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## CONTENTS

### POEMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geoff Page</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alicia sometimes</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan McKinlay</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Dawe</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mal McKimmie</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah French</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Wendell Capili</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Greene</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roland Leach</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Guess</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. P. Quinton</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graeme Hetherington</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Kelen</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark O'Flynn</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Lansdown</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Fahey</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTC Cronin</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bev Braune</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirpal Singh</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Young-Moo, translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Jongsook Lee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### STORIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where Here Is</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graeme Kinross-Smith</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Tension</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy Farr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortunata</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally-Ann Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris Lurie</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
you're memory
Wendy Waring
The Cutter-Off of Water
Alice Nelson
Peggy Walker
Anthony May
Perf
John Stubley

ARTICLES

Kevin Brophy, “‘Man-Moth’ and the Flame of Influence: a poet reading poetry”
Don Randall, “Cross-Cultural Imagination in David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon”

REVIEW ESSAYS

Adrian Caesar on new poetry, 2003–2004
Richard Rossiter on non-fiction, 2003–2004
Susan Lever on new work in fiction, 2003–2004

INTERVIEW

Richard Rossiter, “The Writer and the Community: An Interview with Tim Winton”

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS
PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2003:

Alf Taylor

for “God, the Devil and Me”
GRAEME KINROSS-SMITH

WHERE HERE IS

I haven't said all I want to say about time.

The blowflies die and remain in the tracks of the sliding window. I sit close by reading where there is good light. It is here. I read on in this room. People are always photographing each other, the book says. The photographs capture faces smiling. People don't know that each snapshot of a face may tell a lot about the future, as well as about now. There are smiles and smiles, is what the book is saying. Each photograph is here. It is now. Just for a fraction of a second – a 60th, or a 125th – and then immediately it is not here, it is not now.

I cannot say all I want to say about time.

Now it is what we call midday. It is still this place. This is where I am. I hear the roof crack in the heat. This is where here is, where I am. Will she come here? Will she find me? I am here. She is there. But she could be here. This is the place that time has reached.

Now it is what we call afternoon, the wind streaming the grass heads, the sun reaching in to the leaves and retreating as the branches move. Last night's thunder and sudden, brief rain scuds have gone. I can hear the door of the rough porch banging dumbly when the wind grabs it. Things are drying out again.

Here she is. Now she too is here. She sits studying her legs on the edge of the small dais. She fills my eyes. I love her contralto voice and her shoulders in the green top leaning down. Outside, the work gloves I used yesterday in the wet when I was splitting the wood are drying on the makeshift clothesline strung between tree branches. I can see the gloves from here, bobbing like unsure hands. Now it is another time. The sun has moved on through the leaves. It is roughly what we call evening, but with the time change that's not quite true – the sun's time is an hour earlier. The sun is still here. Its steady, streaming face masterminds everything I see, every ruck in the rug of the paddocks. I have the feeling that it is not
quite now, that it is some other time.

The men died there. They died up the road. It was not quite here, and
I'm not sure exactly where the ute left the road and rolled. I'm not sure
where their bodies lay, separated from each other in the grass. My neighbour
Jack found them. First he saw the ute on its side and went to look. Then he
found one man – he bent down gingerly: no breathing, no carotid artery.
Then stumbling about and swearing with dread and surprise he found the
other man up nearer the road. His clothes were peeled down his body,
probably by the seat belt that had torn apart. Dead – probably trying to haul
himself up towards the road. Both of them crushed. What is the difference
between the slow-burning brazier and private ballet of life and the ash-cold
stillness of death? There was a bottle of whisky in the ute, Jack said – and
syringes. Who knows, he said. It was none of my business, if you know what
I mean. None of it was here: it was there where the road bends near the top
of the hill, near the entrance to the Potter farm. It was then. The time of
the men reached a place and then it stopped.

I still haven't said everything I want to say about time or about death
after life. But if I die without warning will I want it to be down in the sea's
beautiful rooms of flowing tresses or would I like it to be on a hillside in
grass with the spangled notes of larks far up against the blue? It would be
then and it would be there. It's then, I realise, that I will stop
remembering. But at the moment it comes it will be now and here. There
will probably be no choice. Just like Jack my neighbour who found the two
men, and then two months later was face down himself on the bank of the
creek when they found him. Heart. He'd gone down there on the horse to
bring up a couple of mavericks to the crush – rain and plenty mud. So
when he doesn't come back to the fuggy kitchen and when Gwen his wife
has been round the others to check the calves, their neighbour Paul on the
other side is coming up the drive. Jack was going to meet me, he says. It
was then. It isn't now. It was there, not here. So Paul goes to look – up the
top first, near the windmill, and yes, there are three of the Herefords in
the truck but nothing in the yard. It's still raining in heavy sheets across
the face of the hill. He goes down to the creek. He comes back. Gwen asks
him, her face lighting. You better not go down there, he says. She sways
with sudden worry and turns to get her old oil coat. He stops her. She's
quivering. Ring the Doc, he says. And the Doc comes, the smell of rain on
his coat in the kitchen. Not long after him the ambulance comes up round
the road's bends like a slow turtle from Benton.

Jack always said that when he went he wanted to go in the paddock.

I might never say all I want to say about time. What am I supposed to
do? There will be many other happenings that will come to sit near me. I will still breathe, watching each quivering movement until the happening is over. I will wait for the light to settle. There may be the dark clouds like enforcers behind the forest at the head of the valley, there may be the sheen of rain on the road. Afterwards, I will probably turn again to the axe – trimming, splitting – and time will step gently around me. The next burst of sun will reach its fingers into the lopped branches where they lie on the ground. It will draw out the sad wine smell of sap that the tree has spent all its life hoarding.
VERS LIBRE

Out on the skateboard
he is writing free verse,
floating up to

rails and benches,
sailing in the lower air.
And it’s all just a matter of

muscles and tendons,
of “going on your nerve”,
as Frank O’Hara, New York mystic,

memorably said.
The vocab’s in the
knees and ankles,

“ollies”, “kickflips”, “carves” and “grinds”,
the tricks that risk
the full cement,

the moves that sometimes
don’t work out –
that bailing to a minor scuttle,

the rolling on a shoulder.
Friends, of course, are part of it
but they are not the point.
The deck, the kerb,
the wheels and he
are writing as the wind might blow
across the options of the concrete
an endless
evanescent poem.
Nick smells like a jumper you smoked hash in a month ago then threw to the back of the cupboard: sweet, must, fug and dust. He has always smelt like this, with or without drugs. The smell is the sweat in his hair, curling down towards the tip of her nose as she tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. The memory of the smell is dredged up from the base of her brain: she remembers the smell with her whole body, head to heart to cunt to toenails, the smell of her youth.

“Helen,” he kisses against the top of her head, holding her in a tight hug as they stand, just out of the rain, framed by the front door of his house. Music is coming from inside the house, just audible under the high, animal wail of a tiny baby. “Come in and meet the family,” he says.

Helen follows Nick down a long wide hallway, past doors opening onto his life: steel grey office; sun-yellow lounge room; deep red bedroom; sour milk baby’s room. The hall ends in a big, open space. There’s an impression of light, even with the darkness outside, the rain clouds and early morning.

Though she’s never been there before the room is familiar to her, from the photograph of it in the newspaper clipping that her mother sent her last year. The paper had run a series of features over several weeks, *A New Architecture for Australia*, and of course they’d featured Nick, so lucky to have him back, internationally acclaimed, signature work in London and Hong Kong, settled back home with beautiful young wife. And so on. There was a photo, a fish-eye view of this room, Nick in the foreground distorted by the lens, with the thin, backlit figure of Young Wife in the background, sitting on the wide window ledge, her legs drawn up under her chin like a sulky teenager.

In the room now, Young Wife sits with a dark-headed baby at her breast. She looks up from the book she is reading, eyes beaming smiles from under curling dark hair.

“Eva, this is Helen. Helen, Eva. And our little Nina.”
The baby lifts her hand from her mother’s breast, as if to wave hello to Helen. Nick stands watching them all, grinning.

“Hello Helen, I’ve heard so much about you. Good to finally meet you.” Eva smiles at Helen, that beatific smile.

“You too,” Helen says. “I can’t believe we haven’t managed it before now.”

“Well, cuppa?” Nick asks.

“Thanks, I’d like that.” Helen says quickly, welcoming the thought of something to do with her hands, something to hide behind.

“Water for me, darl,” Eva tells him, “and can you bring me the macadamias? Sit down,” she says to Helen, “make yourself at home. Every time I sit down to feed her a message goes straight to my brain. Ping! Macadamia nuts. It’s costing us a fortune.”

“I was the same with Liam. Roasted almonds. Here, I brought something for Nina,” Helen says, foraging in her bag. She brings out a lumpy gift, leans across and places it on the table in front of Eva.

“Helen,” she says warmly, “thank you.”

Nick brings a glass of water and the bowl of neat round nuts, places them on the table by Eva. He picks up the gift, starts to unwrap it.

“Thanks Hel.” He drops the paper and holds up the stocky wooden bee, spins the rounded red wings with his finger. “It’s great.”

“It’s a Buzzy Bee,” Helen tells them. “It’s a New Zealand thing, it’s one of those classics that everyone had when they were a bub. They’re mostly made in, I don’t know, China or something now, but this is a true blue kiwi-made one.”

“It’s lovely Helen, thank you, she’ll love it,” Eva smiles that smile again, beaming it in Helen’s direction.

Nick squats in front of Eva – squats easily, Helen notices, watching him in profile, none of the old-man-groans Tom’s started making when he kneels or bends or folds himself into a small space – and waves the bee close to Nina’s head. “Look Bubba, Kiwi Bee from Helen and Tom.” He turns and shrugs, smiling, at Helen, “Thanks Hel. It’s great,” puts the bee down on the sofa next to them, and places his hand gently on the suckling baby’s head.

“Isn’t she beautiful,” he says quietly. It isn’t a question, and he means Eva as well, Helen thinks, not just the baby. She remembers, vaguely, years ago when her boys were new, Tom looking at them – at her – like that. Nick turns his head to look at Helen, a sideways look, and she’s struck again by how little he’s aged, how much he’s still the young man she remembers from all those years ago, when he was hers.
Nick gets up – Helen listens especially hard for the creak, the crack, the under-his-breath oof, but doesn’t hear them – to tend the whistling kettle, then brings mugs to the low table the sofas cluster around.

“It’s chai. Decaff. With honey.” He takes the piss as he tells her. “It’s all we’ve got at the moment, Eva’s made me empty the house of anything with caffeine.”

“Fine, fine,” Helen holds the mug to her face, inhales. It smells like a sweet, wet dog. She watches Eva and the baby over the steaming tea. Nina has dozed off, her mouth slipping away from the long nipple leaving a trail of saliva and milk joining mother and child.

“I’ll take her,” Nick whispers, and settles back into the sofa as Eva lifts the baby and places her in his arms.

“You forget how tiny they are,” Helen says, “I know it’s a cliché, but you do, you know. When they grow up.”

“How old are your boys now?” Eva asks, reclining now against the arm of the sofa, her feet (her tiny, soft feet, Helen notices) against Nick’s leg, rubbing gently.

“Liam’s twelve, James’ll be ten in August.”

“God, are they really?” Nick whistles. “I remember when you called me, when Liam was born. I was in – ”

“Hong Kong. And we were in Seattle.”

“Was it that long ago?” the two of them say simultaneously, then “Snap.” They all smile at that, smile over their drinks at each other. They’re quiet for a while, the rain darting on the roof, the tea keeping them occupied.

“They’re lovely when they’re like this, aren’t they?” Helen says, nodding at Nina. “Is she sleeping at nights? Are you sleeping?” I’ll bet you are, she thinks, you can’t look like you both look and not be sleeping, not with all the new-baby-bliss-hormones in the world.

“She’s amazing,” Eva confirms, “we’re so lucky, she’s slept through every night, a good nine or ten hours.”

Fuck, Helen thinks, remembering the endless, sleepless months when her own boys were little. “Mmmm,” she tells them, “lucky you. Makes a difference. I remember being so knackered, just constantly knackered.” But you have youth on your side – bitch she thinks, then mentally takes it back.

“Hey, we still going out for breakfast?” Helen asks. She feels the need to get out into the world, be on neutral ground, away from the perfect warmth of their house.

“Yeah, let’s – “
"Darl, would you mind if I didn’t? Helen, I hope you won’t mind, I’d love to come, but I really should have a lie down while Nina’s sleeping. You two must have plenty to catch up on."

"Oh, sure, I know how it is. You sleep," Helen says, relieved and ashamed at feeling relief.

"I’ll take Nina with me, babe. I can take her in the frontpack, she’ll be fine. Give you a real break."

Eva reaches up to Nick’s ear with her toe (with her toe!) and strokes it. "Thanks darling," she coos. She unfolds her legs from the sofa, stands up, yawns and stretches, and reaches out to take Helen’s hand. Eva’s hand is cool and warm at the same time. Soft. Small. "So lovely to meet you. We’ll talk again before you go home, yes? You should come around for dinner. She’s in a fresh nappy, darl. Have a lovely breakfast," and she turns and leaves the room, padding down the hallway. Helen hears her humming, hears doors opening and closing, a tap running. Then quiet. Nina snuffles, still asleep.

Nick looks across his daughter at Helen. "Shall we go then?"

"Yeah."

"I’ll just grab a few things for Nina, won’t be a tick. Would you hold her?"

"Sure."

Nick stands, hands the sleeping bundle to her, then busies himself filling a bag with nappies, spare clothes, a distracting toy: the simple paraphernalia of the tiny. Helen’s body remembers how to hold a tiny baby – how long has it been? – but she is still surprised by the lightness of her, and the heaviness, the density, at the same time. "Hello, Nina," she whispers at her, "I used to be in love with your dad. I’m Helen."

They drive towards the coast in Helen’s rental car. Nina is strapped into her capsule in the back, behind Helen, where Nick can turn around and see her easily, touch her, touch the plastic keeping her safe. There is a quilted fabric star hanging above Nina on the handle of the capsule. She is asleep, oblivious.

The roads have changed, the houses of Helen’s childhood gone, and she is always shocked when she visits to come this way, to see the great walls of roadway where the little dark houses used to be. She turns the car into North Street, pointing straight at the sea. They pass Lyons Street a few minutes later.

"Your old street," Nick says, grinning at her.

"They sold it ten years ago," she tells him, smiling, thinking he
remembers, he remembers about me.

“‘They happy where they are? Mandurah, right?’

‘Yeah, yeah they seem to be. Dad’s got his boat, Mum’s got half the street organised into book clubs and coffee mornings and god knows what else. The house is all new and shiny, well, ten years new, but you know. Yeah, I think they’re happy. They don’t miss town.’

‘God’s waiting room down there, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not so bad, it’s nice for them. It’s their fiftieth wedding anniversary next week, that’s mainly why I came over. We’re having a big party, all the old cronies, people I haven’t seen for decades.’

‘God, fifty years. I can’t even begin to imagine what that must be like.’

‘Tom and I will’ve been married twenty years next August.’

‘Shit, I guess so. Shit. It seems – recent. And forever ago.’

‘You’d already gone. You were in Sydney,’ she tells him, surprised at how well she remembers, at her lack of hesitation in remembering.

‘So I was. Well.’

‘Well.’

‘Well, wish them all the best from me, eh. Your mum and dad. They probably don’t remember me.’

‘Oh, they do. Mum adored you. She always asks me what you’re doing, as if I have some kind of radar connection to your diary.’

She turns the car into Marine Parade, and the ocean is there, dark blue for winter, the noise of it, the glory. The rain has stopped as they’ve driven, and the sun’s out, as if the rain was never there. Helen pulls the car over, swerves across the road and stops, skewed, looking at the water, out to sea.

‘God it’s gorgeous,’ Helen says under her breath.

‘I know. It’s why I came back, you know? I fucking love this coast.’

Helen winds the window down, closes her eyes and listens to the surf, smells it.

‘It’s so warm. For winter. Wellington’s freezing at the moment. Well, always.’

‘Serves you right, living there, I never could understand why you went. Christ, New Zealand! Traitor.’

‘Bugger off. Dag.’

They smile, sit a bit longer, Nick turned back towards his still-sleeping daughter, pulling the rug up towards her chin. He leaves his hand on the rug as he turns back to Helen.

‘I check her about a thousand times a day, you know? Is the blanket too far up, can she breathe, is she warm enough, is she too hot, too many clothes on, not enough. I’ve never felt like this before. I’m taken over. She’s so beautiful. I don’t want anything to happen to her ever, nothing
bad, nothing imperfect. Such perfect feet, they've never trodden ground."

"It's true, I remember, when they're this little you can't imagine them being bigger than they are, being – violated isn't the word, I don't mean anything as strong as that. Changed. Affected by the world."

"Yeah."

"Then all of a sudden they've got big tough smelly feet, just like us. Scabs and cuts and dirty toenails, sticky hair and sour breath. At least, boys do."

"I'll put my Nina in silk slippers with sheepskin lining. Keep her perfect and soft and untouched," Nick grins at Helen, not meaning it, meaning it. "Put her in a convent. Only let her listen to k.d. lang." They both laugh. "Come on," he tells her, "I'm dying for a coffee. I'm sick of fucking chai."

The cafe is already crowded when Helen and Nick walk in. Nick cups Nina's sleeping head in his hand, her body strapped against his chest in a front pack.

A couple is leaving a table by the windows directly over the beach, and Helen and Nick replace them, polite smiles as they manoeuvre around each other in the too-small gaps between the tables. Seated, Helen leans against the window, looking out at the beach. There are swimmers, young and old, despite the temperature, despite the early hour. There are always swimmers at this beach, every day of the year, never mind the weather, Helen remembers that from when she lived here. She remembers thinking they were mad, the ones who swam in mid-winter like these ones – she was only ever a summer swimmer, would wait until the water was as warm as it would get. Now, living in Wellington, she hasn't swum in the sea for years. Not since the boys were little enough to need her to go in with them, and even then she could usually count on Tom to do it.

A girl drops menus on their table. "Coffee? OJ?" she asks, her smile as abbreviated as her language.

"Latte, please," Helen tells her, "and a croissant. With jam."

"Flat white, thanks, and a smoked salmon bagel."

"Right." The girl leaves them to it, scribbling on her pad as she focuses on the next table.

"I was swimming for a while," Nick offers, tilting his head to the side, towards the ocean and the tiny figures shivering behind the glass. "Every morning, rain or shine. It was good. Good start to the day."

"Why'd you stop?"

"Don't know. I was away last winter and I got out of the habit. Kept
meaning to take it up again, but I never got around to it. Then Eva got pregnant – I don’t know, it was just one of those things that fall away, out of your life. I’ll take it up again sometime. It was good, good for me.”

“Something’s been good for you, anyway,” Helen says before she can stop herself, “you look great. Pact with the devil? Painting in the attic? What’s your secret?” She looks at him then, really looks, and finally, this close, she can see the lines around his eyes, at the side, the depth of the lines running from his nose to the edges of his mouth. Laughter lines, etched deep. He’s doing it now, utters a loud laugh.

“Clean living.”

“Bollocks. Tried that, and look at me.”

“No, you look great,” he says quickly, too hearty so she knows she doesn’t.

“Thanks Mister Magnanimous. Good for my age, you’re supposed to say.”

“You’re only my age,” Nick says.

“Don’t remind me. I feel like your mother.” Because she does. Helen knows that Nick will be noticing how like her mother, how like her father too, she’s grown in the years since they last saw each other. That she’s put on her mother’s heft and wobble; that her face has set, like her father’s, into its plain, Anglo-Saxon, meat and potatoes heritage. She has faded to the pallor of wall putty after years in the cool, unbeckoning sun of Wellington. Next to Nick’s slim, dark face and body – melanzane and vino rosso, his Dad was the same, she thinks, skinny as a rake, young until he died – she feels a generation older. Come on, she tells herself, shake yourself out of it.

“Eva’s lovely,” Helen says, and young, and beautiful. Especially young.

Nick just smiles back at her, an almost embarrassed smile, acknowledging, thinks Helen, that he knows exactly how lovely Eva is, how lovely to wake up next to, and how slim and beautiful is her body to hold.

“How’s old Tom? Say hello to him for me,” Nick offers, to match her Eva-talk.

“Fine, he’s fine, same as always. Busy, of course,” because her dear Tom is always busy, and always fine, and always the same. Always has been. Her Tom is the same as he was when she met him: her pillar and post, her support, her brace. As he was all those years ago, when he picked her up and buoyed her up and cheered her up: when he put together the desperate pieces that Nick had left her in after he’d torn out her heart.

But her heart doesn’t hurt any more, not from Nick. It’s been too long,
the hurting stopped years ago. When she sees Nick now, it's as if he's a long lost, well-loved relative, someone she's delighted to remember is related to her. Except that he's not, not really related, except by shared memories of long ago passion, flared bright with youth. She looks across the table at him now, cradling his daughter, and loves him like a brother—but not a flesh and blood brother. Fluids, that's what they shared. He's a fluid brother, long ago shared spit and come and her own distant wetness bonding them surprisingly tightly still, like wet clothes sticking to hot skin. Or as a coaster holds tight to the bottom of a glass, lifting with the glass to the lips of the drinker. Surface tension binds them, with the molecular memory of the long ago action of fluids.

The girl brings their coffees and food, and they smile their thanks, drink, eat a little, comfortably silent.

Then, “I was going through boxes when we moved back,” Nick tells her, “and I found that old poster for The Merchant of Venice.”

“Oh god, you had it on your wall for so long! You used to stare down at us from that poster, remember, you had it over the bed. Your eyes used to follow me around the room, I swear.” His hooded eyes, Helen remembers. “I’ve got the programme at home somewhere. Amongst all the other junk.” She smiles as she thinks of them, so young. “We felt so old, remember, we were the oldest ones in the Drama Society, they were mostly First Years, we felt like their grandparents.”

“Yes, we were twenty-two.”

“You were the only one for Shylock. Remember, everyone said you looked Jewish enough —”

“Yeah, Italian, Jewish, what’s the diff?”

“— and of course you were so old —”

“And you were so pissed off that you didn’t get a part.”

“As always. They made me the dramaturg. I was always the fucking dramaturg, and no one outside the English Department had any idea what one even was. I don’t know why I kept going back.” Helen laughs at herself, at growing close to anger even from such a distance. “It got under my skin, you know? I wanted to be on stage, and all I got to do was bloody dramaturgy. God, I still don’t even know how to say it properly.”

“You were good at it,” Nick tells her. “You used to boss us around. I’d never noticed you before that.”

“I’d noticed you. You were the reason I kept going back. I wanted desperately to do the trial scene opposite you, I had this grand plan to subvert the text and sexualise it,” she takes the piss as she speaks, but it
was true, it had been her plan. “You know, all that talk of flesh. ‘This bond
doth give you here no jot of blood: the words expressly are a pound of
flesh.’ I had it all worked out. You were powerless.”

He is looking at her, fraternal, all notion of sex gone, a mild smile across
his face, as if amused to remember that he and Helen, that the two of
them, that he and the middle-aged woman, that they ever were. The
sexual tension is gone, as it should be, she reminds herself. Nothing like
the smell and electric loin-stirring of the Merchant nights, the rehearsals
flowing into notes, flowing down to the pub and eventually into his bed –
but not until after the last night. A full house, the crowd loud and loving
it, the great surge of whatever it was that lifted and bound them all
backstage, in the dressing room after the last performance was over.
Bubbly, then too much beer, then someone had a bottle of rum, and then
just the two of them and a calming joint, sitting on the grass across from
the pub, by the river. The talking had stopped, stilled by the smoke, and
she’d placed her hand on his back and found that it belonged there, and
he’d turned to her and smiled that bewildered smile and that was it, their
mouths had fallen together and the kiss had lasted an hour, longer, and he
was glorious and she smelt him and her hands travelled the country of his
body as they lay on the cool grass, under the dark night sky and she rolled
him over and he was hers, his flesh was in her, slick, and the night time
smell of the river was all around them, wet – like them – and as glorious.

Helen looks at Nick across the table, again, chewing her lip. Her heart
doesn’t hurt any more. It doesn’t. There is Tom, there are the boys: the
heart-stopping beauty of their boys. And things are good, her life flows
along with equanimity. There is little rush any more – not from sex much,
not from anything really. She assumes this is the business of age, that this
is the shape of a human life. And it is gentle and calm, and she cherishes
this. Yes, she must cherish this, that’s the way celebrate the calm.

“It’s all so long ago, that’s what I find hard to –”

Nick breaks off from speaking, looking up as a deep voice shouts –
maybe a word, maybe “God,” or perhaps something less formed, a guttural
grunt – at the counter of the cafe. “Christ,” the woman at the table behind
them says under her breath, then “Oh sweet fuck” from across the cafe,
then there’s shouting from the beach, wafting to them through the
windows. Helen and Nick look up from their coffees, look at each other,
then down onto the beach like the others in the cafe, but it takes them
some time – only seconds, but everything is starting to happen more
slowly, time becomes strange at this point – to focus on what is happening.
There is splashing in the water – but it’s a beach, there is always splashing.
There is shouting from the beach – but there is often shouting. It’s the tenor of the shouting that helps them make a sense of it. The shouting is shrieking, and the shrieks are of terror.

There is a bigger splash then, a flash of dark, a bullet, an intensity, that most feared thing. There is a shark, breaching the surface. And, as quickly, the shark is gone. Or has become unseen. And Helen realises that there is a swimmer in the water who is not moving, that there is something strange about the swimmer’s shape and lack of movement. And that there are two other swimmers in the water, heading to the still swimmer. Two strong swimmers, two men, stroke matching stroke as they pound towards the still one. Everyone else is getting out of the water, they are standing, shivering, lined up staring at the sea, watching the strong swimmers as they reach the still swimmer. One of them grabs the still swimmer in rescue hold, around the neck; they swim as quickly the long fifty metres back to shore, to the shallows, and collapse on the sand in only intermittent reach of the fingers of foaming water.

There is no blood, not even a drop to pinken the water. No jot of blood. She had expected blood. But there’s the flesh: there is the torso in the shallows where the other swimmers have dragged it, legless, one arm missing, like a shop-front dummy waiting to be dressed. The strong swimmers lie, exhausted, either side of the torso. Three other men lift the body from the froth of the surf, lift it from the shallows and stagger up the beach, place it gently on the sand, above the reach of the water, then one of them kneels at the head, places his hands at what’s left of the neck. Other watchers reach for the two men, the rescuers, help them up, drape them with towels, with jackets, warm them. As she stares, unable to move her eyes, someone covers it – the body, him, she tells herself – with a cartooned beach towel. The shape of his body fills the shape of the cartoon cat, raises it lifelike above the sand. A second person covers the cartoon towel with a plainer one, appropriate, coloured blue-green like the ocean.

Helen hasn’t heard a sound for the last several minutes. It is as if the noise of the people in the cafe has stopped, the cars have stopped, even the waves have been making no sound. But she realises, as the noise slowly starts to filter back into her mind, that her brain must have blocked out the noise, that her poor senses had more than enough to take in without the crash of the waves, the frightened shouting from the beach, the sharply inhaled relief – it wasn’t me – of the people in the cafe. As her hearing returns, Helen hears the thumping whirr of helicopters, that sound of war zones and traffic reports, vulturing in for a stickybeak.

Helen tears her eyes away, looks shyly at Nick across the table. Nick,
still staring through the window, covers Nina's sleeping eyes with his hand, as if to shield her from the horror.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck oh fuckofuckofuckofuck,” he whispers, on and on and on into the salt, sweet, chill air carrying death in through the barely-open window.

They drive to Nick’s in a silence broken only by the quiet whimperings and snufflings of the restless baby in the back seat. Helen stops the car on the verge outside his house. Nick lets himself out, then comes round to Helen’s side to unbuckle Nina. He reaches his hand in through the open driver’s window and lays it over Helen’s, clenched around the steering wheel. His hand on hers is cold and sweaty. Shock, Helen thinks.

“Hel,” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” she says to the steering wheel, “look, tell Eva I had to go, I can’t –”

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s OK.”

She looks past him and down at the staring, black-eyed, perfect baby.

“Hey Nina,” Helen says to her quietly, and the baby stares back at her in an understanding way. “Look after yourself.”

When she gets back to her sister’s house there is no one home, but Ruth has left her soup for lunch, and a note telling her to help herself, that she and Tony have gone to meet friends for lunch, they weren’t sure when she’d be back, XXX, see you, R.

Helen can’t take her eyes from the sheet of paper in front of her. The lightness, the lack of shark and flesh and horror in her sister’s note hurts her, makes her heart ache for the sister, the wife, the daughter, the mother, the lover of the dead man on the beach. For his flesh, ripped and cut and torn: forfeit. To bait fish withal.

She reaches across the bench for the phone, presses the numbers that will take her home. Five rings and the machine clicks on, and it’s James’ voice, her baby, “You’ve reached the Flannery household. We’ve all been abducted by aliens, so we can’t take your call right now. Please leave a message after the beep and we’ll get baaaaaaaaaaagh, the alien noises—” The message dissolves into a gurgle of alien noises, she can hear Liam’s voice as well as James’, then laughter, muffled. She hears the beep and breathes in deeply.

“Tell those aliens you’re entitled to one phone call. I’m at Auntie Ruth’s all day. Call me. Love you all.”

She turns to the stove, lights the gas under the soup. She takes an open
wine bottle from the fridge and pours herself a large glass. She raises her wineglass to the window of her sister’s warm house, out through the window to the trees. It has started to rain again, and the garden is dark and glistening. Water coats the outside surface of the pane; drops join to form rivulets then part again, becoming singular, individual.
ALICIA SOMETIMES

STEALING INFLUENCES: THE SUBURBAN SUBTERFUGE
For my dad

the first: Astral Weeks

Lester Bangs got it right: *twirling melodic arc*
How come you never told me this was your Psalm?

I’d seen you in those photographs: scrubby, mod shoes, fluffed hair, sewn bravado, scuffling drumsticks, 1967.

It was as if hope was on your T shirt, the back read: hip.
I’d lock myself in my bedroom & play musical dress-ups.

Me, with a comb, mimicking heartbreak & loss & you sliding in & saying *dinner’s ready sweet thing.*

the second: Blonde on Blonde

Dylan: the firm glue. Watching you with guitar & harmonica, softly layering your vocals with mine *(ghost of lectricity)* we’d wink *(howls)* discussing what the next line means, flinging definitions & sources.

Double vinyl like wheels driving me further into the dreamy tongue of new landscapes & there in the sun, I’d know I was your daughter, it’s marked: deeply depressed in the bones of your face.

the third: White Light/White Heat

I’d crouch in the living room, headphones & squalling, craning my neck to see if you’d move to catch me
orbit-happy, decibel-excess, the wheezing of sound. This thrill of circular, impatient thrust, rambling

the coffee table. Picturing stark night-clubs eight years too early. Winding words aloud, then I’d

run through the kitchen in my socks, skidding, scrambling just to tell you: this is my favourite bit.

the fourth: Chelsea Girl

On first listen, my diary writes of orange heroin, the girl with the cheekbone blue-green eyes.

This was only on during late Sundays, never when guests were around fawning over your LPs.

I savoured this one, kept the taste for quiet recipe. Fizz would play the record years later in our flat,

openly, as if it could heal the mournful, the searching. I hope it saved her; Nico with her arms around my friend.

the fifth: Greetings From LA

Provocative hallucinations cushioning my teen years I would get ready; doloroso dolling up; Buckley

wailing in funky groove. Rebellion, at least has rhythm. All my moods were in time: energetic & experimental.

LA: Australia contains those two letters but we were worlds away. Sometimes you and I would go weeks ...

but then, the amp in the background or the snare & we’d be all rock group again, on stage, together

in the lounge-room belting out our history in song.
MEGAN MCKINLAY

ANCESTOR GAMES

In Hong Kong,
they give you 7 years – no more,
to shake loose that heavy flesh
and settle your bones into the earth,
Then they crumble you into brass,
to spend the rest of your death
squatting on mantels,
blind witness to the living.

In Japan, you find a corner
of the house, sometimes a seat
at the table, compact and sweet:
mandarins are the flavour of death.
And they pause, now and then,
in the midst of their breathing,
to open and close shutters
on the quiet business of the dead.

Here, our lavish bones crosshatch
the suburbs, push skyward
in columns of vehement stone.
Unruly skeletons lay
stubborn claim to acres; we picket
our dead yards, drunk, still,
on horizons, this luxury of air.

(Here, in this comforting vastness,
we spread our deaths
across all tomorrows,
as if the end of us were also
the end of the world)
ENCROACHING

In the garden,
my sister and I empty our shoes
without being asked.
Some things are learned early:
can’t have that sand in the house.

As we watch,
impossible piles form
around the grevillea –
mountain ranges thrown up
from size 4 sneakers.
Even our mother
no longer blames the ants.

Down at South Beach,
we pick out letters on rust-eaten signs.
*Do not walk on the dunes:
revegetating, restabilising –
all under control here.*
Our mother squeezes
our hands, keeps us
to the path.

And at night, she closes doors
on the relentless advance –
inland and inland,
through pockets and crevices,
fissures and follicles.

Seashell to our ears,
there is only our mother’s voice:
*Don’t go too close to the edge.*
But already, we know:
the edges insist on their own approach;
even in the dry centre, there is no path
that leads elsewhere.
As broom and vacuum sweep
the coastline from our door,
my sister and I wirebrush
our feet on the footpath,
knowing there will always be
inroads.
Despite months of cloistered, air-conditioned days,
the lingering taste of sea-salt on skin fails
to surprise us.
Bottomless pockets, shoes barely bought,
bleed sand as if tapping a vein;
And as we close
those late-night shutters
we catch ourselves in imagining:
a false-backed wardrobe – there!
how easily we step into
this vastness of dunes,
that expanse of sky.
THE WRITER AND THE COMMUNITY: 
AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM WINTON

RR  Tim, you were a student at Curtin University from 1978 to '81, when Elizabeth Jolley was one of the teaching staff. Did she have much of an influence on you?

TW  More in practical terms than anything. It was early in her publishing career and behind the quirky façade she seemed to have a real determination about finding an audience. She had a great sense of craft and an infectious love of literature, but she was also quite worldly, shall we say; she wasn’t shy about the kind of professionalism required in order to be published. She encouraged me to send stories to magazines, showed me how to be systematic about it. She made herself available to book clubs, drove all over the state, and I think that fostered a loyal readership. She didn’t limit herself to the academy and I was interested by that.

RR  She seemed to get a lot out of teaching.

TW  Yes, she liked all that. I was amazed that she stayed so long, particularly once she found such a big readership. She was generous to a fault.

RR  There was someone else there ...

TW  Michael Henderson. He was probably the most influential, for me, in terms of what ended up on the page, you know, prose style and sensibility. He was a Kiwi, a graduate of the program at Iowa, and his novel, The Log of a Superfluous Son was highly praised by Anthony Burgess and Malcolm Cowley, I think. Really austere prose style, very stripped back, like Hemingway through the lens of Beckett. He introduced me to a lot of writing I hadn’t encountered before, Marquez, Juan Rulfo, Borges. There was a kind of idealism in him, in what he was striving for. I was very young, but to me he seemed authentic. He was a writer first and foremost rather than an academic who dabbled in a bit of writing. I gather he didn’t play
the departmental game very well and when he was moved on I was pretty disillusioned. Died a few years ago of cancer. He was a lovely man.

RR    Do you think that apart from some sort of companionship, I suppose, you learnt anything at university? Would you be the writer you are now without attending Curtin?

TW    Well, yes, I learnt plenty. But I think I still would have been doing what I’m doing. I imagine Curtin saved me some time, though. I was living in a fairly remote city, a deeply provincial place as you know, and I was from the working class, so I didn’t have any connections. To writers, I mean. But also socially, Perth’s pretty tight that way. I didn’t have the entrée that someone like Robert Drewe had. I really only saw it in The Shark Net, the ease with which he could penetrate that world. Circe Circle, business, sports figures, the social life of the yacht clubs, and then as a jounro at the West Australian. I was this kid from the suburbs, from a pretty narrow world. Doing the creative writing course saved me years of diddling around trying to find things out for myself. I mean, how else was I going to meet a writer? I think I learnt a lot from individual teachers. Graeme Turner was teaching there at the time and he helped me through a draft or two of Shallows. Before that, Michael Henderson worked with me on An Open Swimmer. The only short story that survives from that undergraduate period is “The Woman at the Well” (Scission) which I submitted as a class piece to Elizabeth. The best help I got was from teachers who saw that I was serious, where we trusted each other, and they mostly let me get on with it.

RR    In 1987 you left Australia for the first time. How did you find being jumped out of Perth and going to Paris?

TW    I’d never been abroad before, but I won the Marten Bequest in 1987 which was $5000 to travel. I never had any ambitions to travel – I was just focused on trying to make a living. I’d published half a dozen books for about a thousand bucks a pop, and I was married with a kid and trying to wean myself off grants ... but I thought, what the hell, maybe I’ll never get another chance. It was a terrific opportunity. Weird, but a great time. I did the bulk of Cloudstreet while I was gone. After Paris we lived in Ireland, in the gate lodge of Leap Castle in County Offaly. Another lucky break. Deborah Roberston, a friend from my Curtin days, knew the owner, a lovely guy called Peter Bartlett, who offered us the use of the place over the winter of 1988. The castle was infamous as a haunted place, and the Sitwells and others had written about it. There was some talk that a Yeats’ poem had been influenced by the tower and its legends.
I remember visiting Yeats’ tower. It was a powerful experience. I felt very much at home in Ireland; it seemed quite familiar.

I liked the people and was moved by the landscape, but I wouldn’t say it felt familiar. It was actually quite strange to me. Rural Ireland was still very poor and a lot of people seemed to have one foot in an almost medieval mindset. This is out in the country, in the midlands. I knew plenty of country people. My family was only one generation off the farm. But I suppose it was my first encounter with something close to a peasant outlook, which I learnt more about in Greece. In retrospect I see that being abroad while I was writing Cloudstreet was useful in more than one way, the obvious one being the ability to see and feel things with the benefit of distance. I think it helped me find a way toward the more instinctive, magical part of the book. All those storied buildings, all those people I met whose imaginations hadn’t been totally fractured by modernism, (you know, this is real but that can’t be real), their sense of wonder was intact. It emboldened me, I suppose.

You returned to Western Australia, to Perth, in December 1988?

Yeah, bought a shack a couple of hours up the coast. It was all we could afford but it suited us perfectly. Raised three kids there. It was a bolthole, I guess. Haven’t lived there fulltime for ten years now, but I still live there in my head. Emotionally it’s really important to me, that house, the place, the reef, the beaches. When you’ve spent a long time feeling vulnerable, living hand-to-mouth, never qualifying for credit or a loan, for instance, it’s hard to underestimate the feeling of security you get from finally having a place the landlord can’t kick you out of. Even if it is just an asbestos shack.

Do you write up there?

Not anymore. Just reading and fishing and surfing. Fun only.

Did you know you were going to be doing The Riders when you were in Ireland?

No, it never crossed my mind. I was happy to keep writing about WA, which felt like my patch. I’ve always liked regional writers, provincial writers, and I’d come to see what I did in those terms. So, it was a surprise. I felt pestered by images and memories in the years afterwards and didn’t know what to do with them. Also I ended up spending a lot of time in planes and airports and foreign cities in the years after I returned to Australia. Funny thing, feeling deeply connected to your own landscape,
really needing it, and having to travel so much. Became a pretty well-travelled provincial ... but that's a fairly common Australian experience isn't it.

RR In terms of writing a children's book while you're still working on an adult novel, do you like working that way or does one distract you from the other?

TW Haven't done it for a while, but I've never found it a problem. In fact I used it deliberately as a means of avoiding being stuck. Writer's block was more than an artistic inconvenience – it was potential financial disaster. So I used to literally move between three desks. I guess I see it as all the same work; it's all story. In fact characters from adult novels drift in and out of the kids' stuff because the settings are often the same. To me it's all the one fictional world; it took me a long time to be conscious and comfortable about that, but I kind of enjoy it. Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson have done it all before, of course, and William Kennedy, Richard Russo and so on. The stories overlap and somehow you're slowly adding to them without any design.

RR The fact that the characters recur; is there a sense in which they are built around real life people?

TW Oh sure, there's an element of autobiography in everything. But the characters who recur don't seem to be showing up because of that. Sometimes it's got more to do with the recurrence of place, me going back to a certain milieu over and over. Characters, plot, subject matter, themes, if you will, all follow from that, it's just how I work. People from my first novel show up in my seventh. It can be fun. For me, at least.

RR With the exception of Blueback which is a bit of a crossover book, I suppose you're very conscious that you're writing something called a kids' book nevertheless?

TW Hard to say in simple terms. I'm usually expending energy imagining my way into the story first and foremost, then figuring a way, by trial and error, of telling it the best way I can and then keeping a kind of organic consistency while I'm doing that. Keeping the voice, I suppose. The question isn't really whether kids or adults will like it. More an issue of whether I'm still interested myself. I'm easily bored. Sometimes the book's almost finished before I have a sense of who it's best suited to.

RR Is That Eye, the Sky the strongest example of that?
TW  No, funnily enough. Early on in that book I was aware that the subject matter was a real stretch, culturally. For Australians, adults as much as anyone else. Trying to write about faith and a primitive mysticism in a post-religious age, particularly at a time of great hostility to Christian symbolism ... I didn't think people would get it, assumed they'd hate it. But I was really enjoying myself during the writing so I just pressed on and I got a real surprise when it came out here and overseas. It was very well received. It was the first novel to be translated, I think. And filmed. But I never thought of it as a kids' book, no. Fun pressing the boy's voice up against all our safe modernist prejudices, though. I was half frightened of what I was doing, but enjoying the discomfort, if you know what I mean. It was the turning point for my work, I think. Gave me confidence. Without it there'd have been no *Cloudstreet*.

RR  For me, what I respond to so strongly in your work is the establishment of place, the environment, the ocean and all that. That seems to provide a connection, to give a substance to the thin history that we have, especially in this part of the world.

TW  I got that same feeling from Stow, still do. An almost sacramental view of the physical world. When I read Rob Drewe's *The Savage Crows* I got that wonderful sense of validation you get, the recognition of somewhere you know finally showing up in a book. But in Stow there was something bigger, deeper, for me, a sense of recognition that was about mystery within landscape and place. He's still my favourite Australian writer by a country mile.

RR  You've become a really key figure in the environmental movement. Anyone who knows your work knows that this is not a recent interest. Do you see the roles of writer and "public environmentalist" as seamless?

TW  No. I see them as pretty distinct things. And I think my public role has been over-estimated. And I can't pretend to be comfortable about any of it, to tell you the truth. I like being a fiction writer, it's the only thing I ever wanted to do and I've done it for twenty-five years with as much personal privacy as I can manage. I find public stuff really hard, very draining, a real problem, so I avoid it wherever possible. Some years are better than others in this regard. Anyway, for quite a time I was able to be a donor or otherwise quiet supporter, sometimes able to discreetly bring people together, sit on committees, usually marine-related issues, because that's what I know most about. Having been a spearfisher and angler and
surfer all my life, having lived in a whaling town, you know, seen stuff happen and come to see how fragile things are, I suppose it made some sense. The renewed proposal to build a marina and resort on the Ningaloo Reef kind of forced my hand, really. It was a nightmare on the horizon. All the major green groups formed an alliance to fight it. We had no money, no real lever. We couldn’t come up with anything better than me, the public idea of me anyway, to get the issue some attention, put pressure on government, engage the public through the media. And once you start that crap you’ve gotta see it through.

RR I guess time spent on these issues is time not spent writing.

TW Well, they are unrelated anyway. Why should a novelist’s opinion be given any more weight than a social worker’s? Novelists shouldn’t sign up for propaganda wars. The only thing I can say in my defence is that even if my participation was reluctant my position was genuine. I did it as a citizen who knew a thing or two about marine stuff not as a novelist – and I didn’t tell any lies. We gave the public enough information to come to a judgement about what was being proposed and when they saw what we stood to lose they got active. It was an amazing thing to be a part of … you know, a moment when people came together across all kinds of boundaries. It gave me a special kind of political and cultural education, I suppose, and I’m still amazed that we won. But I just never expected to spend two years on it. And, yeah, I didn’t write much more than speeches and essays in that time. I begged people for money, wrote a lot of wheedling letters and helped plan stunts to arouse the media. Not my idea of a good time.

RR I suppose the other thing is that you demonstrated you were so good at it, however reluctant you are.

TW It takes a lot of Greeks to wheel out a wooden horse. I was just the horse, really, just the visible part of a bigger enterprise. It was hard having to write or speak on behalf of what in the end was hundreds of thousands of people when you’re accustomed to representing only yourself. And scary to realize that you’re making powerful enemies on the Terrace and in parliament as a result. You’re in the public in a very different way to the novelist. While you seem harmless as a public advocate, the media indulges you, but once it’s obvious that you mean business then the dogs are off the leash and they can do things to you that you’re not sure you can recover from psychologically, legally, financially. It was gruesome.
From here, can you think of major formative influences on your work? That relates to the next query, do you see Tim Winton, husband, father, Dockers supporter and so forth, as a different figure from Tim Winton, novelist, or are they just unpackable?

Influences ... yeah, living in WA, an isolated city. And living a suburban life when the suburb itself was a work in progress. When I was a kid in Karrinyup there was bush on one side of the fence and civilization on the other and it was just all happening before our eyes, the pushing back of the bush, the domestication of the landscape ... in retrospect that seems to have had an impact. Having one foot in each world, a love of the outdoors, a sense of loss from early on. But also the fact that all of us were making the place up as we went along. There’s also the strange cultural isolation of Perth. Even since the Web and the ubiquitous writers’ festival and whatever, you still see writers struggling with this gap between us and the rest of the country. The danger is that Perth is a city that rewards mediocrity to some extent. I worry about the sheltered workshop mentality that still prevails. People aiming low for safety, local presses and agencies feeling the need to nurture and protect and compensate for all this isolation and indifference from the east, so that not only is it a small pond to swim in, but also a pretty warm one. Sometimes there’s a lack of vigour as a result, a settling for less in every sense.

And yet you still choose to live here.

Sure, it’s where I’m from, although I’m mobile in a privileged sort of way. I get to spend time in the country as well as the city, and I can travel. But I’m happiest at home.

Do you think there are particular challenges in being located here at this point in history?

No, not really. I’m lucky to have come along at a time where it was possible to stay. A generation or two earlier it would have been harder, no question. But there’s this weird monolithic thing, maybe it’s a Perth thing, about being perceived as a success. In the public imagination it’s as though there’s only room for one sports star and one captain of industry and one writer and so on, a kind of laziness that maybe comes from the sleepy media outlets we have. When I was young Elizabeth Jolley was the writer and Alan Bond was the businessman and so on ... and now, it’s me. It’s silly and embarrassing and it’s not useful to the culture or the individual. It’s self-limiting.
In spite of the fact that you’ve been widely published overseas and have a huge readership?

Sure, I understand. In purely industrial terms it’s no disadvantage at all — I mean, what’s the commercial downside to being Rupert Murdoch? — but I’m talking psychologically. There’s something morally corrosive about that monolithic status, is what I’m trying to say. And you worry that it’s no help to those around you, you know, making a big shadow that obscures other work, other people. It’s uncomfortable, but I don’t know what to do about it except to leave … and I don’t want to leave.

I suppose with your work so strongly located here, you are more likely to get the Western Australian Writer tag.

I understand that. And I’ve been fortunate that my work has been, well, accessible.

Do you think the writing can go in directions of issues like the environment, refugees, all those pressing political social problems of the moment — do you feel you can engage with those matters as a writer as opposed to a citizen, or is this not how it works for you?

No, it’s not really. I write domestically, I guess. I mean I’ve written a lot of fiction that touches on issues of environment for instance, but it’s rooted in a pretty ordinary, domestic world. And fiction needs complication and doubt, a kind of muddiness that’s the opposite of tract-writing. It’s easy to have a thesis about sexual politics or refugees or labour relations or whatever, but it’s not easy to make that argument survive the bends and bumps of a novel. And God knows there’s some novels ruined by the effort. The novel you just know came with a 15,000 word essay explaining its purposes to some MA supervisor. Man, they’re boring.

So, writer and citizen …

I don’t buy the idea that the artist is above society, that romantic notion that spilled over into modernism … or the artist as high priest or seer. The writer has no special insight and no special responsibility either, but they have the same rights and obligations as everyone else. If I want to have an impact on politics that I feel I can’t achieve legitimately within the weird constraints of my own craft, then there’s nothing stopping me trying it on as a citizen. Being well known is no disadvantage, I suppose, but it doesn’t give the right to talk out of your arse, either.

In your new collection of stories, The Turning, which is due out
later this year, there is a return to communities that are present in your earlier fiction – especially Angelus and White Point. The Lang family bear an obvious resemblance to the Leonards of the Lockie books, set in Albany – but typically these new stories are darker, the characters more embattled, even though the time periods they refer to are the same – the 1970s and 1980s. I am wondering about the reasons for this shift, if you agree there is one. Do you personally have a different perspective on this period now that you are further removed from it? Or is it a consequence of a sense that communities today are less cohesive, institutions (like the Police Force) and individuals are less trustworthy than they were?

TW  No, there’s no deliberate shift of outlook. Despite the cosmetic similarities these are different characters. I guess I just imagined myself into a different place with them. The Langs are in a more malevolent situation than the Leonards and their problems take them down a different path. In a way it’s the slow implosion of a family under pressure ... and the regrets and hurts that linger. The Leapers, the two brothers in the White Point stories, have been around in my head since my student days. That and the dunes of White Point. They could have had a walk on in Dirt Music, those boys.

RR  Many of the characters are facing difficult times: they’re just getting by, or failing to. With one notable exception, they don’t seem to have anyone much to turn to or talk to. Even though you make the point that your work is not issue-driven, it is commonly observed that a sense of isolation and loneliness is a familiar experience for many people today. In this limited sense do you think the stories reflect current lifestyles and attitudes?

TW  Oh, loneliness is hardly unique to our times. Funny, though ... most of these stories are either about adolescents or people in middle age, periods when people typically find themselves struggling to connect. And here there are these characters in midlife considering their own trajectories, if you like, contemplating their loneliness which actually seems to have its origins in their teen years. Do the stories reflect current attitudes? To some degree that’s inevitable but to be honest I’m not sure that I care very much.

RR  A number of the stories are focussed on the past and then in the conclusion arrive, rapidly, at the present. Does this amount to some deliberate, conscious statement about the impact of the past – its unavoidability, its continuity with the present moment?
TW  It's probably more to do with the demands of storytelling. That's often the way people tell you their story, isn't it? The way they suddenly leave off, and drag you back with them into the present. I suppose I settled on a kind of plain conversational tone for a lot of them, people wistfully recounting things. But, sure, the presence of the past is unavoidable, it's there in all my work. The past has its consolations but often it's just a knife twisting in an old wound. Either way, as Faulkner said, it's never over.

RR  As a reader, the collection works in fascinating ways – particularly with the recurring characters in the two families, the Langs and the Leapers. It's a layered reading experience, each story becoming more complex, because of its relationship with what precedes it, and what follows. To some degree this is true of all collections, but here it is almost like reading a novel. Is this a change of mode for you? Are we likely to see more collections like this?

TW  Yeah, that was a happy accident, gradually realizing that the stories related to each other. Could be nothing more than the result of twenty years of novelising – you know, the habit of hauling everything into the net, making connections. The short story writer is happy with a well-made tent; the novelist wants a shanty town at least. There was no pre-conceived chronology, so I did give myself a few logistical headaches. But, yeah, it's odd ... the stories relate and refer obliquely, but they don't require each other as chapters do. Yet they seem to help each other as you say. Somehow they become more than the sum of their parts, the way they resonate. It was interesting, finding my way with those characters. Change of direction? Well, they're just stories. I mean, I love the form, and I liked returning to it, but why ask me where I'm going? I can't even decide where I've been.
I, INCITATUS

And it came to pass that Caligula’s horse
Was proclaimed senator.

Rudolf Marku

I, Incitatus,
broken and bridled
equine senator,
steed to a self-deified
emperor, strode the equator
at the hand of my master,
left the whole world
gasping for breath.

In the unofficial version
of the divine birth legend
Caligula, the Once-born, rises
hydrocephalic and insane
from the morning vomit
of his father, Bacchus.

Death is foretold in his eyes:
he already knows
he will inherit an empire.
Darkness riots in his veins
like wine long-turned to vinegar:
the future is an ecstasy turned sour.

When Caligula’s family descended
like the Furies upon him,
wielding the death he could not outride,
nothing changed.
I, Incitatus,  
coupling with new masters,  
still, daily, circle the globe,  
villages, cities, whole histories  
devoured by fires sparked by my hooves  
and fanned by the wind of my passing.  
Between times,  
in the cool night,  
sleeping standing in my ivory manger,  
I dream my name being called  
by a real God, twice-born:  
First from the thigh of Zeus  
on a mountain of light,  
then from Persephone’s womb  
in the darkness of Hades;  
an ecstatic god of women,  
children and animals,  
calling me to freedom.  
For nothing changes.  
I am a Horse.  
I still remember Dionysus.

THE SLEEPING  
(After reading Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking”)  
I sleep to wake and take my waking fast.  
Mine is my fate and so I have no fear.  
What can I learn by dwelling on the past?  
We feel to think. The mind is all that lasts.  
I hear my mobile ringing in my ear.  
I wake from sleep and take my waking fast.  
You lie beside me: this was all I asked.  
I’ll miss the body I leave dreaming there.  
But who can learn by dwelling on the past?
Night fills the day, like dark wine fills a glass:
My heart gives way upon my office stair.
From sleep a waking takes me far and fast.

Fell Nature has a different kind of task
For you to do; go breathe the living air,
And, lover, dwell but briefly on the past.

From weeping you rise ready to outlast:
I fall away from always. But am near!
I watch you as you take your waking fast.
I watch you never dwelling on the past.
A TOUCH OF THE TESTIMONIALS

“When my husband Tom died
we were so glad we’d chosen Personality Funerals.
They make it all feel so personal, really ...
Like including with the coffin, for no extra charge,
that rusty old lathe from the garage where Tom
spent most of his time at home
until he became too ill.
Seeing that rusty old lathe sitting there on top of the coffin
on the way to the cemetery,
that was a nice touch, we all thought ...

And then when Grandad passed away
it was a pleasure to see they’d put
(right there in the chapel) the engine block
from that old FJ Holden he used to work on
whenever he got tired of watching the sports channels
– that was a particularly nice touch, we all thought ...
As was their including a piece of the lounge carpet
we never could get the oil-stains out of
– that was a nice touch, too ...

And when Uncle Sid eventually went
we were especially moved to see how the funeral people
had thoughtfully provided a large cardboard carton
just to hold all of Uncle Sid’s racing guides
(even though young Reggie said they wouldn’t
last very long in the crematorium furnace
– ‘the hottest tip he’ll ever get,’ Reggie said).
So, when your time comes, too
just remember that you can’t do better
than choose Personality Funerals
– I mean, they know what dignity means at a time of mourning.

And they’re dirt cheap, too.”
How to review twelve months of poetry published in Australia in 5,000 words? And what is the point? Historically, reviews have been a way to guide the reader towards what is worth reading or buying. Are readers really going to rush out and read/buy what I recommend? I doubt it. And my doubts are exacerbated by the impossibility of doing justice to any of these books in a few hundred words.

That I have been asked to undertake this Mission Impossible says something about the state of poetry and publishing in Australia today. Once thriving literary magazines have had their funding cut; poetry is, for the most part, published by small independent presses with limited marketing opportunities; most book-stores do not carry a significant range of contemporary work; many people write poetry, few read it; reviews of poetry in major newspapers are as rare as rain at Broken Hill; critical reviews of poetry are even more sparse. These plights of poetry will be familiar to the few who read this article. The question is, how to respond to the malaise with particular reference to the forty-nine books now carefully disposed in piles on my workroom floor.

Faced with this daunting task, the easy way out would be to choose the ten “best” volumes, (five men, five women) say something nice about each, and then make some anodyne remarks about the health of poetry despite its marginal status in Australian culture. Indeed, one could persuade oneself, given the weight of material under review, and given the beleaguered state of the art, that it would be pusillanimous to do anything but praise. This approach, however, would not only be boring but also would entail the avoidance of criticism. And the lack of a vigorous criticism of “literature” in general and poetry in particular contributes, I think, to the problematic position of poetry outlined above. So I am going to pursue another and more eccentric method. I will devote the second half of this essay to a brief notice of the best books as above. But before this happy
conclusion, I want to make an attempt to understand why I enjoyed comparatively little of what I read in many of the volumes and to suggest some reasons why others of goodwill towards poetry might also find such reading experiences unrewarding. I want to approach a few titles in a critical spirit, which seeks to identify trends that militate against the work gaining much of an audience.

Let me say at the outset that reading such a mass of work makes one ever more aware of how very, very difficult it is to write a really good poem. What do I mean by “good”? I mean a poem in which no disjunction is felt between form and meaning; a poem, then, in which the resources of the form – rhythm, rhyme, syntax, imagery, language – are married to subject matter in an indissoluble way; a poem, in which one feels every word as an inevitability, and to change a word would seem a desecration. I mean a poem which in this way produces “memorable speech” – memorable because it is profound, or funny, or satirical, or hauntingly musical. It is a big ask. But surely this is what published poets should be striving for?

The first obstacle to producing “memorable speech” that hampers many of the volumes under discussion seems to me a false or distorted notion of “the literary”. In a session entitled “Diseased English: Can it be Cured?” at the recent Sydney Writers’ Festival, Amanda Lohrey cogently touched upon this issue. Lohrey spoke of “mangled, pretentious, waffly pseudo-poetical writing which if it has five really bad similes and one strangulated metaphor in it, is considered to be literary”. Expanding upon this, Lohrey noted the misconception underlying such writing: the belief that “the literary ... can’t be plain English”. Though Lohrey is speaking here about judging writing competitions for school children, she is well aware that the problem extends to the “plane of high culture”. The idea that the “literary writer” has “a verbal facility ... they’re like ... a set of fireworks that can just toss adjectives or esoteric words into the air at random and link them up in some fascinating and preferably obscure way – which suggests that the writer is ineffably more clever and sensitive and deep ... than the reader” has, Lohrey asserts, “taken hold in several critical circles”. This leads to the kind of “fakery” in which “we collude in the Emperor’s New Clothes and accept anything that we don’t understand – and that’s full of figurative language – as being necessarily high art. And I think it’s about time we stopped”. Here! Here!

Let’s look at some examples, and examples taken not from the first effusions of the inexperienced, but from poets who already have, or at least seem to have, considerable reputations. In the prefatory pages to Judy
Johnson's *Nomadic*, we not only have the usual list of acknowledged periodical publications, but also a list of some ten or eleven prizes her poems have won. The collection has also had the assistance of the Australia Council. Johnson is unlikely, therefore, to be unduly worried by my carping. But almost every poem in this volume seems to me to fit Lohrey's description of fireworks above. As an added extra, there is a kind of specious exoticism at work in many of the poems, which locates their imagery in the Middle East or New Guinea or India or the West Australian outback, anywhere, it seems, other than the Newcastle, where Johnson lives. The opening poem of the book is also the opening poem of the *Nomadic* sequence; it is entitled “Shape” and begins like this:

This afternoon while looking for my watch
I found a love letter from your mistress.
In 1947 while searching for his lost goat
A Bedouin boy found the Dead Sea Scrolls.

There is no connection between the two events.

This is plain enough, but plainly unhelpful – an anti-metaphor pointed out by a banal and bathetic line. Here's how the poem proceeds:

I exist continents away from the Qumran monastery.
And words on paper predicting a future

cannot compare with copper scrolls
etched with clues to a biblical past.

Yet I encounter coincidence. As a snail shell
may only reveal the extent of its secrets when the snail
is crushed, so each ancient carapace crumbled as it unrolled.
And I am broken also, unravelling this script from eye
to tongue. It is not so much the shell that cannot take the pressure. It is the space beneath the shell, that once upheld its shape.

The poet is right, of course: one *cannot* compare the discovery of a love letter with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. So why are we bothering?
Because of a "coincidence". What this coincidence might be is not vouchsafed us – the date, perhaps? Maybe the letter is her father’s. Yet the next poem in the sequence seems to be about the poet’s marriage. Who knows? What is certain is that the poet is not going to help us out, because that would make it all too easy.

Returning to the “coincidence”, we also return to the tortured syntax of the next sentence and the even more tortured simile and metaphor it introduces. Leaving aside for the moment the “secrets” of the “snail shell”, let’s consider the way the simile unhinges following the word “so”. The first term of the simile is about the relationship between shell and snail; the second concerns the shell only: we are asked to consider the unlikely possibility of an “unrolling carapace”. What are the referents of this metaphor? If the scrolls or the letter or the poet are like the snail shell, where or what or whom is the crushed snail?

The rest of the poem does not help. The poet (like the snail and the shell) is also broken – so much is clear. But then a third term is introduced to the metaphor i.e. the “space beneath the shell”. That would appear, appropriately enough, to be air – hot perhaps? The metaphor doesn’t work. And the point of a comparison (which isn’t a comparison) between the love letter and the Dead Sea scrolls remains obscure.

I cannot leave this book without also mentioning a poem called “Towards the Edge” which describes a man “drunk and naked on the cliff top”, who is “spinning on his body’s axis”. The middle stanza describes an “aerodynamic principle/ that has his penis flare outwards like a/helicopter blade”. One would have thought that a drunk behaving in this manner on a cliff top had enough problems without this serious anatomical worry, which beggars exegesis.

Just in case I might be thought to have it in for “écriture feminine”, let me turn to other examples of the “literary”, this time taken from the work of two blokes. Peter Boyle’s previous collections we are told “have received many honours”. Like Johnson, then, he won’t be troubled by my critical interventions. His fourth volume, museum of SPACE (sic.) is very mixed. It is separated into three sections: “The Museum of Space - Etudes, Part I”; “Jottings and other Poems”; “Philosophers and Other World Leaders- Etudes, Part II”. Etudes, indeed. (Pretentious, moi?). The title poem opens the volume. It is in prose. (I have preserved the line-endings as they appear in the published version but have been unable to reproduce the justified right-hand margin.)
In the museum of space you open the lost codes. They glide around you — emblems and word fragments, pierced shells that become once more perfect spheres. You remember watching a man counting the beads. Though small enough to vanish into his hand, they tumbled through infinite circles. As you looked out one window, the cliff directly in front loomed up like a future you would never scale. Why are water and sand always used to measure time passing? They must then be the one substance — what never gets dry, what never gets wet, the absolute embrace that says, Wade into me.

There are a further two paragraphs of this, both of which are equally obscure because there is no apparent connection between the various scenes and images that we are introduced to, or the very abstract concepts (infinite circles?) that are broached. This is just the kind of stuff designed to make the reader feel stupid. Happily, I don't. I just don't want to read any more, because it seems so utterly pointless to me.

It is not only the prose “poems” that worry me in this book. Elsewhere, Boyle shows his penchant for imprecise metaphors that defy interpretation. “The Philosopher of Leopards” begins, “Why is a child’s ear like a car horn? Why are toes always too heavy for the journey?” Presumably these are supposed to be enticing rather than fatuous questions. But I’m afraid my immediate response is to say that a child’s ear is nothing like a car horn and my toes aren’t heavy. Perhaps this is the point. It’s a joke. But then the rest of the poem does not yield many laughs and certainly doesn’t answer the opening questions. It closes like this:

The leopard is the landscape without holes,
the hand blurred by the foot’s arrival
the spots that are the snow
that was the sky.
Disappearance is all.

Commentary seems superfluous. I leave readers to judge for themselves.

It is a pity that so many poems in this book are marred in this way. When Boyle has the courage of his conviction and writes more straightforwardly, he can be very good indeed. There is a marvellous poem towards the end of the book, “Of Poetry”, which begins with the recognition, “Great poems are often extraordinarily simple”. I don’t
understand why this precept doesn’t inform more of Boyle’s practice.

Another much vaunted poet is Luke Davies. His *Totem* comes with high praise from writers whom I admire and respect. In this instance, I cannot agree with them. The title poem is 36 pages long and is written in five-line unrhymed stanzas. It is very difficult to say what it is about. Love, mythology, physics, life, art, the universe etc. But as to any coherent argument or thesis, I couldn’t find one. There is a verbal energy and exuberance here, transferred epithets and synaesthesia are utilised in a self-delighting, romantic pot-pourri. But I can’t see many people making head or tail of this curious mixture of the high falutin’ and the banal:

The real issue, of course, was this: atomically, energetically, everything was wave function. And a wave continues forever into space, the wavelength never alters, only the intensity lessens, so in the worst cosmic way everything is connected by vibrations. And this, as even a dog would know, is no consolation.

Ah but the dogs will save us all in the end & even the planet. Not the superdogs but the household friendlies, always eager to please, hysterically fond, incessant, carrying in the very wagging of their tales an unbounded love not even therapists could imagine; their forgiveness unhinges us.

It’s a case of Dog save us. The forty love poems, each written in three quatrains, that constitute the second part of *Totem* are a great deal less obscure, but hardly more satisfactory. Often the poems are tripped up by clumsy rhythmical betrayals or clanking rhymes. This, together with the air of pastiche – one hears echoes of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean love poets – tends to make these poems read like clever-clever exercises gone wrong. Placing the titles in brackets doesn’t help:

(Sweep)

Come stay the afternoon at least
And sunset will be none the wiser,
Come suckle like the bees awash
In that hallucinated pleasure
Of stamen deep in the bowl
That petals make. Come stay an hour.
Come lie with me and be my love
My Sugar Lee. I will whisper in your ear
All the dreams you forget
As you sweep away night each dawn.
Come love me till evening.
It is almost noon.

This, I think, demonstrates admirably that plain English is also no guarantee of poetic success.

Several volumes not mired by obscurity and having subject matter that I found engaging, nevertheless failed to convince as poetry. I think particularly here of Cathy Young’s *The Yugoslav Women and their Pickled Herrings* and *drums and bonnets* by Miriel Lenore. These books are autobiographical in different ways and have a documentary ambience. Young’s book is about and for “working women”; it is self-consciously articulating working-class experience in a gritty, hard-edged language. I found many of the poems made me want to know more or to ask questions. All this is good. But, the form of the poems and the lack of tonal variation between them left me feeling bludgeoned. Young’s method is to juxtapose a string of clauses and phrases often eliding conventional syntax to produce a hammering staccato:

on the floor
they work all day
English classes after
lunch room full then a
shopping bag rush through tram doorways
to home to cook the family’s tea do the wash and clean
kids at school now they work to supplement their husband’s wage
parents just arrived
brother’s family to come soon
it will be crowded
3 bedrooms are never the right size to store worry

It can, of course, be argued that the breathless pressure of the lines is entirely appropriate to convey the pressure of the migrant lives described here. I only suggest that too much breathless pressure ceases to have an impact, and leaves the reader numbed after a time. I also wonder if this method in its insistence on economy does not diminish the texture of the experiences and the lives that are being described?
Miriel Lenore's poems are engaged in a geographical, political and spiritual search for her ancestors. The first half of the book is situated in Northern Ireland, the second in the goldfields of Ballarat. The subject matter is powerful, but often I wondered if the artful documentary method was allowing the writer to score points a little too easily as here, in the poem entitled, "Drumcree 2000":

The posters are everywhere
In shop windows on postboxes and lightpoles
Dumcree 2000
Protestant Solidarity
Unite in our struggle against injustice.
'Unconquerable except by death.'

Bernadette Devlin says
if you answer Saint Anything
to the question what school?
you will never get the job

I read of a little boy wanting
to work in the Belfast shipyard
whose mother said first
you must change your name Patrick

Though I am sympathetic to the political direction of this, I'm worried by the way Lenore's method steers very close to the brutal propaganda of the murals she describes.

In the second half of the book, where the material is more insistently historical, I found the poems too bluntly prosaic:

how to educate their children?
Lizzie and John signed petitions for a school
set in a small clearing in the forest
the tiny shack no bigger than a living room
Whim Holes Common School 1863
was for all denominations
unusual in those sectarian days

Somehow the verse form seems unnecessary to the utterance here; the lack of formal punctuation seems a gesture that fails to disguise the conventional and prosaic syntax.
I am well aware of those theories from both right and left of the political spectrum, which see the conventionally punctuated sentence in English as an instrument of oppression. I don't agree with such theories.

Joanne Burns, some of whose earlier work I have enjoyed, seems to subscribe to the idea that disjunction is a radical gesture. The blurb on the back cover of her latest book reads like this: “Burns’ ironic/satiric scrutinising of contemporary society continues in the poems and prose fragments of *footnotes of a hammock* – but often in a more oblique, disjunctive, absurdist way. Moments of self-angst, accidie are parodically trophed” (sic.). As a piece of self-reviewing, this seems to me to be better than anything I could attempt, including the neologism with which the last sentence concludes. Here's the beginning of mardi gras:

```
good heavens not ronald
again sniffing around
the moulding brocades at
the palanquin wrecker's yard
looking for signs of revival,
history's largesse ahoy - he snaps
his fingers as if a retinue
of factotums will fidget
into action at the whiff
of attar from the roses on
his chain store viscose
shirt - snubbed by those
D rate djinns he raises
his love handles like
a real godwallah
hissing for a free lunch ...
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This kind of thing can be fun in small doses, but over the long-haul the ironic, self-parodic, clever-clever, knowing tone becomes wearisome. There are, however, some poems in this collection, which have a more elegiac and intimate tone, wherein emotion is allowed expression in a more unqualified way, and in these Burns's undoubted linguistic flair and energy seem to me to find a more satisfying outcome.

In Adrienne Eberhard's impressive first book, *Agamemnon's Poppies*, it is a relief to find that irony need not be ubiquitous in twenty-first century poetry, and that the conventionally punctuated sentence still has a role to
play in articulating subtle perceptions and fine shades of feeling. Refreshingly, Eberhard is willing to try her hand at the sonnet and rhymed quatrains, and though these do not seem to me to be amongst the best of the poems in the book, I applaud the ambition to make these formal structures her own.

As the title implies, there is something in this book of the exoticism I noticed in Judy Johnson’s work, but here the rhetoric usually convinces of something deeply felt or imagined; there is a rhythmic and linguistic certainty in the development of the poems that convinces one that the writer is passionately engaged with her subject matter, rather than being passionately engaged with artifice. Eberhard is concerned with landscapes of the body, mind and heart; she has a talent for precise sensuality. Her poems about pregnancy and birth are admirable as is the ambitious sequence “Lines from the Black Sea”. Here, Eberhard imagines Ovid exiled from Rome by Augustus. She is not intimidated or inhibited by Malouf’s treatment of the same situation in his great book, An Imaginary Life. In the following poem, Eberhard fuses Ovid’s longing for home with his longing for love:

If I had a boat
and the strength to sail it
I could make my way home.

Return to the lithe, summer air,
to the cool breath of early evening,
to amber wine on my tongue.

I would navigate the narrow channels,
the inland waters, as if they were
the warm, secret places of my lover’s body.

I would suffer the storms of open seas
as if they were the wild gasps,
the frenzy of our couplings.

I would breast the coast of my country,
ihugging every inch and crook
as if breathing love into the pores of her body,
cajoling with the lips and tongue
until, at last, we arrive at Rome.
The poem is simultaneously lucid and complex as it not only articulates the misery of exile and loneliness with its attendant sexual frustration, but also forces us to ponder the politics (and sexual politics) of an impassioned patriotism of place.

Another poet whose precision and clarity I have always admired is Nicolette Stasko. Her fourth book, *The Weight of Irises*, does not disappoint. The wonderful art of Stasko’s poetry is to produce a voice that seems artless. As I read, I seemed to hear the poet as if she were speaking directly to me. In this way, the reader is invited to share intimacies. Though Stasko has always eschewed conventional punctuation, her lines form rhythmical and grammatical sentences, which sometimes seem to slide into each other by sharing a phrase. It is a way of making the reader pay attention to the tensions between the syntax and the lines, and a method of jolting the reader into awareness at key moments.

Stasko has a painterly eye, and her interest in fine art is evident in several poems here. And yet there is never a sense that we are leaving the world of lived experience to indulge in some abstract or superior realm. On the contrary, Stasko engages with paintings as she engages with life, searching for the radiant moments of illumination in the full knowledge of the darkness. Here is a poem from her sequence “Dwelling in the shape of things: Meditations on Cézanne”:

Is it possible to represent
our feelings so exactly?
the twisted trunks of trees mimic
furiously writhing couples *volupte*
whose embrace offers nothing
but violence
not even in the pale violet blue of the sky
the vulnerable green of the leaves and grass is
there peace or tenderness
only desire
a leaping dog with bared teeth
the screams of a woman being raped
or giving birth
are the same
we would rather believe
these figures might be dancing
and that the one who bends to wake
the sleeper
does so gently
Stasko is equally capable of telling a story, offering a dramatic vignette or pursuing a meditation. She is various, subtle and clever. I cannot do the book justice in this small space, better that you should read it for yourselves.

It is also impossible to do justice to the quality “Selecteds” and “Collecteds” from the blokes this year. John Tranter’s Studio Moon contains work published over the last fifteen years and includes some poems not previously published in book form. There is a new and ample “Selected” from Les Murray, entitled, Learning Human. John Kinsella’s Peripheral Light is a “New and Selected”, the selection made by Harold Bloom. Ouyang Yu has a New and Selected Poems and there is a monumental 690-page Collected Poems from Andrew Taylor. Happily, most readers will be familiar with the work of these poets and therefore I feel justified in limiting myself to a few remarks about Kinsella, Ouyang Yu, and Taylor before moving on to discuss a few books by less celebrated writers that seem to me of interest.

Peripheral Light shows John Kinsella in his best light. He gains from the process of selection. His extraordinarily prolific output inevitably means that the quality of work within individual volumes is mixed. Here, Bloom selects the best and the best is very impressive. It is also significant to note that the best excludes the kind of ranting poem that Kinsella is liable to shout at an audience with his manic, machine-gun delivery at poetry readings. Rather, we have here the wheat-belt gothic, the warped pastoral written in high energy lines with muscular cadence and sinuous syntax. The poems are a pleasure to read and made me understand Kinsella’s growing reputation. Bloom’s essay is interesting as well, not least for the way it concludes. Bloom writes that at the “midpoint” of Kinsella’s career, “We are poised before the onset of what I prophesy will be a major art”. It will be interesting to see if this prophecy comes to be fulfilled.

Ouyang Yu is a poet whose work I have enjoyed in literary magazines over the last ten years. His work probes the wounds of living between two cultures in neither of which he is at home. These are political poems in the broadest sense of that word, often fuelled by anger, but there is humour here as well and a formidable intelligence. If I have a criticism of the work, it is that it lacks tonal variation, and sometimes the words seem to have been flung onto the page with a view to creating a kind of anti-art. I understand the impulse to move away from empty aesthetics and the urgency that compels the poet to do so, yet if the utterance comes to seem too easy, too throw-away there is the potential for the reader to treat it too lightly as well.
Andrew Taylor is a poet who perhaps does not quite have the public profile of Murray or Tranter, yet he has been working away consistently over thirty-five years to produce an enormously impressive body of work. This Collected brings together poems from twelve individual volumes and includes some recent, previously unpublished material. It is a book that will live with me for months and years to come. Every time I open it to read, I find new pleasures. Taylor is a quiet poet, fastidious and precise, but this does not preclude a very wide tonal range and the deployment of a keen intelligence and wit in poetry that dazzles with its formal variety. The breadth of subject-matter is astonishing. Taylor is as at home writing about a cockroach as he is writing about a European cathedral. Here is another strength. Taylor is a distinctively Australian poet, yet he effortlessly encompasses the wider world. He is at home in Europe and America, and is a sensitive explorer of those cultures in relation to Australia.

Taylor also writes love poems, landscape poems, political poems, poems about the mundane struggle of day-to-day family living, and in all there is insight and learning worn lightly. One never feels that Taylor is showing off or self-advertising. His voice is welcoming; here is a poet who wants to communicate clearly:

Sometime

For Beate

Sometime in the night you must have visited me
sometime in the poor hours between last cars
and the double thump of newspapers on a drive
when the spirit sinks like water in a bore
during drought sinks and trembles and waits
in a double darkness of fear and sleep
which is not sleep but a kind of hunger

sometime then you must have visited me
with a gesture I don’t remember with a word
I cannot recall with a touch an embrace
a lovemaking gone without trace
when I woke except a winter sun
gilded the edges of our garden with the clear
knowledge that you had come to me again
It is, of course, impossible to illustrate the richness of this book via one poem. Suffice it to say that here is a massive contribution to the cultural hoard.

Among individual volumes of particular interest I found John Stokes’s *A River in the Dark*, Alex Skovron’s *The Man and the Map*, and Paul Hetherington’s *Blood and Old Belief*.

Although he is not a young man, *A River in the Dark* is Stokes’s first book. This is significant because the poems strike one as hard-won. They deal with difficult material – illness, death and grief – in a chiselled language that is searching and sometimes experimental. Through a variety of line-lengths, tonal variation and sometimes startling juxtaposition of imagery, Stokes attempts to articulate those states of mind and feeling on the borders of consciousness that are most resistant to language. Occasionally this leads to a knotty obliquity but there is never the sense that this is gratuitous. On the contrary, Stokes’s voice convinces because the poems convey the sense of struggle he has with intractable material. There are memorable phrases here and occasionally a wonderful lucidity is achieved in poems such as “AIDS Blanket” and “Making the Funeral”. Stokes is an ambitious writer and it will be interesting to monitor his development.

Both Skovron and Hetherington may be said to be in mid-career. *The Man and the Map* is Skovron’s fourth volume, *Blood and Old Belief* Hetherington’s sixth. The shadows of a European past are never far from Skovron’s work, but this does not mean his poems are uniformly dark. One of the pleasures of his voice is that he can appear relaxed and conversational while still adhering to a precise formality. I enjoy the way Skovron’s poems address the big themes of time and memory, of love and political brutality, of music and silence but do so with a lightness of touch, which never descends to mere whimsicality. One is always aware of a keen intelligence driving the poems.

Skovron is not frightened of being discursive, which makes it difficult to demonstrate the force of his writing via a short quotation. But perhaps something of the flavour of his work may be gained from these lines from his wonderful poem, “Mr Wilkinson”. As in many of his poems, here Skovron is worrying away at the collision of cultures when migrants from Eastern Europe arrived in Australia after World War II. The poem describes an encounter between a young refugee, Klara, and an Australian geography teacher who is conducting a class on the capitals of Europe. Klara stands to show him her “town”, “Varshava”. The teacher, condescending, says that they are ‘doing/capitals only, Klara – you will
have to *show us* the exact location of your little town in Poland*. Klara, points to "Warszawa" and it dawns upon the teacher that this is Warsaw. Skovron describes his impression of the teacher’s reaction:

> Just then the bell went, the usual rustle erupted,  
> we shuffled outside for Playtime and fresh milk;  
> but what I had glimpsed imprinted in that moment  
> on Mr Wilkinson’s face has haunted me  
> for forty years. His smile was chalky, superior,  
> but the *eyes* – suddenly blank,  
> with an emptiness between mockery and loathing;  
> and what frightened me in that instant of exposure  
> was the eerie absence of light behind those eyes -  
> a colour that glinted, yes, but opaquely.  
> I recalled, absurd, those impossible horror stories  
> Klara told me, of men in black tunics  
> who grinned to machine gun a column of ghost children,  
> then fondled tenderly a dog’s silken ear ...
to see in what service he deploys those gifts in the future.

I cannot conclude without mentioning and applauding UQP's initiative in producing The Best Australian Poetry, 2003: a selection of the best poems from Australia's literary journals. This deserves to become an institution. It is a generous selection that includes an introduction and notes on the contributors. The idea is that there will be a different guest editor each year - this, too, is a good idea. Here is an anthology that deserves to reach a wide audience. Whether it will or not remains difficult to assess. I suspect that many intelligent, general readers are so tired of reading slight or incomprehensible poems in newspapers and journals that they have given up on contemporary verse. They shouldn't. There is good stuff out there and this is a collection that demonstrates as much.

Poetry Received 2003–2004

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

Adelaide 9 – The Poetry of the City. CD: SA Writers' Centre, PO Box 43, Rundle Mall, SA 5000.


Botha, Christoff, et al. Suasion. The Fifth Collection of Fiction, Poetry and Scripts by Creative Writing Students from The University of Western Australia, 2003.


BOY
For my Father

He was here yesterday
standing in front of the backdrop of an old army blanket
dressed as the princess in Aladdin
the sticky pink of his dress
had to be colorised in the photograph
his face a pale blank

he had to sing a duet with Aladdin
a dream in duck egg blue satin
face as perfect a circle
as a compass ever drew, smile –
strung like a hammock from ear to ear

they had to sing
*If you were the only girl in the world*
& I was the only boy

at the Royal Albert Orphanage
the boy who kept himself a secret
guarded by silence all his life
had to open his throat & hope

that he could follow his voice
like an Indian rope trick – up into the rafters
& tickle those thick ribs of wood, that
given enough force
his falsetto could shatter
the small square window that let in the moon.
EMPIRE

simmering in its silver helmet
the earl grey named after some past
fastidiousness, when the sun never set
on the british empire, now all the china
laid out in bone, waiting
for time to reverse – the handles of tea cups
cocked like royal ears – listening.
Candles flicker as I strike my head three times against the wall.
A cold wind sweeps over the table.
I pour wine in the cups, imagining how you will lay chopsticks
on the meat and vegetables curling up with fumes from the incense burner.
I pound rice with wooden hammers. I knead it, like dough, before cutting the image into steamed, coin-like pieces.
The paste pieces are mixed with meat, pine nuts, chestnuts and water.
A sudden memory of turnips and cabbages you piled up, mountains high, drowns like bean pottage we sprinkled on the kitchen walls.
Like gills, I recompose this crackle of leaves breathing your absence in a dumpling soup.
SALLY-ANN JONES

FORTUNATA

Often in the early mornings, when Astrid goes to the back lawn to hang the washing on the Hills hoist, she sees Fortunata picking tomatoes in her yard and the two women drop their tasks and meet at the fence to chat. Usually their talk is of mundane things. Astrid might want Fortunata to take down all her bedroom curtains and wash them, or clean the oven, or defrost the fridge. Fortunata might want Astrid's advice about her husband, Enrico's, permanently aching lower back or the warts on Giulio's knees. Sometimes Fortunata is making lasagne and wonders if Astrid and her family would like her to make double for them. Astrid always says yes to this but only if Fortunata will accept a special gift, such as a big leg of pork or a case of peaches. Sometimes Astrid is homesick and knows Fortunata will understand how much she misses the cold air crinkling with frost and the glistening, shining green of the grass and the big red double-decker buses. Sometimes Fortunata is homesick, especially if one of her many nephews and nieces in Italy is making his or her first holy communion. She knows every detail of the dress the girl will wear, of her veil, her shoes, the way her thick black hair will be coiffed. She knows how the boy has been groomed to march in the procession around the village, slowly, lifting his knees and for longer so his steps are dignified and slow.

There is one story Astrid never tires of hearing. It is the story of Fortunata's first meeting with Enrico, the man to whom she had been betrothed since she was a baby.

"I was at home, in my village, when the letter came," Fortunata begins. "How old were you? What were you doing? Were you frightened? What did your mother say?" prompts Astrid. She knows the story is old and worn out for her neighbour, but for her it is a new, exciting thing. Another woman's life. Another woman's love. She wants to hear it all in great detail.

"Have you got all day?" Fortunata laughs.

Like Astrid, she is pushing forty, but she is not beautiful like the Englishwoman. She is short and composed of three balls, all balancing on
each other precariously. The top, smallest one, is her head, whose roundness is accentuated because she is losing her short, dandruff-coated black hair in patches. Even her eyes are round. They are the same velvety brown as Maltesers and always seem to be laughing, even when she is being very angry with Giulio for tearing his shirt or letting two of the white rabbits escape from their hutch. The next ball is her upper body, with its big, soft, swaying breasts that look like a cushion stuffed into the bodice of her apron. The third ball is her buttocks, which Enrico loves to grab as he walks past the table where he plays cards on the back veranda with his cronies. He takes big handfuls of flesh and pulls her down into his lap. Astrid has seen her smile when she wriggles against him and the other men, who never seem to have women, look across at them enviously. Sometimes, especially if he is losing, Enrico pushes back the chair on which he is sitting with his wife in his lap and excuses himself gravely and politely for “un momento”, carrying Fortunata inside the house. He is so strong he doesn’t notice that she is heavy, although she must be. They disappear for a few minutes, a door is slammed, there is silence. Then they come out again, both smiling shyly, Fortunata walking so lightly she could have air in the soles of her open boots.

Enrico is incredibly ugly, Astrid thinks. His whole face seems pushed forward into a nose. There is no forehead, no chin, no lips, no eyes, only a big nose with black hairs sprouting from the huge nostrils.

“So what were you doing when the postman came?”

“I was outside, down near the stone bridge over the river, where the bread oven was.” Fortunata speaks slowly as if thinking in Italian then translating into English.

“The oven wasn’t inside your parents’ house?”

Fortunata shakes her head. “No. Outside. At the end of the orto, the vegetable garden. I had made the bread for the day. We used yellow maize flour and the loaves were big as the hills here. It was time to take the bread out and there I was, about to open the oven door when il postino came up the white sandy road on his black bicycle, holding in his hand a letter for me, with a stamp that said Australia.”

“Were you scared?”

Fortunata snorts. “Scared? I had waited my whole life for that letter. Everyone in the village expected it one day. I was seventeen. I wanted so badly to go to Australia, to join Enrico there. I had never met him, but I knew all about him from his mother, who spoke to him at Christmas time on the phone. And my father and his father had been best friends, until Enrico’s papa was trampled by a horse. Everyone knew I would marry him.
Everyone told me he was the best man a girl could hope for.

“I ran to the bridge to grab the letter without even remembering to thank the man who had ridden all that way with it and then ran into the house, where my mother was making a torta from nettles. Yes,” she said, “nettles. They are delicious. Really.

“And that was when my mother sank down in her chair beside the door and began to cry. I am her only daughter and I was going to leave her.”

“But you hadn’t even opened the letter,” Astrid said. “It might have been from someone who knew Enrico, to tell you he was sick or something. It might have been from Enrico, to tell you he was going to marry another girl.”

“No,” laughed Fortunata. “I knew it would be him, asking for me. And it was. My mother and I couldn’t read, but we knew it was. We had to walk to the church in the village and ask the priest to read it. Meanwhile, the bread was burned and had to be thrown to the pigs.

“And then my mother took out all the things she had been sewing for me since the day I was born. Sheets, pillowcases, embroidered towels, tablecloths, napkins, babies’ dresses – a whole trunk of pretty things, some already a bit moth-eaten and yellow with age.

“And we went into Siena on the train and she bought me one good outfit, for meeting Enrico in Fremantle on the very first day, when the ship finally got there.

“All I had to recognise Enrico by was a photograph he’d sent a year or more before. It was raggedy around the edges, a bit creased and a bit crackly, but the man’s face was still easy to see. The face had little close-together eyes that looked kind and teary, as if he’d just been crying when the photographer snapped him. He had black hair that looked as if it might be wavy and a big, hooked nose like a pirate’s nose. And there was a tiny little moustache. A thin line of a moustache over his thin top lip.

“I’d kept that photo in my handbag during the whole long voyage and had taken it out to look at every night before going to sleep in my tight little bunk bed. I was with three other Italian girls, girls who were coming to meet fathers or brothers. I was the only one who was going to get married and they envied me. I told them about the things my mother had sent with me in the trunk and told them as much as I knew about Enrico, which wasn’t much at all, really.

“When the big ship steamed into Fremantle harbour, we could see the thousands of people lined up along the wharf to watch us come in. They were waving and singing and there was a brass band playing. We four elbowed and shoved our way right up to the railings on the side that was
drawing into the quay and scanned the faces in the crowd. We were almost pushed overboard by all the excited passengers behind us. Everyone seemed to be crying and laughing and shouting at once. The air was filled with all those voices like thunder.

"I wriggled my way free to have arm-space enough to bring my handbag up to my chest and pull out the photo. I looked at it in the hot sunshine and the face seemed less familiar. Suddenly, it looked a bit menacing, although it never had before. I looked at the picture and then at all the brown-suited men in the crowd below and couldn't see anybody who looked like the man I had come all this way to marry.

"I was very frightened, for the very first time in my life. What if he had married someone else and hadn't bothered to tell us? What if he was sick, or even dead? What if he'd got cold feet and changed his mind? Perhaps he didn't want a wife after all. He'd been a bachelor all his thirty-nine years. Maybe he liked it that way. He was about to lose his freedom. He was about to have to share his house and half his wage. He was going to have children. What a disruption all that would be!

"I leaned right over the railing and was sick. I'd never been seasick, not once, but I made up for it that afternoon. My three friends were disgusted with me. The Fremantle Doctor had blown the vomit all over the top of my frock. My best frock. It was pure white, to remind Enrico that I was a virgin. I was someone he would have to be gentle with, to take care of. I wasn't a woman like the ones he was perhaps used to meeting whenever he felt the urge.

"One of the girls took me back down to our cabin and pulled the dress off me. She wiped my mouth with a corner of a ship's towel which she dampened with the water in the jug on the little cabinet between the bunks and made me drink some more and swish it around in my mouth to clean my teeth and freshen my breath. All our things were packed so she left me there and ran off to find a steward or somebody to help us. I had nothing to wear and I was about to meet my future husband for the first time.

"In all the commotion, I had dropped the photograph of him, so now I wouldn't know who he was. My mother had sent him a photograph of me, taken in Siena on my sixteenth birthday, but would it have reached him? Did he still have it?

"I leant over and was sick again - on the floor this time, because there was nowhere else. I was sick on the crumpled white dress.

"Then the cabin-mate came with one of the stewards. He had brought something for me to wear, a dress from a store of fancy clothes the crew
wore to celebrate crossing the equator. It was a silly, tight thing like a long blue glove and had a tail which dragged along the floor. It was supposed to make the woman who wore it look like a mermaid.

“It was covered in greeny sequins and real silvery shells. The steward cut the tail off with a pair of scissors, not bothering to check it was even, and pulled it over my head, over the slip I was wearing. It was so tight around my knees I could barely put one leg before the other, but it fitted perfectly and it made me look much better than I had in the white dress.

“The steward and my friend got me up on the deck again. By now some of the passengers, the first class ones, were beginning to file down the gangways and were being met by people on the quay. There was a lot of screaming and crying going on. I was watching some of these rich people carrying on and wishing I was one of them. If I had some money, I could choose whether to stay in Australia or whether to go home again to my mother and the orto and the oven where we made the yellow bread every day. I was already missing all of that. Very much.

“Then I felt that I was being stared at. You know that feeling you get sometimes when you know you are being watched? I let my eyes sweep over the rest of the crowd down there on the dock, not just the ones whose relatives had been in first class, and I saw two men looking up at me as if they had seen the Virgin in the flesh. Their eyes were burning and their mouths were wide open. They saw that I had seen them and they both called out my name.

“But there were two of them. One was quite tall and good-looking, the other one short and round like a mozzarella. Which one was the man who would be my husband?”

Astrid sees her neighbour up on the deck of the big ship with its eager passengers and massive chains holding to earth before it escapes to the sea. She can see her with shoulder-length, bouncy dark hair and bright eyes, a plump, supple body like a seal’s encased in a blue sheath so tight it could be skin. She sees the sunshine shimmer off her, making her light up like a beacon, drawing the attention of not only the two men but of everyone who was there that day. Astrid sees her walk carefully down the gangway towards the men, putting one foot in front of the other as delicately as a geisha with bound feet might.

“I am Enrico!” and “I am Enrico!” the enchanted men tell her, because they share a Christian name. They rush towards here, scarcely able to believe the fairy-like creature who has come into their lives. Close up, the short one could be described as ugly, Fortunata thinks, while the taller has a face to rival that of the beautiful saint who kneels holding a red candle
behind the Pope on the Virgin’s right side in the big painting which once hung over the high altar of the Duomo in Siena.

Fortunata has often gone to see him on her shopping expeditions into the walled city. From the wall of the Museo he is too busy looking adoringly at the Madonna and her child to take any notice of the young woman who comes to admire him. She had first been taken to see him on a class excursion and something about his young, strong, earnest face had brought her back again and again.

One of the Enricos could be him. The other has a look of a beady-eyed, beaked and cranky farmyard rooster with too much competition. Fortunata tells Astrid she was too confused and shy to ask the surnames of the two men who had driven all the way from the wheatbelt town to Fremantle to meet the ship. And too embarrassed to admit she’d lost the photograph and that, anyway, neither of the real men who were possessively clutching an arm each, and guiding her towards the customs officials from their side of the barriers in any way resembled the man in the picture. Neither even had a moustache!

The Enricos seemed to believe no introductions were necessary. After the contents of her one suitcase had been briefly examined by a bored customs inspector who seemed to see nothing remarkable in all the beautiful linens she had brought with her, the men walked her out into the sunshine and across a flat carpark. The short one tossed her case into the back of a utility and the tall one opened the passenger door for her to slide into the middle of the bench seat. It was so difficult for her to step up into the cabin of the vehicle in her tight mermaid dress that he had to lift her up and push her along.

Then they drove and drove and drove for hours, hardly speaking. Fortunata watched the swaying crucifix on the wooden rosary beads hanging from the rear view mirror. She watched the white lines in the middle of the road, hoping to see kangaroos. She watched the flat, brown fields with their grey sheep. She was glad it wasn’t any hotter for already there were pools of sweat between her breasts, in the dip of her belly button and behind her knees. She hoped the tall man, who wasn’t driving, was the man she was to marry. Slyly she watched his profile as he stuck his head through the open window to catch what little breeze there was. He was just like the beautiful saint in the painting called Maesta. She knew it had been painted by Duccio in 1311. It was something drummed into her from school days.

The other man, the parrot, never took his eyes from the road. He drove fast and well, overtaking lorries and cars. She was too shy to make
conversation, they had no idea what to say to a young Italian girl fresh from the arms of her mother.

“When the Enricos brought me to this house there was no pasta machine. I had to write and ask Mamma to send me one. It took months to get here. I don’t know how I lived through those months, with no fresh spaghetti.”

“When did you find out which Enrico was the one you had to marry?”

“Well, the parrot Enrico drove and drove,” she says, smiling as she recalls that hot day. Hotter than this. Or is she used to it now after nearly twenty years? “And I watched the other one, hoping it would be him. After an hour or so he began feeling sleepy and he pulled his head in from the window and lay it back on the back of the seat.

“Then he drifted off and soon his head began to loll sideways until it rested on my shoulder. He was cool from the open window and so trusting, like a baby. He was so beautiful I would have lain with him if he’d asked me. I would have pulled my mermaid dress off by the side of the road and lain with him. Yet I didn’t know if he was to be my husband. As he slept I let my eyes slide down to the zip of his trousers. I wanted to see if I could guess ...”

“Fortunata!” Astrid laughed. “You naughty girl!” Still red, she asks in a whisper, “And could you guess?”

Fortunata grinned. She held her hands out the way Giulio did when he caught a fish. A big one.

“What about the parrot Enrico?” Astrid was fascinated. “Did you look?”

“No,” laughed Fortunata.

“So what happened?”

“Finally we got here and I had to shake the sleeping angel awake. He had to pull me out of the ute because I had stuck to the seat, I was so sweaty. We got here to this house and the parrot one came around the car and picked me up and carried me over the doorstep.

“I nearly cried. So, after all, I wasn’t going to marry the handsome one who looked like the saint in the painting. And then, still holding me in his arms, the wrong one kissed me. He kissed me properly, like in the films, with his tongue, you know. And he tasted fantastic. He knew how to kiss, that’s for sure. He was confident, so right, he completely won me over. I knew he was a real man, a man who could give me pleasure and love and sons. He was strong enough to hold me for all that time without having once to shift my weight. He carried me into the bedroom because I couldn’t stop kissing him. I never wanted to stop. And he threw me on the bed and didn’t bother about taking his clothes off, or mine. He opened his
zip and pushed my knickers to one side. And that was the day I became his.

"The other Enrico was his best friend and the best man at our wedding. Afterwards, he went back to Italy because his grandfather had died and left him a vineyard. Sometimes he writes to us. He has a wife and seven children. I never think about him now."
These my words:

the taste of loaves,

of fishes,
seven there were

and five
that grew,

ate up the
land, consumed
the sea;

and all the wheatfields
on it

and all the fishes
in it.

II
See how I share
the endless harvest

how I shift the load
from me to you

watch how I sweep
the residue,
the bits that fell from other lips,

into these other baskets.

III
These my words: the taste of loaves and fishes.

A field of wheat and all the fishes in it.
My purpose in this essay is to tease out some of the distinctive ways a writer reads – or experiences reading – by detailing and reflecting on my own reading of Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Man-Moth”. It should be a given that in order to be a writer one must be a reader. In the introduction to Donald Barthelme’s book of essays and interviews, titled Not-Knowing, John Barth recalls a class of Johns Hopkins university students asking Barthelme, “How can we become better writers than we are?” After being told that they should read through the whole history of philosophy, the students objected that they had already been told to read through all of literature. “That too,” Donald affirmed. “You’re probably wasting time on things like eating and sleeping. Cease that, and read all of philosophy and all of literature. Also art. Plus politics and a few other things. The history of everything”.

The advice could not be more emphatic. It is also evident, however, that not all readers become writers, or read because they are writers. Are there then particular ways reading is important to writing? I propose that a poet tends to read in distinctive ways, shaded differently to the ways of critics, other readers or students. In general, I argue that the poet-reader takes in a poem as an act performed over time rather than as a text encountered upon a page. This is not, of course, a matter of absolute distinction but of relative weighting. Small differences though can make a significant difference.

In more detail, I want to consider a poet’s reading of a poem under the force of a series of questions put to a poem, questions that lead eventually, through the essential but sometimes difficult process of influence, to the poet’s own poem. The first two questions are focused on the text itself, the following two are to do with personal involvement in the reading experience, and the third incorporates both these elements while providing an impetus and validation for the production of new poems. The first, practical question is, “How does this poem work?” a question that
highlights analysis, poetics and prosody. Linked with this is, “What does this poem teach me about writing?” and here there is the matter of extracting from a text what it has effected as a performance. Both these questions are closely related. Following this there are two even more subjective questions, “What does it move in me?” and “Can I hear (contact, see, sense) the presence of a living person in this writing?” The former question can be instructional, but can also be inspirational for the reader who wishes to be moved by a poem to take up a pen or go to the keyboard. The latter question, I think, can be a distraction, particularly when the life (or stance) of a writer overshadows the writing. It is a useful question, though, if it brings the reader to experience a text as enacted by another writer making certain choices and exposing to view the risks and nuances of a performance - a performance that comes into existence as a collaboration between writer and reader. The final question I wish to highlight is, “What evidence of reading is there in this poem?” This addresses directly issues of influence and tradition, and opens the way to this poem influencing a poet-reader’s next poem.

These are not all the questions a writer might put to a text, and they are not exclusive to writers reading, for they are also the kinds of questions that can be put by critics, teachers, reviewers, and many other readers. But their obsessive contact with the effects of influence and their movement towards the reading-writer’s own writing give them a distinctive slant.

To explore this distinctive slant further, I characterise the kind of reading I will detail below as more self-instructive than, say, a critical or ideological one. This approach has much in common with the close reading strategies of those who broke away from New Criticism in the 1950s and early '60s, creating a space for the later rhetorical close-readings conducted by Derrida on Kafka and Shelley, de Man on Proust, Cixous on Joyce, Deleuze on Kafka, Kristeva on Mallarmé, Coetzee on Kafka, and others in the 1970s and '80s to the present. My commitment to close reading, however, has its basis in my concern as a poet for learning from the ways matters of poetics and prosody have been negotiated by another writer. The choices or decisions enacted in a poem are the clues for me to what gives it life or kills its life.

This kind of reading is also offered as a corrective or alternative to the sometimes overpowering, freewheeling, exteriorised, digressive or scientific critical writing of some post-modern theorists of literature, characterised often by a reliance on intellectualisation. The mid-twentieth century French phenomenological critic Georges Poulet (1902–1991) depicted the act of reading as a peculiar interaction with what he called an
"interior object". He wrote, "Reading, then, is the act in which the subjective principle which I call I, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my I. I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers and acts within me ... This provokes a certain feeling of surprise in me. I am a consciousness astonished by an existence which is not mine, but which I experience as though it were mine. This astonished consciousness is in fact the consciousness of the critic."^ Poulet goes on to describe his view of the two extremes of critical reading. On the one hand is the "mimetic critic" who enters into a sympathetic identification with a work, so much so that the critic's own language mimics or calls up the most sensual aspects of the work under appreciative discussion. Such criticism allows the critic to express and convey the subtleties of the experience of reading a certain work, but inevitably it becomes "too congealed and opaque" to lend itself to intellectual analysis. Rousseau was of this type. On the other hand there is hyper-criticism, whereby a critic manages to reduce every line, sentence, metaphor, every word to "the near nothingness of abstraction".3 This process of rigorous intellectualisation not only reduces all literary forms to the same level of insignificance, but makes the objects of literature "appear to be infinitely far away". Poulet suggested, both unfairly and insightfully, that Maurice Blanchot is such a critic.

In the first case, criticism achieves a complicity with the work under discussion, but loses lucidity. In the second case criticism achieves a maximum lucidity but at the expense of any real connection with the work. The best criticism, Poulet suggested, oscillates between these possibilities. My aim as a writer in approaching Bishop's poem, is to avoid extreme closeness and extreme detachment without losing entirely the privileges and insights each of these possibilities offers.

Poulet, however, is an incomplete guide to the kind of reading I wish to develop. In his detailed appreciation and critique of Poulet, J. Hillis Miller has pointed to Poulet's over-confidence in the capacity of any text to reproduce the consciousness of an author. Miller has observed that Poulet's criticism is associated, finally, with a tendency to take language for granted in literature:

For the most part he does not put the language of his authors in question, hold it at arm's length and analyze it, interrogate it suspiciously for distinction between what it apparently says and what it really says. He does not scrutinize the language of his texts for the covert assumptions of its
metaphors, its tense structures, its silences. Part of Poulet's generosity toward his authors is a taking for granted not only of the authenticity of their experiences, but also of the authenticity of the words in which they have expressed their experiences.4

The inadequacy of the purity or naivety of Poulet's insistence on a philosophy of presence does not, however, have to mean that a philosophy of the abyss is the only reasonable or possible remedy. If language is not a transparent medium for the expression of an author's consciousness, it is equally not the case that language writes the texts we read. I would want to perceive in texts the strange to-ing and fro-ing, the oscillation, of a living person and their equally alive language. This movement gives a solidity to literature, and because it happens in time it constitutes an experience.

The American critic, Helen Vendler has written eloquently of her determination to follow a certain kind of close reading as an antidote to what she perceives as dominant forms of contemporary critical writing:

It is distressing, to anyone who cares for and respects the concentrated intellectual and imaginative work that goes into a successful poem, to see how rarely that intense (if instinctive) labor is perceived, remarked on, and appreciated. It is even more distressing – given the human perceptual, aesthetic, and moral signals conveyed (as I hope to show) by such elements as prosody, grammar, and lineation – that most contemporary interpretations of poetry never mention such things, or, if they do, it is to register them factually rather than to deduce their human import.5

Vendler clearly wishes to restore, as she sees it, a sense of complicity and intimacy with writers to her writing about literary works (she is, as it were, on – and at – the writer's side). She does, though, still bring analytical attention to textual characteristics. They are perceived as choices made by a writer at work with a text and once her discussion of a text is underway she takes up opportunities to conduct formal intellectual analyses, in fact oscillating between intimacy and detachment, or we might say, between text and writer.

There are then two kinds of movement to be considered in reading a text. The first is that movement between sympathy and analysis on the part of the reader-critic, and in addition the traces of a movement between a writer and a language as the text was produced.
On the matter of reading a poem as a performance, I approach a poem as an act in the sense that Kenneth Burke suggested when he wrote that a reading must be dramatistic, that is it must take account of the way a poem unfolds or enacts itself before us. But more than this, I conceive of the poem as an act in the sense that J. L. Austin meant when wrote that speech can be in special cases performative. Austin coined this term in a 1956 essay, and immediately reflected that it was an ugly word but did the job of denoting those moments of speech when it is not possible to speak of whether what is said is false or true, but rather one recognises whether it makes something happen in the world, such as a marriage ("I do"), a baptism ("I baptise you in the name of ..."), or the flow of traffic ("Left Lane"). This classification of a use of language became an important influence on discussions of literature in the early work of Derrida, and later Judith Butler. A poem, we could say, is also a case of an utterance that cannot ever be true or false. Or rather, it is beside the point whether a poem is true or false. It must, in Austin’s term, be felicitious. Felicity has its root in the Latin felix, usually translated as happy. An act of felicity has achieved a happy grace, a striking appropriateness, an aptness. Performative speech is made of conventions, usually within a strict verbal formula, though with poetry it is this very formulaic nature of the performative speech act that is put under pressure. The poem must achieve its existence as a particular experience rather than a meaning (it must be doing something, not just saying something), but must do this within conventional strictures that allow it to act as poetry. This does not mean that poetry and all instances of performative speech have nothing to do with what is true or false, right or wrong, but rather that their relationship to these matters is slanted, characterised more by implication than direct reference or direct claim. Importantly, for my delineation of reading in this essay, the poem as performative speech happens over time, as any performance must. Timing becomes important, development too. Beginnings and endings become significant. A poem unfolds word by word, line by line, image by image, sound by sound, stanza by stanza as we witness it. This order I assume is important to the poet and to the effect of the poem. I know that as readers we can range haphazardly across the written word, particularly when it comes in the short eye-grabs of verse lines or can be scrolled at electronic speed on a computer screen, and these are legitimate ways of encountering a poem. I want to leave this kind of ranging, however, to some later reading and later reflection.

The poem – the performance – is Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Man-Moth”:
The Man-Moth*

Here, above,
cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight.
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the facades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him,
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

Then he returns
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window, for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

If you catch him, hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil, an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips. Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over, cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

* Newspaper misprint for “mammoth”

What in this moves me?
What draws me to this poem? Its beauty and strangeness at first. Then the odd effect of such straightforward speech leading to such elusive meanings. For me the poem’s strange landscape seems to share something with the nearly empty late afternoon and evening scapes of the surrealist painters De Chirico and later Delvaux. It is evocative, but I am not sure what it evokes. A poem that interests me is one that takes me to a thought or a place of feeling, sometimes a dream location that I recognise but do not know. I am drawn to it too because it is an accidental poem. Elizabeth Bishop recalled the writing of this poem in a notebook entry:

This poem was written in 1935 when I first lived in New York City. I've forgotten what it was that was supposed to be “mammoth”. But the misprint seemed meant for me. An oracle spoke from the page of the New York Times, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for a moment.

Prompted by this misprint, the poem reads as both a whimsy and an opportunity taken for a deeply serious exploration or construction of self.

How does it work?
“The Man-Moth” begins with the point of view of the moon or moonlight above a man who stands for Man (very much a masculine figure
in his hat). The opening, indented with the stressed single syllable word, “Here”, is dramatic and unfussy. There is both a sense of the theatrical and an intellectual directness indicated in this beginning. The first four lines take us through a series of scale reductions which are also equivalences: from the moon above to an awareness of the bulk of buildings below, then down further to Man (both a figure and a concept) and even further down to the scale of the hat within which his whole shadow lies, then to a doll and yet further down in size to the figure of a pin balanced on its head. These reductions recall one typical method of handling images in the haiku form, though more literally they recall the way a movie camera might zoom in on details of a scene from above. They are also a demonstration of the way poetry moves through details and images to a sense of general significance, as Aristotle observed in the Poetics. These lines then end with a return to the presence of the moon’s “vast properties”, most notably its queer light: light of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers. That word “in” is strange here. “With” would be a more likely and less noticed choice. It is as if temperatures are taken into thermometers where they are then not just measured but kept. The suggestion is both that this light cannot be measured adequately by recording instruments and that it cannot be contained or captured — that is, understood by Man. The further suggestion is that abstract qualities can be perceived and treated as objects in this world.

This reflection on moonlight brings us seemingly naturally to the Man-Moth of the title. He begins his place in the poem as more moth than man, though there is a rational part of him treating his progress towards the light as an investigation. The vivid image of his shadow dragging like a photographer’s cloth behind him is another element of strangeness in the poem. The insubstantial shadow is given physical presence in the image of the black cloth, just as earlier the abstract notion of temperature was given a physical presence by that preposition “in”. Both shadow and light act as objects in the poem. This observation of shadow has a later echo in a sentence from Bishop’s story, “In the Village” (first published in 1953), where she records a childhood impression from visiting the blacksmith around the corner: “In the blacksmith’s shop things hang up in the shadows and shadows hang up in the things”. The image drawn from photography adds to other elements of intense visual desire (voyeurism?) in the poem: from the moth’s attraction for light to the final address to us or to herself, “if you watch”. The Man-Moth is compelled to move towards what he fears, and we know it is death: the short life of the moth, the death that comes to moths that dive into flames, into the heat of any light,
or exhaust themselves in seeking the source of moonlight – the death that each of us is moving towards within our own fascination. But tied in with this there are images of birth: the circle for a doll, the small hole proving the sky useless for protection, and the tube through which he imagines being forced like a scroll of parchment. This doubled image of birth and death helps give the poem potency as a symbolic work. Victoria Harrison calls the Man-Moth “a culmination of recognizable opposites, man/nature (moth), man/woman (mother).” She observes that though his grammatical signifiers are male, the boundaries of his world are female in form: the doll, the feminine light of the moon, its presence as a hole, and the domestic pin. Harrison goes on to describe the Man-Moth as a creature of cross-species with a cross-gendered consciousness.

When in the poem he returns unhurt he has become more man than moth as he commutes on the subway train with other passengers. It is as if the moth in him is one of his recurrent dreams. The poem takes up a slightly more elevated and lyrical mode as rhymes and near-rhymes accumulate rapidly: “dreams” with “dreams”, “tunnels” with “recurrent”, “ties” with “underlie” and “train” with “brain” in just two and a bit lines. This rhyming, together with an emerging iambic beat and the forced monosyllabic regularity of the false spondees of “he does not dare look out” all work to reinforce the sentence of inevitability and repetition imposed on the Man-Moth’s psyche. Rhymes and rhythms can bang along like a train does. The following lines though fall back to a more prosaic and even awkward form of writing (“the susceptibility to”). At this point there is a psychological conflation of sight and thirst. The Man-Moth dares not look out the window at the “draught of poison”. The light is a vision but also a liquid that would kill him. The next step in the logic here is an interesting one, since this desire for liquid poison light is regarded as a disease. He must keep his hands in his pockets, again as though the light is an object he might take up with his hand – as we might take up a drink.

In the final stanza we are invited to watch this man in order to see the moth within him, though it is not his moth-ness we will find but again a double symbol, a double sign. It is the most human of signs, a tear, but it is also creaturely for it is said to be like the bee’s sting. His tear, we are told, “slips”. This word is triply emphasised: by the comma before it, the full stop after it and by its place at the end of a line. It is so startling that it cannot help but echo “flits” in the fourth stanza, also singled out by punctuation and by placement. For all its presence as evidence of humanity in the Man-Moth the tear holds in itself a sign of his strangeness, his doubleness and through the image of the bee’s sting his
mortality. The poem ends by extending the image of the tear to its deep (unconscious and inhuman) purity which becomes also an image of thirst and an invitation to drink this antidote, perhaps, to the draught of shining poison the moth in him cannot resist.

I read the poem in this manner as a developing performance, each part taking on significance as a step further along a line of thought, feeling and imagination. One of the movements I detect here, is the intense building of images of the moth and then a retreat from it, but always, through the doubleness of the poem's imagery, a sense that the splitting of the self into human and inhuman could begin again at any moment. Each human element carries in it the potential for manifesting the inhuman, and equally each moment of moth-consciousness recalls our own human existence. New York's sheer buildings and its underground rail frame the extremes of this world of transformations, reversals, deaths. This is what the poem performs in me.

What can this teach me about writing?

There is much here for a poet to learn from and marvel at. The first test of the success of a poem is whether the reader goes back and re-reads it immediately, and the next test is whether the reader returns to it in the future. This seems to me one of those poems that can hold its reader's attention in new ways each time it is revisited. Some, though might find such poetry too "finical, awkward, in a state of controlled panic" - as Bishop described the Sandpiper in her poem of that title. In fact, it might be that such poetry draws its critic in to too minute an examination of its grains at the expense of perceiving the wider beach and ocean of its world. Poems choose their critics (and readers) as much as critics choose their poems. Perhaps the most difficult task before this poem is to lift one's head from its details.

It is never a simple matter to take instruction from a poem, but as a writer I trust (instruct) myself to take not only the lessons of the specific and complex strategies analysed above, but to take that vague impression of risk, dream-like logic, visual association and intense, rhythmic scrutiny over to my own writing.

Who wrote this? Do I know her now?

Before going further with the poem I wish to reflect on Eliot's stricture that poems must be impersonal and poets must find a way of removing themselves from their poems. "The Man-Moth" is clearly an intense poem, worked not just carefully but obsessively and somehow making
deeply imaginative, difficult and significant connections throughout. Elizabeth Bishop lived a relatively reclusive and uneventful life. She did not write openly confessional or autobiographical poems and she did not explain her poems by reference to her life. Nevertheless, the main events of her life have become irresistible keys to understanding some of the subjects of her poems and the ways images work in them. Her father died when she was eight months old and her mother soon after had a breakdown. When she was five years old her mother was institutionalised as incurably insane. These events are recounted in her short story, “In the Village” (first published in 1953 in the New Yorker). The child Elizabeth was raised by her grandparents. She missed a great deal of schooling through severe eczema, asthma and bronchitis. She lived in Brazil from 1951 to 1967 with her lover, a woman who later committed suicide. On her return to the United States in 1974 she taught at Harvard where she took classes in Advanced Verse Writing for those she called “the usual nuts and freaks”. She published only four volumes of poetry. For most of her adult life she struggled with the debilitating effects of alcoholism.

Given these traumatic and sometimes vivid details it can be irresistible to read the pattern of her life into this poem written when she was twenty-four years old, barely a year after her insane and estranged mother died. What do we make of her attraction to a double-creature? Is it that she felt herself to live a sexually subterranean life beneath her public one? And does the conflation of light with poison draughts and thirst refer us to her disease of drinking? Is the poem a young woman’s attempt to bring New York and the whole juggernaut of modernism down to a manageable strangeness as she feels overwhelmed by that great and stunningly contemporary city? There are many avenues, cracks, or silver rails in this poem that might lead back to personal elements in Bishop’s experiences and in her psyche, all of them fascinating for those who find a poet’s life as interesting as the poetry. In Bishop’s case, the facts of her life came to public notice when two biographies and a collection of her letters were published in 1994, fifteen years after her death, making it suddenly possible to read the drama of her life back into her poems which until then had seemed intensely impersonal, stitched together with a formidable sense of craft and wry humour antithetical to that looser, confessional poetry of her peers such as Robert Lowell, Randal Jarrell and John Berryman. I find this biographical reading a compelling exercise too, though one that has limited appeal and threatens such complicity or identification with what lies within a literary work that intellectual analysis is soon replaced with intuitions, suggestive connections and
guesses. Biographical (and by extension psychoanalytic) interpretations of poetry can help though to uncover the achievement of impersonality in a poet’s work. We can always ask once such inquiries are undertaken, how crucial is the biography to the sense of a poem or the value of a poem. If in the end, as perhaps is the case with a figure like Lord Byron, it is the life and not the poetry that creates the greater interest, we know at least where we stand in relation to a body of work. It does help with this poem to know that it was written in response to a newspaper misprint and as a young woman’s response to living in New York for the first time in the 1930s. Beyond this I suggest the life need not take precedence over the poem’s poetry, for then we are in danger of treating the poetry more as a case study than a work of art (an act of art).

Is there evidence of reading, of influence?
Another avenue of inquiry would seek to uncover the literary and cultural influences at work in this poem. In Eliot’s terms, laid out in his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, we would seek that “conformity” which has recreated tradition and established a new poem. In Bloom’s terms we might seek the ways in which the poetry misreads deliberately its precursors, as he argued throughout The Anxiety of Influence. Taking a lead from Aristotle we can look for how imaginatively and significantly the poet has imitated not just life but poetry itself.

We know from biographies, memoirs, Bishop’s published letters and from the evidence of her collected poems that the poet Marianne Moore (1887–1972) was a mentor and a significant influence on her poetry. Both published biologico-poetic studies detailing the characteristics of wild creatures. Both wrote poems called “The Fish”. Bishop’s, written twenty-five years after Moore’s, adopts the same detailed attention to a natural creature with highly imaginative metaphorical connections at work throughout. Bishop, like Moore, was committed to a prosaically anti-poetic line that gives each poet’s poetry its modern feel as it progresses through highly associative image-based leaps. Both poets revel in the embedding of rhyme, near rhyme and sound-echoes in their poems, even to the eccentric extent of splitting a single word in order to achieve a rhyme (for example, Moore’s “ac/cident” in “the Fish” and Bishop’s “a/n” in “Pink Dog”). Both Moore and Bishop were practised amateurs in the visual arts and adopted highly visual modes in their poetry. In “The Man-Moth” Bishop indents and shortens the first line of each stanza, recalling the manner of Moore’s shifting left-hand margin in her poetry. The Man-Moth poem itself adopts the mode of a quasi-scientific report on this creature, seeming to parody
Moore’s use of this form in her many poems based on natural history. It is, possibly, a poem that manages to pay respect to her mentor while distinctly disengaging from that influence. In Bloom’s terms, she manages in this instance to misread and update her necessary influence. The poem was written in 1935, shortly before Marianne Moore and her mother enthusiastically took up the task of editing Bishop’s work. It was published in 1936 in *Life and Letters Today*, and in 1946 it was included in her first collection, *North & South*. By 1940 the overseeing of her poems had soured over Moore and her mother drastically rewriting and restructuring Bishop’s poem, “Roosters”.

Elizabeth Bishop’s *Man-Moth* is perhaps an imaginary toad in a real garden (New York), in response to Moore’s definition of poetry as real toads in imaginary gardens.

The mufflers other commuters *must* wear reminds me of the poster Gregor Samsa kept on his bedroom wall. It was an image of a woman in fur-lined mufffs. As a beetle late in the story Gregor scales the wall of his room and covers the poster, protecting it. This reference to mufflers might not be a deliberate allusion to Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”, but there is no doubt that the poem’s premise shares some of the same horror and fascination at animal-human transformation, or more abstractly a fascination with the status of the monstrous outsider.

To take up another possible influence evident in the poem at one of its arresting moments we could ask, why is the moonlight “battered”? Is it battered like silver worked by a silversmith? Is it battered by the sharpness of the New York buildings it strikes as it falls upon the earth? Or, as another poet suggested to me, battered as in a flour batter used to fill the cracks in buildings? Or is there an echo here of Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIV beginning, “Batter my heart, three person’d God”, for Donne’s poem is itself a series of paradoxes and oxymorons taking up images of freedom and imprisonment, violence and love, faith and doubt, chastity and ravishment. Donne’s poem swoons with longing just as Bishop’s *Man-Moth* does. Donne’s speaker is overthrown by his shining God, reason cannot serve him (just as it is misguided in the *Man-Moth*). The desire for imprisonment at the end of Donne’s sonnet seems to be taken up in Bishop’s “If you catch him”, and in the *Man-Moth*’s own rush to enclose himself in a train carriage. It is a small wonder that a single word can link two poems written centuries apart; that a poet can signal an influence through such a single adoption. If Donne’s sonnet is connected with Bishop’s “Man-Moth” then it is through a process of transformational imitation, a wholly active and highly individual use of literature’s opportunities for intertextuality.
From poem to poem

After reading Leonard Shengold's suggestion that "moth" has a psychological connection to "mother", and being reminded of my fourteen-year-old daughter's fear of moths, I produced a poem under the influence of thinking about, rereading, and writing about Bishop's poem. I had set myself the task of coaxing Bishop's poem to influence my writing. The anxiety in this process for a writer is the fear of being merely derivative or being overwhelmed, while the opportunity is to be taken out of the usual narrow rails of the self with its too-predictable repetitions. My poem focused on the presence of moths in my daughter's fears and the presence of birds in our family's back yard.

There is no predicting how an influence will be shaped by the choices poets make (or are drawn to). Influence, I am convinced, is far more fruitful for producing poetry than falling back on expressing personal feelings or recording personal experiences. Attention to other writing takes one's own writing out of itself, closer to an uncanny collaboration with readers and other writers, where it carries the astonished consciousness of an I partly borrowed from what has been read and partly on loan to an unknown reader. This is evolution at work - a series of variations on a pattern, unpredictable mutations on a template, innovation provoked by precedent, and under the energising stress of working in unfamiliar ways a method for writing beyond the merely personal.

The Dream of Moths

The black bird's orange beak is high.
Its fat black morning coat startles us.
My daughter frightened by moths each night asks why the bird advances on us.
Its head twists up to greet me eye to eye.

It dropped into the yard with daylight
as moths were lifting from her dream
as if it could tell us now what all this means.
The cat will turn its back and creep inside.
The bird will knock its food bowl over
then snap each biscuit like an insect.
The black bird's orange beak is wide.

At night the moths return in silence,
soft as mothers, strange as blindness,
blankets of them, coloured only brown
or black or grey. We wriggle down
into the cave of night inside us
until falling light or sudden bird call
brings us crawling back to kitchen,
twisted lemon tree and cat bowl on the bricks
where the black bird shows its dreamless eye to us.
The black bird’s orange beak is quick.

I dress in helmet, jacket, gloves and scarf
to ride my bike into the morning frost.
I am soft and round and dark as moths.
I fear the day and every day will be too short.
I shrug, The black bird comes to us
because we bring it daylight with this bowl.
The black bird’s orange beak opens, shuts.

Note: This essay was assisted and inspired by a workshop conducted at the Victorian Writers Centre in October and November 2003. About a dozen poets met weekly for a month and expressly took up a number of poems as influences. Each week we would take one poem, which we read then re-read each day, analysed, wrote about, sometimes learned by heart, all the while writing our own poetry under the influence, in imitation of, in resistance to, in reply to, despite, or in gratitude to that week’s poem. This exercise required us not only to re-examine our own habitual poetics as we composed new poems, but it made us newly aware of how we were reading poetry. My thanks to those poets who participated in the workshops.

Notes


3 Poulet, 1327.


11 Harrison, 58–9.

12 Harrison, 59.


14 Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Village”: see acknowledgements, *Collected Prose*.


16 Harrison, 220.


WILDERNESS

1
The word *panic*
once meant to feel the fear
of wilderness

imagining the god, Pan,
with his untamed tastes
appearing from the smiling
dark of forest
before you could
scream.

So all the fairytales
where children wander
into forests:
a place of witches & wolves —
creatures who don’t obey

2
straight lines or need light
to know who they are.

So the trees were cut
and canopies collapsed
allowing light to dissolve the dark
to create settlements
which is another word
to feel at ease, to stay in one place,  
not to venture out

to know that things  
will not/can not  
appear suddenly at your door

with the wet smell  
of undergrowth in its pores

3

or the long scrape  
of claw at the wooden door.

And so it was from the beginning –  
or at least the time  
when we thought we should be in control –  
that the wilderness  
was a sentence  
a punishment for transgressors

and the word “wilderness”  
from will – to be wilful, uncontrolled –

was a place where they were sent  
beyond the borders:  
the exile of sinners  
野 men who found frontiers

though it was only those  
who got lost in the forest  
who learnt who they were  
learnt that the wilderness  
was not separate.
“Put that bloody cigarette out”
after Saki (Hector Hugh Munro) 1870–1916

After an ultimate respite
in a shallow shelled crater —
the German sniper’s rifle shot
that put a bullet through his head
left a last neat exclamation mark
upon his forehead
with only the faintest wisp of blood.

Having practised
this kind of exactness in his prose
he would have applauded its execution
along with its economy.

But not his dispatch —
unlike his stories’ best resolutions
this was never going to be for him the high point.

A last simple black comedy of blunder
sunk in the horror of the Western Front.

At the end of all of his collected plots
a kind of final practical joke gone awfully wrong
but with what he might finish each tale —
here with the most improbable outcome.

After four decades of demented maiden-aunts,
the house parties and high teas,
he had stepped through the French windows
in the closing hour
of an almost perfect summer afternoon;
at the end of an age
into a wholly different realm
with a sense of duty *in extremis*
and something after any of his characters who
might have said that he had finally got
what was coming to him.

POETRY COLLECTION

These poems do not belong to me
although I wrote them
all of one interminable winter
when I was desolate for the ocean
and had to be content with the wind
each night scratching in high tension

wires worrying at my sleep.
And in the morning mimicking the scrape
of my pen pushing always at the verb
to do something with a terrible landscape
of castor-oil plants and wild olive:
I did not know then in that bleak earth

that I was mining much.
I bought it back on Tuesday from
a book trolley in the market for fifty cents
and it was warmly buffed with use.
Firstly *Pier Lane Library* on the flyleaf
and then a name in copperplate *Tilly*

and another in pencil *O. Beattie*
bearing it to a trinity of successive shelves.
The title poem wears the imprimatur
of red circles of burgundy probably raised
and put down at a dinner party
slipped as a coaster between all of their
conversations.
Page 45 has a turned down corner
that bookmarks the worst of hours
and found perchance an echo in another.
The inside cover has a copied line
from Berryman—"up for good at five"

as I hold it gently as a frail thing
that has come back to my side
in relative shape after slipping for years
between extremes
turning up from a previous life
something after a stranger.