Adventurers learn here; but do not venture
Yet from their circular continuous sweep
From start to start. Where going is home-turning
Nothing is lost, what’s won is all to keep.

Randolph Stow
from ‘Merry-Go-Round’
CONTENTS

Editorial 5

POEMS

Fay Zwicky 14
Alec Choate 17
Scott-Patrick Mitchell 19
Flora Smith 31
Roland Leach 33
Kevin Gillam 34
Vivienne Glance 35
Cas Rawlins 53
Josephine Clarke 60
Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers 62
Janet Jackson 64
Jenny de Garis 75
Graham Kershaw 77
Tim Edwards 79
Tim McCabe 94
Mallery Koons 96
Peter Bibby 97
Andrew Taylor 155, 156
Annamaria Weldon 166, 168
Meredi Ortega 169, 170
Paula Jones 180
Dick Alderson 182
Andrew Landsdown 192
Sarah French 196
Contents

Helen Hagemann 197
Sue Clennell 198
Maree Dawes 208
Shane McCauley 210
Daniel Stavely 228

STORIES
Marcella Polain 21
David Hutchison 65
Helena Kadmos 80
Richard Rossiter 98
Sophie Sunderland 157
Amanda Curtin 171
Deborah Hunn 183
Barbara Temperton 199
Georgia Richter 230

ARTICLES
Richard Weller 7
Jo Jones 36
Rachel Robertson 211

PLAY EXTRACT
Reg Cribb 55

RANDOLPH STOW TRIBUTE
Randolph Stow ‘Clichés’ 104
—— ‘Country & Western’ 107
—— ‘Merry-Go-Round’ 109
Gabrielle Carey 110
Tony Hassall 120
Roger Averill 126
Sam Dutton 143
Bruce Bennett 150

Notes on Contributors 239
Westerly: Subscriptions and submissions 246
Subscribe to Westerly 247
Editorial

This second issue of *Westerly* for 2010 has WA writing as its exclusive focus. Richard Weller’s recent book, *Boom Town 2050* (UWA Publishing, 2010) suggested to the editors that while West Australian writers are not reaping the rewards of the current resources boom in WA, their work is nevertheless booming in its own way—vital, committed, and not daunted by the conspicuous lack of financial return. It has been an exciting and illuminating experience to bring the work in this *Westerly* together. Representing as it does a range of forms and voices, some well-known, others new to us, we hope it captures some of the diversity and energy that marks writing in Western Australia.

As we celebrate the vibrant future of West Australian writing, we also recall its rich past. Two eminent and much loved West Australian writers passed away in 2010; Randolph Stow in May and Alec Choate in August. In this *Westerly* we have included a special section to honour Stow’s life and work, including previously unpublished poems, and it will speak for itself. Stow’s sister, Helen McArthur, his agent, Vivien Green and particularly his old friend and fellow WA poet, Bill Grono have been instrumental in bringing this section into being. Our thanks go to them all.

Dennis Haskell, former *Westerly* editor, has described Alec Choate as that rare character in modern literature, a celebratory poet, not afraid to value beauty, that unwelcome guest at the party of modern art, and determined always to praise “the dance of life” (*Schoolgirls 75*). Choate was a migrant from England and loved Western Australia, the place he
named ‘Summerland’, which was also the short name of the anthology of poetry and prose to celebrate WA’s sesquicentenary, for which he was Poetry Editor.

In his long and productive writing life, Alec Choate published seven collections of poetry, beginning with *Gifts Upon the Water* in 1978 and ending with *My Days Were Fauve* in 2002. He was, like Elizabeth Jolley, one of a generation of West Australian writers who found their way to publication through the establishment of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Alec’s awards for poetry included the inaugural Tom Collins Poetry Prize, the Patricia Hackett Prize, the 1986 Western Australian Literary Award for Poetry (the forerunner of the Premier’s Book Awards) for *A Marking of Fire*, and the 1997 Premier’s Book Award for Poetry for his collected war poems, *The Wheels of Hama*. Vale, Alec Choate.

Photo of Alec Choate, kindly provided by his son.
Richard Weller

In 1972 at the conclusion of his book *A Sense of Place*, Professor George Seddon warned that ‘some planners’ were contemplating the possibility of ten million people settling on the Swan Coastal Plain by 2072. Underpinned by a scientific and an aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, Seddon urged Perth to stay small and go slow.
It was also around that time that Paul Erlich’s book *The Population Bomb* cast a pall of Malthusian pessimism over the entire planet — one that Buckminster Fuller neatly encapsulated in his text *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. Along with E. F. Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* these were the key texts for a generation of romantics; by which I mean people who, in the tradition of romanticism found revolutionary truth, beauty and inspiration in landscape, not urbanity — and certainly not sub-urbanity.

And yet here we are, nearly all of us living in suburbs. And if the population continues to grow as it is, we will be building many more. To be precise, for the Australian population to reach 42 million by 2056 as the Australian Bureau of Statistics believes is plausible, we would need to build an extra 8.7 million houses. That is, we need to build about 13 Perths in the next 46 years.
On a recent visit to Australia Erlich said that not only would Australia not become a nation of 42 million but many of us would probably have to evacuate. In 2004 Tim Flannery said something similar about Perth; he said it could well become the 21st century’s first ghost-city. He recanted once he found out that the cunning and resilient West Australians had hooked themselves up to a desalination plant. On the other hand, Harry Triguboff, an eastern states developer, says Australia should be a nation of 100 million, living no doubt, in his apartments overlooking the rivers that he thinks should be re-engineered so as to flush the palliative monocultures of the nation’s food-bowls.

By virtue of an annual application of 200 million tones of fertiliser, Australia can feed 50 million people. In 2002 CSIRO concluded that we also have enough water and energy to sustain 50 million people: that is 50 million living what they referred to but didn’t clarify as ‘a moderate lifestyle’. But we are not moderate, not by a long shot. It takes about 5 times more stuff to keep your average Aussie alive than most other people on the planet. To put it another way, if the
Chinese, the South Americans, the Indians and the Africans lived like we do then we would need 5 planets to plunder. Given that we don’t, then we will need to get more out of this one and we need to do so precisely at a time when the planet’s fundamental organs are evidently hemorrhaging. And as we attempt to lift billions out of poverty the carbon clotting the atmosphere will only thicken.

Just reaching everyone in the global community now with the basics of food and water is challenging, but it is estimated that by mid-century the global population will leap from 6.5 to 9.5 billion. To feed the extra people we will need to produce twice as much food as we do now with less arable land and less water than we have now. Despite the fact that the application of new technology always creates new problems, if we are to avoid stupendous loss of life, we will have no choice but to attempt to engineer our way out of the crisis—engineering in the old sense of building barricades to hold things in place, but also engineering in the sense of genetics so as to increase nutrient yields in a denatured world.
Cities rise and fall with floods, fires and famines and their idols usually go with them but what is different this century is that for the first time since the agricultural revolution (10,000 BC) the population of the human race is expected to finally stabilise. This is due to the urbanisation of populations, and all that comes with it. The question then will be whether this planet, as engineered and managed by us, can sustain 9.5 billion living a ‘moderate’ lifestyle. If it can then we will be the first species in history to have grown well beyond natural limitations and lived to tell the story. Every other time a species has excessively flourished it has created the conditions of its own demise.

So what about the Swan Coastal Plain, a place where an extraordinary diversity of species is currently threatened by our divine mandate to multiply and dominate? Perth is predicted to grow to a city of 4 million or more by 2050 and it’s already one of the most sprawled cities on earth. At best the growth necessary to accommodate the extra millions would be infill development not further encroachment on the unique bio-diversity of the region. That said, the region does have lots of cleared, degraded land that it could spread into and in doing so keep the fading Australian dream of a freestanding house and garden alive. That dream will become nightmare however if there are no jobs ‘out there’ and no form of cheap individual mobility to replace cars powered by fossil fuels.

Even if all the existing Australian capital cities and some of our regional centers could absorb their respective growth projections (and given the current mood of the electorate and the strain on infrastructure it is not likely that they will) there will still be many to accommodate somewhere as yet unspecified. There could be significant growth between Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, particularly if serviced by high-speed rail. There could also be significant growth between Mackay and Cairns—perhaps appealing to an aging demographic. There could be new cites in the north, at Lake Argyle and in the Pilbara, and to bring this story to a close, there could be, as George Seddon feared, significant growth on the Swan Coastal plain.
Currently we are attempting to objectively examine the possibility of a network of new towns from Geraldton in the north to Dunsborough in the south. But instead of erasing the landscape we are trying to forge a form of urbanity that responds to its specific conditions. We are doing this in two ways: first, we are only using cleared land. That land is then evaluated for its capacity to produce food which in turn determines population. Second, we are not only reserving all the existing vegetation but also reconnecting the fragments of that remnant vegetation so the gene pool of the Swan Coastal Plain’s biodiversity can flow and evolve as climate change inevitably kicks in. When we do this, we find that the Swan coastal plain could indeed be a bioregion that supports 10 million people. If it doesn’t happen by design it will happen by stealth.
Reasons for Play

Fay Zwicky

Spruce from their analyses
those soulful characters,
spectacles driven backwards
across furrowed balding fronts,
intoned: ‘The trouble with you,
you never learnt to play.’

Said in such tones that
what could she feel but
drab and heavy which
is today’s word but
nonetheless friendly.
And she laughed about the
rough end of whatever
it was she’d clutched.

‘Yes, you are so right’
she said, furious with
concentration and an old
handicap; ‘Morally, I have to
stay out of it. My absolutes
have proved dodgy but yes,
I’ve never learnt to play.’
And born to the Freudian persuasion, she continued, ‘While I was being the eldest son you never were, you were earnestly at play with Elizabeth and Ellen, Elaine, Evelyn and Etcetera’ which were the popular names of the period and not to be lightly spoken.

Eldest girls don’t play early or lightly. Clamped by mysterious authority requiring lineaments of gratified desire, they look obsessed and condescending, but are negatively capable.

Eldest girls believed, born to the Freudian habit, that all could be explained, with a belief that even Hitler, Stalin, and war’s fires could not destroy, that there was always reason behind frightfulness. They couldn’t leave a burning house without trying to help the arsonist. Who knew how to play.
They travelled blind, naïve to universe’s rim like their great grandmothers who’d fled the old world’s burning houses, voices tuned to ironies of apprehension.

Like them, they learnt the new land’s language late, became its wary fire wardens, learnt how to warn without accented stammer, learnt how to leave a burning house alive, divest themselves of glut and test whatever solo flight could bear once they took wing.
Winds do not stir, the desert’s dust is still.
The battle sunset’s red and
disregarding smile fades
from the sky: the dead look small
and stale, and grey, and bodiless,
just scraps, even to their friends,
privileged to loiter here.
Darkness should gentle us, as we turn to stare
above the haze to where star after star
spreads out the teasing tapestry of heaven,
teasing our snatched dreams, drenched in war
and drained of faith. War crouches down, save for
one nervous Very Light which trembles far
out on the smoke-smudged skyline and then fades,
or for some lonely gun-glare. A beast that feeds
on death, but surfeited now; at last engorged,
compelled to rest, war crouches down…

Loitering, our view
before the hysterical
and twitching warscape, is of war at its blind kill,
its random choosing or passing by. No-one
arming at dawn doesn’t believe he won’t win
his little victory, see the day right through.
At night the dreams of men are mockery. With blood
of those we fought
or fought with, our young
eyes bleed. We do not hate.

El Alamein at Night

Alec Choate
Those of us who have not been hit,
whose minds and bodies
are whole, may live for years,
though whenever our bodies are still
the stars and scraps will return,
turn and return in the inhuman stillness.

© The Estate of Alec Choate, 2010
she is river, untamed torrent
curving world around her

. she is current, back
bone’s home & settle

-ment. on all sides, people
gather to build their lives

. bridges define a town

. at the edges she is sure

. lifting, she adorns gown
, fluid silt has found, sediments

a distinction of where she has
come, from where she’s gone

, who she is now. how we bow
into her, dip branching leaves

, tree roots nutrient identity

. wet rearranged phonetics me
& you, dripping together like

wet is the world she weaves

Scott-Patrick Mitchell
words do. georgette
, voile, silken soil. to

keep moving is the purpose of
movement. to enrich world she

flows & knows, she beds her
head to dream pebbles rubbed

& read, drowned runes dredge

. silt is a warning without
wear, of rivers rushing

, rapid love froths the top. plop

, she sets paper swan in motion
toward ocean where what we wish

fish make & become through an
origami reversed. mountain’s spring

begun this song she continues
humming across land she is

running. cities fan around her

.
This is where we lived when it was hot, out on the porch on a summer evening. Our father would carry the television out there. And this is him, my little brother. His skin is still baby-like, freshly washed and shining. He’s glancing away—he did that a lot, as if he always expected something to sneak up—over his shoulder, towards the front door, just as this is taken. Do you think he knew what would one day happen there, in that place behind him: our mother fumbling for her key, her hands shaking, the heavy thud of a stranger’s feet closing in fast? Look—his eyes are as round and solemn as the sea. His hair glitters in the camera flash, his pyjamas stamped with red fire-engines. You might think the sea isn’t round but I’m not so sure. Think of the globe. Everything in this world—even straight lines—seems to eventually become round to me.

There are no dates on these photographs. Sorry, but I was never one for doing that. There are no dates on memories. We put them away somewhere. Then, at intervals, we bring them out. They appear, disappear, re-appear, all out of order. I have often thought that one
I should sort them properly, line them up according to the story. I remember that, on cooler evenings and from across the lounge room, I would watch how he would sit with our father on the sofa, snuggled in behind his knees, in that triangle adult legs make when an adult draws them up alongside their body. You know that irresistible space. Together the two of them would watch television and I would watch them, their visible skin—face, throat, hands—luminous blue in the shifting TV light. Afterwards, when our father was no longer, I would watch my brother and our mother. She never made that triangular space. Instead, he would lean his head under her arm, against her soft warm side, and she would encircle him with her mothering arm, pulling him close. I would watch the same blue light wash over them. Much earlier I had discovered that, whenever he looked up at me, I couldn’t help but smile at him; that whenever he took my hand, something happened inside my chest that made me happy. I was twelve years old when this photo of him was taken. I remember clearly the first time I saw him, tiny and wrapped up, asleep. No-one else made me feel like that. And here he is—right here, in my hands—his whole life was ahead of him, and it is so long ago now and we are both squarely middle-aged and sometimes it feels as if it all never really happened, that particular childhood.

But it must have because I’m still the sister, still phone at Easter and Christmas, leave messages, send packages for his children in December and at birthdays, collect them from the post office a week or so later. So, I guess it must have happened, that childhood and everything else. The woman behind the post office counter cocks her head and smiles sympathetically, shrugs. And I find myself smiling back with my mouth—you know, quick and thin. As if this means nothing. The packages aren’t anything to do with me—goodness, no! This is simply an errand I’m running for someone else. A kindness for a neighbour, you know the kind of thing.
This is him a year later, at three. Fearless, a too-large riding hat on his head. Someone else’s hat; someone else’s horse, too. Someone who had lifted him up, set him in the saddle, adjusted the stirrups, turned in his feet, pushed down his hands and heels, pressed in his elbows, knees, smoothed and threaded the reins through his too small fingers, showing him how to do it, all in a rush. Something it had taken me years to learn. Look how he’s sitting. When I look at this, I can imagine how he must have felt, the horse’s body rocking hugely beneath him, how he must have watched its mane bob, ears twitch, watched that kind stranger leading it, the stranger glancing back at him, how he must have given that stranger his round solemn sea-like eyes, maybe his big infectious smile. I remember clearly all three bodies, mute and intent, slowly circling the gymkhana ring. I was there, you see, behind him, in my own hat, on my own horse. In an old biscuit tin in my wardrobe I keep my only sporting prize: a red ribbon, Dressage, second place. Somewhere he has a certificate with his name in copper-plate: fourth.

One day, many years later, he told me that he can’t remember any of it, asks if our father was there. Well, I was taken aback, had to press my fingernails into my palm to stop tears because he hates my tears, and I told him yes, he was there, standing in the shade of a tree, his forearms leaning easily on the top rail of the round yard. The flighty bay he had bought for me was shying and rearing just like it had in the stock yard he had driven me to one warm afternoon, a place in the bush made of corrugated iron and skinned grey tree limbs. Horses had pushed up against one another in the corral, pushed up against the inside of the rails, heads high, nostrils flaring, eyes wide, white-rimmed with fear. I didn’t tell him that part, of course. I just saw it again and saw, also, our father’s face when I had appeared in the living room wearing my jodhpurs and riding boots, carrying my hat, and he had stared at me and asked me why on earth I was dressed like that. I was puzzled; I always wore them when I rode, he knew that,
and, besides, I had read the books: *My Friend Flicka, Black Beauty*. Of course a horse must be ridden before it’s bought. What did he mean why was I wearing them?

When he had stopped the car in the empty, grey-sand car park he had got out first, spoken to me over his shoulder as I scrambled out behind him: *No need to bring your hat.* I remember I had hesitated then tossed it onto the back seat and caught up to him at a trot. Inside I stood alongside him, stepped up onto the bottom rail of the yard, up on my tiptoes in my boots, and hooked my arms over the top rail so I could see. All the knots in the timber rail beneath my arms had been worn smooth. I squinted through the dust as the horses pressed and shifted like a school of fish. I admired the skewbald, looked to our father, back at the skewbald. I had waited, wondered if these horses, frightened and shifting, were actually broken in—but why would he buy me a horse that wasn’t? I looked about for saddles but there were none, on the wall just a few lead ropes and halters, a stock whip. Stockmen glanced at me from beneath the brims of their hats, their eyes flickering up and down, their smiles twitching as they turned away, and I felt suddenly embarrassed, confused. Like I wanted to hide myself.

And so, months later, there we were, me following my brother around the inside of the gymkhana ring. And then, a little while later, I found myself back there, this time at a starting line, staring down a column of forty-four gallon drums, a cluster of poles, each with a small red triangular flag. I could feel my horse’s skin twitch, his short, anxious breath, his trembling, his tossing head, hooves dancing, dancing in the sand. And the starter’s gun was loud and the crowd shouted, and he shied and reared, and I battled to keep my seat, saw the others racing away, felt my face flush, eyes fill, and turned and turned my horse again on a tight rein to gather him in. Then there he was, our father in the shade of a tree, his arms easy along the top rail, his head back and mouth open, laughing hard. That’s how I had described it to my brother: *Laughing hard.* And my brother had looked at me, incredulous: *Really?* And I had to nod slowly and
look away. Because it’s not in keeping, is it, with the way we like to remember the dead. I know that. Then, in the silence that followed, my brother told me, his head bowed so I couldn’t see his face, that he has no memory of our father at all, and I had stared at the top of his head, at his fingers fiddling with his serviette, and had cast about for something to say. It had been then that I had remembered out loud how someone we didn’t know had chosen him at three, lifted the hat from their own head and settled it on his. *Strong arms,* I said to him, *choosing you, lifting you up.* And he had listened in silence, eventually lifting his head and looking back at me.

The last time we had dinner together I told my brother’s wife the story of that first gymkhana, of his first ride on a horse, the one he couldn’t remember, and my sister-in-law teased my brother a little: such a small boy not knowing what to do—weren’t you afraid, did you wail, fall off? I listened to this, then looked up from my plate and straight at my brother, opening my mouth to speak. But he turned to look at his wife and told her that he had done well, that he had, in fact, won. I had blinked at him then closed my mouth; across the table his back was straight, his body drawn up, just as it had been on someone else’s horse with their hat on his head, doing his best, his fear in check. His wife murmured: *They must have taken pity on you.* And I had to look down at my plate then, cut a piece of food very carefully. Eventually I had spoken as casually as I could into the silence: *Not at all. He did very well.* And then I had picked up my glass carefully between my thumb and forefinger and had sipped a little wine, thinking of that other time, at this table, not so very long before, when he and I were alone and I had told him that story. So. This is what happens, I had thought. And had sipped a little more wine and let the silence settle before smiling brightly at my brother: *This sauce is delicious,* and then turning to my sister-in-law, smiling again: *How’s work?*

It was a small concession, I had later told myself. He was so little, so fatherless.
This photograph—oh, dear!—is my awkward thirteen-year-old self, chasing my hat along Sorrento Beach. Look how skinny I am! I am always surprised to see it, didn’t know it was being taken, and wonder which of our parents had the presence of mind. It’s afternoon: you can tell by the sun on the water, the wind-chopped sea. We had driven an hour from the hills, sitting on our scratchy towels spread along the back seat, peeling our backs away from the green vinyl. We arrive at the deserted beach and fling open the doors, tumbling out, already running, and the southerly snatches my hat, spins it through the air. I take off after it, sand whipping the backs of my legs, my hair mad in front of my eyes as I run, the roar of the wind and the sea and his voice calling after me, wailing. The hat flies and rolls and I chase and chase, then at last in a lull I pounce and have it, then run back as fast as I can into wind and sand, shielding my face with the crook of one arm, the brim of that hat gripped tightly in my other fist, and I reach him, with his body hunched, his back to the wind. And there’s sand in his ears and neck and hair, his eyes screwed shut and sandy and wet with tears, his mouth wet and open and sand in his teeth—I could see into his mouth—and his howl still coming like a cloud, all disappointment, and I can hear our parents shouting from the car park, waving, calling us, bringing us back. He knew what everybody knew: our day at the beach was already over.

Weekends were not all like this, though. Other times we would arrive at the sea to a gentle breeze and our father would lift my brother onto his shoulders, the way he would later lift his own children. Oh, he would squirm and giggle, just as I’ve seen them do, and I would watch our father hold my brother’s knees firmly with his two big hands and stride into the water. He would swim the two of them out to sea, a long way out it seemed to me, toward the horizon, out where I knew even adult legs could no longer stand. And then at last he would turn and swim them both back, and I would watch until our father found his feet again and stood, holding those little knees
against his shoulders as he climbed the slope to the shore. Only then would I let go my breath and I would be surprised by the sudden realisation that I had been holding it. The things we do without even knowing! Sometimes I could see my brother clinging even harder to our father’s face in the long swim back to land; other times he would stretch his arms wide, wiggling his fingers and laughing, and it looked as if he were somehow the one in control, keeping them balanced, as if he was kneeling on the surface of the sea, hovering there and, with his own small body, saving our father’s life by holding our father’s head above water, like a ball between his knees, until they were both brought back by some invisible current. From the shore I would sometimes hear fragments of my brother’s frightened voice, his eyes round bright blue. Then I would see him suddenly smile his enormous laughing smile when, I think, he felt our father’s feet grip, his legs steady. I would watch our father clamber back, grinning, watch him reach up and grasp my brother under his small arms, watch his little legs carve a swooping arc as our father swung him gently down onto the wet shore, would watch him jumping, jumping, shivering, jumping, hear his frightened, excited voice: *Do it again. Do it again.*

4

This is him at five in cowboy clothes. And this, him at twenty, in his graduation gown over black dress-trousers and white business shirt, open collar, no tie, sleeves rolled, as if the whole thing is no big deal. What strikes me is the similarity in the way he is standing in both photos, playing at being tough. Our mother must have taken the first one, a Christmas photo—there is one of me, too, at about the same age, as a cowgirl—but I’m not sure who took the second. Maybe a girlfriend I don’t know about; something about his unguarded face.

When our father died, my brother had asked where he had gone—that heart-breaking question—and our mother had waved her hand as if casting a spell: *To the stars.* Later, when he was in
his twenties and I in my thirties, I played him my favourite Joni Mitchell record with the song that made everyone stardust, and he had laughed—dedicated atheist—and scoffed at the lyrics as I sang along, waving me away as if he were the magician. But for many years after our father’s death, I know he went outside every night in his clown-print, his animal-print, his striped pyjamas to blow kisses at the sky.

At first we had all stepped out, stood on the edge of the front porch where he had sat at two years old and someone had taken that photo of him glancing back at the front door, his face freshly washed and shining. Our mother had switched off the porch light and we had stood, the three of us in the dark, looking up. And then I looked at my brother in our mother’s arms, at his clean and solemn, just-four year old, wide-open face, at his outstretched arm, the smallness of it, and his fist against the night like a pale anemone, opening, closing. I looked at our mother, at her hands hooked beneath his arms, holding him up, just the way our father had done when he swooped him down through the air to the ground, just the way our mother had done when she lifted him each night so that he could receive on his forehead our father’s kiss. And then I did something of which I am forever ashamed. I bowed my head and walked away, softly, quickly, on my toes down the corridor to my room. I closed the door gently, carefully and, covering my face with my hands, slid into bed. And there I pressed the heels of my hands as hard as I could into the sockets of my eyes to obliterate that image: my little brother’s face looking up, the cold blue wash of night, and our mother blinking, her eyes shiny with tears. I became very busy at my brother’s bed-time: turned up my music, practised the piano, put my hands over my ears and frowned hard at maths. Then one night a long time later I watched my brother get up from the sofa, say goodnight to us and go to his room, and suddenly I realised he had stopped doing it. In the shifting half-dark of the TV, I turned back to the screen so that no one would know that I was running through all my memories to
try to find the last time I had heard the front door open and close at eight o’clock. But there was nothing—not even a space where that memory should be.

We sleep without cameras, so there’s no photo of this, just the pictures in my head as I wake in the night, middle-aged and frightened—I’m not sure of what—my breath ragged. The floor is patterned lino—small geometric shapes in autumn tones, endlessly repeating—and it is not what it seems; it is slick with water I can’t see. I step into the room and my legs slip violently from under me.

Another night I enter a room that looks like a room but is not a room; others stand in it normally, speak normally to me, but I can’t speak back, can’t even breathe. I can only swim, must swim, swim for my life, swim through what others can breathe but what is water, unbreathable for me. I don’t understand. I swim up to the ceiling in the farthest corner, lift my chin until my nose breaks the surface and finds, at last, a pocket of air. I tread water madly to keep myself there, alive, take a breath and dive, open my eyes and look down through the water, down to all that is below, all that looks normal and undistorted and clear. People walk on the floor as if in the ordinary air, speak in ordinary voices. I can hear them clearly. I can’t speak. I can’t hold my breath long enough. I look up again, at the ceiling above me, then swim toward it, up to the surface, find that air pocket, dog paddle there. I breathe, breathe, great lungsful of air. They don’t even know I’m there, I think, and I can’t tell them. I wonder how much air I have, how much time. I dog-paddle, breathe. My body begins to tire. I wonder how long I can live like this.

Years later, in the middle of yet another night: my brother and I sit beside a very calm sea. He cups his hand to my ear and whispers: *When he took me into the ocean, when he was swimming beneath me, I saw a brightly coloured parrot fish with a beak like a bird and white shiny teeth swim, smiling, into his open mouth.*
And then last night, the dream that sent me here, to this story and these photos again, all this silly remembering: we lie side by side in the shade of a tree, looking up. The sky is luminous and broken, pieces of unearthly glowing blue surrounded by leaves so still and so perfectly green some hand must have painted them. Nearby, horses graze, lifting their heads occasionally to turn to us and blink, ears pricked. Their tails flick. My brother says, so quietly it could be the breeze: He leaned on the railing. I watched him. He didn’t know. He opened his mouth to laugh. A dragon fly flew out. Its wings were rainbows. He closed his mouth and he saw me looking. He smiled and at me and placed a finger against his lips. Sshh.

Yes, I say, as I turn to face him. That’s right, just as I remember it. And I watch as he kisses the tip of his own finger and, with one soft, steady breath, blows that kiss up into the broken blue heaven. We watch it rise, stall, then begin its drifting descent, shimmering and iridescent, back to earth and both of us.
Early navigation
whole days spent charting shorelines,
shining sands of skin.
Mornings, I ran my hands over the hollows and dunes in my sheets,
the body's language for this landscape of the other
warm on my fingers.

We spoke of crossing an interior;
our speech, sure as the sun at its zenith,
threw no shadows.

Easy to navigate on autopilot.
A constant reckoning of school and car keys.
The pole star of ourselves
always there in the somehow of early and late.

Sailing alone again
we startled at reefs and shallows
our language listing in tropic seas.

Co-ordinates misplaced,
you turned to tripods and binoculars,
watched from your fixed point above the riverbank.
You did not see diamonds flying from a kayak's oar,
dogs smiling in their timeless present and skies of naked pink
disrobing in the mauve of evening

Navigation
Flora Smith
Navigation gone
we lived amongst gaps, my compass skewed
by ferrous fears and the lustrous pieces of your astrolabe
stolen by slate-grey days; love absent, inarticulate and spent.

Mornings, I run my hands
over the hollows and dunes of you left in our sheets.

I am a map-maker.
I can chart this arctic dialect of loss.
Argo

Roland Leach

The Argo is rotting on Corinth Beach,
the timbers lifting like waves, rising like asps,
the heroes have departed,
the women abandoned.

It is time to take stock
of shifting loyalties and betrayals,
admit we have been fleeced.

The great have declared themselves deities,
dividing up the loot in daylight on the streets,
as if it is the will of the gods
and we may have once agreed,
acquiesced to the logic of the world,

but it is time to reassess,
find our own boat-builders perhaps
or dare to imagine
that we no longer need
great men on the prows.

The rotting plank is about to fall.
higher than ever

Kevin Gillam

do you wake to find yourself swimming in ancient water,
pulling as if through honey but remaining still
emerging chafed by time?

do you sleep and see paragraphs of white cockatoos
in your book of sky, their only sense in
shadowed underwings, sleek and fleeting?

do you hover between eyelids and curtain,
crave a lengthening of the anaesthetist’s white flood,
live your hours like scattered accidents?

do you decide to become ocean,
a briny suspension of story and wind tossed denouement,
cathedral for the hymns of gulls?

do you then choose to ride a warm updraft,
read the scrawl of cirrus, live a weightless creed?
Framed

Vivienne Glance

Before my camera
stretched out, innocent and naked
smooth like a woman’s hip,
the earth blushes
    as the sun bleeds.

Unseen photons
fill the mouth of my lens
    pixel by pixel
they are swallowed
into the belly
of this machine.

My gaze consumes
the pinks and browns
    of rocks
the ambers and ochres
    of crevices.

I taste timeless dust
    vapours
reach out for scarlet texture—
I can only touch
    this image.
‘Yes We Canberra’, a satirical commentary program by the ABC’s comedy group, The Chaser, was produced to accompany the 2010 Australian election campaign and included a segment titled ‘Life at the Top’. This segment showed what seemed to be something like an indigenous version of a panel discussion where four indigenous elders sat cross-legged on the earth in a Northern Territory outback setting and discussed the election issues. The juxtaposition of this indigenous context, movingly dignified in its simplicity, with the issues of the campaign—broadband, low-level political debate, funding for mediocre Australian films—made the to-and-froing of election debate seem trivial and startlingly self-centered. The Chaser, with (perhaps unusual) sensitivity not only draws the viewer’s attention to the overwhelming disparity of economic and social privilege in this country, but the complete absence of any discussion of indigenous issues during the 2010 election campaign—a troubling invisibility that quickly begs a comparison to the 2007 Labor victory and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to Indigenous Australians that occurred soon after. In the last segment of ‘Life at the Top’ to screen before the election, one of the elders posed a question concerning Labor’s track-record on Indigenous affairs. They respond:
Elder 1: What have they done?
Elder 2: They said ‘sorry’ to us once.
Elder 1: When was that?
Elder 2: Three years ago
Elder 1: And what about since then?
Elder 3: Lots of things. Every week they remind us that they said ‘sorry’ three years ago.

Despite the wave of optimism following Rudd’s apology it seems that very little in terms of social justice for Indigenous Australians has changed. The absence of important discussion from public debate is a sobering reminder of the continuing presence of the thinly-veiled racism and social conservatism that influenced the nation during the twelve-year Howard era. While it would be both unfair and inaccurate to equate the Labor leadership’s disappointing reluctance to keep indigenous issues on the public agenda with Howard’s refusal to acknowledge the type of past injustice brought out by (among other investigations) the Bringing Them Home Report, a little-discussed but noteworthy speech given by Rudd at the launch of Thomas Keneally’s Australians: Origins to Eureka gives some indication of a degree of historical and political denial that is, arguably, prescient of the conservatism and instrumentalism of many Labor politicians that the Australian public has witnessed in the recent election campaign.

Statements made about history often work as political touchstones and Rudd’s key points were illuminating in terms of his own and his government’s understandings and values. After Rudd’s 2008 apology to indigenous peoples, one would be forgiven for thinking he considered himself aligned with the views expressed by then Prime Minister Keating in his landmark speech at Redfern Park. Rudd’s speech represents Keating and allies in the History Wars (debates about the extent of the damage and destruction inflicted by settler society on Australian indigenous peoples conducted by politicians, commentators and historians) as being at the extreme and fanatical end of a polarised debate and, in doing this, parts company with an
important cultural movement peopled by distinguished intellectuals, politicians and activists who have dedicated their careers to increasing knowledge of national history and attempting to bring about justice and reparation to indigenous Australians. By positioning himself at the moderate centre in terms of views on the national past, squarely and simplistically between the denialists and the revisionists (whom Howard famously termed the ‘Black Armband Brigade’), Rudd implied that ‘true’ or ‘good’ history is fixed and apolitical—a notion which is at best naïve and at worst a totalitarian weapon. Troublingly, he called for an end to the disputes of the History Wars when this type of debate is, surely, crucial for a functioning democracy.

It has been up to participants in other spheres of Australian public and cultural life to keep Indigenous stories and histories alive in the national consciousness in the past decade, particularly in the past two years, whether through the medium of television, such as *The Chaser*, or through films such as widely acclaimed *Samson and Delilah*. The participation of public intellectuals, particularly historians and writers, has also been crucial here. While most current politicians clearly do not want to re-enter the fray at this particular juncture and the debates have died down to an extent, the continual discussion of the more troubling elements of our national past in various forums by historians and novelists have encouraged the continued consideration of not only the national past but, most importantly, the ethically vital issue of social justice for Indigenous Australians.

In his speech at the launch of Keneally’s book, Rudd described the existing discussion of our national history as ‘arid and intellectual’, but many Australians don’t see it that way. In an August 2009 episode of the ABC’s high-rating panel show *Q and A*, broadcast from the Melbourne Writers’ festival, the audience-generated discussion focused largely on history and the national, colonial past. The conversation between writers Richard Flanagan, Tara June Winch, Kamila Shamsie and politicians, Labor’s Lindsay Tanner, and Liberal Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbot (then Shadow Minister for Families and Community Services), made for lively and compelling viewing.
Australian history in its various representations, including politicised and often controversial ones, clearly has currency in our culture. Rachel Perkins’ 2008 documentary series *The First Australians* demonstrates that an audience exists for the type of indigenous stories that are generally considered as the unofficial part of Australia’s history. SBS’s Australian version of *Who do You Think You Are?* follows prominent Australians as they track different genealogical paths which, similarly, include stories of immigration and colonisation. This energised engagement with Australian history challenges Rudd’s perception of existing debates and his covert denial of the type of cultural sentiment that accompanies the success of these types of popular histories. When a *Q and A* audience member asked: ‘Do we struggle to talk about our identity in any depth because we risk feeling further implicated in the brutality of our colonial past?’ he communicated one of the most vexed, complicated and critical questions that faces the Australian nation. The question conveys not only the regret that troubles fair-minded non-indigenous Australians, but also the difficulties involved in discussion: that historical revelation and unfolding interpretations are hard to mentally and emotionally assimilate and even harder to respond to. How should a nation act in the face of such a past? The former (now retired) Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner’s comment on *Q and A* that ‘the biggest weapon you can use on these things is silence’ can be used as a rejoinder to the Prime Minister’s call for the end of vital debates on Australia’s history.

More than two years after Rudd’s lauded apology on behalf of Federal Parliament to the Stolen Generations it is time to revisit important questions of history. Why does the past matter? What are the effects of engaging with the stories and events of the past? What roles do emerging representations of the past have to play in our society? How does our relationship with history matter politically and affect what we do in the present? How can we act or live ethically in a country founded on racial violence? A strand of public debate that emerged out of the History Wars is particularly relevant when considering these questions. In a 2006 *Quarterly Essay*, the historian
Inga Clendinnen asked ‘The History Question: Who Owns the Past?’ in which she discussed the relationship between history and fiction. Clendinnen’s claim is that it is the scientific and verifiable methods that give historians greater authority on the past than writers of fiction texts, who have laid various claims to historical authority. In her view, fiction can delight and intrigue, but ultimately provide little of real intellectual or political value. In the debate that was generated around the historical fiction question, historians including Clendinnen, Mark McKenna and John Hirst, drew attention to the limitations of the novel in representing historical events. These statements made by the historians rightly pointed out that chronology and veracity are necessarily subjugated to the demands of narrative and that, above all, novels rely on human emotion and empathy rather than rational analysis to create connections with people who lived in times past. The historians are correct in their claims that literature cannot compete with history on certain types of truth claims; however, I would contend that different types of historical fiction also have an equally important, if different, role to play in questions to do with the place and significance of Australian history in our contemporary life.

Historical fiction is important in considering the questions posed earlier. While the pursuit of empirically verifiable versions of events is of great value and has made important contributions to Australian political and intellectual life, the connection between the individual and the national past involves an imaginative engagement that can be provoked by histories but is also (and more traditionally) the domain of fiction. Powerful and often deeply felt links between the individual and the past, while never providing direct access to the people and events of that past, have the potential for enabling effects. Fictional representations have a role to play in the discussion about how the past can affect the present in social and political ways. In fact, fiction is as vital as history in keeping the important events alive and well in the national consciousness, and has its own valid claims to truth. For
Jo Jones

this reason it is important to acknowledge that both fields play their own different and important roles in defeating the dangerous silence about the past that Tanner referred to on Q and A.

What historical fiction has to offer Australian culture differs from that of history in four ways. Firstly, it encourages a consideration of the place of the past and the imagination in political life. Indeed, an individual connection with the past through fiction and, in particular, the novel, has been part of the workings of a liberal progressive agenda since the eighteenth century. As I will explain later, there are limitations with this type of liberal empathetic engagement; however, it is surely necessary to consider the role of such engagement in any analysis of the relationship between history, politics and culture. Secondly, imaginative relationships made with the past through these fictions can potentially enable an ethical engagement with ‘difference’ that works in other and important ways than the kind of connections made through non-fiction history texts. Thirdly, fictions can perform a meta-historical function, provoking an examination of the workings and limits of our representations of the past in traditional historical forms. And, finally, history is constantly limited by what it cannot prove or reveal, while fiction, through art, can enter events to an extent beyond what is traditionally regarded as the province of historical enquiry, engaging with the force of human experience that exists beyond the limits of traditional historical representation. These may be events which, for various reasons, were not recorded but endure in memory and traces.

Kate Grenville’s 2005 The Secret River is a good place to begin a discussion of individual novels because this novel, and Grenville’s statements at the time of its release, became the crux of debate about the differences between and relative merits of history and fiction. The Secret River is also a useful example of the historical novel in its traditional, linear narrative form, one that has been popular and influential in Australian literature. As with all fiction (and history), the form of these narratives is intrinsically bound to politics. At the heart of historians’ objections when The Secret River was published
was Grenville’s reliance on empathy (an emotional or moral category) as a path to historical knowledge (an intellectual category). Among the most controversial, and it must be said naïve, statements Grenville gave about the story of emancipist Thornhill (the character based on her own ancestor Solomon Wiseman), was that by visiting the locations at which events had occurred and partaking in some similar experiences, such as riding the gunwhale of a boat in rough weather, she was able to access the responses of her ancestor and those like him.1

In an act of transfer she suggests that a similar process of experiential change occurs when reading a novel. In her view, the reader can vicariously experience nineteenth-century life (or eighteenth-century life in her next novel, a type of prequel to The Secret River, The Lieutenant) and understand the experiences of those who lived there, exposing colonial violence as a sequence of miscommunications and misunderstandings, rather than an intrinsic aspect of an often brutal, virulent, and dominating political and social system.

By contrast, historians alert us to the variety of human experience and how individual human subjects are shaped by the very historical and geographical specificity of existence. As Clendinnen notes, the belief in historical insight accessed through the so-called re-experiencing past events—what she calls a ‘time-leap’—is not only impossible but ideologically dangerous, drawing as it does on the assumption that the knowledge and memories we have from our own experience gives us direct knowledge of the lives of others so very different from our own (20). In this sense empathy, which modern novels rely on to form meaningful relationships with their readers, is not enough to afford historical insight. According to Clendinnen, such insight is achieved through an objective appraisal of the past, albeit an appraisal informed by sensitivity and compassion. Therefore, to tell a story of an early nineteenth-century emancipist, relate the details of his motivations and decisions, including the decision to participate in a massacre of an indigenous tribe, suggests we can access and understand someone so historically and culturally different from white Australians (no matter how much we base the narrative around
historical details and events). The unalterable otherness of individuals of past times is erased in this type of narrative, as is race difference, for example when Thornhill’s wife, Sal, concludes on her visit to the Aboriginal camp that their presence there is morally compromised because the local indigenous group are much more like the British Thornhills than Sal has previously thought: ‘They was here...Their grannies and their great grannies. All along...Even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got meself.’ (288) It is the similarities here, rather than differences, that provoke moral responses. 2

The ‘time-leap’ made by traditional realist historical novels is also apparent in the more stylistically complex work of David Malouf, such as the acclaimed *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlew Creek*, which can also be construed as ethically problematic, revealing an underlying reliance in the universality of human experience that has, in the past, been co-opted to underwrite concepts like colonialism and paternalism. Malouf has made a number of statements similar to those of Grenville about being able to re-experience colonial times through the insight afforded by the universal reach of empathy 3 and conveys his stories through an all-encompassing romantic-transcendent poetic. In *Remembering Babylon*, for instance, while the narrative of a Scottish settler family on the edge of the colonial settlement in nineteenth-century Queensland is historically informed and sensitively rendered, the story hinges on the possibility of a type of transference where settler characters gain profound and indigenised insight and connection to place through moments of heightened and mystical experience. One of the central characters, Gemmy Fairley, a castaway who has spent the last ten years with an indigenous tribe, works (problematically) as a type of conduit for indigenous experience and understanding. As has been argued before, the very materiality and specificity of existence, through an investment in universal subjectivity, is erased here. 4 Put simply, these novels can be interpreted as perpetuating the notion that the social codes and sets of behaviours that seem appropriate and necessary for one group can be applied to another
without due consideration of cultural, social and psychic differences. While it is important to acknowledge that Malouf and Grenville made every effort to base their stories in historical truth and to be respectful of the indigenous culture they are representing, the novels remain largely ideologically determined by the limitations of the traditional historical novel form. In erasing differences between groups of people, such novels thus effectively reproduce the ideological beliefs they seek to contest.

This type of ambitious imaginative leap founded in empathy which informs the traditional historical novel assumes that we should not maim, massacre, enslave, exploit or marginalise indigenous Australians because, underneath a veneer of dissimilarity, ‘we’ are all the same. These assumptions also underpin a rather naïve and politically problematic strand of the reconciliation discourse in Australian culture—the belief that if Australians could realise our fundamental similarities and put the past behind us we could move on. This is a way of thinking that reduces reconciliation to a feel-good, guilt-assuaging exercise for the benefit of non-indigenous Australians that tries to affect spurious closure. Recognising deep-seated difference is important. It lends support to concepts like self-determination and meaningful consultation with indigenous communities on indigenous matters. It makes Australians question the assumptions and methods of an initiative like the Northern Territory Intervention. It may cause us to respond in outrage when we hear, as we have recently, that consultation in a number of Territory communities was undertaken in such a way as to exclude the indigenous community from fully participating.

On the other hand, the politically enabling potential of humanist empathy, the foundation of liberal democracy, must be acknowledged. This type of liberal goodwill and the recognition of racial inequity was made possible by a progressive race agenda in the early 1990s, including the clear acknowledgement of past injustice that led to the Mabo decision. Perhaps what Australians need to revise here is the type of empathy we aspire to have as a nation. Rather than
empathy that relies on universal similarities, scholar and novelist Gail Jones contends we should aspire to a concept she attributes to theorist Dominic La Capra called ‘unsettled empathy’: this is where imaginative and authentic connections are with those who are different, but the assumption that full insight or understanding can be gained is resisted (Jones 2004). Unsettled empathy is a difficult and ongoing process where one is careful not to project one’s own culture/experience/belief system in the guise of understanding. In Jones’ novel, *Sorry* (2007), that begins in the 1930s, her young, damaged and sensitive protagonist Perdita realises at the very end of the narrative the difficulties of accessing and understanding the life and psyche of another, even if, as in Perdita’s relationship with her indigenous friend Mary, you love them deeply. Throughout the novel, constructed as a fable and allegory, Perdita has recurring fantasies of falling snow, its delicate evanescence figured in stark contrast to the red vastness of the remote Pilbara where she lives. Even in the most insightful individuals, the seduction and blindness of whiteness and white privilege runs deep. Perdita’s eventual apology to Mary for a life-destroying error achieves neither closure nor redemption, but becomes an irresistible ethical imperative. We are unsure of what it meant to Mary, but we know it was necessary and important. Like the national chronology of white occupation, Perdita’s story has pieces missing. It acknowledges that the memory of events can be lost and that, even when regained, such damage can never be atoned for or completely understood but must be approached with remorse and the intent to make amends. In this way unsettled empathy, expressed through Jones’ historical novel, is a more ethical way of approaching difference. In *Sorry* the personal is clearly political and demonstrates the way that the bonds of affection and imagination made between the individual and those who are different affects and changes lives. In this way a tale founded skillfully in historical realities, while still a fiction, communicates knowledge of the past and political events and systems, such as colonialism, imperialism and their effects, in such a way that has clear contemporary political and ethical relevance.
Surely this is an important and worthy form of communicating certain types of knowledge about the past that contains important truths.

Like Sorry, Kim Scott’s Benang (1999) is rooted in painful realities of earlier times in Australia. Whereas Jones navigates the terrain of white remorse and regret, Scott deals with the challenges of indigenous survival, part of which involves negotiating and re-negotiating relationships with historical events and history itself. The Miles Franklin Award winning novel self-consciously exposes the limits of traditional history when coming to terms with individual, cultural and national pasts. In a web of stories largely derived from Scott’s Nyoongah family in the Esperance region of Western Australia, Scott’s protagonist, Harley, struggles to deal with the new-found knowledge of both his indigenous heritage and the racially motivated abuses of his Scots-born grandfather by whom he was raised. The structure of Scott’s novel—a spiralling, non-linear collection of stories spanning generations back to initial white-indigenous contact—exposes the limitations of relying solely on traditional historical sources. The stories include fragments of archival evidence such as government correspondence and records, sections of local histories, stories of families conveyed by elders and Harley’s own imagined versions of events, informed by these other sources. In accessing the stories Harley (and Scott) comes up against a problem evident in much contact history—that important events went, deliberately and for different reasons, unrecorded. One such event is recorded in a complementary volume of family stories, co-written with Scott’s Aunty Hazel. The volume tells of a massacre that occurred around the turn of the century that had been covered up, both by the white pastoralist family who conducted it and the indigenous group who were its targets. The surviving people from the indigenous group left the Ravensthorpe area where it occurred (Hazel claims that even to this day no Nyoongah people live there) and when asked of their origins often said they came from Adelaide rather than be indentified with the massacred group. It seems this was partly because the trauma of the experience and loss was so painful.
to recall. Only the stories remain, told in fragments amongst kinship groups in the indigenous community. In *Benang*, Scott re-visions a version of this massacre, the brutality of the pastoralist murders, the reluctant complicity of a white ancestor, the inexpressible pain of Harley’s Nyoongah great-grandmother who witnessed the events and the aftermath, including bodies hanging from a tree and the land itself responding in sympathy and horror to the scene. This story may never be part of a national history because of a lack of empirical evidence or the understandable reluctance of Nyoongah people to open up the story to outsiders, but there is an important truth here. It is clearly an essential and defining story of both loss and survival, as the Nyoongahs in the region endure and connect to their ancestors through culture and place.

Similarly, Alexis Wright’s first novel, *Plains of Promise*, set initially in a mission community in the Gulf country, deals with the silences of history where communities and individuals experience devastating social and psychic breakdown in a way that eludes record and memory. The damaged central character, Ivy, abandoned by the indigenous mission community because of tribal difference and by the white clergyman who has repeatedly raped her, disintegrates into mental illness and dysfunction, with no sense of past identity and little memory of the abuses she has endured. Historical fiction thus provides the means to enter into these spaces of experience that traditional histories regard as speculative and conjectural and which thus lie outside the scholarly domain. Entry into the past experiences of the dispossessed necessarily involves imaginative and speculative journeys which contain their own truth.

Historical novels can be striking in the challenge they lay down to the very notion of the impossibility of historical representation—that sources are never objective, tellers of stories never disinterested or unbiased, as poststructuralist historiographers such as Hayden White have emphasised. In fact, in these novels, history is conceptualised as an abyss and, like human relations themselves, often dizzying in its unfathomability. This concept of history has been compared to
the Kantian notion of the sublime; something the human mind can approach but never fully comprehend. Rodney Hall’s fascinating and critically neglected historical novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *The Yandilli Trilogy*, are narrated by characters who are unstable, deluded, even psychopathic, and strange events are glimpsed through the fractured lenses of fragmented consciousnesses. In Hall’s *Captivity Captive* (1988), based on an actual event in the Southern Queensland outback town of Gatton, the details surrounding a grisly crime unfold as the brother of murdered siblings tells his tale. The more the reader learns of the increasingly gothic traits of the Malone family, the less likely is the truth of the official deathbed confession of a neighbour that begins the novel. Grotesquely inverting the national pastoralist myth, the outback becomes a place where the traumas of settlement, and their less-than-heroic effects, are pronounced. This is seen, for example, in the inwardness of isolated family and social groupings. In novels such as this, the notion of history as a trajectory of progress is exposed as a shimmering humanistic fantasy. Instead, history can be black and opaque, as impenetrable as the psyches of the individual who conceived and enacted this bizarre unsolved crime. Neither are Hall’s novels merely relativistic exercises in postmodern playfulness and reflexivity. If colonial tales are considered instrumental in the making of a nation, Hall’s work (published in Australia’s bicentennial year) is a highly politicised warning against the dangers of isolation and the self-destruction inherent in the power plays that may lurk under the guise of national unity.

Like Hall’s novels, the self-reflexivity of Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) is bitingly political. History itself is not safely sequestered in the past, but shifts and morphs like the pages of Gould’s book itself that, within Flanagan’s narrative, reveals something different every time it is opened. History permeates the present. One conspicuous example of this is the way the deranged commandant of the Sarah Island settlement, where Gould is imprisoned, pillages the environment in a grotesque manifestation of aggressive capitalism. This situation is not intended as a faithful reproduction of the
events of the penal settlement but, rather, a comment on the way the destructive alliance of big business and government in Tasmania in the present emerged out of the exploitative ideologies of colonialism and imperialism of early settlement, and that have dominated Australia (of which Tasmania is presented as a microcosm) ever since. The eponymous narrator of the novel announces from the outset that he is deserving of our trust, but is also a professional and compulsive liar. Rich in postmodern paradoxes, Gould tells his tale of convict conniving, sensual pleasure and sheer desperation. Through the character of Gould, Flanagan ironically suggests that we are at our most truthful when honest about the lies that we live with. The novel reveals the way that history itself, like other concepts of the Enlightenment, such as reason and democracy, can be corrupted to the service of their opposites: the irrational, libidinous and the will-to-power are always ready to surge and grasp the fragile political cultural construct we know as civilization.

On ABC’s *Q and A* Lindsay Tanner acknowledged the inherently political nature of history when he stated ‘...the question of identity and the past is all wrapped up in one fundamental thing and this is that history is a living thing. It’s not settled, it will never be settled.’ Engaging with the past events and their interpretation is vital in connecting with a national community. This also includes facing the important and unavoidable historiographical fact that stories shift with interpretation and that even traditional, empirical history is limited by the partiality and separateness of experience. A consideration of these points is needed in asking vital questions of the Australian nation. Fiction has long been part of this critical and imaginative process. Neither is this discussion limited to the so-called chattering classes. Many historical novels are of interest to a wide audience and are even taught in secondary schools all over the country.

Other nations with histories of atrocity and violence have grappled with these questions for longer, with fiction taking an important role, for example, Bernard Schlink’s bestselling *The Reader* generated widespread discussion on ethical and political issues about the German
national past. They do not exist merely ‘to delight’ as Clendinnen, somewhat condescendingly, puts it (34). Like other countries that live with spectres of history—Germany and the holocaust, South Africa and apartheid, the United States and slavery—Australia, at a time of global political change, needs to ask what type of country we wish to create in the twenty-first century. Facing the events of the past and the workings of history itself can lead to ethical action to tackle issues and inequities of race. As Richard Flanagan said in the same Q and A discussion, ‘[this argument] in the end, is not about our past. It is an argument about our future.’

**Works Cited**


Notes

1 Grenville originally made this statement in an interview with Romona Koval on Radio National’s *The Book Show*.

2 To be fair to Grenville, she attempted to amend some of the more politically problematic elements of *The Secret River* in *The Lieutenant* within the narrative. The protagonist Daniel Rooke and the indigenous girl, Tageran, become friends; however, the character of Rooke ultimately
recognises how little he can comprehend the complexity and extent of Tagaran’s motives and experiences. He, importantly, begins to accept uncertainties as an endpoint. I would still claim, however, that Grenville ultimately runs into similar ideological difficulties as in The Secret River as she remains so reliant on the realist historical novel form.

3 This is cited in McKenna (3).

4 A number of critics have detailed their various ideological objections to Remembering Babylon in the last two decades. A useful overview of these publications is provided by Randall (2004). Other relevant articles include ‘The Obstinacy of the Sacred’ (McCann 2005) and my ‘Ambivalence, Absence and Loss in David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon’ (Jones 2009).

5 The ethical limits of realist form has been most convincing argued by theorists Dominick La Capra in History in Transit (2004) and Derek Attridge in the companion volumes The Singularity of Literature (2004) and J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading : Literature in the Event (2004).

I would also claim that, even through the narratives of both Remembering Babylon and The Conversations at Curlew Creek contain moments of heightened experience and transcendence, the form remains essentially realist in terms of the construction of characters and the ‘well-made’ action of the plot.

6 For an illuminating discussion on the limits of the liberal ideology of reconciliation see Atwood (2005).

7 A recent report—the ‘Will They Be Heard’ report—has evidence to support the claim that indigenous groups were unable to participate effectively in community consultation in the Northern Territory Intervention and that much of the bureaucratic language and systems made the process inaccessible. See http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2009/s2751206.htm for further information.

8 The Nyoongah peoples’ treatment of this site of massacre is further explained in Scott (2007). Also, further insights into this scene are offered in Emmet (2007).

9 It seems that Australian historical fiction writers have never used the defence that history, like fiction, has its own problems of realist form which, in traditional histories, prematurely forecloses on meaning and interpretation. One might speculate that this is, firstly, because the writers have a great deal of respect for the work done by (particularly revisionist) historians and, secondly, because they would not wish to undermine the politically effective allegiance between revisionist history and a progressive Indigenous rights agenda.
River Hunt

Cas Rawlins

There is a child in my class.
She’s the one that chews paper and can’t leave the scissors alone, can’t leave things be. She thinks smiling down.
The push-bike replicates my simple, trim notion of her as I pedal leaning, racing against bush shadows, the terrain.

I like it this way, shotgun slung and finding my way to the river—by myself, the ting, ting of gears and bearings. But then I am Balanda. No Yolngu would hunt Magpie Goose alone. They would gather, they hunt together.

She cries face planted, indigenous-black smearing melamine, when she’s upset this girl, when they tease her sometimes. She can frown a face of worry, her daily intention culminates the laughter and sadness in desktop dribble and dabble of the Yolngu, her people.

And I, just making my way to the river, not losing it by counting cycles on the pedal. This track, that one. How many revolutions? It is like a maze. There are animal tracks everywhere going to all the important places. I project like one small part of the larger canvas, trying to find that important place, my place.
Much later I discover the river. I can hear the paper-winged mob churn and blend evening’s edge across the distance. Sheltered polyphonic conversations swirl and drone, drone and swirl the earth. Their appeal is humorous and enticing…and I remember the child again.

Yes, the light is really failing. Too late.
I leave
without a shot
on the verge of darkness
fearing I might lose the way.
Ruby’s Last Dollar

Reg Cribb

(A play about an elderly Poker Machine addict — Ruby Constance. In this scene we meet Ruby as a very young girl on the streets of Sydney on VE day — 1945. She meets the famous Movietone ‘dancing man’. We see her—and the whole country—full of hope and optimism.)

SCENE 2

Sydney 1945

The young, barefoot girl walks to the front of the stage and stands beneath a shower of paper that is cascading down on her from above. All is quiet at first and she looks skyward with a kind of naïve wonder. A noise starts to take shape as if her consciousness is summoning it up. The sound of a full blown celebration, faint at first, begins to bellow around her. Sirens are going off, whistles and horns are being blown and the din of a million people singing and cheering can be heard. She climbs up to a spot above the celebration and watches. A gangly man in a suit and hat enters and dances his way gleefully around the young girl like the famous dancing man of Elizabeth St on VE day.)
LONNY: Hey! What are ya doin’?

RUBY: Don’t know.

LONNY: Don’t leave me down here like a pickled onion. Come down.

RUBY: Why?

LONNY: 7 million people in this beautiful bloody country darlin’ and they’re all dancing…except for you. I bet you’re a beautiful dancer.

RUBY: Maybe.

LONNY: Aw c’mon. Every other day of my life I’m just an electrical fitter from Petersham but today….I’m Fred Astaire.

RUBY: No you’re not, you’re drunk.

LONNY: I’m a gangly mad streak of joy reekin’ of piss but I’ve kissed every perfect stranger coz today…every stranger is perfect!

RUBY: Well I’m real happy for ya.

LONNY: Hey some Movietone fella with a camera just filmed me, top of Elizabeth St. I might be famous. They might put my face on a coin. What’s ya name?

RUBY: Cat’s bum.

LONNY: Cat’s bum?

*She pouts her lips forward in the shape of a cat’s bum.*
Reg Cribb

I think I love ya cat’s bum.
What’s ya proper name?

RUBY: Ruby.

LONNY: I’m Lonny.
Where ya from Ruby?

RUBY: Don’t know but I shouldn’t be here.

LONNY: Shouldn’t be here? Everyone’s here today.

RUBY: I gotta get back to Sister Dorothy…that’s where I live. She’ll be out lookin’ for me.

LONNY: Guess what Ruby?

RUBY: What?

LONNY: It’s the end of the war…

RUBY: I know that…

LONNY: But not just that! It’s the end of all wars. Ha ha! I can feel it! Come down, this is history! Think about it…no more war!

RUBY: How do you know that?

LONNY: Coz there’s a place called America. They won’t let any more wars happen.
And we’re stuck to ‘em. Like Clag.

RUBY: People will always wanna hurt each other.
LONNY: Aww who’d wanna hurt you?

RUBY: Dunno, but I feel safer up here.

LONNY: Life is all a big game of chance darlin’. But I know one thing. This country’s movin’ forward...as of today. All bets off. We’ll never run outta money again, we’ll never run outta water and we’ll all live in a big house together. All of us!

RUBY: No thanks.

LONNY: In 50 years time we’ll be loved...yeah ...loved by society as the keepers of wisdom and all the young people will bow to us like Gods coz we lived through this time in history. We’ll grow old with our Grandkids at our feet and they’ll never get tired of our stories!

RUBY: You’re mad.

LONNY: C’mon cat’s bum lets go somewhere and get real drunk. Let’s get so drunk we wake up in Venice. Let’s get so drunk that we wake up married to each other.

RUBY: I’m only 15.

LONNY: Ah well God love ya! Your whole life is stretched out before ya like a skyful’o’tinsel. Don’t you worry. These are lucky days! Anything is possible. Come on, come down. The only thing people are dyin’ of down here is pure bloody joy! Most days I’d never tell ya to come down...but today aint one of ‘em.

Ruby comes down to the ground.
Lonny gives her a big friendly kiss.

LONNY: I gotta confession to make...
Reg Cribb

RUBY: What?

LONNY: I'm not Fred Astaire. 
I’m Bob *Hope*! 
Ha ha!

*He dances off into the victory celebrations.* 
*Ruby watches him go.*
Recipe for Risotto

Josephine Clarke

Call the family in. Tell them to be ready at the right time.
Remind them of where they come from—
butter from the Alps, rice from the sodden Lombardy plains,
their nonni from lines of brothers,
the Goldfields, the woodline,
to abandoned shacks in the karri.

Cover the base of the pan with white butter.
Let it sing.
Add onion thinly sliced, garlic finely chopped
and saffron from the autumn crocus.
When you arrive at a yellowing chorus
drop the rice in:
three handfuls for each one at the table,
two extra for the dead in the room.
Recall those times you could not afford such extravagance.
Let the wooden spoon keep the rice moving in quavers.
At the high translucent C, add a glass of wine,
carefully chosen—it will bring another voice to the ground base.

When you draw from the simmering stock
remember where eggs come from,
how much of a hen we use in our lives.
Keep the rice covered in her relinquishing.
It is the hen’s gift to the rice, make certain it is received.
As soon as the rice has gorged itself—*sostenuto,*
hold on to that note,
the journeys,
the sacrifices.
Add cheese, more butter
—light a candle.
Put the lid on.
Don’t let in any forgetting.
The body crosses over quickly

but characters stay behind
and roam ghosted streets.

Shuffling their feet,
they look for shops no longer there

and squabble urgently
in an inaudible language.

Should one make an effort
and force stories out

or allow the body to just sit, invisible,
amidst its irrelevant geography
and enjoyable clutter

and let the imagination
migrate at its own pace
a language an eon?

The outward gaze
compares tree shapes to remembered trees
colours of landscape to remembered colours
Drinks from surrounding faces
to quench old thirsts
kindle new tastes

the invisible parallels unfurl
to tape-measure the distance
between us and us
between home and home.
am I not?

Janet Jackson

in stark black lines on white
the cane toad
with lumps and warts drawn as rounds and discs
inked eyes
a curve as a hint of tongue
comes out of the night
with its croak: am I not?
am I not, too,
made for some
place?
The light of a full moon, bronzed by the smoke rising from the two Burnt Islands, lightened the high bulk of Santorini as the ferry crossed the caldera towards the mooring. The air was faintly sulphurous.

‘Walpurgis night,’ Martin said.

Eugenia snuggled closer to him. ‘I wonder what vampires do when they retire,’ she said.

Before they left Athens, a Greek friend, Anna, had told them that some Greeks believed that vampires retired to the island, although she had not explained what retirement meant for vampires.

The ferry anchored a hundred metres from the floodlit quay. Several launches headed towards it. On the quay there was a bustle like a Middle Eastern bazaar. About thirty mules and donkeys and their muleteers—men and boys—jostled to be closest to the edge. Martin and Eugenia were able to board the first launch but, when they reached the quay, they were separated in the crush of muleteers clamouring to be hired. Martin called to Eugenia to wait for him at the top. He had a sudden seizure of panic that she might disappear; they had met only a few weeks before.
He mounted the nearest donkey. It was one of those brownish grey donkeys common in Greece, with the dark crucifix mark along the spine and down the shoulders. Greeks claimed that it celebrated the donkey that Christ rode on Palm Sunday. He clutched his bag with one hand, the pommel of the saddle with the other. As soon as the donkey felt his weight, it set off, swaying impatiently at each sharp turn of the steep, zigzag path. The cobbles were worn to glassy smoothness, so it had to tread like a cat, its head bowed to inspect the path—or from weariness. Occasionally, as if to remind the rider of the risks, it moved dangerously close to the low stone wall, swayed, and tilted him towards the precipitous drop. The climb may have seemed more frightening at night—the darkness exaggerating both height and steepness. Beyond the range of the floodlights, the water of the caldera was black. The base of the rising smoke from the islands glowed faintly red.

Eugenia called to him when he reached the top. Martin took her arm and turned left along the narrow path at the rim of the caldera, as most of the passengers headed in the opposite direction towards the centre of town. They found a small hotel, and took a room at the front. As they had been among the first to land, they were in bed when the muleteers took their beasts home along the path. The clip-clop of their passage was muffled, either by the thick pumice blocks of the hotel’s walls, or because their hooves were unshod, so that they could be sure-footed on the glassy cobbles. They turned to each other and spoke, simultaneously.

‘Face the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen ride by.’

Eugenia, although of Greek parentage, had been brought up in England. When Martin murmured ‘Masefield,’ she replied, ‘No Kipling’. He was chagrined to realise that she was right.

They explored the town of Thira in the morning, in pleasant sunshine under a blue sky. It was a classic Kykladean scene of white cubist houses with blue shutters and doors and blue-domed churches strung out along the edge of the steep slope. The cats, sleeping on balconies and flat roofs, seemed to be posing for another poster—even
those that were half-starved and mangy. On the far side of the town, a pumice mine was a pale grey scar against the nearly black volcanic rock marbled with narrow bands, sometimes fantastically convoluted, of red, green, bisque, yellow, cobalt, and mauve. Pumice dust rose from the metal chute down which ore plunged to a freighther moored at the loading jetty. A grey scum fanned out over the calm water.

They found a taverna for an early lunch. Martin ordered a bottle of the local wine, one of half a dozen different brands of rosé. The bottles had crudely printed labels, every brand showing a volcano erupting. Their names evoked the geological violence: *Ephaisteon* (volcano), *Seismos* (earthquake), and *Lava*. He chose *Seismos*, which seemed marginally least threatening. It was fresh and *spritzig*.

‘I’m surprised that they can grow anything on this soil,’ he said.

The soil was dry, ashy, and porous; any rain that fell on it sank immediately, leaving scarcely any trace on the surface. The cisterns were frequently empty and drinking water had then to be shipped to the island in tankers. In the tiny bathroom at the hotel, there was a sign: **DO NOT LAVISH THE WATER.**

Eugenia held out her glass. Noticing that Martin was rolling a mouthful around his tongue, she said. ‘Don’t.’ She did not want him to pronounce judgement. ‘Just enjoy it.’

They had a second small bottle to accompany the crusty bread they used to soak up the olive oil on their plates. The wine and the warmth made them drowsy, so they returned to the hotel for a siesta, followed by languid lovemaking. It did not seem possible that they had known each other for such a little time. Martin rolled over. In the shaded room, Eugenia’s skin glowed golden. He leaned towards her and licked her shoulder. His tongue tingled as it had when he sipped the wine.

‘Efgenia!’ He insisted—having only recently learned the language—on pronouncing her name in the Greek way. ‘Effy…that stuff Anna said about vampires…’ His voice was husky and his tongue still too affected by alcohol for clear articulation.

Eugenia nodded drowsily.
‘She also said,’ Martin continued, ‘that some Greeks can’t stay for long on the island. After a day or two, something in the atmosphere gets to them. How do you feel? You’re Greek, after all. Do you feel haunted?’

She did not like the qualification, after all. ‘No! Hungry,’ she said and swung her legs off the bed and reached for her clothes.

Her delight in all sensual pleasures had attracted him to her from the first. She loved food, but something in her burned it up so that she was, although well shaped, not plump. His gaze lingered on her waist, and the dimple where her spine ended above her buttocks.

Over the evening meal, they planned an excursion to Akrotiri on the following day. It was fortuitous that a large part of this Minoan town, on the southwest tip of the island, had narrowly missed destruction when almost half the island was blown away.

In the morning, the wind sounded ominous, moaning around the exposed hotel, suggesting that later it would be a buffeting gale. Martin jumped when he touched the brass door handle.

‘Static electricity,’ he said. ‘The wind sounds ominous.’

‘It’s probably a meltemi,’ Eugenia said. ‘It’s the worst of the summer gales.’

When they went out for a late breakfast, the sky was hazy. The plume of pumice dust from the mine works reached well out across the caldera, mingling with the darker plumes from the Burnt Islands.

The bus to Akrotiri passed through fields of vines, tomatoes and small plots of pistachio. The soil on this, lower part of the island had been laid down earlier, giving it time to rust into fertility. The vines were not supported on wires or trellises, but sprawled on the dry, gritty soil. Some longer canes were intertwined to form circles like large wreaths. The uncultivated ground between fields gleamed with yellow chrysanthemums. Here and there, the dry bed of a torrent slashed the earth. The wind, rising by the hour, whipped up dust clouds, which, here, were red, not grey.
David Hutchison

Martin noticed that Eugenia moved a little away from him on the seat. He felt the pressure of her thigh against his lessen and then cease. He looked at her. She seemed a little peaky.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes!’ She sounded curt. He was not convinced when she added, ‘Just too warm.’

There were few visitors at the site. Martin was glad that they could walk around the excavated streets almost on their own. The houses, preserved and supported for so long by volcanic ash, resembled those still being built in villages throughout Greece: simple box shapes. In a clear space under the extensive corrugated iron roof, were hundreds of large *pithoi*—terracotta storage jars.

‘Ali Baba,’ Martin muttered.

Eugenia did not respond.

Apart from these big jars and the magnificent frescoes, the guidebook noted that few domestic artefacts had been found—and no human remains. The Minoans remained mysterious. Most of them must have been alerted by early tremors and sailed away from the island before the catastrophe.

‘I find it hard to connect with them…Minoans,’ Martin said. ‘They left so little here. I wonder if they really looked like those people in the frescoes.’

He turned. Eugenia was walking slowly back towards the entrance. He called after her and she turned. In the orange light—sunlight filtered by dust—she had taken on the colour of one of the women in the frescoes, which he had seen reconstructed in the museum in Athens.

‘It’s too stifling…I’ll wait outside,’ she said.

Martin walked on.

‘Rot! It’s superstition!’ The voice was American. A middle-aged man in denim shirt and jeans, wearing white sneakers, held out a book towards Martin, pointing to an open page. Martin took the book and,
leaving a finger at the page, closed it to look at the cover. There was a photograph of Thira on the jacket. It was Lawrence Durrell’s *The Greek Islands*.

‘Read that bit,’ the man said, pointing to a paragraph when Martin re-opened the book.

Evangelos Baikas of Akrotiri had this comment to make upon the excavations just concluded. He said, ‘This summer my family could not work in the fields because of the ghosts. In the mountain that came from the sea, there are ghosts where now they make excavations. I saw them. One morning when I went to collect the tomatoes and it was not yet sunrise, a big white light covered a great ghost, covered with a shield. There were many, all in movement, yet they looked firm. They went towards the sea in the direction opposite from the sunrise to escape from the light, which goes towards the west.

The wind roared outside and the eerie orange light dimmed noticeably. Martin handed back the book.

‘It is a bit eerie though…the light, the ruins,’ he said. ‘I wonder if it was Atlantis.’

He found Eugenia huddled in the shelter of the bus stop. Despite the colour of the light, she looked pale. ‘Are you alright? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’

She looked at him, sloe-eyed like those women in the frescoes. ‘Don’t be silly.’

She sounded nervy. Martin wondered if it was the electricity in the air.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, edgily. ‘Perhaps we should go back. The wind’s getting up and I’ve seen all I want to see.’

She allowed herself to be pulled up from the seat but resisted being drawn closer to him, and released his hands as soon as she was
stead on her feet. The bus arrived, with its headlights on, covered with dust.

Fortunately, they had closed the windows of their room and little of the dust had penetrated. Eugenia shook herself.

‘Ugh! I feel filthy. Grit in my hair...my teeth...’

Martin stroked her hair, feeling the fine grains of pumice. There was a crackle of static electricity as she pulled away from him quickly. He glanced at his palm. It was grimy. Eugenia undressed slowly in the gloom and went to the bathroom where she stayed a long time.

‘Don’t lavish the water,’ Martin called. ‘I want a shower, too.’

She did not answer. He undressed while he waited. When she came out, wrapped in a grimy towel, she said nothing as she lay down on the bed. He went to shower. When he was stepping out of the confined cubicle, he cut his shoulder on a piece of wire projecting from the reinforced glass screen.

‘Damn!’ He wiped the steamy mirror and turned his back on it, peering in the gloom at the small cut, which was bleeding. He dried himself quickly. The towel had flecks of blood on it. He pulled several tissues from a box and stood beside the bed, holding them out to Eugenia.

‘I cut myself. Can you stop the bleeding, please?’

He lay down with his back to her. She dabbed at the cut with a tissue and then applied her lips to the small wound and sucked powerfully. He pulled away sharply, feeling ridiculous as he did so.

‘Just put a bit of tissue on it. The blood’ll dry soon.’

She held a piece of tissue against the cut with her thumb for a few minutes and then rolled away from him and drew the sheet over herself. The room was beginning to feel chill. She was soon asleep. Martin lay for a while and then dressed and went out. The wind had eased, but the air was still full of dust. At the travel agency, he inquired about an earlier ferry to Andros, the island they planned to move to in three day’s time.
‘There’s one at nine tomorrow evening,’ he was told. ‘If the wind
dies down and it can moor. Do you want a cabin? It’s overnight.’

He asked the woman to pencil in a reservation to be confirmed in
the morning.

They left the ferry at Gavrion on the west coast of Andros to travel
by bus about twenty kilometres along the coast and then, across the
island through a fertile valley, with many walnut trees, to the capital
Andros. Among the flowers along the way, Jerusalem sage, poppy and
sage dominated. The farms looked prosperous and most of the houses
were larger and better finished than on other Kykladean islands.
Many houses had old Venetian dovecots, although few seemed to
house doves.

The bus dropped them at the upper end of the town where a
barrier prevented vehicles from entering the lower part on a narrow,
rocky promontory. The road beyond the barrier was marble-paved
and the cubist villas on either side were large and well built. All
had elaborate doors of carved pine, and blue shutters. They were the
houses of rich ship-owners.

They found a modest hotel about half way down the promontory
and took a room, which had a balcony overlooking a small plateia
with a church on the far side. Two large daphne trees in the plateia
were in full bloom. At dusk, tiny Scops owls perched on the electric
power lines and hawked for moths gathering to the sweetly perfumed
blossoms.

‘It’ll be quiet here, without cars. We can leave the door open on to
the balcony,’ Martin said.

Eugenia looked less peaky; the short sea trip must have done
her good. One of the owls uttered two piping calls, like notes
from a panpipe. In a nearby street, they found a quiet, clean
taverna where they dined well and drank a soft, pink retsina with
a peaceful name and label. It did not prickle the tongue like the
Santorini wines.
Martin was glad that Eugenia was more at ease. However, she turned away from him when they went to bed early.

‘Not yet,’ she said.

At least it was not permanent.

Rain fell during the night, softly and unheard, leaving no more than a heavy dew in the morning. The breeze had veered to a different quarter and was fresh and dust-free. They packed a frugal breakfast of bread, feta, and dried figs and walked to the inland end of the prosperous town. There they entered a marble-paved lane, running southwest between high stone walls, past more large villas, towards fields lush with weeds and wildflowers, shaded by large pine trees. Unlike most of the Kyklades, the island was well watered, fecund.

At the end of the lane, the landscape opened out. The fences around the small fields were made of large standing stones alternating with horizontal stacks of similar slabs. The standing stones, still wet with rain, shone in the morning light; the hills appeared to be strung with sparkling necklaces.

Eugenia took Martin’s hand. He turned to her and said, ‘Effy…’

‘Please don’t call me Effy or Efgenia any more,’ she said. ‘Say Eugenia…the English way.’

‘OK!’ he said, trying not to sound offended. ‘I just…’

She touched his lips with her fingers. ‘No need to explain.’

She reached up, pulled down his head, and kissed him reflectively.

‘Hello Martin.’ She sighed. ‘I feel I’ve come back.’

‘From where?’

‘Some kind of…of distraction…I’m sorry.’

‘What happened, back there on Santorini?’

‘I’m not sure any more. It was like a dream, a nightmare…While I was waiting for you at the bus shelter…A sudden blaze of light and…’

She clutched his arm. ‘A crowd of shadowy figures.’

‘An illusion.’
‘It didn’t seem like it.’
‘All that haze, the dust, the setting sun...Small clouds, perhaps, eddying with the wind.’
‘No! Figures! They moved towards the sea and disappeared...towards the west.’ Her eyes clouded with puzzlement.
‘Eugenia!’ He folded her in his arms. He was sure that she had seen mirages, or had suffered hallucinations brought on by the oppressive meltemi. He was on the point of saying this.
‘Don’t explain,’ she said.
He sensed that she did not want the wonder—or the terror—to be denied.
This Rainstick

Jenny de Garis

This rainstick
is a wash of sounds
    shingle on a Shetland beach
    wind lifting dune-sands on Orkney
    a magician’s wand
    baring Skara Brae
    like the curls of a fossil

The seeds in the stick stir memory
beyond this skull-shell that
houses my thought

Summer solstice in a long fog
I remember—lured by an island
—launching out
    across an isthmus like a mooring rope
the sea unseen on either side
my lifetime floating in mist
midday and midnight the same strange light

I recall exactly the cliff we climbed
to arrive at the tiny island’s human marking
where the monks left beaten silver hidden
    —and their bones
Another summer comes
to Western Australia where I
upend the stick in Kambarang
—the Nyungar season of decreasing rain
November gardens gasp
and air is a weight on the skin
I will go out
and tilt the rainstick
near my wilting plants

Let the music
of the stick
rain on dry ground
wherever this may be
fill cracks and fissures
whisper into creek beds
sluice the hills
till rivulet
is river
heading for
the sea
All around, subdued resistance sings
in high leaves, the rustle and shift
of dignitaries in silken robes
restless in dark galleries above,
the whisper of black fire somewhere,
the threat of rain or storm or war.

Low over water, among the shadows,
disgruntlement slinks in, shadowed ducks,
the mutter and gossip of smaller folk,
a malingering gull’s last complaint, all this
half drowned by the sea’s great insurrection,
the blur and roar of a city’s brim,
unseen beyond the Nullaki.

Myriads of arcs and curves assuage
the inlet’s hundred bays, blossoming
through a million rays, all tending to one
elusive locus of eccentricity. I crouch to smell
and taste the water’s dimpled skin,
as loose as silk, as grey as lead,
to cool my brow on the great calm mind
of one small bay.
The smoke and lights of home
are cloaked by trees; I can’t know where
she waits for me. Running in the dark
from the lookout, blind with the memory
of house lights below, like lit coals
smouldering in the dark forest’s crib,
a bat’s wing brushed my face
as soft as any woman’s cheek.
Now I hover breathless, waiting,
dipping my hand into the landlocked sea
of forty-seven winters.
Those Rottnest Bags

Tim Edwards

Back then they came to the island,
Stamped with the red imprint,
of that famous dingo;
traces of flour,
still powdered into the seams.

But there were soon dragged,
up tracks of shifting sand,
their mouths brimming,
with tails and vacant eyes;
their sides punctured,
by the needle bones of flared fins.

On the long wobbly ride home,
they sat moist and plump,
in wire baskets,
or old milk crates,
their skin glistening with beach sand,
and the shaved glass of fish scales.

Stiffened by gut and sea water,
they wore the bad bleeds,
like a badge of honour—
became small starched flags,
hung to dry,
on the cottage clotheslines.
Abby came in as I packed fruit between the marked assignments in my brief-case on the kitchen bench. Her hair curtained her face; one leg of her Little Miss pyjamas was hitched higher up her thigh. She tried to pass into the kitchen but I edged across the opening a little and she drew back. She flicked her hair behind her. Her dark eyes stared, but I was stunned by how lovely they were. I looked for signs of remorse but couldn’t see any.

‘Good morning,’ I said.

She shifted her weight onto one leg.

‘Where’s Dad?’

‘He left early.’

I spread my arms on either side of me, forming a triangle with the bench top. My fingers curled under the laminated surface. Abby rolled her eyes.

‘Can I get some breakfast?’

‘In a minute.’ I leant forward onto my hands. ‘Do you realise how late you were?’

‘Oh, c’mon!’

‘I said eleven, and you deliberately disobeyed me.’
‘I didn’t…do it…on purpose,’ she replied loudly, as if I was slow to understand. ‘I thought Letiesha was watching the time.’

‘It was your responsibility to be home on time.’

‘I bet Dad doesn’t care. Why do you have to go mental over it?’

I winced. Why wasn’t Martin here to help me? I gripped the bench top harder. The flaking chipboard underneath the laminate caught in my fingernails. Abby’s curls swung about her face as she paced the floor.

‘That’s it Abby. This is your last term before your exams. I’m not going to let you stuff it up.’

‘What the?’

You won’t be going out with friends again until the exams are over.’

‘Oh, get real!’

‘In a few months you can go to all the parties you want.’

‘That’s not fair! It’s one mistake!’

‘One too many. You’ll take our faith in you more seriously next time.’

‘Your faith?’ Abby spat. ‘You didn’t want me to go anyway. I heard you and Dad fighting about it.’

‘Well, I was right then.’

Abby pushed the heel of her hands into her eyes and lifted her shoulders. I sensed the effort she was making to try and contain herself, and suddenly I felt uncertain, as if I was the one pushing the limits. It felt familiar. My mother and I in that position, circling each other and never meeting in the centre.

‘Abby...’ I began more softly, but she cut me off.

‘Just stop controlling me!’

‘I’m trying to help you...to get through this year...you know?’

She drew herself up to full height, still just short of mine. I flinched. She glared at me.

‘Then just leave me alone,’ she said. ‘Cos your help sucks.’

Her words hit me in the chest. I quivered inwardly. I knew better than to let Abby think that words said in anger were irreparable. And
there was nothing that I was prepared to return against her. But she must have seen the pity flicker in my eyes. She sucked in her breath and spun around. It looked like a cat-o-nine-tails, the way her hair whipped around the doorway and out of sight. A door slammed, shattering me in its wake.

I travel away from the city in the mornings, so there are always plenty of seats. Around me people slouched against blue velvet upholstery. Some yawned; some tried to extend the time they had to themselves with books or ear buds that connected to their pockets or bags. Discordant rhythms drummed softly. I felt heavy and reclusive, as if Abby’s anger clung to me and I didn’t know what to do with it.

At the next station a woman I couldn’t remember seeing before got on the train. She was tall and very pregnant. She carried a small handbag, a book and a travel mug. The sight of the mug irritated me. *Doesn’t she know that eating and drinking aren’t allowed on the train?* She sat on the seat opposite me, tucked the mug between her knees and opened her book to a marker half way through. *Life After Birth*, read the yellow title above a black and white photo of a woman and child playing and laughing.

I stared at the woman, noting each detail, pausing sentimentally on her belly. I remembered how my own body had felt; purposefully pushing outwards in curves I was proud of. Now my remnant paunch was a nuisance.

I judged the woman to be a little older than me, yet her clothes were like a girl’s. She wore red knee-length pants with bows at the hems, and a pale orange top with puffy sleeves. But her face had the seasoned markings of middle age. Her skin, free of make-up and freckled, fell in tiny terraces underneath her eyes. Her red hair was grey at the temples, and drawn back from her forehead with plastic combs. When she moved the curls bounced perkily. Above strappy silver sandals her calves were firm and also freckled. I crossed my legs, blotched purple at the back by childbearing.
She sat very straight, holding her book high above her belly, sipping occasionally from her mug. There was an air of unburdened optimism about her that I, churning with disappointment over the fight with Abby, almost resented. Then it occurred to me that this might be her first pregnancy. The unflattering term that I’d heard doctors use for older first-time mothers came to me. *Elderly prima gravida.* There was something satisfying about the way the phrase distinguished me from this woman. I recounted, almost smugly, that when I’d cradled my babies’ heads, the skin on the back of my hands had been taut like new sheets; that the breasts I’d fed them with had been high and firm. I sighed. Back then, I hadn’t understood what childbearing and aging would do to me. Even though I did, in time, lose most of my pregnancy weight, my body has never been the same. Now, my skin is stretched, my muscles lax.

We travelled past choking queues of city-bound traffic. I wondered about the woman. *What kind of life did she lead? Was she married?* Then she looked up from her book directly at me, interrupting my thoughts. I turned away to look down the carriage.

The train slowed near a station and she stood up, fumbling to stop the mug falling to the floor. At the door people gave her a wide berth. She nodded slightly, confidently claiming the space offered her. As a young expectant mother, I’d been shy of that sort of attention, yet now I envied the way her body accorded her special status. She stepped onto the platform without a backward glance. I watched her curls bobbing over the top of the other commuters’ heads. As the train pulled away my eyes followed her along the ramp, hoping to see which direction she took, but my view of the station disappeared quickly.

My stop was next. Only a few people got off at this time of the morning; twenty minutes later the platform would be swarming with teenagers. I flipped open my phone while I jostled through the small crowd, pressed Martin’s name into the phone and reached his message service. It was seven forty-five. *Where is he?* I spoke quickly after the prompt.
‘It’s me. Can you ring me during recess? And…thanks for sticking around to see Abby this morning!’

I shoved the phone back into my bag and looked around to see if I’d been overheard. The platform was empty, but I still blushed. I flattened my hair back over my head and held the ends against my neck. I imagined Martin hearing the message and how annoyed he would be at my sarcasm and at being put off guard at work. I wondered if I would hear from him.

The cold in the underpass swamped me. I walked through the tunnel, its blue tiles sprayed in black and silver graffiti. Out in the street the crossing guard was still placing his flags, so I had to wait for the traffic. I stepped on to the road during a short break and skipped across both lanes quicker than I normally would. The thrill of playing with Martin’s temper fired my step. Why should he be spared the brunt of it, the awfulness of Abby’s rage?

I slowed down on the hill towards the high school. Spats with Abby, like the one that morning, were increasingly frequent. Some days I felt I’d barely recovered from one before another hit. Does she feel the same?

The departmental office was empty when I got there. Stacks of photocopied worksheets lay in criss-crossed piles on my desk, nudging a framed photo of the kids. A pink Post-it note curled away from the top sheet. Caroline’s handwriting read, Let’s talk at recess. C. I tapped the note nervously, toying with ways to get out of the meeting. My phone beeped. I assumed it was Martin, but the message read, basktbl 2day hom 5. I felt my face drop and realized I’d been frowning. Abby was good at letting me know where she was; reminding me of her schedules. Was I being too hard about last night?

After school I went down to the back of the garden to bring in the washing. Strong winds had blown all day, so the clothes and linen were unusually soft. I struggled to swing a sheet back over the clothes line so that I could find its pegs, but the breeze continued to play with
Helena Kadmos

it and it parachuted above me in a blue cloud. Martin hadn’t rung me back, and my convictions from this morning were waning. I pulled too hard on the sheet and tangled myself in it. When I heard someone call for me the sound was muffled, as if very far away. I was tempted to stay hidden. I pulled the sheet from my head and looked back at the house.

Paul leant against the back door, his long hair a red splash against the white doorframe. His jeans bowed outwards as he slouched. He held a pick between his fingers. So he’d been home long enough to get his guitar out. I called to him but my voice was lost in the flapping sheet. I pushed the folds away from my face and saw a shadow pass behind Paul. He turned, said something into the room, and went inside. I knew it was Abby he was talking to. The sky went blue again and I grabbed onto the sheets and drew the corners into my mouth. The air I sucked through them tasted of lemons.

Inside I folded the sheets and carried them into the hallway. Both bedroom doors were shut, but I could hear Paul’s playing. All semester he’d worked on a composition and it was nearly finished. He strummed, plucked and slapped the guitar in the new style he was practising. I tapped on his door and pushed it open. The music stopped.

‘That sounds great,’ I said. ‘I like it where you pick up the tempo and then drop back again.’

‘Coo!’ he said.

It amazed me that young people could abbreviate such a small word. But I knew that Paul didn’t really need my opinion. He was just tolerating the praise for my sake.

He started playing the section I’d referred to, strumming with extra flourish as he made his way towards the door. He smiled and lifted one silver-studded eyebrow into mock arrogance. When I looked up into his face I couldn’t see anything of the little boy that my life had once revolved around, cuddling and nursing him constantly. After Abby was born, he’d never let me wander from his sight for long before he came looking for me. Somewhere along the way, his nervous
apprehension had given way to the confidence he now strutted before me. When he reached the door he bent down and kissed the top of my head. Smiling, I pushed him away with my elbows. I nodded to the loose manuscript and clothing that littered the floor.

‘Clean up that mess when you’re finished,’ I said. He scowled and drew his pick down onto the strings in a loud, hard chord.

It was silent behind Abby’s door. I edged closer to it and leant against the surface.

‘Hello, Abby.’

She grunted back a short reply. As I rested there, my daughter felt far away, and the barrier between us seemed greater than the thickness of the door. My cheek peeled off the door when I moved.

‘Dinner’ll be ready soon.’

At the cupboard in the hallway where we keep the linen, I squeezed the sheets into the only empty spaces I could find. As I stepped back to shut the door, a pink plastic arm fell with a rustling sound out of a brown paper bag on the top shelf. Crammed up there were things we didn’t use anymore. The arm belonged to Abby’s first baby doll. I couldn’t remember packing it away. Its fingers curled as if beckoning.

I stood on tip-toe to push the arm back into the bag, which moved a little, revealing a patch of light coloured wicker. I gasped, as though I’d stumbled upon a fragile living thing. I lifted down the small basket carefully. Inside, a blue and white cloth covered an old coffee set that I’d bought when Paul was very young. Its small cups and saucers, cream coloured with gold rims, made a much better tea set than the plastic ones from toy shops. It was nearly complete; only the lid of the coffee pot had broken in all the years we’d used it. I fingered the china gently. The tiny handle on the cup only just fit between the pads of my fingertips.

I looked up at the shelf again and remembered other cupboards and drawers around the house that I hadn’t opened for years: dark, silent spaces filled with objects that were important to us once. Those places had helped to order a world that spilled randomly about me
when the kids were young. I’d delved in and out of those cupboards every day.

It occurred to me that many items had at some point been used for the last time without me being aware of it. How had I stored these cups? Had I shoved them into the basket carelessly, assuming they’d be brought out again, while my eyes followed a trail of Lego that also needed clearing? Would I have handled them differently if I’d known I was putting them away for good? I thought of the woman on the train collecting the bits and pieces that come with babies and early childhood. The time between the beginning and the end of infancy seemed hazy to me. I suddenly wished it was very clear. Standing in the hallway in front of the accumulated contents of my family’s life, fingering a small china cup, I felt as though I’d missed something important, almost sacred.

I was reading in bed when Martin came home. I watched him undress, slowly and deliberately, like he always does. He pulled his shirt off and hung it over the back of the chair.

‘I spoke to Abby,’ he said finally.

‘When?’

‘Just now. She’s still awake.’ Leaving his boxers on, he lifted the quilt and fell heavily into the bed.

‘I wish you’d been here this morning,’ I said. ‘We had an awful fight, and this evening she didn’t say a word all though dinner.’

He closed his eyes. Soft pockets of skin settled on his cheekbones.

‘I told you I had a meeting.’

‘Last week, maybe?’

I waited, but the urge to prompt him became too strong.

‘Well? What did you say...to Abby?’

He lifted onto one elbow, bracing himself.

‘That parties aren’t a good idea until her exams are over.’

My relief that Martin had backed me up was bittersweet. He’d made me wait for it, but had proved, once again, that we really did work
together. Our show of unity made me suddenly sorry for Abby. I put my book on the side table and slid under the sheets. Martin’s fingers stroked my thigh. I focussed on the ceiling where the cornice above the bed was freckled with mildew. Abby hated me, and somehow I felt that it was linked to Martin.

‘Why am I the bad guy?’
‘Because…you’re here.’
I turned, twisting my nightie under my waist.
‘And where are you, Martin?’
His head jerked back slightly and he rolled back on to the pillow, letting his hand slide off me. I hadn’t meant to push him away. I leant over him. My breasts fell against the bodice of my nightie and through the opening they looked elongated, almost foreign. Their emptiness made me feel vulnerable and for a second I mourned the loss of their old fullness. I lay on his chest and looked into his face. I buried my hand in the thick, grey-flecked curls behind his ear.

‘Do you remember the tea set?’ I asked. ‘The one I bought for Paul, for his second birthday, I think.’
Martin ran his fingers lightly over my back.
‘The one Paul used for tea parties?’
‘I found it today. There’s so much lying around this house we’ve forgotten about.’
‘Are you hinting it’s time for a clean out?’
‘No…maybe.’
I reached across, turned off the lamp and moved back to my side of the bed. But in the dark I felt unsettled again. After several minutes I spoke.

‘I…don’t want her to go, you know. Abby, I mean. I’m…I’m not sure what I’ll be, when the kids aren’t here anymore.’
Martin groaned as if I’d woken him.
‘You’ll be a grandmother,’ he joked, digging me in the ribs.
‘Don’t be stupid.’ I turned away from him. Tears pricked my eyes and I was ashamed of them. Martin didn’t respond straight away. Then he nudged closer and I felt his lips against my ear.
‘You should go for that head of department position,’ he whispered.
‘I’d never get it,’ I said, annoyed that he was missing the point.
‘You might,’ said Martin. ‘Didn’t Caroline ask you to apply?’
‘She tried to catch me today, but I made excuses.’
‘Jenny, you’d be great at it.’
‘It’s the time. I’d have to go in earlier, stay late.’
‘So? You don’t have to be here every afternoon anymore.’
‘I know!’ I snapped. ‘Still, I miss them you know. It’s silly, but...I loved it.’

Martin pulled me towards him.
‘The early days? You were always exhausted. You never had a minute to yourself.’

*Is that what it was like?* There were days, I remembered, long and difficult, that felt as though they’d never end.

‘There was more to it than that,’ I said softly. ‘I think it mattered to Paul and Abby that I was there. I think it sort of made me too, somehow; staying focussed on one thing. Well...that’s how I thought of it then.’

‘There’s more to come,’ he said. He yawned and buried his face deeper in my neck. ‘We’re not free of them yet.’

I cupped his hand in mine. He still hadn’t got it. It wasn’t just about the children. But thinking about it now, and Abby growing up, and the doll in the cupboard, I was reminded, warmly, of a time and place that I’d left behind a long time ago.

His arm was heavy and I knew it would keep me awake. I lay still and waited until the slowing of his breath told me that he was asleep.

My bare feet stuck to the boards as I walked quietly across the room. In the hallway I stood on a chair and pulled the bags down carefully from the top of the linen cupboard. In other rooms I fished out boxes from the backs of cabinets. I carried them all into the lounge room and sat on the floor in a small circle of lamplight. Wide awake, I sorted through the odds and ends of a life I hadn’t thought about for a long time.
I’d kept our favourite picture books, as many as fitted into a cardboard box. There was the one about a little girl who loved to build cubby houses, and *Chubby Engine* which I knew by heart. I needed to read it, then and there, trying it silently at first, but that didn’t work. I had to whisper to get the intonation that felt right.

‘I am a chubby engine. I work the chubby line. I have a chubby coal car, it keeps me running fine.’ Some of the pictures were familiar, as if I’d seen them just days before; some were new all over again.

I brought a bowl of soapy water to the floor and sponged Abby’s doll, scrubbing a stain off the hair-like grooves in the plastic scalp. In a storage box I found Paul’s Duplo. He’d spent hours building skyscrapers and trains and ships. Martin and I thought he’d be an engineer. But only a few years ago he surprised us by wanting to be a musician.

In the bottom of a kitchen cupboard I fished out the wooden tray that I’d used with the tea set. With flowers, a plate of sandwiches, and a pot of “honey tea”, it had been a favourite in the garden for picnics. The intricately carved ridge that formed handles at the ends was dusty. I wiped it clean.

I stayed up for hours. There were some things I couldn’t find. Abby had a pink corduroy dress that Mum had bought her. I’d loved it and was sure I hadn’t given it away. But I couldn’t find it. I wondered what I’d been thinking when I’d passed it on. When I thought about the dress, and other items I no longer had, I wished I could touch them just once more. So I took great care now to notice each thing. There were some that I just couldn’t let go of. There was no predictable pattern to my choosing, but a sense that a particular cup or book or string of beads contained some of the sweetest memories. For all those, I found a place in the cupboards again. Then I cast aside the items that held no memories or promises anymore, into boxes for the Salvation Army or for friends with young children. And I dwelled for a moment, on every decision that I made.
In the hallway I balanced the tray on one arm and knocked lightly on the door. I opened it without waiting for a reply. Abby was under the quilt. I’d bought the cover, printed with large frangipani flowers, when we redecorated the room for her tenth birthday. It matched the white furniture and purple walls, now covered with posters of pop stars and a pouting Keira Knightly, Abby’s favourite actress. The flowers on the quilt had lost their intense colour. I wondered why I hadn’t noticed its shabbiness before.

Abby’s hair spread behind her on the pillow. She looked warily from under the sheet.

‘I thought you might like breakfast in bed,’ I said.

‘O-kay,’ she murmured with exaggerated suspicion. She sat up against the wall. Her feet neared the end of the bed. I placed the tray on her lap. Buttered toast, and a Milo. A hibiscus flower alongside the cup was already closing.

‘The picnic tray!’ Against the wall Abby’s curls gave her an odd halo. ‘I haven’t seen it in ages.’

At the foot of the bed I stooped to pick up a blouse from the floor. It was white and as slippery as water. It slid over my fingers onto the end of the bed. I wasn’t expecting anything and didn’t see Abby’s face when she spoke again.

‘Thanks, Ma…for the toast.’

I hadn’t gone back to bed until the early hours of the morning and now tiredness nagged at me, but I wasn’t bothered by it. Abby’s toes made small peaks under the quilt. I quickly pinched them. They didn’t retract.

‘You need a new bed. I could take you next week, if you want to go looking.’ I glanced around the room. ‘And maybe on the holidays we could freshen the walls up a bit.’

‘Who’ll pick the colour?’ she asked.

‘You, of course.’

Her eyes widened. I was pleased to see that in spite of her attempts at times to make me feel irrelevant, I could still surprise my daughter.
The pregnant woman boarded the train again. She walked towards me and I tried to catch her eye, thinking she might recognise me. She sat next to me and glanced, smiling politely. I nodded back. Her body spread outwards unapologetically. In several places her thigh, hip and elbow nudged me. I felt overshadowed. Her blue dress gathered at the neckline so that it ballooned over her body. There was a sense of resignation in her clothes that I pitied but understood. When Paul and Abby were babies clothes had meant little to me. I’d rarely felt that the world beyond me and the kids ever noticed me anyway. I’d felt most at home, secure even, in track suits and sandshoes. But I spend more money on clothes now, and I take more interest in how I look. I picked at miniscule beads of fabric on my beige pants.

The woman didn’t have her mug today, but the book with the mother and child on the cover poked out from a side pocket of the bag at her feet. I sensed something was different about her, something subdued: a new discomfort perhaps? Maybe it was just tiredness. I knew that her cumbersome belly would both delight and torment her. My thoughts about her the day before seemed churlish to me now. Where she was heading was, after all, a place I’d once been. Outside the window, trees blurred past in flashes of light and dark. I wondered if I could enter that passage of early motherhood at this age, as she was about to. I doubted it. Motherhood is a one-way journey. A new baby now wouldn’t be a welcome prospect. Beside me the woman was staring straight ahead. I smiled to myself. We were on different journeys, or at different stages on the same road, and mine no longer involved the exquisite illuminations and the embracing seclusion of babyhood.

I recalled that I’d seen all of my family that morning. Martin had brought me a cup of tea before he left for work. It was unexpected but very welcome after the late night I’d had. And Paul was up early for a change. Over breakfast he told me that his composition was finished, his face shining with a sense of his own brilliance. Abby had smiled gratefully when I took in her breakfast. Each a simple, but welcome gesture.
The woman stood up for her stop and wove her way through the crowd to the door. She seemed more self-conscious than she had the day before, excusing herself and apologising when she bumped against someone else. And then I looked away, staring lazily through the window, and almost missed it. As the woman squeezed through the huddle of passengers waiting to board, I saw something shadowy, like a dove, flap to the ground at her feet. The platform cleared and there was her book, its marker on the paving beside it. Its brightly lettered cover blew open and shut in the breeze. She kept walking. I moved to the edge of my seat. While the train paused there was time for me to spring up and call to her through the doors, but I didn’t. I felt suspended, as though she and I didn’t share the same universe. It seemed that if I’d called to her she wouldn’t have heard me. Although we were close in age, it seemed that years separated this stranger from me. Transfixed, I waited for someone else to see the book and run after her as she walked slowly up the ramp to the overpass, cradling her belly in her hands. No one did.

The train began to move. Slouching back against the seat, I decided that it was just tough luck about the book. The woman would find out for herself that she’d lost it. Maybe she’d turn back for it. Maybe it wasn’t important to her after all. As I travelled forward, my view of the woman on the overpass slipped away. The train hurtled through the suburb, and my thoughts turned again to the place I’d just left, as home after home flashed past the window.
The Noongar of old were tracked. Observers watched them, from afar and up close. The writer’s hand of old moved across the page, and our eyes now follow the markings they made, our eyes follow their lines and make sense of their alphabets, sure, even now as Aboriginal writers re-present themselves to the world we follow them too. For the Aboriginal hand that leaves his tracks on the page has swapped one medium for another. One such writer I regularly track. He knows this, he knows I am tracking him, so he doesn’t give too much away. I track his linguistic baggage too, baggage that holds to his fur like doublegees attached to the skin of a kangaroo. I see by the way he is hopping, he is burdened by what he carries. The linguistic continuing verb endings hook iny nj into him as he goes careering across the page. And in speech I am kaadidjiny not ‘jenny’ or ‘jinny’ not kaad-did-jinny but, I am kaad-did-jin more like him, than to the others I listen to stumbling upon the linguistic hook when they talk… As I said I have seen these linguistic hooks that lie embedded in them, and hold them down, sharp hooks they fester in their flesh like the wooden barbs of the doublegee. Now the old man who taught me, his lips danced and curled and his tongue was on fire, like kalamai waarngkaa…he would lick his words and send them on their way. How I wish I could speak like him, and track his talk along the tracks and laneways of his old pads of home.
I once wandered with him, we three his missus and me...we travelled to old haunts of his and her people.
Very often when not playing up for me, the anthropologist watching, I heard him whispering or voicing what the old ones used to say...
He was a Master of the linguistic iny nj, their hooks he’d have used as toothpicks, and doublegees had no hold on him.
And he didn’t leave words on the page, he didn’t have to.
The lands about him were his pages, and his tracks and those of the ancients lay connected.
His palimpsests and theirs lay about him, names, places and happenings and quick was his recall.
Belly laughs made him convulse, till coughing fits over took him...
The land as you know was read by him, read as text.
And his stories remain in his landscapes, his language remains to be awoken, but, I only hope, that his tracks are cleared of the doublegee and hooks that linguists will surely one day lay, hooks like fence snares for hungry kangaroos—hop beneath the wires if you dare
But then, who knows, across the page and onto the earth you will be seeing hearing ‘kaadidjin’ them bounding free to see—find their way and true form free from the hooks of the linguist inquisition and impalement...
Free from the hook, the nj that too few understand so that now their fur carries jinny-plenty of doublegees...we will all be kaadidjin, and watching the page.

Kaadidjin means thinking/listening.
Moths

Mallery Koons

Our lantern invited them in while we played Rummy. They sounded like cashews dropping into a bowl as they threw their fragile bodies against hot glass again and again. We dealt the cards, played a round, re-dealt; they thrashed. When we put out the lantern and switched on our flashlights, dazed moths flitted to the glowing beams. Our hands joined them; together we made shadows on the canvas walls: monsters chomped on moths. Now we lie up to our chins in sleeping bags, the lights off. Moths flutter towards the tent flaps where slivers of moonlight wag fingers at woolly bodies unable to escape. The soft brush of wing on fabric mimics our whispers.
Small Things

Peter Bibby

To you and me it would appear a nothing.  
Little more than a shining film, a patch  
Of damp, not so much collected  
As alighted overnight on the bitumen  
Of the practice nets, in a corner of the park.  
It’s enough for a magpie to take a drink,  
And probably makes the magpie’s morning—  
The tall trees roar, glistened by the wind,  
You and I make hay while we can,  
With delicate placement, the tip of its beak,  
The bird draws from a trace of rain.
Father Pat Canning stared at the ceiling. There was something he had to do today; he could feel it. He had heard the early morning muttering of birds and now eased himself over onto his good side, where his heart didn’t seem to be straining to pump the blood around his body. Slowly the feeling shaped itself into words that formed a sentence and then the thought emerged: this was the day of the funeral. Finally she was dead; she’d gone before him, beat him to it.

Sitting in the corner of the common room at the home, they used to laugh about it, the conspirators. She would giggle and put her hand up to her mouth, apologising to Father for such girlish behaviour. Others, sitting by themselves or in small groups, grey and wavery, would look at them. He could see the resentment in their eyes: Why didn’t he talk to them like this, have a laugh about something? If they’d asked, he would have told them, ‘Because you don’t think death is funny. You’re frightened. And Angela and I, we’re having a little competition.’

He sat on the side of his bed for a while, letting his head adjust. He’d retired, but he’d promised her he’d do it. ‘It’s not much of a deal

Transubstantiation

Richard Rossiter

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though. What do I get if I win?’ She’d looked at him and smiled. ‘My prayers, so your soul won’t burn forever in hell.’ He stood up slowly; he felt alright, certainly not hellish, but if anyone had asked him he would have replied that he didn’t feel anything, which these days was how he felt most of the time. He supposed the right word for his condition would be ‘vacant’. 

\textit{Vacare}, to be empty, to be free. Devoid of thought, reflection or expression. Not lived in. That was true. This failing body had never truly been inhabited. A convenient vessel for the mind or soul: he couldn’t really tell them apart.

Whose turn was it this time? Faidiva or Candela? Such wonderful names. Where would the Church be without them? They had faith, those women. For that matter, where would he be? With the shakes getting worse, he had trouble enough putting on his clothes, let alone the vestments. They would know, he wouldn’t have to decide between them. He made his way into the tiny kitchen and placed a saucepan on the stove to warm a little milk. He smiled as he thought how much he liked warm milk on his cereal as a child and now he’d started doing it again, not through necessity. He wasn’t a parodic toothless old man. He liked it better this way, so that’s what he’d do. The same with every other little thing in his world: he would do whatever pleased him best. Angela said he lacked self-control, that it was a good thing to forego pleasures—and that as he had so few, he would have to choose carefully to make sure he made a real sacrifice and not just a pretend one. He should have no more than one glass of wine with his dinner, and sometimes none. He should make more of an effort with other patients, or clients as they were now called, the ones who didn’t know who he was, or who they were. Presumably they meant something to God, because no one else seemed to care about them. No visitors, blank looks in their eyes, snoozing away the day, not living, but not wanting to die. He had no patience with them. It’s true, he always seemed kind and asked them pointless questions, but, watching him from her corner, she knew he couldn’t wait to get away. One pleasure that did come to mind was reading in bed. Perhaps he would give it up for lent, or limit himself to half an hour.
‘What pleasures are you willing to forego for the improvement of your soul?’ he would ask her. And each time her answer was the same. ‘I have run out of pleasures, so there is nothing for me to give up—not for lent, or any other time of the year.’

He would miss Angela.

But now he’d better get dressed and make his way to the chapel. He had promises to keep. Father Pat Canning wondered about her family, who would turn up for this funeral. She’d never married but had lots of brothers and sisters. He didn’t know how many were still alive. They said they wanted something simple, they would leave it to him to choose the readings. Without thinking, he knew which ones he would use.

He watched them moving into the chapel, some piously genuflecting, others hesitant as if troubled by some memory of a religious past; he could spot the lapsed ones from a mile away. A few chatted sociably, probably catching up with friends or relations they hadn’t seen for years. There were one or two couples who sat staring straight ahead into the emptiness, with nothing to say to each other. There were no young children present. He watched Faidiva, or was it Candela, light two candles. He watched the pall bearers, well, pall pushers really, as they adjusted their faces for the short journey down the aisle. The coffin had a single, and no doubt expensive, wreath. He rose to his feet, steadied himself, and began the service.

As he uttered the familiar words of the Mass for the Dead, *Eternal rest give to them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them*, he thought of Angela lying there in her coffin and wondered if the light had begun to shine on her in the darkness. Was she, even now, greeting the angels, her namesakes, as they bore her into everlasting life? Then he would have the last laugh. In the past year she had become increasingly cranky, turning on him as if he had offended her, saying dreadful things. At first it had been the Holy Ghost that had attracted her ire. ‘What do you think those doves are doing perched on his head?’ she’d asked him, as if he were personally responsible for the images in her mind. ‘Shitting,’ she said. ‘That’s what birds do
when they sit on you. They shit.’ In the last month she had been at her worst. She kept talking about her first communion and seemed to remember, word for word, those prayers of so long ago. She would call out in a loud voice:

‘Do you renounce Satan and all his works, and all his pomps?’
And then in a whisper, she would reply:
‘I don’t renounce Satan, especially his pomps.’ And she would turn to him, ‘Do you know about pomps, Father Canning? Is that what you do when you dress up and walk and talk in a stately fashion?’
And then back to her imperious voice:
‘Do you believe in the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?’
‘How could I?’ she would reply. ‘How is that possible?’
And then she would crouch down in her chair and look up at him and say in a clear voice: ‘If we eat not Thy Flesh and drink not Thy Blood, we shall not have life in us. Isn’t that true, Father? But you’ll have life in you, won’t you Father? All that flesh and blood. I believe that Thy Body is meat indeed and Thy Blood is drink indeed. That’s it, isn’t it Father? That’s you.’
He tried to tell her those things were no longer said, not like that, but she did not hear him.
He turned to the congregation, the audience, those mourners. Who were these people? ‘Jesus said I am the Way; the Truth and the Life.’ Then he spoke to them about the life of Angela, about its continuation, about the soul, about the body. They stared at him, expecting more. Perhaps he should try to say something about what she had meant to him in the few years that he had known her—the conversations they’d had about books, their childhoods, her sense of humour—but then his mind went blank and no words came.
He knew he could not look at the coffin because if he did he would hear her voice again, spitting out fear and awe, her challenge to him. He returned to the altar, his face expressionless. No doubt he looked pale and they were probably wondering how long it would be before he joined her. His head felt thick and his eyes would not focus
properly. Fearful, he uttered the words. ‘This is my body.’ He could feel her approaching, closer, oppressive. ‘This is my blood.’ Then she was upon him, ‘You eat the flesh and drink the blood of your god. What are you? A pagan, a vampire, a cannibal? You are no priest, no servant. What is this terrible thing that you believe in?’ There was a pause, then her laughter filled the chapel. He looked at them, sitting so still and quiet. Could they not hear her? Didn’t they know she had escaped? ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he bowed his head. He placed the host in his mouth and then she flew at him, grabbing him around his throat and he began to choke, the lump of flesh bloody and tough, he tried to swallow, but still it stuck there. He could not get it down, he could not breathe; he reached for the chalice, the wine, he placed it to his lips and tasted the bitter rust, the stickiness of God’s blood.

He turned to the coffin. He could see the light. Father Pat Canning, delicate as a bird, light as a feather, moved towards it, smiling.