Poetry
Ali Alizadeh
Kit Brookman
Jen Jewel Brown
Diane Fahey
Jesse Patrick Ferguson
Adrian Flavell
Syd Harrex
Judy Johnson
Jill Jones
Jazra Khaleed
Anthony Lynch
David McCooey
Graeme Miles
Graham Nunn
Barry O’Donohue
Geoff Page
Rhodora Penaranda
Duncan Richardson
Graham Rowlands
Marc Swan
Yang Xie

Stories
Martin French
Susan Midalia
Joanne Riccioni
John Saul
Sari Smith

Articles
Mike Heald
Carmen Lawrence
Charles McLaughlin
End Sedgwick
Myint Zan

Interview
Antonio Casella

Review Essays
Bronwyn Lea
Elizabeth Webby

Annet van der Voort, Tulipa 15, scanogram, archival inkjet print 70 x 50cm, 2008-09.
Courtesy Turner Galleries

where only the queen
lives longer than the memory
of flowers
—Duncan Richardson
From ‘The Bee Whisperer’
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CONTENTS

POEMS

Diane Fahey 16, 17
Jill Jones 18
Jen Jewel Brown 20
Yang Xie (translated by Ouyang Yu) 39
Duncan Richardson 40
Graham Nunn 42
Rhodora Penaranda 66
Kit Brookman 74
Judy Johnson 91
Syd Harrex 140
Jazra Khaleed (translated by Sarah Katherine McCann) 142
Adrian Flavell 144
Graham Rowlands 145
Barry O’Donohue 159
Geoff Page 160
Jesse Patrick Ferguson 163
Ali Alizadeh 172, 176
Marc Swan 178
Graeme Miles 204
Anthony Lynch 207
David McCooey 208
**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORIES</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susan Midalia</td>
<td>Parting Glances</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Riccioni</td>
<td>Flick Chick</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin French</td>
<td>Blinded by the Light</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sari Smith</td>
<td>The Disappearance of the Mother</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Saul</td>
<td>Hague</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARTICLES</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike Heald</td>
<td>Putting Words in the Buddha’s Mouth</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles McLaughlin</td>
<td>Patricia Hackett: A Life</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen Lawrence</td>
<td>Science Writing as Literature</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myint Zan</td>
<td>Three Burmese poets</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enid Sedgwick</td>
<td>The Writer Catherine Martin</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni Messina</td>
<td>An Interview with Antonio Casella</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REVIEW ESSAYS</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronwyn Lea</td>
<td>Australian poetry 2009–2010</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Webby</td>
<td>The year’s work in fiction</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes on Contributors 217

Westerly: Subscriptions and Submissions 223

Subscribe to Westerly 224
The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to Westerly in 2009:

**KIM SCOTT**

for his story 'A Refreshing Sleep',
Westerly 54:2, 2009.
She knew it would be the middle of summer, but Moscow was meant to be swirling snow, luxurious furs, huddling by a fire with steaming tea from a gleaming samovar. Even the forecast she’d read at home, 30 degrees and humid, had failed to convince her. So she’d packed three jumpers and five pairs of fleecy socks, even a hot water bottle. When she stepped off the plane, the heat rushed maliciously towards her. And then the stifling terminal, packed tight with prowling men straight out of gangster movies, and busty young women with peroxide hair and ‘80s platform shoes. There was concrete everywhere and not a word of English on the multitude of signs. Twenty sleepless hours in the air to get here, and a four-hour wait in Dubai, where fat westerners had swarmed along rows of duty-free whisky, diamonds and Chanel. Petra had sat in a café and watched them, these hordes of waddling lords of the earth, coming at her like prehistoric beasts in logo-ed shirts. Now they waited with her in the terminal, their faces unsure, uneasy, in the relentless crowd.

The immigration official was a stout young blonde with gold braid on her shoulder pads, a red star on her cap and a brittle expression. Petra tried one of the few Russian words she’d been able to learn,
zdrhaštvooytee, hello, in what she hoped was a friendly tone. She made a point of looking blank, remembering the advice of her translator friend, Marie. Don’t smile, she’d said. Muscovites think you’re simple, you know, a little retarded, if you smile at them. Petra handed over her passport, her official letter of introduction, her confirmation of hotel bookings for every night of her ten-day visit, her holiday with a difference. The official glared at her and then looked down at her papers, up again at her face, down again, up again, wordless and stiff, as if I’m a criminal, thought Petra. She’s taking her time, making me wait, shuffling my papers grimly. The woman glared at her again, held up a rubber stamp for ten, fifteen seconds, and then thumped it down on the passport. Petra felt her legs untighten. Ah, welcome to Moscow, she thought: mindless bureaucracy, state-sanctioned surliness. Two cultural stereotypes before she’d even left the airport, four if you counted the gangster men and the vaguely whorish girls. It was a relief to be dismissed with a toss of a head and a parting glance of official contempt.

Finding the commuter train wasn’t any easier. There were forests of arrows on every wall, indecipherable signs. Petra remembered the word for train, poheest, two simple syllables, but people barged past her or shrugged their shoulders when she asked the way. Marie had warned her about this as well: notoriously unhelpful, even, at times, deliberately obstructionist. They don’t care about our tourist dollars, she’d said. They’ve got plenty of tourists from the provinces, and a hell of a lot of oil. Petra’s suitcase felt suddenly heavy, despite its sturdy wheels, and she gave herself up to the surge of the crowd, let herself be pushed through a turnstile and hoped for the best. And there it was, a platform, open space, blue sky, a gaggle of English-speakers, looking startled by their good luck. An overdressed, middle-aged couple began consulting a map and quarrelling; two red-faced, swaggering young men were loudly thirsty for a beer. Petra cringed, her eyes fixed on the ground. I won’t say a word, she thought, I’ll be silent, unfriendly, un-Australian. She waited until they’d hauled their luggage up the steps of the train and chose a compartment further down the line.
The journey felt heavy with the whoosh of the engine, the guttural words of passengers, images on an overhead TV displaying Gucci, Armani, Dolce and Gabbana. Through the window Petra glimpsed brutal, decaying high-rise apartments and then, unexpectedly, flashes of leafy, graceful trees streaked by the afternoon sun. Were they elms or poplars, silver birch? She’d never been good with nature. It could easily have been England, she thought, where she’d lived for a year half a lifetime time ago. She let herself blur with the passing of the trees, remembering the green and pleasant land where she’d backpacked and worked and fallen in love, where she’d cried at the airport when it was time to go home, cried in the plane for hours. She’d been clinging and desperate, a chain-smoking wreck; he’d looked relieved to see her go. *I know we’ll meet again*, he’d said, like an old war movie, trying to be kind, with the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. They hadn’t been in touch for ten or fifteen years, and, of course, they’d never met again. The train braked suddenly and sent her lurching into the seat in front of her. She was aware of a man staring at her, his eyes slitted, and she clutched her handbag more tightly to her chest. She reached her hotel in a daze of traffic and taxi-driver shouts, registered at reception surprisingly quickly, barely saw her threadbare room or felt the baking, stuffy heat as she levered off her shoes and slumped down on the single bed. She was asleep in less than a minute.

What would she write to those back home? Three days in Moscow and an email was due, one of those generic travellers’ tales she’d become quite skilled in devising. The sights, of course, in some detail, the food, the weather, a witticism or two, perhaps a bad translation to amuse her literary friends. Like the sign in the hotel bathroom, exhorting guests not to steal the towels: EARNEST REQUEST written in bold capital letters. People seemed to like her emails: *interesting, amusing*, they said, although she preferred writing postcards, enjoyed selecting images for particular friends. *Postcards are for old ladies,*
her niece had declared, and then blushed with what might have been
contrition. So Petra would be electronic, would comment on the food
(rather too salty and potatoes with everything) and mention her health
for the sake of her elderly mother, say she was fine, walked everywhere
briskly. Anything to avoid the underground, despite what her nephew
had told her. They’ve got marble floors and whopping great statues of
the workers! Stained glass and massive chandeliers, you have to see
it, Aunty Pet! But she would not see it, none of it at all. In London, in
her youth, she’d been groped in the underground, a hand sliding up
and down her groin. She’d felt sick with the press of humanity and
fled from the station in shame. And those were the days of the IRA,
bomb scares and actual bombs, urgently wailing sirens. She’d tried
again to take the Tube but had stood on the platform, unable to board
a crowded train, crying like a fool. A woman had stopped to ask if she
could help and Petra had said, stupidly, I’m Australian. Now, here
in Moscow, she felt the trains shuddering beneath her, imagined the
long, steep escalators crawling slowly down into the earth.

But she would try to describe the city for her nephew. Matthew
was her favourite, a history boy, fifteen, her sister’s youngest. Smart,
restless, dying to see the world, he said. No one in his family had
ever travelled further than Bali (twice), and when Petra told him of
her trip to Russia, he’d taken books from the library and showed her
what he’d found. Moscow razed to the ground by Napoleon’s army
and then rebuilt, a stricken giant resurrected. St Petersburg, a miracle
built on water, and according to legend, constructed in the sky by
Peter the Great and then lowered like a giant model onto the ground.
In the airport café Mattie had sat slumped and dejected, kicking one
sneakered foot against a chair until his mother snapped at him to
stop. He’d finally voiced his longing, how all his life he’d wanted
to see Lenin’s tomb. He’s decomposing, Aunty Pet, he’d explained,
leaning forward on the table. In a few years’ time he won’t be there at
all. He’d ignored his sister’s shrieks and his mother’s look of alarm.
He changed the course of history and you can see him, in the flesh.
How amazing is that? Before she knew what she was saying, Petra
had made an arrangement. *I’ll go and see Mr Lenin,* she’d said, *and if he’s still there in two years’ time, I’ll take you to see him for yourself.* Her sister had looked even more alarmed and Petra had smiled, the extravagant spinster sibling, the self-indulgent maiden aunt, who’d taken early retirement as a teacher and decided to see the world. She’d gone in two-year intervals to the predictable destinations—Paris, Florence, Rome, each time with a different friend, and had found each journey instructive (she had photographs to prove this). But no one had wanted to travel to Russia: it was, apparently, too dangerous, and none of her friends could see the attraction. Petra had found it difficult to explain. Russian novels and ‘Dr Zhivago’ (all that swirling snow); a long-ago lover with stories of imperial treasures; some unformed, melancholy sense of a suffering history. At the airport, she’d clasped Mattie’s hand. *I promise,* she’d said, knowing her sister thought she was mad, knowing that was part of the pleasure.

The hotel’s Internet café was full of high-spirited backpackers who glanced briefly at her lined face as she entered, at her too-youthful summer dress (yesterday’s desperate purchase in the searing heat). And then she was invisible, free to compose her news. The days had been very hot, she wrote: diminutive Japanese tourists huddling under bright umbrellas, pretty young women sweltering in stockings and lace. Her hotel room was adequate, and served up ancient episodes of *Skippy,* ludicrously dubbed, on Russian TV. The ubiquitous babushka dolls were, well, ubiquitous. And no, there were no cunning pickpockets or Russian mafia on the streets. The only sign of organised crime was the McDonalds near Red Square, which charged exorbitant prices for indigestible food. She’d queued for hours to see the Armoury: the coronation robes and thrones, studded with turquoise, rubies, pearls, lapis lazuli, were marvels of excess, but the Fabergé eggs she’d found rather crass. The jewel-encrusted wheels of the Imperial carriages could have fed a million serfs. The Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts was, unfortunately, closed. Churches everywhere were being restored as part of a religious revival, and she’d never seen so many crucifixes—gold, silver, diamond—in
so many conspicuous cleavages. She’d lingered in a bookshop to watch a man talking to a group of eager listeners. He was tall, with endearingly pixie ears, and had his audience eating out of his smoothly gesticulating hands. They laughed, applauded, laughed some more; one man even toppled sideways in his chair. Petra thought the pixie man must have been a comic writer, or at least an amusing speaker, but either way, of course, she had understood nothing, not a word. As she recalled it now, she remembered how this had pained her, how she’d felt like an imposter, a fraud.

And she had to confess that in the brightness of daylight, Red Square had felt curiously blank. She’d tried to picture it—the tsar and his milling, worshipping subjects, the famous military parades, the jubilant workers’ rallies, even, as her niece had enthused, the thousands who’d cheered Paul McCartney and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But she’d seen only endless, dull paving bricks, tourists being posed for photos—the provocative minx, the scowling son, the squirming toddler—and, flanking one side, the world’s largest shopping centre, smoothly marbled, blandly bourgeois, Gum, pronounced Goom, as in book. St Basil’s Cathedral was an architect’s bad joke, its psychedelic onion domes like something out of Disneyland. And no, she hadn’t yet visited Lenin’s tomb, guarded by impossibly handsome young men, all high cheekbones and military bearing, in sleek dark uniforms. But she had promised Mattie; she would go tomorrow, on her last day in Moscow. As she sent off her email, she had an image of her nephew, long-haired, curious, excited, sitting opposite her at breakfast. They would puzzle over the menu and plan the day’s itinerary; he would ask strangers to take their photo in front of famous buildings. It pleased her to imagine such things.

After another hotel dinner of borscht and dumplings (she’d always been unadventurous with food, indeed took little interest), Petra retired to her room. She’d planned another evening walk in Red Square, where it stayed light until 11 and which was packed with desultory strollers, entwined young lovers, parents with pushers
and skipping children. She’d enjoyed her walk the night before, its aimlessness, the pearly sheen of the sky, even the garish lights of Gum, a neon galleon sailing in a sea of happy crowds. Such endless light, such a radiant sky: here, for once, something, some marvellous trick of nature, had briefly met her vague desires. For as she brushed out her hair (looking rather lank, she saw in the mirror, in need of shampoo), Petra had to admit that Moscow had somehow failed her, had not lived up to her expectations, such as they were. She lay down on the bed, the hairbrush hanging loosely in her hand, too tired to meet the evening, wondering why she had come here, where history was mocked by American cafés and icons of Elvis Presley, where waiters ignored her, where she couldn’t speak the language. Her feet ached from so much walking and her head was throbbing from too much sun. Petra felt weighed down, tiny as she was, a short, thin, insubstantial woman looking up at the ceiling, knowing she must get up in the morning, have breakfast and queue to see Lenin’s tomb. The forecast said 34 degrees and she must take the day more slowly, measure it out before catching the overnight train to St Petersburg, already booked, a first-class compartment. She thought of all this and wished she could stop thinking, could fall asleep, fully clothed, her face unwashed, unsoothed by her night cream, fast running out. She must remember to use it sparingly; they didn’t seem to sell her brand in Moscow.

The queue for Lenin’s tomb was already long by 10am, the day already hot. Petra was prepared: she’d had a nourishing, familiar cereal and orange juice for breakfast, put sunscreen on her face, neck, arms. But even though the summer crowds were down (the global financial crisis), there were still plenty of tourists to annoy her, for that’s what she was feeling now, annoyed, irrationally so, she knew, for was she not one of them, impatient in the blistering sun amid the pushing and shoving and gabbling about their stock market losses, the mile-long queues and their latest camera with an automatic zoom, the one they were forced to leave at some check-in that no one had told them about, how they’d wasted an hour while
foreigners barged in front of them until they got angry and barged right back. At least she didn’t carry on like this, at least she wasn’t an overstuffed pig drinking Coca-Cola and complaining, at least not out loud. Once again she felt a great weariness in her limbs, and now in her chest, like a sighing wave that didn’t drown her, that kept her up just long enough to move forward as people elbowed her along, past the security screen, unencumbered by a camera, released at last from the crowds.

She wandered through the grounds of the mausoleum, looking at the granite busts of Soviet heroes. There were scores of them, and most she’d never heard of. Generals, her guidebook said, political leaders, astronauts, writers, their names carved in the Cyrillic she wouldn’t even try to translate. Somewhere, she knew, she would find the bust of Stalin, but what would it matter if she saw him or not, came face to face with his hawk-like eyes and imposing moustache, with his dates of birth and death carved mightily in stone. To tell her friends, tell Mattie, she had seen the image of the brutal tyrant, to be able to say, I was there, I saw it, all these unknown faces, the red carnations on the tombstones, the squealing teenage girls tottering on high heels, their disrespectful chewing of gum. She’d wanted to feel the weight of history, isn’t that why she came here, to this place that everyone warned her would be difficult and dangerous, a silly old woman flaunting her rebellion, her scorn of package tours and cruises, her fling with the mysteries of east-meets-west. For it was a fling, she saw it now. What did she think she was doing, standing in a mausoleum, surrounded by the busts of the glorious and infamous, feeling nothing more than irritation. She was no better than the silly girls, the fatly moaning tourists, miss prissy high-and-mighty, she’d been this way all her life, unable to feel what she wanted to feel, whatever you were meant to feel, that even now, especially now, eluded her. Oh she had friends, she loved reading of course, she’d had a decent career of sorts, and now her travels, belated, some kind of treat or reward for something, for endurance, perhaps, when all was said and done. Her sister had admonished her: You should be
more careful with your money. Petra had laughed, as she often did in her sister’s company. Don’t worry, she’d said, you won’t have to pay for my funeral.

She had reached the black marble steps leading down to Lenin. She was here now; she should make the effort to see, even if it struck her, as it surely had her niece, as rather ghoulish, voyeuristic. V. I. Lenin, the man of letters he had called himself, a man of the people, who had asked to be buried next to his mother. Even in death he had been cheated, thought Petra; revered, embalmed, preserved for posterity, opposite the modish merchandise of Gum. As she stepped down, grateful for the cool, the dark, the unusual silence, she drew in her breath. Around a corner it came into view—deep red drapes, a marble coffin, the body laid out, a ghostly, creamy face in profile. You were not allowed to stop, you had to keep walking in a mute semi-circle, tourists in front of you, tourists behind, you had just enough time to catch a glimpse of the past. As she came face to face with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Petra saw that one of his hands was clenched, the other loose, and that his face was small, almost dainty and strangely alive, his brow slightly furrowed. It made him look perplexed, as if his dying thought had been a quizzical question, some faint, persistent stirring of desire. Petra felt the hush of her surroundings, the cool of the room on her drying skin, and for just a moment, just the smallest rush of time, the circle of people dissolved around her, everything solid melted into air. She was utterly transfixed, touched by the curled-up hand, the smooth, almost boyish complexion, the expression, above all the expression, of Lenin lost to some dream of history, even, perhaps, to himself.

Then it was over and she was returned to the heat and light of the world, hearing the shudders of people sweeping past her, a teenage girl flapping and shrieking: gross me out, I’m never gunna look at a dead guy again. Petra had to smile at this youthful conviction and the flailing girlish arms, at her own sombre, unexpected reflection, her moment of touristic grace. It had all happened in the blink of an eye, the flash of a camera if one had been permitted. Lenin was a dead guy
and she needed to get out of the sun, and tonight she would board the train for St Petersburg, home of the world’s largest museum. The Hermitage, she’d read, housed so many objects that it would take ten years to merely glance at each one. As she set off for the hotel, in need of water and rest, she thought once more of waxy Lenin, and wondered what her nephew would make of that strangely moving face. She could picture Mattie’s own face, his blue-eyed brightness, as she asked him again to accompany her to Russia, to help her see the sights and to help her with the language, to walk down together to Lenin’s crowded tomb. *It’s an earnest request*, Mattie, she would say, and they would laugh, already beginning to make their plans.
Ascending from mud-flat to cypress
the herons veer between straight line and curve
as miraculous wings contend with
their own heft. Perched in a green twilight
each wears its body like a disguise:
a retired wizard, perhaps—behind that
shadowy gaze a lifetime of shape-changing—
or an old philosopher culling
minnow-truths by day to be relished
in this half-heaven. Mellow squawks speak of
instinct tempered by time. Real ecstasy,
they know, waits inside the long stillness
or sweeps in with winds that solve puzzles
on the stream’s surface, set new ones.
Though, somewhere, a reach of territory,
a stick nest at its centre, ravens seem,
like death, trenchantly at home anywhere—
interlopers who’ve breached so many
boundaries, they recognise none.
One strops its beak on a crossbar, inches
from stored lightning; another tends road kill,
daring the spaces between cars. Yawps scour
the air, broadcast a raw indifference.
Careening with slow power through spring light
they cannot know they are works of art
but sometimes fly as if they do—at each dip
or sideways scoop, indigo spangles
flash from mirrors of cloud-lit ebony.
To be out of place and to know that other place is still there on a coast, to remember the colours of a ridge, now velvet green in memory, to walk in disagreement with the colours of this place and to know here too everything is displaced and skewed with recall, to gamble with timetables, to misunderstand lineages within veils of tenderness behind doors, to argue with the bondage of the breast, to flinch while witnessing the bruise in morning, to wake without meaning in an incredible blue heat, to be disturbed by the advantages of blue that test the eyes and in turn veil them in unwanted haze as though this was a memory bordering on recall, to appear to die or faint in the straightness of a road, to adduce this is a way of describing this place, and to realise the world moves a little east of itself when elsewhere, and to move with it, to be unbecoming almost casually, to be less casual especially within the darkness veiling the incredible lostness brought here by travellers out of deserts, out of oceans, out of indescribable histories, with bruises that make bodies faint with remembrance, to apprehend an unbecoming fear that swells lines of buildings, to discuss windows as if they could see back into
an original place, to encounter sun like a glassy star
on a balcony, to appreciate the aqua
dip of stairwells, to stare into the well, to test
absence, to walk a little slowly within a road
while green parrots skew the sound
of trucks and warehouses into the very
wildness that is now transported or dried out
along abandoned river beds and unwanted plains,
and to be followed by a slowness
that now echoes with finitude, to wonder
how that would operate as a sound once familiar,
memory sharp,
 a blaze in the eyes,
burning leaves along ridges of the hills
stretching into the exactly-blue sky dome, to wish
for clouds, and to know weather is not
will, to misunderstand distances, to understand how
the living and the dead wander
out of history no longer being dreamt, to reject
the bonds of city lore without realising how
it holds things in places that touch each other
in the tenderness of finitude, to recant
 slightly
and thereby avoid tripping,
and to undertake wide streets in the blessedness
of time passing, to know how this place
is, and to lose the gamble with weather and time,
to uninstall memory, the taste of the breast,
to fold and unfold every map, to explore
the wrinkle and fray, the lost timetable
with its excuses for tickets, to finally turn
the corner, to find a place to live and work, that
is the end
to everything.
Flying into Perth

Jen Jewel Brown

the shadow of the plane
sprints across the scrub like
a shark across a low reef

after the gasping farms
a green surprise of rounded curls
the long vulva of a river

we hurl across the airstrip
trees burst and bloom from the flat land

Jeffrey Smart sharp wing shadow
two crisp stripes of yellow
archly tilting wing tip lifts

the light here is rigid
so bright it pops
The Mary Gilmore Prize is for a first book of poetry. This year there were 39 entries: 33 of them were authored by women. The shortlist of five, perhaps not surprisingly given the odds, is made up entirely of women: Emily Ballou for *The Darwin Poems* (UWA 2009), Helen Hagemann for *Evangelyne and Other Poems* (APC 2009), Sarah Holland-Batt for *Aria* (UQP 2008), Emma Jones for *The Striped World* (Faber & Faber 2009), and Joanna Preston for *The Summer King* (Otago UP 2009).

At the time of writing, the winner of the Mary Gilmore Prize has not yet been announced; however, several of these titles have already won national (and, in Jones’s case, international) prizes, in some cases in competition against highly esteemed and established poets. Unfortunately, these particular books were published just prior to the catchment for this review so I was not afforded the pleasure of reviewing them here. But I bring up the Gilmore shortlist in any case because I think it best illustrates a point that poetry critics and reviewers have been making for some time now: the most exciting poetry in Australia seems to be found, very often, in first books by young female poets.
The emphasis on female authors, it’s worth adding, has become evident not just in poetry publishing in Australia but also overseas and in other genres. In 2009 all eyes were on the women who swept the heavyweight international literary awards: the Nobel Prize in Literature went to German author Herta Müller who, the Swedish judges said, ‘with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed’; the Mann Booker went to Hilary Mantel for her novel *Wolf Hall*; the International Man Booker went to Alice Murno for *Too Much Happiness*; and Elizabeth Strout won a Pulitzer for her short story collection, *Olive Kitteridge*. Is it an accident they were all women; stacked judging panels; a mini-trend? Or are the tides turning?

Back home in Australia, similar questions were being posed in poetry circles. Reviews that commented on the predominance of young female talent among poets left some of the authors in question feeling not so much flattered as wondering—in conversation and in blogs—why they were being singled out as female: they preferred, some of them said, to be judged—and categorised if they must be categorised—based on some quality of their writing, not on the particular pairing of their chromosomes. It’s not that it isn’t interesting to think about the poet’s sex (and for that matter his or her gender and sexuality), they argued, but only if such interrogations yield interesting results pertinent to their work. Many of the same poets deemed that this clumping, as they saw it, did not. As might be expected, however, some bloggers (some of whom were poets, some critics) accused them of being overly sensitive: the ‘young female poets’ were being complimented, not being thrown into a now non-existent gender ghetto. Then one anonymous blogger—a male?—smirked: ‘I’ve heard them referred to as the Ladies of the Lyric’. The condescension was as loud as the phrase is alliterative, and the sexist cat—to stretch the ghetto metaphor—was out of the bag and running down an alley.

This review is not the appropriate forum for interrogating lyricism, nor its alleged linkage to female poets. There are too many
books that need attention to waste space theorising. But some of these observations—and objections—were foremost in my mind as I surveyed a year’s worth of poetry books sent to me for review. Having read the books on offer, and thought about them, I feel safe to dismiss the gender question as not particularly pertinent this year. And I would dismiss it immediately if it weren’t for the presence of a very striking book in this catchment that happens to be yet another first (full length) book by an Australian female poet: *Ghostly Subjects* (Salt 2009) by Maria Takolander. It’s also one of the darkest books on offer.

Takolander’s poems are ruinous, diabolical, all the more so for their polish and precision. Here, as in Baudelaire, beauty is inextricably linked with evil: it’s ‘the dark italics’, as Wallace Stevens phrased it, that compels the poetic imagination in these poems. Not surprisingly, it’s often night-time in a Takolander poem: night is ‘the dangerous time’, the speaker says in ‘Drunk’, adding ‘anything goes when the light goes.’ In ‘Pillowtalk’, a devastating poem in which innuendo lingers like poison, ‘There is no rest. / Nights are for unreason.’ It opens with a stunningly precise if ominous image:

> Inside the bedside drawer,
> The knife blade empties
> Like an unwatched mirror
> At night.

The child-speaker’s psychological ‘bed was made’ by whatever happened to her during those long, black hours. We’re not told exactly what *did* happen—some words should never see the flood of day—though the father’s rifle leaning behind two old coats does lend itself to a Freudian interpretation. The poem closes with the speaker’s troubling confession that she hides bullets in her mouth—her invocation as a poet?—and grinds them down like candy. Almost all the poems in *Ghostly Subjects* are similarly menacing, but they’re also
stylish and very smart. Don’t be surprised if they take up residence in your body after reading them, like ‘a tree full of vultures… / hulking like souls’ (‘Tableaux’) — it’s just that kind of book.

This year’s catchment, in contrast to the previous year, contained few first-time authors but instead saw a number of fine books by Australia’s senior poets. In Les Murray’s *Taller When Prone* (Black Inc 2010) the poems, as seen in his last few books, are shorter than in his early work, and so is his line. His thinking seems tidier than before, the breathing more relaxed, but this new collection nevertheless showcases Murray’s trademark sally and satire, along with the whimsicality and wisecracking wordplay that safeguards his rank as one of the best poets writing in English. The title of the collection comes from the poem ‘The Conversations’: ‘A full moon always rises at sunset / and a person is taller when prone’. As depicted on the cover, these seemingly paradoxical lines are resolved in the image of a man’s late-day shadow stretching into a paper-thin giant. But as often is the case with Murray it is also a pean to the imagination, the idea that a person is more than himself when asleep and dreaming: ‘a person is taller at night’, the speaker also asserts. Or it might also connote that a person reaches full stature only through the canonising processes afforded by death.

It struck me reading this book that it is haunted not only by Murray’s old foe, the black dog of melancholy, but also by the spectre of insanity. Like Lear—‘O! let me not be mad,’ cries the king— the speakers in Murray’s poem fear losing their mind. In fact King Lear is evoked in one of the most striking poems in the collection, ‘King Lear Had Alzheimer’s’ — a poem that draws parallels between Cordelia’s disinheritance and, to read intertextually, that of his own father’s. The poem pushes a bleak, almost Hardyesque idea of fate and what it does to a human:

*The great feral novel*

*every human is in*

*is ruthless.*
Alzheimer’s appears again in the poem, ‘Nursing Home’. ‘Don’t outlive yourself’, it warns as the speaker recounts the losses and indignities of old age: ‘the end of gender / never a happy ender’. Then, proving he still can dance on bits of paper, Murray conjures ‘a lady’ in a nursing home who has ‘who has distilled to love / beyond the fall of memory’:

She sits holding hands
with an ancient woman
who calls her brother and George
as bees summarise the garden.

‘Summerise’ is quintessential Murray. Sonorous, yes, but it’s also a pun on the season—‘summer-ise’—at the same time granting bees the busy work of joining the dots in this bittersweet scene.

Bees bring to mind Dorothy Porter and her seventh and final collection of poetry, The Bee Hut (Black Inc 2009). Written in the last five years of her life, it was completed just before her death in December 2008. ‘The bee hut became a metaphor for these last years of [Porter’s] life’, Andrea Goldsmith writes in the Foreword: ‘she marvelled at the bees, as she had always marvelled at life, but she was also aware of the danger amid the sweetness and beauty’. In the titular poem, the speaker tells of a swarm of bees that has taken over an old shed:

I love the bee hut
on my friend Robert’s farm.

I love the invisible mystery
of its delicious industry.

But do I love the lesson
of my thralldom
to the sweet dark things
that can do me harm?
Even Porter’s love cannot forego awareness of the forces that hurt and destroy, even if she would have them subsumed within a celebratory synthesis. Like the Romantics who feature in a number of Porter’s poems—Keats, Byron—Porter is often at her finest when voicing contradictory surmises about the relationship between the imagination and the pressures of reality. As Keats did in ‘When I Have Fears’, Porter stared down her own death in her final poems. But unlike Keats, Porter stays wildly passionate—‘exorbitantly flamboyant’, even, like the art deco buildings she sees through her window at the Mercy Private Hospital in Melbourne—until the end. Her last poem, ‘View from 417’, was written two weeks before she died. It’s impossible not to love the stubborn optimism of the collection’s last words:

\[
\text{something in me} \\
\text{despite everything} \\
\text{can’t believe my luck}
\]

In an earlier poem, ‘Early Morning at the Mercy’, the speaker, at 6 a.m. in the ‘cool-blue cool / of early morning’, lets her tea go cold and turns her mind to Gwen Harwood’s *Bone Scan* poems. ‘How on earth she could write / so eloquently in hospital’, she wonders. *The Bee Hut*—poignant, powerful, spirited—has me asking the same question of Porter.

Speaking of luck, Catherine Bateson takes up the theme and spins it on her head in her poem ‘The Day Complains’ from *Marriage for Beginners* (John Leonard Press 2009). Feeling distinctly unlucky—the speaker in the humorous if unlikely guise of ‘a day’—shows, as do many of Bateson’s poems, that poetry and comedy are good bedfellows. It begins:

\[
\text{Why can’t you take me as I am} \\
\text{the way I have to take you—} \\
\text{hungover and foul-mouthed}
\]
in your Cookie Monster pjs
last night’s argument with the ex
banging away in your head

‘The Day’ continues its admonishment of the poet-addressee and concludes with a king hit Dorothy Porter, for one, would love:

So roll over, close your eyes
and sleep me off.
I’ll go down to the nursing home
where they’re grateful just to see me.

Some say Tom Shapcott’s Parts of Us (UQP 2010), his fifteenth book of poems, is his best yet. An unflinching meditation on death, aging, and the unheralded losses that come with physical decline, it is at times painfully candid. In the sonnet ‘Miranda at Two’, just as the speaker’s young granddaughter is ‘tumbling toward speech’—learning that ‘sound is the conduit for all those urgent things inside’—the speaker finds that his own capacity for language, or more accurately his capacity to sound language, is closing down around him:

my own tongue thickens and the muscles distort
language so that I hesitate to express myself and cannot
control articulation. Silence rather than speech
is my new mode.

The final couplet has Miranda laughing up at the silent poet and adopting as her own the poet’s task of naming; she addresses him—though we’re not told by what name—‘with perfect symmetry’. Despite the isolating effect that the loss of speech has on a human life—which is of course the heart of this poem—it is difficult to discern self pity in these lines. Speech is to a poet what hearing is to a musician, and one imagines the loss should be more terrible than it is presented in this poem. But as a poet he is still able to
write—and this he does exceptionally well—but more than this he can listen.

Hearing is a sense Shapcott revels in. Everywhere his love of classical music is evident, particularly in the first section of the book where poems about Stravinsky, Vivaldi, Schoenberg and other musicians abound. But in a startlingly beautiful and enigmatic poem called ‘Nocturne’ it’s not humans who make music, but the ‘night’s full choir / of possibilities’.

Listen. The night is dark
though it’s amazing how much light
pretends otherwise—the stars
could be hidden by clouds but this
street and advertisement message
hoodwinks us into believing
our fate is otherwise.
We are alone.

The poet says he knows ‘the ultimate of silence’ but still, he says, he ‘cannot believe silence / will truly happen to [him]’. Parts of Us tells us it won’t.

With Judith Beveridge’s unquestioned reputation as one of Australia’s most highly regarded poets, even knowing her work well it comes as a shock that Storm and Honey (Giramondo 2009) is only her fourth collection of poems. But those who know poetry know that quality and quantity are not necessary apportioned in equal measure, as Elizabeth Bishop with her small handful of exquisite books illustrated so well. As Bishop sometimes did, Beveridge takes the ocean as her subject and makes it her element. Storm and Honey opens with a boy, or what was left with him, being pulled from the steaming gut of a shark, and it ends with a shark in ‘The Aquarium’ that the speaker cannot forget:

how its eyes keep staring, colder than time—how it never
stops swimming,
how it never closes its mouth.

The shark, the ultimate predator whose open mouth causes ‘our hearts [to] burn inside us’, becomes a symbol of unceasing hunger, the cause of so much grief. It’s this philosophical dimension of Beveridge’s poems that gives them resonance beyond her capacity to carve an intricate image or to craft into language the sounds of the nature and the rhythms of work. Though it must be said that she does the latter exceedingly well.

Like Porter, Beveridge also has a poem about a bee hive—hers is in bushland, ‘in an old toppled red gum’:

Sometimes, I’ll picture that old fallen
red gum exhaling bees from the shaft of its cracked trunk. I’ll picture my hand deep in the gum’s center, warm with the running honey; the swarm suddenly around my head like a toxic bloom,
and the noise, the noise in my ears—still wuthering.

These remain among the most intoxicating lines I have read in a long while. As with Murray’s ‘summarising’ bees, Beveridge’s wuthering bees are evidence of her power as a poet to breathe life into forgotten words and show how their presence in our lexicon is earned, not as a luxury but as a necessity that we may live life fully.

Similarly intoxicating, Sarah Day’s Grass Notes (Brandl & Schlesinger 2009) is, to adapt a phrase from her poem ‘Fungi’, a ‘beacon of freakish beauty’. The rapturous poem ‘Apples’ opens with a couplet as majestic as any—‘these apples have weathered / the rise and fall of civilisations’—and traces their cultural trajectory along the Silk Route to ancient Persia, branching into varieties ‘illustrious as any dynasty’, passing through art and religion and science to end again as themselves: ‘These half dozen apples on a plate— / currency of Everyman’s pleasure.’
But not all her poems ride such heady top notes: Day is also a master of gravity. As seen in the quiet devastation of ‘Wombat’ in which the speaker attempts to haul the bulk of a dead wombat—his head ‘big as a person’s’, his ‘grey palms big and soft as / a child’s’—off the road.

In the end, the only way to move his bulk was to hook an arm under each of historical and haul him like a dead man off the yellow gravel across the ditch and leave him on the grass bank as if in deep repose.

The speaker projects the wombat’s slow decay as his body collapses from within and ‘recedes into two dimensions’:

An arrangement of bones upon the drying grass, summer warming up his patch of earth; the forest ravens jawing higher up the hill, a magpie carolling each lightening morning and skylarks overhead rising on each ascending note.

It’s this kind of movement that gives, along with her many other staggeringly good poems, evidence for the claim on the back of the book: Day is indeed one of the most considerable of modern Australian poets.

Ascending notes bring to mind Alan Gould’s twelfth book of poems: *Folk Tunes* (Salt 2009). The collection, filled with rhymes and rhythms that accord with its title, is filled with light: sometimes it glances off the beloved’s ‘head of silver curls’ (‘She Sings Him’); other times it glints from a juggler’s cleaver (‘The Juggler and My Mother’). Music abounds but it’s when the darkness of satire enters the minds of these otherwise romping and playful poems that things
turn operatic. As in the brilliant but biting ‘In Thought They Lived Like Russians’, which begins:

They stripped the furniture from their flat,
and put on gloves to pay the rent,
they scorned their freeholds in the fat
of middle class content.

The poem concludes, like a Russian novel, with a reconciling of opposing emotions, underscored by a dazzling enjambment that spins meaning on its head:

They were the fate within the novel,
where joy and disenchantment join
at some not altogether sane
not altogether pain-
ful level.

Likewise Ross Bolleter celebrates, mourns, and charms in equal measures in Piano Hill (Fremantle Press 2009). Bolleter—a musician who runs tours at a ruined piano sanctuary in WA—possesses the whimsical ear of a composer, paired (not pared) with a mind ruthless as a zen scalpel. ‘Suite for Ruined Piano’ is a knockout sequence that, as a whole, is an unapologetic ode to the piano. There’s a little bit of jazz in the dazzling ‘Everytime We Say Goodbye’—but it’s mostly about a Sudanese poet who, after sharing with the speaker a meal of ‘chili mutton rice and onion’, recites a poem in Arabic (translated by an English woman). But it’s what the Sudanese poet doesn’t say that gives the poem its crushing ending:

‘Memory’, says the poet, trying not to recall
waking with a gun in his face, soldiers
ripping the coverlets off his children—
who burrowed into their beds abandoning
their bodies like the remains of a feast
not worth touching.

Africa looms large in Marcelle Freiman’s _White Lines (Vertical)_ (Hybrid 2010). ‘Mercy’ is a powerful and moving portrait of a nurse in Johannesburg who each night ‘comes from Soweto / to the white suburbs’ to look after the speaker’s father. The end is amazing:

> When he died she walked
> into our house with its candles,
> her hips arthritic, bent with stroke, still massive:
> round the family table, she held our hands, opened her Bible
> closed her eyes, and sang,
> her voice like a bell—
> you could feel God at her shoulder,
> waiting over the horizon.

While some poets stare into darkness for inspiration, Andrew Taylor looks into the light. _The Unhaunting_ (Salt 2009) is Taylor’s fifteenth book of poems—his first since confronting a severe illness in 2003—is brilliant. The collection takes as its title, and overarching theme, the idea that ghosts are real and live among us—not as spirits but as fellow humans, whose torment is our haunting. Death is their—and our—only release.

Taylor plays with the idea in ‘The Carillon Clock’, a gorgeous poem in which time haunts literally and figuratively. It describes an old pendulum clock that came from France, ‘possibly in the time / of the Second Empire’ but which ‘neither trilled nor peeled / …rather it breathed’. One night the speaker in his insomnia—‘already awake’—hears the clock ‘in barely audible words’ offer up its final wisdom before settling into silence forever:

> And to you—
> my lonely listener—I say, try to live
beyond time, in that dimension
no one can measure. Then the voice fell silent
and for many years the clock stayed
hanging on the wall. Probably
its outline is still there on the plaster.

You can feel, in this collection, Taylor getting closer and closer to the things he wants to say in his vocation as a poet. In ‘The Impossible Poem’, the final poem that serves as a coda of sorts for the collection, the poet—or ‘lonely listener’—conjectures:

There are only two poems—
the one you write
and the one always undoing
your words

As you get older, he continues, the latter, that impossible poem, ‘stretches its fingers toward you’ and you can maybe, just, feel what that poem might actually be:

as Adam might have felt it
when God reached across the Sistine ceiling
toward his touch.

In this impossible poem, all things—a warm stone, a stranger’s smile—become a word or a phrase, a kind of living language we can learn to appreciate even when we can’t quite fully comprehend it.

In Gillian Telford’s *Moments of Perfect Poise* (Ginninderra Press 2008) the poem ‘Hunted’ is a standout. Taking up an activity dear to the heart of Dorothy Porter—driving fast, that is—the speaker is ‘alone / late at night’ with a pack of of cars close behind and ‘coming closer’: and that’s when you know, the poems ends shifting gears
into metaphor, ‘how it is / for a gazelle / losing ground’. There’s a
sense of urgency, too, in Susan Hawthorne’s Earth’s Breath (Spinifex 2009), which takes cyclones—local and mythical—as its subject. Perhaps one of the most haunting poems in the collection is ‘Storm Birds’, which opens with the image of storm birds at rest, looking like ‘a boat stranded in a tree / in flight a crucifix’. In part two of this poem:

Curlews are calling
presaging wind wail out of stillness.

Silent for weeks
their cry is an agony
the keening wind of dispossessed souls.

With Birds in Mind (Wombat 2009), Andrew Landsdown joins Judith Wright and Robert Adamson, among others, in dedicating a whole book largely to poetic birds. But it’s as much a book about the imagination and memory as it is about animals: ‘Now they’re gone I see them / again’, the speaker says in ‘Kangaroo Crossing’—‘kangaroos bounding / through the troubled water // and a heron flying up’. Birds abound—cockatoos, corellas, pelicans—in unexpected water in Mark O’Connor’s Pilbara (John Leonard Press 2009). Meanwhile Vivienne Glance goes underwater in her collection of luscious and imagistic poems, The Softness of Water (Sunline 2009), as best seen in the end of ‘Desire’:

A golden fish
brushes her leg
slips into the folds
of her floating dress.

By contrast Nathan Shepherdson, enigmatic poet that he is, sometimes seems more concerned with unseeing than seeing in his second book,
Apples with Human Skin (UQP 2009). Poems for Shepherdson are not images, nor are they answers, nor even questions: they are simply possibilities and alternatives. Like a zen koan, a Shepherdson poem can be pondered for months or it can be grasped in a flash—there’s no telling when it will release its ore. The idea, the axiom, the paradox is paramount in his work, as asserted in section ‘5’ of ‘the easiest way to open the door is to turn the handle’—a long but straightforward title for a poem whose numerical sections run, quite naturally, backwards:

The idea of a wall
is defeated when the wall is built
tearing it down does not defeat the idea of tearing it down

Perhaps the most handsome books in the catchment are the signed and limited-edition chapbooks produced by Whitmore Press. Barry Hill’s Four Lines East (Whitmore 2009)—rife with the ‘incessant vigor of thought’—is a small book intent on interrogating big realities. Hill is not afraid of abstractions—‘no self no soul no being no life’—but he always drags them down to earth, as in the gorgeous poem ‘Noodles’ that succeeds in shattering such concepts with its final image:

In a blue sweater, pants maroon
like Tibetan robes
the man stands with a golden net
hauling it up like noodles.

Also from Whitmore Press’s chapbook series, The Pallbearer’s Garden (2008) by A. Frances Johnson is, to use the words describing her Aunties garden, ‘caught by wind / and singed by fire’ (‘Floracide’). Each poem is a ‘repeatable beauty’, even when the poet is in the midst of grief and horror. The heavyhearted poem ‘Pallbearer’ ends with unexpected levity: ‘I lift, helft and hold—shore up / howling
lightness, lifting’. Then there’s Brendan Ryan’s *Tight Circle* (Whitmore 2008) which, though a compact chapbook, carries the weight of a full-length collection. The collection is named for a devastatingly good poem the centres on an uncle’s burial: the undertakers ask the family ‘made straggly with grief’ and who ‘need distance from the hole’ to form a tight circle around the grave. They ‘mutter / through the Lord’s Prayer’ as the farmer-undertakers ‘lower [the] uncle into darkness’. The poem ends with a portrait of the speaker’s father (the dead man’s brother) that proves that life moves in concentric circles:

Burying has aged my father  
softened his handshake.  
He wakes in the night to exercise his new replacement knee.  
Each afternoon he leans against the front fence 
with his crutches talking to anybody who’ll stop;  
he has to know what’s going on,  
and when he’ll be allowed to drive out to the farm 
to see the cows 
bunched up in the yard 
in a tight circle.

Sadly, there are two posthumous books—in addition to Dorothy Porter’s discussed earlier—in this year’s catchment: *La, la, la* (Five Islands 2009) by Tatjana Lukic and *Beautiful Waste* (Fremantle Press 2009) by David McComb of the post-punk band, The Triffids. Although she published four books of poems in her homeland, the former Yugoslavia, *la, la, la* is Lukic’s first collection of poems in English since she migrated to Australia in 1992. The title poem appears to be a conversation, perhaps by telephone, in which she assures a worried querent that, no, she was ‘not in the square when a grenade hit’; nor was she ‘forced from her home’ nor taken to ‘the camp’. But she did see ‘corpses floating along the river’ and ‘someone changed the locks and lay in [her] bed’. ‘Yes’, she admits,
she ‘remembers everything’ but, like survivors who want to survive must, she tucks the memories in a place in her mind where the trauma cannot hurt her:

the whole day  
what did I sing?  
about a cloud and a bird  
a wish and a star,  
la la la,  
yes, nothing else

The speaker’s levity may not convince, but the psychological realism is chilling. Lukic writes of her war-torn homeland with such directness that even when she turns her attention to her new life in the sleepy Canberra suburbs, the scarring—darkened by the contrast—still shines through. Lukic died of cancer in 2009.

Many of the poems in McComb’s book (written over the course of his short life) hold a fascination with mirrors: doubling is everywhere. It is as if speaker can’t quite hold himself together in a single psychology. In ‘You’re My Double’ the speaker is scared to sleep by the mirror; in ‘You My Second Skin’ the speaker wants to ‘peel you off me’; and a quatrain called ‘Nature’s Warning’ has the poet driving through the mist of Northern England imagining his ‘belated and her substitute’ for him, lying in ‘a double bed somewhere, kissing’. If you like Leonard Cohen’s music you’ll enjoy *Beautiful Waste*. The two lyricists share an aesthetic that embraces the ceremonies of suffering, finding great beauty in trauma and addiction, full release only in brokenness. In ‘Ode to January 1989’, McComb writes that ‘everything sins, suffers, grows’.

Which brings to mind the closing lines of the first poem in Chris Mansell’s sixth book, *Letters* (Kardoorair 2009), which puts the reader by the Mediterranean Sea, drinking ‘thick, sweet coffee’ and thinking of those ‘who have gone before’. Then the poem would have you ‘visit Cavafy’s house / and think’:
why poetry is filled to the heart
with humanity and this grief
shall be long and strong
and you will weep
one more time and the world
will be laughably fresh
as it has been
this old world
all along.
In the lift my young bird
could hardly suppress its jump

the absurdity was she in the same lift
was a half-old woman

hands inserted in my pants pockets, I
muttered a curse: she generated a devilish air from head to toe

my hands rolled into fists
I muttered: she had a devilish body that turned this way and that

when even my fists failed I had to
bend double putting my buttocks on the railings in the lift

as it ascended to Level 18 she twisted her body on the way out
her devilish eyes
took a careful glance at my fatal bird’s nest that kept expanding

the lift kept ascending staring at the large-framed mirror facing me
I saw a man trying hard to conceal only to reveal more

this man was so dejected he pulled his hands out of his pockets
by then the irrepresible bird was a-wing
The Bee Whisperer

Duncan Richardson

The beekeeper
  helmeted and gloved
  senses the humours of the hive

knows each bee
  better than the tourists
  on the far side of glass

detached
  by microphone and wire
  his voice spills secrets

the endurance of tiny wings
  the meaning of the pollen dance
  and how it is to live
    in a colossal
    seething
    sisterhood

where only the queen
  lives longer than the memory
    of flowers
Duncan Richardson

holding the swarm
   within her amber mind
      keeping the mysteries of wax
         and the perfect hexagon.

The beekeeper walks in a honeyed dream
   and watches the visitors go
      clutching their souvenirs

   then laconically
      smokes himself free
         of the last clinging bee

before he begins
   another
      metamorphosis.
January 29, 2009

Graham Nunn

While I wash dishes to *Modern Times*, what started out a humdrum day—the usual routine of walking, emails anxieties—explodes with a young swallow joyriding through the window coming to rest where the curtains part, head cocked to my wife’s shrill voice, watching the cat move from the couch to take a closer look.

The phone rings, bringing word John Martyn died this morning.

And so the world goes on. Now the swallow circles the kitchen and speeds out the window making the curtains dance wing-stroking an elegy in the air.
1. From Victor to Vanquished

Siddhattha Gotama, the Indian sage who later became known as the Buddha, would be a recognised figure to most, along with some of what he stands for: compassion, and meditation, for example. However, the precise discoveries he made in the field of meditation, which led to his teaching career, and subsequent fame and often deification, are relatively little known. In some ways this is not remarkable. Most people would know who Einstein was, yet have only a vague idea of what he discovered, and little understanding of his theories. The situation is further complicated, of course, by the fact that no written record of what Siddhattha said or did was made until after his death. Add to that translation after translation, and the problem of describing accurately what the Buddha taught is apparent.

Recent work in the fields of cognitive and neuro-science is suggesting that the modes of consciousness attained in meditation practice are different in kind from other modes. This lends substance to the view that a narrative, such as that of Siddhattha’s life, which arises from such practice, may be quite distinct from narratives stemming
from other modes of knowing: the representation of the nature of his journey may vary considerably, depending on the specific way it is being apprehended. The proliferation of meditative techniques in the contemporary scene will also lead to differing versions, and the intersection of these techniques with cultural and artistic values and practices will in turn produce further variation. Past poetic versions of the Siddhattha story and of buddhistic experience have included, for example, Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), a work which is heavily inflected by Protestantism, in which Siddhattha’s own radical rejection of the Brahminical dogmas of his day is transposed so that he may be seen as representing Protestantism’s struggles against Catholic orthodoxy. During the nineteen fifties, the ‘Beat’ poets voiced a version of buddhistic experience very much entangled with post-war American political and social protest.

In this essay, I am proposing that, while Beveridge’s poems do show an engagement on some levels with both buddhistic values and practice, her version of Siddhattha’s story is most strongly the product of a way of knowing usually termed imaginative. Beveridge describes ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, in her collection *Wolf Notes*, as ‘an imaginative depiction of the time Siddhattha spent wandering in the forests and towns before achieving enlightenment.’ My argument is that this imaginative approach, strongly bound up with the senses and emotions, is actually one which is quite distinct in some ways from the meditative, and leads to a representation of Siddhattha’s story which contrasts quite markedly, in some respects, with one emanating from the meditative tradition. I argue that the imagination produces a conception of transcendence very different from that found in the meditative tradition. It produces what I call a utopian vision, which has unrealisability built into it, as it were. This means that Siddhattha’s pursuit, in ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’ of transcendence, so conceived, fundamentally alters the tenor of his journey, the tone of his story, and his import as a character.

The story, or myth, if you like, of Siddhattha, is that of a quest to find a way to emerge from the seemingly irremediable suffering of human
life, to \textit{transcend}, and Siddhattha is traditionally the triumphant figure who rediscovers a means of doing this, thus becoming known as a \textit{buddha}, or fully awakened being. In Beveridge’s depiction of Siddhattha’s story, however, I am arguing that she has produced a radical variant, in that Siddhattha, rather than figuring as the triumphant embodiment of the reality of transcendence, becomes the embodiment of its elusiveness and implausibility. Thus her Siddhattha frequently voices exclamations of longing tinged with hopelessness: ‘O, I don’t know / if I’ll ever wake, changed, transformed,’ (‘In the Forest’, 96); ‘\texttt{O my Yasodhara!} Then do / I know how emptiness makes / a grove an unquiet place.’ (‘The Grove’, 54). And he yearns, for example, to ‘lift on viridescent wings’ (‘In the Forest’, 96), for insight to ‘faultlessly deliver some absolutes’ (‘Benares’, 91), and for a reflexive, visceral belonging, ‘a home I could call to with / the quick
of my mouth...’ (‘Monkey’, 62). This version, I am arguing, can be read as creating a radically different perspective on the limits and possibilities of human consciousness from that evident in versions based in the meditative tradition. It also, in certain respects, recasts Siddhattha in Beveridge’s own image as lyric poet.

My method, then, is comparative, but what I am using as the basis for comparison is not one specific text. I will refer mainly to ‘traditional’ versions of Siddhattha’s story, or versions arising from ‘the meditative tradition’. My grounds for using a general reference like this are that the two major departures Beveridge makes which I focus upon, related to the form of transcendence, and the successful / non-successful tenor of Siddhattha’s journey, are both departures from general features which traditional versions, despite their many more subtle differences, have in common. My generalisation, then, has this specific functionality, and does not incur any compromise of the various traditions’ individual differences on other levels. In general, my textual sources are those which draw upon the Pali Canon, or Tipitaka, the large collection of documents relating to the Buddha’s life and teaching written in the Pali language, which are the oldest records of that time. Nanamoli’s The Life of the Buddha has been my main textual reference.

I would say, also, that I am not claiming that Beveridge is not aware of, or does not understand, the difference I am seeking to describe here between imaginative and meditative ways of knowing. My claim is a literary-critical one: that the text she has produced displays this difference. Furthermore, I do not approach this analysis with the attitude that the kind of buddhistic tradition I am using for my perspective leads to a dismissal or devaluing of other bodies or modes of experience. Rather, it is difference I am concerned to describe and preserve. This certainly does not mean that the particular contribution and quality of the work examined is not valuable in its way. I am arguing only that its contributions are different from other alternatives. In this particular case, it is my view that Beveridge’s poems contain numerous excellent images of the natural world, moments of subtle
psychological understanding, and comprise overall a very interesting sequence. I do note that Ann Vickery made the comment about the poems I am examining here that ‘their Romantic presumptuousness left me rather cold.’ I also examine the role of Beveridge’s aesthetic lineage and orientation, but my aim is analytical and comparative, rather than that of forming an aesthetic judgement (though the latter is of course also a legitimate procedure).

2. Two Kinds of Transcendence, and Siddhattha’s Changed Journey

The kind of transcendence we have in Beveridge’s poems I will call utopian: the world is appraised with the senses, emotions, and intellect, and then a state is imagined in which all of the imperfections which these faculties perceive have been rectified. In this way, an end to unsatisfactoriness and suffering is imagined. It is a state, then, in which there is the peace which the emotional state presently lacks, the absolute meaning and coherence which the intellect presently cannot find, the sustained comfort and pleasure which the senses lack, the all-pervasive goodness which the moral faculty aspires to, and the perfectly efficacious art which the aesthetic faculty is in search of. Transcendence in the meditative practice tradition, on the other hand, while similarly a state without suffering (if one takes ‘transcendence’ to refer to the final state of complete liberation, known as nibbana: transcendence may also refer, however, to an ongoing process through practice) is achieved by an examination of how the perception of and reaction to imperfections, or unsatisfactoriness, arises and causes suffering in the first place. This examination is undertaken via the practice, which develops the specialised form of meditative concentration known as samadhi, whereby the mind is trained to remain focused on its habitual processes, which feed into our responses, in a sustained and non-judgemental, or non-reactive way. Such concentration is then held, by the practice tradition, to progressively facilitate interventions in habitual reaction, and
also to reveal, somewhat like the steady focus of a microscope, the impermanence, or substancelessness, of all physical and mental phenomena. This latter realisation of impermanence, known as *anicca*, in turn leads to a realisation of selflessness, known as *anatta*, which in its turn leads to the gradual, or sometimes sudden, re-perception of suffering, the experience being that there are no solid entities to be desired or averted from, nor any solid self to desire or be averted from them, which is the usual process generating suffering.\(^8\)

In short, then, meditative transcendence is not defined, even inversely, via conventional perceptions or faculties, but by the different faculty of *samadhi*. Nor is it postulated in the abstract and desired from a distance, but rather worked progressively towards through practice and the personal physico-mental experience which that yields. These are two very different forms of transcendence, and are clearly going to have a significant bearing on how Siddhattha’s story is represented.

There have been many formulations, of course, of exactly what the imagination is and is capable of. Here, as with the neurophysiology of meditative states, science is making some efforts to redress the lack which Francis Bacon perceived when he said that he found ‘not any science that doth properly or fitly pertain to the imagination.’\(^9\) It would appear that Beveridge has accepted, at least to some degree, William Hazlitt’s high estimation that it can enable one to ‘foreknow and to record the feelings of all men at all times and places’.\(^10\) The issues involved in defining imaginative mental activity, as against meditative, are of course highly complex. Perhaps, however, it is possible to succinctly indicate in what way differences might arise between an approach like that of Beveridge’s imaginative one, and that of the meditative tradition.

In an interview in the *Encounter* series on Radio National, Beveridge says that poetry ‘brings us back to the fundamentals of consciousness. That is, back to our creativity. It seems to me that our human nature is such that creativity lies at the heart of what we are about. We are programmed for creative self-discovery through a
dialogue with our environment.’ Beveridge then identifies imagery as a tool enabling this self-discovery, and goes on to speak of how she feels that metaphor allows her, in a poem, ‘to make the active perceiving central rather than have the perceiver as the motivating influence, which is a position or a central position, to a lot of Buddhist notions where the eye slips away and what is foregrounded is the Web of Connections, where the qualities of one thing are dependent on those of another.’ Having thus established a connection between her technical aesthetic practice and Buddhist ‘notions’, Beveridge then goes on to describe, using terminology associated with Buddhism, her hope to ‘attain a particular type of awareness, penetrating, focused, yet also permeable and open.’ And a little further on she states that writing ‘for me is a relinquishing to the unknown, to the unpredictable, to uncertainty, and paradoxically, concentration or absorption does seem to appear at the moment that deliberate effort vanishes. There’s great joy in falling into the object of one’s attention, in vanishing into awareness itself [my italics].’ Beveridge then reads the poem ‘The Kite’, from ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, in part to illustrate her point.

In order, then, to give a brief indication of how the meditative tradition’s approach may diverge from Beveridge’s articulation of the processes of self-discovery and awareness, and to raise the possibility that she may not, in fact, be talking about the same kind of experience which that tradition is referring to, I will briefly point out some specific distinctions which the tradition makes on the subject of awareness. Firstly, the phenomenon of ‘absorption’ has a specific place in the meditative tradition: a distinction is drawn between meditative states which are the result of feats of absorption, or ‘vanishing into’ the object, usually known as samatha (calm abiding) and those in which the mind retains a kind of lucid perspective, realising the conditioned nature of the meditative state itself, usually known as vipassana (insight). Where Beveridge is endorsing the former, for the tradition, one of Siddhattha’s most distinctive meditative achievements, along with the rejection of extreme asceticism, is the
realisation that absorptive states alone do not lead to the desired goal of enlightenment. For the tradition, Siddhattha’s unique contribution was the development of a meditative state which is not merely a form of intense awareness, (sati), or absorption, but rather is characterised by the maintenance of what is called ‘constant thorough awareness of impermanence’ or sampajanna, along with a firm moral basis. This latter kind of meditation is traditionally seen as the breakthrough which Siddhattha made, which allowed him to finally get to the roots of suffering. This vipassana, or ‘insight’ meditation, is seen as providing the ‘wisdom’ component (panna), missing from merely absorptive states, which allows the final liberation from suffering. Thus, buddhistic awareness is specifically not a ‘falling into the object’, as Beveridge describes, but rather the observation of the object with a very specific and firmly self-aware orientation.15

The poem which Beveridge reads in the interview, ‘The Kite’ (82–3), is presented as an instance of buddhistic awareness:

**The Kite**

Today I watched a boy fly his kite.  
It didn’t crackle in the wind—but gave out a barely perceptible hum.

At a certain height, I’d swear I heard it sing. He could make it climb in any wind, could crank those angles up,

make it veer with the precision of an insect targeting a sting; then he’d let it royal in rapturous finesse, a tiny bird in mid-air courtship. When lightning cracked across the cliff— (like quick pale flicks of yak hair
Mike Heald

fly whisks)—he stayed steady. For so long he kept his arms up, as if he knew he’d hoist that kite enough.

I asked if it was made of special silk, if he used some particular string—and what he heard while holding it.

He looked at me from a distance, then asked about my alms bowl, my robes, and about that for which a monk lives. It was then I saw I could tell him nothing in the cohort wind, that didn’t sound illusory.

The boy’s absorption, or concentration—his seeming oneness with his activity—is presented as a kind of exemplar of buddhistic consciousness. Yet it could only be taken to illustrate, if rather approximately, the absorptive state I have described above. The comparison is often given, to illustrate this point, that a murderer may be utterly concentrated and absorbed in his task, yet be in a state of the worst ignorance and moral depravity, and quite oblivious to connectedness of any sort. It is also significant that ‘The Kite’ ends with Siddhattha daunted, and as regarding his own transcendental project, ‘that for which / a monk lives…’, which presumably includes his knowledge of awareness, as insubstantial, to the point where, if he tried to voice it, it would ‘sound illusory’. Beveridge’s own conception of sensory, physical absorption, here, as the way to transcendence, is seen as proving itself more real and compelling than a monk’s implicitly less engaged activities.

In raising these two comparisons, then, between what Beveridge on the one hand, and the tradition on the other, present as buddhistic consciousness, whilst I have not provided a great deal of detail, I have aimed to at least give a sense of the specificity of the experience which
the tradition is dealing with. In doing so, it may perhaps become more apparent how certain distinctions become extremely important. I hope also to show, of course, that Beveridge’s own conception of imagination and creativity, and how this is linked to buddhistic consciousness, does result in a particular narrative dynamic for Siddhattha’s journey. My main point here is that Beveridge’s adherence to absorptive states, and her reliance on often sensory-based imaginative procedures, means that although Siddhattha makes some specific kinds of forays towards his reconceived goal, overall we see him in stasis, rather than progressing.

In terms of the actual content of the narrative, first of all, many key events, found in traditional versions of Siddhattha’s journey, such as his change of clothing, cutting of his hair, visiting other teachers, rejecting asceticism, his first normal meal, and confrontation with the disillusioned followers, do not appear in Beveridge’s sequence. This creates the impression, I would argue, of a demurring from participation in a celebratory spirit of progress of the story, and, by implication, of a withholding of acknowledging the credibility of such progress. These omissions also tend to mean that the sense of momentum, of Siddhattha passing symbolic markers on his way towards full enlightenment, is not present. Based on a reading of these poems, the title, ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, I would argue, could well be taken to indicate not a transitional zone at all, but rather to define the state in which the poems regard us as always inescapably existing. This has been recognised, I think, in Jennifer Strauss’s comment that Beveridge has ‘a fine ear for the internal contradictions of human desire—for the way we are pulled between palace and bodhi tree, flesh and spirit, earth and sky’,16 invoking those dualisms, (flesh / spirit, earth / sky) and the predicament they incur, characteristic of utopianism.

Siddhattha’s stasis also results from his portrayal by Beveridge as, if not quite an ‘ordinary guy’, then very much closer to that than the meditative tradition would suggest. Beveridge’s Siddhattha is clearly distinguished, in the sequence, by a very refined sensibility. Yet he
is also wracked by doubt, nostalgia, longing, and guilt. Although we cannot, of course, verify exactly what Siddhattha did experience at that time, nevertheless a contrast arises when one considers the meditative tradition’s view. In that tradition, Siddhattha at that stage was a Bodhisatta, a person who is able to take the final step to full enlightenment, and whose mind is therefore at a highly extraordinary level of development.\(^\text{17}\) Again, one cannot make the pronouncement that Siddhattha would not have experienced the emotions attributed to him by Beveridge at all. However, my point is that, to the meditative tradition, Siddhattha's journey would both be characterised by the specialised activity of meditation, subsequent unusual responses to experience, and also by identifiable progressive stages of development as his practice changed and proceeded. He is said, for example, as a small child to have sat down under a tree and spontaneously attained the meditative state known as the first \textit{jhana}, a state of deep absorptive concentration. And according to the tradition, soon after he left his home, and therefore early in the period Beveridge's poems deal with, he visited several renowned teachers, quickly attained the most advanced meditative states which they taught, and yet struck out on his own again, convinced that their techniques did not remove suffering at its very roots in the psyche. The first teacher visited was Alara Kalama, and his meditative attainment is described as the jhanic realm of ‘Nothingness’.\(^\text{18}\) The second was Udaka Rama putta, whose attainment is described as the state of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’.\(^\text{19}\) If one considers, then, as the traditional story relates, that Siddhattha, well before taking his ultimate seat under the bodhi tree where \textit{nibbana} is said to have been achieved, easily mastered such rarefied meditative states as those of these teachers, one gets an idea of how unusual his mental processes are traditionally regarded as being during the transitional period between palace and bodhi tree. One may also see how, for the tradition, the development of meditative technique and the specialised experience it yields really is the story, and that when this experience is by and large excluded, the story looks very different indeed.
In Beveridge’s version, then, we tend not to get a sense of someone located in an unusual psychological terrain, and of having specific means to gain purchase on and traverse such terrain, and therefore of being poised on the brink of an extraordinary discovery. One effect of this, I would argue, is to make the kind of radical change implied by transcendence seem highly improbable. Siddhattha seems becalmed, rather than developing any specialised kind of calm that may allow transcendent insight—a kind of renunciate without a cause, as suggested by his comment in the poem ‘At Urevala (1)’ (80): ‘I keep to myself and idle away / the time...’ This immobility is a symptom of utopian transcendence, in that one is caused to pursue intrinsically unreachable opposites to present reality. To the meditative tradition, on the other hand, Siddhattha’s task during the time period Beveridge deals with is seen as highly specialised, in keeping with his special status and capacities, and also extremely arduous, rather than allowing for idleness. He is regarded as fine-tuning his meditation, already of a virtually unparalleled efficacy, by realising that the techniques he had used thus far had left the very roots of suffering in place, dormant, and therefore persevering to discover and extract those.

In Beveridge’s version, Siddhattha is not well underway like this, but rather is placed far behind the meditative tradition’s starting line, a situation that is further exacerbated when he seems to retain a fascination with self-imposed suffering, for example in the poem ‘At Urevala (2)’, (80):

Yama, disfigure me. Blemish me with thorns.
Give me a cough as sharp as a leper’s clapper.
I will eat only dust swept up...

Beveridge here, and in a number of other poems, articulates the extreme ascetic drive, which does play a role in Sidhattha’s efforts in traditional versions, but only a preliminary one, as a dead end. Yet the momentous turn away from extreme asceticism, and consequent
opening of a clear way in which to progress, so vital to the meditative tradition, does not receive conspicuous mention. The significance of such a modification of emphasis in the story is very difficult to overestimate, since the rejection of self-imposed suffering in favour of a more moderate ‘middle way’ is traditionally one of Siddhattha’s most spectacular and definitive technical discoveries. The key decision to take a meal, rather than persist with severe abstinence from food, is narrated in the traditional versions, followed by the negative reaction of Siddhattha’s followers, which provides a crucial turning point in his journey: ‘As soon as I ate the solid food, the boiled rice and bread, the five bikkhus were disgusted and left me, thinking: ‘The monk Gotama has become self-indulgent, he has given up the struggle and reverted to luxury.’ These episodes are excluded from Beveridge’s narrative.

It would seem that just as Beveridge’s Siddhattha appears closer to ordinary in terms of his emotions, as I described earlier, so here he remains conditioned by conventional psychological dynamics—in this case the dialectic of the drive towards pleasure, yet fascination with its opposite, suffering—rather than the unconventional psychological dynamics of meditation practice, where the experience of suffering is progressively modified.

Finally, of course, the truncating of the story to omit the triumphant ending, the attainment of final liberation, or nibbana, and presentation of what remains as a complete literary structure, has significant consequences for narrative impetus. The climax of Siddhattha’s struggle for transcendence is traditionally encapsulated in the ‘house-builder’ verses:

House builder, you have now been seen;
You shall not build the house again.
Your rafters have been broken down;
Your ridge pole is demolished too.

Stopping the narrative before transcendence is a natural gesture of humility on Beveridge’s part: an acknowledgement of the inaccessibility
to her, and ineffability generally, of ‘enlightened’ experience. Yet at the same time, a strongly operative effect, I would argue, is that of casting great doubt on the possibility of transcendence, by placing it in permanent parenthesis, or even sealing its fate as untrue ‘myth’. Certainly, Siddhattha’s quest is de-coupled from the engine traditionally drawing it onwards, and the ending Beveridge has chosen tends to strand Siddhattha permanently in his sufferings and uncertainty, as if that situation were these poems’ conclusion about the human condition.

One of the changed directions in which Beveridge takes Siddhattha in his pursuit of transcendence is that taken by the lyric poet, so that he voices his progress, in the poem ‘Path’ (100), in terms of being increasingly able to ‘give each feeling the subtlest form’, the implication being that it is by the increasingly subtle formulation of given feelings that the human spirit is developed, in contrast to the practice tradition’s analysis of how givenness itself occurs. An image from ‘New Season’ (57) illustrates these values, as Siddhattha, wracked by memories of his wife, remarks ‘I can almost hear you wiping away your tears / with your sari hem’. This lyrical absorption in sense-experience intensifies to the pitch of shamanism at times, launching Siddhattha on another alternative route out of the ordinary, yielding avatars in the form of horses, for example in ‘Horse’ (63), and here in ‘Dark Night’ (68):

...Even its eye

was loosening mine with sand.
And when I touched its landscape
of wild waters, I felt

hooves of a thundering godhead
and lightning whips of warlords
ravage my deltas...
This *merging into* the animal world contrasts with the increasing *distinctness* within (though not *from*) the world of nature which buddhistic practice is held to develop, in its cultivation of uniquely human qualities of consciousness. Beveridge says in the *Encounter* interview that ‘the predominant theme that emerges’ in ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’ is ‘the importance of finding a connection with the natural world’. 22 She goes on to say that ‘that’s certainly one of those fundamental tenets of Buddhism, a vision that our place is within an overarching system of relationships, that life is simply a flowing interactive exchange, between a myriad number of life forms.’ 23 Clearly, these are complex ontological and epistemological issues, which Beveridge’s term ‘simply’ rather understates. My point here is that the kind of connection humans have with the natural world, and how this connection may be perceived, are highly specific matters in meditative practice, and that this specificity is not accommodated by either the kind of general formulation of interconnectedness which Beveridge gives in the interview, or by the responses to the natural world which the poems articulate. A reference which could serve to indicate how far the meditative tradition is, in its aims and experience, from a kind of absorption into nature, is this catalogue of what Siddhattha aspires to attain, as he sets out from home on the meditator’s path:

> Then I thought: ‘Why, being my self subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement, do I seek after what is also subject to these things? Suppose, being myself subject to these things, seeing danger in them, I sought after the unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undelfiled supreme surcease of bondage, Nibbana?’ 24

Siddhattha is here resolving to *disassociate* himself from what could be considered the natural world’s natural tendencies and characteristics. An image emblematic of Beveridge’s contrasting move here is one where Siddhattha is literally enveloped by animals, when
he is covered in bees: ‘A long robe of bees flows about me’ (‘Tree’, 67),
which can also be read, if one were to assume that the bees are seen
as more or less yellow, as an ironic subversion of the distinctness
symbolised by the yellow robes of buddhistic practitioners.

The association of lyric poetry with shamanism is of course well-
established. The view that Beveridge’s portrayal of Siddhattha is in
some respects a poetic self-portrait, and that in this sequence she
is dramatising specific preoccupations that have long been central
to her work, is lent substance by a look back at her earlier poem
‘Girl Swinging’, for example, from her first book The Domesticity
of Giraffes. This poem contains many of the key characteristics of
the transcendental drive in the form in which we see it exhibited
by her Siddhattha. The terms in which this earlier poem envisages
transcendence, and indeed its very movement, is strikingly similar,
for example, to ‘Quarry’ (52) from ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi
Tree’; in the former we have ‘Quietly, I wait, / listening to myself’,
and in the latter ‘For a long time I looked into myself’; then in ‘Girl
Swinging’, ‘when, suddenly innocent of misery— / that feeling comes
/ of being lifted into the air’, and in ‘Quarry’, ‘Then I let go of all
thought— / and I felt like a bird / floating in the clear, excavated air’.

The transcendent process is figured and developed, in ‘Girl
Swinging’, in the recognisably symbolist terms of music, as being a
kind of absorption into pure aesthetic form— ‘I long to be a symphony
/ levitated by grace-notes’— a figure also prominent in ‘Between
the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, as in this example from ‘The Krait’ (58):
‘…I thought the world should / be in harmony with my every act.’, or
this, from ‘Grass’ (86–7):

    ...wishing
    I too could find precision among

    unweighable songs; here where
    the river curves, here where the moon
dies, here where the wind eddies—
and here where the men poise—
then scythe their absolute measures.

Martin Duwell has, persuasively I think, spoken of the ‘Rilkean strand’ in Beveridge’s poetic sensibility. In their aspirations towards what Charles Chadwick defines, in recognizably utopian terms, as ‘a perfect supernatural world’ both the symbolists’ lives and poetic careers are often represented as object lessons in the misguidedness of pursuing transcendence. Chadwick’s comment that Valery ‘returned to reality and…recognized that the mind cannot remain turned in on itself’ is characteristic, as is, to bring matters closer to Beveridge’s poetic home, Adrian Caesar’s on Kenneth Slessor: ‘Slessor’s great articulation of failure in ‘Five Bells’ might then become for us a means to understanding the necessity to forge a poetry and poetics that do not depend upon transcendentism…” And with regard to Rilke himself, Robert Hass echoes these judgments when he says of the later poems that it ‘is wonderful to be able to watch the world come flooding in on this poet, who had held it off for so long. [my italics]’ It is a plausible reading then, that in the poems in ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, Beveridge’s poetic lineage has contributed to transforming Siddhattha from an embodiment of the reality of transcendence, to the avatar of a ‘frustration’ she may feel at its inaccessibility, a frustration Martin Duwell remarks upon thus, in the context of transcendence, symbolism and musicality:

Carefully placed at the poem’s ['The Herons'] centre is a single bird which can serve to introduce what might be called the Rilkean strand in Beveridge’s poetry. This bird [in ‘The Herons] stands as though it ‘saw and heard the single / far off, crystal note’. It recalls the language of a poem from earlier in The Domesticity of Giraffes, ‘For Rilke’, a poem which expresses the drive towards transcendent unity in the poems. It celebrates the poet’s ability to
transform the multiple noises of contingent reality into a ‘voice pure as a tuning fork / independent / of what it’s struck off.’ The poem includes its author in the category of those unable to do this, those who are overwhelmed by the noisy world’s ‘blaring decibels’ and whose voices reflect this by their ‘severe grating, unbearable / dissonance’. This inclusion looks, originally, like a kind of modesty, a way of acknowledging the vastly greater poet, but it may be a little more genuine than this— an expression of high goals and creative frustration.31

The preeminence of imagination rather than samadhi as a way of knowing results in a changed tone for Siddhattha’s journey. Rather than the tone being one of positive attentiveness to palpable modulations of consciousness which provide the basis for an expectation of further change, as in the meditative tradition, the tone becomes that of a yearning fraught with intimations of its own futility. The images of the transcendent state which Siddhattha produces are essentially intensifications of dissatisfaction, being inversions of present conditions, and as such are imbued with a doleful sense of impossibility, proclaim a tacit affiliation with the non-transcendent as the only real site of vital existence, or seem to betray, in their unconving poetic realisation, Beveridge’s underlying lack of conviction with regard to the positive and achievable transcendental project as we find it in the meditative tradition.

The poem ‘Monkey’ (62), illustrates this, as well as how the imagination’s fusing of senses, emotions and intellect, which contrasts with samadhi’s aim to disentangle components of mentality, constructs its utopia. Siddhattha listens to the ‘whimpers’ of an injured, isolated grivet, which suggest that its relatives in the mountains may be waiting to welcome it back. This in turn leads to the envisaging of a kind of organic, perfect belonging, which then becomes a component of the utopian transcendence Siddhattha yearns for:
And I wish I too had a home I could call to with
the quick of my mouth, the madness of my tongue.

Siddhattha’s continuing affiliation to the sensual as the real
alternative to suffering is epitomized in ‘A Vow’ (70), where the
transcendent state is imagined as one in which even the most
apparently deprived forms of life will receive maximal physical
comfort, so that

bindweed, burdock, beggar’s ticks
and burr will know the perfume of asphodel
and the softness of lamb’s tongue...

And sensualism gets, rather spectacularly if implicitly, the very last
words of the whole sequence, when Siddhattha resolves ‘to sit until I
no longer want / to burgeon in paradise.’ (‘Ficus Religiosa’, 102): the
word ‘burgeon’ connotes all manner of sensual, vegetable expansions
of pleasure, so that the word ‘paradise’, when it occurs in this sentence,
rings with its full range of hedonistic resonances, which overwhelms
the renunciatory tone. The body-language of the language, as it were,
contradicts its explicit meaning. Thus we leave Siddhattha under the
bodhi tree not, as in the meditative tradition, about to conclusively
overcome dependence on sense pleasures for happiness, but rather
expressing a tacit declaration of their irresistibility. It is interesting
to note, in this context, that Beveridge has herself been aware of
her attraction towards the senses, and how this may possibly draw
her away from buddhistic consciousness. In an interview with Greg
Mclaren in Southerly, Beveridge says that if

you’re a serious practitioner [of Buddhism] then everything you
do should be practice. Everything. But in reality I find this very
difficult, and sometimes I feel that my writing may be a kind of anti-
practice in that my work is very sense-oriented, and so much of a
Buddhist practice seems to be about getting away from the senses.
I often feel I revel in the senses because they fuel my writing. I simply love the physical world and I’m extremely attached to my visual sense. In that regard I feel a real conflict, and I worry that I may be falling deeper and deeper into a sense of dependence.\(^\text{32}\)

Even though highly important objections may be raised, from a traditional point of view, to the dualism implicit in Beveridge’s description of Buddhist practice as involving ‘getting away from the senses’—since, for example, many forms of meditation involve not a departure from, but a re-focusing on, sense experience, such as the touch of the breath and other bodily sensations—her disquiet over the way she reacts to and values the senses, in relation to Buddhism, is interesting in the context of my observations here.

The poem ‘Doubt’ (76) exhibits the utopian desire for intellectual, as against sensual, comfort: for the intellect’s dilemma of contingency to be resolved, when Siddhattha says that he will sit ‘until the edges that implicate my doubt—faultlessly deliver some absolutes.’ In ‘Benares’ (91), the intellect similarly projects a transcendence conceived on its own terms, as Siddhattha searches for what he calls ‘my implicate law’. In this poem, the repetition and rhyme create the sense of an endlessly recurring longing, perennially part of the human spirit, for which the musicality of its expression is the real consolation. In ‘Ganges’ (97), this music seems almost to turn Siddhattha’s story into something reminiscent of Bollywood, when he is given the line ‘But you know me, I can’t agree. Yet, vis a vis / …’ The push towards transcendence seems to wilt, here, into self-deprecating humour.\(^\text{33}\)

When Siddhattha’s uncertainty is given direct expression, in ‘In the Forest’ (95–6): ‘O, I don’t know / if I’ll ever wake, changed, transformed, / able to lift on viridescent wings’, the senses and spatiality are the dominant conditioners of the image of transcendence as one of ascendance, accompanied by the intensely visual ‘viridescence’. The result is a perhaps over-familiar image, recalling many ugly-grub-to-beautiful-butterfly motifs. We also seem to be in the presence of a wistful sentimentality, rather than moral confidence, when Siddhattha
vows to sit until ‘the nests of all birds / are given gifts by the cuckoo.’
(‘Ficus Religiosa’, 101)

Finally, later in ‘In the Forest’, Siddhattha expresses his experience of an intimation of transcendence, when he says that he feels his ‘mind enter / a vast space in which everything / connects.’ This is, again, an image of the intellect’s dream of perfect coherence. And yet its expression is conspicuously abstract and formulaic, perfunctory here almost to the point of caricature. The poetry appears merely to be going through the motions. This seems echoed in the lines’ aural quality: the first two enjambed beats of the line beginning with the word ‘connects’, seem to enact a twofold mechanical connecting: ker-clunk. The effect is that a strange disconnect is created, between the notion of ‘everything’ somehow coming awesomely together in a cosmic unity, and this incongruously banal structural event.

Concluding Remarks

My argument has been, then, that in the representation of Sidhattha’s journey found in ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’, certain philosophical, artistic, and personal orientations have played a part in its construction such that the reader’s experience may well be quite at odds with that which would be gained from traditional versions. The reader, that is, may feel that they have encountered, in Beveridge’s Siddhattha thus recast, a figure who bodies forth the ineluctable suffering of the human condition, and thus the perennial elusiveness and implausibility of transcendence, rather than one who embodies the promise and indeed successful realisation of transcendence. Since Siddhattha is a figure who focuses these fundamental issues of the limits and possibilities of human consciousness, and the nature of suffering, such a transposition of his journey and import may be viewed as very significant.

It is perhaps prudent to say, however, in these times of literalism, and its off-spring, religious fanaticism, that an idea of ‘heresy’ has nothing to do with the analysis I have been undertaking here. This
paper has not drawn upon a ‘Buddhist’ perspective, for example, in
the religious sense: it has drawn only upon the meditative tradition,
which eschews dogma. A writer should be at liberty to adopt any
persona, but the critic is also at liberty to comment on the result.

I have not proposed, either, that the two cultures, the literary-
imaginative, and the buddhistic-meditative, are necessarily opposed
or in conflict, or that the imagination and samadhi are thus. My claim
has been that they are, in important respects, different. The particular
insights into human nature which Beveridge’s sequence may contain,
therefore, will be valid on their own, imaginative terms, and a
valuable part of the spectrum of understanding, of which meditative
insight forms another part.

Notes

1 This article is based on a paper given at the conference ‘Refashioning
Myth. Poetic Transformations and Metamorphoses’, held at the
University of Melbourne, October 2–3, 2008.
2 The literature on this subject is now extensive. Two perhaps better
known examples with regard to the imagination and samadhi
respectively are Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and
its Challenge to Western Thought, New York: Basic Books, 1999, by
George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, and Zen and the Brain: Toward an
Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness, Cambridge: MIT Press,
4 The tradition lists twenty-seven other Buddhas, of which Siddhattha is
the most recent.
6 ‘Discordant Tones: Judith Beveridge’s Wolf Notes,’ Australian Women’s
7 Descriptions of the meditative process are found throughout the many
texts of the Pali Canon. One sutta, or discourse, where the subject is
substantially treated is the Mahasatipatthana Sutta.
8 A traditional textual reference for this process would be the descriptions
of Conditioned Arising, one of which is to be found in Nanamoli (1992)
p. 25.
University Press, p. 218.
Mike Heald

12 *Encounter*, 2006.
13 *Encounter*, 2006.
14 *Encounter*, 2006.
15 The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* is the main primary reference for this distinction, but it is dealt with in numerous other parts of the *Tipitaka*. One commentarial reference among very many is *The Importance of Vedana and Sampajanna*, Igatpuri, Vipassana Research Institute, 2003.
17 Paul Williams summarises this situation by noting that Siddhattha, at his birth, was ‘already a supremely advanced Buddha-to-be (Sanskrit: bodhisattva; Pali: bodhisatta). The life story of the Buddha shows a quite superior (albeit still human) being…’. See Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe: *Buddhist Thought. A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 27.
22 *Encounter*, 2006.
23 *Encounter*, 2006.
33 Humour is not alien to traditional texts, but tends to occur in different forms and contexts. A very interesting discussion of this can be found in Richard F. Gombrich’s *How Buddhism Began. The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, London, Athlone Press, 1996; in particular the chapter ‘Metaphor, Allegory, Satire’.
To reach the church still open at four a.m.,
you’ll have to pass through the bloodiest place on earth,
the Bogo meat market in San Pablo City.
Wade through in your rubber boots, how much
can you stand to stop, flick the tiny boats
of fats and flesh in your toes? Be fearless
as the Master from Galilee. Walk
without staggering like a drunkard
on this scarlet sea through the storms of smells,
smear of skin, scales, hooks and bones,
the glassy eyes, gasps before gagging
on the good ghost. Death comes a-slashing;
a finger holds up; the clawing mutes
are cleaved on the block.

In true nature economy, nothing is wasted.
Fish heads on ice are salted dry in basins,
a hog’s head—eyes gouged out, and teeth filed—
spread spiritless on a banana leaf. Hoof, feet, ear,
rib, tail, tongue, tentacles—each weighed, priced
for what it’s worth to the disparate taste
of a higher feeding hierarchy.
Without sinking, tread gently in this torrent
of bloody engagements with that self-command
that’ll fix fishmongers to abide by your word,
thieves to cower before you. It’s as though,
for the price of worship, you must lay down
your sacrifice of pride at the slaughtering
altar where Saint Peter presides

Liturgy of The Hours

Rhodora Penaranda
just beyond the fence.
Finally you come to the place, shadows of roots
thick between stone walls, name the thing you’ve come for,
but offer only vexation, served-up Job-like.
On the frosted window, the blue aureole
of an acanthus vine brims with fruits,
goblets of wine. The leaves curl
going forth from its cross to fill the world.
To think that this image will outlast us all!
Might not this tree of life wind round this barren heart,
even crack it open, send forth a shoot?
Imagination gave us our art, enlarged
our desires, our sense of incompleteness.
The indefinable knots complicate evermore.

But there’s the silence too,
like this, which composes the mind,
settles my Byzantine bearings among
this foliage. Grace flows with life’s speed,
even as St John—of soft and ductile gold
on the old iron doors, his head swoon
on a silver platter—is served up to me

by an unknown hand.
Editors’ note
In *Westerly* 1, 1965, the editors announced ‘the establishment of an annual prize, the Patricia Hackett Prize of one hundred guineas to be awarded “to the writer of the contribution which in the opinion of the Editorial Board of *Westerly* is the best original creative contribution published in an issue of *Westerly* for the previous year”’ (p. 6). The prize was to be awarded from ‘a sum of money…presented to the University to form an endowment for a prize in memory of Miss Patricia Hackett’ (p. 8). The prize has been awarded annually since then from that endowment, and although its value has increased the spirit of the award remains unchanged. With the announcement in this *Westerly* of the 2009 Patricia Hackett prize-winner it seems timely to review the life of the woman in whose memory this award was established.

An engaging way to gain an appreciation of the woman who was Patricia Hackett is to read her volume of poetry, *These Little Things* (1938). Many of her values and attitudes about life are discernible in its 42 poems. They include musings on physical and emotional
pain, falling in love, death of a loved one, self-esteem, workaholics, sexual politics and many other timeless topics, along with a sequence of eleven poems proclaiming her enduring love affair with the Solomon Islands. The meticulous taste and care that is evident in the presentation of this book also says more about its author than any biographer could tell. It is a book that is difficult to obtain (only 200 copies were printed) but the search is worthwhile. Also included are five drawings by Rex Wood, a South Australian painter and printmaker, who was little known when the book was published.  

While Patricia Hackett wrote poetry, her principal focus in the arts was on theatre and drama and this coincided with a busy career as a lawyer. Born in Perth in 1908, she was the daughter of Sir John Winthrop Hackett, proprietor and editor of *The West Australian* newspaper and principal benefactor of the University of Western Australia, and Deborah Vernon Drake-Brockman. After her father died in 1916, her mother married the prominent South Australian lawyer and politician, Sir Frank Beaumont Moulden, and moved with her children to Adelaide. Hackett’s study for a law degree had a shaky start at the University of Adelaide when she was dismissed, in 1925, for sitting her sister’s Latin examination. After recovering from this setback she successfully completed her studies in London and was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple in 1930 and admitted to the South Australian Bar in the same year. Hackett made her theatrical debut two years later with Adelaide’s Repertory Theatre, and scarcely two years after that, in 1934, she opened her own 150-seat theatre, the Torch, in Adelaide’s Claridge Arcade. Her first production was Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, a play that was then still widely banned. The new impresario favoured anti-naturalistic, physically stylised productions and this did not sit well with some of Adelaide’s conservative theatregoers and critics.

Two encounters between Hackett and critics attracted considerable publicity. The first occurred in September 1934 shortly after the Torch
opened. When Sidney Downer, a Cambridge-educated journalist who worked as a parliamentary reporter and theatre critic for The Advertiser newspaper, panned Hackett’s staging of Geza Silberer’s Caprice, she hit back by seeking him out at Parliament House and flinging a bottle of ink over him. Downer, who was also a member of the family that owned The Advertiser, brought charges against her for assault. In her defence, Hackett claimed that she had simply used the same weapon (ink) that had been used against her. She received a hefty fine, considering relative money values then and now. The second incident involved Max Harris, Adelaide’s youthful avant-garde poet, proponent of modernism and co-publisher of Angry Penguins. In 1944, just days after the Ern Malley literary hoax had made Harris a world-wide laughing stock for publishing the ‘Malley’ poems in Angry Penguins, another mighty blow fell upon him as a result of a critical attack he launched on Patricia Hackett in the University of Adelaide’s student newspaper, On Dit. The Harris attack was centred on Hackett’s involvement with a series of plays for the University’s Theatre Guild and, in particular, her performance in Guild the Mask Again. It was a scathing piece and some injudicious use of language landed Harris in serious trouble when Hackett threatened a libel action. Harris at first pleaded poor proofing and typesetting, but Hackett rejected this and issued a writ for libel. Facing possible financial ruin, Harris agreed to publish a public apology in newspapers designated by Hackett in which he admitted that he had attempted to shield himself from the consequences of his actions by claiming printing errors. Hackett then discontinued the libel action and declined to accept damages.

The outbreak of World War II established new priorities for Patricia Hackett when she assumed responsibility for caring for her sister Verna’s three children who had been sent to Australia from England for safety. To accommodate them she purchased a disused house in the Adelaide suburb of Hackney, at 69 Hackney Road, that had been owned by Wilhelm Nitschke, a prominent Adelaide identity who had established South Australia’s first distillery, operating from adjacent...
premises. There was a large cellar below the house that had been used to store wine and after refurbishment of the property over a number of years, this below ground area became home for Patricia Hackett’s second Torch Theatre, in 1952. Critics were banned from attending performances at the new 50-seat theatre. Actors appearing in the various productions included the poet and Professor of English at the University of Adelaide, Charles Jury, and the young lawyer and future Premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, who shared her law chambers from 1952. Hedley Cullen, who lit the theatre and served as its official photographer has recorded an account of Hackett’s working methods. According to Cullen, recorded music or sound effects were never used. When music was required, ‘live’ musicians provided it and sound effects were created manually. Hackett designed and painted all of the scenery and made or supplied costumes from a vast collection of period garments she had accumulated, including authentic Chinese costumes. There was no
prompting and if an actor got into a mess, he or she had to get out of it one way or another. Productions recalled by Cullen included *The Motherly and Auspicious*, *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, *The Sons of David*, *The Gioconda Smile*, *Spring in Laos*, *Medea*, *Lord of Three Worlds*, *The Old Ladies*, *And So to Bed* and *Tobacco Road*. The second Torch theatre staged about four productions a year from 1952 until 1958 when its program was wound down.

Patricia Hackett’s involvement with the Solomon Islands began in 1936 when she was invited to perform some legal work in Tulagi. This led to the forging of a strong emotional link with the natural beauty of the Solomons and her decision to take out a 99-year lease of the small island of M’bangi in Tulagi Harbour. For the next six years she spent up to four months on M’bangi each year, until forced to evacuate the island with minutes to spare by the Japanese invasion in
April 1942. Some of the fiercest battles of the Pacific war were fought in the Solomons and Hackett never saw ‘her’ island again. Patricia Hackett died in August 1963 after some years of ill health.  

Notes

1 Patricia Hackett, *These Little Things* (Hunkin, Ellis & King Ltd., Adelaide, 1938).
5 Ibid. (Peoples; Atkinson); Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993), pp. 167–171; Max Harris, ‘East Lynne at Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or Plays at the Hut,’ *On Dit*, June 30, 1944, p. 2; Max Harris, ‘Apology by Max Harris,’ *On Dit*, 21 July, 1944, p. 3.
7 Peoples, ‘Hackett, Patricia (1908–1963); Atkinson, Grande Dame.
9 Atkinson, Grande Dame.
10 Ibid.
We set out at dusk, down to the dock, heavy with line and tackle and lures. Our targets are the squid that clump like worshippers at the base of the jetty. Every year they can be counted on to throw themselves onto a subtle jag in a surge of fanaticism; the urge to eat.

While the others set up the battery lamp I take my rod to the edge of the dock and peer down into the black of water and weed, looking for the bright patches that spell sand, squid, good fishing. There is nothing to see, no light to see it in—but then squidding’s a night ritual. (You trust to luck.)

We settle in for the long, dark shift. The click and whirr of a released reel, the distant splash as a lure dives in, grinning with its metal tail. Every so often a pulse of excitement as the line goes tense, then a frustrated jerk of the hands to break out of the weed and hurry the line in.
Soon we’ve got one, struggling against the shock of being trapped, of prey turned vicious. It comes in close beneath the water like a wraith, a poor drowned ghost in floating white shift, then snapped up into the lamplight, convulsing in a shit of ink that dribbles down its tentacles. Smacked on the concrete it writhes, a hopeless grind, a dancer without gravity.
An Interview with Antonio Casella
‘On leased land’: The Sensualist by Antonio Casella

Giovanni Messina

Introduction
Antonio Casella was born in Sicily in 1944. In 1959, his family migrated to Western Australia. Unable to speak English, he spent five years apprenticed in an iron foundry before working in the asbestos mines at Wittenoom. He returned to Perth and attended night-classes whilst working as a house-painter during the day. In 1970, at the age of 25, he enrolled at the University of Western Australia, where he studied English literature and European languages. From 1974 he worked for a number of years as a secondary school teacher.

Casella’s literary works include the satire Southfalia (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1980), and The Sensualist (Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), a novel centred on the lives of Italo-Australians living in Perth, written with the assistance of a Literature Board grant in 1988. Most recently, Casella completed An Olive Branch for Sante (2006), as part of the attainment of his PhD in Creative Writing at Murdoch University. An extract of this work (when still in progress) was published in Westerly in 2005 (November, vol. 50, pp. 76–81).

In the following interview, Giovanni Messina, a PhD student in Catania, Sicily, who is carrying out research on Sicilian ethnic minority
writing (written in English) in Australia, revisits *The Sensualist*, noticing in the work postcolonial concerns that eluded the novel’s early reception. It is useful to include Messina’s characterisation of *The Sensualist* as a prelude to his interview with the author, which was conducted at the University of Catania in May 2009.

‘In *The Sensualist*, a well-off builder, Nick—defined as a “top dog” by Australians and a “kangaroo” by Italians (already a diasporic subject, even though he is not aware of it yet)—is married to an Anglo-Australian woman and has two children, Nella and John. The novel is divided into five parts (following the classical Greek drama division) and develops in three days—from Friday to Sunday—recalling Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. In fact, at the age of fifty-four, Nick experiences the ‘death’ of his present identity and the uncanny return of his past through ghosts and projections of his mind. The projection of a pair of black trousers is the uncanny element through which the truths of the past (that his uncle Saru is his biological
father and that his grandfather shot his mother) come back. However, these truths bring about his awareness that he is a foreigner living “on leased land”; that is, in a liminal space.

Joyce, who moved to Perth after getting married to Nick, is another ‘migrant’ character in the sense that she feels displaced away from the place she grew up as a child. Through dreams and memories, she is taken back to the north-west of Western Australia, depicted as a vast, alien world feared by many white inhabitants. Joyce always wishes to be somewhere else, she feels eternally displaced like her parents do when living on the station at Binji Cross (north-east of Geraldton).

Two major aspects of the novel should be highlighted: firstly, Nick’s childhood experience is just a symbol of the past. In other words, he has not rejected the past because of his trauma—at least not consciously, that we know—but because of the Australian policy of assimilation which asked immigrants to cancel their ethnic identity and become completely new ‘Australian’ subjects. Secondly, immigrants’ feelings of displacement mirror those experienced by Anglo-Australians (Joyce and her parents) by virtue of the elisions in the foundation myth of colonial settlement (of which the life on the Binji Cross station is a symbol). In fact, Joyce’s parents—especially her mother—feel as if they were foreigners living on a land which is not really theirs. This bastard complex (Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), is literalised by the baby which Joyce’s mother bears to an Aboriginal man, and which she has to renounce.’

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‘It’s your home, the birthplace of your children and yet you feel a foreigner, as if you lived on leased land, a land you can never own, can’t entirely trust and maybe fear to know too intimately. He worked in the bush, cleared thousands of acres, thought nothing of it.’ (Casella, 1991, p. 297)
Let’s start with your writing style. I know that you have been influenced by, among many other writers, James Joyce. You say—I’m quoting from your critical study The Italian Diaspora in Australia—that «imitators too have their own way of imitating». What is your way of imitating James Joyce’s writing style in The Sensualist?

Well, to start from the end, the final section of The Sensualist is a monologue spoken by Nella, one of the main characters. In writing that section I was influenced by Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of Ulysses. The narrative style of The Sensualist also owes something to Joyce. It’s not stream of consciousness though, for which Joyce is justly famous, and which gives his work such psychological intensity. In The Sensualist I employ a ‘restricted’ point of view, that is to say that the perspective the reader is given is confined to that of the three characters: Joyce, Nick and Steve, who narrate the story in turns. Even though two of them narrate in the third person, the reader is not allowed an omniscient, all-seeing perspective but a closed-circuit view, limited to how that particular character apprehends his/her world.

You say that we have the points of view of these three characters, but while Nick and Joyce use the third person, Steve narrates in the first person, and yet he keeps the reader at a distance.

That’s true, even though Steve narrates in the first person, he is actually the least accessible of the three characters. We get closer to Nick and
to Joyce, at least I think we do. Steve, on the contrary, manages to keep his distance. This may have something to do with the fact that his view is relatively superficial. He just looks at the surface reality and has no inclination to get beyond that. This may also be a ploy, on his part, to avoid recognising his latent homosexuality. Nick too shows faint signs of homosexual latency, but he could never acknowledge it, least of all to himself. Nick uses sexuality as an instrument of power and control, to get what he wants from his wife, his mistress and Steve.

*In The Sensualist the reader discovers the characters’ pasts through revelations. What connection is there with Joyce’s ‘epiphany’?*

I wasn’t consciously thinking of James Joyce’s epiphanies when writing certain scenes. Most characters in *The Sensualist* live in denial of their true self. Therefore you can argue that part of their survival kit is the avoidance of self-illuminating epiphanies, settling instead for the comfort of pretense, self-delusion and oblivion. In the book’s journey Nick and his wife separately begin to uncover long-buried incidents. The process strips them of those pretenses layer by layer, and leaves them ‘naked’. So each memory uncovered is not so much an illumination of life, but a form of self-divesting that leads to a raw, but truer vision of self.

*For example?*

For example, Nick’s realisation that his childhood experiences back in Sicily constituted a more authentic reality than the present. Or his wife, who is more introspective and to some extent more cynical than Nick, arriving at the shocking realisation that the only possible life for her is through Nick. When he dies, much of the life-force drains out of her as well.
The Sensualist contains a mixture of forms: poetry, fiction and drama. Although it is written in prose, it was first conceived as a play. Why did you change your mind and why did you choose to write one scene as a piece of drama, complete with stage directions?

That’s true, I had initially intended to write a play, but once I began writing I found the novel form better suited to the kind of story I had in mind. That scene you refer to, on the other hand, just seemed to work better as a self-contained theatrical interlude. For me it works, but others might disagree.

Also in the way that Florence and Harold speak and judge the guests at the party, they are not unlike a Greek chorus...

Yes, that was a deliberate piece of ‘staging’. The two of them sit up on the balcony and look down on the guests in the garden, who are mostly migrants, in a superior, condescending way. Their function is similar to the way a chorus is used in a Greek play in that they comment in a critical, judgemental way on what goes on in the garden. They are the voice of ‘mainstream Australia’, if you like.

The device is also meant to invite the reader to consider the relationship between the migrants and the established Australians. Flo’ and Harold are Anglo-Saxon Australians and university-educated. They represent the dominant race, who feel socially and intellectually superior to the people they are looking down upon (in both senses of the word). Hence each of the three elements: the physical positioning, the attitudes that Flo’ and Harold display, and the language they use, invites the reader to reflect upon the relationship of power that existed between migrants and the established middle class, who, ironically, were themselves descendants of former migrants and colonisers.

In your critical study you also say that ‘writers write themselves […] in their books’. What experiences in The Sensualist are based on your own life, if any?
Lots, but I’m not sure you want to hear about them. I could tell you, in any case, that my private life was in turmoil at that time, as my marriage was breaking up. Let’s just say that the problematic relationship that Nick and his wife have, reflected some of the unhappy stuff that was going on in my life in that period.

*Would you consider the writing process, at least in your case, as a way of healing, a sort of therapy, for the dilemma of the ‘here’ and ‘there’ lived out by the diasporic subject?*

Yes, particularly in *The Sensualist*. Writing is many things, among them, a kind of therapy, a purging of your innermost fears. That’s not to say that a person living in a Diaspora has to write in order to be able to survive because, obviously, a lot of people don’t write. But certainly, writing is one of the channels that allows you to air certain views and purge certain toxic feelings, if nothing else because the writing process tends to bring them to the surface and perhaps sublimates them.

I’m very proud of my Italian heritage and of the fact that I was born in Sicily. My origins are very important to me. But within the context of everyday living I don’t feel that I’m being—certainly not today—victimised. So, to some extent, living in a Diaspora suits me, I feel comfortable in it. Writing for me is not a means of escaping a difficult reality. But it certainly allows me to give form to those inner fears, conflicts and experiences which have marked my life.

Starting with *The Sensualist* and subsequently, I’ve returned to that theme of people living simultaneously ‘here’, as in the physical space they inhabit, and ‘elsewhere’, in the world of memory and dreams. That for me is the state of living in a Diaspora.

*What is the function of the gothic elements of the novel, such as ghosts, shadows, voices?*

I didn’t aim for a gothic element in the novel or considered that there was one. Again, it’s interesting that you should see that aspect. I guess
any work that deals with buried memories, guilt and inner fears is bound to have shadows, voices and ghosts, for instance, *Hamlet* and *Wuthering Heights*.

As far as nostalgia is concerned, many late twentieth-century critics describe it as connoting a mistake or an evasion because it meanders away from the truthful, the historical or the precise. Isn’t nostalgia, at least from this point of view, a longing for a place that exists only in one’s memory?

That’s absolutely so, in my case at least. When we recreate the past, and the incidents we experienced a long time ago, we give them different nuances, new colours, fresh smells...so that the past becomes ours again. In other words, we don’t just recall things, we recreate them. In this process we take ownership of our past, transforming it into a more significant reality than the one we live everyday, which can often seem monotonous, empty of meaning and therefore less real. Even when there is a purpose in our actions, like planning a project, we are not inclined to find, or seek, meaning in those actions. The physical process of completing the action becomes the purpose. The past, on the other hand, is completed in itself but, paradoxically, more amenable to being reshaped, reflected upon and hence, to give meaning to our present reality.

*If a migrant identifies with a past which doesn’t exist any more isn’t his/her identity a sort of mimicry?*

I think a lot of literature, drama in particular, is built around characters who are self-delusional, living a false life, in some cases inhabiting an accommodated virtual reality. On the one hand, the landscape that we imagine, that we describe, that we attach ourselves to, is most likely very different from the landscape that existed then, and from the one which exists now. So that the migrant in remembering relives an illusion. On the other hand, who is to say
that the present is not an illusion? Because what you see and what I see are different things and yet we live this same moment together. What we call reality is really a personal interpretation, coloured by such elusive effects as mood, past experiences, cultural codes and so forth. So I don’t think that the present reality is any less constructed than the past.

_Nostalgia is interpreted from many different perspectives. Amelia De Falco (2004), for example, distinguishes between ‘experiential’ and ‘non-experiential’ nostalgia, depending on whether a migrant has lived in the homeland or not, such as second generation migrants. Do you agree with this distinction and how far does it go?_

Well, second and third generation migrants get to know about their heritage through the stories they hear from others, usually the parents. So their information is second-hand. But that doesn’t mean the effect is not as powerful as the experience lived first-hand. Again, if the recipient of those stories, the child of migrants, then applies his or her imagination to it, his or her dreams...he recreates that experience all anew and appropriates it. The result can be just as powerful.

I have known second-generation and third-generation Italo-Australians who have never been to Italy but long for it as much as their parents. In most cases these children and grandchildren of migrants cannot speak the language, but they still have a very strong desire to visit the land of their cultural origins. My two daughters, who are visiting Sicily with me, are a case in point. They were born in Australia of an Anglo-Australian mother, they speak no Italian, and yet they have had a burning desire to be acquainted with the land of my, and their, ancestors. That’s because when they were young children I used to speak to them about the landscape and about certain events. So they experienced Sicily second-hand, through my stories. For them those stories were a powerful inducement to come and experience the place for themselves.
Would you agree that Nick’s nostalgia for the past might be interpreted as a reaction against the Australian policy of assimilation, which he had fully embraced when he arrived in Australia, as a boy migrant?

In opting for assimilation Nick buried much of his past. Even his choice to marry a local girl can be interpreted as an act of rejection of his roots. The journey of the book is one of return to those roots. However, I don’t think he is consciously attempting to bring back the past. If anything the past forces itself upon him, advancing inexorably as the world he has believed in, and worked for all his adult life, begins to collapse all around him. He retreats in his memories and seeks refuge into the world of his childhood back in Sicily, which suddenly appears to him to be more real and more dependable than the crumbling edifice of his present reality.

Does the novel construct an opposition between past and present?

Not overtly. If the reader finds such a construct in the novel, that’s his/her privilege. If a book has managed to give form to some of the ideas that the reader has brought to it, or even to add to those ideas, then the book has done its job.

When speaking of nostalgia we have to speak of the relationship between migration and territory. What does it mean for you?

It’s a very good question and quite central to The Sensualist. As Nick begins to remember, it’s not so much the people that he identifies with but the landscape. Even when he recalls his beloved Nonno, the old man appears more like an iconic figure of that world. The overwhelming imagery that characterises the novel is that of the land and its power to capture and possess us. This is not simply the call of the land, it’s the recall of a world in which Nick felt safe, and which more authentically reflected whom he felt himself to be, even after an absence of some fifty years.
The same goes for me. I’ve come back to Sicily time and time again, not so much to see relatives, but to re-live an elusive experience, to breathe in the air, to smell the earth and hear the noises. I just want to take in that indefinable atmosphere which, in a visceral way speaks to me of identity, of who I am. That’s not to say that my ties with Australia are not equally strong. Both of my parents are buried in Australia, my children were born in Australia, so my family attachments are in Australia. And yet, my desire to return has not diminished.

So it would appear that I have an incurable case of nostalgia that makes me want to reconnect with the physical landscape. On another level, of course, I want to return to the emotional landscape of dreams and memory. Just like Nick Amedeo I keep wanting to return to a world reconstructed in my imagination. In one sense I am chasing an illusion. And yet, just as the mind realizes that such a remembered world never existed, the heart believes in it with utter conviction. And there we have it, the classic diasporic condition: opposite realities co-existing simultaneously, despite the contradictions.

Migration is associated with the idea of mobility. In The Sensualist Joyce is often described looking out from windows. They are the only connection between two spaces: the inside of her house and the outside world which represents her freedom. But as soon as she crosses that threshold, I quote from your novel, ‘it does not take long for the outside to become the inside, for new walls to go up, for new windows to frame the space and shut [her] in again’.

Well, the thing about Joyce is that she’s trapped. It’s a trap of her own making and that’s not unusual. If the outside represents, as you quite rightly put it, freedom, it also represents the unknown, the possibility of having to confront one’s demons. Joyce fears the state of being free, she does not believe herself capable of coping with freedom, so she latches on to a strong, decisive, uncomplicated man (or so she believes) like Nick. She desires his control because she doubts her
ability to control herself. But when, thirty years later, Nick’s world proves to be just as fragile and vulnerable as hers, she can do nothing to rescue him. She simply lets go of him.

There is a strong self-destructive undercurrent in the novel. Joyce’s mother self-destructs (but not before attempting an escape, both literal and metaphorical, by running away with an Aboriginal man). Joyce too prefers the inside to the outside, self-incarceration to freedom, immobility to mobility. Even though at the beginning of the novel she talks about leaving Nick and escaping to Melbourne, we know that her attempt will be just as futile as her mother’s a generation before.

And, paradoxically, she gains a sense of freedom at the end of the novel when she is paralysed. It’s as if physical mobility corresponded to an internal immobility and vice versa.

That’s a very good point. For a personality like Joyce’s paralysis represents a release. Now she doesn’t have to take decisions or make choices. Obviously her immobility is also a metaphor for her inability to contend with true emotions. Several times over the three days of crisis, she could have come to the rescue of her husband but she does not, and perhaps cannot. On that last morning after the party, when he asks her whether she thinks he should postpone the fishing trip with his son, he really wants her to say, ‘don’t go’. At this point of extreme vulnerability he needs her warmth and protection. Instead she tells him to go.

And so she sends him to his death…

In a way. By saying ‘you go’, she’s condemned him. But in another sense she has no choice. She married Nick for his strengths, for his certainties, to compensate for her uncertainties. Now he is in deep existential crisis, he has allowed himself to be visited by the demons of his past and doesn’t know who he is any more. This is not the Nick she married. This Nick is of little use to her or to himself.
Can this relationship between mobility and immobility be a metaphor for Nick’s ‘Australian’ life, so that he is perceived as free only after his death when Joyce sees him on a hill which recalls the Sicilian hills of his childhood?

The interfacing of the relationship that exists between Nick and his wife, with stillness and mobility, is certainly an interesting one. Joyce’s stillness—which is only a perceived stillness, because it hides inner turmoil—does seem to contrast with the restless mobility of her husband.

You can likewise argue that Nick’s constant ‘mobility’ is his way of running away from unresolved conflicts with his host society, with himself and, more importantly, with his past. At the opening of the book we find a character who has all but rejected his past. He has buried Nicola Amedeo and what has surfaced is a hard-drinking, fornicating, arrogant man caught in a spiral of self destruction.

Joyce’s conflicts are, if anything, even more deep-seated. Her way of coping is to take refuge in self-negation, passivity and self-destruction. (And/or destruction of her marriage). Her stillness, her muted despair, is a form of nihilism. Nick’s mobility too is on a fast track to self-destruction. First he takes a mental journey back to his childhood, while the pig roasts, then, significantly, he meets his death on a boat, whilst wrestling with his son.

And migration, which is connected with mobility, can be a sort of mobility towards a better life but sometimes can become a kind of immobility and stillness if we reject our past.

Stillness—understood as a state of contemplation of our place in the present and of our past—helps to make us richer human beings culturally and emotionally. On the other hand, mobility—in the sense of change, striving and goal-setting—is equally important in life’s journey. Too much stillness—that is, introspection and living in the past—and we risk remaining blocked, trapped by memories.
Like Oreste Ancelli?

Like Oreste Ancelli, exactly.²

I would like to ask you about the second generation Sicilian migrant writer Venero Armanno whose novel The Volcano you have analysed. Are there any similarities in the way you both deal with Sicilian migration?

I think both novels reflect our respective migrant experiences. Armanno was born in Australia and brought up in a Sicilian migrant household. He must have received his Italian identity (and love for Italian culture) second-hand, through the stories he was told, and the behaviour he observed around him.

I was born in Sicily and migrated to Australia at age fifteen. My experiences were first-hand, but, due to my long absence from my birth place, those experiences have been distilled by time and oblivion.

Armanno, quite wisely relies more on research, on his background readings, on formal mythologies about Sicily. His Sicily is perhaps more of a cultural concept, mine is memory filtered through time and distance. I wanted to capture a lost world. Armanno, I think, creates his own Sicily. I would suggest that neither are recognizable as the Sicily of today. But then, I wasn’t really interested in contemporary Sicily. The Sicily of The Sensualist isn’t even the Sicily of my childhood in the fifties, it’s the Sicily of my grandfather, whom I never met because he died before I was born.

Armanno’s novel is more literary, at least I think so, mine is more personal. His spans a vast landscape which to some extent attempts to bridge Sicily and Australia. My novel, I think, keeps the two worlds quite separate and focused, and relies more on contrast than on bridging. The Volcano is more political than The Sensualist. Armanno tackles the theme of migration overtly, he deals with discrimination quite extensively, while my book hardly mentions discrimination. The preoccupations of my characters are more existential in nature.
Bibliography


Notes

1 This is an edited transcript of the original interview. I would like to thank Mr Antonio Casella for reviewing it after my editing.

2 Oreste Ancelli is the kind of immigrant nostalgically longing to his mother country and living trapped into the past. He sees Nick as a someone who betrays his past and calls him ‘a kangaroo’ (Casella, 1991, p. 41) meaning, in this case, someone who has been assimilated to the new country.
1. The Windswept Cliff of Gender

I swayed for a while at its edge, breasts swaddled like patients beneath the institution of a navvy’s uniform.

Felt the flesh of my tongue stinging… with what? Salt air? The irresistible tickle of an old sailor’s oath?

I boarded the boat at Touloun as a man. Announced myself throat-deep in the subterfuge as one of the officers’ sons.

Then, all too soon, the conceit was done, the harbour cleared. Ambition shrank back beneath the plain cloth of petticoats.

Laced into my corset again, I realised I had learned two lessons. The first: that the body is more self-contained than the mind, adrift, indifferent to gender, or even species. What drives it is weather: the subterranean summer it would maintain at all costs,

pumping the warm breeze of blood from port to port.
And my second enlightenment?
That God preferred my dissident garb.
He’d been a shark, circling, when the scent of new male

was on me. His message clear:
there is no such thing as too many

martryrs-in-the-making
when a ship sets South for savage islands.

But who’s voice was it that whispered
those uppercase words—Sacrifice and Redemption—
man-to-man in my ears?

God dressed as the Devil?
    The Devil dressed as God?
Even Moses hedged his bets.

Crafted our first sunset at sea
by igniting his own burning bush on the horizon.

2. Nautical Itch

Louis’ itch would be familiar to many a nautical wife.
It comes from too many visits to the brothel

of his wanderlust. He wants no more
than any boy does: to play warships on a basined sea,
cleave the waves, his cannons constantly prepared to boom.

I have called this syndrome: Bludgeoning Naivety.
    (Look no further than Napoleon for the dryland template).

But the ocean does not exist to be conquered.
It is a mirror. In the middle of which is a bandaged heart.
Should the sea’s length and breadth be unravelled, our wounds would be revealed.

Which does not preclude the masculine urge to take on suffering: yaw to yaw and pitch to pitch.

3. A Polarised Look at Romance

Terrestrial magnetism. Pronounced quickly, it sounds like an explanation for attraction between the sexes. So who’s to blame if the intensity of its resultant force varies at certain parts of the day, different places on earth. Louis’ devotion to science ebbs and flows as he peers through the magnifier of each singular task. Runs a finger across the small, cool palm of his looking glass lens as though to wipe off the smear of our voyage’s hidden agenda.

There, I’ve said it.
There is a whiff of planned self-abuse in this trip.

As though we have been organised to visit a circus, with the sole intention of gawking at the bearded lady.

The rigging swarms with tropical pollens. Louis unfolds his charts with whip-crack efficiency.

The surgeons Quoy and Guimard prepare their traps, ready their formaldehyde.
Gaudichard, the botanist, clears his nose of snuff and textbook dust so that he may stop and sniff the South Pacific roses.

All is activity, which is not the same as moral purpose.

The Minister for the Interior knows as well as we do that the hemispheric girth of the planet has already been measured by that sea-going tailor, Baudin.

He has pronounced it amiable to expansion and contraction.

Our directions, so far as I can tell: to shove the hand of our ship down the trouser front of this fertile new territory,

test the heft and lightness of the low-hung jewels therein.

Calibrate whether they would be inclined to flinch or swell in the capturing palm. To wit (and sotto vocce),

a suitable site for a French penitentiary. And reportage on British military strength in New South Wales.

No wonder Louis paces at night. The titles line up in his head, and none so melodious as ‘Distinguished Explorer’. Masturber. Molester of young colonies.

And part time French chef, as it’s impossible to make a decent jus without boiling up a mess of bones.
4. Statistics

_Uranie_ is 112 feet long, 28 wide and 14 deep.
    She carries two cannons, 125 crew.

Conditions are so cramped that I am forced, when writing letters home to straddle the astronomical equipment.

Although Louis agreed to smuggle me on board, the rest of our all-male contingent are uneasy in their deference.

When I venture on deck, they leave me the port side. Roll their unsavoury songs and swear words of eighteen syllables, like rum barrels, aft, to a spot where thunder beats sly drums of mutiny.

I do not imagine for a moment to be raped nor murdered. But the colour of the sunsets worries me as we near the equator.

Something to do with sowing, and reaping. If it is indeed true that the Good Lord has thrown down islands on the ocean as he throws down seeds in a field, then I draw his attention to an overdue harvest. As far as the eye can see, a crop of wheat is left to rust, each dusk on the water only cleared with the rising of a sickly sickle moon.
5. Headache

Oh the melodies of pain!
The smooth hours arrive like a barbed punch
right between the eyes.

First mate is adamant that I be bled at the heels.
I can only conclude I am a boat

which needs the bungs pulled out at the stern
to be drained of the bilge,

which will in turn
    magically reduce pressure
    on the figurehead at the bow.

6. Inheritance

The old King has died in the Sandwich Islands.
We stand on shore in air
that tumbles like feverish straw.

The hot weather is a turgid novel,
ever progressing beyond a description of itself.
The natives greet us with cocoanuts and a bucking goat.

They smile and smile till their faces turn rictus.
Am I the only one who sees the light steeling
like weapons in their eyes?

Louis chides me for rudeness when I refuse
the palanquin at my beck and call.

But I have seen suckling pigs delivered to the fire
in exactly this way.
Despite my disquiet, I admire the vigour and depth of the natives’ resentfulness. The new King demands that every person, of whatever rank, prostrate themselves as he goes by, regardless of mud, or manure. Who would desire to be the meek, inheriting an earth that must be eaten face down, like swine, one sour mouthful at a time?

7. Custom

It is customary to accept livestock as gifts. Louis has been presented with two young children from Timor. Boy and girl. A breeding pair?

For fear of offence, we have agreed to take the boy. We shall baptise him on board, then drop him off at the first port where I sense he will be dealt with kindly.

Last night, a native concert, where a girl held a violin horizontally. Her fingers were cats’ tongues, licking raspy at the strings.

The women wear barely any clothes, hence no pockets. They use slits in their ears to carry cigars and fishhooks, and are constantly bare breasted, which pleases our men no end.

The crew peer so insistently that it is rare not to see the reflection of a soft mountain
with a flesh-pink peak to conquer
in each male eye.

8. Shipwreck and Eclipse

Shipwrecked at French Bay in the Falklands.
As though our Mother country had found
some slight in our scholarship,

and sent us to the farthest room in the house
for a penance of weeks, and a starvation diet.

We have survived on rabbits. Penguins.
Turtle soup. Once, the reeking blubber
of a stranded whale.

Louis is ill. I have drained a bird of its blood
so that he may drink and be strengthened.

On the 15th March he rises from his bed
to watch an executioner’s hood pull over
the face of the sun.

Impossible not to shiver
superstitiously
under its sentence:

No good can come where a living eye
is closed with a coin of the dead.

9. Home

Astonishing to see on a map just how far science
has taken us
    before propelling us home.
So what of our reckoning?
No new geographical discoveries, but the cages and crates line up.

The abacus tilts by sheer weight in our favour.

25 mammals, 313 birds, 45 reptiles, 164 species of fish, countless shells, 30 skeletons (including that of a Papuan), 1300 insects, 300 plants, 900 rocks.

And as for our casualties?
Seven crew from dysentery. One midshipman who broke a vessel in his chest, and choked, unable to cough up the clot.

A septic wound on my arm (a bite from the pet monkey I was given in Rio de Janeiro).

And a certain slow leak of courage from my heart.

The minister for the Interior has written his report.
The work accomplished on our voyage, he says, is not negligible.

10. On the Outside Looking In

All seems ludicrous to me now: dinner parties and protocols. Women tied into corsets like fermenting sausages. Men powdering their fussy pompadours.

I brood constantly on the cockfights we witnessed in the Marianas.

Those poor creatures, bound to each other’s ankles. And their owners, not content with the destructive potential of beak and claw,
tying small knives to the birds’ heels
so that an opponent
may be killed with a single blow.

I am fearful of where all this striving
for adventure and intensity will lead.

Will it eventually
drive humanity to eclipse itself?

What else would be left,
having searched and plundered every corner

of the earth’s vast pocket
but to turn it inside out
and expose the black lining?

I wake deep in the night,
pushing the glittering band of my wedding ring
around my finger compulsively.

The gesture is not one of faith in light’s
triumph over darkness.

    Just unconscious, habitual turning.
Like a bewildered mouse

who suddenly finds herself
on the outside looking in
to the cage that holds her wheel,

still running around in circles,
for want of a new idea
to deal with an impossible freedom.