Transporting herself imaginatively as a contemporary male with a long past, Elizabeth transferred onto paper and canvas a lifetime of association, shared experiences, adventures, memories, songs and anecdotes heard in the twilight years...
of lost worlds. As Louise Morrison has acutely observed: “Perhaps Burrup can be understood as a conduit for Durack’s vast reservoir of knowledge and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture.” In similar vein Maureen Smith has said: “The story of Eddie Burrup and The Art of Eddie Burrup is a resource. Much of what it contains is no longer retrievable. With it, elliptical time, as obtained in the Ngarrangami, (the Dreaming) is reasserted and who can say that a new paradigm for reconciliation has not been defined?”

Fast rewind now, to 1953. In that year Elizabeth Durack produced a series of ten paintings that were extraordinary for their empathic recreation of aspects of Aboriginal life and culture. The series, The Cord to Altcheringa, had stemmed from personal experience of ceremonies, from familiarity with Stone Age masterpieces on rock faces in northern Australia, and from lessons learnt from Jubul, a bark painter from Arnhem Land. Elizabeth went on to produce three more comparable series: Chant for Kurddaitcha (1954), Love Magic (1954) and The Legend of the Black Swan (1956). All were inspired by Aboriginal ritual and legends, a fact clearly acknowledged at the time.

The Cord to Altcheringa was purchased in 1953 for the University of Western Australia through the Tom Collins Bequest. In the same year, Vice-Chancellor Stanley Prescott asked Elizabeth for a description of the series. Her reply to the Vice-Chancellor must be somewhere in the university archives but to date has not been located. In the meantime, here are extracts from a draft dated January 1954, located among her papers:

“The more I endeavour to write a ‘description’ of the paintings … the more impossible it becomes … I could proceed at tedious length on the fact that visually the works stem from what I know of our Aboriginal sacred life and ceremony; that the paintings hang around this ceremony … however, without wishing to indulge in fantasy I can frankly say I am not quite sure where this particular crop of work came from. I know that while I worked on it I was in a peculiar state of being possessed – this particular expression called for this particular treatment. ‘Why,’ said one of our local art savants, ‘why, with all the benefits of the twentieth-century palette and Mr Windsor and Newton at your disposal should you have chosen to make mud pies of mud ochres and charcoal?’ To which I could only lamely answer, ‘I don’t know.’ … the fact is whatever I have captured of the tenuous Cord to Altcheringa could not be translated … through the multi-coloured array of pigments developed over centuries of research but only by a reversion to the first available medium, and by
a re-orientation to the primary arrangements of composition and formal construction ....”

_The Cord to Altcheringa_ hung in Winthrop Hall for thirty years and was seen by thousands of students and visitors. By the early 1990s, or perhaps it was the late 1980s, the pictures were taken down for reasons unclear. They are housed now in the splendid storage facilities of UWA’s Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

The art critic and writer Patricia Anderson has said: “A painter – like a novelist who writes, or a composer who composes – is someone who wakes up in the morning and paints. Everything revolves around this imperative. Even when there are lapses, delinquencies, disruptions, fallow times – even a crisis of confidence – the imperative remains. The creator alone understands the lonely journey and its hoped-for outcome.”

It’s a comment that resonates strongly for me as that is what Mother used to do. She used to get up in the morning and paint (or write) and often was still at it late at night. Of course she had lapses, disruptions, crises of confidence but for over sixty years she was a person driven by the imperative of developing and honouring her God-given gift, of seeking to capture, to recreate, an essence of thought and vision – whether it be of a wildflower, a wayward child, bush roads or old and sacred ceremonies.

Over the “lonely journey” of her long working life, Elizabeth Durack produced a great deal of work, some of which came almost too easily, some of which she struggled with, much of which simply poured out. In the end the daemon, Eddie Burrup, possessed her.

**Notes**

1 The work as a whole falls loosely into two streams: either _Out of Sight_ (alternatively ‘The Harvest of the Eye’) or _Out of Mind_ (alternatively ‘The Mill of the Imagination’). It was the latter stream of thinking and work that most preoccupied Elizabeth, that influential out-of-tune critics dismissed and to which _The Art of Eddie Burrup_ belongs.


Elizabeth Durack, *Flood on the Yule River* from the series *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, 1996, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 100 cm
Eleven years ago, the true identity of Eddie Burrup, an (apparently) indigenous artist from the North-West of Western Australia was quietly revealed in an article in *Art Monthly Australia* by Robert Smith. Burrup’s works had been included in the 1996 *Native Titled Now* exhibition and in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin that same year, accompanied by extensive artist’s notes written in Kriol and photos of his country. However, in March 1997, Elizabeth Durack, an eighty-one year old, white, female, third generation Australian from a West Australian pastoralist family, who was already well known as an artist and a writer, contacted Smith and asked that he make it publicly known that she was the true author of the Burrup works. Within a week of Smith’s article, Durack was being heavily criticised in the national and international media and labelled as either the architect of the greatest artistic hoax in Australia since the Ern Malley affair or perpetrator of a fraud of the same ilk as author Helen Darville-Demidenko.

Hoaxer or fraudster, it was Durack’s incursion into indigenous cultural territory that attracted the most vitriolic criticism. Djon Mundine, who was the Curator of Aboriginal Art for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney at the time, stated that Durack’s behaviour was “a fucking obscenity” and Wayne Bergmann from the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre described it as “the ultimate act of colonisation.” I’d like to closely examine Durack’s actions and the accusations levelled at her in relation to the historical, social, political and cultural context in which the works were produced.

Well before the Eddie Burrup scandal became the talk of the town, Durack was a household name in Western Australia. Elizabeth, and her author sister Dame Mary Durack, were members of a well known pioneer/pastoralist family here. Their grandfather “Patsy” Durack established and
ran (later with the help of their father) “Argyle” and “Ivanhoe” stations in the East Kimberley. Although she was sent to Perth for schooling, Durack spent most of her twenties and thirties on the stations, even running “Ivanhoe” for some time in the 1930s. Furthermore, Durack was well known locally as an artist. She held a staggering eleven solo shows between 1946 and 1950 and was one of only three women artists chosen to participate in the now significant 1961 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London that cemented the reputations of Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, Fred Williams and Brett Whiteley amongst others.

Nonetheless, critical opinion of Durack’s art practice prior to the Burrup scandal varied widely. Some argue Durack has been overlooked. For example, Christine Sharkey suggests that Durack pre-dates Guy Grey-Smith and Robert Juniper in her interest in depicting the dry, outback interior. She also states that Durack’s watercolour paintings of rural or Aboriginal labourers from the 1950s and 1960s rival Harald Vike’s works. Janda Gooding agrees that Durack’s depictions of Aboriginal people were progressive for their time, stating that “few other artists were creating such powerful portraits of Aboriginal women in the 1940s.” On the other hand, David Bromfield, noted Western Australian academic and art critic, was not particularly impressed. He felt that she “was not a great artist. Nor was she particularly innovative in the wider context” and stated that her painting “came uncomfortably close to a range of familiar styles, from utilitarian potboiler realism and outback social surrealism to a figurative version of Jackson Pollock.”

It is easy to assume, especially from the vantage point of 2009, that a pastoralist’s relationship with Aboriginal people must have been patronising at best and exploitative at worst. But Durack’s relationship with the Aboriginal people she lived alongside was quite different. It is well known that her family were unusual in their protective attitudes to the Aboriginal workers on their properties. Whilst it is also easy to retrospectively describe that attitude as paternalistic, at the time it was understood and valued by these people. Smith learned from independent sources that those who worked for the Duracks made their connections to the family known, when on other stations, because of the protection it afforded them.

Many commentators described Durack’s use of the Eddie Burrup alter ego as a hoax. Debra Jopson and Kelly Burke compared it to the well-known Ern Malley affair of the 1940s. But as Smith explained, “a hoax is when you attempt to spoof people” and many others, in the absence of an explanation by Durack, countered that the long history of respect and understanding for Aboriginal people by her family made it unlikely...
that her intention was to hoax. Alternatively Durack’s actions could perhaps be understood as yet another example of outright plagiarism; the sort of appropriation that has resulted in Aboriginal images and designs appearing on everything from the one dollar note to souvenir tea towels.

Historically, white Australian artists have also appropriated such designs. For example, Margaret Preston once claimed that Aboriginal designs made splendid decorations, but she later modified her statements as she became aware of the deeper spiritual content of such motifs.

However, the Burrup designs were not copied from another artist. As Robert Smith explained to Jane Freeman and Duncan Graham, “Elizabeth has not plagiarised anyone or taken anyone’s motif or taken anything from any living person. It is all her own creation.” Durack herself was taken aback by the accusation of plagiarism; “The implication seem(s) to be that I sat down and copied Aboriginal dot painting or something like that. It was never like that – never.”

Durack did utilise Aboriginal designs in the 1950s but she fully acknowledged the sources of her imagery. In the foreword to *Australian Legendary Tales 1953*, a book of Aboriginal myths illustrated by Durack, she clearly states that the imagery she included in her compositions was taken from carved nuts, bark paintings, rock faces and other sources and belongs to Aboriginal people. Moreover, she explains how she was taught by one of her Aboriginal friends “to understand black man’s [sic] pictorial art.” Her description of the traditions of bark painting and, importantly, the cultural significance of painting in relation to secret/sacred cultural life are sensitive and respectful.

To Durack, Eddie Burrup is a fully fledged artistic persona. She explained: “If I think things through, I would say that Eddie Burrup is a synthesis of several Aboriginal men I have known ...[but he is] a character in his own right with a life and career of his own.” As Smith explained, Durack “always talks of him as a third person, because, to her, he is a real person because he is a compound of people she has known.” Three senior Nyoongar Aboriginals seemed to understand. After meeting Durack, they released a statement that said “We the Metropolitan Nyoongar Circle of Elders accept that Mrs Elizabeth Durack is the Human Body, that her alter ego possesses spiritually to work his art ... so essentially her art is a spiritual form of expression of a present living spirit of an Aboriginal person.”

But it was exactly this suggestion of an Aboriginal alter ego that angered Djon Mundine. He said “It’s like Kerry Packer pretending he’s Mahatma Ghandi.” He went on, “saying that because your family has lived on the land for years you feel about it as deeply as Aboriginal people and can
pick up the culture is just absurd.” Durack’s supposed appropriation of a culture is at the heart of the most convincing criticisms of the Burrup works. Kaye Mundine, who was head of the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Organisation, put it simply, saying “it’s cultural theft.”

This was not the first time that Durack had produced work containing Aboriginal cultural material. In fact, she was once commissioned to do so. In 1953, Durack was asked by the Western Australian Government Tourist Bureau to produce a mural sequence of works; a ten-panel painting called *Love Magic*. The Art Gallery of Western Australia noted that whilst “to the uninitiated, these pictures appear as strongly-patterned semi-abstract works with aboriginal [sic] motifs, they are fully authentic expressions of aboriginal [sic] lore.” But Durack’s use of this material, once perfectly acceptable, even desirable, in the 1950s when people here began to be genuinely interested in Aboriginal culture, started to attract criticism in the 1990s with the socio-political changes witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1995, the Art Gallery of Western Australia held a retrospective exhibition of Durack’s work which came near to being cancelled only days before it opened. An assistant Curator at the gallery, Tjalaminu Mia, suspected some of the works contained secret/sacred men’s business and alerted the Curator of Aboriginal Art, Michael O’Ferrall. The subject matter was reportedly confirmed by Aboriginal people who viewed the works and were deeply offended. The works were a series of paintings, called the *Cord to Alcheringa*, that portrayed a dreaming story. They were owned by the University of Western Australia and had been hanging in Winthrop Hall for forty years. Nevertheless, it was only when a Kimberley Aboriginal man signed off that the works were “free to be seen by everyone” that the exhibition went ahead. Bromfield felt that whilst these works were the most interesting in the show, perhaps the rituals that informed the works “should never have been seen or interpreted by an outsider.”

But Durack is not considered to be an outsider by the Aboriginal group whose material she had utilised. It is clearly understood that she has a classificatory place in the Ord River Mirawong language group. Consider for a moment that Durack, during the 1940s, would walk with her Aboriginal “family” on ceremonial business. Some journeys took over two weeks, as the group walked to “manage country.” Durack remembers once such journey undertaken to meet up with others and discuss unfinished wet-weather business. On these trips, Durack would spend her time sketching women digging for yams and seeking small animals for tucker or she’d make drawings of the men as they stood or sat around, painted up
for the ceremonies to be conducted at night. These journeys and the life
Durack shared with her Aboriginal “family” gave her an unusual degree of
insight into Aboriginal culture.

Durack described the artistic “team” that produced the Burrup works
as “mild old Eddie Burrup who has nothing in mind but reconciliation
and old Elizabeth Durack who has been in contact with and overtly been
working with the influences of Aboriginal life for over 50 years.” Perhaps
Burrup can simply be understood as a conduit for Durack’s vast reservoir of
knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture.

One ethical issue remains to be considered; that is the marketing of the
Burrup works as Aboriginal artworks and their inclusion in indigenous-only
art exhibitions and awards. Regardless of her connection with Aboriginal
people, Durack is not indigenous. Durack’s daughter, Perpetua Hobcroft,
managed the Durack Gallery in Broome through which the works were
distributed. Gabrielle Pizzi recalls being approached by Perpetua to
organise an exhibition of the Burrup works. “They were clearly promoted
to me as Aboriginal work and one would presume that [Ms Hobcroft] knew
they were painted by her mother.” Similarly, Doreen Mellor who curated
Native Titled Now explained that the exhibition “show(s) what Aboriginal
artists and people feel about native title and in that forum… [it] is just an
enormous betrayal and another breach of trust between black and white
Australia.”

The use of an alter ego is not new in art. In fact, it is a relatively
common strategy employed by contemporary artists to direct or affect the
meaning of their work in the viewer’s mind. It could be argued that a
false or fictitious author operates much like a material or method in the
same way that these contribute to meaning. For example, indigenous
artist Gordon Bennett has produced a number of works under the name
of John Citizen. Citizen is an invention of Gordon Bennett’s, a character
without an indigenous identity used by Bennett as a device to further his
investigation of identity.

Contrary to Mellor’s statement implying that Durack betrayed us all,
black and white, for Durack the Burrup works are an act of reconciliation.
Durack talks about the two mythic figures of Djanba, the spirit of co-
operation and reconciliation, and Mulunga, the spirit of vengeance and
retribution. She said that at the end of the 1800s, both cults were circulating
widely but she believed Mulunga is dominant today. For Durack, the Burrup
paintings and notes are produced in the spirit of Djanba. She said “I see it
as working within the spirit of reconciliation – as gissa-gissa – arm in arm,
within mutual respect, within progression together, within unity.”
Durack’s vast knowledge of Aboriginal life and the Kimberley was once called upon by the Northern Territory Law Department at the time when the whole area that “Ivanhoe” and “Argyle” stations were on came under a Native Title Land Claim. Ironically, it could be argued that Durack automatically qualifies, through her classificatory relationships, as one of the claimants. This slippage between black and white in Durack’s life and her art makes the Burrup works rare and rich reflections of our culture; one that needs to be understood as a product of complex histories.

**NOTES**

5. “What’s the Fuss.”
10. Jopson and Burke, “Painting Hoax has Art World Divided,” 5.
13. Freeman and Graham.
17. Freeman and Graham.
26 McCulloch, “What’s the Fuss.”
27 Farmer.
29 McCulloch, “Blacks Blast Durack for her Art of Illusion.”
32 “What’s the Fuss.”
Elizabeth Durack, *The Last Meeting* from the series *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 93 x 84 cm.
Paintings © the Estate of Elizabeth Durack
TED SNELL

THE FANTASIST: ELIZABETH DURACK AND EDDIE BURRUP

Why would a well-established artist create a fantasy that she was an Aboriginal man from the Pilbara and submit “his” paintings to a major Indigenous art prize, and a leading commercial gallery, and then insist on publicising the deception, only to recoil at the predictable response? This is the fascinating conundrum that prompted Louise Morrison’s article “The Art of Eddie Burrup.”

Let’s clear the air first of all. Was it fraud? Yes it was clearly fraudulent for a non-Indigenous woman to create a false identity for a fictional artist and to present the artworks he was purported to have painted to an Indigenous only exhibition. As Morrison confirms in her article this act of deception was compounded when the artist’s daughter, in the hope of securing a commercial exhibition, submitted other paintings to Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.

But that doesn’t answer the intriguing question of why the artist acted fraudulently. Was it a desire to rekindle the waning critical interest in her work or the hope of making money from this deception? Was it envy that prompted her to act, anger at the success of Indigenous artists no matter what the quality of their work and as such a mischievous attempt to undermine the Aboriginal art market or did she indeed believe she had an authentic Aboriginal story to tell? Or perhaps it was a potent mix of some or all or even other motives?

It’s not inconceivable that Durack was seeking recognition of her talent at a time when she felt overlooked by critics, curators and collectors. In an interview recorded by Film Australia for the Australian Biography series, she reports that according to her daughter and dealer, her new “morphological works” were unlikely to find a market under her own name but, “if these were done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere, but you’d never agree to doing that, you’ve always played things so dumb
and so straight, you’d never sign things under another name.”¹ Her rather quick take up of the idea suggests both her excitement about showing the paintings and her eagerness to have them recognised as works of significance. The monetary gain may also have been a motivation but her comments later in the interview that the creation of Eddie Burrup was “a device to liberate me, and it did liberate me” draws the focus back onto her work and her desire to re-energise her creative practice.

This sense of liberation is one of the central motivations for artists adopting anonymity or pseudonymity. As Morrison points out, the contemporary Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett has created the pseudonym John Citizen, a non-indigenous person, “... as a device to further his investigation of identity.”² Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates the American author sought the freedom to explore a new genre, mystery fiction, when she created Rosamond Smith. “It was a new birth. I was renewing myself. Everything was being given me one more time,” Oates explains.³ It seems clear that Durack also felt she was given “one more time” and a chance to make work that broke through boundaries and opened up new possibilities.

It’s also possible that the decision to accede to her daughter’s suggestion may have been motivated by the phenomenal success of so many Aboriginal artists who had taken up art late in life and quickly achieved a level of critical acclaim that surpassed Durack’s own, despite many years of hard work. Indeed the comment that if her new paintings been “done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere” seems to confirm this view of the art market as favouring Indigenous artists and whether or not it was malicious it was clearly an attempt to deceive. That said it does seem clear that this is not a case of plagiarism. The new paintings were strongly influenced by Durack’s knowledge of the rock art of the Burrup Peninsula, as she admits in the notes written to explain Eddie Burrup’s inspiration, but she was not appropriating the work of another artist, she was Eddie Burrup.

This is the central core of the whole controversy and it’s why Djon Mundine, Wayne Bergmann, Doreen Mellor, Kaye Mundine and many other Indigenous Australians have been so outraged and affronted by what Bergmann describes as “the ultimate act of colonization.”⁴ Did Durack really believe she was channelling an Aboriginal person and speaking with an authentic voice? She may have been delusional but even if she believed this conceit why did she choose a male persona?

It is generally accepted that Durack knew Aboriginal society well enough to understood the clear demarcation of men and women’s business,
so was this an attempt to create work from an entirely new perspective or was it anger at the success of more famous male artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous? If the latter then it is more easily explained, if on the other hand she was hoping to liberate herself and her creative practice, as she suggests, then it raises other issues.

Artists throughout history have adopted pseudonyms of the opposite sex to tease or taunt their viewers or readers and to gain new insights from taking on a different persona, but with Durack’s knowledge of Aboriginal society it seems incredible she didn’t realize the added insult to Indigenous people attached to her adoption of a male persona. Although, as Morrison points out she had previously created works under her own name that contained secret/sacred men’s business,\(^5\) so it is possible she was less empathetic than was supposed throughout her life.

Morrison argues that the complex histories involved in the Eddie Burrup fiasco provide us with “rare and rich reflections of our culture” but the real fascination it offers is the psychological case study of a fantasist whose fiction undermines her credibility as an empathetic advocate of Aboriginal culture and reveals the emotional and intellectual turmoil of an artist’s musings at the end of a long career. This is fertile ground indeed for further research, discussion and conjecture.

**Notes**

1 Elizabeth Durack, *Australian Biographies Series*, Film Australia, 1997
4 Wayne Bergmann quoted in Morrison.
5 See the discussion of the *Cord of Alcheringa* series detailed by Morrison.
ROLAND LEACH

FOR MY MOTHER

My father’s muscles were earned from decades
lifting timber onto the back of trucks.
When he flexed his arms they rose like
a great swell over deep water,
not threatening till it closed on shore,
which was often the local bar
where he drank and had fights,
but on growing old
he became sentimental and died.
My mother is much tougher,
she’s over eighty and hasn’t been to a doctor
since her last childbirth,
puts her shoulder into moving wardrobes
and drags back her German Shepherd
as if wrestling a lover when he tries going over the fence.

She refuses to die.
Standing at the flywire door armed with her broom,
ready to fight death when she hears the click of the gate.
Kevin Gillam

The Watchful Moth

clear the river is so
black and the trees a
mesmerism of
matt finish thinking
as I wait for hard
sun to find skin. a
wattle bird chases
song, waves move atop
moving and the March
solstice sits painted
unequal on me.
and leaves do leaving
best? light gone to grain.
sell me only the
scent of things, moistness
not from home, talk to
me in the language
of spoons and couches,
in vowels able to
hold. the out wanders in,
spins infinity.
loose-limbed traveller,
was that, tierce da
picardi at each
digs. Oban the last,
the way the train looped
like Christmas lego,
no pieces missing,
Oban lost, fine mist,
“haar” they call it there,
skinless lake, swept to
share with unthinking.
where sits the watchful
moth? there, not still, but
looping and feeding
on fluorescent moon,
the river now a
thousand cuts on cream
satin, the river
a home for stones in
pockets, the river
a last deed yet done
It’s late evening in one of the several hundred thousand villages of India, and a woman lurches through the thick rain pounding the main street. She holds a cloth wrapped bundle so close to her chest as if she can never own anything else. Her hair is plastered like tar to her skull, and her thoroughly soaked sari is stuck against her small pubis, her thin thighs. Everyone in this village of less than six hundred, barring a few dozen children perhaps, knows her. She is Kamala but the meaning of the word – lotus – is clearly inapt if one were to only consider her physical condition.

Her mental condition is much worse. She shoots desperate glances left and right, at the few brick houses, the many huts. Just one window of a small house is open. A light comes on and a bald head pops up. It’s Palekar, the postman. He’s about to close the window when he sees Kamala. She tries to shout over the watery din but can’t. She manages to bring her palms together in utter supplication, utter appeal. Palekar jerks back and slams the window shut.

Kamala stands where she is, hoping Palekar will have second thoughts. He’d spoken kindly to her at the flour mill just last week when she’d gone there to grind ten kilos of rice. He’d told her that he’d kept a letter for her safely at the post office, a letter from her ageing mother who lives in a distant village. The letter was brief, just a few questions in raggedy handwriting: is Kamala all right? Have there been more fights with her husband? Can she somehow obtain permission to visit because the mother fears death is approaching?

But Palekar’s window stays shut. Just like all the other windows and doors, mouths and ears that have been shut to Kamala for the last two years. Because of Sharat Deshpande, her husband. He employs much of the village to work in his fields of paddy, sugarcane, and maize. No one owns as much land as he. No one is prepared to risk his ire. Jobs would of
course be taken away, but worse, houses can be torched, wives and sisters can be raped, husbands and brothers can be murdered. Such things are common in India’s forgotten villages.

Through the ropy blurs of the rainstorm, Kamala sees that three shops farther down are still open. Shetty’s tea-stall with a signage in blue and white: *Wah! Taj! The taste of real India!* Then the Vodafone shop with a banner in red and white: *Magic Box with FM Radio – only Rupees 1999!* And a third – *Tata Internet – Stay connected!* Strange exhortations in this forgotten village.

Two men at the tea stall eye her over the rims of their steel cups. She hasn’t seen them before. Good. Strangers may help her. They know nothing about her or Sharat Deshpande. She staggers towards them. But one cocks his head and then turns and looks the other way. The other man follows suit. And Shetty, who is pumping the kerosene stove, is the very picture of innocence. Kamala realises what may have happened. Shetty has warned them. Something like “If you want to stay alive, don’t even look at her.”

Farther ahead a few people scurry beneath umbrellas and plastic sheets. Kamala tries to scream but the rain batters her face and she can’t quite fill her lungs. A hood of plastic approaches her from the right. At last! Someone with courage, thinks Kamala. The plastic folds back to reveal a thick beard and a scarred face. Kalia, the blacksmith, the strongest man in the village. Last week, he’d extricated the damaged wheel of Sharat Deshpande’s cart as if it were a toy.

“Brother Kalia,” she begs. “Please come with me to–”

Even before she completes her appeal, the plastic hood flips down and glides past.

Kamala stands where she is, tempted to sink to her knees, to just embrace the slush and let the thick rain drown her but then another thought grips her: what has she got to lose now?

The police chowky is fifty yards away. She knows what she will encounter there – the vigorous crotch scratching, the abusive mouth, the drunken eyes. Head Constable Ajit Vartak, somewhat like Sharat Deshpande, only bigger and coarser. Vartak has nothing but contempt for this village. Kamala has seen him wield his bamboo *laathi* on petty thieves and gamblers at the market square. He’s also rumoured to have forced himself on a couple of women whose husbands were jailed for theft and cheating. But Kamala has nowhere else to go. Her aged mother is dying if not dead already. Her lone brother has run off to that richest of all cities, Mumbai. Her father is no more; his heart gave up when he was ploughing his field. He couldn’t take it any more, the daily harassments of money lenders to return their money.
Money that he’d borrowed to marry off Kamala to Sharat Deshpande. She could have run away, one may say. Women in India’s forgotten villages don’t, can’t run away. Not from husbands like Sharat Deshpande.

The police chowki comes up. Kamala pauses at the entrance. The bundle at her chest rises and falls. From above descends an orchestra of tiny drums; rain beating on thousands of leaves. It’s a peepul tree. The irony! Peepul is considered sacred, a symbol of Shiva, and believed to make any womb fertile. Kamala had tied dozens of vermillion coated threads in prayer rituals around such a tree near her house. Now she can only whisper: O Shiva, at least protect me here.

She drags herself up the steps. There is the acrid smell of beedi, and something else, a stench like food gone several days old. Is that man already drunk? She’s tempted to turn and run but her feet, as if of their own volition, now the left, now the right, go forward.

Head Constable Ajit Vartak is a forest of black curls slumped over a table. To his left sits the only other staff of the police station, Rahman, the junior constable, and he’s engrossed in a Bollywood magazine.

“Hey! What do you want?” Rahman asks in a loud whisper.

“He … he forced three servants to—” Kamala can’t go on because it all comes back to her: on the floor of the storeroom, her arms pinned to the sides, someone slamming into her with the vigour of a husking machine, and then another in his place, and yet another, and all the while, Sharat and his two brothers lolling against the walls, passing a bottle of whisky to one another, laughing, quaffing, spitting.

“He? Who is he?” And then it dawns on the junior’s mind. “Wait, you are Sharat’s wife, aren’t you?”

“You have to arrest him. You have to—” She can’t speak any more. The floor tilts. Shiva! In a trice the junior steps forward, preparing to catch her. Somehow she rights herself and wards him off. Vartak stirs awake and peers with barely open eyes at Kamala. “Huh? Whatthefuckisthematter?”

Rahman goes to his table and crouches low. “Sahib, it’s Sharat Deshpande’s wife. She wants us to arrest him.”

Vartak ups himself some more, stretches his arms and yawns.

“Three of them, Vartak Sahib, three of them …” Kamala’s voice breaks. Vartak shoves a hand inside his shirt and scratches an armpit.

“What three of them?” he mutters and turns to Rahman. “Get tea or coffee or whatever that motherfucker Shetty has in his two bit shop. My head is splitting.”

The junior closes the magazine with exaggerated care.

“What the fuck are you doing?” bellows Vartak.
“Going, Sahib, going.” Rahman grumbles and shuffles off.
“And you, what is this story you bring? Can’t you …” he stops. Kamala sees a shine slide into his eyes as they rake her up and down.
“Sit,” he commands. Kamala wobbles towards the bench against the wall, leaving a trail of wet footprints.
“Not there. Here.” Vartak points the bamboo laathi to the chair before his table. Kamala hesitates. Vartak slides the cane up and down through his cupped left palm. It’s such a vulgar gesture that Kamala trembles. She goes up to the chair. Vartak’s gaze is on her wet throat, on the only gold she has been allowed to keep, the mangalya, two small medallions signifying that she was married in Lord Shiva’s presence.
“I am waiting.” Vartak’s voice has taken on an exquisite softness, sheerest silk rubbing on the smoothest metal.
She narrates what happened. “Then they beat me and threw me out, Sahib. This … this is all I have.” She extends the bundle and a corner of the cloth comes away to reveal two saris, a towel, and a bed sheet. But Vartak is staring at her wet blouse, at the outlines of her small breasts, the too large nipples. She hastily pulls up her sari. Vartak comes around and sits on the table edge. His left foot starts to jig, inches from her knee. She tries to ignore the black boot but isn’t prepared for what happens next. The end of the bamboo comes beneath her chin. Her head tilts back.
“You must have done something, eh? You must have abused your darling husband. Or you must have slept with someone else. Why else would he throw you out, eh?”
“Sahib, I … I have not given him a child … I mean, I couldn’t. I … I think so. I am not sure. But it could be his mistake, Sahib. That he is unable to give me a child. Today … today I told him we should go to Manickpur. To the hospital. To find out what is wrong. Why I couldn’t have a child. For that … for that …” She chokes but somehow controls herself and looks at Vartak. The man’s eyes take in her right cheek that is pink and going blue, the lower lip that is puffed and split at the corner, the base of her throat that has four ugly bite marks. And then she feels the bamboo leave her chin. The wood travels down her throat and stops above her left breast. Shiva!
“Sahib, no tea, just coffee.” It’s Rahman who’s come sprinting back; he doesn’t want to miss anything.
But Vartak’s eyes do not leave her and she continues to look at him, all along the length of the wood right up to his face, the oily skin, the glaze in his eyes, the thick dark lips that are thicker and darker than Sharat Deshpande’s.
“Don’t lie to me woman,” says Vartak. “We police have our methods to get the truth even out of a stone.”

“Sahib … I am … telling the truth,” she gasps. The bamboo is sliding. The hard wood is now on her left breast. She speaks fast, the words tumbling over one another, “His brothers raped me repeatedly. This went on for the last two years. Ever since my father died. And today they made three servants—”

“Sahib!” It’s the junior again.

“Get the fucking coffee,” snarls Vartak without taking his eyes off Kamala. Rahman sprints out and Kamala shivers but something tells her to hold the Head Constable’s gaze. To look away would signal defeat. Then she feels the cane below her breast. The wood moves, her breast lifts once, and once more. She braces her feet against the floor, takes in a deep breath, and calculates how quickly she can get off the chair and run. But suddenly it’s over; the cane drops and Vartak goes back to his chair. Rahman returns with a glass of coffee. From outside an eerie silence seeps in. The rains have ceased.

“Get the complaint register,” Vartak orders the junior.

“But Sahib! Sharat Deshpande would—”

“Who the fuck is he? Eh? Bigger than the law? This is the day I was waiting for. For someone to complain against that bastard. Now I have his wife. His wife. If only more women had this woman’s courage, I would have thrown half the men in this hopeless village behind bars. But no matter. This is going to be an example. Sharat Deshpande is finished. We will take this woman to the hospital in Manickpur and get her examined. But first write whatever she says. Every fucking thing, understand. Not one word should be missing or I will strip the skin of your backside quicker than a wild dog would.”

The junior tumbles about in a tizzy and Kamala places her little bundle of clothes on the floor. Her lungs relax. Even the terrible pain in her groin seems bearable. She starts to talk. Rahman scribbles in the complaint register. Vartak slurps. Great big noisy slurps. And a lotus has defied the murkiest of waters.