In paintings, etchings, and drawings, Rembrandt depicted himself, in known examples, nearly a hundred times; all except a few of the earliest lack any trace of vanity.

Frederick Hartt, *Art: a history of painting, sculpture, architecture*

I.
1663
The mirrors want you
to trust your protean
skin, its bric-a-brac of colours,
its folds and pocks, trust
that this has always been
you.

Instead, you’ve spent
your life
trying to dive under
the shallow secrets
of your skin
and find a face
shaped by something,
anything,
solid.
That face in the mirror
is just an etching
carelessly made by time.
Rembrandt, where are the portraits
of your blood, its centripetal
spin inward? Show us how
it leaves your shaking
arms and hands the way a wounded man
tries to crawl from the battlefield
and find his way home
to die. Show us how, each time
it finishes its cycle, it's caught
at the door to its house
and sent on another forced
march away from the heart.

II.
1664
Hundreds of days without Hendrickje,
thousands of hours since you crossed
the bridge outside your window
together—and the last time you did,
you were too busy to stop
and watch the river like she wanted.
Her hips tickled your fingers
as you hurried her home,
trying to outrun the thunderclouds
boiling in from the west.

One night you realized you could no longer draw
the soft curve of her chin, the lazy curls
her hair dropped onto her neck.

Which of your faces
is the one we should turn to
for comfort, the one that shows us
everything will turn out fine?
III.
1667
When Saskia died, her face
stayed with you so clearly
that your eyes
felt like stained glass,
her portrait melted into each.
Hendrickje spent years
wiping away the memory
of another woman,
and when she died,
your eyes were ready
for her beautiful etching.

Instead, she left you
quickly, a thin cloud
that wisped away
while you stood in your window
watching the river,
its pale blues caught
in the sad lavender of nightfall.

All these worthless
surfaces, the easy trickery
of brushstrokes—tell me
the truth, mirror, come clean:
when could the skin
show the true,
subtle blue of veins,
the blood's desperate,
pointless drive
to rest?

IV.
1668
Now all you have is an empty house,
your treasures and curios sold to pay the piling bills,
two wives and four children lie
in the graveyard. But you stand there grinning, as though you know some final joke.

The experts say you're alluding to Zeuxis, that you see yourself in him, a bitter man caught gasping for breath, laughing like a crow at a wrinkled old woman until you fall forward, dead.

But this is an ugly ending.

Rembrandt, let's call the critics bitter old men, and we'll write you a different story: It's true, you're saying, I am sixty-two years old, tired, alone and ill, but I'm happy now. There's no sense in this at all,

but last night I dreamt I held a razor to my throat. Suddenly, I flicked it across my forearm, again and again. The blood fell from my wrist onto the floor in fine handwriting—

Not yet; your hands have other work.

But the thing about dreams is that we all wake up, and the pretty endings, Rembrandt, are few. Too few, I'm afraid to give them to the dead.

V.
1669
The whip-shock of age has lashed your body. Death is peaking over your shoulder, and you've lost your faith,
not in your God, but in Rembrandt—
now, your work is only the work
of an old draughtsman, a hack,
and you refuse to give this face
your signature.

In the end, to be
unnamed, after all the searching
to finally find yourself
undone, and lost.
In a radio interview last year, Australia’s Olympic Laureate, Mark O’Connor, spoke of the shortcomings of the lyrics of popular music and its failure to achieve the same level of expressiveness and originality as poetry. Yet for all the commercial, derivative and repetitive nature of much (though not all) pop lyrics, it at least has vitality, and a wide, renewable and lasting audience. If this is “failure” what can be said of the “successes” of poetry? The limited publication opportunities, the limited commercial backing, the limitations of funding, the limited audience, the death or contraction of the “little magazines”, add up to many black moments, even for “successful” poets, who will generally need a day job to support their habit. One sometimes suspects about the only people listening closely to poetry are poets themselves; others are forced into it by educational curricula only to experience it as the compulsory fun of an assessment event. Most are blissfully unaware. Yet there is a poet in all of us: and nearly everybody has loved a poem sometime. And in the past year, if only people knew, many new poems to admire and inspire have been published, in an incredible variety and vitality. They display, of course, the differences between the purposes of pop culture and poetry. Popular music has a primary purpose to entertain, and only occasionally does it slip into the expressive, always with the support of the band and often the excitement of the concert or the party. Poetry, on the other hand, generally takes its primary mission to explore the limits of expression. And mostly does so, like Keats’
unheard melodies, in silence, and alone. Performance poetry, poetry readings and multi-media poetry remain still relatively rare experiences. Yet this need not delimit poetry from using entertainment and excitement as tools of expression. And this, I believe, is what the best poetry has always done.

And if we are looking for a book that explores entertainment as an essential component of good poetry, one that should be made compulsory reading is the first published collection of Homer Reith, *The Dining Car Scene* (Black Pepper). The volume takes its title from a poem that effortlessly evokes and re-interprets Hitchcock's images from his popular classic *North by Northwest*:

> something more mysterious  
> than microfilm and secret agents  
> is following the train:  
> it has the curve of the Twentieth Century Limited  
> in its sights.

The poem draws us into a volume that explores some of the mysteries and limits of the twentieth century, presenting it as a thriller in search of the secret that seeks for the “chance of doing something finally worthwhile”. This “something worthwhile” is the emotional punch and urgency explored in his central tour de force poem “Siberia”, where a notion of poetry is examined that compares it to the art of boxing. The poem’s central epiphany is that “pugilism’s a sort of poetry”. The poem thus rewrites the cliche that depicts the image of elite sports men and women as “poetry in motion”. Reith’s discovery, however, is that the reverse is also true: “Poetry’s a sort of pugilism”, means it should pack the punch of things like popular sport and popular music. It should have the power of

> a left to the body, a right to the head,  
> ten seconds and you’re in Siberia

And indeed, frequently Reith lives up to this prescription, his poetry providing the knock-out blow to heart and mind, that sends the reader to Siberia. His poems speak urgently and directly of
experience itself, in all its essentials, incorporating and transcending the personal, seeking out the mysterious power of what may be "finally worthwhile", and always with wit and ironic charm. The penultimate poem in the book shrieks the ultimate "Helter Skelter" experience, expressed in terms of "Flying High". The metaphor is played upon with Beatle-like directness and excitement. In the tradition of the metaphysicals, the lover in the poem makes extreme claims: he is born for "flying high", is at home in "aerospace", which, like a knock-out punch, is:

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a dangerous place for lovers  
especially in the cockpit, with all its flashing dials  
and mysterious instrumentation.  
What if you end up being ditched  
in deepwater?
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The reader is drawn through a series of gut-wrenching experiences on the roller-coaster of ordinary extra-ordinary experience, where the technical mysteries of the Twentieth Century Limited end up in the cock-pit of an old-fashioned rhetorical question, relating the meaning of experience to its risk. What's exciting about Reith's poetry is the way it can speak directly of experience, but also capture the ambiguity and ineffable nature of its possibilities.

This contrasts with poetry that seeks directness by addressing its audience by means of personal performance. Such performances frequently deliver the knock-out punch on the night, but the morning after, some of the excitement has gone. This could perhaps be argued of what seem to be records of some of May Carroll's hilarious performances in *i wanted to throw your things out on the lawn* (Cornford Press). Carroll speaks urgently to her audience in the vernacular, with the wit and comedy suggested in the title of the title poem, addressing themes popular amongst devotees of popular culture: broken relationships, beer, toilets, god and the late un lamented C.E.S. This is an entertaining, lively and unpretentious record of ordinary (if grungy) experience - yet reading it in book form is to experience Siberia as a hang-over, rather than the feeling of being "sent" there. Jacob Rosenberg's *Behind the Moon* (Five Islands Press), on the other hand, gives notice of the pain of the
gulags of Siberia, but recollected with a tranquillity that belies its subject matter, lost in the traditional imagery and devices of the sonnet form. It is sometimes difficult to remember that Rosenberg is addressing the very alienating twentieth century themes of the holocaust and the experience of being a holocaust survivor. Rosenberg attempts to express the spirit and dignity of those who did not survive, and explores the meaning and ways of coming to terms with the pain of that experience. Yet if Rosenberg’s language tends to dilute experience, he will always find an audience interested in his subject. Thus, oddly, like Carroll, his poetry contains a popular element - if directed to a very different audience. Carroll’s poetry is pure attitude, while Rosenberg’s represents a temple for his reflections. It is experience at a distance. If the poetry of neither delivers the “knock out” punch, both go a few successful rounds in representing their own particular contests in survival.

Another result of Five Islands’ support for the poetic enterprise this year (far and away the most prolific), is Brook Emery’s first collection: and dug my fingers in the sand. This former icon of popular culture (sun, sand, surf, centre-fold) has brought his instinct to bear on what I think is the poetry book of the year, containing the accumulated wisdom of his age. The poems display an undeniable maturity and an easy conversational range that yokes an impressive erudition to the reality of experience firmly anchored to the eastern seaboard, which is rediscovered in its historical context. If Reith’s poetry sends one to Siberia, Emery’s transports one across the universe, or at least to Bondi (which some may regard as its centre). Emery’s descriptions of physical phenomena are as obsessive, precise and accurate as those of Robert Gray. His imagination has the curiosity and reach of an all-round renaissance man. He experiences first hand the operation of Newton’s laws of motion in the experience of diving; of Archimedes Principle in the depths of Bondi Baths; Emery experiences time with a geological grasp of the ages and the eras, and has an astronomical perspective of the earth in space. His book begins and ends by turning scientific, historical and geographical wonder into genuine poetry.

The closing sequence of the volume, constitutes Emery’s Revelation - “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth” - locating his source of wonder in a school assignment on astronomy:
At thirteen I looked deliberately into the night sky.
I should have been doing it months before. I was supposed
to plot the phases of the moon, its rising and repose ...

The assignment is finally awarded an ironic "C" for its imaginative
rather than scientific qualities, yet the insight gained on South Head’s
Christison Park is akin to that of a later-day Keatsian Cortez, and begins
Emery’s metaphysical rampage around the physical world. If this
sounds capital “R” Romantic, then Emery’s poetry isn’t: it is never
pretentious or obscure. It is always ironic, precise and conversationally
urbane as it opens the reader’s eyes on explorative trips as various as
the Blue Mountains, the NSW coast, the 18th Century Pacific and the
Mares of the Moon. Like Reith’s, the book is always on edge, the
excitement of the edge, usually on the littoral (literally) between the
Great Dividing Range, and Emery’s true element, the sea. Brook Emery
establishes a new mythology of the Sydney Basin, finding its place
between what is past and is passing, in a language that distils what is
to become, from a coign of vantage somewhere out there in the cosmos.

Dorothy Hewett’s twelfth volume also contains the accumulated
wisdom of her age. But she looks back over her life from a pinnacle
deliberately sited only *Half Way up the Mountain*. Rather than a
celebration of inspiration, it is a reconciliation with life’s limited
achievements. In the volume’s structure, I am reminded somewhat
of Samuel Beckett’s Malone waiting to die. The opening section,
“From a Dark Cottage”, is a series of poems on her “present state”
– to employ Malone’s term – that presents vignettes on how she is
coping with growing old half way up the Blue Mountains. The
“dark cottage” is inhabited by images of night, falling asleep,
senility and death: there are the eccentric neighbours, descriptions
of the “Old Women of the Mountains” and the “Death of a Cat”.
The poems do not depress, however, they are wryly observed and
about a coming-to-terms with age and death which is completed by
opening vistas of meaning onto the past in “The Moonlit Creek”:

but I’ll be looking out on the garden
when evening falls
when the darkness under the trees
gives way to a radiance of light
There is a dream-like tension as the poems move between a fear of dying and an acceptance, to almost an embrace of death as a release from life into a sort of second childhood ("I am child again "), which is cue for the introduction of the second sequence of poems "The Sunlit Plains" – where, again like Beckett’s Malone – Hewett entertains herself with stories from the past. Unlike Malone, however, there is no question of identity – Hewett is very much her traditional self – romantic, cynical, Bohemian, sentimental, radical, opinionated, prolix. She relives a multi-faceted life from a childhood in the Western Australian wheatlands, to the volume’s final section “Salt Harbour“ set in the Sydney of the author’s prime. If this book works, it does so because of the sense of the vibrant personality of the author reliving her life and confronting again many of the issues that have arisen and now pass before her. There is the life of the plains, her family, the animals, “Strawberry, Buttercup, and Daisy” and the farm itself:”we helped build and destroy”. The confrontation with things past and destroyed recurs; the Bohemian Sydney of the Cross in the fifties, the dead poets, “Sylvia and Keats”, Ezra Pound, Lowell, and John Forbes – one of many tributes this year to the late ebullient master of Australian post modernism. In the last poems we witness an Australian poet who foresees her death, and comes back to the rag and bone shop of her heart:

we are the ones
who know the truth of the modest compromise
nothing can be well done only dreamed of
and botched in the execution

Yet despite this Malone-like pessimism (except for the memory of having once had idealistic dreams), the volume is vibrant with faith in opinion, personality and relationships. In a sense it is because Hewett acknowledges a pinnacle only half way up her mountain to perfection that this volume is more successful than some of her others, with its vision of the universal drama of human limitation.

Rosemary Dobson’s Untold Lives and Later Poems (Brandl and Schlesinger), like Hewett’s, are very much the poems of old age, revisiting people from the past to immortalise their characters in
typically economical vignettes. There is little sentimentality in *Untold Lives* and nothing sensational: in contrast to Hewett, the focus is on the subjects themselves, as opposed to their significance to the poet. The poetry is quiet, reflective and sharp as ever. The “sometime academic”, for example, “who at graduations seemed to murmur “my dear child” to graduands is devastatingly revealed in the final lines:

In all that company nobody divined  
That he was drowning kittens in a pail.

The wisdom bequeathed to Dobson by age is not only to have a real understanding of people (arguably a lifelong talent), but to have the freedom to reveal people in time, to show how “what they were then” turned into how they finished up. “Remembering Kitty” is a fine example of this, as Dobson recalls the seductive nature of Kitty’s laughter as a child. Yet she goes on to evoke how this liveliness is squandered in her “Spend thrift” and vain age, until she died:

A widow twice in her house alone,...  
Her soul like thinnest chiffon floated free  
And – not to be handed on, Kitty’s alone –  
Her laugh went with it, up and up, away.

These poems will be remembered among Dobson’s finest. The second section of the book, however, is more personal, involving her own experiences confronting death. The elegy for her husband, Alec Bolton, “A Marriage”, is poignant in its realisation of the “empty spaces” left by the departed children and dead husband. There is the contrast between the memory of the cluttered family home, when “we never could walk .../ direct /Through the furnished rooms”, and the “now” when:

I can cross the room  
From any direction  
To single chair  
The single bed.
This poem captures the sparseness, dignity and poignancy of Dobson’s imagery, which, if she is indeed in the seventh age of Woman, she’s doing a lot better than Shakespeare’s blokes.

The same may be said for Vera Newsome, whose High Tide (Five Islands Press) completes the wisdom of the elder stateswomen of Australian poetry. If the volume celebrates the high tide of life, it is very focussed on how the ever rising tide of time obliterates our ephemeral works in the sand:

I write my name at the sea’s edge.
The tide will come, blot out
all I have known have done.

Thus begins the final poem in the book. In its simplicity and directness there is an urgency and desire to get things down before they pass away forever. As in Rosenberg’s Behind the Moon, the imagery is taken from nature, but here it is effortlessly made new again, the poetry revelling in all its ambivalence. As in Hewett and Dobson, the overall themes revolve around facing death, aging and loss. Yet if time is the figure of loss, removing health, vigour, and loved ones, it is also the figure of salvation:

Can mind remain untouched
when body cries
with a vexed longing
for the dead dream
of netting the ball
catching the wave ...?
But there is a space to meditate, time to remember.

We see here the uncanny contrast between her directness and ambivalence that generates the tension in the volume. Newsome veers between the endurance of being cared for - as she is treated like a child after her stroke (“The Stroke”) - to an almost transcendent perception:

So much to know. This? This?
What is its meaning? Touch savours.
Language fails.
Yet we know, we know.

This frenzy of experience is held in counterpoint by the final line of “Afterlife”: “There is no future memory”. At other times death seems a consummation devoutly to be wished, when adopting the persona of Lazarus, Newsome upbraids Christ for disturbing his glimpse of paradise to bring him back to life for selfish propaganda purposes. Overall, this is a poignant, moving volume, with touches of macabre wit.

In contrast to this direct, lyrical expression of the experience of aging, Jean Crawford in Admissions (Five Islands Press) attempts to trace the experience of a psychotic admitted to hospital, firstly as an emergency, then as a potential neurology patient and finally into a psychiatric ward. The poet poses as Ariadne tracing the perceptions of the patient Ruth, and the perceptions of Ruth by those around her. In this way, Crawford boldly explores the limits of expression. The experience is harrowing. Yet this illustrates the central conundrum for the fate of poetry if it is to be read, understood and enjoyed widely. In trying to express the maze of perceptions, the experience remains just that, a maze, despite the author’s perceptiveness and verbal originality. While the older women speak of experience with a depth and directness that give that “knock out” blow, Crawford’s enterprise tends to remain in the realm of the obscure.

John Kinsella’s The Hierarchy of Sheep (Fremantle Art Centre Press) is founded in direct experience, but also too frequently wanders off into unfounded obscurity. An example of this can perhaps be identified in his tribute to John Forbes. Not that I think Kinsella’s tribute [“Ode to John Forbes (or Ring of Bright Water)’’] is not sincere, but it is perhaps too sincere in its flattery. For this volume continues Kinsella’s “counter-pastoral” project, incorporating elements of post-modernism (a la Forbes) and post-structuralism that unnecessarily detract from the power and expressiveness of Kinsella’s natural talent. Present in the volume are his usual great strengths in evoking a variety of images, moods and scenes, mainly from the West Australian Wheatlands and other scenes of Perth and the South West. The description of “Rainwater Tanks in Summer” or the account of Uncle Clem’s theories on
lightning strikes ("Uncle Clem reckons quite a few"), or the tension between cockatoos, tourists and the inhabitants of a cemetery up "Ensign Dale Court", are charming, poignant and witty as ever, enriched by an understated sense of subversive irony, where everything is different to what it seems. This volume attempts to take such experiences and events out of their local or personal context and situate them globally - perhaps the modern equivalent of "universality". If Hewett’s poems constitute an elegy for the death of her life in the Wheatlands, Kinsella’s poems attempt to capture and describe without sentimentality the processes of their changing. In contrast to the poems of The Silo, which depicted the farmlands as a sort of eternal Arcadia, the poems in The Hierarchy of Sheep are on the move, largely bereft of the first person pronoun, invaded by "cut out boutique pastoralists" ("Sheep at Night") and often deconstructing themselves with phraseology such as "the freelancing/ narratology of marketing boards". While I’m happy to accept Kinsella’s satirical point here, I struggle with the words. The poems also re-evaluate to some extent Western Australian experience from the perspective of the English Fenlands, where Kinsella partakes in the traditional Australian project of self-definition through travel. Yet for all the post-modern satirical - say Forbesian - jibes at the forces of globalisation that have transformed Kinsella’s Arcadia, many of the poems seem out of their element. "Fencepost", for example, begins as a thoughtful and interesting meditation on that very pastoral subject of its title. But towards the end, the poem loses confidence in its project and demolishes itself with an allusion to the art of Tom Roberts as a form no longer capable of encapsulating modern experience:

A Tom Roberts painting becomes a lost refrain -
information breaking up, the field enclosed -
without pain.

Kinsella’s opinion may well be correct that modern art is about information “breaking up”, and that modern fences may well be painlessly virtual rather than barbed, but for the poem to work, it can’t be simply stated as a surprise ending, if the perception is to succeed as anything other than an opinion. As in the poetry of
Tranter and Forbes (to just mention the leading Australia exponents of this idea), the “breaking up” must be embodied throughout the fabric of the poem. By and large, Kinsella’s fenceposts remain very traditional objects, and if they are breaking up, it is probably due to the more traditional processes of change and decay than the information concerning them. In other words, Kinsella’s pastoral project is still too, too successful, and the counter-pastoral project sits like an uneasy superstructure on top. Fortunately, however, Kinsella is too good a poet to be sunk by its weight.

John Foulcher’s new volume also dabbles with the post-modern - but not obscurely. In *Convertible* (Ginninderra Press), he also pays tribute to John Forbes with gentle remonstration - “The future’s not so empty John” - as he tries to work out how much of Forbes’ scepticism and cynicism he is prepared to accept:

let’s crouch in the fo’c’sle of the empty present
stubbly with living
as we search for minor continents [my italics]

Indeed, Foulcher’s new poems (as his earlier ones) are “stubbly with living” as he discovers the “minor continents” of everyday existence. As the title suggests, Foulcher’s project is not counter-traditional: rather his aim is to convert the traditional. A nice example is a poem entitled “The Body”, written for his wife, in the context of her priesthood. In this poem, Foulcher, like some latter-day Solomon, converts the words of the sacrement (“This is my body, / Take eat, Do this in remembrance of me”) in such a way as to pay transcendent tribute to his wife. As he remarks, if the body is a tent (as claimed by the chaplain at his mother’s funeral) Foulcher declares he wants to “pack my tent away and move in with you” (his wife). Thus Foulcher converts very literally the theological idea of marriage as union of body and soul into the reality of a living metaphor, a real relationship.

As in Kinsella’s work there is the discovery here that things are not what they seem - yet it is constantly found that they are more than they appear. This not simply discovery, but an uneasy wondering, an ordinariness composed of a “braille of love and contempt/ at the heart of the poems”. Foulcher claims: “It’s a gift
being average, and mostly more true”. He makes this claim against an unnamed “great” but “weird” poet as his new book tries to convert the imagism of his earlier work to a more complex sort of understanding of the invisible glue that exists between people. As if to emphasise the sense of being average, the book concludes as it opens with a prose poem. The volume opens by quoting a warning sign: “No swimming/ submerged objects”. It concludes well above all submerged objects on a peak of the Snowys, where:

Here, I seem so alone in the world, so happy ...
voices rise from the fire, like sparks
shimmering a bit. Tonight we’ll all tend to our
blisters, there’ll be stories and jokes,
food of a kind; a billowing temporary sleep.

And thus in the contradictory nature of these poems, balanced uneasily between presence and loss in the necessary temporariness of fulfilment, Foulcher deconstructs by reconstructing ordinary, traditional relations into something new.

Phillip Hammial’s *Bread* (Black Pepper) reminds me of an exhibit I saw a few years ago in the Pompidou Centre in Paris. I do not recollect the artist, but the work featured the supine figure of a man that sat up every minute and beat its bronze head against a brass bell. The wit, the repetition, the hollow resonance, the postmodernist statement peering at itself again, and again, describes Hammial’s sparkling triumph. The attitude of the audience to Alice’s music, in “Music” speaks volumes about Hammial’s postsatirical attitudes:

Alice tried them all - flute, clarinet, trombone, bassoon, French horn and tuba.
None of them would work.
The audience thought that the squeaks, flutters and hisses were deliberate.
She became the darling of the avant-garde.

Thus Hammial’s work misses as it hits, demanding an audience that is itself sent up, the only position it really enjoys. Such
knowing is the only thing it can know. The most pure of the post-moderns in this bunch of poets, Hammial achieves a catchiness hard to resist, a satirical campness whose wit is always one step ahead. Black Pepper’s third offering, Andrew Sant’s Russian Ink, brings so-called normal experience back into focus, as it is explored in the vernacular. “Stories of my father” is an effective elegy that brings the reader in touch with the personal side of Sant’s talent, while the “Green Man Poems”, perhaps less successfully attempts a sort of mythic comedy. The verse novella, “Summertime”, is probably the section of the book that succeeds most fully. It chronicles the experiences of the new nineties, share-owning family - with the satirical inversion that it is now the non-sensitive new age women who work the market while the bewildered husbands attempt to make sense of the cryptic notes left on the phone pad. As the comedy unfolds, Sant deftly exposes the mythic layers surrounding summertime holidays and resorts, the ultimate dreams of every investor, until they are revealed bathetically as “The ritual holiday at the beach”. This dream of our entrepreneurial heroes is defined by Sant’s anti-hero Jim as: “nothing bar wild proximity to place and season”. The poem and the book end when Jim and his wife Wendy:

open the glazed
doors onto the garden and, barefoot,
toast what might be an island sunset.

The killer word “might” catches Sant’s understated sense here, his good humoured satire and self-satire entertains as it subverts.

Andrew Sant’s novella contrasts in its simplicity with the complexity of Alan Wearne’s second verse novel, The Love Makers, the first book of which is called Saying all the Good Sexy Things (Penguin). Centred on Australian popular culture of the sixties through to the eighties, the book contains a galaxy of characters who entertain using a lively vernacular, remaining recognisably true to their eras – the swinging and not so swinging sixties – and settings – Sydney’s Sutherland Shire and Melbourne’s St. Kilda. The poetry explicitly explores the popular, with allusions to pop songs, political slogans of the day, the language of Religious
crusades and advertising jingles that form the consciousness of the characters. From a *Puberty Blues* view of life (which one is reminded incontestably of) in the early sections, the novel develops into the love life of Barb in the 70’s and 80’s. Acute, accurate as Wearne’s observations, his sense of character and ear for the vernacular are, I’m not sure how far they transcend the popular culture they depict. Barb’s search for meaning in her love life is in some danger of being read as soap opera, and the characters are largely as stereotypes. Yet perhaps this is no matter, and is a mark of the book’s readability and success. It is approachable and enjoyable poetry that one often forgets is poetry as such. Embracing the “ordinary”, it does so without the deliberate sensationalism and exotic features of Dorothy Porter’s *Monkey Grip*. Wearne concentrates on saying the good sexy things, and promises better things to come.

Philip Salom’s *A Creative Life* (Fremantle Art Centre Press) moves away from the popular. Perhaps the worst thing about the book is its punning title, and perhaps that is because it tends to be too overloaded with significance. Taken from a typographical error of an American composer who wrote: “How strange and exciting it is living this cretive life” – the volume sets out to explore the creations and accretions that have formed and informed his life. Dedicated to the memory of his father, Salom’s new collection evaluates the life that accretes to him through his “Kin Ships” (another awkwardly punning title) between generations. Salom’s own son, belonging to the putative “Generation X” is “echoing back to A”: a “post-postmodernist without even knowing it”, victim of “the needle of what isn’t – and isn’t well./ A to X swallowed like an overdose”. Yet if Salom agonises over one he has “kinned”, he also worries over the probable approbations of the one who has “kinned” him, his own father, who, hauntingly, he imagines staring:

at my sparse hair, then calls out: Yellow!
I say yes, I’ve coloured it before it all falls out!
And he stiffens, sucks back air between his teeth.

As if he hates me or is scared … *Here I am, Dad.*
This example of the tension between the notion of generation as accretion versus creation perhaps efficiently captures the wit, emotion and economy of the book. At the intellectual level then, the title is appropriate: but the poems themselves pack an emotional punch that belies its cleverness. His prize winning poem, “Preservation: Things in Glass” explores the age old conflict between loss and creation, which is exactly the conflict revealed not only between the generations, but in the very act of generation itself, resolved not only in the traditional acceptance of change, but embraces change in an original way as the process of accretion.

*Drowning Ophelia* (Sunline Press) by Roland Leech, is unfortunately a good example of the hard times poetry has fallen upon: a book full of prize winning poems by a recognised poet, needing self-publication. A pleasant collection of poems from the west, Leech wanders from Ophelia’s madness to the conquest of the Incas, from Darwin’s great voyages to the travels of Ulysses – both Homer’s and Joyce’s. Like Brook Emery’s, Leech’s poetry displays an impressive erudition, imaginatively interwoven into authentic meditations which mostly steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of pretentiousness and bathos. In some poems, such as “The East Timor Poems”, there is a raw passion and anger that stands as an interesting parable on mixing the normally immiscible: politics and poetry. The silence about the Dili massacre, which fuels the poems’ anger, has exploded into a resolution of sorts since the poem received its “Second” in the Newcastle Competition. If the crisis has passed, as is the ineluctible nature of politics, the poem lives on as a testimony, perhaps, of the power of poetry to voice popular opinion and maybe even contribute to political change.

Eminent Indian poet, Keki Daruwalla, also exhibits an impressive learning in his millenium collection, *Night River* (Rupala) seeks to unravel the various paradoxes and enigmas surrounding life and its significance. If this is the subject of most poetry, it is absolutely explicit in Daruwalla. In “Letter from Helsinki”, for example, the poet describes for his mother the effect of witnessing a Kelwala dance:
The good fellows danced and the evil ones danced,
They intermingled and I didn’t know which was which.
That has always been my trouble, Mama,
Figuring out the face from the mask,
Good from evil, dream from reality.

This has the seer-like quality of popular philosophy I associate with John Lennon. Yet if Daruwalla has a strength, it lies in his ability to evoke the dance before he tells us what it may mean. His themes range from Indian history (“Partition Ghazal”) to “Exile and the Chinese Poets”, from Greek mythology to French existentialism (Camus’ Meursault from *L’etrange*). There is a sort of universalism to Daruwalla’s perspective that transcends location - a man who finds his sense of reality in an amalgam of Eastern and Western culture that is his own. “Happiness” he tells us, “lies in the familiar, the penumbra that one can sense”. Daruwalla seems familiar with most things: his poems give a strong sense of his “penumbra”: yet through them we constantly glimpse the ideal. It is a surprise to find such overt Platonic thought in a volume out of India: yet it is of such surprises that the volume is constructed to keep the reader reading.

In contrast, *Water Wood Pure Splendour* (Orchard Pavilion Books) by Agnes Lam embraces a more quotidian outlook. Sensitively and honestly expressed, Lam writes of her friends and family in East Asia and America, of home and profession, in language that is straightforward, though never prosaic. If she writes of the ordinary, it is with a lightness of being that floats it beyond the mundane, overall creating a poetry that reaches out after those parts of life difficult to express. In Hong Kong or Singapore of the nineties we are everywhere. Thus *Water Wood Pure Splendour* travels well, expresses an insight into Chinese-Anglo culture in a manner that cleans the palate and refreshes the mind. Lam’s simplicity is the obverse side of femininity to that presented in Five Islands’ Meredith Wattison in *Fish Wife* and Annemaree Adams in *The Dogs*. Both take on the ordinary too – but the ordinary of subjective being. Exploring the internal and intrapersonal, Wattison uses domestic imagery from the kitchen and the bedroom, reaching out toward the mythic in her “Sir” series, where the role of femininity is explored and exposed “like the naked sensuality of the
The poems intrigue as they locate the emotional equivalent of the everyday in the exotic and the archaic, capturing and inspiring the imagination. Adams also explores the intrapersonal, but her muse draws her sexuality toward the political and the social – exploring the real roots and real ends of sensuality in a way that is often confronting. Adams sets her dogs loose, hedging the reader into an uncomfortable re-evaluation of attitudes, lurking as skeletons in the closets of the mind. Yet in so far as these poems are political, it is never the politics of ideology and anger. It is the insight of a wisdom that is as rare as it is passionate.

If the books I have so far mentioned have in different ways and to different extents sent me to Reith’s “Siberia”, there are others that speak with that same urgency, symptomatic of a truly vital form. Lesly Walter’s *watermelon baby* (Five Islands Press) contains lively and passionate accounts of parenting and family life. Tricia Dearborn’s *Frankenstein’s Bathtub* (Interactive Press) is Australia’s own Mary Shelley, creating great art, wit and new perspectives out of old body parts. Clayton Hansen’s humorously mixture of prose and poetry in *The Ventriloquist’s Child*, also from Interactive, makes for some compulsive, entertaining reading. In more painful mode, there is real urgency in X. Duong’s *refugee Refugees see the East Timorese* (Integration) whose ironic title masks an experience deeply scarred by political and military thuggery. There is also a collection of “Greatest Hits” of the nineties: *New Music: an Anthology of Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Five Islands Press), whose editor, John Leonard makes a shrewd selection of the best poems of the last five years, under a title that makes explicit the connection between poetry and music. Other anthologies include new voices from the N.S.W. Central Coast *Close Up and Far Away* (Central Coast Poets Inc. 2000), an interesting collection of West Australian poetry, *emPOWa* (P.O.Box 16, Scarborough, 6922) and Adelaide’s *Flow* (Friendly Street Reader 25). In these last collections, the vitality and breadth Australian poetry is made clear. Unlike Pirandello’s characters, this poetry is clearly not looking for an author. I hope it finds an audience.
I, Simpson, and my donkey, Murphy, have been eighty-six years on the road now, looking for the inland sea. This trip will be our last. Fair weather has accompanied us for the most part, but three days ago it rained. We were a little west of Diggers Rest and four days out of Melbourne. It came upon us quickly, boiling black clouds on the western horizon and a sudden blast of wind from the south. Murphy became bogged in a roadside ditch and I could not get him out. He snorted, irascibly, each time I tugged at his rein, and for one terrible moment I thought he was giving up on me and wanted to go home. But I got him out in the end. That night as he slept I saw the shiver coursing through his flanks and knew he had caught cold. The next day the shivering grew worse and small rivulets of clear snot fell from Murphy’s nostrils. I’ve plied him with oranges, but he eats them reluctantly. Since yesterday morning I’ve carried the pannier bags myself. I hope to make the Sunset Country before the week is out; perhaps the dry air there will put him back on his feet.

He’s a good animal, I can’t deny it, a little on the mulish side at times but old enough for me to forgive him his pertinacious ways. (I do not know the ratio of donkey years to human but he cannot be too shy of eighty; I am either twenty three or a hundred and nine.) We’ve been through a lot together, Murphy and I, but the beast has stuck by me where many other donkeys and no doubt many more humans would have given up years ago. He’s from India, originally. What he thinks of our enterprise, I cannot say: not even
I, his lifelong companion, can penetrate that inscrutable look. Perhaps he simply has nowhere else to go, nothing else to do: better a futile journey than a more futile staying at home. I’ve studied his face often these past few days for a sign of his present thinking but the look is more inscrutable than ever. Can anyone understand a donkey, what goes on in a donkey’s mind? I am more qualified than most, but no wiser than a century ago.

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I wasn’t always looking for the inland sea, it was never my intended vocation. Help-mate to the dying; that was the lot I was burdened with and one which - with no false modesty - brought me some measure of fame and a steady supply of good quality cigarettes in those earlier, far-off days. I still wear the red-cross armband, threadbare now with age, but help-mate I am no more. A wanderer rather, in search of - I was going to say myself. We brought the bloodied racks of bodies back to the hospital tent, drank what little hospital brandy we could find, then journeyed out into the terrible cacophony again. A man and his donkey, I have a photograph of us somewhere, in my pannier bag I think: me a rough-headed youth smiling a smile that could almost be a grimace, Murphy looking disdainfully for God knows what reason at my foot. That was the Great War, they called it the Great War, and I’m sure it was great for some, but somehow the greatness of it got past Murphy and I and we had to content ourselves with the trivialities of blood and broken limbs. A wounded soldier once called me over to his bed and asked me in all innocence why I risked my life and that of my donkey to bring all these half-dead fighting men back from the front. At the time I could not answer him and turned his question over in my mind for days. Lasseter was his name. He gave me a vial, a small glass vial, with a clear liquid, water, inside. Rub a little on your forehead, he said, if ever you get in trouble - I could use it myself but I’m past caring. A good man. And yes, I had all but forgotten the little vial (the second assault had started and those weeks were weeks full of hell) when one morning on my way back down Shrapnel Gully I took a sniper’s bullet through the heart. I lay where I fell, gazing up at Murphy braying in lamentation, until
in the blind panic that only death's nearness can bring I uncorked the vial and took a swig.

Eighty-six years, it's a long time, by anyone's estimation. Lasseter is long since dead. Don't worry, I had said - how easily said! - I will fill the vial again. He gave me the map that his father had given him - but I have trouble reading it now. I could once close a cut finger just by passing a hand over it, turn back a common cold with a grin. But my eyesight is failing, my bones have started to creak, my healing powers are not what they were. We follow the vast network of fissures and gullies inland, leaning on charity where we must, paying our way where we can. In the pannier bags I carry herbs, plant extracts, small animal parts, all the little tricks I've picked up along the way. In the empty vial I keep the locust egg that a Talmudist gave me and a sliver of deer's antler that I got from a Chinese. I draw on the haberdashery of knowledge I have accumulated, from people I've talked to and books I've read, and fill in the gaps extemporaneously. I mark my face and utter ritual incantations of my own invention, I crush crusty snail shells with a mortar and pestle and keep the dust in a Vegemite jar. But the physician cannot heal himself. My bones are cold in the marrow, my heart speaks to me out of tune. Without the miracle of the vial-water all my healings are second-rate.

***

On the fifth day following the rain we decamped to a hayshed near Toolern Vale. I made up a decoction of aniseed, raisins and valerian root and gave it to Murphy two-hourly. He seemed to improve a little but then the weather turned foul again. I was reluctant to push him more than was necessary and we stayed there two more days drying out. On the third I foolishly lit a fire and burnt the hayshed down. We moved to Barkstead, a journey which with Murphy still sick took longer than it should have and by the time we'd set up camp in an abandoned farmhouse there I realised to my consternation that we had been twelve days out of Melbourne already and had barely covered fifty miles. I could not let any more time get away from us, so we walked from Barkstead to the highway and took a ride in the back of a farmer's truck. Cattle had
been in there, or sheep perhaps; it stunk of manure and damp straw was piled up in one corner and covered by a tarpaulin. The truck had barely pulled away when Murphy began braying inconsolably. He's smelt the excrement, I thought, and become prey to some obscure animal lust. I tried to quieten him, fearing the farmer would abandon us then and there, but he only brayed all the louder. I heard a groan, then saw the tarpaulin move. I gingerly pulled it back. Murphy suddenly fell silent.

Her name is Laura, that's all I can get from her. The farmer was reluctant to part with her at first but in the end I bribed him with the few precious dollars I had - I don't know what came over me; inveterate Samaritanism I suppose. I tied her securely to Murphy's back and led her in off the highway to a picnic ground by a creek where I cleaned and dressed her wounds. "Laura", she said, and fell silent again. I prefer not to think too much about what went on in the back of the truck but I imagine it involved the farmer and probably one or two more of his mates. I know I will never get the story from her. She will not speak to me, not even to say Thankyou. I gave her a powder and passed the wine cork over her. In the bean tin I mixed the last of the beetles and made a poultice from it. She suffered my ministrations uncomplainingly, like the patients I have dreamed about.

We stayed there a week at the picnic ground before setting off again; Laura now riding side-saddle, me walking ahead with the rein. Though barely conscious when we found her she now sits atop Murphy with an almost regal air, brushing away flies with a switch. Her appetite has returned and she devours the rations I offer her; she has gained weight noticeably, and Murphy sinks noticeably further under it each day.

***

Six weeks have gone by and we've barely covered ninety miles. O fateful day that I found that girl in the truck! I have even begun to harbour ill feelings towards Murphy for having alerted me to her in the first place: we've had nothing but bad luck since. Murphy's cold has become pneumonia, a crepance in his off-hind has begun to fester, I lost my compass somewhere on the road from Stawell
and spent two days trying to find it. We are now just outside Dadswells Bridge and have been here for the better part of a week. I’ve tried to talk to her, convince her that as much as I might like to take her with us, under the circumstances I can’t. We’re looking for the inland sea, I say, and it will be a long and terrible journey ahead. She seems to listen: she looks me in the eye and politely waits until I’m finished before bowing her head again. But she’s made no offer to go. I wake late in the morning from a terrible sleep to find her already astride Murphy with the switch in her hand and that faraway look in her eye.

I’ve taken to the bottle; try as I might I can find no other way to still these sounds of warfare in my head. They started the night I found Laura, faintly at first, as if from a distance, and then louder, until they have now become the deafening roar that almost bursts my skull. Whistling shells, machine gun fire, barking orders, cries of pain. I go to the back door of a country pub at closing time and beg for a bottle of brandy and a carrot for Murphy to help us on our way: Lest we forget, I say. The old regulars dutifully whip around amongst themselves and the publican returns with my booty wrapped up in a brown paper bag. I accept it graciously - You will be blessed with many children, I say, in the fullness of time - and disappear again into the night to rejoin Murphy and Laura at our camp on the outskirts of town where I slowly drink myself into a stupor. Laura says nothing, but behind her supposedly vacant eyes I’m sure I see a look of reproach. Murphy stands a little way off, chewing on his withered carrot, his eyes deliberately averted to the ground.

***

I don’t know how much time has passed, I’m not even sure where I am, but things have taken a turn for the worse. I must have been suffering from the tremens. Hastily and against my better judgement I’d diverted our party to a small north-western town - the name escapes me now - on the strength of a rumour that there was a hospital there where Laura might get treatment for her wounds. She had started bleeding again, crimson rivers down the inside of her thighs. But the hospital had either closed or not yet
opened: I stepped back and forward in front of the doors until my head began to spin. In the end I broke a window and climbed inside. I walked the corridors, in each room four empty beds. I prised open a cupboard and found a bottle of pills - a paregoric, I presumed, with my decidedly outdated knowledge of such things - and a bottle of methylated spirits. Like matches in the hands of a pyromaniac. I was unhinged for three days and suffered from the most violent and confusing hallucinations. Not since I first smoked opium in Egypt have I experienced such intoxication. Under the influence of this hallucinosis I led us boldly inland (It won't be long, Laura, I said), but we missed the Sunset Country completely and ended up in the Little Desert, south of Nhill. A stark, inhospitable place. I pulled out my maps in utter despair, for I could not find myself on them. Is that possible; to suddenly and completely disappear from the face of the earth? Dead trees, dead grass, grey dust and sand; we lurched from one useless landmark to the next. Flies hovered in clouds above us, Murphy’s wheeze was a broken accordian. We finally made camp beneath a tree which for some reason I thought I recognised and gave ourselves over to sleep. That night in my dreams I heard the beating of wings; when I awoke in the morning Laura was gone, a fine layer of dust on her bedroll. Murphy brayed like a wild beast and brayed all morning long. Around midday I began digging a hole at the base of the tree, convinced that in some other time I had buried a bottle of brandy there and then as I dug even more convinced that this bottle of brandy was in fact the inland sea I’d been looking for and that by finding it and drinking from it all would be well again. But it was the wrong tree, it must have been the wrong tree; I dug all day and half the night, found nothing and collapsed; exhausted. In the morning I left Murphy at camp, took Laura’s switch in my hand and began to move from tree to tree, using it as a divining rod. This is why she carried it, I’m utterly convinced of that now, and this is why she left it behind, so that I might use it so. I criss-crossed the desert with the stick outstretched before me, Murphy hobbling at a distance behind, braying for me to return. Crows wheeled above me, morning became noon, the stick quivered ceaselessly in every direction but it was not until I’d dug three fruitless holes that I realised it quivered not for water or liquour but because of my
trembling hands. I tried to still them but I couldn’t. In the end I hurled the stick from me and saw it slither into the grass.

***

Murphy’s sleeping, I think he’s sleeping; I lie with my head on his belly and can hear a faint gurgling inside. I look up at the sky, an infinite sky, through crusty half-closed eyes. I see Laura naked, again and again and again and again and again and again and again, ankle now thigh now waste deep in water, splashing it over herself. It’s a dream. I’ve dug beneath a dozen trees, have dug up half the Little Desert, and need to rest for a while. But tomorrow I’ll start again. Tomorrow I’ll find the inland sea, the inland sea or the bottle of brandy or perhaps if I’m lucky the two transmuted magically into one: tomorrow, or the day after, the day after surely. I’ll dig all day if needs be. Yes, the day after surely.
SPIDER

All day
and night too
that spider has not moved
from its barren vantage on the wall.

Affixed like a brooch
or a windblown thistle
waiting for the moment
some hungry impetus

invigorates it
to scurry across
the ceiling in pursuit
of midges, house flies

smaller members of its genus.
But for the moment
it is still as a stain;
remains the icon

in my children’s sleeping consciousness,
curious how the seven legged
huntsman received his limp,
and does it hurt? Terror is only
a human moment.
The sun visor dropping
its unexpected cargo in the driver's lap.
Even the Flick signs

cause a shudder of instinct
leaving you destitute
in your cubic metre of freedom
where every visible spider

lurking in the dust
is the innocent source
of revulsion, made human,
made manifest.
START THE SAME BUT DON’T RHYME.
RHYME BUT START DIFFERENTLY.
The cat’s that jealous since you were born that she’s been throwing up all her meals.
Even edentulous, you have frightened her back from herself.
Your small fingers and coy smiles must appear to her as disagreeable weapons and the black of her eyes widens around you as if from a natural flood of light.
In this case, she thinks, the prominent trees mean everything they have marked and where love is landing has fallen prey to substitution.
She decides that despite the inconvenience of a boot to the stomach, she’d prefer to piss indoors.
Just maybe rhymes with baby. I’ll be a cat for longer than that.
Colonial literary treatment of the convict system is generally regarded as being either moral or sensational in its broad tendency. After all, the first “Australian” novel, Quintus Servinton, excused both its author’s hubris in essaying the pen and its felon subject matter on the grounds that it “might convey useful and instructive precepts under their most attractive guise” (QS xxxiii).¹ Similarly, Mrs Vidal and Caroline Leakey could have joined Henry Savery in “def[y]ing] the hand that may be lifted against the moral tendency” of their convict fictions (QS xxxiv), where assignment and other schemes for rehabilitation feature prominently. These concerns yielded to portrayals of the more violent excesses of the system in the writings of Marcus Clarke and “Price Warung”. Each writer, it is agreed, made “‘free’ use of fact” to present, in Hergenhan’s words, “the spirit not the letter of the system as he saw it”.² Their fiction is intent on revelation. Clarke, after a brief fact-finding trip to Port Arthur in 1870, reported how locals “begged that the loathly corpse of this dead wickedness called Transportation might be comfortably buried away and ignored of men and journalists. But”, he added ominously, “‘the smell of it’ remained--remains” (MC 529).³ And in For the Term of His Natural Life the decaying cadaver of “a monstrous system of punishment futile for good and horribly powerful for evil” is exhumed (MC 530). A generation later “Warung”, maintaining that “the Transportation System had thoroughly] knitted itself into the fibres of our national being”,
made comprehending and extirpating its legacy his mission. Not surprisingly, subsequent commentary has not expected concealment, in the form of covert or encoded subtexts, in colonial convict fiction. Yet the peculiar position of convict authors, as I shall argue, made them almost inevitable and throws considerable light on interpretative dilemmas raised by the writings of Henry Savery and James Tucker.

Irrespective of whether free man or felon, colonial novelists concurred that portraying the convict system was fraught with considerable risks. As Clarke signalled, the reach of the establishment was long: "Officialdom, with its crew of parasites and lickspittles, may try to palliate the enormities committed in the years gone by; may revile, with such powers of abuse as are given to it the writers who record the facts which it blushes for" (MC 530). To this threat "Warung" added, in "The Henry Porcher Bolter", his own conception of potential mental impairment produced by long immersion in the corrupting details of transportation. Ostensibly the story explains how the author, as a schoolboy, became interested in the penal system through his friendship with an escapee who had stolen another man’s certificate of liberation and bribed a magistrate. Since then the bolter had amassed a library of gargantuan proportions in a cottage near the final home of famed reformer Peter Lalor. Books filled every corner of his house, leaving hardly enough space for a man to "worm" between mountains of printed matter. A veritable "bibliomaniac", the old man ‘lived in his books, and died among them”--but not before he had initiated the author-to-be into the arcana of the system (PW 4). Obviously the story serves to increase “Warung’s” authority, yet it can also be read as a projection of his actual situation. For all its physicality Porcher’s house resembles the authorial mind, laden with indispensable historical matter and in touch with radical thought. The schoolboy and the bolter recall aspects of himself: his early innocence and the man he threatened to become through prolonged exposure to the system, a “raucous, [surly] ... hater of the human” (PW 4). "Warung", too, was a bookworm who claimed he had built up a collection of "10,000 manuscript and printed items worth a total of 2,000” related to the convict past (PW xviii). He also inhabited a fictional name or pseudonym stolen from others,
and the writerly freedom he enjoyed depended on a comparable manipulation of evidence which would not necessarily stand the test of objective judgment. Finally "Warung", like Porcher, never escaped his dread knowledge of transportation, so that in him idealistic and misanthropic tendencies existed together in uncomfortable, at times scarcely sustainable, proximity.

These dangers, social as well as psychological, appear minor when compared with those faced by writers condemned to transportation, who depended not only for the paper on which they wrote but for their very lives on the penal system. Authority had many options for avenging itself on critical or refractory convicts; displeasing compositions could simply be destroyed. Solzhenitsyn, in a moving scene from The Gulag Archipelago, is summoned to the commandant's office where he witnesses a pile of manuscripts, among which lie perhaps unread masterpieces, being fed to a roaring fire to keep the Siberian cold at bay. Such scenes, though unrecorded, were probably reduplicated in antipodean penal settlements, and the colonial censor was ever vigilant. Orally transmitted works aside, the preservation or publication of more ambitious texts, to judge from extant writings, presupposed that the work be morally uplifting and supportive of the ruling establishment. But this ruled out neither veiled authorial motives nor subversive subtexts, as the cases of Savery and Tucker demonstrate.

So disparate are Savery's major compositions, The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land (1829) and Quintus Servinton (1831), that commentary has raised the possibility that he was not the author of both pseudonymous books. The known facts of his life, however, clearly point to him as their author, and the switch from irreverent satirical sketches to didactic fiction reflects apparently a shift in creative purpose, as an initial escapist impulse gave way to a desire to plead implicitly for his own release. In each instance writing was a perilous undertaking, in that his potential liberty was at stake. The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land, written during a fifteen month stint in a Hobart prison, appeared initially as instalments in the Colonial Times between 5 June and 25 December 1829, and so contravened an official decree of July 1828 which forbad convicts writing for the press. Arguably Savery's pseudonym, "Simon
Stiackley", comments on this predicament. Not only was the surname Stukeley well known through its association with the antiquarian William Stukeley, who shared Savery's fascination with Stonehenge, but more germanely it was linked to a notorious Quaker. This Simon, according to West's *History of Tasmania* (1852), tried to convert the Grand Turk in Istanbul. His attempt was met with a threat of decapitation, followed by assignment to an asylum, to which he responded: "I said the world was mad, and the world said I was mad; and they out-voted me". Though not deemed mad, the hermit is accused in various instalments of being a caricaturist and dangerous acquaintance, while his publisher was successfully prosecuted for libel, for the hermit produced sketches of local rather than representative interest that made contemporaries wince. The targets of his satire are diverse, from medical practitioners to professionals at "law and jaw" (H 103), from weddings to orphanages and sheep raising. But government practices are spared his lash. In fact, the hermit is so commendatory of them that he sought to forestall criticism through an imaginary interlocutor who charges him with "cry[ing] up the Governor too much". This draws forth barely disguised sycophancy. "You would not have him [the hermit] scold when it is not deserved ... merely because the Government are concerned, would you?" (H 175). Savery had no desire to see an official inquiry into the authorship of the instalments. Hence he was careful not to provoke the wrath of the local potentate, nor to alienate official good-will, being well aware like "Stukeley" of the need to "always court the powers that be, there's never any knowing to what fertile plains they may prove an avenue" (H 86).

Wish-fulfilment and compensation were less obvious but important spurs to composition. As the hermit conceded in the final instalment: "It was entirely my own pleasure that led me, a few months ago, to appear before the world as an author" (H 180). Part of this pleasure came undoubtedly from casting off the demeaning role of a felon for one appropriate to his breeding and knowledge: that of a satirist seeking to reform mankind and thereby to help a fledgling community. He could also dilate on matters close to his heart, from business affairs to womankind, presenting himself as "an admirer of the female character, when it
shines in its native lustre, free from acquired specks and blemishes” (H 117). Importantly, too, the sketches not only helped pass the long hours of incarceration, but they set him free imaginatively. In the guise of hermit he circumambulates at will in society, enjoying the best fare of the governor’s table while criticising his cooks and servants, and undertakes extensive excursions to settled areas beyond Hobart, in some of which he worked as an assigned convict. Authorship thus emerged as a means of rewriting his lot strongly in his own favour, and of appearing as a public benefactor - an experience which encouraged the creation of – Quintus Servinton.

The novel, unlike the sketches, was clearly intended to further Savery’s prospects in the colony. Whereas the identity of the hermit remained a secret, the ensuing book, although published anonymously, was so close to its author’s case as to invite identification, with the corollary that Savery was offering his past, as well as his putative reform, for public scrutiny. With his sights now set on a ticket of leave, his earlier displays of authorial pride and moral superiority were curbed in favour of requisite humility, while he covertly sought to meliorate his actual sins, which ranged from forgery to attempted suicide, as the regrettable excesses of youth. Thus Servinton, in most respects, is a paragon of virtue. “Naturally any thing but intemperate” (QS 115), he eschews drink, lewd or boisterous behaviour, and “prefer[s] business ... to the syren” (QS 132). In addition, “a dishonest thought had never entered his heart” (QS 213). His weaknesses are self-confidence and ambition, coupled with impatience under constraint. Repeatedly the reader is asked to weigh “the active restlessness of his mind, the towering grandeur of his projects”, against “the uniform correctness of his private life” and motives (QS 316). Further exculpation comes at the outset from a gipsy prophecy to Quintus’s father that, on returning home, his wife will have given birth to a son destined to a chequered career, marked by threats of violent death as well as disasters “from thirty to forty” (QS 3). The details fit his career exactly. All seems preordained, though Savery frequently rephrases this in more orthodox terms, as in a moment of extremis in the antipodes: “twice, was the victim in the power of the destroying angle - twice, did it seem that, no human means could have averted the arrow, when a Providence whom he had too much neglected
and despised ... stepped in with its interposing aim, and rescued him from destruction" (QS 282).

The other major area of refashioning concerns his wife Eliza. Salacious tongues accused her of a shipboard romance with the newly appointed Attorney General, Algernon Montagu, and, on learning that Savery had lured her to Hobart with a false account of his circumstances, she resolved to return to England. He slashed his throat. In the novel Eliza’s counterpart, Emily, is an impossible ideal: loving, forbearing, intelligent and entirely devoted. She answers Servinton’s need for “accomplished and elegant female society” (QS 140), makes him the centre of her existence, and manages all things well. No blame is attached to her throughout the narrative. When privy to his secret thoughts she unfailingly sets Quintus right. Nor does she depart from the strictest propriety during the long southward voyage, or act precipitously once she has landed in the colony. Consequently Quintus can assert his “most unbounded confidence in your good sense, your correct principles, and your affection” (QS 376), while the narrator underscores that “Quintus, with all his faults, was decidedly formed for domestic life—was ardently attached” to his wife (QS 234). Also Emily, unlike Eliza, does not abandon him to his fate in Hobart. She returns to England only at his biding to plead his case before higher authorities, demonstrating, as Emily maintains, that “a wife can always help her husband” (QS 355). In short, Quintus “would as soon have renounced his faith in a superintending Providence, or in his Redeemer, as in Emily” (QS 349). Was this portrait of the couple simply wish-fulfilment on Savery’s part? Or was it a gesture of appeasement as well as an attempt to sway Eliza to act in the manner of her fictional counterpart? Had Savery not abandoned all hope of conjugal reconciliation? At the very least her portrayal reflected favourably on her spouse, and kept alive hope of his improvement in accordance with Emily’s dictum “that it greatly depends upon the wife, what the husband is like” (QS 326).

Finally, in this rose-coloured version of events, even the local governor regards Servinton’s efforts benignly. He is “inclined to shew him any little indulgence that came within the established regulations” in appreciation of “the struggles he was making, towards recovering his station in society” (QS 333). But this, like
other crucial details, was far removed from actuality. Lieutenant-Governor Arthur stated categorically: "Savery is a Man of whose real reformation, notwithstanding the strong testimonials of his conduct from Home and in this Colony, I have but a very faint hope". Later events would confirm this negative verdict, and that the novel signalled no abiding change in its author. He remained morally weak and liable to repeat old offences, as well as a skilled fabricator of misleading documents.

Nevertheless, Quintus Servinton fulfilled its tacit purpose. It made, in effect, a dual case for commuting its author’s sentence: the offender has genuinely reformed and, like the hermit, through the moral tenor of his writing he has "done the State some service" (H 180). To pious souls, at least, its portrait of a peccant but regenerated young man was apparently convincing. An early admirer of it remarked: "If Mr Savery wrote this Book he cannot be a bad man, and I think he has atoned for his offence against Public Justice" (QS xxiv). Nor could the administration have been displeased with a work which stressed the humane aspect of its procedures, which argued that a "more than average share of talent" (QS 307) among criminals provided a fortuitous starting-point for the colony, and which praised "the excellent classification of modern date, in places of confinement", that allegedly limited severe personal suffering as a feature of transportation to the first two decades of settlement. Less partial readers were not so easily persuaded. A review in the Athenaeum noted that the book "might have been infinitely better, had there been a spice more of human infirmity ... but really we nauseate a little at such unadulterate virtue - it wants the seasoning of vice and error". Savery, however, was not primarily concerned with verisimilitude or engrossing his audience, but with appealing through Servinton for his own liberation. It came a year after the novel’s appearance when he was granted a ticket of leave, which afforded apparent confirmation of Servinton’s assertion that “there are no difficulties, however seemingly great, that are not to be conquered by perseverance” (QS 57). Yet Savery’s own end belied this sanguine adage, and his short spate of creative writing owed more to imprisonment than perseverance. In 1840 he was convicted for a second time of forgery and banished for life by Algernon Montagu to Port Arthur, where
he succumbed to the hell of despair against which Servinton had preached so upliftingly.

Related interpretative problems are raised by the pseudonymous oeuvre of James Tucker. Again there is the issue of whether seemingly disparate compositions were produced by the same pen, with an additional conundrum thrown up by unexplained inconsistencies in his main protagonist, Ralph Rashleigh.\textsuperscript{12} Their resolution is, I believe, again to be found in the conditions under which his works were created. Whereas Savery’s education saw him exploited primarily in clerical capacities, Tucker had much broader experience of the penal system. Like his fictional hero Ralph Rashleigh, he first encountered hard labour at Emu Plains. Thereafter he was overseer of a labour gang in Sydney and a “special” in Port Macquarie, working variously as clerk, storekeeper and draughtsman on government-related projects. At this former penal hell in Tasmania, old and ailing convicts outnumbered the able-bodies, and a benign regime encouraged Tucker to compose plays under the aegis of the Port Macquarie Literary Association. It had been founded in 1840 and an empty barn adjoining the government store served as a theatre. For its audience Tucker is alleged to have written lost satiric skits like \textit{Makin’ Money} and \textit{Who Built That Cosy Cottage?}, and he is sometimes credited with three novels, only one of which has survived.\textsuperscript{13} His extant plays, \textit{Jemmy Green in Australia} and \textit{The Grahame’s Vengeance}, represent the dominant genres of the day, respectively comedy and tragedy. They have been tentatively dated to 1845, the same year in which \textit{Ralph Rashleigh} was perhaps begun;\textsuperscript{14} however, commentary has failed to explore this conjunction, as well as the insights these works provide into the convict author’s preoccupations.

Tucker’s plays are the work of a competent dramatist, determined to push local theatre beyond tame adulation of British usages and culture. Personae are deftly sketched, dialogue is terse and well-paced. The “special” was clearly writing with performance, as well as a potential censor, in mind. In the colonies, the stage was widely regarded as a powerful instrument for moral guidance which could reform vice and reinforce authority. Tucker therefore could not attack the status quo directly, but he dramatises
both grounds for questioning it and the prevalence of self-interested action. *Jemmy Green in Australia: A Comedy in Three Acts* is an early treatment of the New Chum fleeced theme, popular at the time in the song “Billy Barlow in Australia”. Characters like Smash, Plausible, Wheedelem and Smooth see to it that Jemmy is parted from his cash by bogus property development, by overpriced, feral stock and by other forms of “barefaced robbery” in the aptly named country of Gammon. In effect, Jemmy is “roasted alive by a lot of “orrid savages” (JG 80), as his sweetheart had feared, though ironically his tormentors are white rather than black. And even Green is not an entirely innocent party, given his announcement at the outset of having heard “vot fine fortunes vos to be picked up by any vun that vos vide awake ... and as I’m a real Londoner, no vun would find it were easy to do me” (JG 43). The locals are merely “vider awake” and sharper. Overall the text shows little respect for a society riddled with greed and hypocrisy - characteristics which recur in Tucker’s blank verse tragedy.

The Grahame’s Vengeance or The Fate of James the First King of Scotland by “Otto von Rosenberg” is a study of justified rebellion in the face of misrule and tyranny. Throughout James I is presented as a “fell tyrant” bent on enriching himself at the expense of his nobles, and on enslaving his subjects. One of them, Sir Robert Grahame, is pushed by banishment and the murder of his wife and children to commit regicide. The anointed king dies unbecomingly under a flurry of blows in his privy, where he has fled for safety, while his assassins are spurred on by the thought “Twere criminal to spare the tyrant” (GV 70). The Grahame is the play’s unequivocal hero, whereas the highest authority is depicted as “the Scottish Nero” (GV62). More unsettling still, Tucker’s drama implies that concepts like traitor or justice are ambivalent rather than clearcut, or as Sir Robert instructs his brother:

Malcolm, ’tis ill success alone forms rebels;  
For if rebellion or revolt be prosperous  
Then are all its leaders styled the first of patriots. (GV 34)

History, privilege and conventions express, then, not immutable decrees but the will of the victors. Superficially both plays were
hearty divertissements. Covertly, however, they strip authority, whether invested in kings or attorneys like Cunningame and Cheeter, of automatic reverence, preach retribution on “miscreant tyrant[s]”, and empower each individual to seek his own good in a world ruled by might and craft rather than impartial justice.

Ralph Rashleigh was born of the same constellation of ideas, but they are treated here with greater circumspection because its subject is the very convict system in which the author found himself. Outright rebellion could no longer be affirmed, even if James I had numerous counterparts in the antipodes. For instance, the sadistic commandant of the Newcastle limeburners is described as a “petty imitator of the haughtiest monarch that ever wore a crown”, or as a “modern Caligula” (RR 226). Administering the lash is his vice. The agonised cries of victims gratify his soul, and he furiously strikes his scourgers to redouble their efforts until his cane breaks, providing a “splendid specimen of a British officer” (RR 227). Yet Tucker, apart from using heavy irony, leaves the incident to speak for itself. Instead of a didactic tract, he produces a picaresque novel which depicts Rashleigh’s criminal career in England, including his formation, life-style and robberies, followed by the vicissitudes of penal experience in Australia. No aspect of the local system is praised. Convicts are constantly portrayed as the victims of authoritarian caprice, liable to maltreatment of every kind as well as starvation and without legal redress. This theatre of penal cruelty is interrupted by the protagonist’s enforced sojourn among bushrangers, and ends when he becomes one of a group of escapees who are hunted down by aborigines bent on revenge. Ralph alone survives. He is adopted by an elder of the tribe and later wins a pardon when he saves two shipwrecked women and their child. A key factor in securing his release is the moral probity he has shown in Australia. He never kills except in self-defence. He is not brutalised by degrading servitude, and he is punished in the colonies only for trivial or imaginary offences. He is, however, the focus for eyewitness accounts of brutality and injustice which are at times so shocking that the author interrupts his narrative to stress that this is not a sensationalised depiction of penal proceedings, but reflects information ‘gathered from the different persons consulted as authorities, the most favourable of whose representations have
been selected" (RR 225).

In short, Tucker provides a comprehensive critique of transportation, yet contrives to avoid official displeasure. Hence professionals within the penal machinery are normally spared direct accusation. The horrors perpetrated are attributed to lackeys, or felons seeking by various shifts to improve their lot or decrease their sentences, like the sadistic Joe at Emu Plains who "delight[ed] in oppressing his men as much as possible" (RR 77). Ralph is saved from this overseer's lies by one conscientious magistrate among three: a newly arrived officer from England. Other overseers, however, are able to revenge their conferee amply in this "execrable system of tyranny and intolerable oppression" (RR 85). Nor do the convicts' sufferings necessarily end when, after a period of penal constraint, he is assigned as a labourer or servant to a settler. Instead, as Rashleigh learns at Arlack's farm, he has exchanged one form of tyrant for another, who regards his government men as machines to be worked ruthlessly for profits until they collapse, whereupon they can be replaced by fresh victims. The felon usually has two options. He may either abscond to become a bushranger, and then pillage to survive, or stay "to endure all the acts of petty tyranny and overbearing malice that minds, intoxicated by the acquisition for the first time in their lives of almost unlimited power over a fellow being, alone could either conceive or prompt the execution of" (RR 143). Such accusations are compellingly dramatised, as are the scarcely tolerable sufferings of convicts in a realm fixated by the lash:

Still the Woodboy scorned to betray any pain, until the "Captain" cursed and swore like a maniac that neither one nor the other of the scourgers was striking at all! And he set a third operator to punish the second, a fourth to punish the third, and so on, until the whole six scourgers were pegging away at the backs of each other, the first one flogging the woodboy, and the commandant himself lashing the last with his horsewhip. (RR 222)

The boy's offence, which provoked this scene bordering on madness, was to eat the scraps given to the commandant's pigs.

As in The Grahame's Vengeance, tyranny inevitably produces its backlash, though Tucker takes considerable pains to distance
himself from the new tyrannicides. This he does by making them vile bushrangers, and through the strange role that Rashleigh plays as their unwilling bondsman once they release him from prison. Foxley, the leader of the group, slaughters his former masters and overseers, hunting down unrelentingly those under whom he suffered as a felon. They have escaped the law, he claims, but he will see justice done: “I’m judge in this here Court, and I never acquitted a tyrant like you in my life” (RR 156). So Huggins, an overseer renowned for leaving prisoners dangling by their handcuffed hands from a beam, is staked out over an ants’ nest and eaten alive. Sympathy for this fearsome tribunal is abrogated by its lack of mercy and by Foxley’s own outrageous crimes. At times he burns alive or rapes innocent females, and he kills callously. Rashleigh registers abhorrence at these deeds, and is inevitably distanced from the scene either by falling into a swoon with horror or by a blow to the head. His humanity is always vindicated. He fails, however, to slip away from the band, where he serves arguably as a marker both of authorial detachment and of guilty complicity.

The author further absolves himself from the charge of approving atrocities by stressing the unreliability of convict verdicts. Tyrant, readers are told, is “a term used … to designate any person … who may perform his duty more strictly than is agreeable to the exalted notion these worthies entertain of the deference and consideration with which they ought to be treated” (RR 173). The resulting conflict of perspectives is dramatised through the portrayal of McGuffin. The outlaws remember him as “McGuffin the tyrant”, a pitiless inspector who could administer floggings without trial. One bushranger recalls him ordering the lash for a fifteen-man iron-gang as well as its overseer, and underlining his arbitrary power with the explanation: “Why, to keep the hair out of your eyes, to be sure, you rascal!” (RR 187). Another evokes him on horseback, a scourger running at his heels, “serving [sic] out stripes to all and sundry”. Yet McGuffin displays “indomitable” courage when captured by Foxley’s band (RR 189), and not only escapes but eventually hunts the bushrangers down. He also points out that such rogues deserve a thorough whipping. Nevertheless, the narrative as a whole lends credence to the bushrangers’ complaints
and they are allowed to die bravely. The last of them, McCoy, is game even as a condemned prisoner, exhorting those in chains to “turn out like men...[against] the blasted tyrants” (RR 208), and he pushes his appointed executioner off the scaffold. The majority of the bystanders, unlike the horrified main protagonist, are on McCoy’s side.

Although Rashleigh, through a series of symbolic transformations, becomes redeemable, no hope of a saving metamorphosis is held out for the convict system. Instead, it is depicted both as a finishing school in inhumanity and as an ongoing source of corruption, sewing the seeds of violence in its victims to ensure a never-ending cycle of cruelty. The endless line of flagellators, at whose end-point is the commandant who beats his subordinates, is its appropriate emblem; tyrants, toadies, sadists and hypocrites are its progeny. Ralph, through immersion in this “great cesspit of the moral filth of the colony” (RR 211), is physically and morally tested. His prison slops are replaced by sheepskin bearing the government brand. Next he is reduced to an Adamic state, which is the prelude to his last bid for liberty. It ends, however, in his forced adoption by the aborigines, complete with male initiation ceremonies and colouring agents which darken a complexion already “embrowned” by “suffering and toil”. Finally, he shakes off superficial signifiers, literally losing a layer of skin to emerge in pristine whiteness, fit to receive his conditional pardon. The English criminal has been turned away from the paths of idleness, the convict has progressed from savage to civilised freedom. Bemused, his friends regard this new man, enabling Tucker to reflect on the force of first impressions and habit. The novel concludes with Rashleigh speared by “bloodthirsty barbarians”, and the orthodox reflection “whom the mock philanthropy of the age characterises as inoffensive and injured beings” (RR 303). An attentive reader will recollect, however, that aborigines alone were capable of turning away from the lex talionis, and that the primitive hardships of their existence were more attractive than a return to penal servitude. Ostensibly *Ralph Rashleigh* focuses on one man’s progress, but its covert subject is the system which blighted the author’s adulthood and endangered the very order and civilisation it was meant to foster in the colonies.
What exactly became of Savery and Tucker is unclear. Savery was prone to black depression and the sickening irony of being tried and condemned by his wife's putative lover could only have fed his bitterness. In the hospital at Port Arthur he was seen prostrate on a stretcher, a "scarce-healed wound of his attenuated throat" - a pitiful figure with hollow eyes far removed from his origins "in the very first circles" of Bristol. The sight awoke in the dramatist David Burn "sentiments of the deepest compassion mingled with horror and awe. There he lay, a sad - a solemn warning". Savery died fifteen months into his sentence, perhaps by suicide. Similarly, Tucker's further life, after being granted a ticket of leave in 1847, is shrouded in conjecture. It seems he went to the gold-fields in New South Wales, was briefly imprisoned in Goulburn, and issued with a ticket of leave for the Moreton Bay district in southern Queensland in 1853. During this period he apparently passed his manuscripts for safe keeping to a Maitland acquaintance, Alexander Burnett. Twelve James Tuckers died in New South Wales and Queensland between 1849 and 1890, and no confident identification can be made. 1888 has been suggested as the likely date of his death, as has 1866, when a James Tucker expired at the Liverpool Lunatic Asylum from "decay of nature". What remains of both felon authors are their works, pre-eminently their fictional tales of individual reformation. Ostensibly these vindicate the imperial establishment, but implicitly they attest to the constraints under which each man wrote. Their works are also a timely reminder that to stress the terrible suffering caused by the assignment system is not to indulge merely in black-armband history: the convicts' ordeal was real enough, as was the virtually irresistible suasion exercised by the system on its inmates, while these men's actual lives testify to the human wastage that could be produced by favourable as well as barbaric treatment within the penal system.

Notes


3. This and ensuing quotations are from the third instalment (Argus, 26 July 1873) of a series entitled “Port Arthur”.

4. As Hergenhan justly remarks: “one has to listen carefully to hints and overtones which heighten the symbolic nature of “The Bolter” (Unnatural Lives 66).

5. A brief overview of his fictional methods is given by Andrews in PW xviii-xxviii.

6. In the Preface the novel is described as “a biography” and “no fiction, or the work of imagination” (QS xxxiii), while in the Introductory Chapter an anonymous author claims the book is based on Servinton’s own autobiographical manuscript (QS xi).


8. For an account of further divergences between the fictional hero and his author see Avis G. McDonald, “The Bitter Banishment of Quintus Servinton”, World Literature Written in English 28 (1988): 66-74, where they are read as evidence that Savery, “as pure wish-fulfilment, constructs a nostalgic idea of home, of gentility, of belonging” to minimise “the harsh sense of exile to the antipodes” (71).


10. From one of more than seventy testimonials that accompanied Savery’s petition for remission of his sentence in January 1832. The writer, James Grant, believed he could “know more of his [Savery’s] principles from his writings than any other source” (QS xxiii).

11. 28 January 1832, cited in McDonald, “The Bitter Banishment of Quintus Servinton” (74).

12. The basic dilemma is, in the words of Adrian Mitchell, that “Ralph Rashleigh is two kinds of hero” that “do not reconcile” (Fiction section in Leonie Kramer, ed., The Oxford History of Australian Literature [Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981]: 43). His shifts of character or standpoint have been variously explained. According to J.J. Healy, they occur because “Rashleigh is never more than a thinly veiled persona of Tucker’s internal gestures of self-discovery and apology” (“The Convict and the Aborigine: The Quest for Freedom in Ralph Rashleigh”, Australian Literary Studies 3 [1968]: 247); Robert Dixon sees him as an observer of Tucker’s essay on the course of empire in New South Wales” which sacrifices characterisation to satire (“Ralph Rashleigh: A History of Civil Society in New South Wales”, Southerly 41 [1981]: 315); and Hergenhan discerns in his changes an attempt “to align him with respectable society, and law and order”, and more generally a “self-vindication [that] seem[s] pitifully limited, unappealingly self-comforting” (Unnatural Lives 25, 30).

13. See Colin Roderick’s introduction to Jemmy Green in Australia for further details.


15. These implications were probably lost on his listeners (which was just as well for the playwright) for, according to eyewitnesses cited by Roderick: Tucker strained the intellectual capacity of his audience, since Delaforce on one occasion remarked to Charles Dick that he “was hard to follow” (JC 27).

16. Similarly, he depicts the earlier tyrannicide committed by Bright with detachment, although
the scene clearly shows that the man is driven to violence by unwarranted and sadistic punishment (RR 88).

17. The encounter took place on 9 January 1842. Burns' description is reprinted by Hadgraft (QS xxvii-xxviii).

18. This was the date preferred initially by Roderick (JG 28 and RR xi), though later he conceded the evidence was inconclusive (GV 13).
LUNCH WITH A STRANGER

She could be in school on this clear, cool day, but she has drifted in the sand, swallowed by the white noise of water and now the murmur of her own thoughts in a small restaurant on the beach. She has a journal, a pen, and a wish to be everywhere at once. Breakers make one last stand before collapsing into foam at the feet of migrant sanderlings. Beyond the shore an oil barge crawls along the horizon, but she’s not on it.

She barely hears a sketchpad hitting the table, a chair scraping next to her. When she looks up she can’t get her eyes back from the glare of the water. He’s an artist, he says, coming slowly into focus. She sees a day-old beard, salt-and-pepper, that sweater they all wear, New York men on a day off. He puts his hand out, tracing her name on the marbled cover of her notebook. He wants the right face, you see, the heart’s doorway, and all those freckles. The best work is done outside.

So this is what she’d been waiting for, a story she could walk into like a beachcomber, words no boy in school can say. Light shimmers on the waves as they step away from the restaurant. She sits in the sand, hugging her notebook, the wind tapping her skin with a thousand droning fingers,
his face lost in a glint. A small dust devil swirls behind her, and the sound of his pencil is the ocean’s stroke.

Her hair is all light, he says, leaning forward to brush it from her face.
Riding a Hamburg city bus, I let my eyes glaze out the window: people blurred on dogs on benches on shrubs; my ears catch snatches of German. It's grey today, so much like Vancouver I hunger for home, pang blue for rain hanging plump dollops from fall-gangly trees.

We come to a stop, pick-up and let-off, and my eyes rest on an old woman peddling her bicycle, full basket on her handlebars, long grey curls flitting free of their pins down her nape. She is the prettiest part of today. Take me home to your ginger house and teach me to knit in German. I want to kiss her cheek.

Something rotten, a crack, a beetle, bites into her tire and rocks her, slams her sideways into the pavement. My forehead, all my fingers press the window. She crouches up from where she fell, hand over nose, blood streaming through fingers like water from a tipped vase, a crack in the fishbowl!

German-less, I am mute, gasping for air, for water. She kneels and picks up groceries, cupping her nose.

Blood still draining from her small fine head, the accordion doors close and the bus begins to inch ahead. Panic wells in me, leadens me, just my mouth opening slow as flowers, closing, opening. A young man stops on the other side of my glass, touches her shoulder, helps her stand. We lurch forward; I work my jaws, breathe through my shaking throat.
When he licked the black stuff it reminded him of something. Of a little, black, squat-bellied tar machine. It used to be towed behind a green council truck through the seaside streets of his childhood. It had a nozzle. He was sure of it. There was a nozzle at the end of a tube through which hot tar was sprayed onto the roads. But the smell. He could almost smell it again. A sweet smell. The sweet tar of childhood. The elusive and haunting savour nearly bought tears to his eyes.

His tongue troubled something else. A node of vegetable matter. Or animal. His tongue worried the troublesome and unidentified obstruction. He drew his head up slightly and tried to focus on the undistinguished blat of stuff. He almost focused. He addressed the matter seriously, "Men and women of Orstraaalia," he said. "I come not to praais Kimmy but to bury this troublesome salad."

"Not in the middle of the road you won't mate," said a distant voice.

"Are you sure this is him?" said another.

"Of course I am. Turn him over and look then."

"I have. That's why I asked."


A safe seat, even without the Green preferences, the women's vote and the reconciliationists, sent him back Qantas Business
Class. The black tarmac of the roadways became something he contemplated from a distance and brought no more clean, sweet smelling memories of childhood.

In rapid succession the leader, his leader, of the Opposition died. Shortly before the funeral of his large old enemy he was re-elected to the position. The unpopular PM called a snap election which broke his party and Edward Chippen became the father of his country, again.

On election night when the old familiar voice, though perhaps somewhat huskier and more statesmanlike, began the refrain beginning “Men and women of Australia”, the applause in the Tally Room was so loud and so prolonged that he was unable to continue. Several of the hardened television anchors, who had mostly worked in his office when he was last in power, were so moved that their transmissions were hindered by unrehearsed and almost lifelike emotion. Many tears were shed throughout Australia that night.

Chippen bought a new broom to the governance of the country. He also reconciled many old enemies, buried party feuds, opened new windows of opportunities, apologized to everybody - including the Japanese, and closed the door on old traditions. Every day the new regime planned to turn over a new leaf.

“It stinks in here.”
“Does it?”
“It’s you. You’re smoking aren’t you. You’ve taking up smoking again,” she said.
“It makes me feel good. Something to do with my hands. Keeps my weight down. Only cigars. I like them,” he said. “I’ve stopped the booze.”
“I heard you had to. You’ll lose votes with that in your mouth. Why do they let you?” she asked.
“Only in private,” said the Prime Minister. “They let me do it in private.”
“No cameras?” she said.
“God no. Only in private I tell you. How are the kids?”
“They’re all right. How’s she?”
“She’s all right. Busy. Always busy.”
“So was I. I was always busy.”
“I remember,” he said.
“I’m surprised they let you have a second.”
“Term?” he said. “The people wanted me.”
“Wife,” she said. “I didn’t think divorce was allowed.”
“This is the new century,” he said. “Besides 60 Minutes said it was kosher.”
“Still seeing them are you?” she asked.
Proving that every day was a new beginning was tiring for the PM. Every day, in the luxury of his office he proposed and disposed of the fate of the nation. He reviewed the press, drank his coffee and ruminated to his staff, “Can’t we do anything? The Achievements of the Second Chippen Government will be a mighty thin book” he said beguilingly.
“If it finds a publisher,” murmured someone at the back of the room.
“Slither and Co. could be interested. I’ve got their address,” said the one who wrote his words.
“Look Edward, what we want, and I speak for all the Caucus here,” said the Media Liaison Officer Attached to the Prime Minister’s Office, looking over his shoulder, “is for you to do not very much.”
“Not much?” said Chippen.
“Nothing in fact,” said the minder.
“But the people voted for me. They elected a reformist Prime Minister. They have my record.”
“They elected a drunk we pulled out of the gutter before he ate his own vomit,” said a smiling young woman.
“Food poisoning,” said the Prime Minister.
“Relax. Enjoy the power. Just don’t do anything. Remember what a mess you made of it last time.”
“Of course he doesn’t mean mess Edward,” said the Minister of Recreation and Pornography. “He’s too young to remember. But there were certain problems last time.”
“Oh God, don’t anyone mention the Big Picture,” whined a young voice as its owner mimed the attachment of a clothes peg to her upturned snub nose.
“Whenever you did anything you ballsed it up,” continued a
relentless young voice.

"Isn’t that sexist?" asked a second.

"So this time," said a lower grade third voice with pretensions, "don’t do anything. The country will respect you for it. Look up to you. God knows, after the conservatives they are tired of change but. Sit back, reap the benefits. You deserve it. Especially after the first time."

"But why the webbed feet?" asked the Prime Minister.

"The polls. We polled. They said they wanted a more colourful PM. Just slip your arm through here."

"And that thing?"

"Goes with the legs."

"But not the beak. Never the beak," said the PM.

"Don’t you realise that the highest rating figure ever on TV was a bush kangaroo? Association will work in your favour," said the holder of one yellow plastic thing. "This’ll be great. Left foot first, Prime Minister."

"But an emu," said Chippen.

"It’s patriotic. And besides a used car mob has rights to the kangaroo," said the young man holding out the right foot. "You’ll be a hit."

"The country needs cheering up Edward. Polls say so," said the Minister for Anti-Mining-Logging-and-Fishing. "And too long to wait for Christmas. You’ll be great."

"Anyone got the tail feathers bit? Got to think of the younger voters PM."

"Look in the mirror, sir. You look just great. Your country will be proud of you."

And the image of Chippen PM smiled contentedly back at himself. "I’ve only ever wanted to be loved," he said through the slit for his mouth to the mirror. "Only ever wanted to be loved by the men and women of Australia."

"You are, you are," sang the caucus of voices from the best and bestest in his office.
ELIZABETH STEPHENS

MINA LOY’S LAMENT

Where are you, Arthur Cravan?
I have worn out this harbour with waiting.

My skin has crusted, my feet taken root.
Waiting has made me a statue, miraculously weeping.
The faithful will come and gather my tears.
Griefs flicker at my feet like candles.

Fishermen with hands starred with scales like sequins
cross themselves as they pass. In storms they will say prayers to me,
Our Lady, Star of the Sea.

And all the women sharded beetle-black,
who move like mirages in the rotten-seaweed air,
and all the net-menders by the seawall
and all the street-vendors with tin toys sharp as knives,
fear me as a monument to their own tragedies.

Tuna-boat masts sway like out-of-time pendulums.
Even the gulls could be calling your name: Arthur, Arthur, Arthur.

The world has become an echo of your absence.
The streets hold their breath.
And my head is like the inside of a bell, tolling for you.
Cordite is taken from a wooden box. It is cut into strips. Sewing by hand, effort is made not to prick skin or messily fasten the material together. Moving the needle closer to puncture the hessian, black and white newsprint advertisements filter breath and tiredness. Cordite is taken from the box, cut into strips then placed inside a square of rough fibre. Fingers move closer and closer to the material, slowly but with urgency as if drawing blood. The material is folded. Cordite is taken from a box, cut into strips then placed on the washed-out material.

Past open-air markets, where potatoes are sold illegally, sand coloured suburbs stretch hesitantly to the north. Streets, filled with factories and warehouses, surround the city centre. In the early evening, the sky is orange grey. Smoke particles congeal in the atmosphere. Cordite is taken from a box — cut into strips, placed inside hessian. Black canvas obscures natural light. A silver needle is threaded, held up against a thumb. Under a tin roof, air is thick with oil fumes — a stink that remains on clothes even after they have been boiled.

A silver needle is threaded with cotton. Soldiers originally reported missing are now believed to be prisoners. Electricity saved means more power for production. Fight hard, work hard, play hard. The fine physique of our service personnel is built upon a national love of sport. Folding the material, cotton binds the hessian into a secure bag. Bending over to the side, cordite is placed on the metal table. The explosive material is cut into strips.
Inner cleanliness is more important than ever. The key to our liberty is in our hands.

Closer and closer, the thread buckles and falls from the needle's eye. Pinching two fingers together, the thread is licked quickly then turned towards the fluorescent light. Hessian is flattened into an even square, then creased in half. With careful stitches the needle moves across a designated line. From the wooden box, cordite is cut in strips with a heavy knife turning brown at the blade centre. Excuse me. Don't look now, but I think that you're being followed! In fact you are being followed! This is your "austerity conscience" — speaking in clear tones that you can't mistake.

How many lights were burning in your house last night? A needle sews a line, carefully and evenly to create a hessian bag. The hessian's uneven texture is reminiscent of sea-grass, or malnourished grasses that grow near sand dunes. In human hands, it smells of salt. Cordite is smokeless. If ignited in the open air, it burns. Chemicals merge and create a propellant that is waterproof and unaffected by climactic change. Cordite is taken from a box. It is cut into strips. Sewn in a line. Put in a pile.

Taking the explosive from a wooden market box. Cordite is placed on the metal surface. It is cut into strips. Hessian is placed underneath it. A needle, threaded with white cotton, sews hessian into a square. During the lunch break, the supervisor — a man in a beige trench coat, with sealskin brylcream in his hair — makes speeches from the back of a utility vehicle. Production for Victory must come first. Never scrimp on your effort, our boys in the jungles of New Guinea depend on it.

Their lives depend on you. Cordite is taken from the box. It is cut into strips. The supervisor surveys employees who wear scarves and leather belts around their waists. Society ladies wearing imported linen dresses and open-toed shoes visit the workshop. They arrive after lunch. Uniformed drivers wait outside in limousines. Cordite is placed in a pile. One winter afternoon, a lady carries a fur-coat over her shoulder. The white fur looks as if it were sewn with silver thread, under pools of artificial light. Cordite is taken from the box — lined up on the table and cut into strips.

Stains on the knife blade are geographic. The stains resemble archipelagoes. Graphics decorated with arrows, found in daily
newspapers. Organic in shape, rusted electric orange brown, not unlike birthmarks or bruises. Hessian is sewn in constant strokes. From the wooden box on the floor, cordite is taken. It is cut into strips. Sewn into a hessian bag then placed in a pile. Young and old suffer the martyrdom of headache depression: nervous headaches, depressed headaches, morning headaches.

Electric trams are crowded with people, overwhelmed by armpits that smell of bleach and garam marsala — an itchy smell like the canvas of uniforms. Bending over, shoulder blades crease. Cordite is taken from a wooden box. It is placed on the metal table. The popping sound of chewing gum the colour of white paste. Footpaths are painted with yellow “keep left” signs. Hessian is folded in half. Cordite placed beneath it. Sewing along the line, the hessian is folded together.

Cordite is taken from a box. It is cut into strips, placed on hessian, folded in half. Put in a pile. Firemen wear khaki-coloured steel helmets. Engines are decorated with camouflage designs that fold in on each other. Wire netting covers windows. Sandbags at the base slouch like overfed torsos, ready to burst. Are you able to recognise the face of the enemy? His face is that of a humourless, ruthless and mystical fanatic. Reaching over into the box, a hand touches the base. A splinter embeds itself under the skin.

Hot air is blown on the palm and fingers. Noise in the factory is constant. The whirring relentless sound of industrial machinery is deafening, even though it comes from an adjacent room. Cordite is placed on the table, cut into strips then put inside hessian. With utmost delicacy, a silver-coloured needle sews the material with graceful movements. The cordite is enclosed. Explosive material is taken from a box. It is cut into narrow strips, then placed on hessian.

The material is sewn evenly and put in a pile. A hand reaches over into a wooden box. Every penny counts. Yesterday we might be lavish. Tomorrow freedom will come again. Cordite is placed in a pile. It is cut into strips. Put inside hessian, sewn in careful gestures on a blue-pencilled line. Cordite is taken from a wooden box on the floor. During the break, women eat on stairs outside the building, to get some fresh air. Factory employees are not allowed to wear rings, hair clips or brooches.
Before the twelve-hour shift begins, women put on special shoes (without nails) provided by the factory. Cordite is placed on the table and cut into strips. Put into a hessian bag, sewn in small stitches into a perfect square. Bending over to reach the explosive substance. Cordite is cut into strips. It is put inside a piece of hessian. Sewn in half. Put in a pile. Cordite is taken from the box; it is put on a metal surface, then cut into strips.

The newly married, or recently bereaved, drive cars at low speeds through emptied suburban streets. Windows in solid, newly built houses are covered in black paper. Neighbours visit anyone thought to be breaking the light restriction laws. In geranium-filled gardens, middle-aged fathers conduct air raid rituals. Cordite is taken from the wooden box. Wood splinters at the corners. Black ink spells words and letters. The explosive is cut into strips.

Basic food items are scarce. Hessian is folded in half. Thirty thousand American soldiers have recently arrived. Tent cities emerge on parkland, near the university. There are shortages of fruit, vegetables and beef. Sloping against the line, a needle threads the material. Did you get involved today, in the youth rally at the stadium? Fibre separates with the movement. Cordite is placed on the metal surface. My goodness, the General’s wife shopping — photos in the paper. She has a Malaysian amah to look after her children. Cordite is taken from a box.

It is cut into strips, placed on the table. Two fingers join together, as cotton threads a needle. She is such a well-dressed lady. A friend who works there — you remember, Fay O’ Halloran who works at the Myer’s millinery department — tells me, she always says please. Sewing against the line, the hessian is sewn together. Then put in a pile. There are few cars on the streets. White camellias and concrete storks enclose each garden and cream-brick house. Taken from the box, cordite is placed on the table. It is cut into strips, enfolded in hessian. It is put in a pile.

The rough fibrous material is harsh against fingers; the cordite is sewn together. In the well-ordered suburbs, the shapes of modern houses recollect the depression years. Car headlights are on low beam; black covers emit a pink light. Daily struggles revolve around darkness. Cordite is cut into strips. The knife is discoloured. Sewing against the line, the metal is hidden. Regulations determine
the use of artificial light. Bad lighting, bad ventilation and eyestrain are the main sources of absenteeism.

Held up against the light, a silver needle is threaded. In one factory, lighting is so bad that blood vessels break behind employees’ eyes. Sewing against the line, the cordite is placed in hessian. Fluorescent light bulbs that release a cool light, one third incandescent, are preferred. It is not comfortable to look at the sun. Cordite is cut into strips. It is put on the table. Sewn together in rapid movements; it is put in a pile. It is not comfortable to look at a sheet of water glistening in the bright sunshine.

Cordite is taken from a box. When walking at dusk, the air-raid siren shrill in the skies, it is easy to fall into nostalgic reveries about home. Threaded against the light, cotton is held between two fingers. Hessian is folded, then put in a pile. Cordite is taken from the box. In the morning before work begins, the air hovers like an etched template from a more temperate hemisphere. The explosive is cut into strips, sewn together, then put in a pile. In the half-light, figures appear without notice. The mist makes human forms diffuse.

Cordite is taken from a wooden market box. Cut into strips. It is placed on material, sewn along the line — marked by a blue pencil. A river, filled with brown water, moves in inexplicable currents. In circles and other less familiar geometrical forms. The grass is cold. In the middle of a brownout, a bridge emerges like a silver blade in the darkness. Metal collects the ever-diminishing light. Cordite is taken from the box and cut into strips. Threading the needle against the light, the material fastens together. Near the unfinished railway station, with clocks that never show the correct time, there is a public hotel.

Cordite is taken from a box. Cut into narrow strips. Feeling against the line, the explosive material is put in a pile. The hessian material is stained with a permanent smell of shallow water. On public thoroughfares, fourteen-year-old girls wander about in short-skirts (coloured red, white and blue). Cordite is taken from a wooden market box. It is cut into strips. Rouge on their lips and cheeks, the girls drape themselves over foreign military personnel offering gifts: orchids, boxes of chocolates and silk stockings.

At Hatcher’s Drycleaning, telephone numbers are put in
American soldier uniform pockets. A needle is threaded, against the fluorescent light. Noise, a mild braying of electric fans — the air opens behind a door, women's voices are heard. Cordite is cut into strips. Hessian folded. Put in a pile. Few women wear clothing recommended by government. The siren suit, with its sensible brown material and minimised use of cloth. Dresses made from discounted fabric officially entitled border love. Battle of flowers. Cordite is taken from a wooden box.

The explosive is cut into strips. Sewn evenly along the blue-pencilled line. A hand reaches over into a box. Men return with strange illnesses — night sweats and heat that ferment inside bones. Cordite is put on the table and cut into strips. The explosive is put inside hessian and sewn in careful movements along on a line. Cordite is taken from a box. Cut into strips. Exotic birds, rivers overflowing with scales — mosquitoes and sweat of fear. In human hands, hessian smells like undergrowth.

Every inch of cartilage can be felt under the skin. Physical gestures move from the automatic to the exhausted. At night on empty trains war brides sleep fitfully. There are no lights at railway stations. Suburb names have been removed to confuse invading armies. Official notices ask: Is your journey really necessary? Chest pain feels like bloody fibres rubbing electric. Dry and short of breath. Fingers smell like explosives. Cordite is taken from a box, cut into strips. Placed inside hessian. Sewn in gentle movements against a blue-pencilled line.

Every truncated breath merges with the deserted streets: the endless aureole of newly built suburbia. The corrosive stench of explosives encircles an eye. Sleeping women lean against windows covered in black paper, taped at the corners. In the city, where cars crawl home on the silver metallic bridge, public gardens are pitted with trenches. Deep holes turn the earth inside out and return it to the surface. A fingernail marked by oil rubs an eye. The nail avoids the duct — the tiny flesh inlet where tears form.

Near the river filled with brown water, palm trees create black silhouettes. At the elephant skin base of the palm trees, women meet soldiers. Despite posters warning against gossip, people talk. Beside the public hotel in a lane filled with rubbish bins and cobblestones, it is said, women commit indecent acts in return for
liquor. *How about it then, come on. Come on sugar. I'm not here long. The jungle is waiting for me.* Reaching behind her back, the zip on her dress braces like a snake. The silk-polyester material of her dress falls to the ground.

She winces a little, when the cold touches her naked arms. She moves closer towards the crowd. She hears the soldiers cheer. A rapid stain of colour reddens her cheeks. The girl, with wide, wheat-country hips, stands up straight. She winks at the uniformed men who throw money at her feet. *Honey, come on now. Don't let me die before I see it — from the Japs, or curiosity.* She wriggles out of her slip, bending over to unfasten clips on her stockings. Pushing strands of mousey coloured hair from her eyes, she blushes. Cordite is taken from a wooden box, cut into strips. Then put in a pile.
Colours are words’ little sisters...
I’ve loved them secretly for a long time...

I’m very close to young Crimson, and brown Sienna
but I’m even closer to thoughtful Cobalt with her distant eyes and
untrampled spirit.

Rolf Jacobsen

(i)
They moved to the new housing estate
when she was ten, to a street named for Jack Lang.
Her father could not have approved,
he was on the side of the bosses.
Before he and the childbride were thirty
there was a new company car in the driveway
and four daughters lined up in matching dresses
waiting to be photographed.

After school, on weekends, she rode her bike
around the cul-de-sac in restless widening circles,
making the blue gravel fly
like cinders from the cracker night bonfire
she built there every year.
The scarecrow on top she dressed in her father’s discarded blue
overalls.
The east coast cities and their suburbs
are fusing like a Mondrian;
square miles of brick and grey cement,
azure rectangles of backyard pools, the margins
of intersecting roads and canals.

By now the creek at the end of Jaylang Place
is build on, filled in, or channelled.
A girl whose last name was Kiss
once lived on its embankment. Her eyes
and skin and hair were foreign.
A strangeness of words and cooking smells
came out of her windows.

Before the houses grew over everything
the sisters would go on their bikes over the small bridge
and past the Kiss house, to play in the bush.
Sometimes Blue laid her bike down on the bridge
and walked into the creek bed, feet sinking
in the mud and green slime.

Summer made a cake of it, layers
of brown and cream, orange and red clay
so appetising, the consistency
so much like warm butter
she plunged in with both hands,
making all the creatures she knew
and had imagined.
A mother who was bigger and stronger,
a brother who might call the love
out of her father's heart,
an angel to protect her;
they all crumbled where she left them
in the first rain.
Now she's somewhere high and far away. The creatures of her hands emerge whole and tempered by the fire. She paints their wings and cloaks with the colours of her sisters, of the mother who didn't grow, and the blue-eyed son she made out of her own body.
Floornoacker

Robyn Greenfield always brought loads of money to school - neat clean notes in her plastic wallet that her mother gave her every morning so she could buy her lunch.

Robyn was tall with big buck teeth and a scared laugh, like she wasn’t sure if she’d said the right thing or even if you liked her. Her father was a wharfie. He knocked off by lunchtimes most days and sometimes we’d meet him in the Centennial and he had a face like rare roast beef and he’d buy us red lemonade and packets of chips and he’d laugh with us at first and tickle Robyn but then he’d get quiet and Robyn would say “Come on, we’d better go home.”

Her mother was tall, with black curly hair and she worked as a floorwalker in Ball & Welch’s in town, looking out all day for people who stole things from the shop. I could imagine her craning her long white neck, watching people standing too close to the tables with the bags against their stomachs, or keeping an eye on the changerooms for people trying to smuggle things out under their clothes. Sometimes I’d catch her looking at me with narrowed eyes as if she thought I’d stolen something.

Robyn lived over the railway line in a street full of factories and I went to her house after school. She earned heaps of pocket money because she did all of the housework before her mum got home from work at night. She’d vacuum the rugs, sweep the kitchen and make all the beds. When she heard her mother’s key in the lock she’d jump up and get a cold can of beer out of the fridge and pour it into a glass.
Her mother walked through the house, inspecting each room. She never smiled or called out, just walked through, like she was walking through the store, looking for thieves.

"Haven’t you got a home to go to?" she said to me every time and then she’d laugh her sharp laugh and Robyn would laugh and I’d join in. She’d take a long sip of her beer and say, "Get Mum’s slippers will you Rob?"

Robyn had a double bed and a soft frilly cover on it and a pillow that was white fluffy dog and you pulled open a zip in its stomach and put your pyjamas in there.

"I hear you want to finish school, go to University," Robyn’s mum sucked hard on her cigarette and frowned at me through the cloud of smoke. I just shrugged as if I hadn’t much thought about it. "Robby’s going to work with me as soon as she’s old enough to leave school," her mum said. I nodded. "That’s the thing about Robby. Robby knows her place."

When tea was ready, Robyn had to go up to the Centennial to tell her Dad to come home. Sometimes she’d meet him halfway, and they walked home together. Other times, she told the barman to remind him. One night her father came home and her mother served up sausages and baked beans and he said he was sick of fucken sausages and he picked up the plate and threw it at the wall. The next day after school Robyn and I scrubbed at the wall but the huge stain like blood was impossible to get off.

On Saturday nights Robyn went with her Mum and Dad to the RSL and one night I stayed over and they took us both. I had on a frilly green dress of my sister’s, with a ruffled neck and white lace on the front. Robyn wore her mother’s clothes and because she was so tall, and her mother let her wear makeup, she looked like an adult. She wore a short black skirt and a cream satin shirt and a string of her mother’s jet beads. Her big teeth stuck out even further from the dark red lips but I didn’t tell her that because all of a sudden she looked like a stranger. She wore a pair of high heels and she had trouble walking in them but she towered over me and I felt small and stupid in my sister’s dress.

The RSL was really just a big upstairs room with a band down one end and a bar in the middle, with tables and chairs on one side for the ladies, and stools on the other for the men.
As soon as we got there, Robyn got us both a drink of Coke but when I tasted it it tasted bitter. The music started up and it was rock and roll and we started dancing, and Robyn was laughing a lot and waving to the blokes who stood around the bar and I wanted to sit down, because they were all looking at us and I thought her dad might come over and tell us to sit down.

We had some more Coke and I drank the lot because I was thirsty and Robyn said, “Careful!” and laughed. Then everyone was up dancing and a bloke came up and asked Robyn to dance and she got up and twirled off with him and I drank some more and wished she’d come and sit down again because I didn’t know anyone here and they were all yelling and laughing and smoking and the room was so hot and all of a sudden I felt sick.

I went downstairs and just made it to the gutter and vomited everywhere. But it didn’t make me feel any better. I sat on the kerb and put my head between my knees but I nearly had my face in the sick and that made me feel like doing it again.

I sat on a park bench on the opposite side of the street and I could look up at the windows of the RSL and see people screaming and the music sounded tinny from here and I could see people spinning past the windows with their arms sticking out, shrieking and laughing. I let my head drop on my chest and I must have dropped off because when I woke up the music was much slower and only the occasional couple waltzed past the window.

I didn’t know what I was going to say to Robyn and her parents about where I’d been, I was too ashamed to tell them I’d been sick. I’d tell them that I remembered I’d left something behind at home and I’d just nipped back there to pick it up.

I climbed the stairs again and the smell of beer hit me as I got to the top. The carpet was sticky under my feet. I couldn’t see anything when I got to the top because they’d turned the lights down low and the man in the spangled jacket was singing Blue Moon and Robyn wasn’t at our table, she was sitting on a bloke’s lap and they were kissing and her mother was swaying by the window with her arms around the neck of a man who wasn’t Robyn’s father.

A man came over and asked me to dance and I had no where to sit and no one to talk to but I couldn’t dance. Dad tried to teach me
a few times. "Just relax," he kept saying to me, "follow where I lead." But I hopped and skipped and stepped on Dad's toes and I felt like an awkward horse or something and after a while he gave up and I heard him say under his breath to my mother. "It's hopeless."

But I got up and danced with the man and it was slow enough that it didn't matter, and he didn't seem to know where his feet were taking him either and we moved around the room and his hands were sweating and he kept looking at me and smiling and I could feel his hand pressing into my back, and a wet patch where his hand was. Then in a dark corner he pulled me close and tried to kiss me, he got his mouth on mine but it tasted horrible, all cigarettes and sweet drinks smell and all wet and I pushed him away and he said, "Ya cocktease" and staggered off.

He was headed for a group of men at the bar and I was sure he was going to go and say something about me and what if Robyn's dad was one of them? I'd die. I wanted to hide but I had to wait for Robyn and her mother to go home with them. But they hadn't even noticed that I'd been gone before. They wouldn't notice me leaving now. I'd left my things at Robyn's house but I could walk home from here, it wasn't far and I could pretend in the morning that I had to go home for something important that I'd forgotten, or I had to get up early to go to Mass or something.

I walked back down the stairs and along the street. It was leafy and green by daylight but by night it was dark and the leaves of the trees hid the streetlights. In the distance, a train rumbled. Up ahead was the subway that cut underneath the track but it looked like a black mouth and I was too scared to go inside. I crossed to the other side of the road so I wouldn't have to pass it. Up ahead, a possum looked down on me from its place on an electricity pole. Its eyes shone like spotlights, unblinking in the dark. It watched me pass. Now I was coming up to the station, and our road. A divvy van turned into the street and headed towards me. I turned into the nearest house, and pressed myself flat against a wooden fence beside a huge bush that smelt of oranges and the van slowed. A dog next door was throwing himself against the wooden fence, barking and thudding his body against mine. The van passed. A light came on in the front room of the house whose garden I was in and I ran
out, jumped the low front fence and ran up the street under the shadows of the trees.

All the shops were shut on our road but they left their window lights on and once I got to the supermarket windows I felt safe. But by the time I got to Jeff the butchers I started to worry. I stared in at the plastic parsley and the white trays laid out in neat rows in the window. What would I tell Mum and Dad? And I didn’t have my own key, I’d have to wake them up.

I slowed down, I dawdled. I stopped and stared in each window I came to - Joe the barber’s with its pole that lit up at night, his photos of young men who all looked like Elvis with blonde, brown, black hair, in turtleneck, crew neck, v neck jumpers, side on to the camera or front on, staring straight at you. They didn’t look like any of the young men I knew. Joe got his photos from Italian magazines. Maybe all the boys in Italy looked like that.

There were lots of Italians in the Expresso Bar right opposite Joe’s but they didn’t look like these pictures either. They sat around for hours in there playing cards and drinking coffee or standing in the doorway of the shop, looking out onto the street. Tonight there were only a handful but the man behind the coffee machine came out to watch me as I passed on the street.

It must have been after 9.30, probably 10.30 I thought so Dad would still be up reading. I knocked on the shop door but it was Mum who answered it because the sound carried up to their bedroom overhead. Then Dad was there. “What’s wrong,” Mum said, “where’s your things?”

“I thought you were staying at Robyn’s,” Dad said.

I shrugged. “I just felt like coming home.”

Mum leaned toward me and sniffed. “She’s been drinking!” she said to Dad. “Have you been drinking?”

I shook my head. I just wanted to get up the stairs and into my nice clean bed.

“Leave her alone,” Dad said. “Let her get some sleep. She’s come home, that’s OK.”

The next day was Saturday and I went down to Robyn’s at lunchtime when I knew her Mum wouldn’t be back from work yet.

Robyn let me in and we went and lay on her bed. “Man,” Robyn said, “I got blind last night! And that Lex was all over me like a
rash. What happened to you, anyway?" She rolled over, clutching the pyjama dog. "Your mum was on the phone first thing, I don't know what she said, but Mum slammed the phone down."

I felt stupid now. We could have shared this lovely white fluffy bed and tried on different makeups all morning and instead I'd been helping out at home just like any other Saturday.

Later Robyn walked as far as the station with me, carrying my bag. We stopped in at the Centennial on our way past. Her mother and father were at the bar, her mother perched on a stool with her long white legs twisted around each other like snakes, a cigarette trembling in her fingers.

"Here you are," she said when she saw me. "Robbie, get yourselves a lemonade." Then she leaned over and put an arm around my shoulder and pulled me close and whispered to me so no one would hear. "Think you're better than us, do you?"
That the eyes mostly delude
can be a good thing:
unfocus them and you can
blur the summer burst of colour
near Sukhna lake* into a Canadian autumn:

this is what I make us
walk into, into a moment
neither past nor present
but close to a goodbye.

You lower your mouth
over mine. I am heady with the taste
of the wild berry you have just eaten
(there are no berries near the lake),

and weary with the effort
of loving. Your haste declares you
to be a man on your way, and I am
weary with fitting the pieces together
after each parting, of shaming
the spirit into masonry
after the mind's vagaries and
the body's lusts have taken their toll.

I grow bold in my dreams.
In the dream I had of you, 
you were 
the last man.

You arrived like a prophet. 
You were the prophecy. 
Standing on the edge of my world, 
you pointed to what lay behind you: 
the blue sky, nothing – 
and pronounced, “I am the last man.”

I smile feebly recalling the dream, 
I smile at the silliness of all dreams, 
as I enter the breach 
between dream and the real 
which is the space 
within your arms.

And I wonder 
if you can tell how much is despair 
and how much desire in my eyes, 
as I pull you down to the grass 
and into my dream 
as the last frizzled 
clot of sunset 
tapers into a red eye 
that closes over us.

* a lake in Chandigarh, India
The sculpture in the city square of a flock of pigeons taking off in fright, frozen in bronze at the moment of escape, had become a mental trigger for Thomas. Every time he passed it in the morning, appraising it admiringly, he would think of the superior beauty he could create if sculpture were his chosen artform.

Winter was receding, and in the brighter morning light both sun and cold glittered on the birds' newly polished wings. The several that remained forever on the ground stood in puddles from last night's rain. The contrast of the shining birds against the dark, slick pavestones inspired him and lifted him for a moment above the sluggishness he had been feeling. Two men entered the square together, and passed between Thomas and the sculpture. He noticed that neither of them even glanced at it, and shook his head.

After a few minutes he continued along his usual route to work, much longer than necessary to detour past the sculpture, and to take him through the most architecturally pleasing parts of the city. Every morning he felt like a tourist.

Finally Thomas turned down a narrow street, oblivious to its rich breakfast smells of coffee and warm bread. He quickened his pace with purpose as he threaded past café tables, and freshly groomed people. Of all the streets in the meandering route from his house to the theatre, he would avoid this one if he could.

As he came past each morning, many of the shops and buildings were still shuttered and locked, but there was one doorway that remained always open. Even trying not to breathe, he always
knew exactly when he was approaching it, this small, unremarkable opening with its concrete steps leading up and away from the street.

As he walked past the concrete stairwell the smell of decay found him and clung to him, his daily reminder of the body left inside that no-one wanted to find.

He resisted, as he did every morning, the pull inwards and up the familiar concrete stairs, and with an effort lifted his heavy legs to continue on to work.

In the theatre he was extremely useful, helping to rig lights, rearranging sets, ironing costumes. Often he would sit in the stalls and prompt, though the actors missed their lines less often than he would have liked. He disliked most of the work, and would have been happier never to see the clumsy innards of the stage, but it was only a matter of time before someone would notice his talent and he would be living the life he was meant for, under lights with a black gulf before him, being someone else, and finally a part of something truly beautiful.

But some days as he locked the stage door at the end of a rehearsal, all the others having left before him, he would realise that he had not witnessed a moment of the day, not spoken a word to anyone, perhaps hardly even moved, afflicted by the vision of the woman lying dead in her small flat at the top of the concrete stairs.

Sometimes he tried crossing the road, but the extra distance made no difference to the potency of the smell. This time the pull was worse, and Thomas felt himself moving towards the hole as certainly as if he were water flowing down a drain.

He looked up at the window above the stairs. The curtains were open, and the bland statuette of a cat along with a few vulgar greeting cards stood arranged on the sill, exactly as they had been when he left. He crossed the street, thinking of the way she had sat down on her couch as if she would never get up again. Seeing her face for the last time as it mirrored his own disappointment so exactly and beautifully, he thought of a performance he had once been moved to tears by. In the final moment of the play, immediately following the death of her beloved, a woman had
been lifted bodily off the ground as if strung up by her grief, plucked from the earth to hang hopelessly, never to come back. His lover’s sinking had been the same. As her heart broke he could see her body shutting down, her bloodstream disrupted, her organs slowing to a gradual stop. And as he shut the door behind him, he felt her spirit flutter past him like a dead leaf in the breeze.

He stood on the footpath in front of the concrete stairwell, the rotten organic smell beginning to suffocate him. He had never confronted death before and understood it only through books. But the foul smell and the vision it summoned of a young woman’s body defeated by decay persuaded him once more it was something he should not see, and he let her lie another day.

He was close but so far from his dream when he took flowers on stage to the actors on closing night. He had done it several times now. Off-stage, this had never appeared to Thomas as the moment of triumph, though strangely it seemed the actors themselves enjoyed it best. The finest moment for him was always the second of completion between the last line of the play and blackout. It was as if, during the brief pause in darkness, the inhabiting spirits that had shared a period of their lives fled the theatre, unwilling to corrupt perfection with their continued presence. This left only the actors, bizarre creatures to Thomas as they accepted their flowers without noticing him. They were like gaudy guests at a costume party, imitating something exotic yet themselves still so terribly ordinary. He watched them in doubt as their lacquered faces disappeared briefly among the petals, emerging again with brilliant, accomplished smiles.

He called this space between perfection and everything else the fourth wall.

A single moment in his life had taken him behind this barrier. He had been sent to collect the bouquets for the evening’s presentation. The florist was on the same street as the theatre, and he strolled down to it on a windy, high-spirited day, straight past the concrete stairwell that meant nothing to him at the time.

Floral perfume attended him delicately, but Thomas only noticed that there was no-one in the store when he entered. He walked through the moist air towards the door leading to the back of the shop.
At the door, the vision revealed itself to him in an instant. Through the window in the back wall a grey cityscape gathered like storm clouds, and the watery light fell onto a woman in the centre of the room. A great pile of white roses was heaped across a large table, and the woman was immersed in it. She was looking down, and strands of dark, straight hair fell across her face, gleaming as if wet. With only her head and arms visible, her hands moving gently amongst the petals, the woman seemed to be swimming through a frothy sea.

Tears came to Thomas’s eyes as he looked at the picture. Standing still, he gazed unnoticed for several minutes, admiring the composition, colour, use of light. When he sighed the figure looked up in fright, and startled him.

The moment passed, but rapture carried Thomas through the next ten minutes. Afterwards, he couldn’t remember those ten minutes at all, as if his own life had been frozen at the same moment that the image began to move. All that was important was that he would see her again tomorrow.

He could still think of the first time he saw her and weep at its beauty. Later, the memory was the only reason he stayed, as the shape of her face and the gleam of her hair were still the same, and looking at them helped refresh the image for him.

Most other things about her puzzled him. In a moment of elegance she would stand in the slanting afternoon light of her window arranging flowers in a vase, her long, delicate fingers guiding the stems towards perfection. But looking at her more closely, it hurt him to see those beautiful hands with dirt under the fingernails, the luminous skin marred with scratches from thorns.

Another time, with her disappointingly dingy flat transformed by candlelight, they sat close together talking. He was telling her of his dreams and a tear shone romantically in her eye. He leaned forward to kiss her, but missing his intention she turned her head to watch the approach of her grey cat. The cat leapt onto her lap, and after kneading her clothes for a few moments, lay down to go to sleep.

She asked him if he knew anything as nice as the trust of another living creature, or being loved by one who didn’t need to love you.
She told him to touch the cat, to feel how soft and warm it was, but Thomas was already leaving the room, looking for a book of poetry that would give him what he sought.

There were moments when he puzzled himself; watching her face change as she read good and bad news in the newspaper, or when she mumbled quietly and worriedly to herself when she was in a hurry. And when she came home from work one day, an unnoticed caterpillar on her sleeve, his strange rush of feeling seemed entirely undeserved.

One evening at the beginning of winter he waited in his lover’s chilly flat while she worked late, sitting down to become immersed in a book until her arrival.

He was entirely absent from the room until he felt a sudden weight on his legs through four points of pressure. He watched in annoyed amazement as the cat trod about his inconveniently placed legs. He still held the book open with one hand, while he reached back and rested his other arm across the back of the seat, pulling his body away from the domestic spectacle.

Finding a spot with room enough to balance on, the cat curled into a ball and lay down on Thomas, purring. Thomas looked at it for a while. Finally he decided to tolerate it, and turned his attention back to his book. But shortly afterwards, a vague sensation made him disturbingly aware of his own body. Only when he relinquished the book did he realise that he was slowly stroking the cat, and that it was, in fact, marvellously soft.

It became clear that he was losing sight of what he knew he wanted. There were several Sundays when she had persuaded him to visit friends or walk through the park instead of going to the gallery. There were days with her, occurring more and more frequently, when he did not even open a book. At first he thought he should simply spend more time away from her – back in his home with his books and paintings – but his house felt airless and cold, and he always returned to her sooner than planned. But when he realised he had been spending less time at the theatre he knew that the issue was more serious.

He stayed on after the next closing night. The audience was long gone, and the cast and crew had left for their usual party. Most
things were packed up and the entire theatre was dark, but Thomas switched on the stage lights, dressed himself in the sweaty costume, and went out on stage to summon the spirit of Romeo, separated from his love by unfeeling fortune, but believing, truly, that by the laws of love and beauty they would be allowed to come together in the end.

Many times he had played this role, in his house and in these stolen moments on the stage, and he had felt all of Romeo's overwhelming love and intensity. He had cried Romeo's tears many times, but tonight he could not do it. No spirit came to fill his body, and in his head were only thoughts of whether she had stayed up for him, and something she had said that morning about why he had never been to an audition.

He stared at the boards beneath his feet, uncomfortable in his ill-fitting costume. The only meaning he attached to his life had been taken from him by a woman who, beautiful as she was when she slept, snored.

Spring was rising up through the small spaces between buildings and footpaths and roads. Its organic exuberance would not be extinguished by layers of concrete and asphalt that were metres thick. Jasmine tumbled over the wall behind Thomas's house, and he blamed it for the sickly smell drifting through the rooms, making him feel ill.

Finding it difficult to move, he lay in bed for a long time before rising. The cold of winter still pervaded his house, but he sensed the riot outside and preferred to be where he was. There was no Vivaldi, no Monet, no impressionism at all out there, nothing to draw him from inside his walls but another day of fading hope at the theatre.

On the street, flowers seemed to crowd him from all unlikely places - on traffic roundabouts, on café tables, in people's hands. With a sudden happy surprise of recognition, he admitted the symbology was too strident to be ignored. It was time to go to her. If spring was this powerful, he could garland her with flowers and she might depart with as much beauty as she arrived in.

He recognised the familiar stench from much further away than usual. As he approached the concrete stairwell he was worried he
might throw up. When he reached the open doorway, the nausea and a paralysing guilt made it hard to lift his feet.

He grasped the smooth wooden banister and stepped up onto the first of the stairs. He was in the narrow, cold tunnel, and now inside he felt he was sealed in. He fought the desire to fall down on the concrete and not get up. Two steps from the top he paused, and placed one hand on his heart; it was either beating so fast he couldn’t feel it, or not at all. He could see the bottom of her door and sense the stillness beyond. He wondered how the smell could hit him in such waves, when everything inside was so still.

Then he was at the door. It was closed and locked, and stood between him and her while decay did its last work. Even the smell grew fainter as the dust sifted down from the shape of a human to a characterless pile on the floor. Faced with no other option, he knocked.

The stillness continued but the smell returned, creeping up on him from behind, engulfing his head and threatening to pull him backwards down the concrete stairs. Then the door opened.

She stood alive in front of him, wearing baggy pants, a t-shirt and slippers, her hair tied roughly at the back of her head. Looking inside, he recognised more of her bland ornaments, sitting on shelves alongside piles of newspapers and magazines, and dirty coffee cups. Though he couldn’t see any, the smell of flowers emanated from the room. Tears came to his eyes, and he couldn’t speak.

She raised her eyebrows and said hello. The smell of death still shrouded him, trying to pull him down the familiar stairs. Standing and waiting for him to respond, she looked across to the kitchen where the kettle had just boiled, and he saw the daisy tucked matter-of-factly into her ponytail. The cat curled like a vine around his leg and pulled him forward into the bright living room.
PAOLA BILBROUGH

ITINERANCY

Returned from Mexico he spent all year travelling between a city terrace with an untidy garden, and his mother's house in a southern spa town. A town full of braided sour dough loaves, glass beads and claw-foot baths of sulphuric water; soft and brown as old tea.

I could never predict when I'd see him, sometimes recognising him in a queue or the dreamy-dim of a movie as the credits rolled. He'd grip my arm with a warm hand, wrist covered in whorls of dark hair, spine glowing pale, skin stretched tight.

Always on the way elsewhere, he'd crack his joints, rotate his head, trying to settle into his own body. Once I ate dinner at his house; the other guest was five years old with a name from The Mists of Avalon. Night fell and we dressed her in a Che Guevara T-shirt, tucked her beneath crimson chenille in a room filled with Freda Kahlo postcards and reproductions of Flemish Madonnas. I had an urge to try on his shirts, lining the back wall like an audience. All in a state of disrepair: frayed cuffs, pearl buttons split.
I wanted to push up his sleeves, inhale river silt and sandal wood. Instead I wound his hair in tight rosettes and my fingers came away velvet-slick with oil. Outside, a plum tree dropped fermenting fruit and the child slept; her breathing filling the room: wind through bamboo.
ELIZABETH CAMPBELL

THE CONDUCTOR

Head thrown back as if he had just been shot or perhaps
in wonder –
you are straining
that his empty hand express
your dormant trigger-fingers,
lying
on complicit knee and armrest.
You seethe like mud.
His gestures,
perilous as
a neck-hung violin, the irresistible
forward force of the strings –
they swoon like pistons
and his elbows upwards and upwards
like a drawing of water.
He rummages the sound,
caught
in the span between seat and breathless
seat, slumping and wearing his wet hair, he crafts your passion like a whip. Cracks sound through your body like years, a wingspan – like a life yoked to an intolerable music.

**Gabriel**

Where's Gabriel now that visited my cell?
I call, I call, I call – Gabriel!
Gabriel! Gabriel! Gabriel!

— "The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation" by Henry Purcell

It is a fast, sick climb to these higher registers – the denser air the thinner sound. It is not union we want but intercession, the diviner's dipped stick – we adore the messenger that gives tongue to namelessness that brings more words into the fold. Our ears call – we adore the voice. Up here the intervals are closer the visits more piercing as she trades bodily resonance for head-voice, for a higher note. Pig-headed, hankering, we adore the voice
as she calls silence an abandonment
passion a first cause,
as she sings through her scalp
as she seeks the angel in her cell –
she will bawl him out
she will bring him into the fold of words.
"The past is not dead," said William Faulkner spookily. "It is not even past." It is a novelist's idea - a historian would probably not put it like that - and novels, which conventionally tell their tales in a historic tense, are one place we are used to looking for a confirmation of this necessary sense of the presence of the past, its representation. The novel is a relative of historiography, if one with a rather disreputable past of its own, and not averse to impersonating its more respectable elderly sibling. Thus Robinson Crusoe, the first novel in English, advertises itself solemnly as "a just history of fact", and Defoe still had his fingers crossed three years later in recommending Moll Flanders to the reading public as "a private History". But - leaving aside the fact that they tell lies - novels are indeed as close as we may get to a just history of private life, the history of the way people live, what they think and feel and say to each other: a history with the unimportant bits left out. A trawl through some of last year's Australian and Asian fiction - and there is space here only to cover a few of the many fine works published over the last year - shows the novel is as hard at it as ever, muscling in on historiography's territory. An historical self-consciousness - perhaps not the same thing as that great critical fetish, a Historical Sense - is stimulated by anniversaries, of which Australia has had its share in recent years; and the millennium itself, with its journalistic chorus harping on about endings and beginnings, probably played some part too in the particular
fascination of this recent fiction with the writing of history, and the undead past.

History comes in many guises, and one of these is the story we tell to remind or convince ourselves of who we are. Postcolonial writings in particular inflect the past in this way, and this work of reclamation upon the past has kept postcolonial writers busy telling the old stories of new nations. Whether Australia is postcolonial (or post-colonial), has always been postcolonial or is not postcolonial yet, or enough, depends on what you take this slippery word to mean. It is probably not a question that bothers Peter Carey much, yet his novel *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (University of Queensland Press, 2000) in some ways makes a classically postcolonial move, reclaiming a part of the national past that has been silent, or traduced in other tellings, and holding it up to the light for what it may have to say about the people in whose name it is reclaimed. In this way literature performs one of its oldest functions, telling the stories of ancestors. A culture’s choice of its ancestors is a defining act. Sometimes we are dealt the wrong ones, with tragic consequences, and then if we are lucky we may be allowed to discard them and invent a new set.

Peter Carey and Ned Kelly were made for each other; the surprising thing about this book is that it has only now been written. Carey's real coup, as all the reviewers have pointed out, has been to find not just a character for the outlaw, but a voice in which his history comes alive. It is a remarkable invention, and Carey doesn’t put a foot wrong in four hundred pages, avoiding the limitations of the voice (the relative poverty of vocabulary for example) as surely as he exploits its strengths. The stylistic effects are not complicated – the full stop is almost the only punctuation Ned uses; he confuses the modals *was* and *were*, and so on – but Carey makes this narrative a vehicle not just for pacy action, but for lyrical flights, humour, moments of great tenderness, and a strong feeling for place and atmosphere. He also manages the feat without ever patronising his hero.

Soon as we rounded the spur Joe spoke urgently into my ear You see that Sergeant’s adjectival repeater mate? I smelled Joe’s smile it were a sardine can peeling open in the dark.
That's the effing Spencer he said I put my hand across his mouth telling him to shut his hole. O that's a beautiful thing that Spencer. I punched him in the chest but were very pleased to see him laughing in my face for Joe Byrne when happy were a mighty force. I told him I would buy him a damn Spencer once we was out of our dilemma (271).

There were not many books around but Ned Kelly was a careful reader of Shakespeare, the Bible, and Lorna Doone. Somebody declaims the St Crispin speech from Henry V before the Kelly Gang's final battle at Glenrowan, and a double point is made. First, that the history of Ned Kelly really could be as much of a national epic as the story of Agincourt became for the English. And, more troublingly perhaps, that although the past may not be dead, the making of heroes is something that answers less to the past than to the complex and sometimes hardly admissible needs and interests of the present, as interpreted by a Shakespeare or a Peter Carey. The True History of the Kelly Gang is as much about truth and history as it is about the gang. Ned himself is in quite a modern sense a celebrity, as aware as Bonnie and Clyde of his press reputation, anxious in his way to manage the news, and annoyed when his story is not told right. The whole narrative is moved by his need to set the record straight for the child he will never see. He often refers to contemporary press accounts and witness statements about his doings. After quoting one such, he says: "It is more or less true about the horse stealing but there is no mention of how I earned Mrs Goodman's enmity you will notice that true & secret part of the history is left to me" (227). Behind the truth claim of the protagonist of this anecdote lies the different sense of the fiction writer's assertion of title to the true and secret part of history itself.

Ned Kelly as narrator becomes, in the course of his own story, as much the focus as Ned Kelly as bandit hero. Forced into crime by poverty and injustice, his ruling passion is to get his story known, in the belief that publishing the "true history" of the unfairness visited on his family will secure them justice. Meanwhile the gestation of his daughter, to whom his story is addressed, coincides with the gestation of the writing itself. Indeed the whole book is haunted by writing. At one point the gang take refuge in a
shepherd’s hut, whose walls are crudely papered with pages of *The Illustrated Australian News*. Ned rigs up a sort of hurdle, and mounts it so as to be able to read the upside-down news of eighteen years before, plastered to the ceiling. (What he reads about is news of the American civil war, and this is where he gets the idea for his famous body armour, from reports about the duel of the ironclads the Monitor and the Virginia.). In this tale possessed by the glamour (and betrayal) of writing, Ned is finally given away by a language-man, the schoolteacher Curnow, who also gets his hands on the manuscript of the True History. By this time, with his pathetic faith in his message of petition to the government, Ned Kelly has become textualised in several senses. “My 58 pages to the government was secured around my body by a sash so even if I were shot dead no one could be confused as to what my corpse would say if it could speak” (354). Before his death, the hero and his story have become one and the same thing, as they must be for us.

This important and often beautiful book picks up where *Jack Maggs* left off, in the construction of Australian myths. Ned Kelly the outlaw is at least partly aware of what he means to the people around him, in wresting a measure of agency from the extraordinary hardship and endemic victimhood of their lives. This is a part of the myth too, and it is not impertinent to wonder what cultural need is being answered by the choice now of this romantic victim of oppression for an ancestor, rather than the vicious but equally Australian bushranger Harry Power, for example, or the cruel squatters or corrupt police. Ned Kelly himself has a gratifying theory of the essential and historic opposition of his country’s people to injustice, for “they was Australians they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be forced to wear the white hood in prison he knew what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the eye and even a posh fellow like the Moth had breathed that air so the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and marrow” (342).

A myth of a different sort is at the centre of Phil Leask’s *The Slow Death of Patrick O’Reilly* (Black Pepper, 2001). There are three main
narrative strands to this intricately woven novel. The Patrick O'Reilly of the title is a tramp, but also a semi-legendary figure, dangerous and immemorial, who is believed by some to have roamed the Tasmanian forests for a hundred and fifty years. His story mingles with that of Bernard Laurent, a war-weary Frenchman who jumps ship in Tasmania and wanders into a secluded valley looking for work; and with that of Clément Hébert, another Frenchman who came to the island in 1802 and left a journal of his years wandering in the forest (and turns out to be the ancestor of the current Patrick). From early on, there is a self-consciousness here about place and story, land and history. The Frenchman who has come to Tasmania also seems, appropriately enough, to have landed in a storybook.

At last, he [Bernard] felt pleased to be ashore, wandering through the Tasmanian bush, wandering through the old stories that spilled out of everyone he spoke to whether he wanted to hear them or not, as if the whole country was awash with things that had happened and had to be talked about, things that had to have a life of their own, filling every space in this huge, wild, empty landscape (29).

Phil Leask writes powerfully about place when he is looking at it, but his view is too often obscured by a portentous and romantic insistence on the mystic numen of the land. You can see these moments coming by the length of the sentences, and their cumulative effect can be irritating. There are important and interesting issues here, about “development” and land ownership and the relation of human beings to nature, but they are often steeped in a metaphysical solution that sometimes seems to mean a good deal less than it says, a Tasmanian sublime. “Now it was coming to a close, the dreamlike wanderings of an old man who had lived a life like no other, living with no thought or need for tomorrow, since today was forever and forever was a part of him, like the great, broken, immutable rocks that rose up around him, and the wind and the rain and the sun and the snow, and the lakes that one day would vanish beneath the sea...” (263). Phil Leask should perhaps be introduced to a really ruthless editor. “A country
as young as this cannot have lost its history, not so soon," thinks Bernard (67). But there is just as much history as you want there to be. Patrick O’Reilly is the direct link with the past, with the earliest white settlement of the island, and with the state of nature; there is a story worth telling in his death.

Peter Carey and Phil Leask have written novels about history. Arabella Edge’s The Company: The Story of a Murderer (Pan Macmillan, 2000) is a historical novel. It is inspired by and based on the wreck of the Dutch East India Company flagship Batavia off the western coast of Australia in 1629, and it is narrated by the apothecary Jeronimus Cornelisz, the mutineer leader, psychopath and murderer. Jeronimus has a background of libertinage and possibly satanism in Amsterdam. We are perhaps told more than we need to know when it is explained that his mentor Torrentius casts his horoscope and predicts he will return as a boulevardier in Paris, inciting revolution from his Bastille cell. His sadism is the point of the story, yet it’s debatable whether such a story is best told from the inside; Jeronimus tells the tale chillingly enough but in the nature of things he is not best placed to understand it.

He has already been at work inciting mutiny when the ship strikes the reef. About two hundred and fifty souls make it to a small group of islands, among them Jeronimus who comes ashore clinging to a cedar gargoyle of Beelzebub from the wreckage. There they make shift to survive for forty days during which the apothecary establishes control as “Captain-General of the Coral Shoals”, increasingly ruthless and crazed, before the rescue ship comes and he is tried and hanged. Arabella Edge is pretty good on realisation, colour, and (as far as I could tell) period detail, including her brief but striking evocation of Amsterdam in its Golden Age, the capital city of freethinking, and seedbed of mercantile capitalism. But Jeronimus himself, though he generates some vivid narrative, is not a very interesting consciousness, and in the end, in spite of the intriguing title, the novel is not entirely successful in drawing connections between the company and the murders. We are hardly offered an insight into evil or madness. The Captain-General is one of Nietzsche’s gentlemen, he is bad and gets worse because he is able to, at first getting rid of people to improve his own chances of survival with his rapidly corrupted sidekicks,
and later becoming arbitrarily cruel because he enjoys it. A hint at the link between the business of the murderer and that of the Company is his treatment of his captive Lucretia, a beautiful bride voyaging out to a marriage of convenience in Batavia. She is objectified and possessed like a prize, a jewel or a painting. She resists in the only way open to her, by stubborn silence.

I was reminded a little of Barry Unsworth’s excellent *Sacred Hunger*, another account of a descent into violence and madness in the context of the capitalist rapacity – the "sacred hunger" – that built the European empires. I was also reminded that we have just celebrated the centenary of the genre’s strong precursor, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. It remains to be seen whether this essentially twentieth-century vision will continue, or mutate, in the new century.

Closer to the historical pole of historical fiction is John Toohey’s *Captain Bligh’s Portable Nightmare* (Duffy and Snelgrove, 2001). This retells the story of Captain William Bligh and eighteen crewmen, crowded into a 23-foot launch by the mutineers of the Bounty, and their journey of 6,705 kilometres across the Pacific to the Dutch East Indies. Bligh is not a endearing hero, and the journey itself was prolonged by his refusal to risk contact with the natives of several islands where they could have made landfall, and at least found food and water, on the way. The point is made that Bligh’s former commander, and Oedipal shadow, the great Captain Cook, was less paranoid about the Pacific Other; on the other hand, Bligh was to die in his bed. Bligh’s great journey was really a triumph for Enlightenment self-confidence in a year, 1789, when revolutionary turmoil was to overtake it in Europe. It is a gripping story, though not especially well told by John Toohey, a better historian than novelist, who has devised a rather awkward generic mix of fidelity to sources with new-journalistic ventures into empathetic interiority, and occasional dollops of background on such matters as the diseases of sailors, and the intellectual atmosphere of the Scottish Enlightenment. This seems to be a marriage of fiction and history where the partners cramp each other’s style. There is a bit too much speculation on what Bligh was thinking of as he scribbled in his logbook (often roast pork, forgivably) to make a completely reliable history, but not enough to make a satisfying novel.
There is no ambiguity about the genre of Kate Lyons' *The Water Underneath* (Allen and Unwin, 2001): here is a novel and no mistake. And yet the considerable strengths of this book are more lyrical than narrative, at least on first impression, and more with the evocation of place than event. It is indeed a full-blown modernist text, with its densely organised imagery, complicated time scheme, and opaque record of the thought processes of characters who are a mystery to themselves. There is an unexplained death, of a mother and baby, but this is not a mystery story in the conventional sense; though we will discover the facts, the truth (Conrad’s distinction) will remain indeterminate. Twenty years after a disappearance, bones are washed up from the lake. This is where the story begins, but it moves back as much as forwards, and no reassuring detective waits at the end of the trail; the novel’s journeys are in fact endless.

The history here is that of an outback mining town, both vacuous and oppressive. “That was the worst of it. You couldn’t get out of it, not really, not on foot. You could walk and walk on one of these roads and a few miles outside the town borders you were nowhere. There was nothing there you could imagine except the absence of here” (48). This overwhelmingly unpromising place is in transition, from the 1960s to the present, from the harsh realities of mining to the heritage trail of outback tourism, “a glossy approximation, with none of the dirt, none of the squalor, none of the holes” (196). But this a novel full of holes, the odd and sometimes irritating gaps and leaps of its incomplete narrative record, the communicative chasms between characters who are inarticulate and, in the case of the central character, the part-Aboriginal Frank, shielded by elected silence from the unspeakable past. It is this silence that sets two women, Vonnie and her daughter Ruth, on the road to their own destinies, one tragic and the other incomplete. In a story where memory is not doing its cultural work of giving people something to share – their stories – Ruth the orphan is left holding the inadequate remains of the past in the form of traces, something buried under the roots of a tree, a half-remembered fragment of childhood experience, the falsifying records of epitaphs, and the blurred sepia photographs of dead miners, now that only nostalgia is mined after the minerals have run out.
They stand erect and unsmiling outside tin cottages. They are waiting for history to arrive. When it comes it will be sudden. It will leave them receding through a tunnel of unused years. It will be cholera, typhoid, fire, flash flood. The sudden surrender of thrice-gutted earth.

Men stand in unfailing readiness, in unaccustomed daylight, implements in hand. Picks and lamps and shovels, these things give them gravity, they prop them up. Famous yet nameless. Like Frank, known only by tools and deeds. Inside the dark mouths of doorways, like shadows or sepia ghosts, lurk their absent wives (228).

This is distinguished writing, and a brave and skilful first novel which ponders the relation between the body and place, and the question of what it might mean to inhabit a country. To my taste it goes too far in its modernist opacity and sacrifice of cohesion, especially if you compare it to the formal simplicity of a novel like The Kelly Gang. The Water Underneath is a glittering artifact. Set in unremitting and blistering heat, it has a cool heart.

A more expansive “private History”, postcolonial and transpacific, is to be encountered in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s novel Joss and Gold (Times Books International, 2001). It starts in Kuala Lumpur in the sixties when the young graduate Li An marries a dull but worthy research scientist and joins in the busy chatter of Malaysian nation-building, only to find that as a Chinese she may not be considered as integral to the new nation as its majority Malay Muslim citizens. Enter Chester, a Peace Corps volunteer with whom she develops a slightly risky friendship. Things build to a climax in the overcharged anti-Chinese riots of May 1969, during which Li An and Chester are thrown together for a single night of love. The second part of the novel takes an unexpected turn. Instead of following the fortunes of Li An, who has a baby on the way and some explaining to do to her husband, the narrative moves to the USA, ten years on, to pick up the story of Chester. This is a novel with a pronounced sag in the middle; in the American section, with the dimly apprehended Chester and his uninteresting circle, something goes flat in the narrative. Much of the early energy returns in the last section, when Chester returns to Asia, to
Singapore, where Li An, now divorced, and her daughter and most of her friends have fetched up. Here we see how Li An has established a successful career and is bringing up her daughter in a female household with the help of her mother-in-law and an unmarried friend. For a while the story seems to be shaping itself into some variation of Madame Butterfly, as Chester tries to get the child to come and stay with him and his wife in New York, but in the end a more prosaic modus is worked out.

Here we have a full house of the postcolonial thematic repertoire of race, ethnicity, nationality, identity, language, education, the family, tradition and modernity, with a strong attention to gender politics. Li An herself begins as a predicament rather than a character, but grows more substantial, and though she prospers in the face of adversity there clings to her something of the melancholy which seems to be the signature of the Chinese Malaysian condition. Around her, the voices of a racialised nationalism mingle with others that insist that she is Chinese, with all the obligations that title can be said to bring with it, especially for a woman; and these identity-forming pressures clash with her rather naïve enthusiasm for the colonial canon of EngLit which she has imbibed as a student. By the end, in Singapore, we can understand her innate toughness, but also what has been abandoned as the price of accommodation to materialism and the success ethic which is the other side of the coin of “big city tolerance and anonymity” (246). This is a valuable essay in a familiar mode, with a set of middle-class young people finding their feet and their identities in Asian modernity, in relation to the colonial past, the national present, ethnic cultural traditions and beliefs and a changing sense of the possibilities of gender. It is not Shirley Lim’s fault if the men in her story are uninteresting. (If we are dealing with myths of ethnicity, this one is as feminine as Peter Carey’s is masculine.) There are two strengths in particular in this book. The dialogue, which is flat when the scene is Westchester County, comes alive and expressive in the various forms of Asian English. Second, there is an admirable attention here to the body, to registrations of heat and cold, pleasure and discomfort, to body language and the secret inner work of the somatic life. The frenetic bodily life and generous feelings of the young Li An – dashing around
on her motorbike, expounding Keats, enjoying rojak or ice cream – are curtailed and disciplined with disappointment and responsibility, but at the end of the story it seems as if something of that earlier warmth may be returning. "A muse of feelings she thought she had forgotten, more than words, more than poetry, returning to the spaces inside her body its silent and eloquent touch" (306).

If the loves and estrangements of Lim’s characters have something to say about relations between the East and America, there is a more structural dialogue in Nigel Gray’s Strangers (Stone’s Publishing, 1999), which takes the form of a series of letters exchanged, in 1988 and 1989, between Adrian, a social worker in a dying seaside town in England, and Harri, a failed actress making a new life for herself in Australia. Adrian makes contact years after a very brief encounter which (at first unknown to him) has produced a child, but the two will never meet. Nigel Gray manages the epistolary form with great skill, as the picture gradually emerges with each letter responding, often angrily or mischievously, to the previous one, laden with memory, confession, and a halting approach to love. Though there is much to admire here, in the end I found the book disheartening and claustrophobic, as much because of the form as of the desperate lives it reveals. Claustrophobia, of course, need not be claustrophobic for the reader. It is one of the themes of Robert Drewe’s brilliant The Shark Net (Viking, 2000), his memoir of a provincial boyhood and youth in a Perth suburb in the fifties, interwoven with the story of a multiple murder. I mention it here, though it does not come into the remit of a fiction review, as one of the best new books I have read for years.

Speculative historical fiction is a little genre of its own. What happened in what Hitler called his “lost year”, the year after the defeat of the German army in which he served, in 1918? In The Day We Had Hitler Home (Picador, 2000), Rodney Hall would like us to suppose that the temporarily blinded German corporal was sent, by a combination of bureaucratic muddle and the endemic accidents of war, to Australia, where he was welcomed into a bourgeois family in the mistaken belief that he was the son of acquaintances of theirs. This is a novel about the modernist age, the age of aeroplanes, cinema and fascism. It starts off, as the jocular
title signals, as a sort of historical farce, with the mix-up of Hitler’s arrival by mistake in a boat bringing Australians back from the European war, and the need to return him to German soil. But it develops into a serious examination of just what largely unadmitted connections might be found between the “Hitler” and the “Home” of the title. A novel with some similarity to William Boyd’s equally enthralling *The New Confessions*, this story takes its initially quite innocent heroine, Audrey McNeil, from Australia to Weimar Germany. The story begins, in a sense, when Australia did, making its first formal appearance on the international stage in 1919 as a signatory of the disastrously punitive Versailles Treaty. There is some fun with the farcical espionage story, as the sullen Corporal Hitler is smuggled out of Australia by air, but this is followed by Audrey’s ten years in Munich, where she is as slow and unwilling as everyone else to recognise what sinister shapes the history of her own times is there assuming, until she witnesses Hitler speaking at a rally. She pursues a career in film – the great modernist art – where she puts together a record of the life of the city which she believes to be a simply aesthetic project, only later realising that it is a political document, and a tragic one. The novel reflects on itself in the way that Audrey considers the relation between art and life, “watching the rise of violence in the streets as no more than material for my film” (253), until her eyes are cruelly opened; the Senegalese lover, her first, is beaten to death by fascist thugs. The last part of the story tells how she manages to smuggle her lover’s child to safety out of Germany, a grim balance to the earlier smuggling of the incipient Hitler out of Australia a decade before.

The book is beautifully shaped, an instance where a fine aesthetic judgement reinforces the strong political freight of the story, whose themes come home in several uncomfortable senses when Audrey with her grim experience of Nazi racism returns to an Australia, and a household, where racism is just as firmly rooted. This is a really good novel, faultlessly confident in its period evocation, but also one in which, without being anachronistic, the structure of an imagined past is firmly linked to an urgent engagement with the present. The story of Audrey’s family, absorbing in itself, also stands in front of the story of the emerging nation, which stepped forward in 1919 and yet wanted,
and perhaps still does, to believe itself in some lucky way immune or exempt from the burden of history. "Espionage being all the rage and the new subject for movies, doubtless our best defence was the fact, universally acknowledged, that nothing ever happens in Australia" (110). This is when they are on their clandestine and strangely— but how ironically— innocent journey to deliver Hitler back to the German soil he will soon be making speeches about. The happy conviction that history is something that happens to other people is the real virginity that Audrey has to lose in her story.

When a book is prefaced by a complex family tree, like Maggie Blick's Remembering Malcolm Macquarrie (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001), we feel we know what to expect. The diagram turns out to be an essential reference point in a story that covers a century or so, shifting back and forth in time over the decades, telling and dropping and resuming different strands of family history. It is a difficult and ultimately under-rewarding book, but a courageous one; it covers a lot of ground, and in the end it may be truer to the actual texture of family memory— with its repetitions, confusions, unexpected rhythms, unfinished subplots— than more stately and tidy essays in the genre like Buddenbrooks or indeed Roots. The Malcolm Macquarrie of the title was born in 1910 and lives until 1997 but the centre of the story, if it has one, is his step-granddaughter Alison "Tubby" Murray, who is fascinated by the old man as a child, attends his funeral at the time of another crisis in her own life, and keeps returning to him in memory up to the time of her death— which occurs, I think, when the story ends, some time around the middle of the twenty-first century. It is a saga which encompasses births, marriages, divorces and deaths, journeys and returns, disappearances and reunions, family secrets, the dismal gloom of adolescence and the crazy gaiety of old age. It is a story without straight lines, however. Not only does it shred its chronology— moving in the space of four chapters, for example, from 2004 to 1946 to 2013 to 1997— but it shifts across the perceptions, memories and dreams of most of its cast of characters, in varying modes from lyrical to realistic to metaphysical. It is easy to get lost - it doesn't help that there are three Malcolms and three Alisons in the family— and in the end there is a question whether these people were interesting enough to sustain the effort.
There remains however the fascination of watching Maggie Blick ring the changes of a remarkably resourceful technique. The texture of the novel puts you in mind of textile, perhaps the cross-stitch that Alison (one of the Alisons) enjoys – “Millions of coloured dots, and this beautiful picture surfacing before her eyes” (148). But probably a better image of the mnemonic processes of Remembering Malcolm Macquarrie is the red, lint-infested patchwork bag that Tubby carries round in her crazy old age, an image that seems to take on symbolic weight near the end as the researcher, possibly a relative of hers, who is studying Tubby’s case tips out the contents of the bag onto his desk.

Maybe this thing he calls dementia is something else entirely. A kind of prison of the mind where doors long held shut by the force of culture come creaking open, and contents spill out in disarray for those around to piece together. A kind of wakeful dreaming, a resolution of the past, a purging. He repacks Emuram’s [Tubby’s] personals, and absently rubs his bruised head. Emuram has awakened something in him. Memories, shame, a sense of the fluidity of things. Not fixed. Not determined by any outside force. But free. (244)

In this twenty-first century novel, whose story reaches forward into the still unlived, there is at least a suggestion of envy as the man of the future contemplates the messy ragbag of an old woman’s memories. Her memories are the traces of her freedom, and it is unlikely that freedom can mean much in a posthistoric future.

Notes
1. Since this article was written, The True History of the Kelly Gang has been awarded the Booker Prize for 2001.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Paola Bilbrough is a Melbourne poet who is currently working on her first novel as part of an Asialink fellowship in Japan.

Godfrey Blow is a West Australian artist who has had many solo exhibitions beginning with his first in London in 1976 and whose work is held by several major and regional galleries, principally in Western Australia. The painting used on this cover comes from his most recent work in which he is concerned to explore symbols derived from natural forms that give an insight into the nature of existence.

Madeleine Byrne has worked in France, Slovakia, Britain and the US. She lived in a Slovak village for a year and has written a manuscript about the experience entitled "Landscape of Ghosts." She speaks, French, German and Slovak.

Elizabeth Campbell was born in Melbourne in 1980. She lives, writes and sings there. Her work has recently been published in New Music Contemporary Australian Poetry.

Michael Connor after working in publishing and bookselling, is currently completing a history PhD at the University of Tasmania.

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Amanda Curtin works as a freelance book editor and writer. She has won the Katharine Susannah Prichard Short Fiction Award, the Golden Key Honour Society’s Literary Achievement Award for Excellence in Fiction, and the Lee Steere History Prize.

Tim Denoon is a Sydney writer whose poetry has appeared in various journals in Australia and the USA. He has recently returned from an Asialink writer’s residency at Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi.
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Paul Hetherington has published five previous volumes of poetry and *Stepping Away: Selected Poems* will be released in 2001. He won the 1996 Australian Capital Territory Book of the Year Award with the collection *Shadow Swimmer*. He is publisher at the National Library of Australia.

Sue Hosking teaches in the English Department at the University of Adelaide. Her article is part of a larger collaborative project with an Aboriginal group.


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Douglas Kerr is Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Hong Kong, and has worked on the literature of the Great War (*Wilfred Owen’s Voices*, Clarendon Press, 1993) and on Western writing about the East in the colonial and postcolonial period, from Kipling and Conrad to Theroux and Timothy Mo. He is currently finishing a monograph on George Orwell.

Billie Livingston’s first novel, *Going Down Swinging*, was published in Spring 2000 by Random House Canada. She has just finished a short story collection and is working on a new novel.

Anna Mandoki is an accountant and writer of unpublished novels. She also has a degree in psychology, which comes in useful sometimes. She has lived in London and Budapest, and is now based in Melbourne.
Lorraine Marwood has recently moved from a dairy farm of 25 years, to Bendigo in Central Victoria. Her first volume of poetry Skinprint was published by Five Islands Press in 1996. Lorraine also writes children’s poetry.

John Mateer is a poet and art critic. He has recently edited a special African issue of the internet poetry journal Slope http://www.slope.org, and the latest publications of his own poems are Through the Silent Bushland of Skin (Vagabond, 2001) and Loanwords (FACP, forthcoming 2002).

Mark O’Flynn’s second collection of poems The Good Oil was published by Five Islands Press in 2000. He lives in the Blue Mountains and was recently funded to write a play about Eleanor Dark and Eve Langley.

Ouyang Yu is currently based in Melbourne with 20 books of literary translation, poetry and fiction published in both Chinese and English, and 7 or 8 books of various genres unpublished. His latest book of poetry is “cunt sequence” written in Chinese.

Gina Perry is a Melbourne based writer of fiction and non fiction. Her stories have appeared in a number of literary magazines and leading Australian newspapers. She is Arts Victoria’s writer in residence at the Melbourne Metropolitan Meat Market.

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Archna Sahni has lived and studied in Kuala Lumpur, Mumbai, Chandigarh, and Toronto. Until recently a college lecturer in Chandigarh, he is currently completing a PhD thesis that compares the story of Draupadi in the Mahabharata with its modern Indian depictions, and has recently compiled a book of poems.

Phoebe St John ordinarily lives in Melbourne, where she completed a BA at the University of Melbourne this year. She is currently in New York for a period of six months, doing some writing there.

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Elizabeth Stephens is a doctoral student in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, where she also teaches creative writing and critical theory. She has published poetry, short stories, and criticism in a range of journals, both here and overseas, and has won a number of prizes for this work, including the tertiary section of the National Short Story Contest.

Alan Urquhart teaches at the Sydney Institute of Technology, reading and writing some poetry.

Andy Weaver from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, has published poetry in various Canadian literary magazines, including Grain, Prairie Fire, and The Fiddlehead. He is currently working towards a PhD in English at the University of Alberta.


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STORIES
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Mark O Flynn
Wendy Gan
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Judy Johnson
Jan Teagle Kapetas
Aileen Kelly
Billie Livingston
Lorraine Marwood
Ron Pretty
Archna Sahni
Phoebe St John
Catherine Swanson
Andy Weaver
Deb Westbury
Ouyang Yu

ARTICLES
John Mateer on Breyten Breytenbach: 'the wise fool and ars poetica'.
Victor Ye on East or West: An Inquiry into Today's Chinese Literature.
Sue Hosking on Homeless at Home, Stolen and Saved.

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Tony Hughes-d'Aeth on the year's work in non-fiction.

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