Writing to Katharine Susannah Prichard in 1946, Miles Franklin spoke of her ambition to contribute to the building of a “gregarious culture”. She was expressing something of the frustration she had felt since returning to Australia in 1932 that the “independent and inclusive culture” she dreamed of was slow in materialising. In reading for this review, I am struck by the powerful irony that while the collective impression I have is of the existence of that mature, literate culture that Franklin yearned for, the books are published at a time when many Australians feel disenfranchised by a conservative, reformist government that leads Australians further from social democracy to ideological sites where debate is discouraged and ideas die or atrophy in reactionary talk loaded with what Sylvia Lawson, in *How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia*, calls “punitive admonition”. The culture that reveals itself in this year’s non-fiction is capable of celebrating a diversity of issues and views expressed in a range of cultural forms: pre-eminently there are several fine collections of essays which provide vehicles for Australian intellectuals to speak on the compelling issues of the day, from the Republican debate to land rights; globalisation, to the aftermath of September 11. There are books on poets, on women playwrights from the Great War to the sixties, and on satire in the novels of Christina Stead, on the Melbourne artist, Howard Arkley and on Picasso and Matisse, on music, and arts policy; there are diaries, letters, biographies and autobiographies, memoirs and hybrids, incorporating various modes of writing; there are histories of: the contradictions in Australian history, the First Wave Feminists, Sydney’s razor gangs in the 1920s and ’30s, the ascetic, St Antony in Egypt in the third and fourth century AD, the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, Shakespeare on the Australian stage and the pantomime in Australia, the Japanese in Australia, a Japanese war bride, Gallipoli, bunyips and Australia’s “folklore of fear”, death and dying in Australia, the activities of secret police in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, in France during the Revolution, in tsarist and
communist Russia, and in Germany; there is journalism: notably, Miles Franklin’s unpublished journalism, some of Chris Masters’ stories that did not go to air, and “Banjo” Paterson’s despatches from the Boer War; and there are travel books by David Dale, speculating on his perfect journey, and by Christopher Kremmer who floats through Afghanistan and near environs in the wild east looking for carpets, and books about the murder of Sister Irene McCormack in Peru, and about Donald Groom, the Quaker Peace Worker. There are new editions of previously published works: Monash’s letters; Clive James’ autobiographies; John Pilger’s The New Rulers of the World (2002) is spun out of his television film of the same name and includes original and expanded versions of recent essays; arguing for a “democracy” of music, Andrew Ford’s Undue Noise (2002) brings together a range of material, much of which had been published in 24 Hours; and John Hilary Martin has brought together into People of the Dawn (2001), selections from W. E. Stanner’s earlier work on Australian Aboriginal communities.

Indicative of what I am suggesting about the scope, imaginative reach and engagement of this year’s non-fiction is Sylvia Lawson’s, book of talk and stories, How Simone de Beauvoir died in Australia (2002). Rigorously interrogating contemporary Australian society, “listening to voices from the cultural margins [and] the metropolitan centre”, she sources her arguments from Australia, Paris, West Papua, Britain and Indonesia. Using the techniques of fiction, memoir, history and essay, she is exploring the absences, silences and amnesia she finds and, in the process, hears voices arguing incessantly about this increasingly “conflicted, tantalising, difficult” place. How Australia works out its relations with its near northern neighbours and its indigenous people, she argues, has as much to do with national identity as Anzac Day, the Melbourne Cup or the AFL. It is a book of conversations, and while Lawson’s conversations are intimately with de Beauvoir, with the measured and politicised voice of Dorothy Green and the more flamboyant, personalised voice of Dorothy Hewett, the book also participates in conversations with numerous recent books and essays discussing Australia’s republic, reconciliation, Australia’s role in the refugee crisis, on creating a just society, Australian feminism; globalisation, and with reading and writing, ways of seeing and angles of vision.

In his Boyer Lectures, David Malouf wonders if it is not time for Australia to stop asking what others – our Asian neighbours, the Americans and the British – “think of us”, and try more adventurous lives, free of watchers. This choice, cited by the editors of Republics of Ideas: Republicanism Culture Visual Arts (2001), and resonating ironically with the
Australian Government’s recent international posturing, is as fundamental to this collection of essays as it is to those brought together by Helen Irving, in *Unity and Diversity: A National Conversation* (2001), and *The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Ideas for the Future of a Civil Society* (2001); essays that flow out of that critical and emotional moment in national definition when the nation was considering the possibilities of a republic, contemplating a century of federalism, and ticking over into a new millennium.

Canvassing the likelihood of an Australian republic in the new century in the face of a voracious globalisation that problematises the idea of the nation state, *Republics of Ideas* looks for a Republicanism unshackled from its various colonial yokes, old and more recent, able to face the complexity of its recent history and, as eloquently and forcefully put by Larissa Behrendt, able to recognise the rights of its indigenous inhabitants. No less than Sylvia Lawson, the editors are raising questions about the relevance of some of the “symbols, icons and narratives of our nation and its cultural life”. What do “nation”/“culture”/“identity” mean in a globalised world, asks Mary Kalantzis. While, as far as the referendum is concerned, the consensus of the collection seems to be that, even recognising the Prime Minister’s “intransigence ... and manipulation of the terms of the referendum”, it is as well that it was defeated: Australia was not ready for it. Humphrey McQueen argues that a “No”-vote was necessary to enable the country to move ahead, since the minimalist model put up by the Republican forces was little more than a vote to continue a nineteenth-century political system. It was a great opportunity lost by the failure or inability of the citizenry to control public ideas.

Rarely far from the surface in discussions of the kind of Australia we are building for the future is consideration of the populist phenomenon embodied in Pauline Hanson and One Nation, and the eruption they caused in Australian politics in their brief stardom. Hanson surfaces in four of the essays in *Republics of Ideas* and while it is often in the context of right wing conservative racism, it is most accurately to be seen as a reactionary force, enlisting that cross-section of Australians who were concerned about the rate of social change in Australian society, and about economic hardship. This argument is most tellingly taken up by Belinda Probert and Rick Farley in their Barton Lectures, collected in *Unity and Diversity* (2001) in which they probe the social consequences of the rapidly accelerating process of change. Probert tackles it through the lens of class, and Farley through a latter-day analysis of the traditional city/bush dichotomy. They find an accelerating displacement of the middle class who still have jobs and work hard, but see themselves slipping down the economic slippery
pole. This slippage makes room for One Nation and the politics of grievance and blame that takes root in the rotten soil of frustration, bitterness and anger; and their supporters want revenge.

Race, reconciliation and the need to recognise and celebrate the different forms of diversity and sources of unity in class, gender, ethnicity and cultural and constitutional relations that shape Australian society permeate all the Barton Lectures in this collection. Mary Kalantzis laments that the Centenary of Federation was not adequately prepared for and thus continued a century of forgetting, of hiding, of obstruction, and Lydia Miller pointedly asks, "If those who constitute the state are not prepared to act in a manner that enfranchises the polity, why should Aborigines as a polity entrust their autonomy to such a dangerous institution?" In the process of outlining the neglect and denial by generations of governments, she sees no validity in a politically opportunist, expeditious government that ignores the Reconciliation document which envisioned a "united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all".

As they were designed to do, the "Bartons" take their place in national conversations that must no longer be put off. No less than Unity and Diversity, The Alfred Deakin Lectures, drawn from seventeen different sessions and more than fifty speakers, and ranging widely through the natural and social sciences – from astronomy, to the Human Genome Project; sport, to speculations about the brain of the future; conservation, to architecture and town planning and the future geographic and social reality of the country – are also speculating about Australia’s future. Furthermore, picking up themes from the earlier books in this review, the powerful imperative is that any image of the future must include consideration of Australia’s role in the Asia-Pacific and its attitude to indigenous people, refugees, and multiculturalism in practice; and it must include consideration of the consequences of globalisation and a "networked world".

Bringing together earlier work and expanded versions of some recent essays on power and its abuses, John Pilger’s The New Rulers of the World (2001) participates centrally in the conversations that I am suggesting link the above books. In Pilger’s bleak view, the new Rulers – powerful governments and agencies controlled by the US, promoted and promulgated by transnational media corporations, dominate and transcribe the current and future world, ever widening, not reducing, the divide between the rich and the poor. Pilger explores this "new" order, tellingly exposing it as the "old" imperialism gentrified by the term of globalisation.
Chapters focus on the systematic carve up of Indonesia since the 1960s; on the “vindicatory” bombing of Afghanistan which has devastated the landscape but not run al Qa‘ida to ground; on the Iraqi threat and the influence on the Bush administration of the right-wing dominated “Wolfowitz [‘total war’] cabal”; and, against the background of the celebration of the Sydney Olympics, on the continuing subjugation of the Aboriginal people. We know the story, Pilger says: recognition of an Aboriginal history in the history of this country is to locate dispossession, massacre and resistance beside a white history of heroic endeavour and progress in the face of a resistant environment. But to promote this inclusive history is to risk being accused - in one of those phrases that seeks to close off debate and diminish the subject - of fostering a “black armband view” of history.

In a much less polemical way, stories of the dispossessed and stolen, their voices silent or muted, are kept alive in *Storykeepers* (2001). Edited by Marion Halligan, this superb collection brings together eighteen well-known Australian writers, each of whom was asked to respond to the work of a dead writer. In many cases these, too, are conversations between writers and books, and contributions by Carmel Bird, Lucy Frost, Henry Reynolds, Bill Gammage, Beverly Farmer, Cassandra Pybus, and Alexis Wright (evoking her grandmother, Granny Ah Kup), provide a spine to the collection, releasing voices or stories of Australia’s Aboriginal past and continuing present into an extended conversation that knits/knots the collection together. Elsewhere in the collection, Delia Falconer, perhaps, takes her brief most literally and builds a moving story around an imagined meeting between the aging master, Kenneth Slessor, and a tentative acolyte who has tracked him down at his favourite haunt. Elizabeth Jolley responds to Peter Cowan, Tom Griffiths to Francis Ratcliff’s *Flying Fox* and *Drifting Sand*, Gary Crew reacts bemusedly to finding similar concerns to his own in Ernest Favenc, and Greg Dening reads Bligh’s journal. Each of the contributors is seen “rummag[ing] in [the] ragbag of what it is to write in Australia”; and considering what events we take from our past, the stories this past offers up.

In a different, but related way, the fifteen contributors to *Words for Country* (2002), exploring language and landscapes, are pondering why certain stories become attached to or grow out of particular places and are unpacking some of the cultural “freight” carried by “landscape”. It is impossible, of course, as we turn into the new millennium, to think of landscape and language in Australia without considering the politics of land rights and original inhabitants whose languages are embedded in
landscape speaking for it, to it, and out of it. Not surprisingly, several of the contributors ask whose place it is; who belongs in it and can speak for it. For Rebe Taylor, writing of her place, “land, not blood, secretes memory”.

Inevitably, *Storykeepers* and *Words for Country* are about reading writing and, as Dening puts it in his elegant piece in *Storykeepers*, “reading to write”. Fortunately, one of the choruses of *The Writer’s Reader* (ed. Brenda Walker, 2002), is the injunction to budding writers to read. As Nigel Krauth says: “Any student of creative writing who does not read – no matter in what genre – is not committed to the task.” While Peter Bishop’s anonymous American poet pleads: “Read! Read ... until your head is bursting with words and images and rhythms.” And “day dream”, argues Michael Meehan, who finds the notion of a willy-willy – a force-field of “power, rhythms and energies” – useful as an aid to describe what plotting in the contemporary novel might be like. Rather than dwelling with those certainties that can deliver “instructions: lessons, guidelines, wisdom and sometimes reassurance”, he wants an author speaking “from the heart of the whirlwind”, dealing, as Glenda Adams puts it, following Barthelme, with the “not known”.

This is a writing guide and not a self-help manual: just as David Dale doesn’t instruct readers how to travel in *The Perfect Journey* (2001), but notes a number of the variables, *The Writer’s Reader* does not presume to tell readers how to write, but merely wants to provide a “general guidance and recognition” and exposure to “particular techniques”. It has an inbuilt understanding of the vagaries of the imagination and the slipperiness of language; of the paradox of the profound urge to make writing and the fragile instability of the process. Accordingly, the book takes as its subjects, those “engaging” but “intransigent” elements of writing: the relationship between the work and the self; structure; issues of originality and authenticity, character, location or place, narrators and the consequences of point of view.

In many cases, Walker’s contributors are taking the reader into their confidence. Chris Masters’ *Not for Publication* (2002), while it is a kind of manifesto about why he is a journalist, is also a sharing of insights into how he practices his craft. His advice to anyone wanting to follow is to acquire balance. This is more than fairness, he explains, it is to find ways of accommodating the “contradictory elements” of passion and objectivity. And it is this “balance” which seems to have been a part of that vital education that “Banjo” Paterson acquired in his brief spell as a correspondent at the Boer War, from November 1899 to July 1900 (R. W.
F. Drooglever. ed. From the Front. A. B. ("Banjo") Paterson's Dispatches from the Boer War, 2000). For, having gone thrilled at the prospect of an adventurous war and being cruelly contemptuous of anyone not white or British – that is, thinking as a regular colonialist – we notice a gradual disenchantment with the war and a growing sympathy for the Boer. At the same time he began also to make clear distinctions between “the smart and wide awake, ... hard faced Australians” and the “heavy, vacant ... look” of the British, pre-empting Bean in seeing in the Australians, versions of a new breed. And, if one of Paterson’s great frustrations was that his dispatches were transported by sea mail and, for his contemporary audience, were robbed of the impact and immediacy of the telegraphic report received through Reuters, in retrospect, reading these letters as a kind of continuous narrative, the digressions and diversions which Paterson introduced to compensate for the delays are a feature. That is, it becomes a tale told with panache.

Turning occasionally for anecdote and light relief to Paterson’s Happy Dispatches (1934) and poems arising out of the experience, and writing excellent clarifying and amplifying linking passages, Drooglever gives readers a good view of the war from Paterson’s perspective. Once Paterson settled to the task – the editor suggests that his initial reports were as “formal as a starched collar” – and had thrown off, or found ways of evading the shackles of self-discipline and the literary straitjacket of simply reporting the facts, he finds a lively, dramatic and engaging style with ample room for his dry Australian wit.

In a year which has seen the passing of the last of the Gallipoli soldiers, attention has often been on Australians at war and, for anyone interested in the Great War battles involving the Australians in Gallipoli and in France the War Letters of General Monash (ed. Tony Macdougall, 2002; a new edition of the 1934 collection of his letters to his wife,) are indispensable reading. Notable for their detachment and objectivity, candour and intellectual rigour, we don’t look here for affectionate exchanges between husband and wife but, knowing his audience and perhaps with one eye on posterity, Monash sends her extraordinarily detailed accounts of his war work. He is a man absolutely engaged with the task in hand and the letters reveal his amazing capacity for, and attention to, detail. Nowhere is his style better understood than in the series of letters, from 12 to 19 December 1915, dealing with the retreat from Gallipoli. Monash was also, however, conscious of the very broadest perspectives of the war: an ability to see the big picture was one of his great strengths. So that his fury over the horrendous losses and disregard for the welfare of the men in the “hair-
brained ventures" embarked upon at Bullecourt and Paschendaele, is to be understood in the context of the deliberations of the War Cabinet and Hughes’ inability to come to England to represent Australian interests.

For Les Carlyon (Gallipoli, 2001), refuting C. E. W. Bean’s jaundiced comments about Monash’s inappropriateness to command the Australian Corps, Monash was “the greatest military commander Australia has produced”. Leisured and expansive, this latest Gallipoli, following Masefield, Moorehead, Robert Rhodes James and Hickey, is for the general reader. Told in the vernacular – “Braithwaite fusses over etiquette like a viceroy’s butler”, and occasionally sounding like a VB ad.: “Death was there when you rolled a smoke or told a joke or carted water” – there is the sense that we have read it all before; but it’s a great read. The occasional use of the second person is effective, enabling Carlyon to collapse time and the distance between teller and reader, and to introduce readers intimately and expansively to the forbidding landscape of the peninsula which defeated the men as surely as the enemy. It is as romantic (if not as apologetic) in its way as Masefield’s and as urbane written as Moorehead’s; it is comprehensive in its treatment of all battle zones on the peninsula; it releases many voices into the text, some of them new; and the cameos of the principle figures, invariably evoking their inner life and foibles, are a feature of the book. Of the hapless Stopford, he writes: “He could not lift his briefcase into the train when he left Victoria Station for the Dardanelles … .[If his] fire had ever burned, [it] had gone out.” And he gets the complex role and influence of Ashmead Bartlett right, I sense.

What Paterson and Monash would have made of a poet like John Forbes is a matter for conjecture but they might have enjoyed a good yarn over the intricacies of warfare, for war was among what Peter Porter calls Forbes’ “eclectic marginalia”. Seeing poetry as a vocation in a way completely foreign to Paterson, John Forbes died young and is sadly missed from the Australian poetry scene. Edited by Ken Bolton, Homage to John Forbes (2002) collects into one volume essays, poems, interviews and letters by numerous hands in an attempt to illuminate the man and his work. Although they are written out of love and affection for Forbes and are underpinned by a profound sense of loss, most of the contributors are able to see his blemishes as well as his beauties. So Ken Bolton, who sees Forbes as “our token, our talisman, our mascot, our one who goes before”, can also write of his obsessiveness, his difficult and testy nature, his vulnerable ego, quirks and damaging weaknesses which, as age and illness bit, became more exaggerated.
Like Bolton’s essay, others are anecdotal, mixing memories and discussions of the poetry. In the process, they provide a kind of narrative of Forbes, the poet; and serve as the beginnings of a biography, perhaps, while all the time showcasing the poetry. The only extended critical essay is Ivor Indyk’s “The Awkward Grace of John Forbes”, which is a fine piece, comprehensive and suggestive, in which Indyk makes a crucial distinction between Forbes and the New York poets he so admired. In reading Forbes after O’Hara, he suggests, “we miss the appearance of ease, the confidence of articulation, the assurance that all things count, even the most ordinary, which a powerful culture confers on its poets. What we have in abundance is irony, springing from a deep sense of limitation, and intractability.” His point is that, while Forbes may seem, like O’Hara, to be going on his “nerve”, the Australian is always aware “of the dangers lurking beneath, distance, in comprehension, lack of control, violence ...”.

A book like this has several ambitions, of course, not least to mark out a place for Forbes in Australian poetry. There is not the same urgency to find Les Murray’s or David Malouf’s place in our literature. Their places are secure and they are well served by two recent collections of essays. Edited by Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross, The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays (2001) brings together nine new essays, fitted to this most intelligent, erudite and craft-conscious poet: four from Australian critics and five from scholars closely associated with the University of Copenhagen. Although the collection is not comprehensive in the poetry it singles out for consideration, the studious attention given to Fredy Neptune (by Line Henriksen, Clunies Ross and Charles Lock) is welcome. In other essays, Peter Steele finds a “lexical zest” in a poetry in which “mouth and eye conspire to give freshness all the room it needs to move” and, in attending to the interplay of sound and image in the poetry, anticipates Nils Eskstad’s useful discussion of Murray’s “soundscapes”. Martin Leer addresses Murray’s poetics of place; Christopher Pollnitz looks at the discursive “middle-distance poems”; and Peter Pierce reads the prose collections and finds A Working Forest (1997) far from what Murray calls his “narrowsspeak”.

More modest in conception and scope, David Malouf: A Celebration (2001), published by the Friends of the National Library and compiled by Ivor Indyk, includes a brief introductory essay by Indyk; four essays which mix anecdote with criticism; and a small sampling of Malouf’s poetry matched to the essays. Set in motion by Indyk, for whom Malouf is “a master of intimacy”, capable of closing “the distance between writer and reader to create an intimacy which is lyrical, sensual and immediate”, the
common thrust of the essays is in the delineation of a private/public interplay between his life and poetry. Vivian Smith’s essay is notable. Finding in *Neighbors in a Thicket* a poetry “drenched in a sense of belatedness, of the burdens of history, culture and political ferments for an Australian in Europe in the middle of the Cold War”, Smith is struck by the emergence of a unique voice, its registers and the consistent interplay between ... the big picture, or the grand subject matter, and the deliberately understated approach and tone that so nimbly sidestep the grandiose.” This, too, as Bolton says of Forbes, is central to Murray’s vernacular, and is Malouf’s Australian voice.

As different as these three poets are, a feature of each of them is their prodigious reading. Picking up Anne Gray’s elegant edition of the first volume (of a planned four) of *The Diaries of Donald Friend* (2001), I am struck by Friend’s precocious eclecticism. As a fourteen or fifteen-year-old Friend was variously reading Isadora Duncan’s provocative biography one day, seeing *The Iron Mask* on another, anticipating with delight the possibility of seeing Mlle Pavlova again, dipping into *Omar Khayyam*, painting “Spanish” miniatures and taking lessons from Sydney Long, “curing his soul” with Beethoven, and investing in Japanese cloisonné vases and admiring arrangements of yellow objects d’art on another. Friend emerges as an exceptional, early-flowering talent, whether as a conversationalist, writer or artist. He was a prolific diarist and this edition, comprehensive in scope and generously interspersed with his drawings, runs from his schoolboy diaries of 1929, through his Nigerian Notebooks of 1939, to five separate selections from his war-time diaries from June 1942 to December 1943, when he was twenty-eight.

Indulged by his mother whom he adored, and who clearly saw and encouraged his talents and located him in a refined world, he dreamed of a brilliant success for himself “being blessed with a genius for art and a talent for writing.” One of the strengths of the *Diaries* is that it keeps the two forms together. They read like an artist’s journal – or a collage bringing together fictional, biographical, historical material, drawings, journal entries – and in them we see him thinking through an idea, experimenting with approaches, responding to the world immediately around him. Populated by a cast of characters, central to whom is his mother; artists; friends and intimates who include Arthur Benjamin and the Ogoga, Ruler of Ikerre; and sundry men in the ranks, Friend is always the dazzling star of the diaries and, it has been said, what we have is a wonderfully and arrogantly opinionated “self-portrait of a personality in flux”, who rarely stayed long in one place or with one group of friends. Articulate, spoiled,
snobbish, intelligent, indulgent, manipulative, confused, witty, sensitive, the diaries also reveal him as capable of self-reflection and self-deprecation. Lamenting the “lack of companionship” he felt among the “warm, stupid, kindly” enlisted men, he notes, however, that he is “like an envious cripple squinting with venomous malice at those who possess talents that I do not. But just the same they are talents I would despise to possess.” To escape his boredom he would flee to Bon and Tas Drysdale’s to drink gin and talk, “the most glorious thing”, and have immense fun making dramas like the one in which Donald played a “subaltern and occasionally a half-fay French girl called Ziska who danced the troika and sang czardas!” The dramas ended, he remarks, “only when the gin and rum had run dry.”

We begin to see the growth of a mind in the Diaries and that is also where Clive James’ real interest lies in Always Unreliable (2001), which brings under one cover James’ three volumes of autobiography. For, as accurate as these memoirs seem in their external detail, James’ consuming interest is in tracing his psychological development as he spirals out from Unreliable Memoirs, set in Australia, to Falling Towards England and May Week was in June, engaging with an ever-widening world. While we may have seen something of the later James in young Clive’s scholastic successes and in his poems in the first volume, it is in the two later books that his prose style and signature wit most clearly forecast that future which, with fascination, delight and envy, we have watched unfold over the last two decades.

The postwar Australia that Clive James grew up in provides the temporal zone of Susan Sheridan’s study of the Australian Women’s Weekly, Who Was That Woman? Established in 1933, by the 1950s and 1960s, the Weekly was reaching one in four families: it was a national media institution. Driven by questions about the target audience; the Weekly’s expectations of that woman; and her dramatic changes in “identity” over the twenty-five year period of the principal focus of this study (1946 to 1971), Sheridan and her co-researchers Lyndall Ryan, Barbara Baird and Kate Barrett probe this popularity and examine the ways in which the Weekly constructed a female-centred world for its readers. Locating their study in the context of earlier research by Susan Windship and Jill Julius Matthews, they argue, however, that it was not a narrow women’s magazine; that it offered women “the sociability, the connections” outside the family that were absent from many lives. They recognised that magazines like the Weekly, “took on the role of educating women as consumers ..., creat[ing] the conditions necessary for successful advertising by directly addressing women, in images as well as words, and providing a mix of “survival skills
and daydreams" that matched the diverse routines and interrupted rhythms of everyday life for women.

Susan Sheridan and Susan Magarey (Passions of the First Wave Feminists, 2001), acknowledge each others’ intellectual support in preparing their two widely differing books; and their concerns are distinct! For, if Sheridan is focusing on the education of the middle class woman as consumer; in her reappraisal of the standard image of the first wave of Australian feminists around the turn of the twentieth century, Magarey’s concerns are more fundamental to the rights of women. Rather than grim-faced harridans, “wowsers” and narrow moralists bent on spoiling “men’s pleasure”, she wants them to be seen as “passionate” – in every sense of the word – political activists, central to whose agenda was a reconsideration of sex and sexual relations. Magarey mounts a forceful argument that moves these women – centrally, figures such as Rose Scott, Vida Goldstein, Henrietta Dugdale, Mary Lee, Edith Cowan – far from the God’s Police stereotype. The force of the Woman Movement campaigns over the thirty years from the 1880s was to resist and contest discursive stereotypes in which women were positioned by discourses that focused on gender and men by a discourse based on the “testerstonisation of men’s bodies”. They were opposing the notion that women were chattels in which, as Goldstein explained, they “were regarded primarily as sex creatures ... to be chosen by men ... as outlets for the impulses and alleged needs of men.” Their rebellion was not against sexual relations but against the exploitation of women’s bodies.

Not surprisingly, Miles Franklin is a continuous presence in Passions of the First Wave Feminists for, in her fiction and her personal life, she provided role models for its central figures. A Gregarious Culture: Topical Writings of Miles Franklin, edited by Jill Roe and Margaret Bettison, brings together occasional pieces, reviews, essays, texts of addresses, broadcasts and interviews, and letters, first published in newspapers and magazines in the United States, England and Australia. Here it is possible to trace her progress from bush girl to feminist, from committed social worker to literary nationalist, and to find an energetic and individualistic prose contributing to the development of the gregarious culture that she sought. Running chronologically from “An Australian Bush Girl” (1894 to 1906); through her experiences in the US (to 1915), England, during and after the First World War (to 1920); it culminates in the prolific period of publication (33 pieces) after her return to Australia in 1932. Of particular interest are her observations of American women, drawing on her experiences in the US, where she worked for the American women’s trade
union movement and wrote for Life and Labor; the series of essays she sent back to Sydney from London during the Great War; and the work of her last twenty years which reveal her deep engagement with Australian literary culture, its development, and the threats to its growth.

In her last twenty years, Miles Franklin was in a dialogue with Australians and their literature, and one of the concerns of this essay has been to try to capture something of the tenor of the conversations that are currently engaging Australians. In an interesting way, the new bi-annual journal, conversations, a journal of general cultural and literary interests, reflecting the philosophic, geographic and cultural interests of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at ANU, is contributing to this impulse. Superbly produced, one senses at every turn the creative and meticulous hand of Ian Templeman, the editor. It is something of a coup for the Research School to have him but they have put him to good use! The first number sets the pattern for those that follow; with 10 pages of poems, including five translations from ancient Chinese; an intimate reflection on the “majesty and the madness, the mayhem” of the 1999 General Election in Fiji; evocative photographs of Flinders Island; short stories; and a piece of life writing. In subsequent issues there are music and lyrics from two Peggy Daroeon songs; selections from a long narrative poem, Yashodhara: Six Seasons Without You, by Subhash Jaireth; a fine essay on Friend’s Diaries; and some Hardy Wilson drawings from a trip to China in 1922–25. That is, in conversations, as I have tried to suggest in this review, we see a diversity of contributors, working in a range of forms and genres, engaging directly and critically with their own culture(s), while raising their eyes to the horizon and engaging directly with others.

Miles Franklin would have jumped at the chance I have had in the last couple of months to read across the non-fictional output of a culture and would have relished the arguments that are taken up and unleashed in these books and essays for, to return to Sylvia Lawson, just I have to Miles Franklin, in them we can hear, across this difficult, tantalising country Australians conversing and arguing about who we are, where have come from, and where we are headed; those crucial questions of national identity that cannot be resolved without consideration of our history and our external relations in the region. We hear, as Edward Said was calling for in his essay in The Deakin Lectures, the collective efforts of intellectuals acting across many fronts as “lookouts”, discerning the possibilities for “active intervention” whether performed by themselves or “acknowledged by them in others”.

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Non-Fiction 2001–2002

All titles are referred to directly or indirectly in the review


Cowan, James, Journey to the Inner Mountain: In the desert with St Antony. Sydney: Hodder, 2002.


Notes
1. The Monash War Letters and Sebastian Smee’s book on Picasso and Matisse, included in this review are in the same series.
2. Ironically, in *Razor*, Larry Writer suggests the social context for his history of the gang-land savagery that flourished in East Sydney, over control of the rackets that sought to control prostitution, the supply of alcohol and drugs, and betting, between 1927 and the Second World War, lies in the consequences of the reforms influenced by the activism of the first wave feminists, the Church, and temperance reformers, which resulted in the banning of street prostitution, and alcohol sales after 6.00pm.
At first you think the taxi will hurl you through the gates marked Bangkok Baptist Mission. But the driver swings the wheel and skids down a slippery dip lane to brake in the courtyard of The Dragon. Day and night the Baptists endure this bad-tempered entrance. You remember as you unload your pack, that the pastor from Kentucky claims there’s advantage in worshipping next door to Bangkok’s most raided hotel.

“You people,” he drawls, “give the converts a real good picture of life before the flood.”

Is it only six months since you last stood coughing in the exhaust fumes left by an angry driver? Farangs going Dragon sit with maps on their knees; haggle like children; don’t tip. Six months ago did you blink so much, like a diver fitting a face-mask for the first time? Did the backpack thump like a scuba tank as you puffed across the lobby to the teenage porter?

He still talks the hippy slang with a face as solemn as the judge who sentenced Willy.

“Haven’t got no single, man. Got a double, okay? H block, room 15. You split with the other dude. Have a groovy stay.”

You hesitate on flippered feet. A breeze stirred by the afternoon rain saunters over to fill your lungs with coolness and your mind with delusions of safety. You dive for the green palms of H block.

You’re kicking slowly across the undulating lawn, past the shady pool with its jury of light-tanned travellers, mostly young men, who glance up and measure the newcomer. Is he cool? The backpack is old but the trousers are pressed. Fair hair. Could be a Scand, dodging the winter. No, the skin’s too wrinkled at the side of his eyes. Could be an Aussie bussed in from the peninsular? So where are the thongs? Not a narc? Good for a hit?

Then you’re through the shoals, walking over warm concrete. Thai maids, hair twisted in bright scarves, cease their polishing of the brass railing and move aside. You knock on door 15 of H block.
Someone offers an international “yeah?” and calls from her bed that you’d better not be a pervert and she needs three days rent in advance. You mumble about not too much sleep in Kuala Lumpur ... not being a rapist.

“Pervert, I said,” comes the reply in a strong Australian accent.

The next view through the mask is of Chris, curly hair, white arms, the product of one year on the road. She lays down her copy of The Island. You’re beginning to feel part of a best seller yourself.

“Peter ... this uh German Guy I was with ... he’s had to fly back to Germany because he hasn’t got a passport. You see he’s Armenian or something and doesn’t have real German citizenship and there wasn’t any room in his book for more stamps. That was ... uh ... to be for the visa to Japan. We were both going to Japan. So he told them, three times he told them, please leave that last section blank ... Hey, have you got any real cigarettes?”

We smoke the duty-free.

The sleepless nights on the Malaysian train heave in the stomach but suddenly slide the right way, so that they ballast the tumbling fall into slumber that takes you more sensuously than you can recall in years. For a minute you achieve the ultimate, you forget why you came.

“But they didn’t. So he’s had to fly back to Germany, all for a piece of paper. Just one space left and they have to stamp it ... ”

I surfaced to the sound of scuffling in the wardrobe. The walls were cracked and bare but for a poster celebrating Thai Air’s inaugural flight to Chiang Mai. Considering the dope and duty-free smoke which must have curled about the room since that first take-off some years ago, the poster was in excellent shape.

Chris drifted past eyes half-closed, fingers gracefully preparing a bong. She stretched out on her bed, put a spluttering Chinese match to the bowl and sucked deep.

“So I’m off to Japan.”

The ceiling fan was revving like a Spitfire propeller. As the bamboo blinds stirred forwards and back, chopstick shadows feasted on Chris and the bong.

“Japan. Yeah.”

She was talking now in the softest of voices, part sad, part western-spoilt. “I mean this is a guy’s town. When I come back from Japan in two weeks ... I’m going down to Phuket to lie in the sun ... uh ... have a rest, you know. Then I want to go do India. That’s where I’ve always wanted to go, you know.”

I did know. Two years before in an identical room Willy and I had rocked to the wrap-around juke box tunes rising from the pool and talked
Asia, Swearing an unspoken oath that we would keep hovering, keep scrimping, talking the language, passing the joint, getting to India.

Chris pushed the bong across the lino. I had meant to keep a clear head but, what the hell, there were some inevitable traditions at The Dragon.

By noon the next day I was struggling to stay upright in a tuk-tuk headed for prison. As the three-wheeler driver slip-streamed through the roller derby of Silom Road, my nose drew a hundred memories from the street woks and noodle carts which overflowed from every laneway. Above all, there was the reek of durian. That fruit may have the aroma of a crumbling drain but the Thais adore it. Old farangs say that once they developed a taste for durian they were addicted to Asia for life. I wondered if Willy had the habit by now. Then I remembered that you can’t get delicacies like durian in gaol unless you have real money. There was no facing Willy until I’d done my job; had some hope to offer. I clapped my hands at the driver and yelled a change of direction.

Bangkok must be the only international drug capital where the undercover agents leave business cards at the major bars. I didn’t have a contact this trip, the Drug Enforcement Agency changed personnel too often, so I had the tuk-tuk drop me at East of Eden in Pattpong Road. The barman passed me a lacquered spitoon holding a dozen cards and politely turned up the Dixieland background music as I fended off the hostesses and made my call.

She’s from Ballarat.

By the pool we chat about the lawless past of that old gold rush town. I joked about there being similarities with Bangkok. Chris changed the subject. “How come you’re here?” she asked.

“Do you know a George C. Scott film, The Last Run?” I reply, feeling eloquent after a few glasses of Mekong whiskey.

“Nah,” she says, with a pout.

But I’ve warmed to my subject.

“He plays a retired gunman in Spain. A girl asks what he’s doing there and he says he’s looking for the guy responsible.”

“Responsible for what?”

“His wife’s plastic surgery.”

“Her surgery...?”

“Yeah, he says to this girl as they’re driving in this fast BMW – “My wife went to Spain to have her breasts lifted” – then he changes gears – “I thought she meant with plastic surgery.”
“Come again?”
She was from Ballarat alright.
“That’s my way of saying I’m looking for the guy who took my girl.”
“Bullshit. You’re after cheap dope.”
“Okay,” I owned up, “so where do you get it?”
She smiled for the first time. “Try the Alamo.”

She gestured at the stone wall protecting the poolside eating area. “See those pegs in the wall? If you climb up from the rock garden you can stand on them and signal how many sticks you want. They’ll pass them to you. 400 baht a stick.”

Fashions and prices change. Last year they called it McDonalds and the rate was 80 baht less.
“What about quantity stuff?”
“Wouldn’t know,” she shrugged. “Taxi drivers?”

Conversation ebbed. When I offered her a spray can of mosquito repellent she gave me the surly look of an ozone lover and departed. I stayed by the pool. An open bottle of Mekong is a good way to make contacts.

Chris didn’t steep well that night. Her muttering reached across the room, sabotaging what little drowsiness I could muster. I moved to the bathroom for some breeze from the louvre windows.

A market garden hungry for every centimetre of soil lay below. It spread to a railway line, jumped that and flowed to the ladder ramps of some ruined stilt houses. In an hour I saw three runners creep from those houses and lope across to scale the walls of the hotel. The Alamo was enjoying excellent poolside service.

Chris was still nervous after breakfast. She’d always done things with Peter, she said and since he’d gone she just sat around The Dragon. Today she had to get out. Would I go along?

Our floating markets tour took us roaring along the narrow klongs in a motorised barge which flicked muddy waves against the blackened stilt houses along the bank. The guide sang through his megaphone that around the next bend a monkey might be picking coconuts and sure enough, he was. If we were lucky, he predicted, a wise old man might greet us and sure enough, there was a noble greybeard, bowing low before the muzzles of our twenty cameras.

Some washerwomen on the banks of the klong looked up to see our bow waves sluicing their morning’s work. Chris winced. Her eyes mirrored their trapped, entranced gaze.

A villager was paddling past. I hailed him, stopped the barge and in a few minutes we were shopping in a local market. Chris bought incense and
candles. I tipped a pick-pocket we caught in the act. That afternoon we
dined on the best fish I've ever tasted.

"I want to be buried here." Chris sighed, licking her fingers. "With my
mouth open."

As I put her on a bus for The Dragon she hugged me and smiled at my
surprise.

During my interview that afternoon I should have been thinking of
Willy but my mind strayed to that smile.

When I got back I found Chris pacing the room. She was alternating
between the bong and the last of my cigarettes. The story was out in five
minutes.

"I've got four pounds of hash inside the sleeping bag. It's for ... uh ...
that guy ... the one Peter knew - in Tokyo. It's all fixed up. It'll be easy I'll
make $5,000 ... for walking through a gate."

I couldn't believe it. This idiot child was spilling to a stranger she'd
known for two days. Chris misunderstood the look on my face.

"No, really. I can look really straight. With my hair up and uh ... I've
got this dress."

Someone next door was playing an Indian flute. Chris let her batik
dress fall and keeping clumsy time with the snake charming lilt, begun
rummaging through the wardrobe. It should have been erotic - a woman
barely out of teenage dressing slow motion in a cobra basket of a room
overlooking a moonlit garden. When Willy peeled off travelling shorts and
T-shirt and slid into Western dress, it had been a turn-on. Chris though,
looked like a little girl playing with mummy's clothes. Her lopsided, low-
cut bra made the image more ludicrous. I put my arms around her.

We spent the night making slow, soothing love; dozing, smoking, not
saying much.

For a week we settled into a type of domestic routine. My interviews
were taking longer but I made sure I was back by dusk.

Chris and I would go to local restaurants, window shop and chat with
other travellers. We even attended the Thai boxing at Lumpini stadium
and the same night, glanced inside the Baptist Christian Mission. The
converts looked as they were the one who had gone the ten rounds with
the Lumpini pros. We were becoming known. I was hearing things. Then
I met the Tokyo contacts.

I knew who they were as soon as I walked into our room and saw the
skinny one whose hands shook and eyes looked as if he'd been around too
many mosquitoes. His companion, Klaus, wasn't "into raves". He worked
at isometric exercises as the skinny one gave me some tips on Thai
marriage laws. When Klaus was satisfied I had fully appreciated those biceps under his Indian shirt he settled into what he called a lotus position. It put me more in mind of the squat used by Thai boxers. Whenever I looked his way I seemed to be getting a very malevolent "Ohm".

"Don't say it!" she warned after they had finally zombied off.

But I couldn't resist. "Fee fie fo fum," I taunted. "I spy the style of a smack freak bum." That was the rhyme we used for the Alamo's special Customers.

Twice that night Chris woke screaming, but I couldn't comfort her. She was going through the courier's hot spot; when the strain of whether to go or pull out strikes like malaria.

I was eating breakfast by the pool when Chris made the entrance I was dreading. She wore her airport clothes. There was no childishness now in the red summer frock, high heels, the pinned-up hair and make up. Ignoring me, she ordered fried noodles and produced a bottle of Mekong.

One way of looking relaxed and seductive at Customs was to be slightly boozed. But it took practice. Willy had trained on gin and tonic.

The DEA agent was pleased with my report and insisted on driving me to the prison. When I emerged my nerves weren't up to a tuk-tuk. I hailed a cab to Pattpong Road and by 5 p.m. was booked on to next morning's flight to Sydney.

I don't carry any weapons. Junkies don't notice them, nates have seen too much TV and Thais just have to scream faring and a nationalist army arises in the street. However, I do pack a can of mace. My hand was deep in my shoulder bag and resting on that spray as I mounted the stairs to H block. There were no freaks about. Chris was back in batik and vacant-eyed as usual.

I sat down next to her on the bed and began my sermon on risk. It was pointless. She had passed through the hot spot.

Remember, the first rule of the house, mate, I warned myself. Look after number one. This lady has chosen, right? Right, I agreed and then the flute music curled through from next door, stirring some pleasure in her sleep walker eyes. I couldn't stop my stupid tongue. "You won't be making the flight, Chris."

She looked up.

"If you do you'll end up in gaol. Have you ever been inside a Thai gaol? You prowl a concrete room with 50 other women and that's your recreation. You starve unless you have money coming in. You shit in an open drain. No toilet paper. Just your hands."
“What are you on about? Why am I gonna end up there?”
The grass was wearing off.
“Because this town breeds double-dealers. What’s to stop those freaks spilling to the cops? Or your Peter who had to fly home. Heard from him lately?”
She flopped her arms around my waist and smiled up.
“People get away with it every day.”
I grabbed her wrists.
“The pros do, Chris. The pros. But not the small fry. The narcs need someone in court to justify their existence. There are twenty-seven Yanks in this town, living like sultans because they’re busting degenerates for America!”
“How’d you know?”
“I know. The system is primed for targets like you. Any informant splits the value of the court fines with the cops, and they are heavy fines, Chris. Your $3,000 is small beer compared to a regular income in Thai fines. So why should Peter and the boys have to do something dangerous like smuggling?”
She pulled free and screeched at me. “You’re a narc!”
The flute seemed to pause. I remembered the thin walls.
“No, Chris,” I hissed back. “I’m lower than that. I’m a stoolie, a snitch. And you know why – because a girl your age, Dutch girl called Willy, met some people through me. Met some Peters. I talked her into doing it. We were going to travel forever. She’s done two years in Rama prison. Quite a bit older-looking now, and she’ll be dead in another five unless someone pulls strings.”
“You’re a narc!”
“I sell a few names, that’s all. Twice a year I drop into Malaysia and Thailand and listen. Then I pass on my info to the DEA. They compete with the Thais for the easy busts.”
She moved to her shoulder bag, apparently uninterested. But I was charged now with the relief of confession.
“Do you think I do it for money? The DEA doesn’t even pay for my flights. But I score some remission time for Willy. Wouldn’t you want someone to do it for you? I only knew her a few months for Christ’s sake and two years later I’m trying to make up for introducing her to the wrong guys.”
You would have thought her only worry on that hot Thai night was how unwrap the stick of gum in her shaking hands.
“Have you dobbed me in?”
“Do you think I’d be telling you this if I had?”
“Have you!” She was almost screaming.

“Your smack freaks are targeted. Your name hasn’t been mentioned. But they’ll involve you. Dump the stuff. If you take that flight to Tokyo, you’ll go down.”

Chris moved to the bed, chewing gum, not looking over as I packed. I thought we could talk it out. But during my two minute shower she and the hash went out the door.

Many times that night I threw my back against the barricaded bathroom thinking a pounding in the corridor was the sound of the main door being kicked in. To stay awake, I watched the plankton runners, gliding across to the Alamo knowing I was more vulnerable now than those all-nation dreamers waiting above the pool for their nightly whitebait.

Before dawn I removed the louvres from the bathroom window and jumped. I zig-zagged across the field, ran through the stilt houses and plunged into the back-streets that I’d memorized from a local map.

I changed taxis three times before reaching the airport. Customs was slow. I watched for any uniform coming at me. The officials are the ones who really worry me. They move the big stuff.

Everything went all right and I caught the Qantas flight. My neighbour was a first-year student high on Asia. Sex had been his turn-on. He didn’t ask what I’d been doing so I didn’t bring up HIV.

As always at Mascot my pack went missing. Neat or not, pack carrying short-stayers from Bangkok experience inexplicable delays with luggage. The Customs agent chatted with me as we waited for it to be found.

“See any drugs over there?”

“See them, you can’t go anywhere without it. Do you see many?”

“We catch twenty a week,” he lied, watching my eyes and smiling. “Mostly through fizzers.”

“Fizzers?”

“Informers.”

It was easy to return his gaze and nod. I was home. My double-dealing was finished.

They brought the pack. As I grabbed hold two Federal cops did the same to me.

The caution was given in a second. Out came a pound of hash stuck with gum to the inside of the bottom pocket.

“Told yuh,” said the Customs man.
JAMES QUINTON

THE GREAT THING ABOUT A HYPOTHETICAL SELF

It’s a cosmopolitan sky
For now, a boat is moored
The lips of the wharf kissing its side
All the while I’m thinking this in lieu of you:

When I’m pressing my face in your welcome mat
Your neighbour licks a light post
She says it tastes like exhaust fumes whisked in
With pancakes & honey –
   (I’m none the wiser)

I sit all day, asking myself
Is this it?
Cigarettes & muesli don’t amount to much
That’s the great thing about a hypothetical self
Courageously he runs out in the drops
Of milieu, feeding your addiction

& you, the beggar, plead hopelessly for more
Salvaging every lampshade and cupboard
From the side of the road –

It’s chuck-out week & your youth punishes you like a milk-less fridge
DAVID LUMSDEN

HEAD-ON AND CHARGED WITH PERHAPS

our crash seat on this injured matter
with its year swerve and blue veil of air
belts us to a destiny that we
star-spun front seat occupants
strapped in the collision zone
await like an amazing bang

the orbit is unending
art is air
every soul is an expatriate
and neither distraught prayer
nor any jumble realm
has power to extort a clear result
from void terrain or angular momentum
Johannesburg, 1988

I watch from the doorway of our house –
Mercy, the nurse, holds my father’s hand
leads him gently to the car,
white headed, stoop-shouldered,
he accepts her strong dry hand.

Mercy tells me of strikes in Soweto –
people told to withhold their rent,
but with no office to approach
when evicted, their boxes,
pots, pans, blankets and clothes scattered
around them on the road.
Government leaflets in their turn say
*Do not support the boycott* –
yet compliance would risk scorched rubber and ash, a burned house
roofless, her daughters and their children
under a cold burning sky.

Mercy goes to church on Sundays,
prays from a full heart. She walks
through the township dawn,
her wide body a warning
to *tsotsis*.
Each night
she comes from Soweto
to the white suburbs
to care for my father.
When he died she walked
into our house with its candles,
hips arthritic, bent with stroke, still massive.
Round the family table
she held our hands, opened her curled Bible
closed her eyes, and sang.
Her voice like a bell,
you could feel God at her shoulder,
waiting over the horizon.

“tsotsis” – township gangsters
The last time I saw you, George, you were dead. Imprisoned in hospital light. Now I imagine things are dark for you, if they are anything at all.

We buried you near a eucalypt. On the day, sunlight was just how you adored it, with your eyes closed halfway, warmed in a wicker chair you had pushed out onto the dying grass. I never took much notice, except when oily clouds filtered the light and you frowned, adrift in the yard like a bird whose wings would not dry. I wish I had studied you, examined the shadow you cast or the restful promise of your dangling limbs. As I look back, it is possible I believed I could have fallen asleep just by walking too near you or resting on the grass at your feet.

And you didn’t see me, George – how could you, half asleep in your chair. I was part of an irritating world you observed only when it had darkened you with shade. If you saw me at all, it was looming over you, blackening your light.

I cannot remember how many years it has been since you died, although I know it has been many. The difference between living and dying does not seem significant any more. Who is dead and who is alive? I picture you pruning the roses that will outlive us all. I raked up the leaves from around your grave with my hands and put the longest stem in an old jar of water.

It seems a ridiculous fact to tell you, and perhaps you know already, but before I left the cemetery I lay down on your grave, the stone so cold beneath me, and stared up into the sky. Then I closed my eyes, trying to empty my mind of thoughts, but imagining how it could be that I would not exist, imagining an absence of everything. You know it better than I do, George, and I wish I could ask you. How foolish I would have seemed; an old woman lying on the grave of her dead husband.

Strangers now live in the house. Can you remember when we bought it, wondering about the lives housed by our wood and stone? So much of our lives is nothing. So many of us leave the world no different than how
we found it. They haven't left much of the garden and I am told that they built a swimming pool over the grass you tended with such care and futility. Thank Christ they left the rose beds.

That is how I still see you, pruning shears in your gloved hands, frowning with concentration, stems and thorns stacked at your feet.

Now our lives are the memories of door frames and window sills as others sweep the floors or polish the mantles. They can have it for it is only good for so long and after that it falls away to nothing. You know all this, George.

Many years ago there was a time when I had yet to meet you. It never occurred to you to ask what it might have been like, before you arrived so hopelessly dressed, but never without a carnation in your buttonhole. There were many hours when I did nothing but sit behind a closed door and stare at the ceiling, a pursuit that these days drives me to such acute boredom. What could there have been to think about? Whatever it was, there was no end of it, so much so that my adolescence seemed an age of unending contemplation.

"What can she be doing in there?" my mother asked to whoever would listen. "Not even a sound." I passed hours as if I was swimming laps.

There were men before you and, I imagine, women before me. They remained in the silent gulf between us. Whatever was left unspoken was left unchanged, as if we could not affect anything that we could not say. I could count half a dozen affairs that I almost had, those more beautiful than the one or two I did. Is that to say that I did not keep faith with you? I should say I did. How can years of ordinary bondage be tainted by a few hours of indecent pleasure? We had children, for Christ's sake; we came to more than hot air and perspiration, we came to more than the childish impatience of ravelled clothes. Before you it was simple, as if the touching of bodies had no meaning.

"What can she be doing in there?"

On summer evenings there was never more to do than to listen to the cicadas. How could I have explained that narcotic - all damp heat and the smell of flowerbeds? Voices in the kitchen as women took turns at stirring the pots.

My father and the boys always returned after dark, swearing quietly in their exhaustion. You met him once, standing at the door; a strong, tall man of few words, who was happiest when he had something to lift or a hole to dig. That summer he was sinking a fence, digging trenches out near the edge of the bush, the sweat pouring off his blistered back. He laughed when I raised the mallet to drive in the guidepost, but I did it only to save
the blisters weeping on his hands. He took the mallet from me and drove
the post himself.

Silent action became a language between us, his huge hands picking
me up, setting me down out of the way. The few words he did have set me
on the path that wound up next to yours. If this letter were for him, I
would thank him for that.

At the time I could have killed him for his terrific silence that could
suffocate a room. He’d think we didn’t notice, but we would be gasping for
air. The boys understood it, even enjoyed it, out in the yard or the bush;
they would follow him without need for speech. For me, silence came only
with isolation, behind a closed door, half tucked up in a single sheet.

When most men die, they do so loudly. They hallucinate, leap from
their beds, argue, fight death with their fists. My father closed his eyes and
died without a word, without even moving, as if death has been how he
had lived his entire life.

From those ashes you came, with an umbrella and a crumpled hat,
stANDING in our doorway. Somehow it was my father’s decision, the words
of a man with no words. “Get your coat and go with him. The poor boy’s
been waiting. Walked all this way when it wouldn’t stop raining, so hurry
before he falls to pieces on us.” Then my mother laughed. Do you
remember? How she used to cover her teeth with her open hand whenever
she laughed? Then Dad would grin his closed lipped grin. That is exactly
how it was.

George, I don’t know why I am writing to you. There nothing left for
us to say. All the words are useless. It is as though I am talking to myself,
which I can do without a pen or paper. Could I be putting everything in
order, arranging the furniture in a room I will never see again? If so, how
can I begin? The greatest art is sometimes silence. This means I should
not begin.

But I am not beginning, for this is something that I could never have
begun.

“Get your coat and go with him.”

Of everything I remember, there is one time I will make my last
thought. I will remember an April of many years ago. There was a swamp
with reeds and I was so young and small that I could lie on the reeds and
they would support my weight above the water. The light came in through
the trees. I fell asleep and woke when night had fallen. I will remember
the weightlessness upon the reeds and the child I was, imagining it to be
a throne. Carried above the heads of servants. Idle thoughts, George, but
with a beautiful substance. Alone in the bush, suspended above the
swamps, I listened to the singing of birds.
I got my coat and went with you, smelling you in the car all the way, a heavy scent somewhere near old, rotting wood. You drew me in close when we danced and somehow I was reassured by the weight of your cotton suit. Then it was months before I saw you again, because my father died. When I did, you didn’t smile like you did the time before, but held my hand, as if you thought I might have fallen apart had you not been there to hold me together. At the time I thought you were like a word inserted into a sentence, one that had been, or should have been, forgotten. I often thought of you standing in the doorway, soaked through. Then you became all the sentences I understood.

Outside the window I can see into the garden, or imagine I can. I am sitting at the old kitchen table, the ancient cloth spread across it. There can be no explanation for it, but I made up my face and did my hair before sitting down. Later I will visit your grave and deliver your mail.

The best time is in the evening when the shadows of the trees have grown long and the crowds have gone. Head stones turn red in the sun, especially the angels that tower above us. When the light is like that I look around, wrap my coat tightly and lie myself down on your grave. Just the sound of leaves and the wind in uncut grass.

Then I long for that moment to be upon me, the thought of harsh swamp reeds cutting my skin, the darkness falling on me and the first feel of - I will try the word – of dying.

George, where are you when these thoughts eat me alive? Why do I hunger for the stone of your plot behind my back and just enough sun so that it still warms me?

Damn it, George, you know more about it than I ever could, but I know it so well. I will go there. The time will come, whether I am ready or afraid. The time will come when shadows cast themselves. They will fall without light, darkness, ground, or walls. They will fall upon themselves in a world they comprise alone. Nothing can stop it and that, finally, becomes the tragedy.

I am now everything that I ever was. It is enough, George, for the words fail me. In the entire world there are so many saying so much, so much and so little. Now the words are useless, so I must end. Goodbye, I say, though to whom, I do not know. Goodbye.
GRETTA BEVERIDGE

THE LOST MOLOCH

It was a whale. A whale breaking through the desert floor, red sand streaming down its grey sides in fan-shaped showers. As its head dived back into the earth, Gina could see black spots along its pale belly. In a second the scalloped tail waved its white underside like a flag and was gone.

Gina straightened her head. Her mother, Faye, was in the passenger seat, messy brown curls spilling around the sides of the head rest. Gina's aunt, Wendy, was driving, her hair like a thatched hut from Africa, long blonde bits bobbing over short brown. Wendy never sat still, even to drive. Most of the time her hands weren't anywhere near the wheel; they were waving, jabbing, tapping, pushing the radio buttons or twisting the little dangling crystal ball on the rearview mirror to make sunbeams dance on the roof.

With music loud in her ears, Gina couldn't exactly hear Faye and Wendy's words. She wanted, but didn't want, to hear. Wanted to know, and didn't, her future.

If she turned her head to the side, Gina would see the whale again. Eyes shut, she moved her head like a sloth, slow motion, to face the side window. She opened her eyes in time to see the sheeny smooth mark in the desert that meant a whale had just disappeared underneath. Then they were past it, on, on, with the low bush covering everything. Not one big tree to lock your eyes on, feel pleased as it came nearer and satisfied as it went - you were that much closer to the end of the trip. They were sailors on a dried-up ancient ocean, rolling on through an empty red sea. Empty except for the whales.

"Gina! Gina! Take it!" Her mother had her arm curled behind her seat, offering Gina a Yowie. Gina took it, and her mother muttered to Wendy. "She's not all there", or something like that. Gina could guess the meaning without hearing the words.

It was a new series Yowie, one Gina didn't have already. The chocolate outside was always OK, but the animal inside was the best. She couldn't
figure out what it was at first – something with spikes all over it. A moloch, a Thorny Devil, a special kind of lizard that lived in the desert, in the place they were driving through right now, it said on the instructions. She joined the plastic bits into a prickly creature, short and stumpy.

Wendy stuck out her arm, fingers waving, and Gina put the lizard and its explanation onto her aunt's palm. "A moloch," Gina said, pulling out her earphones.

Wendy read the paper in quick glances. "Moloch' with a 'c' sound at the end, not a 'ch'," she explained. "Interesting."

The lizard fitted over the locking knob on Gina's door. It perched there, bumpy and cute.

"I'm only 35," her mother said. Gina put her earphones in, but left the sound off. Hear some, not all.

Wendy took a long time to reply. Her arms waved on both sides of the steering wheel, palms roofwards, fingers spread. "An adult with responsibilities." The car rocked under her hands' return to the wheel.

Through dust and smears, Gina studied her mother's face in the outside mirror. It was one of the secrets of the back seat, the kids' place where adults hardly ever got put. People didn't know you could see them rolling their eyes, pulling their mouths into ugly shapes.

"Emus. Bloody buggery emus." Wendy was pointing ahead. A group of five birds dithered on the side of the road, waited until the car was almost level, then spurted out, heads forward, feathers flopping, legs lifted like trotting horses. The car swayed with braking.

"You might tell me if you see them," Wendy said when they were travelling straight.

"I didn't." Faye looked out the side window. So did Gina. No whales.

"Hold us up for days if we hit one."

"Do it! There's one. There's two!" Gina saw spit fly out of her mother's mouth.

"Why put it off? Seems to me like you've already decided."

"Thanks so much for your thoughtful comments."

The crystal ball jiggled under the rear vision mirror and Gina let her eyes swivel with it until they hurt and she was dizzy. The sun was burning into her cheek and knees. Wendy's brown eyes filled the mirror, meeting Gina's, then flicked away. With her head turned slightly and her lips mostly closed, she muttered something to Faye.

"She gets on with you," Gina thought her mother answered.

Faye screwed her head over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows in a question to Gina.
“Are you OK?” Gina thought her mother would say, but Faye’s lips stayed in a straight line. Gina hoped the lifted corners of her own mouth said “Yes”, but was afraid she had only looked “sulky”, her mother’s favourite word. What question had she answered?

Eyes closed, Gina remembered snorkelling. Not floating star-shaped like the other people, but walking carefully across the shallows where the sun lit the clear water in long bars, bent over with her face in the sea. She had felt other eyes, had turned through the water and seen a crowd of black and white stripey fish stopped behind her. They moved their faces upward, sideward, down — anywhere else. Us following you? We were just going this way. Their eyes swivelled to see if she’d moved on. Gina walked for a few seconds, then spun round quickly to embarrass them. They were too fast — their tails waved innocently towards her. She waded on, happy to have company.

Her head snapped up. She’d been asleep. They’d stopped, and Wendy and her mother were rummaging in the console between their seats. “Wee stop,” Wendy called as both doors slammed. Gina tried to remember where she was. Faye and Wendy had gone off in separate directions, disappearing into hollows on either side of the road. Gina unwrapped toilet paper from the roll. Outside, the air was warm and new, smelt of dirt and honey, Gina decided after a few breaths. The sisters were already back before she had left. “Here.” Her mother gave her a box of matches. Wendy called “Mind the snakes.”

Squatting to set the damp toilet paper alight, Gina saw a dusty red lizard under the next bush. Not a stumpy moloch, but a racehorse with speedy body and a long skinny tail. It was still, ready to run, and its eye swivelled like the coral fish, watching her from the shade of hundreds of pink flowers that streamed along drooping branches. She struck the match and the lizard sped off, its front legs high and its back legs sideways like a frog’s. Gina followed her footprints almost to the road and stood with eyes shut. If she breathed and breathed, maybe she could store this alive smell inside, fill her self with the bush.

The engine roared and she ran to get in.

The car smelt of orange peel. Her mother spoke from the driver’s seat. “You look retarded, standing with your eyes shut.” Before Gina could answer Faye changed gear and was on the road. Wendy turned. “Are you OK?” She smiled and waited for Gina to say “Yes”, then fiddled with the radio knobs.

“Music to forget by,” she said.

“No chance. MYOB.” The reply was sharp even through the static that hissed in the speaker near Gina’s left ear.
“Family. It is my business.” Wendy wasn’t scared of her sister. Gina had seen Wendy standing straight while her older sister had her nose almost on Wendy’s, raving like a principal. Gina had seen Wendy rock back ever so slightly, then shift her weight onto her toes so that her head bent forward. Faye’s voice had softened, then stopped. If she grew tall as her mother, Gina hoped she might stand nose to nose with her and win.

“Take her, then”. Her mother was murmuring, but the words were clear enough.

“Your offspring, your problem.” Wendy probably thought she didn’t know that word, “offspring”. They were talking like she was stupid. A baby.

Earphones in, music on, but soft.

“My chance, my turn. New man, new town, new life.” Faye snapped off the radio and settled into her driving. Caught once more in the rear vision mirror, Gina quickly turned away. A flock of budgies raced them in a tight ball of small sharp shapes. Too fast for Gina to see their wing beats, they dived and swerved alongside. Not like emus, who panicked and ended just sad heaps of feathers that lifted in the wind of passing cars. Budgies stayed on one side of the road, kept pace, held together until they were tired of the chase and then vanished over the crusty red sand into the glare of the sun. They survived to roll in the air another day.

The music growled – flat batteries. The Gameboy ones were the same size, so she swapped them. Music filled her ears for a minute, then groaned and stopped. The road was too bumpy to paint her fingernails without splodges. Her diary was boring: full of “Then we did this” and “in the car”. Not safe to put the truth on paper.

The whales were exciting, but she’d get a cricked neck with it twisted all the time. Every 10 k, she would turn. Past her mother’s left arm, with the big plastic wristwatch and glassy sapphire ring, through the steering wheel, the numbers rolled over until a zero was on the end.

Perfect timing. The desert heaved and a whale surfaced. If she was out there, Gina would have heard the puffing sigh that sprayed sand into a coloured fountain. Flowering bushes hung like streamers on the whale’s body, then slid off its smooth skin. This whale flicked its tail and was gone, but beside it was another one. They were travelling together because they wanted to. Nobody was making them stay close. She tried to find a way to recognise the second whale next time, but it seemed to be the same as its friend. Maybe next time she could see a different mark, or a shape in its flukes.

Nothing had happened in the car. Her mother’s hands grabbed the wheel; Wendy was reading a book. Gina waited for the kilometres to go by.
The numbers moved very slowly. At 5 k's Wendy lifted her head and said "Mum’d have a bit to say." Faye didn’t answer.

Nanna was more of an emu than a budgie, Gina decided. There’d be no help there.

When zero was at the end of the numbers, Gina checked the scenery. No whales. A bottle tree – she’d seen a few of them. A tree died, someone stuck a bottle on the end of one of the empty branches. Someone else thought “Great idea” and put another bottle on a different branch. People must stop specially to stick their empty bottles on this tree, right in the middle of nowhere. If Gina ever came on this road again, would she remember to bring a bottle? You could make a wish while you stretched and slid the neck onto the wood. What would she wish? Mother stay? Mother go?

The radio was on again. A man was talking about being a tribal kid, in the bush. “Everyone was family,” he said. Faye jabbed Wendy’s arm and turned the radio up. “My mother had three sisters. If anyone asked me who was my mother, I’d point to all of them. They were all my mother. That’s the way it was.”

“Huh!” Faye punched the air with her fist. “It’s a sign, Wendy, it’s a sign.”

“You...”. Wendy spluttered. The sisters laughed the same; mouths wide open, heads bent, hair over their eyes.

It was a long time later that her mother said “Petrol”, and swerved into the driveway of a roadhouse. The three of them pushed open the doors and unpeeled themselves from their seats. The air was hot, so hot outside. They stood on wonky legs and stretched their arms, like monkeys let out of a cage.

No one else was at the petrol pumps, but groups of Aboriginal people sat on the ground around the building. A woman’s voice shouted from inside the roadhouse, and then a kid roared. There were lots of people fighting in there. Better stay in the car, Gina thought, and closed the door. Faye opened it. “I thought you wanted batteries.” She left the door open. Gina followed. A woman walked out of the shop, carrying a small dark child on her hip. She didn’t look at them. Right next to Gina she yelled at someone somewhere else, and Gina jumped.

Inside it was cool, air-conditioned like the car. Five boys were running around in front of the counter, shouting and laughing. Their clothes were filthy and way too big for them; their hair hung in dreadlocks, but their eyes and teeth shone. Slowly Gina realised there was no fight, no big
trouble – they were buying icecreams. Among sounds that didn’t seem like words, she heard “Paddlepop”. Behind the counter a big white man grinned and shouted “What kind of Paddlepop?” More laughs, more roared conversation in their own language. The kids hopped on bare feet, held up ten-dollar notes in brown fingers with pink nails, took their icecreams and piled through the door in a shoving knot.

Gina watched them through the window. The boys ran to the small groups and held out icecreams for everyone to lick. So many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters – would that be better?

Her own mother, her really truly mother who wanted to give her away, grabbed her arm and dragged her to the counter. “Batteries. What kind? The man wants to know”. The service station man smiled at her while she rubbed where her mother had pinched.

Now Gina didn’t need to watch the speedo go round. She could time her whale-watching by the music.

A song finished. There was nothing close to the road. But in the far distance, on the line where blue sky met red earth, the black shape of a whale threw up like a shadow on a wall. It stood on its tail for a second, then fell backwards and vanished. Gina craned her neck as it leapt and leapt, outlined against the sky. She had not seen that before.

Another song ended. Time to look. The sun had swung over to the other side of the road, and in its setting light, sand ran like blood down the sides of a pair of whales, one slightly ahead of the other. They dived and disappeared, rippling the ground with their huge bodies. Another flicker of movement, and five dolphins leapt together, small and neat, like Yowie toys compared to the enormous whales. They dived, surfaced, dived, following the whales, or the car; Gina was not sure. One more dive, and the window was empty.

It was late. She could sleep, like Wendy, but her legs were aching from sitting still. Quietly she undid her seatbelt and tried to stretch her legs across the car. Her mother turned, but said nothing. Gina leaned forward, stretching her arms, and looked through the front seats at the rushing white lines.

There was something on the road, a small something. “Look, look.” Gina leaned onto the console, wedged her shoulders between the seats and pointed, close to the windscreen.

“Get out!” Her mother elbowed her in the chest, hard. The car swerved.

“Stupid girl!” Faye was shouting to Wendy, looking back and forth from the road in quick jerks.
Gina breathed open mouthed, trying to get air into winded lungs. “It was a moloch. I saw its bumps.”

“Shut up.” The car took off and Faye started to sing in a deep, put-on voice.

“For God’s sake, Faye.” Wendy struggled upright. “Calm down.”

It was no use trying to stop. Gina felt her mouth open wide and a horrible wailing came out of it. She was bawling, like a little kid. “It was a moloch. I’ve never seen a real one. You could’ve stopped. It was a moloch.” The words dribbled with tears and snot.

“Stay! Stay! With this?” Faye was screaming over Gina’s noise. She reached her arm behind Wendy’s seat, and raised her hand. Gina was too slow, was always too slow to duck, and took the backhanded whack right across her face.

They moved even faster. Wendy swivelled to see Gina, then straightened her head, wordless. Gina opened the window. Air stung the scratch where her mother’s ring had dug into the skin. She cupped her hurt cheek in one hand, and with the other flicked the plastic moloch off the knob, spinning it into the dusk.

She had nowhere to go but on. Nowhere to go but with.

There was salt on the wind. The whales were always there, somewhere, gliding through warm sand and when they felt like it, throwing themselves into the cool sweet darkness of the bush.
This is an essay about the fictocritical concept of a “space between” the categories of literature and criticism, and the relationship of this metaphorical space to the institutional places in which fictocriticism circulates. The “space between” refers to a space created by the epistemological collapse of critical distance in postmodern theory, a textual no-man’s land in which a generic intermingling and hybridity of form takes place. Fictocriticism, however, could perhaps best be described as a term around which a number of theoretical and institutional negotiations between the creative and the critical takes place. Rather than offering a single authoritative definition of the term, I will attempt here to describe how fictocriticism is constructed out of an ongoing series of provisional self-definitions.

“Perth in the late eighties.” This was the opening line of the introduction to No Substitute, an anthology of prose, poems and images, according to its subtitle, which was published in 1990 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The originating moment for the writing collected here, as Noel King and Anna Gibbs point out in the introduction, was the formation of an “enormously productive” (9) writers group, which led to the establishment of deSCRIBE, a writers’ weekend comprising part of the Perth Fringe Festival in 1988. This physical place, according to King and Gibbs, was also a site for the fashioning of “a space that might be designated postmodern” (10). In describing the work conducted in this space they write:

Generic mixings and mergings taking place in the indeterminate discursive spaces between fiction and autobiography, fiction and the practice of performance, give rise to a “contaminated” writing, a writing of compounds and mutations, a hybrid writing which is not just not any one thing, but not any one thing. (10–11)
This passage gives voice to the metaphor of a “space between” generic boundaries which has become the prevailing trope of fictocritical discourse. The work presented here is often fragmentary, and “experimental”, seeming to shift between fiction and essay. Many of the contributors were connected to universities in Western Australia, especially Curtin and Murdoch, and to writing programmes in those universities.

In the same year that *No Substitute* was published, the University of Technology, Sydney, established its Masters of Arts in Writing. This was launched at a conference entitled “Subject Writing Object” which examined the blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in contemporary Australian writing. While the new Masters degree was concerned with developing students’ writing to a professional level, its coordinators, Stephen Muecke and Amanda Lohrey, also hoped to “encourage new forms of writing, such as imaginative writing in the area of non-fiction”.

At the same time that the degree was launched Noel King had moved from Perth to take up a teaching position at UTS. In 1991 Muecke and King collaborated on an essay for *Australian Book Review* entitled “On Ficto-Criticism”, thus giving a name to the work King co-edited in *No Substitute* and to the work which Muecke hoped to encourage at UTS. This essay takes the form of anecdotal musings by Muecke interpolated with an italicised theoretical meditation provided to him by King. Muecke reminisces that in 1972 Barthes’ *Mythologies* had provided him with an epiphany, that it represented some new form of writing, which he could not at the time define. He did not lift his head from “heavy theory”, however, until he met up with King at UTS.

King, we are told, had arrived from Perth where ‘there had been a really productive little group of writers working – some of them – in what Noel called “ficto-criticism”’. For fictocriticism, then, *No Substitute* was the moment of arrival, and this essay is the moment of naming. In asking where this “ficto-critical stuff” came from, Muecke says he was provided by King with a quote from Fredric Jameson in 1987:

“Ficto-criticism” makes a lot of sense to me. It is very clear that there has been a flowing together of theory and criticism. It seems that theory can’t exist without telling little narrative stories and then at this point of criticism, criticism seems very close to simply telling stories. It is an advanced and energetic form of conceptual criticism. (13)
What is curious about this is that Jameson is talking about the merging of theory and criticism, rather than fiction and criticism. This quote is taken from an interview with Andrea Ward where Jameson discusses various aspects of postmodernism, including the collapse of "critical distance". Jameson argues that intellectuals need to acknowledge the narrative elements of postmodern theory – which he attempts in his own writing (what he calls "culture critique") by using history as an explanation for the anxieties of contemporary cultural experience. He does not discuss any deliberate incorporation of "literary" techniques, or a generic intermingling of fiction and critical theory. This, nonetheless, is how King uses the term. "When ficto-criticism arrives", King writes, "what departs? Presumably the stable and separated bodies of 'fiction' and 'criticism', replaced by compounds, mergings, mutations and mistake's" (13).

In response to this Muecke writes: "I had thought it was just a matter of some critics writing anecdotally or autobiographically, incorporating stories about how they came to know into accounts of ('objective') knowledge and in the process becoming more readable" (14). What is being established here is fictocriticism as a move within theory, a mode of critical writing which echoes the work of Barthes and Derrida.

King draws attention in this essay to Rosalind Krauss' idea of the paraliterary, and it is worth describing this briefly as this will continue to be described as the North American counterpart of fictocriticism. Krauss argues, in "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary", that if the nature of modernist literature forced readers to reflect "on the conditions of its own construction", so that reading became "a much more consciously critical act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a postmodernist literature should be the critical text wrought into a paraliterary form". Krauss makes no mention of the metafictional work of writers such as John Barth or John Fowles as moves beyond the "exhausted" possibilities of modernism. Instead she claims that the "literary products of postmodernism" are "paraliterary" works by Barthes and Derrida which collapse distinctions between literature and criticism. This work, she claims, is ignored by the "critical establishment", but is nonetheless being enthusiastically received in graduate schools of universities (294-5). "And what is clear is that Barthes and Derrida are the writers, not the critics, that students now read" (295).

The effects of the assimilation of the work of Barthes and Derrida into what John Guillory called the "theory canon" in graduate schools is taken up by Muecke in a 1992 essay entitled "Marginality, Writing, Education". This essay proposes to discuss "the question of marginality under..."
postmodern conditions”, especially in relation to Aboriginal identity in Australia.” Muecke argues that academic interest in notions of marginality have contributed to a growing enthusiasm in the humanities for non-traditional theses, such as audiovisual presentations and “the inevitable appearance of 
ecriture in thesis writing as the influence of Barthes and Derrida becomes more prevalent” (267). According to Muecke, the analysis or the expression of marginality in the academy lends itself to experimental writing:

These effects coagulate as a style sometimes called ficto-criticism which signals another breakdown, between the purely literary text and the critical commentary. In other words, a ficto-critical literature can include its own criticism, and critical or theoretical texts are increasingly making it a virtue to employ the techniques of fiction writing. So the literary text is no longer central to the marginalia, the comments. The opposition begins to break down. (267)

Here Muecke maintains a distinction between a work of literature and a work of criticism, but suggests that each can adopt a ficto-critical style, one which extends the possibilities of criticism, enabling criticism to operate within a literary text (in the way reflexive commentary might work in metafiction), or to appropriate literary techniques to explore its own status as writing. Muecke went on to practice fictocritical writing himself, publishing No Road with Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1997. This book was reviewed as an example of fictocriticism, and has been described as “the first fictocritical monograph published in Australia”.

Noel King, on the other hand, went on to consider the relationship of fictocriticism to the broader practice of academic criticism. In a 1993 essay King discusses the importance of Ian Hunter’s neo-Foucauldian work to an understanding of postmodern celebrations of “surface”. King draws on several of Hunter’s essays, as well as his book Culture and Government, to characterise his overall position as an argument that “contemporary critical writing has come to conceive of itself as an intensely self-interrogating activity”. Eschewing notions of hermeneutic depth in order to continue skimming new readings off the surface of a text, contemporary criticism has refashioned depth in the figure of the critic. Each new act of textual commentary is a critical occasion for a new act of self-interrogation. It is precisely this understanding, however, which demonstrates the continuity between postmodern criticism and earlier forms of critical activity – where it is the absence of knowledge within the reader which is the source of a
lack of understanding of the text. It is the "deployment of a post-Romantic cultural apparatus which results in the enigma of the text becoming the enigma of the one who reads it" (6). This "critical practice - the problematisation of self and text or, more accurately, self via text - constitutes not so much a formal description of a text as a particular use or deployment of a text for an ongoing activity of self-scrutiny, self-shaping, self-problematisation" (6).

Criticism is no longer to be defined as an epistemological task, but as an ethical practice. King argues that this move does "break down the distinction between criticism and literature, but in a manner quite different from the strategies outlined by the advocates of the ficto-critical and the paraliterary. For Hunter, criticism and literature fall within a single zone of being: ethical practices. They are not related as subject to object or structure to experience" (23). So according to King the "paraliterary or ficto-critical move" is "a move within a particular game rather than a description of the rules of the game" (23). What he is suggesting here is that Hunter provides an overarching description and historical explanation of the way contemporary criticism operates, while fictocriticism is a mode of criticism within this overarching description. Nonetheless they both have the effect of breaking down distinctions between literature and criticism.

Hunter's approach is to consider a textual artifact as constituted by both a text and what a critic does with it. If a new model of criticism is to be forged out of this insight, then it would require a self-reflexivity about the ethical practice of criticism. "Hunter's critique of an epistemological mode of criticism", King claims, "proposes a model of criticism which would notice what was done with the textual object, noting what operations were performed on it. Such a view construes the text as a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self" (15).

The comparison which King makes between Hunter's description of criticism and the fictocritical move within criticism leads to the possibility of conceiving fictocriticism as the logical outcome of Hunter's insight. In other words, fictocriticism can be seen as a mode in which the ethical formation of the critical subject is foregrounded as the originating motive of criticism, but evades Romantic notions of selfhood by seeing this critical subject as the product of a textual performance.

At a 1995 conference for the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Heather Kerr discussed fictocriticism in the context of an anthology of fictocritical writing by women which she was preparing. Kerr draws attention to King's passing comment that fictocriticism is different from Ian Hunter's description of criticism as an ethical practice. She then claims:
Looking at the texts offered so far in our quest to gather a collection of Australian women's fictocriticism, I am struck by the possibility that Hunter's model, rather than sitting in some opposition to the project, actually describes the protocols some of our potential contributors wish to regard as fictocritical ... It looks to me as if the fictocritical performance, writing as performativity, is being understood as a particular ritualistic practice of a 'self' and that the text is being regarded as a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of that self. Hunter had in fact offered a new historicised description of the whole field of contemporary critical practice, rather than a model for a new critical practice. As King suggested, Hunter used Foucault's "description of ethics as a 'practice of the self' as a model for generating a different understanding of the practice of literary-cultural criticism" (7). Hunter's suggestion that a text and the critical operation performed on it constitute a single artifact is not to be taken literally; they only constitute a single artifact in Hunter's description of criticism as an ethical practice. Hunter himself is maintaining a critical distance from his object of study. Fictocriticism, however, is literally one text, it is an occasion for the staging of an ethical performance of a critical self by commenting upon itself, its own condition as a hybrid genre (even though it may also refer to other texts). That is why it is a move within a game, rather than a description of the rules of the game. It is not a metacritical discourse. However, King's offhand marginal comment on fictocriticism within a study of Ian Hunter's work, a passing reference to their relationship, has become the basis for a definition of fictocriticism as a move beyond the "problem" of hermeneutic depth and postmodern surface which Hunter has described. It is in Kerr's paper that the phrase "a space between" is introduced to describe fictocriticism, a phrase which has its origins in the passage from No Substitute which I quoted earlier.

The anthology Kerr was discussing was published in 1998 by the University of Western Australia Press. Entitled The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism, it was co-edited by Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck. It is obvious from the subtitle of this anthology that fictocriticism is a mode of writing which has gained prominence amongst women in the academy (and most of the contributors are academics). In 1997 Anna Gibbs, a contributor to The Space Between and co-editor of No Substitute, asserted that there was "a strange forgetfulness around the term fictocriticism as it's used in Australia now", suggesting that fictocriticism made its appearance "in the writing (mostly non-academic) of women very
well aware” of works by feminist figures such as Cixous and Irigary.” This awareness was manifest, Gibbs claims, in the feminist anthology *Frictions* published in 1982 by Sybylla Press and edited by herself and Alison Tilson. “Much of this writing blends essay and fiction, shifts suddenly between fiction and poetry, makes use of indeterminate forms like the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés – all manner of literary detritus” (1). Gibbs posits three institutional trajectories for the spread of fictocriticism in universities. It “began to make its way into the universities”, she claims, “initially through women’s studies courses, and then through the advent of courses in ‘creative writing’”, as well as through the influence of “the so-called ‘autobiographical turn’” of cultural studies (1).

Fictocriticism can be seen to derive from feminist uses of the critical “I” in the 1960s as a challenge to androcentric academic objectivity; a challenge embodied in the axiom “the personal is political”. This feminist trajectory is taken up by Helen Flavell in her review of *The Space Between*. Flavell argues that while Amanda Nettelbeck described fictocriticism in her introduction as the result of the influence of postmodernism, she herself felt that work collected in the volume was influenced more by feminism. “By relying predominantly on postmodernism and the ‘big’ male theorists like Derrida and Barthes to explain this collection of writings by women”, Flavell asks, “is Nettelbeck’s essay in danger of following a critical tradition that excludes and invalidates women’s work?”

I would argue that the North American counterpart of fictocriticism is not the “paraliterary” but what is called confessional criticism.” The term “confessional criticism” appears to derive from Elaine Showalter’s introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985), which is indicative of its own indebtedness to feminist challenges to academic criticism. But confessional criticism is also indebted to the post-structuralist critique of critical and philosophical modes of writing as metalanguages, and the subsequent rejection of the epistemological relationship between these modes and an unquestionable truth. If the disinterested and impersonal prose of academic writing can no longer provide access to knowledge, then the intellectual as a political subject becomes the only enabling motivation of critical activity. The move beyond post-structuralist theory characterised by confessional criticism is realised in localised narratives which are embodied in the contingent truths of the anecdote, and a naming of personal and political investments in the object of study. Each act of criticism is an occasion to enact a form of identity politics, where the critic does not so much express an essential self, but performs the role of critic.
Like confessional criticism, fictocriticism develops out of a tradition of liberating criticism from its parasitical dependence on literature. This tradition of liberation has two strands: either a distancing from literature as an object of study, hence making criticism into a science (from philology to structuralism); or a move towards literature by claiming the use of a creative faculty in criticism (aestheticism and impressionism), or collapsing the generic boundaries between literature and criticism (poststructuralism).

In 1996 Anne Brewster, another contributor to *The Space Between*, presented a paper entitled “Fictocriticism: Undisciplined Writing” at the inaugural conference for the Australian Association of Writing Programs. “If there is a generic division or opposition which ficto-criticism seeks to mediate”, Brewster claims in her paper, “it is the demarcation inscribed in academic production of the genres of high art (fiction, poetry, drama) and the essayistic modes which purport to study them (commentary, criticism, analysis, theory)”.

Brewster argues that an “event contiguous with the emergence of ficto-criticism is the burgeoning of creative writing programs in Australian universities. Indeed a number of the academics interested in and writing ficto-criticism are involved in creative writing program’s (29). These programmes, she suggests, “on account of their own anomalous and anxious positioning”, open up a space for the introduction of “hybrid and cross-generic projects”, one of which is the “conflation of fictional and critical discourse’s (30). Creative Writing classes become a literal place where students can explore the fictocritical space between. “The enthusiasm with which students versed in theory take to fictocriticism in creative writing classes”, according to Brewster, “suggests that in a creative writing program they have a license to do what can’t be done in the more formal literary or cultural studies essay, that is, personalising the theory and making it over in their voice” (31).

Brewster does not state that fictocritical writing necessarily should be taught in Creative Writing classes, claiming instead that she is merely tracing a genealogy of the form, articulating the institutional sites at which it is appearing. No account is provided, however, of how fictocriticism might provide options for the student of Creative Writing who is not “versed in theory”, of what sort of license it might provide for the writer of traditional literary genres, or of why its practice is not allowed in classes devoted to the study of theory.

A cynical way of considering this is to see Creative Writing as a way of accommodating fictocriticism by bringing it into the academy through the back door, but leaving it on the doormat. As a “genre” fictocriticism
provides a certain amount of academic credibility to Creative Writing because of its overt and reflexive engagement with critical issues. In turn, writing programmes can act as a form of generic containment, protecting the boundaries of the traditional academic dissertation from fictocritical contamination. In a 1993 discussion paper delivered to Melbourne University, which proposes that the Department of English with Cultural Studies set up a doctorate in Creative Arts, Philip Mead points out "the unique version of Creative Writing that has evolved in the English Department, namely a combination of and negotiation between critical, theoretical and creative writing". He argues that an institutional recognition of fictocritical writing could be achieved through this doctorate and that it would also benefit the discipline of Creative Writing. He suggests that "we might also want to think about how we could introduce and accommodate that hybrid kind of writing which is called "ficto-critical". The idea would be to strengthen and define the area of study [sic] Creative Writing, and make it a co- and/or prerequisite of English Department and literary, Cultural and Australian Studies offerings (3).

Fictocriticism emerges in the institutional circumstances where those teachers and students who have the desire to write and hence become involved in Creative Writing, are also influenced by poststructuralist/feminist theory. This is due to the fact that Creative Writing and "theory" developed in Australian universities at the same time. If fictocriticism is a metaphorical (postmodern) space between theoretical and literary genres, the discipline of Creative Writing is an institutional juncture for this space, a literal site for negotiation between the demands of the academy (theory) and the demands of the literary market (literature), plus the attendant theoretical binaries of objectivity/subjectivity, and exteriority/interiority. Fictocriticism can thus be seen as a product of institutional forces, the teaching of Creative Writing alongside the teaching of Theory in Australian universities.

In "The Investigation", Helen Flavell constructs an "academic fiction" around two protagonists: a male, moustached, professor at a traditional sandstone university who is made nervous by his students' enthusiasm for the "new critical genre" of fictocriticism, their desire as students of Theory for a more personal and lyrical response to the texts they study; and a young female student known as Anna. "Anna is 24 and a postgraduate student. Her university doesn't have sandstone arches and ivy creeping; she's been brought up on a transdisciplinary diet of various subjects levelled under the umbrella of 'communications'". She's studied creative
writing, journalism, won a prize for an essay in cultural studies, and thrives on reading contemporary theory”. What is being constructed here is a generational (and gendered) narrative describing the institutional and interdisciplinary conditions for the emergence and popularity of fictocriticism. This narrative may be too stereotypical to function as an accurate description, but it is instructive of the way in which proponents of fictocriticism wish to position it as a marginal yet dynamic practice within the institutional power structures of the New Humanities.

It is possible now to argue that fictocriticism is a textual space for the postmodern writer-critic, and Creative Writing the literal place (although not the only place). In discussing the function of Creative Writing programmes in the university, Kevin Brophy refers to “continuing tensions between so-called critical-theoretical writing and creative writing, a tension that might have been defused for some by recent explorations in factional or ficto-critical writing”. Yet how is this defusion achieved? If one decides to write fictocriticism one consciously determines to blur generic boundaries in their writing, via a hybridisation or mongrelisation of disparate textual elements, and thus enact or perform a critical operation. If generic boundaries are blurred, however, this only takes place within the hybrid form, it is performed each time by a fictocritical act. This is why it is a performance of the critical self rather than a stable genre. As Anna Gibbs writes, it is “a hit and run guerilla action, tactical rather than strategic”. These last two terms recall the work of Michel de Certeau, who described strategy in spatial terms and tactics in temporal terms. According to Gibbs, “fictocriticism is not iterable, surprise being of the essence, and no two impasses in writing or debate are ever exactly the same ... It is, in essence, performative, a meta-discourse in which the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale” (1). So it is a tactical, temporary raid on strategic divisions and hierarchies. It prises open a “space between” genres and knowledges.

Unfortunately, this temporary mongrelisation, tied to an ethical performance of the critical self, is often accompanied by a narrative of supersession, as if the epistemological breakdown of the barriers between literature and criticism effected by post-structuralism had also made a generic collapse inevitable. In an editorial for the journal *Paradoxa*, Brian Attebury claims that metafictional and fictocritical “violations of boundaries tend to make people very nervous”, as if these “people” might feel an impending redundancy for their conservative genres. We may also recall Noel King’s question: when fictocriticism arrives, what departs? For King, it was the separate bodies of fiction and criticism. But what is meant
by this departure? These bodies have obviously not departed, they are not redundant, they only depart within the fictocritical text itself, within its own performative moment of hybridity. The suggestion that fictocriticism may serve as some exemplary dialectical resolution between the poles of writing and criticism – or, more precisely, between literature and critical theory – cannot be sustained. Rather than negating or rendering obsolete the distinctions it challenges, fictocriticism requires their continued opposition for its aesthetic dynamism and offers yet another mode of writing within a plurality of options available to the writer.

This brings us back to what a postmodern writer-critic might look like. The postmodern project of “hybridisation” is to break down barriers between genres, to recognise that genres are institutionally conferred categories, or at least rhetorical conventions, rather than essentialist modes. If followed to its logical extreme, however, collapsing boundaries within literature, and between literature and criticism, into a generalised “writing” means erasing rather than celebrating or multiplying difference. Obviously this erasure is neither possible nor desirable. Hence postmodernity is best described as a plurality of genres, and each new hybrid splice (fabulism, magic realism, metafiction, fictocriticism, creative non-fiction, confessional criticism) is an addition to this plurality rather than a negation of pre-existing options; an addition which, moreover, requires the existence of the genres it spliced in order to retain its hybridised identity. This plurality means an erasing of hierarchies rather than generic differences, and a loosening of boundaries, retaining the conceptual differences of genres but exploiting their practical possibilities of permeability (rather than contamination).

Rather than the traditional writer-critic whose criticism derives from their creative practice and serves as some form of illumination of it, or the postmodern version who enacts their dual identity within the single hybridised work, what is required in a “post-Theory” academy is a collapsing of the figures of writer and critic into a concept of the intellectual. This intellectual will respect the discursive difference, but not hermeticism, of varying modes of writing, rather than attempting a polyglot homogenisation under the aegis of postmodernism, and move between these modes as his or her political requirements dictate; not with a unified subjectivity or theoretical position to express, but with a plurality of subject positions to adopt.
Notes


6 It should be noted that the journal *Paradoxa* defines “paraliterature” as fictional works which exist outside the canon of accepted genres, such as science fiction. I have not encountered the use of the word paraliterary elsewhere.


8 See Muecke’s biography on the website for the Transforming Cultures research program at UTS: http://www.transforming.cultures.uts.edu.au/


19 “Bodies of Words”. 1.

20 This quote is from the editorial for volume 4, number 10 of Paradoxa, reproduced on the journal’s website at: http://paradoxa.com/excerpts/4-10intro.htm
Light and bass; the fever pulse. The synthesizer shimmers, strawberry sweetheart and plastic. Cigarette smoke hangs; a stinging, drowning haze. Breathing through it is a struggle, my mouth open. Sweat drips from the ceiling, mingling with my own, running down, damp tendrils clinging to my cheeks. A torrent of feedback pounds my ears. Railings and elbows crowd my ribcage. A great mass, palms raised in belief, we heave

Against the stage.
Here a creeping tiger stalks,
Charged with his own beauty.
He is Jarvis Cocker:
A devastating one liner
Delivered with
Arched brow and
Painful cheekbones.

Beneath the lipgloss and snake hips
Lie dirt and menace.
Beneath that
Lies what saves us.

On his spider legs, Jarvis crawls
Towards ME
Hissing
About feeling uncomfortable standing only in your
Underwear.
Stabs his finger
Electric
He says:
There’s No Escaping
The Fact That
I’m A Girl
And He’s
A Boy.

For an instant, his eyes
Are too real,
My stomach shrinks.

It’s so black outside it feels like there’s no land and no sky, just the four of us in this little rusty hatchback hurtling through space and time. My best friend Claire’s driving, listening to us all crapping on and beaming her big generous smile; her boyfriend Rowan, crouched in the front, unconsciously cradling his skateboard like a proud Mum and gazing adoringly at Claire; Nickers, knees up in the back with me, luggage where our feet should be, her freckled face screwed up and announcing in a loud silly baby voice –

“This weekend is gonna rock like nothing else, awright? Wait till you meet my Dad, he rocks, he’s so cool. Everyone calls him Ruffy, cos he’s rough as” she snorts at the joke.

“You’re so Aussie, Nickers,” I tell her, knowing she’ll take it as a compliment.

“Well that’s what it’s like in the country. You guys think I’m Aussie, wait till you meet some real Mt Beauty bogans, wait till you meet my Mum in her tracky-dacks and her moccies.”

“What’s her name, Shazza or something?” grins Rowan over his shoulder.

“Cheryl!” Nickers and I squeal. Claire laughs at us, without losing her quiet focus on the road. Being near her makes my heart ache.

Lulled by the sweaty warmth of the interior, I rest my forehead on the cool window pane and let headlights pass me by like comets.

I held Claire’s hand on her first date with Rowan, a few weeks back. She was too shy to meet him alone. The three of us hung out in this plush red bar in the city; Claire was driving, so Rowan and I shared the bottle of wine. Another time, the two of them swung by my place in the hatchback, Claire hanging her head out the window –

“Hey Mandy! Wanna come to the movies?”

I bolted up my driveway and scrambled into the back seat.

“Hi Rowan, how’s it going?”

“Cool.”

“So what are we going to see?”
Claire told me once that Rowan had said if he wasn’t going out with her, he’d probably want to date me.

Afterwards I felt hyper and started showing off, careering around the empty carpark and mimicking scenes from the flick. They stood together and laughed at me. I tip-toed up to them, like a silent movie villain, whisked Rowan’s skateboard out from under his arm and took off with it, cackling. Claire jumped straight into her car, revved the engine and sped after me. I was cornered.

“Alright, alright, I give up,” hands in the air, skateboard relinquished to Rowan’s loving attention. But Claire was still rolling with the game. As I stepped into the car, it lurched forward, knocking my elbow painfully. Horrified, she leaped out, smothering me in a bear hug.

“Oh Manda, Mandy, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, are you OK?” Arms around me, she peered into my eyes, concerned, guilty.

“It’s alright, I’m OK, really,” I smiled. “It’s just my elbow.”

“Ohhh, sorry sweetie,” she held me tight, I closed my eyes, allowed her to wrap me up. Her body was warm through the fluffy mohair. My face rested in her smooth sweet hair. Her breath was like faintly sour lollies.

Later, we dropped Rowan off at the station. As the train trundled in he looked at me, then looked at Claire. He kissed her goodbye, lightly on the lips, hands around her waist. I watched, imagining he was kissing me, our noses getting in the way, wondered what his saliva would taste like. The two of them released each other, and Rowan turned to look at me again.

“Bye Amanda,” he said, stepping forward, leaning his doughy white moon face towards me. Our eyes cinched. He paused, inches from my face. I raised my eyebrows at him. He offered me a puzzled look in exchange.

“Bye, Rowan,” I said, holding his gaze. He stepped back, entered the carriage, and waving from the yellow lit window, was gone.

“I thought he was going to kiss you then,” Claire laughed.

“So did I,” I said.

Then, slowly, “actually, I think I wanted him to.”

“You should have!”

“What, like you wouldn’t care?” I grinned at her. She shrugged.

“Probably not.”

We sniggered and she put her arm around my shoulders.

“I’m so so sorry for bumping you with the car.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry, it was worth it to get hugs off you.”

“Amanda! You can get hugs off me anytime you want.” She hugged me again.

“But Rowan’s there,” I complained to her shoulder. “I don’t want to get in your way. Don’t you mind me muscling in on your dates all the time?”
“No,” she snorted. “Don’t worry about Rowan, he’s just a stupid boy.”

Arriving at Nickers’ place at last, we pull up beneath low rain-heavy branches. Drops shake over my head as I emerge from the overhang. I stand up straight, reaching my hands up to the brilliant heavens, stretching out my back and inhaling air like ice. Mt Beauty.

Nickers’ Mum, in her nightie and moccasins, greets her disapprovingly at the flywire door.

“After midnight, Nicolette? Well, better late than never, I suppose.”

She reserves smiles for the rest of us. Her steps are heavy down the short hallway as she shows me where the toilet is.

Taped to the pine-lined wall inside the bathroom is a cheesy old poster of a blonde girl playing tennis in a minidress, pulled up so you can see her scratching her bum. I slide the door open, catching Nickers walking past me in the hall.

“Nickers, what the fuck?” I burst out.

She doesn’t return my mirth, and with a stony face she says simply “It’s my Dad’s.” I can see I’ve done something wrong, but I don’t know how to fix it, so I say nothing, and she walks away.

Nickers has her bravado back in the little yellow kitchen. Waving her spatula she fries up a mountain of bacon and eggs, spilling out stories of Mt Beauty Boganism and laughing at all her own jokes. We eat our midnight feast around the kitchen table under warm orange lights and a framed poster of Mick Jagger. Godzilla plays on the telly, then turns into music videos, flickering over our faces as we lie curled up in the darkened lounge room, Nickers on the couch, Claire, Ro and I side by side on rubber mattresses. The telly is switched off, and Claire and Ro roll up together beneath the blankets, leaving me a lonely island in a rubber sea. But Rowan reaches out and takes my hand, drawing me into the huddle. Drifting into sleep, I breathe in his rich male scent, I can sense the hair on his arms and the strength of his muscles.

The next morning, for a laugh, Nickers cuts my long, black hair, chopping off big chunks out on the verandah, the mountains looming grey and clean above.

Propped against each other, Ro and Claire press advice on us –

“No, shorter on that side, it’s uneven.”

“Leave the fringe as it is, yeah, like that. Oh, maybe shorter.”

At last the kitchen scissors are still. I stand up and take a first, anxious look at my reflection in the window. In the glass my silhouette is long and lean. My hair is very short, rough, cropped. It ... looks ... good! It really does.
Short and funky and sexy and, I don’t know, I feel kind of dangerous all of a sudden.

Later that day, when we’re heading out and I’m wearing a black shirt and jeans and I put on a long line seventies leather jacket, Claire ruffles my hair and gives me a funny smile.

“You look like Jarvis,” she says.

Jarvis. He wasn’t always cool. In Sheffield, England, circa 1987, he was too tall, too thin. He wore spectacles like safety goggles, perched on his too-large nose. He was an obscure, overwrought twenty-three-year-old adolescent, all big woolly quiff and nervous, long-fingered hands.

Tonight he’s at a party in someone’s flat. Not just anyone in fact, but a girl he likes. The flat is tiny and cheap. Still, it’s flashy and spacious compared to the cold, dark hole that Jarv inhabits. Dark because the bedsit’s single light bulb blew last week and he hasn’t been bothered to replace it yet; cold because he can’t afford to heat it (he’s between jobs). The key pieces of furniture in his flat are a yellowish charity-shop sofa, a sizable dent in the wall (inherited from the previous tenant), a mammoth hi-fi, and the lingering odour of a youth misspent.

The girl who’s throwing the party is named Susan. She’s an art college graduate, a receptionist for a company that manufactures insulator batts. In her spare time she still paints; the walls of her flat are lined with canvases, all acid colours and geometric shapes. Her guests, squeezed between the sofa, coffee table and refrigerator, loudly bemoan all things Thatcher, spilling wine on the carpet and nodding their heads to The Smiths.

Jarvis hates The Smiths.

“Essentially, I’ve been doing the same thing as The Smiths for years with my band Pulp, only darker.” He informs a bewildered group hanging round the kitchenette.

“I mean, of course it’s excellent when an indie band actually gets recognised, it’s just that it’s so typical that it’s a band that’s really easy to listen to that gets famous. The English public just doesn’t want to be challenged anymore.”

Perching on a stool in the studio, Jarvis croons intently into the microphone, his eyes scrunched shut in concentration and his hands clutching the headphones. The other band members roll their eyes behind his back.

He imagines he is Nick Cave, or Scott Walker, projecting his melancholy soul into the hearts of adoring listeners. Gathering despair like
storm clouds he sings deeper than his natural range, flattening the notes. As the song reaches its climax, he wails:

“All I’ll curse my pride!
Curse my pride!
Curse my stupid pride!”

Susan’s standing by the open window finishing a cigarette. Jarvis releases the captive audience in the kitchenette and ambles nonchalantly towards her. He retrieves a self-rolled cigarette from his pocket.

“Hi,” he greets her, propping himself against the window sill and lighting up.

Susan thinks he’s “a bit weird, but sweet” and asks him to roll her one too.

“Here’s one I prepared earlier,” he says, thinking you smooth bastard, and reaching into his pocket for a second cigarette, rolled at home with this exact moment in mind. His fingers fumble. I left it behind, he realises in horror, blushing.

“Oh. I thought I had an extra one, sorry,” he explains, and fills the awkward silence by fiddling with cigarette papers and tobacco.

“How’s the band going?” she asks, charitably.

“Oh, yeah, great thanks,” he smiles at her. “Actually we’re releasing another album this year.”

And he’s off. At first Susan receives the monologue amiably, but it quickly becomes evident that she finds her fingernails more interesting than his band. “Sweetness” only gets you so far, especially when you’re “a bit weird.”

For God’s sake, shut up, Jarvis, he thinks.

“Do you want to see my Spiderman impression?” he asks her brightly. She’s back. “Spiderman? What, can you climb walls or something?”

“Well I wish I could. I mean, I think that would be a really useful skill in this modern age.”

She laughs. “Do you? Why’s that then?”

“Well, before the industrial revolution being Spiderman wouldn’t have done you much good; there wasn’t really anything big to climb up then, just haystacks and the odd barn, I suppose. But with, like, the advent of the big city, and skyscrapers and so forth, it’s become a real pain having to walk around things all the time. I mean, if you were Spiderman, you wouldn’t have to bother with streets and corners and things like normal people, you could just – woosh – out come the cobwebs and right up the buildings and over them.”

Miraculously, she finds this funny. “I suppose it would be good if you wanted to spy on people in flats,” she suggests.
“Oh, well, I do that already.”

More laughter. Yes!

The night wears on. Jarvis drinks a lot. Tangerine hexagons and pink trapezoids swirl before his eyes. Morrissey stops warbling and someone puts on Cyndi Lauper. The sofa is pushed against the wall, and the girls start dancing. Jarvis lolls in a corner, sulking. Susan has stopped paying attention to him; there’s a handsome geezer from London who’s giving her the eye. Why do girls go for smarmy bastards like him? he wonders, and even slurrily raises the topic with a couple of blokes standing nearby. They look up for a moment then go back to their conversation.

Jarvis shrugs his shoulders at them.

“Susan,” he calls out to her. She doesn’t hear him.

“Susan!” His voice suddenly sounds very loud. Susan turns round, puzzled.

“What is it?”

Other people are watching now. He feels a bit silly, but ploughs on.

“Err, I never showed you my Spiderman impression”.

“Oh that. I thought you were joking.”

Was he joking?

“No, you’ll see, I can climb up walls!” he laughs, and stumbles towards the window.

People exchange glances.

He heaves himself up onto the window sill.

“Jarvis, you’re not really going to do that are you? Shit. It’s three storeys. You’re pissed, just go and sit down or something.” Susan speaks quietly.

Crouched on the edge of the sill, he turns to reassure her, saying, “No, I was only joking – ”

Loses his balance and falls.

There’s a scream. He clings to the side of the building, his legs swing in empty black air.

Susan, terrified, appears at the window. The party noises have stopped, and other faces materialise beside Susan’s. Someone laughs, covering their mouth.

His fingers are stretched white with pain. They’re attached to a ledge of crumbling decorative brickwork, serving a functional purpose for the first time in its history. There’s about three feet between him and the window above, and a thirty-odd foot drop to the road below.

The shock clears his mind. He breathes the cold, sharp air quickly in and out.

His feet graze the side of the building, searching for a foot-hold, but
the fancy brickwork has run out and the wall is smooth. “I can’t climb back up,” he whispers.

A tangle of willing arms descends from the window. One hefty looking bloke leans halfway out, stretching his hand down to Jarvis with all his might.

“Come on mate, give us your hand,” he strains, attempting an encouraging look. But it’s no use. No one can stretch quite far enough.

This is really it. The only way is down. There’s no chance he’ll be able to drag himself back up to that flat. He’s going to fall, and if he’s very very lucky, he won’t die, just break every single bone in his body.

It’s not fair, he thinks. This is no way to die. He’s always imagined that his death would be profound, dignified, an event; tragic and touching and generally well-staged. But this is tragic in completely the wrong sense: dangling foolishly from the side of a building after a few too many pints and a sad stunt to impress a girl. Where’s the dramatic soundtrack? Where’s the meaning in it all? Twenty-three years of loafing about ending in a totally ignoble death. The kind of death you read about in the papers for light relief.

So be it.

He shuts his eyes tight, unfurls his aching fingers, and drops.

It’s alright Jarvis.

You poor thing, lying on the road with your body all broken. But can’t you smell it in the damp bitumen? Something’s changed at last.

All of a sudden you’ve stopped assuming there’ll be a happy ending.

And when your bones finally heal up, you’ll decide to pursue a slightly more sensible goal than pop music: education. And then, ironically, you’ll begin to make music people actually want to listen to. I promise.

By 1995 you will be a pop superstar, a national icon. You’ll headline Glastonbury. You’ll get arrested for mooning Michael Jackson live on television. Girls will want to shag you. In fact, you’ll become so famous you’ll wish you weren’t anymore.

Of course, the adulation won’t last forever (it is pop we’re talking about here, Jarvis) but the point is, you’ll make it – your mark. Just wait and see.

Back in Melbourne, Claire got sick of Rowan. She just stopped calling him. I ran into him after a few days of this. He seemed bewildered:

“Do you think Claire wants to break up with me?”

“No! Of course not.” I don’t think he believed me.

She wouldn’t ring him, so I did.

“Uh, it turns out you were right, Rowan. Claire doesn’t want to see you
anymore. Sorry about what I said the other day, I didn't realise."

His voice was wounded. “I don't get it. What did I do wrong?”

“I don't know, Rowan. I don't really understand it either. I guess sometimes this stuff just happens.”

“But, I thought she really ... I mean everything was just, so ... the four of us, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“It probably sounds stupid, but I thought we'd be like that forever”.

“But I'm sure we'll all stay friends. It's just that Claire doesn't want to be your girlfriend anymore. Just give her some space for a while, and then she'll probably give you a call, and we'll all be back to normal.”

I thought I'd better go see him and find out if he was coping. Nickers hadn't seen him since Mt Beauty, hadn't even called him. Because of Claire. I felt sorry for him.

I sat next to him on his bed. Very, very close, our shoulders just touching. I played with the elasticized tops of my black over-the-knee socks. Stretching them slowly with one finger and letting them spring back around my thighs. I brushed his shoe with the tip of my own and glanced at him, sideways through my lashes. His fingers were grateful on my cheek. He kissed me with fleshy wet lips. I didn't breathe. I kept my eyes open, and when he stopped kissing me he opened his. They were out of focus, big and sad and watery blue.

I went round to Claire’s place the following night. She was blow-drying her fringe in the bathroom mirror, trying to get it to sweep smoothly across her face in a perfect imitation of a Sixties Mod girl.

While I was waiting for her to finish with the dryer, I played with the liquid eyeliner. I’m not very good with make-up, and this stuff was messy and hard to put on right. I pressed up close to the mirror, trying to squint through one eye while keeping the other shut, but I ended up getting silver blobs on my eyelashes and dribbling it all over my cheek.

Dabbing at the drips with damp cotton wool, I realised how close I was to the mirror. My face was all I could see; it overwhelmed me, so pale, vast and boneless.

I stepped back in disgust. Immediately the warm cedar bathroom returned with the gentle noises from the loungeroom nearby; Claire’s family talking quietly and watching TV. Claire was patiently combing her fringe over her forehead, her face fixed with concentration.

I watched her for a moment, then announced, “I kissed Rowan.”

She stopped combing and looked at me carefully.
She was silent for ages. I chewed on my bottom lip.

"Aren't you angry?" I asked at last.

Her mouth squirmed and her eyes roved the walls, settling on the ceiling.

Finally, she said "No, not angry. Not really. I guess I kind of saw it was going to happen anyway." She looked at me. "If he makes you happy, well," she smiled and shrugged.

"I'm such a terrible best friend."

"No you're not, Mandy, you're great!"

"I'm a bitch."

"Don't be silly," she kissed me on the cheek, squeezed me, and smirked, "Truth is, I don't want him anyway, man. If you want him, you can have him."

I couldn't help laughing at this. "He is kind of a disposable boy, isn't he?"

She rolled her eyes in agreement. "He's just, always ... there."

Claire picked up the silver eyeliner from the sink.

"Let me show you how to put this on." She shook her head at me.

"What's that mess on your face? You haven't got a clue, have you?"

She unscrewed the cap and placed one hand on my shoulder.

"Now hold still and close your eyes." Breathing softly and close to my face, she stretched my left eyelid flat with her thumb and deftly applied a fine wet line, then did the same to the other eye. She smiled at me, one hand on each of my shoulders.

"Perfect."

Tonight I'm going to see Rowan, for the last time. The city rushes, gleaming with neon moonlight. I'm striding down Lonsdale Street to the skate park. I've got my walkman on, Pulp, of course, and Jarvis is heavy breathing in my ears, whispering about agony and revenge, and about "the way that things that aren't supposed to feel good, sometimes do." The whole street pulsates with the bittersweet synthesizers. Petrol fumes and the scent of cigarettes, glace cherries, and cheap, sharp wine infuse the crisp air. Emerald shards crunch into the concrete beneath my polished footsteps. Orange beams herald the growl of Friday night motors in sleek metal bodies. My long leather jacket slaps satisfyingly against my thighs.

Rowan is waiting for me at the tram stop outside the skate park, I see him across the road as I wait for the green man. He doesn't notice me. He looks anxious, dumpy in his baggy clothes, the ubiquitous skateboard propped against his leg. The lights change and he sees me walking towards him, gives me a pathetic wave. I flash him a smile, but feel sickened. It's not really fair to do this to him, I think, but somehow it seems like he deserves it.
CRAZY LOVE

Weighed down, taxiing, her heart bothers her. No turning back. Big hole where the door was, wind surging in, tin sheds rush past then a lightening, grass behind, below. Grins all round. Cars, animals reduced to toys his hands that woman’s naked body a train line intricate patterns, dams. They’ve been warned about dams. The instructor shouts but she’s tired of advice. She knows what she must do. Gaining height, circling.

Engine cuts. Number one nods, steps out onto the wing strut. Everything’s stopped. Just wind hissing, puffed overalls cracking, the instructor’s voice. A shadow passes, a shout swallowed by the wind. The back arch is feeble.

Her turn. No room for fear. She’s had about enough of fear. Now she is spreadeagled, then she’s away, sucked into a tunnel of gravity that bed falling kissing her stretch marks calling one thousand two thousand three thou ... wind stuffing her mouth what can she say gagging her shocking her back arch forgotten she thinks she hears herself screaming it can’t be her. The static line rips her open with such a jerk her crash helmet slips forward, blinding her. Relief. Temporary end to confusion.

She shoves the helmet back, drifts, separate from the big picture, sees the canopy below, searches up, around, blue beyond dark circle, this brittle marionette laughing aloud out there where nobody can hear, laughing without certainty into the wind.

She adjusts toggles, tries steering towards the white cross. People dot the distance growing larger but she can’t see him leaning against the bullbar, waiting. She hopes she’s doing OK, watches out for fences, water, any unforeseen danger as the world comes into sharper focus. The ground really does rush up. His hands. Her body. She’s going to hit hard.
MARK O’FLYNN

ON RECALLING THE SHOPPING COMPLEX VOTED UGLIEST BUILDING TWO YEARS RUNNING

Those small stunted suburbs have gone now
where my father swam thirty short laps
before work. The soft slop
of his freestyle permeating dreams
I brokered behind adolescent curtains.
Gone, now, though geographically speaking
every spare quarter-acre block where imagined
massacres flourished has been built upon.
Here a fence torn down;
where once were trees
there now exists a shopping complex
to which all roads lead, bright as a distant city.
The cattle tracks of my path to school
buried under aggregate and gravel.
I could spell the word asphalt
before any other kid in class.
Gone the paddocks where Bronwyn Maddox
dared slap the great long sausage
of the horse’s penis with a wooden ruler
as we cringed on the safe side of the wire.
Gone too the horses.
Gone Bronwyn, also.
The first gutter I lay drunk in.
The short cuts and alleyways,
creekbeds and misspent scenes of lust
and torture, of which my mind is never free.
Go then, you decrepit half-built suburbs
buried under bitumen’s deep scar.
Every adjective’s extreme.
Even the flooded quarry where we were warned
never to swim for fear of repeating the prophetic
drowning of our young classmate,
unmarked but by barbecues.
Duckless.
Though the drifting oil slick’s spectrum,
still the same.

My dad, he was a quarry man.
I LIKE AIRPORTS

for the big screen TV
of weather,
the city’s hazy histogram
and the unsteady horizon.

But also nights:
a missing suburb
in sugary dark,
its capital
a small-scale city
of radar and eyes.

I like the way planes dwindle
to tail-lights, shed
their angry skins.

And every avenue ends in take-off.
Every poem begins
on the ground,
then is shot heavenward.
On a Suffolk beach I met the captain of the world’s first submarine. In green oilskins he marched towards me along a stretch of golden shingle. He seemed to come from nowhere. He hadn’t: I was simply not looking his way. I had been engrossed by the sight of strangely mesmerising North Sea currents, sending water surging in and out of what looked like a lagoon.

In impressive English the captain said the submarine, that designed by the Spaniard Isaac Peral, had gone aground in shingle. He said it was around the corner, behind the Martello tower to the south.

The complexion of the captain of the world’s first submarine was grey and blue and blotchy, as might be expected of someone habitually shut up in deep water. Serious and solemn, he adjured me to keep the presence of the vessel and its crew a secret. I agreed, not because I believed him but because I saw no immediate problem in agreeing. He told me he commanded the real thing, famous for its flawless trials of 1889 in the Bay of Cadiz.

We were standing in one of the world’s forgotten places, Shingle Street. Forgotten by people, by trees and sizeable animal life, and so by time itself.

It did not therefore seem strange that he should speak to me at length, and present the historical background to his sudden appearance. In a plot set in motion by Isaac Peral himself, the submarine had been appropriated in vengeance at the unappreciative naval authorities of the day, who wanted outrageous changes made to his design. If I cared to know the background, the captain said, Alfonso de la Pezuela, his great-grandfather and Isaac’s right-hand man, had switched the original for a 77-ton replica in 1914, as the great submarine was on its way to being mothballed in Cartagena. Charged with transporting the marvel, Señor de la Pezuela and his team of nine had made the switch in a cove close by Cadiz. The replica was taken on to Cartagena where, at his great-grandfather’s orders, its hull was filled with cement so that it would not budge again (the cementing,
carried out by night, was a further act of vengeance). The replica did move once, said the captain, although that was of no relevance to anything. It had been to Seville and back for a show, full of concrete and not the real thing. Now the impostor was back on stilts, on a plinth of cement with jets of water playing on its belly, on a forlorn esplanade in Cartagena.

He was sure I would not tell. Thousands upon thousands knew but had not told that the Isaac Peral, which he and the crew called el cigarre, had been travelling the coasts of Europe and North Africa for the best part of a century. Why had it? I asked. He took a sheet of paper from his jacket. In English were the ten questions most often asked him.

1. Why are you doing this?
   Because it is fun.

2. Why is it fun?
   There is a mission that makes it fun. The mission is to see that the whereabouts of the Isaac Peral do not become public knowledge.

3. But why is the boat not discovered?
   Because no one is looking for it.

4. How is it people nonetheless do not find out about what you’re doing?
   They do find out. But they do not tell. That would end the fun, and they respect that.

5. How do you survive?
   By research. We are experts at research. We research every place we want to go to. We find the inaccessible coves. We find the people who will help us with food and repairs and supplies.

6. Who are the crew?
   We are ten men, all relatives of the original ten men. We are not allowed to leave the submarine. We have chosen this life. The only other condition in selecting us is our height. Tall people are not suitable for submarines.

7. What happens to a crew member when he gets sick or old?
   Doctors must come on board. If a crew member is too sick or too old he is replaced by a son or another in his family.

8. So there are no women?
   No. The rules were made in 1914 and will not alter.

9. Isn’t it strange to be on your way for weeks at a time and have only sporadic contact to the outside world?
   Perhaps. We are old fashioned. We know this. But we keep up with technical developments because our research has to be the best. Recently, we were donated a laptop notebook. For that is our secondary mission, you might say: perfection in research.
10. How far can you travel?

396 kilometres at three knots, 284 at four knots, 132 at six knots.

He took back the paper. Now in its fifth edition, it was for information, not for copying. Having to photocopy papers ashore, he said without elaborating, had on occasions placed the crew in awkward situations. He said he would enjoy practising his English with me. He had been studying it ever since he had acquired an English grammar near Gibraltar. I put to him further questions. His name too was Alfonso, like his great-grandfather and compadre of Isaac Peral. Isaac had had many grudges against the government. He did not want el cigarre to be museumed like a stuffed steel animal. Hence the idea of the replica. The switch was extremely difficult to engineer, in every sense of this word. The Isaac Peral was 22 metres long and had a beam of 2.87 metres. In English these figures were 71 feet by nine.

We strolled on, towards the white coastguards' cottages for which the hamlet of Shingle Street is best known, insofar as it is known at all. There customs officials worked and lived, I warned him, but he was unworried. Did he not miss his family? I asked. Yes, he said. That was the price. Everything had its price.

What about sex? I said. Sex? he said, as if hearing of an invention he might have missed. Women, I said. He got out another sheet of paper with English words. Women, I said, wimin, an unphonetic word. Mujeres, I tried in Spanish. Ah, ah, he said. We have no, no tengo.

Dressed in the same oilskin green, another man came up almost running, his presence announced by the chatch chatch on the shingle. Ah Ramón, said the captain — who abruptly turned his attention to the water skating across the shoals, the same sea-scape he had caught me observing — diga las cosas al este hombre, talk to this man, Ramón, I must study the North Sea one moment. Si capitán, said Ramón saluting before adapting this salute to flick back a great flap of hair. The mid-length style of his hair minded me of the 1970s. He asks about women, said the captain. Mujeres.

Ramón and I walked slowly. We are ten men, señor, he said. So sometimes we go and find women. Except Oscar. Oscar is our chief navigator, although probably the youngest such in the whole of Spain. We have him not because he is good at navigating, he is not good, we have him because his family threw him out. He wants men, there are always men who want men. He wants us too, most of us, but he cannot have us. Oscar has to wait, like the rest of us.

The captain's footsteps trudged up in the shingle.
Do you know women here? said Ramón to me under his breath.
Women? I whispered back. I don’t.
What? said Ramón. I can’t hear you.
I don’t know a soul, I said loudly, I’m not from round here. I’m just here for a conference. A conference on tree care.
Care? Care? said Ramón.
The captain joined us.
Good, he declared without specifying what he was referring to. I hope your questions have been answered, he said. Ramón speaks English well, indeed we all do. We have nightly spelling bees.

We made chitch chotch sounds as we headed for the tiny café besides the cottages. A chill gust accompanied us, causing us to pull our coats more tightly, as a front of dark and powerful clouds moved up majestically from the south.

I bid the captain sit at the only table, but Ramón stood staring at the TV behind the counter. I glanced at the screen: a lady on all fours was scrubbing at a paw-marked kitchen floor.

Women! said Ramón expectantly.

Hardly had we reached at the menus when two men in official caps walked in. Are you officers of the customs? the captain asked. Indeed, they said. The captain explained his difficulties with the submarine while immediately handing them the paper with the questions and the answers. We have nothing to declare, he added. He turned to the counter and ordered three teas.

Are you from the institute? one man asked the captain.
I have told you, he replied.
It was my turn to be given a questioning look.
I’m out walking, I said. I’m attending a conference of foresters at Snape.

I know, he said. You still have your badge on, Mr Squires.

Meanwhile Ramón kept out of the way, twirling a stand of postcards with towns along the Suffolk coast.

If you really have a submarine round the corner, the other said finally, it will almost certainly float off with the next tide. As submarines do. I suppose you have engines. You are bound to have engines.

Of course. Two electrical motors each with thirty horses’ power. Six hundred and thirteen batteries. Two propellers.

Three, Ramón interposed.

All right, three, said the captain. Two vertical propellers and one
horizontal. We now have a spare propeller on board as well. Please give me my paper back. Thank you.

If, the man repeated at the door.
They left.

If? said the captain to me.
A treasured English word, I said, if. We even have a poem called that.
I have not heard of that, said Alfonso puzzled. Tú, Ramón?
No.
Our country is nonetheless full of poems, Alfonso remarked.
Not nonetheless, corrected Ramón, however.
They did not believe you, I said. So I don’t know what they will be thinking.

No, the captain agreed. But if they are right about the tide, all we can do is wait. But I think they know nothing about submarines.

I must have this card to send to my mother, said Ramón. It is called “the house in the clouds”. Look. She will not believe this building.

Well good luck, I said.
You are not going? said Alfonso.
I should. I have a seminar. It’s several miles by car.

Ramon stopped the postcards twirling, his hand on a black-and-white photo of what I guessed was Benjamin Britten. You have a car, señor, he said desperately.

Wait, said the captain. Do you not want to see our great ship? Our pride? I know it is not at its best, resting as it is, beached. But you will not have this chance one other time. You can ask the other woodsmen for their notes. Like in the school. But you cannot see the Isaac Peral again. We don’t dock in the same place twice.

We are not docking, Ramón commented. We misjudged the currents.

It was a complicated situation Ramón. You cannot imagine, señor, he said to me, how difficult manoeuvring through the oilfields is.

Oscar, Ramón remonstrated, Oscar is to blame. Oscar was looking at pictures of men instead of his tables, I saw him. His tables were upside down.

Yes, yes, said the captain. Let us not go through that again. So you do not want to see ... the very deck where the queen of Spain, Maria Cristina, once walked and stood ...

No. Well yes, I said hesitantly. It would be interesting, of course. Highly ... An extraordinary vessel. And you being captain, but ...

I see. It is for you to choose, señor Squize. Off my back is no skin.
But I really should go.
Yes, you are leaving. Goodbye. You will keep this secret.
Oh yes.
Adios.
I left. The North Sea was still sluicing back and forth across the shoals. Short sharp waves crowded on each other’s backs. I looked left and right, taking in the strange beauty of the shore called Shingle Street. No soul was in sight. The sky was closed with the cloud from the south. It started raining. I looked back to the little café. Ramón waved from inside. He beckoned frantically. He came out chattering fast.

Please, señor. I do not know how to say this. I think our capitán does not want to be alone, but he cannot say. We men are with ourselves all the time, we need, I need ...
He pulled out a map.
What about this place? he said. Ipswich.
I drew a blank and said: You got me there.
Got me? Las chicas? He looked up at me hopefully.
I said I didn’t know.
Please come back, señor. Talk to our capitán Alfonso, el pobre. Please.
I agreed, I don’t know why.
Despite the vast empty acreage of the beach, he stepped aside. After you, he implored.
The captain, whose complexion had darkened in the meantime, as if taking on the light and darkness of the weather beyond the window pane, looked up astonished. He had two charts spread across the table.
Yes?
Yes, I replied, not knowing exactly what this meant.
He rolled the charts together. And please, he said, you will call me Alfonso.
I sat back down and ordered more tea. I offered to pay for Ramón’s postcard. Ramón said he would have to go back for his address book. Wait, Alfonso said.
Alfonso suggested we play some hands of Bézique to fill the time.
The time?
The time the crew would need to make things properly shipshape for a visitor, of course.
And Bézique?
It was a favourite of his great-grandfather’s. I had no idea how to play, but he sent Ramón to fetch the cards. This game is not so difficult, he said. After a month or two you can maybe win. It is my joke. Go go, Ramón, go. And take the charts. And salute.

Go! After we play, I take you and show you the Isaac Peral. We are so proud of him. In any case we are rid of Ramón now. That Ramón, much stupidity.

I voiced the notion that the captain might be glad to get away from the whole of the crew.

They are good men, he said. I would trust them with my life. I would trust them with the world’s first submarine.

There was the sound of more scrunching steps.

It was Oscar, not Ramón.

Why did Ramón not bring the cards?

Blond, young, his dark blond eyebrows prominent, Oscar broke down in tears and set his head on the table.

Come on, said Alfonso. This is no good.

They are so cruel to me, Oscar said, they say I must go. Ramón says he cannot go backwards and forwards all day, he is not a delivery boy. I must go. I must run fast along the stones or they will throw them at me. I have no friends on the Isaac Peral. He knows? he added suddenly as he became aware of me.

Yes he knows. He is coming to see el cigarre.

You are from here, señor? I want to stay here. I have my passport with me. I want asylum in the United Kingdom.

Pst! said Alfonso, that is not possible. Asylum asylum, wherever we go all I hear is asylum. If you stay, we all go under. Collect yourself.

Blond Oscar sighed loudly, took out his passport and looked at the first page.

Can I stay and watch you play?

You may, said the man who told me he was the captain of the world’s first sub-marine. It may not be so interesting for you: I shall win and win. Here are the cards, señor. I know all the English terms. Royal marriage, sequence, double bézique, ten for the seven, ten for the last trick. These are points, these tens, this is why we have these scorers that go round and round. They are very beautiful, are they not? See how this purple is set against this yellow. Such a sense of colour. You know our Velázquez.

You don’t mean Velázquez, interrupted Oscar. You are crazy, he said for my benefit. Ramón says we are a team of crazies. El equipo crónico. Read this paper and tell me what you make of us, he said handing me a paper like the one Alfonso had.
Ramón Ramón, said Alfonso angrily.

Look at this photograph señor, said Oscar back with his passport. Do you think it looks like me?

By now the captain had the table filled with upturned cards. A double béisique, he said presenting two queens of spades and two jacks of diamonds. This is the best you can get – five hundred points. Quinientos, as they say on the Canary Islands. Yes there are two packs. Very beautiful. We cut. Now I cut. The king of hearts. I deal.

It is impossible to know if I was fortunate with the cards, or if the captain had overreached himself, but he lost the series to two thousand points. Alfonso turned on Oscar. I told you, he said to Oscar, we should have stayed in the oilfield until we had a sensible plan. I am not the capitán, retorted Oscar, I advise but you decide, you are Alfonso de la Pezuela. Go leave me, he said to Oscar, may the dirt of birds fall on your head. Oscar agreed to go out and study the North Sea waves. But talk to no one, he ordered.

Alone again, Alfonso wanted a second series, this time to two thousand five hundred. I want to see the Isaac Peral, I said trying to turn our talk in that direction. According to this sheet of paper shown me by Oscar, I said, the vessel could only accommodate a crew of six, not ten.

No, ten, said Alfonso as he flicked the thousands pointer on his score card round and round. It says this but this is not true.

Look on the paper. Don’t you want to see for yourself?

I know this paper. Why should I want to see it again?

Does it have a periscope?

Of course.

What about this, a chemical system to oxygenate the air?

Yes. Please deal. Like I said, first two cards, then three, then two again.

Eight.

Three torpedoes.

No no. No torpedoes. Not any more. Not since 1914. They are in cement at the end of the esplanade the Paseo de Alfonso XII. We put them in our replica and hoped one day the hot sun would blow up the paseo. I am joking. We are strictly peace-loving. The Soviet authorities know we are there but they know we are peace-loving and they leave us.

They are not called Soviet now, I told him.

No? He shrugged. It is on account of such strategies, he resumed, we can continue our mission. It is your turn to pick up a new card. You cannot hope to do well without eight cards to play from. Ah, my trick again. Yes, we are peace-loving. Isaac was a naval officer but he turned his back on the
navy. We do not consort with navies, defence departments. The military-industrial complex, he said pleased with the expression. We are not going to sink anyone’s fleet. You keep your Francisco Drake. Mira!, if we had not been peace-loving we would not have agreed to be shown on our Spanish postage stamps.

You negotiated with the post office?

The Peral Post Stamp. That was a long time ago.

But the Americans must know of you too.

I don’t believe so. I explain something. There are fish who make mistakes. The barracuda sees your shiny wristwatch and thinks that is a lovely swarm of fish, I must eat that. The shark swims under you and sees you with your surfboard. He thinks that is a lovely seal, I must eat that. Now America sees our submarine and says, that is a wreck, a whale, a piece of oil rig. The shark: the shark bites and tries out what he sees. Bites a bit, then he notices this seal is horrible, so he stops. Do the Americans, however? No, they don’t. They don’t check, they are so sure they are right. They are the shark who does not check. Don’t you agree, Oscar?

Oscar’s gone. You sent him out. Perhaps he’s gone back on board?

Of course, how stupid, the captain said, I’m so used to having him around. They’re always there, all the time. Oscar has his boo-hoo, boo-hoo, every time boo-hoo and then it’s over; Isaac is his home. Asylum! Ah, the ace of spades. Very valuable indeed. Look, I play the nine of spades. You cannot take that, you would be stupid to take that. I win the trick and I get the ace for my seven. You see how it works. A most beautiful game. Oscar should not have given you his paper. I am afraid I must confiscate it. You will give it to me, please?

After we have gone to the ship.

Very well. After this series we shall go.

The tide is advancing, I pointed out.

Yes, he said. Four aces. A hundred points. You will not catch me this time. Where is your forest?

Losing the second series, Alfonso left the café brooding. The rain held off. The shingle was still golden although the sky was overcast. Listen, I said with a hand to one ear, the stones are moving at the mouth of the lagoon. It is not a lagoon, said Alfonso, it is a river. We discussed the movements of the local coastline. I told Alfonso about Dunwich, its medieval centre now submerged. Where today the main road leads straight over the cliff. You could explore ancient Dunwich, I suggested. Alfonso was not greatly interested. Our spotlights are not strong under water, he replied. The sands are moving every-where. In the North Sea we are sailing over a desert.
The Martello tower to the south was up for sale. Alfonso ignored it. Now he was ignoring everything. He said he was preoccupied by the task of refloating. It was dangerous to refloat a submarine, it could easily get damaged. It could even break in two. It would be a hazardous manoeuvre. Not everyone could stay up safely up on deck.

I nodded.

In truth submarining was a hard life, he continued. You had to suppress fear of small spaces. Fear of slicks of oil. Of having nowhere to go when you had to get out. There were no windows, nowhere to jump. Even the captain’s bunk was impossibly narrow. He had not turned over in a bed for eighteen months. It was like sleeping on a plank. Death in a submarine was excruciating; life in one ...

Slamming us from nowhere, a new wind blew his sentence to a standstill. We paused to get adjusted to the bluster.

Soon, he assured me, we would be rounding the spit where the vessel was. First we would see the conning tower – the ancient conning tower, like a funnel – then the grey upper half. Then, depending on the tide, the red lower half and, although beached, something of the glory of the great cigar.

The wind dropped as we turned the corner.

There were clumps of reeds in what also looked like a lagoon.

The captain shivered.

This is wrong, he said. This is not as it should be.

In what way?

There was not nearly so much water here before, he replied.

This really is a lagoon, I said firmly.

I know what’s in your mind, he said suddenly, bitterly. It’s obvious. You think there is no Isaac Peral. But I must tell you this is of no importance to me, none at all. What does it matter what you think? What does it matter, now or later?

I suppose not.

At least you have not seen her beached. I said you would see her glory, but in truth el cigarre on land is not a pretty sight.

Alfonso, I said turning to face him, I think you owe me an explanation.

Alfonso shrugged.

I do not think this, he said.

Let me guess, I said. You are going to say they have left you behind.

Yes, they have left me behind. But why are you angry? It is a difficult, terrible situation.

Having missed the seminar, I settled for watching the currents cross the golden shingle one last time.
So where are you from Alfonso? I said. What are you doing here?
I told you, it is of no importance.

We looked at the sections of North Sea water, great tarpaulins of grey and yellow. Like a compass needle, the captain turned to gaze beyond the lagoon entrance. He was facing the direction of Belgium, where a small wave rippled as at first four struts, then the periscope, then the ancient conning tower broke the surface.
“I FIND A SPACE FOR IT SOMEHOW”: NEW POETRY

What kind of space does poetry occupy – do poets occupy – in our culture? In *Bestseller* (Vagabond Press, 2001), MTC Cronin is blunt:

But this poetry I speak of
which has the stillness
of a leaf or a road
Which has a loudspeaker in its hand
Which has more relaxed glitter
than a skyful of country stars
Remains as still and quiet and reticent
as the poet would be
if asked in a public place
“Are you a poet?” (“These Days”)

All books of poetry, taken as a whole, represent an argument about the available public spaces for poetry, an argument about what it means to be a poet. This argument may not be openly articulated, as it is in Cronin’s book, but it is carried on just the same, as an argument, poets enter into with other poems and poets, with other alien and familiar poetic practices, or with other expressive forms. Much recent Australian poetry, a little embarrassed, perhaps, to be asked that question in public – “Are you a poet?” – has been shaped by just such an argument with the dominant expressive form, narrative fiction. There seems little doubt that the ascendancy of fiction in the mainstream literary marketplace has had a profound influence on the direction of Australian poetry. With established outlets for poetry shrinking (and new publishers, armed with recent cheaper desktop technologies, proliferating), more poets have been encouraged to try their hands at a novel, or have turned to verse novels, or have become conscious that a collection of poems must have some greater narrative coherence. The poem as a unit of meaning is therefore likely to
exist in (an often productive) tension with the sequence of which it is a part.

Deborah Westbury's fourth book *Flying Blind* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002) is a good example of a collection shaped by a controlling narrative. Images and situations are shared across poems and these interconnections allow meanings to resonate beyond individual poems. This careful building of linkages creates not only a narrative in time, but also a sense of space and generosity.

The title of the collection keys in subtly to a cluster of images and preoccupations - with eyes and watching, navigating and being lost, panicking - which converge in the impressive title poem (placed in the very middle of the book) that charts the fatal plane crash of J. F. Kennedy Jnr in 1999. In this poem Westbury moves deftly between the reportage of a public tragedy (how more public could one get than the Kennedys?) and a meditation on how it is that we lose our way. Seven lines in, the poem tells us that “we cannot see it”. Watchers are framed within watchers: from the narrator who surveys the “moonless” night-sky through an attic window “full of clouds”, to the coastguard mapping the sea-bed for the wreck of the plane, to the cursed Kennedy clan, (“gathered/ for a wedding./They look up, they look away”) and finally to Ted Kennedy, who, in trying to navigate J. F. K. Jnr’s final moments, remembers the child photographed at his father’s state funeral:

... unable to reconcile the evidence
of absence, the blankness out there and the false horizon
in front of him –

at the end, the fear for which there is no answer.

After a sea of words describing impeded vision, the narrator returns to scanning the unreadable sky and closes the poem with an apt and arresting image that ties together the poem’s themes of fate, flight and disorientation:

you follow news of the search, your mind
wandering after birds – whether they fly on nights
like this, where they go to die, and if, opening
a ribcage smaller than your hand, you’d find
a gyroscope there besides the heart
and a tiny arrow, spinning around, confusedly.

The conjunction of narrator/bird/ribcage is modified in “The Diagnosis”. This provides a good example of the way in which Westbury’s collection
builds the map of its meanings through echoes sustained between poems. Even though “The Diagnosis” is far less ambitious in scope than “Flying Blind”, it borrows the latter’s reach and territory via the shared image. When the narrator’s worst fears are confirmed after a mammogram her inner panic is imagined as a “spirit flying in terror from her body/ and beating itself against the frosted window”. In a movement typical of many of Westbury’s poems here, her narrator is calmed by reconnection to the ordinary, the loved:

... she remembered the boy,
and, whispering his name over and over,
her ribcage opened
and the bird came quietly in

Westbury’s poems also share much broader thematic linkages. Many lost children, mainly sons, haunt Flying Blind and these all link in turn to Westbury’s brave autobiographical poems on this subject. The title poem and “The Tattooed Boy” deal with historical lost boys, whilst poems such as “Crime & Punishment” and “Her Son’s Keeper” depict betrayals of sons. Other poems like “Blue”, “Our Father” and “watching the wrestling” deal in different ways with unnurtured children or unhappy families.

A sense of the poet as careful watcher emerges throughout. Westbury’s personas are consummate quiet observers of both neighbours and strangers. Her world is often peopled by the lost and the marginalised. Her scapes include industrial wastes, shopping malls and country cafes. She moves with ease between an unselfconscious vernacular language that fits these territories and something more literary.

The Dantesque journey that the book takes through loss and grief is not without its “Virgil” moments. The epigraph for the first poem, taken from Victor Frankl, makes it clear that suffering creates its own kind of beauty (“What is to give light must endure burning”). Westbury writes sensuously of ordinary moments and connections that keep us going. These are centred on a hand-warmed coin passed from a toll-way attendant, babies growing in bellies, a yearned for love-child, even “two ruddy faced tellers” clutching their “sliced white” on the way home from work. There’s an earlier and memorable Westbury poem about living on hope. This book begins with “sulphurous air” and ends almost with eyes resting on “evergreens”.

Tracy Ryan’s latest book Hothouse (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002) is, like Westbury’s, also thoughtfully ordered with the similar aim of
building a sense of narrative through a cathartic inner journey. The “Hothouse” space frames the book’s central theme of displacement inside poems with flower/plant associations. Poems in this group are also often slanted statements of an aesthetic that is bound up in the poet’s shifting responses to austerity and abundance in the natural world.

As a mode, antipastoral has always attracted Ryan. In the antipastorals of this book abundant growth is viewed with ambivalence, even suspicion. In “Joseph’s Coat” the narrator declares, after the gift of a houseplant invades “my ideal/ the bare wall or floor”, that “only so much flourish/ can be faced”. There is “small room/ for green”. Again, in “Green”, a poem that rather reverses the lessons of Seamus Heaney’s “Death of a Naturalist”, the voice of the poem looks back to childhood memories of things that didn’t grow:

I learned you could tend
and tend without
recompense – you either
had it or not.

This thwarted growth is expressed in a series of menacing images that close off rather than reveal the mysteries of fertility (the “sly smile” of broad beans, the “blind eye” of coconuts). Several poems that follow also work around the axes of austerity and abundance. In “She Gives”, a mango, an exotic out of place “in an English winter” is “an embarrassment/ of riches, roundly/voluptuous” and its very materiality resists the text – it is “too gross for metaphor”.

Ryan’s flower poems naturally carry the freight of that tradition and sit inside broader systems of literary meaning about romantic love, femininity, fertility and mortality. They build the sense of a personal history that spans the experience of different places. In this way, the textual (via the language of flowers), growth and sense of place intertwine to build a narrative about the northern and southern hemispheres (or more explicitly England and Australia). As the book makes ready to move from north to south, there is a grouping of poems that use images of buds to trace a sense of opening out. In “She Takes Away”, companion to “She Gives”, the gift of a bunch of tulips fail their promise and “will not open/ ... except by chinks”. Here the lover is absent but in the next flower poem, “Outside the glasshouse”, the experience of unfurling camellias is mediated through that presence:
I hold back: double pink, double red,
such richness best at a distance
or I am swamped
unless it's instinct
tells me not to intrude
between you and the beauty
of your response.

This poem marks a turning point from all the others that describe frustrated growth. Even though there is still wariness of abundance (the lover photographing the blooms approaches them “as one might/ a timid animal” and their “glut of colour” is “almost insulting”), a change of tone is registered in the camellias’ considerate staged flowering (“Not all at once”), their “longevity/ and faithfulness”. The poem’s title also signals that we are moving beyond the confinements of the hothouse.

Buds, hothouses, even stanzas burst in “Homecoming” when the narrator returns to:

... this
letting it all find space. A release
a return to the wilderness.

The narrative of north/ south – austerity/abundance is, of course, too neat, and too neat for the bounds of Hothouse. Although the south is figured as a “release” and is connected to the erotic in the poem “Regeneration”, nature here also smacks of that Australian “weird melancholy” (“Moreton Bay Figs”, “Oleander”). Towards the very end of the book there is an interesting shift from the very ground that has given the collection meaning and shape. In “The Last Orchid” the voice of the poem declares: “ignore the orchid/ mere symbol unable to inspire, a woman/is not a flower”. This pronouncement clears the way for two last flower poems that float free from the previous language of flower associations. In the first of these, “Fragile Cycles”, encounters with the “small, sparse” white spider orchids provide a new frame for dealing with loss. The narrator describes the orchids as “new and artless”. It is precisely their quality of artlessness, the fact that they are not literary in the same way as flowers from the northern hemisphere, that provides the world-weary voice of the poem with a new “point/of departure”.

Robyn Rowland’s Fiery Waters (Five Islands Press, 2001) also unifies poems around female sexuality and the seasonal. Although there are some
strong poems about ageing and illness, there is a tendency for autobiographical elements to overwhelm. Too often the space for poetry here belongs to the New Age or to that sort of shorthand for the poetic moment, the lyrical surroundings of bungalows “smothered in green bougainvillea”. Rowland’s lush, emotive style is light years away from Ryan’s elegant, angular economy.

Dorothy Porter’s Other Worlds: Poems 1997–2001 (Picador, 2001) offers a different model for unifying a collection. Here, as the title of the book suggests, Porter continues her exploration of alterity. Strangeness, wildness, set-apartness, and the inhabiting of radically different consciousnesses: these are well-established Porter territories. In the first three parts of the book that otherness spans the various worlds of deep space, a poetry festival at Medellín, dead, violent civilisations (Rome, the Aztecs), and the Northern Territory. These worlds are related to each other by their shared sense of drama, danger and death wishes.

The deep space section opens the book. Here, space is turned inside out to mirror human frailty. There is a head-spinning confusion of bodies and space as “star-gazing” and disease are elided: “Space is white/ with melanoma spots/ for stars.... Let me end in fire”. The experience of deep space provides its narrator with access to fiery extremes (almost to a sense of the divine) and the coming of disease is evoked with ecstatic prayer. The body as microcosm of the universe is turned on its head in “Disaster” when the contents of a Petri dish are likened to “distant constellations”.

The language of the whole collection works hard to eradicate over-civilized poeticisms and goes for earthy, Anglo-Saxonisms (or Ockerisms) such as “chundering”, “scum” and “pong”. But another literary sensibility also haunts Porter’s pages. Beyond or beneath all her wild spaces lies that “other world” of poetry, and of what it means for Porter to practise poetry. This frame is given to the collection largely by Porter’s use of Keats. The first hint of Keats occurs in another series about mortality baldly entitled “Death”. In “VII” the princess and the pea is elided with sleeping beauty in a piece about the risk of breast cancer:

... you approach
the tangling kingdom
of empty palaces
where everything tastes
of autumn.

Three consecutive poems towards the centre of Other Worlds build on this Keatsian motif to explore the productiveness of dreams, enchantment,
immersion and doubt. In the first of these, “Faith”, the narrator defends a life “illuminated and/ choked/ by dreaming” because those dreams:

... burn and smelt
this world, this life
into great messy
plundering sense.

In “The Pool” the voice of the poem describes the importance of immersion in the subject for the poet. To enter imaginatively the consciousness of another is to be able to possess the “iguana’s cold-blooded/ hungry nerve ... And lose./Lose thermostat./ Lose skin./And then, only then./ I can sing.” This absolute immersion is reminiscent of Keats entering the pecking of the sparrow on the path. Finally, in “everything becomes mysterious”, Porter revisits Keats’s conception of negative capability:

those eerily lovely
ethane moments
when you’re utterly comfortable
with not knowing

The collection’s most explicit intersection with Keats comes in the section entitled “Poet In Medellín”. Poetry and the irrational meet most forcefully in “the hot diesel-scented night” of this “hallucination city” where visiting poets read to mental patients with “otro mundo stares”. In the final poem “Parque De San Antonio” Porter prays to be blest “with Keatsian soul/ enough to listen” and wonders at the very end “Did I wake or sleep?”

Waking and sleeping, or rather that state of suspension between the two that is so beneficial to the making of poems, is also evoked in Robert Gray’s latest volume, Afterimages (Duffy and Snellgrove, 2001). Yet Gray’s long, graceful lines are a whole other world away from Porter. Gray’s poetry has always been after images insofar as he is a consummate imagist committed to a poetry that describes the material world with exactitude. But this title also suggests the intensity of memory – those vivid sense impressions that remain after our eyes have closed, or after we have left a place behind (like Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility”) – and the intensity of Gray’s engagement with questions of how it is we perceive the world. The title also alludes to Gray’s love of the visual arts, and there are many references to art throughout the book. Gray’s drawings,
which accompany the text, share the same meditative quality as his writing. Similarly, the characteristic longer lines of Gray’s poetry that are so well fitted to thought, hold the gestural sense of a deft, sensitive sketching.

Gray charts a wide territory in *Afterimages*: from solipsistic nocturnes to the extraordinary bonds between fishermen; from Sylvia Plath’s graveside to Thomas Hardy’s self-tortured writing life. Although the book’s subjects seem disparate, shared preoccupations and images emerge. Hardy offers an interesting frame for several of the poems. “Summer, Summer”, the opening poem of the book, does as much as any well-conceived short story (which is how many of Hardy’s poems may be described) and recreates a quietly devastating moment at an English cricket match. This is an atmosphere piece full of the right, crisp sounds and tangential thoughts to communicate both the match and that half-interested, wandering, erotically charged state that belongs to spectatorship in the poem:

Canvas chairs and crumbs and the match from Lords kept low
on the portable,
and some
of us are stretched along the turf, and half turning the head,
at times, can watch
from under
cover, the pair who, laughing near, wine-flushed,
now each begin their slow ticklings with grass stalks.

At the end of the poem the lovers abandon the match for their love making and the reader is left in a Hardyesque moment to contemplate a spectator who “will never have his hand upon a firm breast again”.

Something of Hardy also appears in the prose poem “A Poem of Not More Than Forty Lines on the Subject of Nature” in its musings on isolation, the secret life of the external world and the bleakness of an indifferent universe:

So clear is the night, and so heavily-laden,
I think I can hear, far off, the roar of its terrible, rampaging machinery.
I am on a planet that is lying face-up to those burning faces like dice.

This poem shares common ground with “Chameleon” and “Xanadu in Argyll”. These all concern the working spaces of a sort of Ur-poet: “this one room”, “a borrowed house in the country” or the dream room of “Xanadu”: 
... that place where I stayed,  
or else have dreamed, and never saw, perhaps,  
or not like this. A room that opened wings  
each side of a small bed: the low, stretched wall  
of whitewashed plaster.

"A Poem of Not More Than Forty Lines ..." and "Chameleon" trace disorientation and self-recrimination that belongs to "the crossing-point of night". Although there is doubt, these are productive storms and, ultimately, these poems seem to be about the space that can be borrowed for poetry or the space of poetry itself:

This is a house, though, where I lie: I could find within it, through certain rooms, through many rooms, things that seem laid out for me. It is a house left me by default. A strange house, that was not made with hands.

The winged bed, the whitewashed plaster and the whole Coleridgian dreamscape of "Xanadu in Argyll", complete with its "hillslope" of "ferns", is a whimsical and joyous work portrait, and ends with the image of the poet "always found, a moment, leaning/ in that doorway, when evening's coming on."

The reading in gardens, the hands traile d along books, the borrowed houses and the scattered taste edicts of Afterimages all remind us that Gray's world is a highly aestheticised realm. His poems are so well made, his lineation so keyed to communicating consciousness, character, and mood that at times his poems are as encompassing and satisfying as small films. Those who believe that Gray's autobiographical work lacks a sense of intimacy could do no better than to read the stand out poem of this volume, the tender portrait of the poet's mother, "The Dying Light", to revise this judgment.

Les Murray's new book, Poems the Size of Photographs (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), is as idiosyncratic and challenging as ever. Like much of Murray's work it is a book that sends readers searching for a key, a set of tools for decoding. His syntactical oddities can make readers strangers inside their own language, so that reading becomes an exhilarating struggle. Perhaps one clue comes from material on the back cover of the book. Instead of the usual edifying blurb there are these two faux naive sentences framing the sepia photograph of Broadaxemen: "Les Murray lives on the east coast of Australia between Forster and Gloucester. Most of the poems in this new collection are short, though some are longer". 
The rhyme between Forster and Gloucester puts one in mind of nursery rhymes and seems to offer an appropriate foretaste to the riddles, aphorisms, and nonsense rhymes that dot Murray’s book. The other clue is the photograph. Smallness is significant here, both the irregular size of the book and the brevity of many of the poems. Through this spatial frame, Murray invites us to “read” through a stack of “sepia ancestors”, to hold them in our palms.

Many of the poems carry the strange tension of photographs in that they freeze in time a random moment that can only ever be part of the story. In uncontrived photographs all meaning derives from something taken by chance. This is so in the eerie poem “At the Falls” that dramatizes an ugly incident witnessed between a husband and wife on a mountain walk. When the woman “falls painfully” her husband spurns her with angry embarrassment and the narrator predicts that:

Over the years, this memory
will distil its essence: fear

of the house her eccentric man
inhabits, and what is done
there, or away from there.
That she is the human he has married.

This bizarre “snapshot” holds the exact tension of the photograph without clues, without narrative certainty. The use of the words “house” and “human” help to emphasize the inhumanity of the husband’s nature. Beyond this moment, he is constructed as beast-like, as a figure belonging to strange tales.

The strange tale or yarn is another focus of the book. “At the Falls” is followed by two more tales: “True Yarn” and “An Australian Legend”. All three poems function as monstrous stories about the Antipodes. They describe freak waves and “wild mirror-image” fighter-amazons. A feature of Murray’s strange tales, and of the book as a whole, is his use of the sublime. Poems like “The Annals of Sheer”, “At the Falls”, “Mythology” and “Apsley Falls” are all set at heights and imbue the natural world with terror and beauty. They are all vistas that seem uninhabited by the human gaze, nature poems that seem almost only themselves – they are like von Guérards on Heidelberg “Nine by Fives”. This egoless gaze is something that Murray actively strives for in the wonderful “On the Borders”:

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That hawk, clinging to
the eaves of the wind, beating
its third wing, its tail

isn’t mine to sell. And here is
more like the space that needs
to exist around the image.

In this book the habitable for Murray, the sense of a body being at home in the world, adheres to poems about the basics: work, clothes, childhood smells. There are some memorable work snapshots such as “To Dye For” and “The Cut-Out”. And words are to be lived in too: “and why not a whole metropolis/ street signed for its own life and ours:/ Childsplay Park and First Bra Avenue” (“Reclaim the Sites”).

If Gray is always “listening to” things, then the things of the world sing all the time to Murray. He celebrates the music of the non-verbal world and finds it everywhere (“The Tin Clothes”, “Touchdown”, “Pop Music”). “The Barcaldine Suite”, one of the book’s finest poems, is an origin story of music that lists the “ambient sounds that music has dipped up/ in its silver ladle”.

In The Clothes-Prop Man (Wakefield Press, 2002), Martin R. Johnson is also concerned with work, and yarns that belong to folk culture. This verse novel makes use of working-life photographs too, documenting the building of the South Para Reservoir in South Australia in the 1950s. This volume recovers stories of other lives, and shows Johnson’s honesty and respect for his project. The section called “Married Workmen’s Camp” includes some of the best work in the book, especially the beautiful poem “Wind”. The balances between the documentary and the lyrical, autobiography and history, are a strength and pleasure of this book.

Murray, Johnson and Geoff Page all evoke a sense of the earthy through the remembered smells and textures of rural childhoods. Page’s fifteenth book, Darker and Lighter (Five Islands Press, 2001), begins with twinned autobiographical family poems. These opening poems balance between them many of the preoccupations of the book as a whole: place, genealogy, mortality, regret, love. Perhaps most importantly, they trace the means of salvaging what might be needed from the past. They are also originary Adam and Eve-like fables of what it is we inherit and save from parents, and also of how we might begin to let these things go. In the first of these, “My Father’s Tile”, Page describes the life of a souvenir tile from his father’s “one trip only”, an object concentrated with absences, holding
both memories of the one trip never spoken of much and of the poet's childhood home on the Clarence River:

The tile is mainly grass and sky
and has the echo still
of summer afternoons back home

from where it hung there on the wall
looking out across the river,
days that go on somewhere still.

Several poems in Page's book ruminate on the melancholy way in which memories will outlive the objects to which they adhere. The tile here, or the mother's letters in the following poem, may well become the son's rubbish. But it is the text that the tile carries ("'Don't scratch against the grain' ... Now that's a way to live your life") that moves the poet on to the point of letting go of the possession. It is the life beyond things, the life of words and memory, that promise a kind of salvaging. Even something as dispersed as scattered ashes can hold it all together:

I find a space for it somehow -
that memory of Argentina
and 1938

: in a brain that's ashes now
scattered on a morning curve
that slopes towards the river.

"Sermon" and "The Kelpie's Back" deal with absences and the textual again, but in the context of writers and readers. In the first, Page explores the paradox that eventually text is all that's left, but that it can never divulge the whole inner life of the writer. (This is very like the sentiment at the end of Murray's "The Barcaldine Suite": "and there's no one on earth/ who knew us by heart"). "The Kelpie's Back" laments all the ghost poems from old anthologies that die with their readers. The poem's closing cast of readers evokes an earlier Australia: "... Women at/ small cedar tables/ ... drovers lonely at a fire".

A thread of nostalgia for the 1930s runs throughout the book from the vivacious women in "Three Widows" who "talk the thirties back between them", to the glamorous mise en scène of "Lipstick" to the thirties beauty of "The Face" on whom age has conferred "this extra grace", and finally to
"Scott and Zelda" still quaffing back "quick martinis". Page, who is a consummately economical scene setter, seems to connect this period with both glamour and gusto. The most playful of his rhymes, one of the pleasures of his work, also recall popular songs from that era:

Love is just a roadside crow
flattened by the sun,
the kind of accident that might
occur to anyone.

Page’s poetry can’t help but be touched by his teaching life and there are poems in the collection about the fragile lives of adolescence. In this he shares ground with John Foulcher. Foulcher’s *The Learning Curve* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002) is a new addition to that productive sub-genre, the young-adult verse novel. In a well-paced orchestration of different voices, it charts the rather grim lives of students and staff at a Catholic high school. Among the best things are the rhythms of the prose poem “Why Alan Won’t Come to School” and the bleak poems set inside the conventions of English tests. In his fine book, *How Not to Kill Government Leaders* (Wakefield Press, 2002), Stephen Lawrence also touches on the space poetry might hold in school lives and the extremities of adolescence. He shares with Cronin and Peter Boyle a desire to write about poetry’s status and social efficacy:

Is this poetry?

Writing’s most embarrassing
and poorest cousin. (“Is This Poetry?”)

Peter Boyle’s third book *What the Painter Saw in our Faces* (Five Islands Press, 2001) explores the blessings, frustrations and limits of attempting to know the world through words. It is a book suffused with the colour white. If blue belongs to Westbury and Ryan, red to Porter, mauve to Gray, the colours of earthiness to Page and Murray, then white is Boyle’s colour – the white of stars, of flowers, the white of “the soft inner side of the elbow”, the white of visions and dreams, of vulnerability and of the numinous, and significantly of emptiness and of not knowing. The narrators of his long-lined poems frequently declare that they are lost. Two poems open with the phrase “I don’t know”. At different points and in different moods this sense of being lost intersects with a failure of language, or more precisely the sense that, in Boyle’s words: “the passion for words that overflows/ is
your own private and chaotic death” (“Everyday”). In “I want to see the world beginning” the narrator desires to travel beyond the world of words and naming into “the first day” of the “earthly world”. Here an Eden asserts itself, clouds are free from “their would-be interpreters” and “words have made very little headway”. Conversely, in the beautiful, elegiac prose poem “Missing Words”, Boyle’s narrator catalogues things and moments for which no words exist:

The sound the clock makes when it is disconnected and taken down from the wall but can’t lose the habit of trying to jerk itself forward. The look of old socks drying on a rack in the kitchen all through a winter night, hanging starched and sad opposite the wedding photographs. A word for your face when you can’t love but would almost like to try.

This equivocation about the efficacy of words is also brought to bear on the social possibilities of poetry. “Japanese Poet on the train to the Medellín Prison” asks very plainly “what do you give the Central Juvenile Detention Centre of/ Medellín”. The delicate symbols of the Japanese poet’s culture (mulberry leaves, paper of five colours, and apple seed) hold a grace and integrity but ultimately: “She doesn’t know how she could measure/ any poem against the rapist and the murderer/ and the crack dealer”. The poem also shows the intense empathy in Boyle’s poetry for his female subjects. (see also “Cecile” and “Woman at the Musée d’Orsay”).

This book is one of the most satisfying of the year’s work precisely because of this kind of inclusiveness and the tender, generous nature of others observed. Boyle can have a dark hour of the soul and still write convincingly about the washing or sleeping children at the same time (“At the centre of our lives”). Despite its deliberations on both the private and public failures of what one of his poems calls “Your silent unwanted art”, there is a great dignity and courage in Boyle’s poetry.

Perhaps another review might have visited the coincidences of shared particular spaces that occur between books, such as Gray’s and Murray’s delighted encounters with a fox, or two very different visits to Sylvia Plath’s graveside (by Gray, again, and Rowland). But the books above also share broader commonalities. They visit dark places, “other worlds”, things lost and salvaged, adolescence, the work of other poets, and the limits of language. This commonality suggests that poetry will always find and inhabit the spaces that it needs to, if only readers can “find a space for it somehow”.

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Poetry Received 2001–2002

Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the above review.


*Boyle, Peter. What the painter saw in our faces.


*Cronin MTC. Bestseller. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2001


Langford, Martin. *Sensual Horizon*
_Wagtail – 1 people like that and other poems by joanne burns
Wagtail – 2 November in Madrid and other poems by Peter Boyle
On the headstone’s frame, her photo blooms and swells –
weather, or sight, scratches across
her double-breasted coat, crabs at her eyes,
but her cheeks are flesh, the face visible, whole, a child’s gazing up at God or the camera. Her coat, all buttoned and sealed up.
A child, finished or not.
A thought, fingered in the pocket, barely formed before the camera flashed her out of time, and parents buried her with prayers for her future – and roses coy toss out a careless petal, a notice of resurrection, and vanish, in a cough of their own dust. She is left to rot in peace.

She hesitates. Turns slowly in her grave and cannot turn back.

She is a long way from God.

Above herself, she records the sun’s persistent angle. Her blue eye stares out the stone. What does God see? Passing, she draws me in, and I stumble,
as if in suddenly loose soil. But her touch leaves no trace. Her seeing seeps from its frames and Breathes the visible air. Even her faith must return to its element. She enters the slow infinity and forgets. Prayered-in, by a foliage of tongues which murmured with the beginnings of prophesy, rustling swaying bodies of Christians, clothed and made naked by their own closed eyes. An old woman etched in sudden light, her tongue knotting inside the cheek; a prayer working up and down her face like treadled thread; and on the platform, above a packed array of shoulders, cuffs, Pastor John, smoothing his tattered grey suit. Waist-deep in ocean, he baptised the cripple who rose from his chair, legs growing back. Nothing stirred the faint stirring; patterns shimmered and slanted, the hot sun, an uninvited sign, crashed through the blood-red curtains and circled with the dust; then voices, as if from other bodies, other times, burst out in a wordless torrent that would pierce the sky with upward rain. She saw not the heavens but their heads, gleaming with the bulbs of new stories, and when she shut her eyes as if to pray, a music grew in the pitch and clamour, and their sounds, their cries like Daniel’s roar

*Burn us, Lord! Burn us and let us be redeemed!* wistful flames in her ear.

A sudden sea, surging round Noah’s prow - and her life, all bundled in repentant prayer passes his eye like a fleck of dust or slant of rain, brief unsteerer.

God - jolting in His mirror.
Did Noah never snarl the hair
of a giraffe, imagine a world?
Cowled in a wooden womb, the species,
Shem and Ham and Japheth, and unnamed wives.
Was it peaceful at the helm?
Or was his weathered, wind-slapped skull
still poked and mocked by people no longer real?
- who would not heed the flood
that seeped into their very rooms,
warped their wallpapers, unsettled
their dinner plates, and floated their carrots away;
invaded their speaking mouths, inching above
the windows of their aquarium houses
- as anything but rain, brought on
by a hidden cloud, from which,
like swimming dogs, they ran,
in mortal fear of Weather.
Not even a little boy
stopped to believe he might rise, that his eyes
constitute a hole, through which
whole trees could be withdrawn, histories
and deeds unravelled
within his seeing, to the needle-point
of never-having-been. That his memory, too,
would simultaneously vanish, and he
touch light by being light, with hands
more music than any music they could play.
God’s burn, sunlight veining a leaf:
could she, with an accidental turn
toward a world imaginable to Him,
shake Him with a wash of finite gaze?
With priseable cracks, her picture.
A young and unrebuked stone
flowerless, in a fraternity of weeds,
shouldering the wind-tunnel gasps
and sound-emptying bells of Lygon Street trams,
among blackbirds and frail, pink-clad widows
who bend, effortlessly between prayer
and three-cornered conversation.
Stubborn upright,
a whispering wall, the unyielding vocal echo
of one who shouts, though inaudible in the surge,
*Get Thee Back, God! Thou Hast Made
Thy Bed, Now Lie In It!*

But her silence grows, her
forgetting is steep. In a moment, her moment
will come. All He needs to recall her is a flash
of light, a thought, barely formed.
flocked like a tiger’s pelt reminds me of you, my first bite a mouthful of flowers. I save you one honey-red as wine, plump as a bee-stung cheek and when you arrive, offer it up – I sing praises to the naked, downy skin with its heart of coals until, half laughing at me, you eat.

A thousand still lifes burn to cinders.
Oh, you eat that peach.
AFTER LONG SLEEP

I
Across the courtyard your neighbor leaves all lights burning.

II
Rain forces the ferns slowly down.

III
After long sleep how the nerves quiver. One note ascending, a knifepoint of pleasure you feel as pain.

IV
Some piece for the flute the neighbor’s child keeps playing.

V
Open your window. Though you thought you had lost the world, crowned in spires the World finds you.

VI
Molten silver, that same note, same note until she strikes it true.
I think you come back here often,
visiting as you used to do all those back to Bridget Connolly,
– to sit on the bench by the main drive
under the tall gum-trees
and listen to the magpies – if you’re lucky
when walking among the graves, earlier on,
you’ll start up a hare; in the neighbouring paddock
there’ll be at least one horse
looking randomly over the fence
– and you’ll see 7SD (as it was)
on the far hillside where I walked, before we were married,
picking flowers to give you, but not blue-bells
(they’ll break your heart, you said) in that faraway time
which visiting your grave brings always so close to me.
I am happy again, in a different world,
and hope you are, too. And I still don’t deserve it.
You would like her. And she would like you.
When we drove down from the late sunlit road
into this shadowy region where trees
reached over us and the sun mere memory,
one of us said: “It’ll be dark soon ...”
An obvious and commonplace remark, going nowhere, yet
as soon as uttered it struck us as
a premonition? a prophecy? a mood from outer space?
– something in the phrasing and the timing
made it seem resonant between lovers.

*It’ll be dark soon ...* Thinking about it since,
it’s not possible to decide why those few words,
uttered at the close of a pleasing day,
should be so memorable, as if one had been given
a walk-on part and a single line, only to find, surprisingly,
that what was spoken immediately acquired
a value not evident in the script
but one which had those roadside trees
leaning forward, a silently comprehending audience.
CONTRIBUTORS 2002

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BRUCE Dawe is a well-known Australian poet. His most recent publications are A Poet’s People (Longman) and Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems (5th rev. ed, Longman). The most recent study of his work is Dennis Haskell’s Attuned to Alien Moonlight (UQP, 2002).

PAUL DAWSON has recently completed a PhD at the University of Melbourne and is currently working as a lecturer in Creative Writing in the School of English at the University of New South Wales.

ROBERT DREW is the author of novels and short stories and, most recently, a prize-winning memoir, The Shark Net (2001), which has been adapted for ABC and BBC television to be released in 2003.
EUGENE DUBOROV has several collections of verse in Russian; poems and short stories in English in periodicals in Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere; also in Hebrew and German translation. He divides his time between London and Jerusalem.

LUCY DOUGAN'S first collection *Memory Shell* (Five Islands Press, 1998) won the 2000 Dame Mary Gilmore Award. She is an assistant editor of the literary magazine HEAT.

MARCELLE FREIMAN is a lecturer in creative writing and post-colonial literatures at Macquarie University. Her book, *Monkey's Wedding* (Island Press, NSW) was published 1995, and her poetry is widely published in journals in Australia and the UK.

JO GARDINER lives in the Blue Mountains and works as a psychologist with adults, young people in custody, and disturbed adolescents in a specialist education unit in Penrith.

JEFF GUESS has seven collections of poetry, the most recent being *Living in the Shade of Nothing Solid* (1998). His new collection *Winter Grace* is complete and in preparation now for publication in 2003.

JACK HIBBERD has written 40 plays, and has published three novels and two volumes of poetry. His most recent is *The Genius of Human Imperfection* (Black Pepper, 1998). He is working on a third: *Madrigals for a Misanthrope*.

NATHAN HONDROS lives in Perth and is preparing a collection of stories with the working title *The Short Life of Rodney Small*.

JEAN KENT'S most recent collection, *The Satin Bowerbird* (Hale & Iremonger), won the 1998 Wesley Michel Wright Prize. She was a resident of the Literature Board's Keesing Studio, Paris, in 1994; her more usual home is at Lake Macquarie, NSW.

ROLAND LEACH'S latest collection published in 2002 is *Darwin's Pistols* by Picaro Press. He is the proprietor of Sunline Press which has released three hardback poetry collections, and has many more in the pipeline.

MARGARET LEWIS is a retired school teacher. She belongs to a group of women writers who meet to discuss their own work, and also have workshops. She writes only when she has something to say.
JOAN LONDON’s third book, Gilgamesh, won the Age Book of the Year for Fiction in 2002. She lives in Fremantle, Western Australia.

DAVID LUMSDEN lives in Melbourne and works as a software designer.

MELINDA MARSHALL is a new young writer who lives in Melbourne, although her heart is in London. If she can find the time between backpacking and writing fiction she may one day complete her BA (Hons) at Melbourne University.

MEGAN MCKINLAY is a West Australian writer of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. She completed her PhD in Japanese literature at UWA in 2001 and has just finished her first novel.

MARK O’FLYNN’S second collection The Good Oil appeared in 2000. He lives in the Blue Mountains where his play Eleanor & Eve was produced earlier this year.

VIVIENNE PLUMB is an Australian living in New Zealand. She held the Buddle Findlay Sargeson Fellowship in Auckland, New Zealand during 2001. Her novel, Secret City, is to be published at the end of 2002, and she has been invited to read at the Ninth World Poetry Reading in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in October 2002.

FIONA PROBYN teaches in the Gender Studies Department at the University of Sydney. She has articles published in Australian Feminist Studies, Australian Humanities Review, Meanjin, New Literatures Review, Senses of Cinema and the Journal of Australian Studies. Her research focuses mainly on postcolonialism, feminism and Australian settler culture.

JAMES QUINTON, new to the cult of the untrue, considers himself part of the generation God forgot about.

JOHN SAUL’S short fiction has appeared in publications throughout the UK and in France, Germany, Italy and Australia, and in anthologised form in a number of books put out by Serpent’s Tail. His collection, The Most Serene Republic: love stories from cities, was highly praised by London’s Time Out. He hopes to see two novels published in the near future.

IAN C. SMITH lives in the Gippsland Lakes Area with his wife and four young sons. A collection of his poetry will be published late in 2002 by the Ginninderra Press.
ROGER VICKERY was born in Ballarat and lives in Sydney. Since returning to writing in 2000 after a twelve year break he has won several short story and poetry awards.

SHIRLEY WALKER is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of New England. She has published several books and many critical articles on Australian Literature. Her most recent publication is a memoir, Roundabout at Bangalow.

ELLEN WEHLE is an editor and performance poet living in Boston. She says having a live audience "helps winnow out the weaker poems", and writes for both the spoken word and the page. Work is upcoming in FIELD, Terra Incognita, and Runes.

PETRA WHITE was born in Adelaide in 1975; she is studying for a BA in English & German Literature at Melbourne University, and working part-time as editor and tutor.

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