westerly

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JAMES BAXENDALE

Two and a half dreams about Bleeding

I don't own an overcoat. I did once. A grey herringbone one given me by a great uncle. There wasn't much left of Uncle Harold when he gave me that coat. I suspect we paid him a compliment in assuming that he'd lost more in Flanders than a handful of flesh from behind his kidneys. On the lining of his coat you could see that his back still bled at times. Otherwise it looked all right, but there wasn't much pleasure in getting it. Old Harold was so furtive and jittery about giving it that you felt you'd taken part in some sticky fingered outrage against the sanctity of his marriage—his middle-aged, childless marriage. There's no way you can confront or assemble the physical details of a consummation of that marriage. With Aunt Faith it was the shape of her mouth and hips. There must have been puberty one day and a dry womb the next, before anyone got around to noticing it or doing anything about it. Harold's celibacy didn't look as flawless. He was withered, prelatical; but there are photographs of him outside a hospital in Southampton with a nurse who might have been beautiful.

Harold liked to dress up. A high crowned fedora, soft cream shirts, brown pinstriped suits with big shoulders and pleated trousers. Like a Saturday morning black man, but his stuff wasn't secondhand. He looked like that in my dream. I'm lying in the long grass up the hill from the cottage. The grass is still green near the roots, as old corduroy, with wild blue hyacinths. So overcast that it's no particular time of day. The weatherboard cottage looks unnaturally white and solid. Old Harold comes sneaking through the lombardy poplars by the road. There are two others and they move towards the house following Harold, imitating his jerky, high stepping walk. Three fedoras swivelling manically with every step. The last one wears an overcoat and carries a pickhandle. I've got some valuable stuff in the cottage but I'm going to get that pickhandle in the head if they see me. My gun's in the back room. Would I kill old Harold if I could get there first? Up out of the grass I'm in pyjamas. What the fuck am I doing in the grass in pyjamas?

I discovered Cynthia and the Oceanic Bar in autumn. It's best then in the late afternoon with the beach nearly empty and the sea still warm and oily under a low sun. You know how it is. By mid-afternoon boredom is something physical—a clammy hand on the back of your neck. A remedy suggests—no, imposes itself upon you. Walking into the sun down Pier St., ladies with small dogs and metallic hair being so charming and shrewd at fruitstalls, obscene pensioners dying publicly on seats along the esplanade. Four or five nips of White Horse or Bell's you decide might sustain the piece or give it some piquancy. At the Oceanic Bar is
Cynthia. Cynthia talking to the barmaid in a voice gin scented and carnal. Cynthia looking like Jeanne Moreau and Katherine Hepburn—looking like Lauren Bacall and Tallulah Bankhead. A still proud still vulnerable lady. And at once you've already woken in her sunlit room along the explanade. Full gluey kisses and gauze curtains blowing in from tall windows to touch their hems gently against the counterpane. I spent a dozen afternoons at a table near the window during the following months and read when Cynthia wasn't there.

A dream about Cynthia and Harold started with me staring down at her face and his arse; the former impassive the latter moving unequivocally up and down. What's left of Harold's hair at the back is sweaty ringlets. His skin's so translucent that you can see more than just the form of his bones. Cynthia's long fingers rest in the purple hole in his back and it fills slowly with blood and sweat. She frowns when I speak and gently restrains Harold from turning to face me. "Michael", she says in a low voice. "Don't be angry. You are only dreaming." "Yes. Piss off", says her lover in a lower voice. "You are only dreaming."

The weather cooled and Cynthia's appearance at the Oceanic became less frequent. I didn't see her for months until one evening in June. A sunless premature dusk. I was wearing the herringbone coat. Trams rumbling in Pier St., blue flashes as their antlers touched the wires. I came out of a shop with a bag of dried pears and a woman fell in front of me. So close that I'd have had to step over her to go on. I carried her out of the rain. She was precariously old. Only her face seemed alive, bleeding below one eye: the blood spreading pink in white powder. A man and his woman came past. "Can you . . ." They'd persuaded themselves they hadn't heard me even before I spoke. She gripped my wrist so hard I was afraid I might not get away without leaving a paw or some skin in her gintrap hand. There were people behind us. "What . . . What . . . Did she . . . Is she . . ." I turned to them and Cynthia stood watching us, yards away in a white coat. The fingers on that wooden hand cracked as I opened them and pulled free.

"You need a drink." Cynthia smiled. We turned into one of the buildings along the esplanade, a private hospital I think. There were flights of stairs becoming lighter at the top. Her arm dropped from mine to give me the latch key. The room was already in milky light. It was like a film set, faultless to the smallest detail. Everything was old; not very old, thirties perhaps. 'Black and White' cigarettes, a bulky radio, a clock set in heavy contours. I sat in a chair with floral covering and she sat opposite in a matching one. Her eyes followed mine, chased them into a gilt framed mirror on the wall beside us and caught them there, smiling. She poured brandy and attended to the gramophone. I like her music better than the furniture. 'Mood Indigo' and Fats Waller's 'London Suite'. I was standing; I think I meant to walk over to the gramophone. She moved in front of me, stood very close and gently took my glass and dropped it into the chair behind me.

Away from her lips, Cynthia was dry and papery. Everything was exactly as I'd pictured it. The bed of brass and white enamel, the stucco pattern on the ceiling and most of all Cynthia's body. She moved quickly tossing back the satin eiderdown, but her breasts assumed no shape that I hadn't seen before. Touch added nothing to what I already knew of her. But it was incomplete. Cynthia had given herself to me so many times without knowing and there was no more to have. No more. I broke the skin beneath her nipple. Cynthia bled into my hair and onto the sheets. She smiled and bled steadily until I left. The herringbone coat lay somewhere in her room.
Death of a House
Mt. Martha, 1973

The verandah light glares on the rotting boards, shows the tall grass in the some-time driveway, fades into the wilderness of shrubbery and dark . . .
At one a.m., cars still hum along the highway, somebody's dog is barking.
Fifty years ago, when this house was built, there was nothing much to be heard, even perhaps at noon, but the wind and sea: it's one of the last of the old houses—little enough, in an unconscious style, dingy enough, hard to keep clean, enwrapped in enough land to make an estate agent's mouth water in anticipation. Two double-fronted solid-cream-brick bungalows could as well be here, and each with 'spacious grounds'. There is as well, on a block connected curiously at the back, facing a side-street which has itself become 'desirable', a four-room bungalow built out of driftwood (with water, sewerage, light) which nobody uses now; which recently its neighbours (not the new mauve-brick own-your-owns, but rather the thirty-year-old well-kept weatherboard further on) claimed as a health-and-fire hazard, damn their eyes and the mannerless dogs they keep.

It was in that bungalow (which I remember without sewerage, water or light) that my childhood summers were lit by sun and Coleman lantern; this house, and decidedly grand it seemed, was the realm of my forbidding grand-dad, tall and hard to imagine; in his absence his eldest son with wife and boys were here (my father was the second oldest son). I played with them, I never really liked them, hardly have seen them since except at funerals and as we exchange possession of this house at the height of summer. They seem perfectly nice, despite their odd religion, especially the youngest one with the French wife.
In photographs I can be seen
clutched by my loving mummy
at three years old, on a deserted beach
that stretched for miles (she looked younger then, too).
In others, my brother and sister, even
a lady I called 'Aunt Ida' (I have
no idea now who she was: she certainly wasn't
an aunt) also disport
themselves in out-dated costumes,
all looking happy, and happy not just as if
for the snap of the Box Brownie
which I suppose my father, absent
from these as from other scenes, held.
Once my grandfather unbended:
he built me a replica of the yacht,
'The Seagull' (named with that same unerring
taste for the inevitable which made
this house 'Moonshine', the driftwood bungalow
'Sunshine'), which he, the family's previous
big-spender, bought and owned for—
was it a week—until
he moored it just off here and the wind
came up, broke her moorings, and broke her up on the reef.
The old romantic. It must have been
after that that he learned to watch the weather,
became as good at it as the fisherman—Don—
whom he used to help with the nets.

Anyway,
I didn't much sail the yacht, mainly because
too many other kids wanted to help me with it:
it wasn't our beach anymore: I put it away
carefully in the boat-shed (we had two dinghies
and a motor-boat: there weren't many then)
for better times. Next summer
it wasn't there. I asked my stern grandfather:
he had dismantled it because
I didn't seem to care for it enough.
Even then, I think,
I knew him for the sadder one. Much later
I found that I could talk to him a bit:
on this verandah. He gave me lemonade.
He drank a bit himself. He got senile before he died,
I'm told. I of course was somewhere else.
The old man dealt in real estate himself. He had enough foresight to buy a lot of land round about here. He sold it: too soon to make a killing, late enough to make early retirement feasible, while his second son as junior partner worked harder than he ever had at their real estate business: forgiveable from my point of view, because, not rich, he seems to have had a flair for life, at golf a low handicap (seven, I think). He and my grandmother turned this place into the plentiful garden whose abandonment reels away now from the reproachful light. Just over there in the dark, a good lemon-tree is dead.
This verandah, so generous, so beautiful, so perfect
for summer nights like this, with a cane lounge,
a book and a glass of wine, has become something
you watch your footing on; the garden,
laboriously stripped of its native tea-tree,
looks better at night, at least, than it does by day.
Though the main fabric is sound, this house is dying.
A bit dingy, a bit dark, almost decrepit,
it isn't the place at all
that you'd bring friends to if you wanted to impress them;
it's been outbid by houses all around.
Since nobody owns it (bless her wandering wits,
my grandmother hardly counts), nobody
cares for it, literally, and nobody,
so far as I can see,
cares if it dies, though with it
all sense of my grand-dad and grandma, and all sense
of their extended family will die.
Grand-dad and grandma can't be sad now; I can't cry
either, farewelling that lot. Still,
somehow I care, I care:
here more than anywhere else my memories cohere
in ways that I've been thinking about all night
('Sunshine' and 'Moonshine' indeed).
Soon my old grandma will die, the price be right,
the executors sell. Right in their way of course.
The Silver Ice Cream

The silver ice cream came between them, sharply pointed, honed like a spike, it dropped straight as a plumb bob and dangled there between them. Knives in his brain, blades in his blood.

In anticipation.

"And I am very frustrated" she said head down meekly, "in what?" he said, many things O many things" she said, "your adventurousness, your intellect, your creativity, which one?" he said. "O that's not all". Your love, (he thought), he never said.

"There is something missing in my life and just tonight I decided what it was".

"Here is the red teapot/doubles as a kettle, do I put the tea in?, how many spoonfuls?", "two", "and boil it?" "No no, you boil the water only first, then put the tea leaves in-/why are you playing like this, what is the significance of your refusal to make me some tea,"/"but don't you pour the boiling water down onto the leaves"/ "yes"/"well how can I if the boiling water is in the teapot/kettle before the leaves are"?

Cold rain washes the black concrete, splashes the earth, a drop in a sleeply eye wakes it. The wet breeze blew through his brain, tired, heavy, resigned to outness. Kicked the backyard door open, footfirst into a bloody great puddle—fix it landlord/your blocked drain—leapt into the back porch, ground open the back door and there she was. Surprised at the lovely surprise, hi hi, h'llo h'llo, how how. "My god, I thought everyone was asleep", she said . . . "I've been all wrong for an hour and a half . . . I've had this marvellous involvement with my brain". In this midnight concrete house alone. But no longer. "I'm stoned you see". "On your own?" "Yes".

He wouldn't mind talking about his Number One hang up so he asks her about her Number One hang up. "I don't know what your Number One hang up is," she said, "but mine is that I'm not articulate enough". "I thought it was the doubt that you would ever achieve anything as a painter, because you are not painting are you". "O it's true, I need this damn job as an excuse". Just another mortal fob off. Actually it was fancier than that. "But you know and I know so why worry about being more articulate". "Because then," she said, "I could have the men I want, not just the ones I can get".

Someone had left their sunglasses on the table, dapper cool ski type they were, he put them on, looked mean, looked man. Hard at her. Stoned, she was so stoned. "O do not no, o take them off", she hid her head in her small hands. Freaked she
was, so struck by the transformation of the boy next door into the hard hearted male, strange and impregnable. "Say why, just tell me why you want them off". He stood towering over her cowering. Playing sweeties and monsters, and glared godlike down at her, deep into her eyes peeking from behind small hands. And all her hair hung forward and hid her even better. Her vast and silken faery hair, so strange and impregnable.

"Please make me some tea", said she. "But I don't know how", said he, "besides tea has a negative aura for me, bad stigma, coffee is even worse, I mean my grandmother drinks one and my mother drinks the other and I have to break away from home". It was about here that he gave her the benefit of his doubt, thinking that he may as well stay awhile. Her movement caught the retina of the beast and held his attention, and a little of his hope, though his blood had set hours before at the pub when he became pissed off with the idea of getting women.

"I like little games and looks and gestures" she said, "when you don't have to speak". ("I loved a guy like that once but now he's only an old rag at the bottom of a suitcase and I will probably pull him out one day and find a worm there). But you take it so far, until I find that at the very end there's a frightening light heartedness, you see into the very bones of people's hearts and throw down strings then start playing marionettes with them." "Because, basically" he said, "I have a formidable self assurance and can mock the precious vaults that lay hidden within even the most hardened manipulator/don't have the insecurity that causes people to take themselves so seriously. My demons are only of a secondary order."

"Bullshit" she said.
That was impressive and thought provoking, even if wrong by the laws of how he went/was able to do.

"And I must tell you about my marvellous stone, o I am so stoned, it is so much better in the stoned world. Tonight when I came home and thought you were all asleep I just didn't feel like the old routine of the last three nights, reading and listening to records, so I got stoned. I was going to sit up there in my room and see how different the world looked. I had this marvellous involvement with my brain you know (and I decided a few things). This music was bombarding my brain and yet I, me, was listening to it, sympathizing with it. Not just my brain but me as well. It was not physiological involvement but, er, diagrammatic."

"O."
"Tell me, am I being significant or does everyone know this?"

He took the glasses off and mock begrudgingly said "well allright, I'll make your bloody tea then—it's just that this chair beside the radiator is quite comfortable and I'm like inert tonight so why should I stir, even to go to bed, since it's late and I should be asleep. Tomorrow will be a poor day, no-one interesting, no new books, no place to go, no boost of energy, so it makes no difference if I sit suspended here far into the night." "I was going to read and think alone" she said, "but then you appeared and changed it all." "If you wanted to you would be up there doing it."

At eleven-thirty pm. she with the long hair echoed her way through the dark streets and entered the empty concrete house, she proceeded up the yellow stairs to her large white room and faced the prospect of her empty bed as she had done for the previous three nights. Something in her was roving and rising, she would have preferred to jump out the window and dance fleetingly amongst the clouds, the wet wind bending back her hair and baring the bones of her face to the there-
ness of the night. But facts were facts. A book and a stereo offered the only ways out, she had gone with them the nights before and now they were not enough. She remembered the grass he had left her and, as she had often done in moments such as this, she rolled a joint and smoked it.

For the next hour and a half she probed the fascinating pleasures of her situation, alone in a deep night house with her music. It was at this time that she experienced the autonomy of her sensory apparatus as it responded to the music registering on her brain, as if each note shot a coloured arrow into her head, at the interval of its own timing, and she was watching it, feeling as well a strong affinity with the sum total of these firings.

Then she went down to make some coffee in the bare stone kitchen, when suddenly she heard the backyard door scrape open, the bounding of a few heavy footsteps, the grind of the kitchen door, and in. She was no longer alone.

"Some people are so inhibited it's a terrible waste," he smiled wryly, shyly at this. "You know I'm talking about you" she said, "you lure and leave me because you don't know what you want." "No-one" he said, "I want no-one, but life would have it's moments if a few people played a few games with me every now and then." At this he picked up the sunglasses lying nearby and put them on, knowing very well what image they would create, that he was capable of if only he went to the trouble of dressing up to it. And tipped his head forward a little, scowling from beneath his forehead, from behind the shaded glass. Having had a close, confessional relationship with this single being of her species, knowing him in a condition of mutual disarmament, she was, despite her desire for love, quite taken aback by the sudden sexual enmity of his image.

He knew this, and after a few seconds of self conscious doubt, took on the rugged male model's role and teased her with fierce, destructive looks. She shrieked and cringed into herself, little girl like, part out of genuine intimidation, part out of the pleasure she found in playing that role with a man.

So what's this bit about the silver ice cream? You think it lends a portentous note, of drama. It does, doesn't it.

She decided she would help him make the tea now that she had changed the situation from sitting in the lounge to standing in the kitchen. He put the water in—: "do you use hot or cold water?" he said, baiting her in the bored/defensive hope of starting another little maze of stoned inanity with her. "What do you mean hot or cold" she said, "any bloody water, water's water"—"yeah, well my mother, under the influence of her husband, under the influence of his mother, under the influence of the English, says it is best if you use cold water." No answer. "It matters if you are a purist in these things." Again, on another more usual track—"what's a teatowel?—an owl with teats on it." It brought a smile, despite herself. But things might be building here this night and she did not want to be taken back to square one. Though she could only go where he felt he could flow to. Closer or away.

To destroy is to love, you either destroy or be destroyed. What is love but two people trying to annihilate one another. With their teeth, with their minds, so as to eliminate differences and become the same. People who are close/always trying trying to destroy one another, to get closer to the real. You try to destroy the retrograde parts of your self. You try to destroy retrograde people/show them that is all you are destroying and see, the person's still standing, only now with less shit. More visible. Probably a hell of a lot less impressive too in PR terms and ad man's values.
He came out of the upstairs toilet and was just about to proceed down the dark steps when he heard her coming up, to the level of the bedrooms. He found himself touching the bannister. With a fraction of panic but mainly with the big heaviness of his inertia he just stayed there, leaning sluggishly against it.

She pranced up, made the turning and stopped at the view from the window. Unaware of him in the dark stairway, she blew on it and drew a school child’s snail in her breath. She enjoyed doing that and watching it. Then she turned, took two steps and saw a sizeable man casually standing there. “I was just on my way back down when you started up, so I stayed here” he said.

“You saw me at the window then?” “Yes.” “I like doing that, I did it when I was little,” and she lay on the bannister, threw her leg over it, opened her fine legs. “And when I was little we also used to slide down the bannisters too, we lived in a house with big wide bannisters”. She straddled this one sexually, her tits tantalizing it, her face smiling her little girl smile, her playful little girl tones, two steps down from him. Her touchable hair.

“Yeah.”

Her way you could never be sure, eye games, teasing, striking poses, playing serious, playing bastard, in the end playing love even. With direct academic words you can state the case, if you are articulate, you get a mastery, imply a maturity, see so much because you have words for so much. He played puppets with her inners, had the words. She doubted if she could ever match the existential range of such people. Did she mean him?—the something missing in her life, in most people’s. And who’s to say the real isn’t suddenly found at the peak of a long, complex game.

“You put the teapot so, with the boiled water in it, and just spoon the leaves in then mix them up. It makes no difference if they start at the top or the bottom of the water”.

“I’m sure the English would have something to say about that”.

She bent over to switch the gas off while he cooled his heels in the corner. Suddenly she turned, proffering him the singed ends of her hair in her small hands. “I’ll cut off the frizzled parts,” he said, grabbed a bread knife and ripped into it, serated rips. Only half an inch or so. “You like that don’t you,” she said. “It gives a certain relish.”

She moved between the moon, the female lure, to seduce her rapist and love it, and her person. “I’m melting,” he said, “in my bones. At times I’m consumed by an incredible overwhelming tenderness for you”—he never said, you lovely bitch, looking at her while she was turned, pouring the tea. But she turned, her eyes were too real and what was hovering at the window flew away. Heavily he left her and trudged upstairs to the dyke to piss and breath a space. As if there could be more rounds in this night of losers.

“What right do I have to inflict myself on you,” she said head down meekly from her chair, “why should I rant on about my story.”

That bit about her being inadequately articulate, what did she mean?, the man she wants?, professors of literature, fine arts lecturers? What did that mean, her own rise in awareness, knowledge, maturity, to get the self she wants. But this was old stuff.

You don’t talk the boat around babe, you watch the wind, watch the tide, get hold of it’s rudder.

He told her “rights are what other people give you.”

It meant amongst other things, that she wanted him.
I'm hanging over this bannister and naughty imps are starting charging their pitchforks about in me. I'll run and jump on daddy I know and shriek and knock things over, then I'll jump in the river with my dress on. It would cling to her thighs.

That big man there won't play and home is far away.
Then she jumped up and bounded into her room and put on a record. He stood awhile, saw her light come on, heard her record start, he stood awhile, a long while. Heavy like a barge, present, pre-set, he could not be turned.
And went into his room, hating it.

The old silver ice cream hanging patiently.
NICHOLAS HASLUCK

Matinees

I saw Wiesemuller in my time
run antelopes to earth
and wrestle in the shallows
of a film director's mind—killing
the crocodiles single handed.

Knowing what to expect
that was the beauty of it—
the iron clad figure crumpling
on the battlements, a hand
pressed to his side as if seized
by indigestion, the crossbow
falling from him as he fell,
always hit the water.

The serials never ended—
up to his neck in quicksand,
the hero, six days later,
was only buried to the knee
and his shirt had dried out;
he grasped the trailing vine;
the tarantulas, out of courtesy,
had fallen back a foot or two
and the deadly piranha fish,
this week, weren't biting.

These were stagecoach days
when the breech was never empty
and judgement, riding shotgun,
fell sideways to the first arrow—
matinees, afternoons like covered
waggons formed in tight circles
against the marauding world . . .

the cavalry rides backwards
into the hills and waits there
for the slow handclap; time
is counted out; the screen
spills dwindling numbers
into darkness . . .
In Pursuit Of A Dialectic
Munching A Violet Crumble Bar

sweeping the cobwebs of existence
under the mat
has become a reality
with the invention of the non-stick
broom, brother
but how will we dispose of the cobwebs
of the mind?

develop a Manifesting Ray Gun
and we could do Him in
Ah, but such expertise—light years hence
when the need is essentially present

suggestion: petition Him with humility

O wings of the mighty Manta Ray
we mere mortal preying mantis
in sacred symphonic sycophany
pray for deliverance from your web

creeping through the doors
of unlocked nostrils—they did
try it, you know—
The High Priests of the pyramid
Friend, they were nastily entombed

knew a chap who brewed
gangrene cream
cured everything from leprous trees
to syphilitic butterflies
should we paste an application?

so blank—your historical genes
what of ich-habe-gout-gout Wilhelm
and his flesh-coloured stocking?
until the wandering courtesan
slipped her hand in
Brother, did she extract a tasty plum
Sutra on the royal toe
your point well taken
i am so recent, so forgetful
for there was the tattered goldfish
dressed with a double-coat
of spring-clean duco
took the favour most ungratefully
drowned from the suit
of sunshine veneer

quite! is not munching a bar of steel
a little futile
unless you're a conscience-stricken vampire
in need of blunt teeth
there is, after all, no problem
with a set of false ivories

so they walked and so they talked
genuflecting on the way
plucking grapes to consume time
the collective silt of gilt-edged toads
lapping the swamps of Fantasy Road
The Hanging

The rope waits, and last night's whore
Recalls the press on her loins, the angry
Urgent darkness, and the tumult spent.
The gaoler's toll at the gate, the same,
Was the usual handful of breast, the husky bite
At her ear, the beer-blown joke again
Worn stale with telling. On dead man's straw
She spread her legs, a cloister of hope
For hanged man cruel with life, waiting
For morning and rope, and crying with salt
On the dirt-stained breasts of a whore.

The rope waits, and the man now dead
Looks at the end of his life, the holiday fair
He has made. Last night's whore parades
Propped on her lover, his throat all lace,
Bought with a dead man's shillings, before the rope.
Lost Lover

Now THIS is something I can't handle.
You on the jukebox.
It's weird—I play you over and over again.
I even got you on the motel radio
in Ceduna on the way back. But they cut off your chorus
for The News.
One day the deejay'll say:
'Spinning in Solid Gold!
The Biggest Seller of Seventy-Two!
Let's get truckin' to LOST LOVER
by a groovy little Aussie named Sue!'

Sue.
You.
On the radiooo!
Phew.

And me?
I'm in the Paddy Hannan-Slept-Here-Cafe,
Bayley Street, Coolgardie.
On my way home.
A fistful of silver, diggin' your Solid Gold.
The proprietor chuckles, delivering greasy spoonerisms
as I get you on, again and again and again.
You're costing me a fortune! More
than you ever let me spend on you before.

Hey!
When are you gonna be on
GTK?
So your lost lover might see you again . . .
eh?
Pianoceuticals

1.

I remember old Mr May the piano tuner
and his bifocals in 1932
and his son Charles who passed
his pharmacy exams at Sydney Tech.
The old man had the room behind the lab
filled with keyboards and frames
and rosewood cabinets and the walls
filled with diplomas.
Charles got one too
but he had to hang his out the front
where the ailing customers could see
he was no charlatan, no quack.
Sometimes, when all the keys played in tune
old May would peep through the crack
in the back wall
and watch the tuneless grey-faced people
ranging their squinting search
along the shelves of
  Kruse's Magnesia
  Armadillo Kidney Liniment
  Thompson's World Famous Gazelle Brand Gangrene Preventor
  and sundry other unreadable labels
too high up
ever to sell . . .
And he'd wonder: But where will they get the money
to cure their bankruptcy?
and he'd thumb through Charles' credit book
and count the names to pass the time.
And just occasionally
when he heard the CHING! of the register
he'd shut his eyes and find the note on the nearest keyboard
and play it with his right index finger
only
two octaves down the scale
so that nobody would think he was being funny
or smug.
2.

But pretty soon along came '39
and the world found new songs to sing
with regular tempos
and they didn't care too much
if the old Beale sounded okay or not
and Charles climbed into khaki
and got shot at in Borneo
and then bombed in Broome
and died in a corrugated lean-to lavatory
alone
   of course
and with no Armadillo to help
and no Gazelle for later anyway.
And old Mr May sold up the lot
except for a few bottles of aspirin
that seemed to relieve his new condition somehow—
But one day when he was
torn from temple to temple with the terror
of migraine
a truck carrying relief supplies to the wharf
at Balmain
tossed him at the kerbside
and the drain
ran with Mr May's blood.

It's a small world and a quick one
so whistle the treble melody happy
while you've still got air in your lungs.
FAY ZWICKY

Stopover

First there were the premonitions. Capricious, unreasonable, deepset, each ringed with tiny sulphurous bubbles of panic. The lurking possibilities of a future before which she wavered and shrank. The heat seized her, pressed like some great grey fist, giving her the excuse she so urgently needed to hate everything about the place. The eyes, for instance. Those melancholy sepia jellies set in expressionless faces, the daguerrotypes of new wars. Hundreds of them. Waiting. A sea of silent grey-green phantoms, each with his hands dangling between his knees in the great open vaulted airport at Honolulu. They kept coming in groups of two, three and more, forming in long silent lines, serious and unexpressive. Two smooth powdered stewardesses in tomato red uniforms chattered, oblivious to the slowly growing files. One licked an icecream cone from time to time, her tongue flicking in and out like a lizard’s. The children wanted one too but the shop was too far away. When Mark became shrilly insistent she turned to him sharply. “For God’s sake shut up! We haven’t got time for icecreams now. The plane’s coming soon.” And so the family sat close. A small knot of colour in a grey-green sea.

It was an old habit of hers to regret war. Was it anything more than a self-indulgent reflex? “Give me a superficial impression”, she’d asked the night before in the stopover room suspended above flat Waikiki water, two or three off-season heads corking the surf below. “And try and make it stick.” I am terrified, she reflected, terrified of this country. This madness so quickly absorbed into rituals of assassination, violence, penance, grief. And, finally, blankness. She looked at her children sleeping in white sheets, exhausted by the long flight from Sydney and wished they had never come.

“What do you think will happen to them? To us? I feel so unreal here. What’s going to happen?

“Now what sort of a question is that?” he’d replied, irritated. “They’ll live through it. Europe did. And so will we, if that’s what you mean.” He'd never felt obliged to wrestle too hard with her questions. The answers didn’t greatly matter at such times so long as the tone was kind and serious.

And the bloodstains. Those clearly discernible streaks on the turquoise wall and dull yellow sofa near the window of their hotel room. Excessive and out of character, but still visible. Undeniably there. At first she could scarcely believe what she saw, kept staring at them as if by the constancy and intensity of her gaze she might deny their existence. She had begun then to feel the ground shift under her, scarcely trusting her senses. A woman travelling with her husband and two young children simply isn’t given a room with bloodstains on the wall. Fresh
white towels, yes. Shining porcelain. Toy soap cakes in pink, blue, green. But those
gothic suggestions matched more daring lives. They were, after all, quiet people
in search of a night’s sleep.

Driving from the airport to the hotel the plaintive chill of a Joan Baez song
drifted through the taxi radio:

The dove has fallen and torn her wing.
No longer songs of love will she sing.
I am not here to sing songs of love.
I am here to kill the dove.

A long way from innocence, through anarchy and breakdown. The mood was
not reassuring, the angles of misunderstanding already pointed.

“Aloha to paradise!” The disc-jockey’s frenetic whoop between swelling ukeleles
cut the pure thread of sound.

“Doesn’t ‘Aloha’ mean ‘welcome’?” she had asked the slumped bull neck of
the driver.

“Can mean anything, lady. ‘Welcome’, ‘Thank you’, ‘Goodbye’—now days
mostly ‘goodbye’.”

“Ah, yes.”

Passing the Ala Moana shopping complex warm heavy smells of food and flowers
filtered into the air-conditioned car. Donut stands. Bloated orchids. Vegetables of
an almost grotesque perfection. The delicate furlings of cabbage leaves aligned
with curling ginger roots, creeping marrows, water chestnuts like small spiked
clubs, and white swollen turnips. The vast coarsened cornucopia of a diseased
luxuriance. Japanese-looking families hunched over plates of fish and beans. A
Hawaiian youth with a sagging stomach stepped out in front of their slowly
cruising taxi wearing a T-shirt which said “Visit Saigon, Fun Capital of the
World!” Missing him, the driver sighed.

“These kids don’t care.”

“Oh?”


“Can’t you secede?” Her husband looked away with an impatient movement.
One of the children was clamoring for a T-shirt with words on it like that boy.

“With food in the belly like we got and a 20% discount to the military, are
you kidding?”

“What would happen if you tried?”

“Trouble, lady. More trouble. We can’t afford no more trouble. You interested
in the surf reports?” Without waiting for an answer he leaned forward sharply to
swell the disc-jockey’s yelp. “Waikiki three feet. Kailua breaking at two to three
feet. Pokai Bay five feet, fair weather ahead . . .”

“You got surf where you live?”

“Not bad. Some good beaches on the east coast”, said her husband.

“You letting coloured folk in yet?” The expected came casually. Or so it
seemed.

“A lot come in all the time.” They both bristled. What was wanting in his
answer? It was the truth, wasn’t it?

“You just don’t want everyone to know about it, eh?”

“Could say so.”

The driver spat neatly between two blue rubbish bins on the kerb. They looked
very shiny and new. On each was written ‘Mahalo’. ‘Thank you.’ So ‘Welcome’.
‘Goodbye.’ ‘Hello.’ ‘Thank you.’ This was America already.

The night passed uneasily. Sirens wailed in the streets. The lifts purred up
and down leaving remote voices on their floor. Muffled in the air-conditioned
room, her husband and children slept. Disturbed by vague pains in her chest she
got up several times to listen to their breathing, opened the window once or twice to hear the far murmur of the surf. The bathroom mirrors reflected more aspects of herself than she wanted to see and, after swallowing a glass of water, quickly turned off the light. Stood very still in the dark. Further down, car lights swept through the palms clustered about the hotel passing over walls and windows. Crowded erratically-placed neon signs reddened the sky near the trees but beyond these she could see nothing. On one of the balconies of the darkened rooms in the next block a seagull came to forage. Soon after their arrival, at the children’s urging, she had thrown a few cracker crumbs out on their own balcony but so far no bird had come.

On the way to the airport next morning to catch the plane to San Francisco she was glad the driver had not spoken, welcomed the mind-numbing ukelele. The children were mostly quiet, their chatter rising in little spurts of interest in the passing sights. The native village. The huge pineapple on top of the Dole factory.

“Are we in plenty of time?”

“Of course. We’ve got an hour yet.”

The drive seemed longer than it had the day before, but she accepted his calm even though breakfast had made her slightly nauseated. The restaurant had been crowded. Men and women in hectic colours hung about the door waiting for an empty table. The waitress had been courteous but rushed, And Jill had knocked over her glass of milk just as they were getting ready to leave and had demanded another. With a slight sign of exasperation the waitress had returned to wipe the table as another family moved swiftly in their direction.

And now they waited with the soldiers. The children had moved away a little and were making a game of picking their way over all the bags and attaché cases. She felt very proud of them. Mark was whispering something to Jill who nodded vigorously. How fresh they are, she thought, how spirited and attractive! Mark’s auburn head was close to Jill’s little blonde plaits and she was suddenly filled with a great and weakening tenderness for them. Why don’t these men respond? Americans were supposed to like children, weren’t they? She said as much to her husband. He looked up for a moment from his map of San Francisco. “Perhaps they’ve been through too much to care. They haven’t won a war, don’t forget. It spoils a national mood pretty quickly.”

She was still put out by those unresponsive silent men. No. Solemn boys described them better. She took it almost as a slighting of herself.

“Seven years ago they would have been offering them sweets.”

“A lot’s happened in seven years. Maybe they’ve learned something about being hated after all. It’s taken them years to learn that nobody likes to receive charity.” He had memories of occupied Europe to draw on. She had nothing. She felt snubbed yet knew what he meant. But she persisted with some petulance. “What’s that got to do with our kids? Surely they could crack a smile?” Sounding a little strident so he returned to his map. “Why should you care if they smile or not anyway?”

How much of her own anxiety had he detected in the wish? Did she, in fact, want reassurance, love (if it must be named) for herself through her children? It seemed very likely, but because it put her in an ingratiating defensive position she dismissed the idea, trying to focus her thoughts on San Francisco. To look ahead as he did. Why was she always turning back to the unwieldy past, trying to handle the slippery events of a present that always got away. He, on the other hand, seemed able to scoop up the essentials of a situation no matter how varied its components. Hovering over them uncertainly, she found their shapes too hazy and irregular to either seize or digest. She was, she often thought, a slow learner. One of the slowest.
“Excuse me, is anyone sitting here?” An English voice. She looked up, pleased. A resonant deep-toned voice. Since childhood she had been drawn to people by their voices before anything else. A tall stooped man in a lightweight grey suit wearing dark glasses and holding a small black briefcase was motioning towards the empty seat beside her. “No, please do”, she said. Her husband glanced briefly at the man and continued to read. The newcomer put his case on the floor between his shoes. As he sat down he looked around at the silent soldiers.

“It seems we’re to have company on this flight.” An accent of sorts? A certain old-fashioned courtliness, or was this overdoing the charm stuff?

“Some company. They haven’t said a word ever since we’ve been here. Almost an hour. Not even to each other.”

“They’ve probably seen things they’d rather not talk about.” Another snub. Well, she’d asked for that. Hesitating a moment, she tried to erase the mistake (I am a sensitive person, believe me), surprised by the urgency of her need to correct it. “Yes, how stupid of me. They’re only boys after all. Young enough to be my own sons, some of them.” Then, to help herself over the hurdles of such despised platitudes: “Are you going to San Francisco?”

“Yes.” Adding, as if to ward off the charge of presumption against a nice girl (woman?), “I have some brief business to do before everything closes for Christmas”. I am nearly forty, she thought. I am not a girl. She longed to ask him what kind of business but said nothing.

He was not young, yet carried himself easily. The face was smooth, fine boned, and set in a rather melancholy cast. She breathed a soothing whiff of pipe tobacco and soap. Why was it always easier with strangers?

“Will you be staying in San Francisco?” He inhaled deeply, a relaxed man.

“No, just stopping over. We’re bound for Chicago.”

“A pity. San Francisco is very pleasant. My favourite city in this country.”

“Is Chicago so different then?” America was America. Or was it?

“Very different and very ugly. Very ugly indeed. You certainly haven’t chosen the best time of year for your visit.”

“One can’t always choose.” Her voice sounded strained. Why did he have to tell what she already felt in her bones. She remembered Max Weber’s description of that city. He had likened it to a man whose skin had been peeled and whose entrails could be seen at work. She shivered, remembering reading the passage aloud to her husband a few days before they’d left home: “He would see it like that”, had been his response. “That’s your typical depressive reaction. It’s probably no better and no worse than any other large city.” Even so, she felt she would never learn enough cunning or toughness to survive what was coming. Passing through the sinister-looking metal detector frame to enter the waiting lounge she had again experienced the same chill fear. More suspicions (what were in all those bags?). More fears. That was what wars and uprooting did to people. Heavy at heart she had turned away from the terrible lack of expression in the eyes of the young soldiers. And the trouble wasn’t over yet. The weather. The time changes. Her head felt leaden, her body slow. At home it was summer. The oleanders bloomed thick and white, the nights warm and balmy. She recalled packing the last case with toys and Jill’s little dresses, her brooch with the white opal shining green in the moonlight, a new Italian wallet for her husband—a late present from old friends. As fresh tears sprang to her eyes she resolved to remember to wear sunglasses more often.

A jet appeared unexpectedly from between two palm trees, rising almost vertically in front of them. As her eyes followed the sun strips on the wings her husband shut the book with a snap. “It must be time soon. Where are the children?” The children! She was suddenly enveloped in panic, the stranger at her side forgotten.
She’d been keeping Jill’s blue dress in sight (or so she thought). Her husband was already cutting his way through the silent rows. “You stay with the bags. I’ll go after them.” His voice sounded very faint in her ears. She had sprung to her feet feeling giddy, dazed. The man beside her looked up. “Why don’t you sit down? They surely can’t be far.” The pink stewardesses had also risen and were moving towards the Exit sign, clattering their heels like castanets. The vaulted concrete roof seemed towering, the spaces between the vast arches depthless. “Yes, I suppose I should sit down.” Trying to steady herself the words came automatically. Her husband had disappeared from view. Every second became an intolerable span as if, inch by inch, she were being stretched on an iron cross. He had been drawn away from her as by some powerful undertow of that grey-green sea.

A negro soldier sitting close by but away from the others signalled with his hand. “Behind you, ma’am.” Turning round she saw Jill in her blue dress stumbling over a military bag. She was crying. Jumping up, she ran behind the row of seats and grabbed the child to her. “Jill! Where’s Mark? Didn’t you see Daddy? What’s the matter? Why are you crying?” Like aimless gunshots the questions burst out. “Mummy, you’re hurting me.” Of course. She loosened her hold on the child. Her feelings. Those useless treacherous stirrings. But she kept her hands tight across the child’s chest feeling the quick delicate heart-beat against her own hammering pulses. The stewardesses had disappeared. “Mark wanted an icecream. He’s looking for the shop.” She felt the blood beat in her eardrums, a terrible pressure building up in her head. “Which way did he go? Daddy’s looking for him. Tell me, Jilly, for God’s sake stop crying and tell me.” But the child, panicked by her mother’s face, was white and speechless. “Come over here and sit next to me.” The stooped stranger was now leaning forward to the child, patting the seat beside him. Caught in her mother’s arms the child looked at him for one still moment. And then began to scream. And scream. The air was hot and close. The stranger continued to beckon. “Please, Jill, please darling!” But the screams grew louder and the child writhed and struggled frantically, thrashing about with her head to keep it away from the stranger’s gaze.

The first boarding call came. A distant crackle, barely audible above the stricken cries in the now buzzing murmurous building. She turned to the man who had risen along with wave after wave of green uniforms, close-cropped heads. As the stranger bent to pick up his bag he looked at her long and hard. Suddenly she discerned a certain thickening in his face, an incipient grossness that she had not seen before. He bowed to her and smiled. “A pity that you must go to Chicago”, he said and walked away. The child was quieter now. She had buried her head against her mother’s breast, moving convulsively. Everything was very silent and empty around them. “It’s all right, darling. It’s all right. Daddy will come. Daddy will find Marky. There! There! It won’t be long.” Her heart now thudding with terror in the silence, she cradled the soft head and began in a steady enough voice to tell her daughter about a very tall thin man with a black bag. “And what do you think he had in the bag, sweetheart?”
Sports Fans

Diogenes in a tub,  
wisest of men  
but hearing world sounds  
mono-aurally.

Until the other end  
fell from the tub  
and he began to hear  
stereophonically.

Stereophonic Diogenes,  
now greater than all men  
as well as  
wisest  
knowing  
the sound of the world  
heart with both ears  
instead of one.

If only Diogenes  
had not lived  
in a tub  
but in a bottle  
then we might  
have learned to see  
with both eyes—  
instead of one.
The sun was in the summer grass,
The coolabahs were twisted steel:
The stockman paused beneath their shade
And sat upon his heel,
And with the reins looped through his arm
He rolled tobacco in his palm.

His horse stood still. His cattle dog
Tongued in the shadow of the tree,
And for a moment on the plain
Time waited for the three.
And then the stockman licked his fag
And Time took up his solar swag.

I saw the stockman mount and ride
Across the mirage on the plain;
And still that timeless moment brought
Fresh ripples to my brain:
It seemed in that distorting air
I saw his grandson sitting there.

Sitting beside a fire in Adelong, David Campbell’s birthplace, I listened to a woman, seventy-nine years young, read the poet’s early poem, “The Stockman”. She knew the poem, knew the country, loved both. Then her voice stopped and I could hear the flames blanketing to themselves again. It was a double stop. Outside the frost was settling; in those mountains the stars spit in the clear nights. And in the room David Campbell, using simple words, had made time pause.

Campbell’s work has not received great critical attention. It is perhaps because his is the art that conceals art; it disarms analysis. And it is perhaps because he does not seek attention; David Campbell the man is deservedly hard to find in the hills above Canberra. He is big, shy, self-deprecating, his body carrying just a touch of reticence, disorganization; his mind focussing over his small farm and onto poetry.

David Campbell has owned “The Run” for ten years, but not farmed it. Now he has moved onto it, his house sitting naturally among the wild-armed gums along the Molonglo River. It is designed to be a minimum effort farm, cattle only, to allow him maximum writing time. His Murray Greys browse over the rises, the rabbits run, and the clear sun of the Monaro that has ridden over him most of his life still warms him here.
He was born at “Ellerslie”, a station near Adelong owned by the Campbell brothers, in 1916. His father, an Australian-born doctor, had done further study in Edinburgh before returning to practise in Young, N.S.W., and Marrickville in Sydney. He came to own or part-own several stations, including “Ellerslie”, at different times. He was a man of intelligence, humour, loneliness, David Campbell recalls. At “Ellerslie” David Campbell and his three sisters were entrusted to governesses who came almost as intruders from the outside world. The children found that in some cases a measure of passive resistance and pranks on their part would send the governess packing again. “Ellerslie”, long since split into smaller properties, was then an isolated mountain station. “If any outsiders came”, Campbell recalls, “we would shoot out and look at them through the trees.”

Foremost among those immortalized in Campbell’s poems are the station hands on “Ellerslie”—men like Harry Pearce, the station’s bullock-driver, and Billy Stanton and his father who worked the cattle and sheep. As a boy David Campbell used to ride out with the men in the morning and back again with them in the evening after a day on the run. “And they’d talk”, he remembers, “in their beautifully serious way—you know—about important things like the droppings of a dingo, and how you could tell from them whether it was only a few weeks old or six months, and they talked about things like eagles, and hawks’ nests, and snakes . . .” Billy Stanton’s father was a great rider, the poet recalls, and Doctor Campbell used to be at him to give one particularly high and testy horse a bit of work. “Oh, I’d like to have a go at him, doctor”, Tom Stanton used to reply, “but I haven’t got me light boots on.” Turning over old photographs of those days, David Campbell quietly repeats Patrick White’s statement—that for the artist childhood is the purest well. A number of Campbell’s early poems are based on his childhood experiences at “Ellerslie”; it is significant that among some of his latest work is a sequence on “Ellerslie”, published recently by Poetry Australia.

His days at King’s School, Parramatta, were dominated for David Campbell by Rugby football. Not much of the schoolwork appealed to him—with one exception. “Geometry I liked”, he says. “Very like a sonnet: absolute minimum of words, and a QED at the end.” At eighteen, he went to Cambridge to study History, “whipping off to another country”, as he says, “before I knew my own”. History did not engage him particularly, but it was here, by a happy accident, that he discovered poetry, although he was not to begin seriously to write it until years later. He was confronted in the Cambridge examination room by a question on an Economic History paper that began improbably with the last lines of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—“... Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty . . .”. Goaded by the tone of the question, not confident of his prospects in the subject, David Campbell vented his spleen on this question in an enjoyable written tirade and waited for the notice of his expulsion from Cambridge. Far from being banished, however, he was transferred to the English course the following term. He found himself under the famous English scholar, E. M. W. Tillyard, as tutor. It was Tillyard who encouraged Campbell’s love of poetry.

At Cambridge Campbell was of no less value as a footballer than at King’s School—he played Rugby for England against Ireland and Wales. Here too, with Tillyard’s encouragement, his first writing was done—two ballads noticed by Sir Arthur Quiller Couch. By the time he returned to Australia Campbell knew that above all else he wanted to write poetry. His family were bewildered at this uncommercial announcement. Jackerooing at Moree in N.S.W., Campbell found, in fact, that it was only among the station hands that there was an acceptance of his love of poetry as something natural and worthy.

In 1936 the Campbell family sold “Ellerslie”. David Campbell spent a brief time in Melbourne. At the outbreak of war in 1939 he joined the Air Force.
Always fond of flying, and with 100 hours logged with the Cambridge Air Squadron he was in training at Point Cook in Victoria sooner than most. Out of his years of war flying with the R.A.A.F. in New Guinea and the Pacific Campbell produced only one war poem, the memorable “Men in Green”, in which, as a pilot ferrying a bunch of fresh and confident infantrymen to the front line he chronicles the sudden silence of their meeting with the battle-shocked men they have been sent to replace:

... For fifteen men in jungle green
Rose from the kunai grass
And came towards the plane. My men
In silence watched them pass.
It seemed they looked upon themselves
In Time’s prophetic glass.

David Campbell’s part in the New Guinea and Pacific campaigns is a matter of record. As a pilot and later Commanding Officer of 1 Squadron, 2 Squadron and 32 Squadron, he was awarded the DFC and Bar. He flew in Hudsons, Mitchells (the best aircraft to fly, he recalls) and Beauforts (the worst). But the war for a pilot, as David Campbell discovered, had a certain air of unreality. There was the uncanny feeling, flying out on bombing assignments, of crossing the path of his opposite number in the Japanese Air Force who was also intent on his bombing raid. There was no meeting of the enemy at close quarters. “The war was relatively ‘clean’ for a pilot”, Campbell recalls. “There was your duty to your mates, but very little feeling of hatred of the Japanese. It was best to look at it almost as a mercenary, and make sure you earned your pay. You soon realized, as ‘Men in Green’ hints, that the blokes in the army bore the brunt of it.”

(A poem, of course, is in a sense never finished. Campbell made considerable changes to “Men in Green”, changing “bits of awkwardness” that a student had brought to his attention, before the manuscript was sent away for his paperback Selected Poems which is to appear shortly. “Who was I”, Campbell says, “not to take notice of what someone showed me in good faith!”)

It was in 1942, with the R.A.A.F. in New Guinea, that David Campbell started writing again—pieces like “Harry Pearce” and “The Stockman”. He submitted them to the Bulletin and at his first chance dropped in to see Douglas Stewart, then not long the editor of The Red Page. So began a long friendship. “I appreciated Doug’s conservative, well-informed criticism”, Campbell says. “We were lucky to have him on the Bulletin, taking a middle line—not avant garde, not too staid. In fact, looking back one can see where one owes so much. First there was my father, who introduced me to books and intelligent conversation. And there was my mother’s reading to us from the Bible; I knew it inside out before I was ten. There was E. M. W. Tillyard, who made me aware of poetry. There was John Manifold, too, at Cambridge—introduced me to the ballad and Mozart. And Doug Stewart—I owe him a lot in fishing and poetry. One tries to pay one’s debts.”

After the war, married and with children growing up, Campbell moved onto Wells Station, a 1800-acre property just north of present Canberra. Money was short, the work of developing the run was hard, but the country was beautiful, with Canberra distant in fog beneath the snowy tops of the Alps. Campbell has touched it in “Looking Down on Canberra”:

No doubt the world is carrying on
For Canberra groans in purple haze,
Yet it is good, these autumn days,
Sitting among the hills alone,
To watch a spider thread a stone
And listen while the mountain jays
Fill the distances with praise—
And every web and song their own.
The thousand voices of the town,
The worn phrase, the ruined word,
In this clear mountain silence drown,
Leaving the sweet song of a bird
And coupled stone. Yes, it is good
To think and sing in solitude.

After developing the station, Campbell sold out. “Before we left, Canberra was spreading out towards us. The kids by then were at the riding stage—they could gallop over in the evening for a free view at the Drive-in that was built near us at the Wells”, David Campbell recounts. The Campbells moved then to “Palerang”, a property between Canberra and Braidwood, to live as neighbours to their long-standing friends Forbes Gordon and his wife. “Forbes was a man of silences”, says David Campbell. “He even outsat the Scots when he went back to Scotland. He was the sort of person you could sit with for hours without a word and yet feel a sense of communication and happiness.”

Now David Campbell’s son is on part of “Palerang”, the property called “Duralla Creek”, and the poet can sit in the sunfilled lounge at “The Run”, tucked away in the hills out of sight of the road, and write. He walks with his two dogs, works the run, does pottery at Canberra Technical College, or perhaps confers with the poet Rosemary Dobson about the translations they are doing together of poems by the Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Natalie Staples of the Australian National University provides the two Canberra poets with a detailed casting in English of the works of the Russians, offering a number of alternative senses for particular words, phrases, lines. Then David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson, working separately and only comparing their two renderings of the Russians’ poetry at the final stage, turn Natalie Staples’ literal raw material into poems in English. “It’s humbling sort of work. You learn more and more about poetry as you do it because in a real sense you are writing new poems”, says Campbell. “In some cases we end up with two completely different poems in English—there’s one poem of Mandelstam’s that I am quite convinced is a send-up, and I have interpreted it that way. Rosemary is just as certain that it’s a straight poem, so her poem in English takes that line. We’ll probably publish both as equally valid!”

David Campbell’s first book of poems, Speak With the Sun, appeared in 1949. He sent the manuscript to his former tutor, E. M. W. Tillyard, who liked it and passed it on to Chatto and Windus. Since then Campbell has published The Miracle of Mullion Hill (1956), Evening Under Lamplight, a collection of short stories (1959), and his other collections of poetry, Poems (1962), Selected Poems (1968), and The Branch of Dodona (1970). Campbell has two more volumes of recent poems accepted for publication and the manuscript for a second book with University of Queensland Press is at present in the hands of the publishers.

When he speaks of his own writing there is an unstudied repetition of certain names that gradually draws in a picture of those other writers whose work Campbell particularly savours. He has had an admiration for W. B. Yeats since first becoming conscious of poetry. He has a high regard for A. D. Hope, Bruce Dawe, Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, Douglas Stewart, Rosemary Dobson, Francis Webb among other Australians; for Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin among current English writers; for John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell among the Americans. Now, at “The Run”, Campbell is writing more poetry than ever before. “I probably manage to average a poem a week now”, he says, “whereas before I might write the equivalent of a book every six years or so, now I’m doing it in two.”
Campbell has always spoken for the unwitting element in poetry—the work carried on below the surface, perhaps over years, operating on a seed of fascination sown in the subconscious. "(A poet's) poems that are any good are partly given", he says in his introduction to *Selected Poems*. He falls on the sonnet form, the ballad, the courtly chanson and latterly on freer verse, but still under his deft control of rhythm, rhyme and half rhyme, to utter what he wants celebrated. More often than not he'll find a line or two that gives him a start. Perhaps it will spring while he is fishing in the Miles Franklin country near Brindabella (Douglas Stewart's beautiful poem, "Brindabella", grew out of one such fishing trip with David Campbell over Mount Franklin and in to the Goodradigbee River in its mountain valley west of Canberra). Or perhaps Campbell will get down the first bones of a poem on the back of an envelope as he comes back from the coast in the car; he fishes there, too, with Douglas Stewart, whenever a weekend offers. Like most poets Campbell finds that one poem completes itself at a sitting, while another, even after six months, is still not formed. Campbell can use the beautifully limpid simple statement, the element of legend in the ballad, the jewel-like completeness of the sonnet and the dry wine of satire in his work. In fact, in later poems like "The Australian Dream", a glorious, uncomfortable account of a surprise visit from the Royal family, Campbell comes very close to the tone of Bruce Dawe.

But the signature of David Campbell's poetry, viewed as a whole, will remain the Monaro—valley, mountain, magpie, stockman, trout stream, horse—and the joy in working the land. This country is the inalienable setting for his celebration of memory, of the soil, of love. Witness "Night Sowing": no more perfect lyric exists in Australian poetry than this—

O gentle, gentle land  
Where the green ear shall grow,  
Now you are edged with light:  
The moon has crisped the fallow,  
The furrows run with night.

This is the season's hour:  
While couples are in bed,  
I sow the paddocks late,  
Scatter like sparks the seed  
And see the dark ignite.

O gentle land, I sow  
The heart's living grain.  
Stars draw their harrows over,  
Dews send their melting rain:  
I meet you as a lover.

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*Graeme Kinross Smith is at present working on a two-volume illustrated book of profiles of Australia's major writers to be published by Cassell Australia.*
Consider two kinds of realist. I will take my examples from late nineteenth century playwrights, but the distinction is found in prose as well. The first is Henri Becque, author of *Les Corbeaux*. Becque learnt the techniques of the nineteenth-century well-made play and was impressed by the new realism. His plays are realistic (like photographs) on the surface, while the conception of the whole is still essentially melodramatic. The characters no longer wear flowing cloaks and meet in ruined towers; they wear frockcoats and pace about drawing-rooms. Still they behave with the purity and extravagance of romantic characters, and at the end of each act, 'reality' docilely shapes itself into tense, effective curtains. Ibsen, by contrast, interested himself in the everyday world because he thought it important in itself. His realistic surface does not hide romantic conceptions. It refers itself in the other direction, towards the audience, who are supposed to corroborate its truth from their own experience. An author like Becque can learn to trust his surface more, or an author can like Ibsen reimport the density and the universality of symbol. The significance of a realistic surface may lie either in front or behind it: either in its relationships with the audience or in that unseen space behind.

All the commentary on Peter Cowan's work makes him out a realist like the Ibsen of the 'social' plays. Cowan is said to be a recorder of certain depleted lives, whose stories extend understanding and compassion to the voiceless. The work is like this, but there is more to say. Myself I am guided by the feeling expressed by Eluard about the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico.

For me, this vision is always accompanied by a feeling of cold, as if I had been touched by a winter wind from a distant country.

The new collection of Cowan's stories, even more than previous volumes, seems to demand a different kind of reading in which the realistic surface is acknowledged but not sheltered behind.

One of the symptoms of invisible pressure in these stories is found in *The Corner*'s abandoning of quotation marks for the dialogue. Their absence affects you neither as gimmick nor idiosyncrasy but as conferring on the dialogue a weightlessness and anonymity. The variety and substantiality of real voices has gone. Of course, typography alone doesn't achieve this effect. The words from different mouths sound the same. Still, just as in the introduction of proper names, which seem to have difficulty lodging in the texture of these new stories, the typography speaks of the battle to justify each mark on the page. *The Corner* is a very short story about a man who runs over a cyclist. There's a brief dialogue
in the police station, an interlude while the man sits alone in his living-room and a longer dialogue with his wife in which we learn that the man's attention had wavered to the girls' playground on the corner. The sense of weightlessness and the absence of colour in the story convey the man's estrangement from his own condition, while what is given in the story about his past suggests how he got that way. In such stories as *The Corner* Cowan erases his own voice. Their discipline is to keep out emotions which could not be felt by the central character.

Certain situations, characters and tones recur so often in Cowan's stories that they begin to impress themselves on you as obsessions. In the first collection, *Drift* (1944) there are two stories told by an itinerant stranger who finds himself drawn into a situation involving others. The narrator's chief concern is to avoid becoming involved himself. The narrator of *The Beach*, the first story in the latest collection, is an ageing Sunday painter who comes upon a woman and her retarded son while on holiday near Busselton. This is how the writer suggests the boy's condition:

She was standing near the edge of the rock. The yellow of her dress clear, sharp, against the broken surface. The child sitting close to her. Neither made any movement. Except for the vivid colour of the woman's dress I would not have seen them.

They were so still that one of the thin rock lizards waited in the sun along the edge of a crevice near the child. The boy's fingers quivered, his fist opened and closing gently, scarcely movement. Then I saw the flies about the child's face. His hand, with its faint pulse, never lifted towards his face, his eyes.

In the dialogue between the painter and the woman Cowan shows his usual mastery of the awkward fumble. The painter tries to be companionable because the woman, apart from the mute boy, seems to have no friends and no particular way of passing the time. Despite what he tells her about a fisherman friend it becomes clear that he, too, needs to go out to her. But what we take at a first reading to be his well-meant and somewhat touching gestures of friendship are shown at the end as coming out of impercipience. The woman and her son go for a night walk along the beach and the boy is drowned. We remember the tableau at the beginning, with the boy near the edge of a drop; the shark in the bay; the oddness of the woman's responses. The implication is there so strongly that we look back through a story which has completely altered its shape. Now, behind the routine masks of Cowan's people we glimpse the impassive face of murder.

The decency of the man who tells the story is shown to coexist with a blindness clearly related to his sympathy for the hunted shark (though this detail has other overtones as well) and the false tranquillity age has brought him. The story convinces you that its events are probable, and finely-traced. But its stress is on what lies behind our normal responses to others, on the opacity of their motives and the self-deceptions we impose on appearance. I am saying more than, here is a realistic story with those themes. The 'themes' constitute the response; the process of making out the significance is the same as attending to the story, not an act of abstraction performed afterwards. Cowan would agree with Iris Murdoch that, not just on exceptional occasions, but constantly, 'we deform the world by fantasy' and his stories fluctuate between the real and the fantasy-created so as to blur the distinction and call both into question.

Cowan has always been preoccupied with loneliness, isolation and the ironic state of those whose need for affection stifles their naturalness and so deprives them of gaining affection itself. But the way in which he treats his themes has slowly changed, and the change seems to have become more marked with *The Tins*. His earliest stories are mostly set in the bush, and concern the effects of physical isolation and incessant work. Later stories tend to deal with the suburbs, seen as deserts of emptiness and boredom. For Cowan's earlier characters, the determinants of
their lives were outside themselves. Man with his capacity for love and freedom confronted a world which denied him both. In the later work, the failure to achieve fulfilment is still encouraged by the vacuum around the characters, but the essential cause is inside, usually in some unspecified denial or failure of courage somewhere in the past. The stories rarely dramatise the losses themselves but instead deal with their later effects. Cowan has become less interested in tracing causes than in exploring increasingly strange states of mind and feeling. Compare the title stories of the last two collections. The Empty Street is a study of a murderer. Michael lives in a suburb with a wife and family he hates, bored and made uneasy by his routine job. He lives for his garden, and in particular for his orchids. Things exotic and beautiful, coaxed out of the grey sand, needing unnatural conditions for their natural flowering: it's not hard to see the fable. This long story includes much detail of the past lives of Michael and his wife. Michael's recurring dreams, given in detail, introduce a chill, violent imagery into the story. Although the lines of causation do not quite meet—Cowan's sense of the inexplicable is too strong—we feel we could give some account of the evolution of Michael from a tolerably frustrated man into a murderer. In the title story of The Tins we learn much less about what might have shaped the obsession of Jacobs, a schoolteacher who cannot bear to throw away an empty tin. In the shed at the back of his house (on a backyard of grey sand) the tins pile up to the ceiling. Jacobs reveals his secret to a painter working on the staff of the school. The painter is infected by the obsession and begins to collect bottles and cans. Only Jacobs' suicide jolts him back to 'normality'. What gives the story much of its power is the way Cowan's prose moves from the 'normal' to the 'abnormal' without betraying any change in tone or texture. After reading Cowan, the life-denying rituals of the suburbs seem as insane or as customary as a belief in the sentience of tins. Whereas The Empty Street reached backwards in time, The Tins, like the other longer stories in the new collection, seems to take place in a continuous present. Both the new story and the old are fables of creativity. They explore connexions between art and sex, between denial and violence. In the new collection, however, the foreground of realistic detail has become thinner and its perspectives less reliable. You are reminded of Kafka or Beckett.

Writing the review of Sandgropers, which appears in this issue, I was reminded of the way Western Australian writing in general exists in an enclave of its own time, having little to do with writing in English elsewhere. I argue there that there is little specifically West Australian, however, about most Western Australian writing. The possibilities of form are those which have already been discovered and worked out; the subjects are national. Neither of these generalisations is true of Cowan. The art of the stories is modern in the stylistic sense. We can parallel Cowan's techniques in prose fifty years old, but it does not anymore than Joyce or Beckett does, strike us as dated. And as for Western Australia. I don't know. But when I read the signs along the highways, spaced out, HELP KEEP OUR CITY CLEAN; when I see in the new suburbs houses as impalpable as the veneer on their walls, resting on the sand like children's plastic bricks on a carpet; when I contemplate the road toll and its popularity; and the suicide rate Dorothy Hewitt mentions and the way the Press reports details of murders no matter how remote, then I am reminded of Cowan's stories. The condition he explores is not confined to a few selected people in the community, and nor is it the result of Cowan foisting his obsessions on the outside world. It is a condition which however we have sidestepped or transcended it, we in Western Australia share with him. We are specially implicated in the way we judge these stories.
ELIZABETH JOLLEY

Orchard

1. COUNTRY TOWNS AND PROPERTIES

For sale five acres virgin bush partly cleared and fenced with round poles for horses one acre lucerne abundant water power available tin shed for tools septic system possible pig license suitable stone fruit goats and almonds G.P.O. thirty six miles.

_All land is some one's land you said and this land is our land._

2. THE LAND

Sun stroked slopes
Waist high wild oats
Shadow splashed.
Light gravel loam
White with frost,
Summer warmed
Winter washed.
3. NEIGHBOUR WOMAN ON THE FENCING WIRE

So you've bought this place well let me tell you
straight away your soil's no good all salt even a
hundred and sixty feet down and up on the slopes
is outcrops of granite and dead stumps of dead
wood nothing'll grow there we know we've tried
what the crows don't take the rabbits and bandicoots
will have your creek floods in winter and
in summer its dried the water's all salt there
too your sheep'll either starve or drown and if a
calf gets born it'll not be able to get up that's
the kind of place this is and what's more you've
poison weed all over your block so if you
put stock you'll lose the lot and another thing
there was a snake on our place last year and it shot
through into yours and I daresay it's still there and
where there's one snake there's sure to be another
and there's been some terrible accidents round here
only last week a man just married a week
thought he'd fix his roof and fell through the rafters
and his wife only a young thing found him hanging
dead and then there was that pig ate a woman's
baby right in front of her door mind you I always say—
4. THE PLANTING

Tokay Shiraz Muscat
Grenache
Pedro and Fontignac.

Cherry Plum
Satsuma
President and Golden Drop.

Star Crimson
Apple blue lupin
Ryegrass and Strawberry Clover.

Peach Elberta
Peach Hale Haven
Apricot and Nectarine.

Packham Pear
Quince Champion
Winter Nelis and Josephine.

All crops if they come are certain crops you said.
5. NEIGHBOUR ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VALLEY

The lonely man has fenced his golden crop
And white flowers fall from his honey tree
Spreading flowers where they drop
Down on the flowerless bushes of the scrub.

The lonely man whose name is still not known
Has burned the stubble of his crop
Into the earth, and harrowing the soil
Has made a heap of stone.
6. DEAD TREES IN YOUR ABSENCE

You are not here
And this is what bereavement must be like.
Till I met you there were no seasons
And now again there are none.
Swooping
Magpies attacking the morning
With their voices tumbling
Above the twisted brittle vine
Ghosts with black burned buds.
Dry twigs scorched black leaves
Curled in death.
Useless
Piped water pouring on dry earth
Pitted with sharp warm fragrance
Of dust and dusty trees.
In the quiet heat of summer all life is withdrawn.
7. PEAR TREE DANCE

All day the sun wrapped colour
On bleeding bark and polished stone
These old great trees were growing
Before men made this place their home.
The light is fading from the northern hills
All day it was the second planting,
Kind feet stepping on soft earth dancing
Firming the fresh soil's hopeful face.
In a shower of promised leaf and flower
Will stand a bride blossomed in living lace.
And from the tinfoil label
Comes a fragile music
For the pear tree dance.
Winter nourished
Summer cherished
The secret flesh of sweet fruit whitening
Beneath the glow of fragrant ripening.
Just now, the hungry heron flies alone.
JOHN M. WRIGHT

Vincent Buckley's Golden Builders

Vincent Buckley published his first book of poetry in 1954 and has published two more since. Yet it is only with his latest poetic sequence that he has achieved really impressive stature. If the earlier poetry was generally concerned with defining an individual in terms of his family and friends, locating him in an immediate but intensely personal landscape, *Golden Builders* places the individual in his whole environment. And the environment itself is solidly present in the poetry. This is an apparently spontaneous, yet deeply-felt city poetry which explores the possibilities of individual resilience in an expanding modern society.

The relationship between city-life and specific human suffering emerges in the poem as a ubiquitous but essentially arbitrary one. Against the background of:

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They are digging everywhere. From street to street
the sound stitches pavements together. [4]
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we have:

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... She comes, five minutes early,
brushing the cold brick of each house,
with her fingertips—Fluttered into a head-back
confidence—The child like a bolt in her womb [4]
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It is in the dynamic of a city that growth and proliferation occur. Simultaneously, and in the very same streets, there is individual human suffering which is seldom caused directly by the nature of the city *per se*, but which is often precipitated or accentuated by the city-experience. What we have in the sequence as a unit, and in this poem in particular, is a finely controlled revelation of the intimate, paradoxical relationship of growth and destruction. Expressed so crudely, this might indeed seem facile, but the poetry itself evokes with extraordinary fulness and immediacy a whole range of human responses to the pressing of the urban environment against the pane of individual consciousness. We find, for example, the embodiment of an almost Orwellian sense of monotony, oppression, and exposure.

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... and the cars endlessly
with a stripped sound
on paced macadam
I dread them
pale concrete/ sleds through them/ swerving slowly through space
the long cough/ of crushed cities [21]
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and later the poet discovers what must surely be the paradigm analogy for urban claustrophobia

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The street noise is piped up like muzak [25]
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which embodies that succinct and compelling intuitive description of city life offered in section six:

... you lie in the centre
Of rectangles, spaces of sound.

Yet, for all the adventurousness of this, the poetry sometimes has a strangely conservative feeling—emphasising individual smallness (though never insignificance) when confronted with the sheer power of the city. The power is seen as compelling and attractive. At times the poet becomes quite reverent in the face of growth.

... Clear city
you let me see flame
touch angle-iron to iron
run sap between them

knit, anneal without torment
or speaking these flashings your voice

He is borne along on the surge of the city's power, always conscious of those crying machines hurrying along at their work—in a sense, behind him.

So through the new rush of buds, past the moulded high-flying cornices
and through throat and chest I hear the chop and change of the machines.

These superb lyrical lines—expansive, free-moving, with a soaring resonant tone—assert individual resilience, demonstrate that this individual has not in any lasting sense been 'crushed' by the city—even if he can never forget that the bustling, pervasive life of Melbourne in flux is the background. Naturally enough, the sensitivity which glories in 'the new rush of buds' and 'the moulded high-flying cornices', appears disgusted here:

... But
over the bridge Vickers Ruwolt
mashing out its lengthening
masks of smoke
sulphurous Breughel-red swirlings in air

But the dominant tone is not, in fact, disgust. It is scarcely difficult to detect the sheer awe in

sulphurous Breughel-red swirlings in air.

The final sense we have of Vickers-Ruwolt is not one of appalling pollution, but of an ominous, strangely compelling power—the mystery residing in such phrases as 'lengthening/masks' and 'Breughel-red swirlings' and the delicate, fading-away tone of 'in air'. So finely preserved an ambivalence often saves the poetry from being simplistic or morally facile. Sensitive responses are, one feels, usually ambivalent.

Yet *Golden Builders* does far more than crystallise an individual's sensitive ambivalence towards his environment; it is not a personal history embellished with reference to other lives, but rather a deeply-observed 'cross-section' of human beings seen as human beings—interacting with their environment. Frequently such interaction leads only to alienation—that final alienation of a lonely death 'in the slimed oil of his motorbike' leaving 'friends' (and 'best' friends, at that) to 'quarrel over his radiogram' [9]. In *Golden Builders* there is an extraordinarily full world conceived, one feels, not in a drawing room or an academic study, but in the streets of Melbourne.
It is a sequence rich in the sense of contrast and in its grasp of recurrent rhythms and patterns of behaviour and events which inform, and to some extent, shape life. Always, the clinical, the mechanical, the unemotional are juxtaposed against deeply-felt sensations of all kinds—suffering, yearning, isolation, physical pain (of people and dogs, even centipedes—that fine use of synaesthesia ‘their movement/ an unvoiced shriek in the loam-like damp’). There is, for instance, an interesting similarity in the patterns of sections four and ten. Certainly four is the better—being at once more evocative and subtly understated (which section ten manifestly is not), more distanced and smoother. Here the mechanical, monotonous aspect of construction work is juxtaposed against the specific tension of an anguished woman (‘Fluttered into a head-back confidence’) going for an abortion, which tension is, in turn, contrasted with the abortionist who ‘has the skill of an engineer’. The ‘something’ crying ‘weakly at the furnace door’ (with all the resonances in that phrase) is an innocent victim. In some sense, the foetus seems to be a victim of clinical ‘know-how’ or of the dictates of a ruthless ‘scientific’ pragmatism. There is no honour underlying that bland description of the abortionist’s composure:

...The abortionist
has the skill of an engineer
his eyes brood like a pilot’s. His hand is steady
as he lifts it away from her sweating legs.

The three-sided contrast is of a man controlled, unmoved (and immovable?), the foetus unable to actually ‘feel’—entirely passive, the woman a suffering, sentient being. The abortionist is seen in a similar light to those demonstrators in ‘Microbiology I’, but there is a subtlety in the treatment of the former which works effectively to make him somehow more repugnant, altogether more alarmingly present than the figures in the following passage.

Been here before. Through
the smart-arsed doors
two deep stairs lock. White-coated demonstrators
carry their phials in front of them like tulips
and flick you with their eyes.

There is something factitious here—particularly in the first pair of lines—a kind of contrived spontaneity. The poem moves on to the suffering dogs. In their suffering, they recall the woman—in their actual cries and complete helplessness they recall the foetus crying weakly ‘at the furnace door’. For the dogs, too, are at ‘the furnace door’—somehow they, too, appear as innocent victims of clinical know-how (all that ‘efficiency’ of the technocratic society) which, in both these poems, is seen as something considerably less than an absolute end!

What does seem absolute is the desire to live.

think how, in any circumstances
the body makes will make its effort

Even the centipedes:

rush from wall to wall, their movement
an unvoiced shriek in the loam-like damp.

and evoked most strongly of all, those rats:

When I smoked them out and killed them
they backed up like Spartans until, cornered,
tails twitching at the locked door,
they came screaming at my knees.
It will be noticed that these lines enact in their rhythm the rats' indecision—'they backed up like Spartans until, cornered, tails twitching ....' gathering into that superlative release of tension in the final rush of the last line—sharp and unbroken.) Everywhere, at all times, people 'count on the light switch/Staying unmoved'. Buckley defines the central concern of the 'Practising Not Dying' poems thus:

That process of dying which one feels in oneself, when outer and inner world flow together, and the body assembles its powers in order to keep itself alive in the world and the world alive in it.\(^1\)

—an eloquent summary of what the 'will-to-live' really constitutes in Golden Builders. The poetry moves between poles of consciousness. When the environment is too far 'inside me', we have:

The traffic glitters towards dull junction
it inches forward in the muscles of my face
crush forward in the agony eyeball
My shoulders push against it. The smell
tangible as a stain. And for no reason I catch
the vinegar smell of fresh sweat
in the thin hairs of my arm

—consciousness being entirely devoted to battling against the encroachment of the too-present environment. This poetry is dialectically opposed to section eleven—'Blake in the Body'. Blake is depicted as the paragon of human vitality, the transcendent individual consciousness—alive 'in the body', incarnate—in his full humanity, his openness to the world while his inner world keeps its integrity, its whole vigour.

It was light leaping
All through the house; the unpruned vine
Reached to the roof-angles.
In the long tilting stiff-grass paddocks
With ecstasy you heard the ploughboy
Say "the gates are open, father".
The gates are open.
The twinned harrows' tines shone like earthshine.

Buckley has flung his gates of consciousness open to produce a bursting, exultant poetry. 'Blake in the Body' is the most soaringly exuberant and passionately celebratory poem he has ever written—the lines above are a prayer. The richly personal and fully created conception of Blake tells us much about Buckley's own stance and his conception of poetry as a 'sacralising' act. Here is the counterpart to the 'Practising Not Dying' poems—the capacity to respond fully and freshly being epitomised in Blake, the most 'golden' builder of all.

It should be clear, then, that I think *Golden Builders* offers a mature and deeply perceptive evocation of a full world. It is freer-moving, more varied and expansive than anything Buckley has written previously. *Golden Builders* does far more than define one man's place in the world, one man's responses to it—in an extraordinarily full sense, it seems to offer 'the world itself'.\(^5\) The stance of the poet has moved very close to the actual process of perception. The rhythms are closer to those of thought and speech—delivered, as it were, directly to the reader.

But friendly Marco at 3 a.m. drunk crying
into Lygon Street's unending funnel
this shit of a country.\(^20\)

Here is a more adventurous use of spacing than Buckley had ever allowed himself before *Golden Builders*, and the adoption of small letters so commonly at the
beginnings of lines (in place of the previously unvaried capitals) seems to announce that this is a more adventurous, more spontaneous sequence in technique as well as content.

Accompanying this innovation, is a movement away from the old faults of a didactic rhetoric. Frequently in the earlier poetry—particularly that of the first two books—the rhetoric seemed to grow out of a 'stance' somewhere above, or aloof from events, which entailed a certain over-structuring of observation towards making a specific point (or points) which quite often got bluntly stated in the course of the poem. _Golden Builders_ seldom appears to be coercing experience into some kind of predetermined pattern (although there are exceptions, such as the 'Microbiology' poems)—the observations and details seem to flow thoroughly naturally—altogether convincingly. The world has an existence independent of the poet's.

A failing which does remain is occasional sentimentality—although it is now occasional. Interestingly, sentimentality in _Golden Builders_ is often accompanied by obscurity.

Will I find my soul here,  
my Irish soul, as in my schooldays? \[22\]

Unless the reader knew that, as a child the poet attended a bluestone school, which was largely demolished to make way for more 'modern' structures—and most readers could not know this—he must remain absolutely lost. The allusion is hopelessly obscure. Also, the phrase 'my Irish soul' recalls the 'Celtic myth-making' which was so prevalent a habit in the Buckley poems of the nineteen fifties.

But the occasional recurrence of these faults proves little more than the self-evident truth, that any poet is likely to be threatened always by the same failings found in his earlier poetry. Far more significant is the sustained achievement in _Golden Builders_ of that ambience Buckley was usually only able to capture fairly briefly. The ambience he did sometimes offer was almost always intensely personal, even if fairly non-specific.

I was born under the continual movement of trees.  
('Borrowing of Trees', _Masters in Israel_)

or even

A south-west wind thrashed on wet gravel.  
('Christmas Cold', _MUM_, 1970)

But in _Golden Builders_ Buckley sometimes achieves a more general and timeless kind of ambience—and in far more sustained bursts:

Evening wanders through my hands and feet  
my mouth is cool as the air that now thins  
twitching the lights on down winding paths. Everything  
leans on this bright cold. In gaps of lanes, in tingling  
shabby squares, I hear the crying of the machines. \[1\]

This brings Eliot to mind (quite apart from the similarity of the first line to 'Morning stirs the feet and hands' in 'Sweeney Erect')

The winter evening settles down  
With smells of steaks in passageways  
Six O'clock  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days (_Preludes_ 1)

except that the Buckley seems more tactile, more finely registered. Perhaps it is closer to this:

Now the light  
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane  
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,
Where you lean against a bank while the van passes.
(Eliot, 'East Coker')

Buckley has described the nature of the 'lyrical' impulse in Eliot thus:

What affects us is not a directness and simplicity of any singable, extravertable kind, but a haunting and haunted quality, the cadence of a reminiscence from profound depths or unmeasured spaces, the echo of a feeling that lives on as deep in the inner ear as any words can go.\(^3\)

There are moments in *Golden Builders* which are themselves accurately defined here. But more commonly the ambience Buckley achieves still emerges as an intensely subjective personal kind as in:

In sleep you go
back up into the old brain
wound tightly as the old city,
walled, thirsty, alive— Come out
as from a seance to the choke of white bread
the rubbed taste in your mouth
bones standing up
in the water of your face. \(^7\)

—where, from the phrase 'come out' onwards, the lines swell with intensely registered physical sensation—sensation so vital that, no matter how universally applicable, it is clearly primarily and originally personal.\(^4\) Throughout *Golden Builders*, despite the 'truth' of the human and material world it presents, we can usually detect the strarings of an individual beneath the surface. Observation leads so frequently back into the self:

The traffic glitters towards dull junction
it inches forward in the muscles of my face \(^26\)

We have, in the end, a poetry which relates strands of experience and observation into a complex network—piped, as it were, directly from the poet's original, initial perceptions. One has less sense, generally of a conscious shaping process having been undergone—before the poetry was 'written'. We do have the sense of a distinct (and vast) unit of poetry—a man who is working his life out, defining it through, and in, his poetry—not (often) confessing or indulging—but relating the presence of the city to the fact of personality, asserting the significance of environment as a shaping force. And at the very centre of all this, he can rejoice through expansive, spontaneous, swelling cadences—rejoice in man's desire to be alive 'in the body'.

there we made our search for Christ's body
the Holy Thursday procession went
scraping its confident rough Latin
till it packed up like a dole queue
down the side wall. Bodies
that wanted song and space
singing inside their cramp .... \(^16\)

**FOOTNOTES**

1 'the Poet's Tongue' p. 5.
2 Evan Jones wrote once (*University Gazette*, April 1967) that 'Stroke' offers "not, as it were, the metaphors for the world but the world itself". If one takes 'Stroke' to offer "the world", then *Golden Builders* presents something like a universe.
3 *Poetry and the Sacred*, p. 37.
4 One feels this even without reading the succeeding four lines (the end of the poem).
extracts from glebe sketchbook

roofs spinalcracked askew
like downturned books
open at pages the inmates
never got passed
always intending to finish
but somehow never picking up
the threads again
of an unliterary life
the last pages uncut
so many anonymous lives
up in the air
& terraced by an architecture
dead when it was built

bus shelters shine almost but not quite
golden in the late autumn sun
the city is not jerusalem
the towers not byzantine
are etched in fire only when seen
in a certain light

the library updated with a face-
    lift of beaten copper
goes through the motions
of outlasting a fireproof
    age
casting a reproachful look of solid
glass upon the mock
    battlements of the sandstone
quad

it is the focal point here
but only for those whose home
is elsewhere
those who live here know it only
as another instance
of the colonial mind
that parades strange fashions
in food & dress
& goes native on occasion
the musician

he plays a long distance
piano
one with teeth
& wears black wrap-arounds

his hands punch & bang
the barrelhouse chords
he's learned to live with
& he squirms on the stool
like a bitch on heat

he sweats & the voice
comes out sand-papered & brass-knuckled
from across a vast
wilderness of deserts
cool & fused
with the bedouin blood
of harlem
like an angel in a blast
furnace
whose wings are lead

he hunches his shoulders
when the set is thru
& shuffles off to the bar
scrounging drinks from the turtlenecked
kids who've come
to pick up on hip

poem: untitled

he studied modern poetry
all day all week
his head began to swim
the bowl so very small
& all the fish
radioactive
GRAEME KINROSS SMITH

Poet

. . . unremarkable; presses glasses back
along a slippy nose;
thinks before he uses serviettes;
believes meals are dispensable
if we are to feel
the sun and earth connive;
will
drive
his wife mad with his jazz,
keeps shirts too long,
still dreams
of unmarked snowdrifts,
is naked as a lover, leaves
spades in the rain
and knows with Olson
there’s no such thing as truth.

Likes to let his kids stay up
with memorable lateness now and then.
He learns, watching their pastel souls
swim among his musty friends.

After they’ve gone
he sits on by the fire,
warms at its death, sees
dark press around the flames.
Takes out his bunched Buddha of uncertainty,
savours the glum face,
turns it in the light . . .

He hears outside
the wind with fingers at the tiles,
and a jet
planting its strips of sound
down the difficult air
like words.
Riverina Uncle

He lifted me on carts,
gave me charge of lambs,
showed me death—
sheep with eyes picked clean;
the melodrama of slit throats.
He spanned the country
with his First War limp
and his thick hands.

But one day after lunch
he vanished.
I skirted sheds, peered
through years of machinery;
but he'd gone.

I climbed, jilted, in the hay shed
and sudden, through a windy hole,
I looked down on the huge roulette
of horses mating.

There,
a shrunken ringmaster
in the corner of the yard,
my uncle shuffled,
murmuring a litany of advice,
looking over his shoulder,
worshipping . . .
Life Size

She cries it clean and laughs it dry,
    Then wears it still unpressed.
She answered when I asked her why
    She goes about so dressed:

"The life I live is wash and wear
    And tailored to my size.
Teardrops wash it free of care,
    And wrinkle-free it dries."

Fraction

The clearing in the wood:
I stopped and watched the setting sun
    Where we once stood.

I almost had to laugh:
The mood I felt was the same one,
    But only half.
MICHAEL DUGAN

She

was the wind
blowing in from the west,
forcing the branches
of mind and body
till they cracked.
Going as suddenly
as she came,
leaving a strange
stillness. A few
scattered twigs
and leaves.

Crows

Old black nuns
croaking a thankful grace
over a dead sheep.
BRIAN DIBBLE

How do
two live
as one?
When one
or the
other
one
dies.

Pinus Ponderosa

as big around as a—
well, you know—
and widening
at the top
to a kind of a
umbrella—
sometimes
opened,
sometimes
closed,
depending on
the weather.
Ponder that.

Seaman Pettimore's Peace

Hove me home to sheltered harbor,
guide me into warmth of port,
Climb my mast, lower my boom,
unload the cargo from my hold.
Then gently fold my sails and let
me rest in your soft waters
that bathe and soothe my hull.
I know there will be other crews,
no need to tell—nor hide—all that.
I've no illusions, only dreams,
to fill my sails for days and nights
until I come again.
The Savages are Listening

What could I give you
broken laughs, perfumed drugs,
exchange
tooths, gold earrings, for those innermost slivers
of your face, your pale flesh

Man of feathers and stones
I’ve been wading in circles
grinding
hips and hands, silver spiked tongues, my skin
crawling
forgetting who I’ve slept with, which demon was evoked,
faces and words, too much confusion . . .

In circles, in orbit
I’m your plaster doll
(though idols with clay feet have fallen before you)
I’m your one cracked true one, your naked
and funny thing

The savages are listening
when you speak of feathers, shells
the sea in your ear
strokingsadness down, your tongue thick inside me

The savages are listening, hear
your words crystal clear, gems
extravagant necklace
  It’s your jewellery of touch
I crave for, wild thing . . .
  (the animal is in your hand)
not your head of civilizations
marooned between books
JENNIFER MAIDEN

Motes
(remembering my grandmother)

I understand it: how one dreads
the virtuous exhaustion
that polishes all dust-motes
to sudden auroras in space;
and how, for her to lean
on the pins-&-needles in her arms,
discover them freshly upholstered
in nylon bedjackets and lace,
was waking in the uniform of death
while memory still lied "and then... and then...
 to dress the true virginity, of breath.

The Actor

Life nips behind my eyes,
but in this box of orange light
conflicting skin at last is reconciled
by powder thick as frost.
In harmonies of sweet cosmetic dust
my lips are arteries that pump
the truth like blood: a man
so free now that he need not choose
which accident will shape him.
BOOKS


Papers presented at the second David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar at Canberra in 1970 are brought together in a carefully edited and handsomely bound volume entitled Studies in the Eighteenth Century. The continuing existence of these large international scholarly gatherings at Canberra under the canopy of shared interests in the 18th century is unique in Australian academic life and undoubtedly imparts benefits beyond the precincts of the National Library.

Altogether, twenty papers appear in this moderately massive volume of 419 pages. Most of them reflect and further a tendency in literary studies to explore the texts for extractable ideas rather than inherent values and to line up author and text as counters in a complex game of cultural history. Whether the 18th century lends itself more readily to such procedures than the intellectual milieu of other epochs is in itself an interesting cultural-historical question. It is possible to view the century, with its deepening curiosity about the world of nature and about the nature of society and mankind, accompanied by increased detachment from the intellectual attitudes of the past, as a fairly precise point in history when a great number of those concepts, categories, methods and models which tenaciously persist into our own world came into being. Dr. Elkner's fascinating essay on "Diderot and the Sublime", for instance, presents through the astonishing diversity of one great, restless 18th century mind a number of conflicting aesthetic and moral ideas which have insistently engaged and re-engaged thinkers ever since their first formulations in the Salons of Paris and in the drawing rooms of 18th century English country houses. It is not only such enduring fundamental problems as Diderot's passionate search for escape routes through the "brazen bonds" of history and biological determinism which are deeply relevant to our own age but some of the by-products of his central ideas, too, such as his bold aesthetic leap beyond words on the stage to the realm of "body language" as the ultimate source of the theatrical sublime, a notion reinvented in this century on both sides of the Channel by people like Gordon Craig and Mallarmé. As for his celebration of what seems to be the first fully fledged formulation of élan vital in "criminal sublimity", it had its modified revival in Nietzsche, and lately, closer to home, in the apotheosis of Saint Genet as well. But if Dr Elkner's essay unobtrusively vindicates the value and significance of 18th century cultural history for the modern reader, the same thing cannot be said about all studies appearing here in the same bracket. For example, Professor Leith's condensed summary of French educational trends in his "Modernisation, Mass Education and Social Mobility in French Thought 1750-1789" is an over-dense synopsis of his projected work on educational ideas in 18th century France. Sentences sag and paragraphs flounder under the weight of names: "men such as Le Mercier de la Rivière, Quesnay, Turgot..." are lifted from respectable obscurity by patient scholarship to deliver whatever significance they have for scholars working or aspiring to work this remote patch of educational history.

Other contributors, more sensitive perhaps to the demands of this genre, attract and illuminate more by encompassing less. Professor Fabian in "An Early Theory of Genius" demonstrates the pioneering contribution of an Aberdeen Professor of Philosophy, Alexander Gerard, to speculations on the nature and characteristics of "genius" as a distinct human type. Though a self-contained study, massively documented, the essay is able to blend into the larger framework of this volume by emphasising significant and widespread epistemological changes in local contexts.

Professor Fabian relates Gerard's vegetative analogies of the human mind to similar ones expounded by Young and notes that the method "presupposes about the middle of the century a transition from physics to biology as the background discipline from which analogies and metaphors could be derived". The first of a series of transitions, it seems, which offered models to explain the workings of the human brain in terms of the most advanced or most fashionable scientific discipline of the day.

The title of Roger Robinson's article: "Henry Fielding and the English Rococo" is pleasingly misleading. Mr. Robinson is not a "sister artist". He does not indulge in those evasive tactics.
practised by literary critics who transpose critical terms drawn from the sphere of the plastic arts or architecture to the study of literature, generally to the detriment of all, but explores Fielding’s narrative digressions with engaging sensitivity and obvious enjoyment. The “apparent coexistence of Rococo and Augustan” in Fielding’s novels is noted without undue excitement, and some subtle parallels are drawn between Hogarth pictures on the walls of his interiors and Fielding’s digressions as examples of oblique moral comments on the “main action”, but the enticements of Mnemosyne and her disciples are resisted by Mr. Robinson, who keeps his eyes steadfastly on Fielding’s texts.

No reader of this volume, however mildly committed to these topics under review, will fail to enjoy Professor Landa’s “Of Silkworms and Farthingales and the Will of God.” Like a great connoisseur who exhibits a mere roomful of deftly chosen objects from a vast collection to illustrate ramifications of a single motif, Professor Landa brings his extensive erudition to bear on economic ideas surrounding the lady of fashion, “The Clarindas, Belindas and Celias of the reigns of Queen Anne and the first two Georges”. But of course the images of the lady of quality in the writings of the period are turned by careful arrangement into a series of gilt framed mirrors to show “the very age and body of the times.” A fine sense of period, together with an unfailing ear for its many voices, make the reading of this essay intensely pleasurable: economic history, one feels, is too interesting a subject to be left to economic historians.

On the other hand historiography, to be amusing and instructive, should be left to critics and historians such as Mr John Hay, who in an article on Tristram Shandy assails its system of “riddles and mysteries”, its teasing chronological discrepancies, which are the very texture of Sterne’s novel. Mr. Hay’s profound rapport with this author is evident in his delight in pursuing Sterne’s fantastic chronological convolutions to the point where his elucidation of Tristram’s possible illegitimacy is no less complex and fascinating than the narrative method which caused the problem.

For those interested in satirical typology, there is a learned article on “Swift’s use of Biblical typology in The Tale of a Tub” by Paul J. Korshin. The Tale of a Tub is further examined by Gardner D. Stout “as an expression of Swift’s whole state of being its author and speaker”, and Michael Wilding in yet another article on Swift moves beyond the topical and specific political allusions in Gulliver’s Travels to demonstrate Swift’s Christian-humanist pessimism, manifest in his deep misgivings about any political organisation in Society. “All societies” (so runs Mr. Wilding’s summary of Swift’s views) “are political and all political societies are corrupt or explosive or both . . . political and social organisations were established because man was fallen; and because man was fallen, they themselves were inevitably corrupt as institutions”. Such conclusions and the arguments leading up to them interestingly anticipate and deflect some of Professor Donald Greene’s complaints in the fourth article on Swift (“Swift: Some Caveats”) “How odd,” he writes, “that modern students insist on clinging desperately to the belief that the labels Tory or Whig furnish some magic, metaphysical clue to two opposing philosophies of life.” Mr. Wilding’s implicit definition of Swift’s politics subsumes and transcends Whig and Tory and all attendant specific ideology, and since his arguments operate on a more general and more significant level he not so much disposes of problems such as Swift’s “transformation into a Tory stalwart” but shows them to be ultimately of little importance.

These essays are by no means “essential articles”. Even their rightful clientele, academics in cognate disciplines, will read this volume with uneven interest. Yet few people interested in 18th century matters will fail to come across paragraphs, pages or whole articles that stimulate the interest and engage the imagination. There are notes on the contributors; an index of proper names; and eight pages of illustrations.

PAUL KOVESI


The appearance of Sandgropers gives us a chance to ‘assess the state of writing in Western Australia’. That’s the assumption behind the various reviews of the book in Eastern States papers, and I found myself sharing it when I reviewed the book for the ABC’s Mon-
day Critics programme. It now seems to me dubious whether the geographical grouping is any more than that; whether the individual stories and poems in the collection amount to a statement different from their aggregate of statements.

This anthology does not seek to parade ‘write Westralia’ deliberately across its pages [says Dorothy Hewett in her Preface], but I think there are certain themes and preoccupations that do engage writers living in this part of the continent. Some of us have gone in for ancestor worship, or ancestor burying, the bush is still really just across the subway from the dogs’ home, childhood beckons us all with nostalgia for those romantic rituals and ceremonies made valid by time. The scrub is endless, so we take to the sea searching for fish and gilt dragons. Death, the journey, the desert places, haunt our consciousness, and we write endless postcards ‘to he who lives alas! away’. It may still look a little like Eden, but suicide does grow in this clean air. We do have the highest suicide rate in Australia, and D. H. Lawrence called the early West Australians ‘children of death’.

The ‘themes and preoccupations’ she evokes are certainly to be found in Sandgropers, but I think they could be found in any broadly representative collection of Australian writing. Perhaps there is some general set of characteristics common to writing here, but if so, I think it would be a list of absences, rather than presences.

But to go along with Dorothy Hewett: four of the seventeen stories are about childhood. Of these, only Fay Zwicky’s fine story Hostages is about moral experience. It searches a childhood relationship with a music teacher which brought for the girl the beginnings of hate and the end of unquestioning childhood routine. The point-of-view is that of the adult looking back. No lines of causation are drawn between the childhood events and the later life, but the adult personality is before us, ironically continuous with the familiar stranger that was herself when young. The aim of the story is an act of comprehension the reverse of analytical. Just to see, clearly enough, is an important kind of understanding.

The other three stories about childhood (those by Donald Stuart, Peter Woolcock and Iris Milutinovic) hardly amount to stories at all. Some childhood experience is given ‘for its own sake’—the same might be said of Hostages—but the felt aim is to recapture rather than in Zwicky’s sense to understand. The impulse in these stories is to go back, to re-enter a world of sensual immediacy where lyricism and energy come naturally out of the moment. Stuart writes in the third person about an aboriginal boy while the other two take the form of personal reminiscence. But in all three stories, the point-of-view comes from inside the experience. There is no perspective, and no consequent irony. Regular readers of Westerly will recognise how much of this kind of writing there is both here and elsewhere in Australia. It is as though for these writers the elementary mastery over words that fixes a moment in the past is itself an important magic. The past dwelt on is frequently childhood, seen as insulated from what came after. Is there a hint here of that emotional emptiness we so often talk about? For some of these writers, the end of childhood seems to have been the end of passion.

Another kind of story deals in the standard powers of realism to direct the reader’s attention to this or that beyond the confines of the story itself. Richard Beilby’s A Glimmer of Gentle Pride works to arouse compassion for the aborigines, as in its different way does the Donald Stuart piece. In Hugh Edwards’s The Shark Fisherman we find plain reminiscence, written with professional skill and vigour and with an unsentimental affection. The line dividing such a reminiscence (if it is that) from a story like T. A. G. Hungerford’s Remora is hard to draw. It wouldn’t affect our response to Remora to be told that the three, simply-drawn characters had existed, and that the author himself was the man with the notable snout. In both Hungerford and Edwards the underlying values are those of the life of manly action. To read fiction like this is to extend and (perhaps) intensify the experience of listening to yarns. The characters are readily understood and belong to already-familiar categories. The medium is used to record what we agree in advance is worth recording. As in the stories about childhood, the writer, whether from modesty or incapacity, is content to place some experience before us which will neither strain his powers of understanding or extend the experience he trusts we have of how things go in the world.
Merv Lilley’s *Going Ashore* begins as if it were another simple proposition. Joe Honeywell is a fireman on a coaster, brooding about his wife who wants him onshore for good. The crew resent him, both because he’s an Eastern-Stater and because in his capacity as ship’s delegate he wants to take a tougher line with management than they’ve been used to. What makes the story outstanding, besides the interest of the central character’s situation is the rich, idiosyncratic prose.

They drew their two little bottles from the steward, went leisurely along the well deck enjoying the last of the afternoon sun, and climbed up to the blunt end, sat around, leaned over the rail to watch the wake, talked a little, gradually mellowed out. Big Ears quoted a poem about a soldier and an Arab girl’s romance, finishing each verse with the prophetic words, ‘Sieda Bint’, and no one knew who or what Sieda Bint was, but they knew that a soldier and a girl had parted, and it was slightly sad, partly inevitable, ironic, convenient. It related them, unconsciously, to themselves.

The viewpoint in such a passage moves easily from the intimately-understood realities of life on a ship to humorous perspective and sharply intelligent commentary. There were the makings of a *nouvelle* here, and it may have been a mistake to try to cramp the material. At any rate, something goes badly wrong at the end, where the ship threatens to explode, but not in the metaphorical sense prepared for: “Watch about closely Joe, somewhere this thing’s near breaking point.”

The stories by Fay Zwicky and Merv Lilley stand out from the groups I have placed them in. There is an accomplished story by Elizabeth Jolley as well, but the third outstanding story in the collection is by Peter Cowan, amongst these writers the only one with an established and considerable reputation. Interestingly, all the short stories in *Sandgropers* show a commitment to realism. There is no experimental prose and no mythmaking. Only Lilley, Zwicky and Cowan manage altogether to avoid the traps of flatness and mere contingency. Only these three, I am tempted to say (with a reservation for Elizabeth Jolley) attain fiction proper, whether through density of dialogue, complication of viewpoint or the reshaping of ordinary narrative prose into a more expressive and subtle medium. I don’t want to suggest that the difference is ‘technical’. The different techniques indicate the presence of a great intensity of imagination in writers who demand that fiction should be something more than fixating.

One of the motives behind the sponsorship of *Sandgropers* by the W.A. Arts Advisory Board was to give an opportunity for younger writers to appear in the grandeur of hardback anthology. The three short story writers I have singled out are none of them precisely young (though Fay Zwicky is a comparative newcomer to publication) and the absence of impressive younger poets is even more obvious. Andrew Burke is poorly represented by one early and another indifferent poem. Even so, his is the voice one picks out above the drone of sentimental complaint. The young poets here wrap their verse around them like a comfortable dressing-gown. Their concerns are too often nostalgic or elegiac; they refine upon and cosset their feelings. The staple form is the short lyric of private life, and one has a sense that for these poets the world is too threatening to confront directly. Ken Hudson speaks for all:

> our language of hearts for the moment
> is stilled. above our house the winter
> night broods/hunched over us like
> some evil cat with hungry eyes and hot
> raking claws

The better poems in the collection form a group about which it is impossible to generalise. Dorothy Hewett’s *Grave Fairytale* uses the Rapunzel story as the basis for a powerful allegory of sex and creation. O. D. Watson has contributed what seems to me his best poem. Of the group of three by Randolph Stow the best is *Penelope*, a beautifully-cadenced poem which rightly stands at the head of the collection. To quote only part would disable it. Like Stow, William Grono is preoccupied by emptiness. His poem *Absence*, written since he went to America, is located in ‘an upstate New York clutter of concrete./clapboard, truncated trees’, but its desperation and its sense of a lost world of value might as easily have been prompted by the Narrows approach system or the bullring in Leeds. Still it’s tempting to claim *Absence* as a Western Australian poem.

Absence abides here. Thruways, highways make it easy for anyone who comes to go. Our patrimony is lovelessness. (Ah, love. *Love*. That much-
advertised resort! To be in love, to escape into ourselves... Driving out, nights, we dream of possibilities, snow wandering the long unlovely streets.) Absence prevails: Hedrington, Berryman dead; friends gone; ourselves (Alert, wary) less than we were, clinging to vestiges, imperfect memories...

Snow falls and the room darkens a little.

For the sake of completeness I should mention that there are three critical essays in Sandgropers. Margot Luke reassesses Peter Cowan's novel Summer, Cowan himself contributes an appreciative note on Seaforth Mackenzie and Jean Whitehead writes about two novels by Randolph Stow. I don't see why these are here. None of them is particularly good, and there is certainly no school of Western Australian criticism demanding representation on the same basis as the poets and writers of short stories. The space would have been better filled either with a substantial piece on Mackenzie or a general essay on writing in this state.

Sandgropers will inevitably do much to shape the image the rest of Australia has of writing in this State. I wonder if one of its effects will be to reinforce the sense other Australians already have of Western Australia as a place apart? How would it strike us if there were to appear, backed by subsidies, puffed by the Press, floated at a posh reception, an anthology of Victorian writing? Do writers in Melbourne or Sydney think of themselves as members of a State team? Despite Dorothy Hewett's Preface, the context to which you refer the best work in the anthology is the context of Australian writing generally. True, the smaller population here, and the isolation, mean that the indifference of the public is not concealed to the extent it is in the East by a large enough subculture of the literate. The writer has no earplugs against the howling silence. He is tempted to believe that this different awareness of what being-a-writer is like gives him something different to write about. If so, on the strength of the anthology, he still doesn't write about it. Unless Hal Colebatch means to include artists in his splendid lines after MacGonagall:

The city of Perth by the diminished Swan River,
Is not really a place for a high-liver,
And indeed when visiting astronauts arrive and scan it,
I am surprised they do not plant a flag, for to claim it as another planet.

BRUCE WILLIAMS
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