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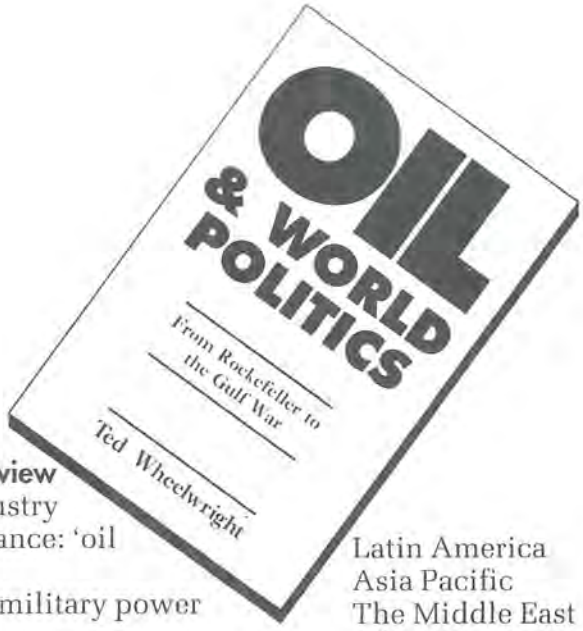

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PETER MURPHY

The Absence of Angels

I walk by the lake every day. I feel particularly lucky about this. There aren't many lakes in the city. It occurred to me some time ago that there was something exotic about it and now, since winter has come and joggers are scarce, it's even more so. Once you walk a little way from the road your attention focuses on the swans and small black water hens that disappear beneath a shower of bubbles.

On these cold, still mornings the lake seems to stretch out indefinitely and you can imagine you're in another country. Swans fly low or turn their tails up in the air fossicking for underwater food. Ducks crowd together on little piers with nameless birds - thin creatures with long necks, sleek heads and a habit of shaking their craggy wings intermittently.

Of course, you can't help seeing, on the far side, the little cars speeding in and out of the city, as if on an unseen surface. Above them the large flashy modern buildings glow with the aura of a modern city. It's not yet part of the official tourist precinct, but that time will come.

I've always liked the idea of Lake Geneva. Not that I've seen it or a picture of it. Switzerland, that crisp, clear, concept, as it exists in my imagination, gives the phrase, Lake Geneva, the brilliant quality of dreams. For a while whenever I saw my lake, I thought, "Lake Geneva!". I stuck with that title till it gave way to Hotel du Lac, which, though technically inappropriate, seemed to have been brushed by more of the magic associated with lakes than any bona fide name I could call to mind. My lake seemed to become more interesting after that. I wasn't surprised that a name could do so much. I believe in words.

This inspired me to name other parts of the city that I travel through as a commuter. I'd sometimes thought that there were a number of other public sights in the vicinity that, with determination, could be made to take on a certain romance. There is a small, pointed stone column, surrounded by four carved lions, near my tram stop. It's to remind pedestrians of soldiers who died in the Middle East. I called it Cleopatra's needle, though I have to say it's rather too mean to merit connection with the wide terrain I think of as Egypt. There's something repulsively prosaic in its inscriptions.

I went to Europe a few decades ago, but don't think I'll go again. It meant a lot to me - seeing the world. It wasn't just that it was bigger and older than here. There was an amplitude, an accumulation of dreams, focused not only in great monuments but in corroding oddments and the mysterious surface of streets. I remember a brick wall into which children had ground edges of coins to make spherical holes.

When I returned, this city offered nothing to my imagination. The possibility of this happening had never occurred to me, but now that it had I felt compelled to take it on board.

"There's nothing here," I thought. "I'll just have to wait till I can leave. It's over there, every bit of whatever it is."

That was years ago. I can't remember when I decided or realized I wouldn't go again. That time isn't vivid in recollection now, even though, then, not just space but time and life had begun shrinking imperceptibly. The city had its moments, but they worked mainly as pointers to over there - crisp as the stencilled black hand of the Nineteenth Century with its extended index finger. They represented closing spasms of some kind.

And then, through the force of circumstance, my place of work moved into the vicinity of this marvelous lake.

Of course, other people are drawn to it, too, bringing with them the riddles of their lives. One morning in summer I passed a fat man in his sixties sprawled out near a fixed fishing rod, half of him on the concrete at the edge of the water and half on one of the piers. Beside him was a large bottle of whisky, with no more than the glint of a golden bottom.

Perhaps he hadn't had the strength to put the stumpy glass neck to his mouth at the very end. Minutes later, I imagined him snoring, if he wasn't already dead.

It wasn't the presence of other people which made this lake my key to another dimension. More than anything I think it was the expanse of water which made this transformation possible, that and my acceptance that this was all there ever would be. I had become capable of thinking about how I might enjoy it as something else.

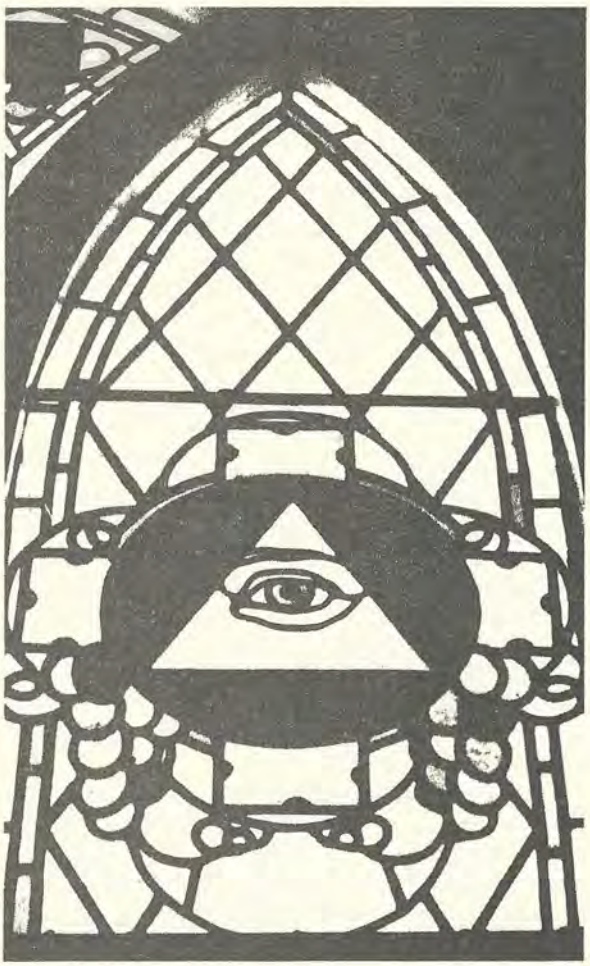
After all, I'd seen the process at work in reverse. In an overseas museum I met a man who said he went to school with me. He invited me to his place and gave me a lift. On the way everything he saw reminded him of what he called "home". It occurred to me that whereas I was delighted by the difference between there and here it was the sameness that he found wonderful. He could no more help himself in going too far in imagining the sameness than I could in imagining the difference.

I was lucky in being shifted along with my place of work to a part of the city filled with allusions to the East. I noticed Cleopatra's Needle first because, as a pedestrian, I tend to look around, even on a route I take every day. It was a few weeks after naming the Needle that I was tempted to see a monument which others had named 'the Shrine' as mysterious. With those extraordinary columns, that general movement towards the pyramid shape, it wasn't too difficult to think of temples carved out of the side of cliffs and colossal figures at the entrance. In the columns alone appeared the curve of human flesh. I named it, therefore, the Temple of Flesh and Death. After that, it was a new building and a new place and would never seem the same. It troubled me, however, that it would appear as if unchanged to others and, worse still, that I was the only person who could see the city as I did.

As buildings aren't all there is to a city I soon came to realize I couldn't see it in an entirely new light if I let people stay the same. Because the chief distinguishing feature of people in this city is their determination to appear in either large or small numbers I decided to term some the Rush Hours and others the In Betweens. I prefer the In Betweens even though I'm normally a Rush Hour person. It's not just a question of numbers but primarily a liking for scarcely populated space - that and the expressionless faces of people you pass individually during the day.

I don't travel only at the Rush Hour. I travel at night sometimes, mainly by train. As I usually take the same route it wasn't until recently that I found myself on an old line. After passing beyond the modern stations near the centre we were out in the realm of the pyramids, or, rather, our version of them. They were vast, these old stations, and empty too, even for a time when not many commuters come out.

I can't remember much sequence here. It was more a sense of bright shapes emerging suddenly out of darkness. They belonged to the age which



dreamed of the ocean liner. Their thick metal columns supported long, gabled roofs of corrugated iron - and platforms which stretched out to the end of time.

I was familiar with subterranean corridors linking platforms in the heart of the old system and had also frequented the Underground. Never till this ride, however, had I seen such lyrical metal overpasses, some crossing the lines in a gracious curve and roofed with corrugated iron, painted silver. I felt privileged to be passing through, at

this secret time of night, what was not merely an inscrutable feature of the city but a city in itself. Indeed, in its silence it seemed to approach the awful austerity of a necropolis.

Nevertheless, my feelings were of wonder rather than of awe. I resolved to travel on other lines after dark. In this way I'd not only expose myself to architectural realities which had so far eluded me but would enter their presence at a time when their influence would be most formidable. Some, like the line of the first night, expressed their vehement sense of life in iron and stone. Others, however, met the silence of the stars in the form of painted wood, spiked often, and girdled with stairways up, over and around the buildings and rails. Never had I seen anything so close in spirit to the bunting above service stations. It was a fiesta without people!

In time I came to realize it wasn't just the architecture. It was the night with its colossal emptiness which set off so vividly the whimsical shelters which delighted me - or did they make this emptiness available to me; not only available but delightful? It was emptiness, certainly, which made palms and gums so eloquent in the frail light. One evening, watching streetlights diminish in radiance as darkness absorbed them, it occurred to me that I no longer felt called upon to name things. The emptiness which hung over everything was too complete for words or buildings.

And yet there they were - my names and my shelters, the stations on what I had come to think of as the Pyramid Line - and I was still enchanted by them. Once near midnight, wondering long after the station attendant had gone home, whether I'd miss the last train, I looked from one fluorescent light to another down the length of the platform and thought how natural it must have seemed to imagine angels in terms of the illumination of stars. Not that they would appear at home among long glass tubes . . . Nevertheless, in comparison with some places I'd passed through, it was at least possible to imagine their absence.

But individual transcendental beings, still less a whole race of them, could scarcely feel at ease in a land famous for its emptiness. Not surprisingly, then, I remembered one night, travelling by rail to a post-Bicentennial event, that this country had once been titled, South Land of the Holy Ghost - more by way of a desired script, it seemed, than to designate endless space.

To a deeply spiritual people, such absolute emptiness as they must have imagined here could signify nothing but the home of an indefinite spirit, one so bent on filling every thread of being that it couldn't bear the thought of too much substantiation in the form of objects. Looking out windows on either side of the train I imagined the darkness rushing by me, scarcely touched by the margins of illumination. I brushed my hand in front of my face and, thinking about space moving through my hair like fire, thought,

"Ghost! Ghost!"

floating fund

BARRETT REID writes: Yes, magazines like *Overland* are being hit by the recession, in fact we have a fight on our hands. If you can afford it please take out a subscription for a friend at the special price of $20 p.a. In the meantime the grim news is lightened by the splendid seasonal cheer of donations to a total of $1158.50 between August and October. Specific thanks to: $126, A.W.M.; $100, J.N., N.H.; $80, K.I.; $76, S.P.; $50, J.B.; $26, R.C., C.G., M.McL., L.A.R.; $24, B.G., D.B.; $20, D.M.; $18, M.C.; $16, A.W., J.B.M., J.P., A.S., D.B.; $12, R.J.H., L.B.; $11, T.S.; $10, G.P., R.D., S.T., J.G.; $7, B.J.; $6, W.K., P.F.B., J.P., B.A., J.G.B., B.J.R., G.R.S., J.A.D.McG., D.R.D., B.R., M.K., K.I.P., R.C., J.K., T.A.C., C.C., J.D.R., B.S., D. & K.W., J.H., G.R.S., A.B., J.E., L.C., S.McK., D.M., J.H., S.O'S., B.H., K.P., B.B., P.R., B.D., N.H., A.J., M.M., F.L., M.W., M.B., G.H.; $5, J.D., L.W.; $4, B.R., O.J.; $2, J.C., D.C., J.S., R.A., J.C., G.A.R.; $1.50, B.T.T.; $1, J.A., D.R., R.B.

IRINA GOLOVNYA

A Letter From Moscow

The Qantas plane took off from the runway at Melbourne airport and after a few minutes Australia slipped beneath me. The aircraft swung from side to side for a few seconds, then straightened as land unrolled into the infinitely blue Pacific. Fate had presented me with three happy months in Australia: behind me was Sydney and its writers' festival and the glittering waters of Balmoral Beach - an unforgettable experience!

My thoughts return to the Blue Mountains and opalescent bush, and I recollect the drive north through the most 'scenic' of Australian scenery, staying with friends at Woi Woi, Foster, Urunga, the Gold Coast . . . Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne also vividly impress themselves on my mind; and then Tasmania with its legendary Port Arthur, where my constant but invisible companions were Marcus Clarke and his convict hero Rufus Dawes.

Australia was flying with me, not leaving me for a second.

Friends' voices still rang in my ears and I almost felt the warmth of their well-wishes and farewell embraces.

But I was returning home, to Moscow and a new 'round' of Perestroika.

Moscow was seething, boiling, demonstrating, protesting against a threefold price-rise for transport, major foodstuffs and commodities. Extraordinary sessions of Parliament were being held and heated debates kept Muscovites glued to their TV sets. People used to say: "When the Supreme Soviet is sitting, theatre attendances drop - one farce is enough for the day." Miners' strikes, inter-ethnic conflict, bloodshed in Karabakh, Lithuania, Ossetia; and earthquakes in the Caucasus, crowds of refugees from destroyed areas, more earthquakes, more floods, more ethnic conflicts - isn't it too much all at once? If you asked someone about literature you would be brushed aside: who is thinking about writing now! People dash from shop to shop, stand in long queues in the hope of buying food. What food? Anything you can get you hands on will do! We cast glances about the empty counters and sigh: if everything has disappeared, will Glasnost still survive?

The new Press Law officially abolished censorship. The door for private initiative was opened. Now anybody could publish any book, if only he or she had the money - and the paper. So paper immediately trebled in price, while printing costs increased fourfold. But where there's a will . . . and the people, long starved for freedom of speech, finally got it!

Newspapers began sprouting like mushrooms after rain. Vendors sold them at Metro stations, in road underpasses and in the squares. You could have any newspaper you liked: left-wing, right-wing, centrist, monarchist, official, semi-official, non-official. The liberal Muscovites favor *Argumenti i Facti*, *Moscow News*, *Megapolis Express*, *Kuranty* and *Independent*. (Almost all these newspapers claim to be independent.) I was even rather surprised to see a children's 'independent'. "Independent of whom?" I asked the boy selling it. "Independent of the adults," he answered proudly.

A great number of co-operative publishing houses have emerged, and kiosks and bookstalls display a wide variety of books, some of which make old-timers stop in the street in disbelief. Alongside M. Gorbachev's speeches and B. Yeltsin's autobiography *Against The Grain*, you can now find the *Memoirs of the Tsarist Family*, *Recollections of the White Russian Generals*, *Lovers of Catherine the Great*, *Mysteries of the K.B.G.* and *Galina* (the autobiography of our celebrated 'dissident' singer, Galina Vishnevskaya). You can find books on religion and idealist philosophy and, what is most amazing to Muscovites, books on sex—*with* illustrations! There are piles of adventure and detective novels, by Agatha Christie, D. H. Chase and E. R. Barrows; even *Gone With the Wind* and

The Thorn Birds - all reprints and commercially profitable, to remind us that we are moving into a free market.

Perestroika has also returned to Russian readers books that were formerly suppressed, and this has 'rehabilitated' many a great author, such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, Andrey Bely, Vladimir Nabokov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and many other victims of the big extermination-of-ideas campaign which began after the Revolution. All these books were known in intellectual circles, as were the 'forbidden' books by Solzhenitsyn and other liberal writers of the underground. The Muscovites, those who were tired of half-truths and lies, became devout readers of Samizdat literature. Nowadays, people say - half seriously, half humorously - that secret reading and dissident talk in Moscow kitchens paved the way to Perestroika and the New Thinking.

Now that whole shelves of these shadowy pages have emerged into broad daylight, "grass has finally sprouted through the concrete" - in the words of Evgeni Popov, one of the previously 'underground' writers who had been expelled from the Writers' Union, and whose works were for a long time out of print. Popov is now enjoying success and popularity for his short stories, novellas and a recently published satire on the nomenklatura, *Beryozka Restaurant.*

The well-known satirists Vasily Aksyonov and Vladimir Voinovich - who had been excommunicated from the Writers' Union and were living abroad as emigrants - have also been reinstated. Aksyonov's novels, *Ozhog (The Burn)* and *The Crimean Island*, both written in exile, were published in Moscow and warmly received by the public. Vladimir Voinovich ('Chonkin') enjoys great popularity and his brilliant, satirical, anti-Utopian *Moscow - 2042*, printed by a co-operative association, sold like hot cakes.

Times are changing, and 1990 was declared the Year of Solzhenitsyn! All the leading periodicals serialized his *Gulag Archipelago* for everybody to read - while a couple of years ago one could receive a prison sentence just for possessing his novel.

In 1989 the Writers' Union finally joined the International PEN Club, which was hitherto regarded with mistrust and suspicion. Anatoly Rybakov, our famous novelist, became the first President of the Moscow branch. Wittily, he called this belated event "a sort of atonement for our past sins". Rybakov's big novel, *Children of the Arbat* was a similarly belated event. Finished in 1967, it had to wait twenty years for its publication. Writing it at that time was a courageous act, as Rybakov made Red Terror and Stalinist repression of the people his chosen topic. The novel, a huge hit, was soon translated into more than thirty languages, including English. Together with its sequel, *Thirty-Five and Other Years*, and the recently published *Fear*, it takes impressive account of those tragic times. "The system demanded not only obedience from its citizens but also support of its terror," Rybakov concludes bitterly.

Books of Rybakov's scope are few, with most writers nowadays preferring shorter genres - short stories or novellas - for time and history press upon us!

The 'new prose' (and 'new poetry', too) burst into the periodicals: into *Novy Mir*, *Znamya*, *Octyabr* and *Yunost (The Forum of Youth)*, as well as *Druzhba Narodov (The Friendship of the People)* and our favorite weekly, *Ogonyok*. The 'new prose' poured out in an incessant flow. Now we have quite a group of talented new writers: Fazil Iskander, Valeria Narbikova, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, Evgeni Popov (mentioned above), Vyacheslav Pyetsych and Alexander Kabakov. The last-mentioned writer is a *Moscow News* analyst and satirist, author of the movie-script *No Return*, who predicted a reactionary putsch in Moscow in 1993. His prediction came true in August, 1991.

These writers, and many others, do not represent any trend or current, nor do they have any one political leaning. Each explores his or her own special themes, problems and characters. Some write 'harsh' naturalistic prose which is called 'chernukha' - a derogatory term meaning 'black painting' - while others write lyrical and poetic prose with subjective overtones. One of the dominant features of modern prose is its irony, another its multiplicity of styles and genres. There is the freedom to experiment, to 'mix colors', as we say.

Some writers tend towards documentary-style prose, often blended with mystifications, absurdities and the grotesque. Fantastic Utopias and anti-Utopias are, in some of these works, visions of real life projected into the future.

Contemporary Soviet writing is diverse and offers a many-sided picture of life: of the city and the country, of centres of correction, hospitals, prisons, life in the army . . . but first and foremost, it concerns ordinary people and their problems - people whose lives are often falling apart, who are trying to find the way to each other.

One of the most original and accomplished figures in contemporary prose is Ludmila Petrushevskaya. While some like her and others

do not, she is still a very prolific and widely-read writer, mainly of short stories. Plays, too, seem to drop from her pen with ease. Her most popular plays are *Three Girls in Blue*, *Columbine's Flat* and *The Music Lesson*. Though she has many admirers and many detractors, she is widely recognized both at home and abroad - though not so long ago she could not get a single story published or play produced. Theatre directors and publishers rejected her works as 'chernukha' and claimed she belittled Soviet life and the people. But the blame was not with Petrushevskaya, but with the life she had to live and observe. Brought up in an orphanage, all her stories and plays are shaped from life's rawest materials, and they have both a dramatic and comic face.

The problems she tackles are usually personal ones: lovers in conflict; women forsaken, then married or remarried; children neglected; quarrels with neighbors in communal flats; inter-family conflicts; relatives who fight for possession of a room, a house or property. To them she says: "People should be human in spite of being relatives." There is a lot of humor and warmth in her stories and plays, though some have a tragic coloring. Her characters strive to find a "circle of friends" - the title of one of her stories - a stable structure to cling to in life.

It was an exciting experience for me to see one of her short plays rehearsed by the students of the Russian Department of Melbourne University, under the experienced guidance of Sonya Witheridge. But my amazement was greater when I saw the play rehearsed in *English* - translated and directed by my host in Australia, George Dixon, a professional actor and enthusiastic student of Russian. He produced the play with a small group of actors, with Lola Russell taking the lead. I think Ludmila Petrushevskaya herself would have loved to have attended the play in Melbourne: she, and another of our new writers, Olga Kuchkina, studied drama for a time at Alexei Arbuzov's studio.

Olga Kuchkina also writes plays and short stories. In her play *Joseph and Nadezda*, she daringly explores the relationship between Stalin and his wife, beginning with their first meeting and ending with Nadezda's tragic death. The play is, psychologically, very convincing.

Returning to Petrushevskaya - she has now turned to 'experimental prose', which is not yet well-known or popular in our country. Her novella *The Philosopher and the Wench* is imaginative and erotic. The episodes are disjointed and the main character an indecisive teacher, a self-styled 'philosopher' whose life becomes complicated when he witnesses a crime committed by hooligans at a petrol station.

Valeria Narbikova's prose is also experimental, and its serious message is conveyed in a fanciful and original way. Her novellas *The Balance Between Daylight and Starlight* and another with the strange title of *Pro-Beg* - which might be translated as *The Marathon* - found a warm response, particularly among their women readers. Both books are about love and lovers, seen through a mist of romantic adventure, and they reflect upon the future and past. They convey an atmosphere akin to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *Pro-Beg*, her lovers flee from the city to spend a couple of days in a southern republic - which suddenly decides to break off from the Union and declares its independence. But the central government decrees that it can only break away *vertically*, not horizontally! So there is only one way out, and that is 'up'. The lovers must make their escape into the Cosmos. This fanciful idea allows the writer to philosophise on life, politics and the destiny of man. She telescopes all human history together (pro-beg is a race, a universal marathon) and blends, in a Joycean way, mythology with real life, shifting the action from one century to another.

The man-made world, says Valeria Narbikova, is evil. Man has 'robbed' the Creator of his/her property by continuous division and re-division of the World. Nature is dying, mankind threatened by cataclysms and people must find a new balance between "daylight and starlight", to restore the harmony between the real earthly world and the Cosmos. In Valeria Narbikova's vision, Woman is a great unifying factor embodying Love and Eros.

As I have already said, many readers nowadays prefer 'harsh' prose - especially men. A very popular representative of this writing is Sergei Kaledin, who came into prominence with his story *Smirennoe Kladbishche (A Humble Graveyard)*. It attracted public attention because of its very subject matter - which few have explored since the days of 'churchyard poetry' and Russian Romanticism. The story is about the daily toil of grave diggers. The author himself had worked with a grave-digging team as a young man, to earn extra money. The grave-digger's community is a world in itself, with its own laws, subordinations and 'mafia'. Kaledin employs a deft talent and lots of humor to brighten up his grave subject. The story was made into a film, which was also a great success. Another Kaledin story *Stroibat (The Building Battalion)* concerned sensational disclosures about some aspects of Soviet army life. Kaledin's style here is rude, as it should be, and the story is very authentic. It tells of the everyday life of young soldiers in

a building battalion - the uncontrolled power of superiors, the system of hazing, corporal punishment, and other 'normal' humiliations the boys were subject to. As a result of such treatment, there were many desertions and even suicides. The story raised a storm of indignation within military circles: Kaledin was accused of 'slinging mud' at the army and, through military censorship, a ban was placed on the presentation of its stage version.

One of the most impressive works I've read recently was Svetlana Aleksievich's short novel *Boys in Zinc Coffins* - a dramatic documentary based on the diaries and letters of young recruits sent to Afghanistan. The eighteen-year-old boys were torn from their peaceful lives and plunged into the hell of war - a war in which we participated for ten long years, fighting for a Communist government. It was a fratricidal war with heavy losses on both sides. It was also a 'silent' war, a 'hushed-up' affair. Military censorship was vigilant that no 'undesirable' information should be leaked. The boys fought in secrecy, died in secrecy and were brought home to be buried, in even greater secrecy, in zinc coffins labelled "Cargo No. 200".

I was in Australia when the Gulf War began, and when it finished. In Sydney I saw anti-war demonstrations and meetings of protest, and a nagging thought kept eating away: why did Russian mothers not go into the streets to protect *their* sons? No-one even mumbled a protest. Was this hypnosis? Fear? Or was it the ingrained habit of submitting, without even a word, to all the demands of the system, right or wrong?

I recollect a fable by Fazil Iskander in which he trenchantly describes the relationship between pythons and rabbits. Pythons, he wrote, are excellent hypnotists, yet even they wonder why the rabbits will allow themselves to be swallowed.

There was one dissenter against the war, however, who protested loudly - academiciam Sakharov. Because of his lone plea for the young soldiers he was exiled from Moscow to Gorky town. Yet the "Afghan syndrome" is still an aspect of Soviet psychological life, and a very dangerous one: perhaps the explosive situation of August 19 was only its most recent manifestation.

The condition of literature mirrors that of the Soviet Union. Literature and life run side by side. Sometimes literature lags behind, and sometimes it sprints ahead - to predict and give warning. Life is renewed and so is our writing. But who can say what is going to happen next?

Our society is rapidly advancing into a post-Perestroika period - but what is in store for us? We Muscovites look wryly upon events - and some are very disappointed, others still quite hopeful, especially the humorists. We have many writers who are also humorists, and they are much loved by Muscovites: Alexander Ivanov, Mikhail Zadorni, Mikhail Zhvanetsky . . . there are so many now that we can even imagine setting up a Ministry of Humor, which may help us survive! In his book *A Sad Collection of Humorous Stories* M. Zhvanetsky says: "We keep laughing, but nothing changes . . . and that is what makes life sad!"

There is a ring at the doorbell, and our postwoman has brought two of the latest magazines. (Actually, more belated than latest.) I quickly look through them and find Vasily Aksenov's novel, *The Yolk of an Egg*, and feel tempted immediately to start reading. Vasily, you see, was a former neighbor of ours. But I must go to town to do some shopping.

The rain has stopped and the sun appears through the clouds - not the Australian sun, but the sun all the same, only in a different sky. At the Pushkin Metro I walk past the rows of vendors, and there's a larger 'crop' of fresh newspapers. Is it the effect of the rain? And a new title catches my eye: *Kenguryenok* - a Russian pet name for a baby kangaroo. A new paper for children? What a surprise - this must be the longest leap of an Australian kangaroo, from the spacious Australian bush to the narrow passages of the Moscow underground!

Irina Golovnya is a scientist and translator of Australian literature (Marcus Clarke, Steele Rudd, Dymphna Cusak and Frank Hardy). *She thanks her Australian friends for their kindness: Leslie Rees, Clem and Nina Christensen, George and Lola Dixon, Rupert Lockwood, Enid Tardent, Joan Gowen, Norma and John Chervin, Penny Lockwood, Christina Grishin, Bernice Morris, Peggy Cregan and Sonya Witheridge.*

GORDON NEIL STEWART

A Boy And His Reading, 1917-1927

The first book I remember looking at was a gilt-lettered, red-bound Victorian translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* illustrated by Doré. The text was far beyond my five-year-old ability but the pictures of damned souls in the circles of Hell being boiled in oil and stuck with pitchforks were memorable. I was fascinated by the sinners turned into trees, tormented by falling flakes of fire, inserted into fiery holes in the ground or plunged into boiling seas of pitch.

There was a companion volume of Dante's visit to Heaven but I found the saved souls and angels tedious. Purgatory was more interesting but my favorite remained the Inferno full of black-faced devils and damned souls.

When an aged relative asked me to give a penny from my pocket money for the missionary society, she said that if poor Pacific natives were not baptised they would be lost for eternity between Heaven and Hell. I gave the penny unwillingly and wondered how the brown people would all fit into Heaven. According to Dante and Doré everyone there was white. Little did I know that I was echoing the white supremacy concept that black was the devil's colour.

The Divine Comedy was housed in a revolving bookcase that could be turned by the pressure of a finger. Later, when I could read, I found most of the books there were the kind women of my grandmother's age and position were expected to read: Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, the poems of Christina Rossetti, Browning and Francis Thompson, and one I later read, *The Cuckoo Clock*, by a Mrs Molesworth.

My grandmother's father, a clergyman high in the Methodist Church, had written a number of books, including one promoting the views of Archbishop Usher who had demonstrated that history began with the creation of the world in the year 4004 BC. He dismissed the blasphemous assertions of Darwin, Huxley and Lyell. The old man, a missionary in South Africa where my grandmother and her sisters were born, had also written a grammar of what he called "The Kaffir Language".

My grandmother's younger sister wrote pessimistically religious poems that were collected and published in books, and my grandmother wrote short stories for Methodist journals whose small print I found difficult to read. Unlike the Anglicans, whose base was the English village or Cathedral town where the lower classes were dutiful, respectful and content with poverty, my grandmother's family came from England's dismal manufacturing towns and were more aware of the horrors perpetrated on people by the industrial revolution.

My grandmother's didactic little stories depicted people driven to the lower depths of poverty, but saved from sin and able to live respectably. This at least showed an awareness of the realities, however doubtful her solutions.

My grandfather's charity extended mainly to fellow Scots fallen on hard times, but my grandmother sponsored a boys' club in the country town near her home and indirectly helped fallen women, a category existing in our district since convict days. She was a kindly person who loved having her grandchildren around her. From a great cedar wardrobe came sweets and little presents. She had a little harmonium around which my parents and I would sit and sing while she played rousing hymns like 'Shall we gather at the river' or 'Onward, Christian soldiers'.

She was small, her white hair always covered by a lace cap with ribbons. From hints dropped by the grownups, I gathered her husband was difficult to live with. She was said to be extravagant, like most wives in the family, probably as a protest against her overbearing husband. There was a story that she would buy silks and ribbons at the local store and, with the connivance of the shopkeeper, have them billed as necessities like sugar.

My father was born when my grandfather was nearly sixty, so when I was an infant he was already in his nineties, a forbidding figure, clean-shaven except for hair under his chin, with bleak pale eyes that never seemed to express any sympathy. Perhaps my father's somewhat eccentric character partly came from having an elderly and stern father. I have a photograph of the old gentleman at seventy-five in frockcoat and top hat, with his youngest son, a gangling fifteen. They do not look a happy pair.

At ninety Grandfather broke his leg and was no longer able to ride around his acres even though he'd had a pit dug so he could mount his black mare. Resigned to a wheelchair, he lived in his own apartments on the ground floor, looked after by a nurse. She was a formidable starched person who fixed me with a gimlet eye.

At mealtime grandfather was wheeled into the big dining-room and placed at the end of the long table surrounded by his children and grandchildren, a patriarch of old. He seemed to look upon them with disdain. I don't think he ever spoke a word to me.

The great joints of roast beef or boiled mutton placed on the table were carved by his eldest son and were supported by dishes of boiled potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower or onions. It was healthy enough food in the Scottish-Australian tradition. My eldest uncle had spent some time in France, but this had little influence on his home cuisine.

The food was prepared in a half-underground kitchen at the back of the house where a large and bosomy cook and one or two younger women hustled around in an atmosphere reminiscent of Dante's Inferno, especially in our long hot summers. I found the servants more interesting to talk to than my own grownups, who seemed always preoccupied with their own affairs. The servants' conversations about their lives drew me to the kitchen, though the cook shooed me away from the business of preparing the cooked meats, making caper sauce (an essential addition to boiled mutton) or pounding and twisting great heaps of dough that were turned into suet puddings and treacle tarts.

What did my grandfather read? Not very much more than the Bible and other religious texts, I think. Around the house were to be found nineteenth century editions of Burns, Scott, Dickens and Thackeray, but I doubt if the pages had been read for decades.

I liked the musty smell of books; they seemed mysterious and intriguing. In the smoking-room bookcase I found a battered copy of Baron Munchausen's travels, which contained many strange and fascinating stories. One was about people who lived in trees and whose bodily wastes were exuded in the form of vapour, a very convenient method, I thought. For some reason the grownups considered this book unsuitable reading for a boy and it was whisked away.

There was always a case of books sent up from a Sydney subscription library with works just out from England, by writers such as Hugh Walpole, John Buchan, Frank Swinnerton, Ethel Manning, John Masefield and many now-forgotten middle-brows. These were snatched up by the women and sometimes by the men. They were kept from me, because they were considered too advanced or dealt with unsuitable subjects.

Along the great staircase hung large and competent portraits of my grandparents, some religious pictures and a few muddy Victorian landscapes. Colonial painting was not worthy of patronage, except for a portrait of my grandmother at the age of sixteen, at the time of her marriage, done by an unknown painter.

The family fortune and position was the result of a grant of land made to my great-grandfather, ten years before Queen Victoria came to the throne, after forty years of service in the army. Of the old soldier's literary tastes there was no sign except

a leather-bound history of his regiment.

He was a strange man, forceful and energetic, harsh and brutal in some ways yet kindly in others, and a friend and admirer of Dr John Dunmore Lang, the avowed democrat and republican, to whose school in Sydney he sent his son. In Scotland he had several natural children, one of whom proved to be the father of Mrs Molesworth, a successful writer of children's books. The old man maintained his natural children until they could earn a living, for he had a strong sense of paternal responsibility.

The children also took his name, traditional in the distant part of Scotland where he lived. He was more than suspect of ill-treating his wife and reportedly had other natural children after he came to the Colony, in the bad old days of early settlement.

After my great-grandfather died my grandfather, rich after the Gold Rush, built an ostentatious mansion on a nearby hill. All the wealthy families of the district built mansions and grandfather was not to be outdone. He was aware of the power of wealth. For him the new house, elaborately and expensively furnished in the latest style from England, represented a break with the unpleasant period of the convict system and the rough democracy of the Gold Rush, when Jack was as good, and sometimes had as much money, as his master. The mansion asserted the priorities of established society.

For all its grandeur, the big house contained only one bathroom, very beautifully fitted with blue tiles. Next door was a water closet rather like a throne room, with a magnificent china bowl with blue designs. This instrument was only for the select and other utilities of the more traditional kind were to be found outside. The old house down by the river was abandoned though sometimes poor but respectable Scottish families lived there for peppercorn rent.

After World War I the house was taken over by my aunt, Grandfather's youngest and favorite daughter. Built by convicts of handmade bricks and rough-cut timber, it seemed to my young eyes as old as eternity. It smelt of wood fires and had noisy possums in the roof. It was where my grandparents had lived and died and many convicts had laboured until the system came to an end. While my great-grandfather might have been rough and bad-tempered, he was probably not cruel to the convicts. Many others were. But to have a man's skin flayed off his back because he was insolent or stupid would not have been in his nature. This was an English gentry rather than a Scottish characteristic.

My aunt renovated the house as a holiday home and refuge from Sydney's summer humidity. It had no electric light. Paraffin lamps were used to illuminate the main rooms and one went to bed with a candlestick. The sanitary arrangements were primitive and bathing meant heating water on a wood stove and pouring it into an iron tub.

When her husband died, my aunt moved there with her Sydney furniture and her husband's considerable library. What happened to my great-grandfather's furniture I never knew, for, apart from a writing desk, none remained in my grandfather's new home. I suspect it was considered not smart enough for modern times.

The Victorians thought the Georgians licentious, irreligious and generally morally unsatisfactory. When Australia began to prosper in the second half of the century, Georgian times (the bad old days of the convict system) were shut out, for some of the prosperous people had convicts among their ancestors. It was possible to see a genteel lady wearing gloves and carrying a parasol, the height of refinement, and to know that her ancestor had been some rough and hairy convict who had arrived in the Colony in chains.

After the death of my grandparents the extreme

religiosity of the household was toned down. No longer were there family prayers, Bible readings, grace before meals, visits from clergymen, trooping off to church once or twice on Sunday. Religion became more or less a nominal activity, concerned with marriages, christenings, burials and special festivals like Easter and Christmas.

My father, despite an intensely religious upbringing, was a complete sceptic. He read Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man*, Fitzgerald's version of *The Rubáivát of Omar Khayyám*, H. G. Wells, G. B. Shaw and other sceptical writers of the period. He also had the romantic tastes of the pre-1914 period and read Boccaccio, Rabelais, Villon, Wilde, Ernest Dowson and Swinburne. He was not anti-religious, merely uninterested. I was never christened, never taught the Lord's Prayer, never had religious instruction, except when an aged relative (the same who had taken my penny for the missionaries) tried to teach me the Ten Commandments. I found this rather silly; I had no intention of worshipping any graven images and didn't know what adultery was. I was never sent to Sunday school, but our family never did go; it was for children lower down the social scale.

My aunt's husband, my Uncle Jim, was a graduate of Edinburgh medical school. His father, a Scottish merchant, had once been bailed up by Ben Hall who took his gold watch. Uncle held that a man of the professional class should have a proper library, with leather-bound volumes of the classics. There, row upon row, were the poets, the novelists and playwrights and the works of Victorian intellectual giants such as Macaulay, Ruskin and Carlyle. (I wondered later why the foremost ideologues of the era were of Scottish descent.) The collected works of Dickens and Thackeray, several Shakespeares, Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey rested in quiet rows on the shelves.

Uncle Jim was a determined man who had risen high in his profession and numbered among his patients wealthy members of Sydney's Chinese community and the higher type of kept women. He must have had an enquiring mind and a broad one. In his library I found a copy of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and a book by the radical Labor Party politician Frank Anstey, *Red Europe*, about the war of intervention against Soviet Russia. He also read *The Bulletin*, a publication banned by my grandparents because of its attitude to respectable people and because it had once printed something derogatory about my grandfather. Uncle had a few volumes of Lawson's short stories and A. B. Patterson's poems. The family preferred to ignore Lawson, but Bartie Patterson was different; he came from a respectable Scottish family and had been a squatter, though not a very successful one.

My aunt knew him well. Years later in a shop in Edgecliff she asked him to sign a book of his collected verse. He did so willingly but told her that his work was forgotten these days and no one wanted to read it any more. This was just before the War. Not long after there was a revival of interest: 'Once a Jolly Swagman' became almost a national anthem, and people would recite 'The Man From Snowy River' or 'The Man from Ironbark' at parties.

My aunt knew Norman Lindsay and the artists

and writers associated with *Art in Australia*. She had a small but interesting collection of paintings, including a Charles Lloyd Jones, early Kenneth Macqueen watercolors and etchings by Sydney Ure Smith, Hardy Wilson and Norman Lindsay. I was aware of Lindsay's work from an early age and his so-called scandalous behavior was often discussed among the grownups. I remember my father pronouncing, "Of course, the man is a sexual maniac". I was not too sure what this meant, but it certainly sounded rather nasty. There was a sort of love-hate relationship with Lindsay; while people disapproved of him, they were fascinated by his life and work.

My parents were close friends of Jack Lindsay's parents-in-law. Jack, of course, was Norman's son and, as I found later, a perfectly rational and talented person. Neither he nor his father could be described as living a riotous life and politically Norman was as conservative as his respectable detractors.

In my family, while Australian literature was generally ignored, we were all acquainted with art, particularly painters of the Heidelberg school. My father once took me to the Sydney Art Gallery and, with some reverence, showed me the Streetons, Gruners and Roberts. I suppose at that time I shared the family's attitude to books by Australians: they were not really serious works like the classics or books from England. But this colonial attitude did not stop me enjoying Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* and I even dropped a tear when Judy was crushed by a falling tree and died. Books by Mary Grant Bruce, Mrs Gunn and May Gibbs were around the house.

There were also books that once belonged to my cousins, ten or more years older than me: *Treasure Island*, *The Jungle Book* or Edith Nesbit's stories about the Phoenix or the Psammead. I developed a taste for Jean-Henri Fabre's strange little stories about spiders and insects, and found a book my father was keen on, called *The Gods are Athirst*, by Anatole France. It was quite exciting in parts but heavy going. By now I began to be interested in more modern books such as Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth*, Marryat's *Mr Midshipman Easy* and Stanley Weyman's over-romantic stories. Charles Lever's novel, *Charles O'Malley* was pretty weak but had some fine descriptions of cavalry charges and great battles against Napoleon.

Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* I found goody-goody but Herman Melville's story about the great white whale filled me with momentary enthusiasm for the sea. I was thrilled by the opening sentence: "My name is Ishmael!" The book revived my interest in the boat owned by my mother's father in which we used to sail around the Harbour at weekends, but no great whales appeared.

In summer I stayed at the big house in the country and went riding with girl cousins or shooting rabbits with sons of tenant farmers. My father taught me to shoot, insisting that I never fire at a sitting rabbit, only at running ones, as this gave the rabbit a sporting chance. After a little practice I became a good shot. My two uncles were excellent shots and the eldest one, when in England, was invited to the best country houses.

During his time in Paris he must have mixed in society, for he knew General Boulanger, then Minister for War, who invited him to shoot at Rambouillet, the summer home of the President of the Republic. Boulanger, it will be remembered, later attempted rather half-heartedly to take over the government and establish a military dictatorship. He failed and fled to Belgium, where he committed suicide on his mistress's grave. My uncle had lived in Paris during a most turbulent period when great changes were taking place, new boulevards were constructed and the Paris Opera built. It was the Paris of Zola's Nana, Maupassant's Bel Ami, and Proust's Baron de Charlus; a far cry from stodgy old Sydney and some dusty little bush town.

But this was long before my uncle settled down to be a country gentleman. His sorrow was that he had no son, and the estate, which was entailed, would pass out of his hands. His wife died and left him with five lively daughters he found difficult to control. He was musical, playing the organ with some brilliance. He was never friendly to me,

perhaps because his two brothers had sons and one day the estate would go to my elder cousin.

It was a house in which the children were ignored unless they got in the way. This did not bother me in the least, as it allowed me to do exactly what I wanted. I was thrown into the company of two younger girl cousins looked after by a nurse who entertained the children at night with table-tapping and telling fortunes in tea-leaves.

Sometimes I would escape to the library. The grownups found me somewhat peculiar, but did not worry as long as I appeared healthy, ate my food and bothered nobody. My elders and betters sat in the smoking room and talked about money, gossiped about the neighbours and the family, the likelihood of drought or a rise in the price of wool. I would sit in an old armchair or lie on a sofa in a quiet room during the long hot summer afternoons, when all was silent save for cawing crows or the chug of an irrigation pump down by the river, and read, immersed in a dream world. I had acquired the ability to read very fast and swallowed book after book at what most people considered astonishing speed. I occasionally skipped passages if there was not much conversation or no illustrations. There is an art in skipping. One learns which paragraphs are important and which are not.

At school I forgot the dates of the kings of England and had little interest in Latin, although I made raids on the school library. My father was an avid reader, too, and would sometimes read aloud from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or Carlyle's *French Revolution.* I went on to read Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities.*

My father was given to reading rather declamatory verse from *Lyra Heroica*, a book prize from his South Audley Street, London, preparatory school. One of my father's favorite poems was Macaulay's 'Horatio', which had firm trenchant lines describing the heroic ancient Romans. Another favorite was Tennyson's 'Battle of the Fleet', which began "At Flores in the Azores, Sir Richard Grenville lay . . ." Its ringing verses made me feel how fine it was to be English and what treacherous dogs the Spaniards were. Yet I was not English, but Scottish-Australian, and the Spaniards were no threat to me.

Of course, I didn't come into the world with impeccable taste in literature. I read commonplace things, too: *The Boy's Own Paper*, *Chums*, books about handsome young Englishmen who gave Zulus and Pathans their just deserts, even stories about young Australians who fought and defeated Chinese hordes attempting to invade the Northern Territory. There was Rider Haggard, and stories about ruthless Red Indians, noble Cavaliers and nasty Roundheads, refined aristocrats and brutal *sansculottes* in the French Revolution. Because it was about France, my father was keen on a book called *Scaramouche* by Rafael Sabatini. I took this book to be a translation from the Italian until years later I discovered that Sabatini was born in England and wrote countless historical romances in English. He was a sort of inferior Dumas.

In old bound volumes of *The Strand Magazine* I found Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, following with enthusiasm the adventures of the drug-taking detective and his dimmer associate. I was given *The Hound of the Baskervilles* one Christmas and, in nightmares, I was pursued across the moors by the giant dog. I awoke imagining its pricked ears as it gazed through the bedroom window. When my father found out he took the book away.

When I was thirteen or fourteen, my interest in books began to change. I was less attracted by action and violent deeds and more by characters in the book. Books revealed another world beyond childhood. I began to suspect the existence of a new and troubling universe.

My emerging interests led to a grownup version of *Robinson Crusoe*, and then I found in my uncle's bookcase another of Defoe's, *Moll Flanders.* This came as something of a shock. Victorian times had blotted out the eighteenth century, but my broad-minded uncle had leatherbound editions of them all: Defoe, Swift, Smollett, Sterne, Fielding and Richardson. I certainly do not think these writers were ever mentioned at my rather dull school in Sydney.

One summer when I was a little older and encouraged by having read *Moll Flanders*, I started on Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, a startling literary experience that left me bemused. This was very different from Dr Fu Manchu and Bulldog Drummond! But some of these books were rather dull; I found Richardson's *Pamela* downright boring. Then came Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*, whose hero had other adventures than those in the *The Boy's Own Paper.* Was the world really like this? Then I went on to read Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* which I found silly and pretentious. I was puzzled by the ending which went: "So when I stretched out my hand I caught hold of the fille-de-chambre's . . ."

What a strange way to end a book and what did he catch hold of, I wondered?

Gordon Neil Stewart lives in Bathurst, NSW.

PETER NEILSON, Mutla Ridge, 1991, charcoal and chalk on paper, 60 × 85 cm

Peter Neilson's Charcoal Drawings were exhibited at Delbridge Street Gallery, Melbourne, in July. Mutla Ridge *and the drawings shown elsewhere in this issue were part of this exhibition. Alongside* Mutla Ridge *the artist hung the following quotation as a Statement:*

"One of the most controversial incidents of the war with Iraq was the carnage at Mutla Ridge (about 30 km north-west of Kuwait City) . . . The assault on the retreating army began when US M1 tanks lined up on the other side of the ridge, cutting off the escape route . . . Once the pass had been cut off, there was nowhere to go. They were trapped and capable of nothing but surrender . . . Aircraft were then called in to finish off the job. . . . Nobody counted the bodies found and buried. . . ."

Michael Davies, *The Times* Defence Correspondent quoted in *The Australian.*

CAROLYN van LANGENBERG

Bone Island

These days, he sits on the stoop of his mobile home and he looks across colours his myopic eyes flood together. Blue and purple gravitate upwards to join the blue of the sky. He didn't see the blue flow downwards to disperse into a wash of purplish mistiness. For Kel always saw the world upside down, somehow back to front and inside out.

Later, he'll complain that they, kids and do-gooders, know-alls! - fuss about him wearing his striped pyjama jacked over his shirt or sweater as if it truly was a jacket. And one day I'll go to visit him to hear more sinister tales of malcontent. But for the moment, he's newly retired and happy enough.

Kel is fifty-six in this year, 2002. He decided when pressed about ten years ago to opt for early retirement. He had then already begun to experience a blinding lassitude so terrible he feared losing sight of everything, including himself.

His work, as a despatch clerk for one of the larger universities, was routine. When threatened by a new form to fill in or a new procedure to follow, his face slumped into fleshy jowls. His body developed nervous twitches and minor allergies. His eyes disappeared under thick eyebrows. He didn't resist the changes. Disconsolate, he gave in, caved in. He resigned himself to drinking too much and, when he slipped the key in his front door, alone, he beerily sighed his worries to himself.

Kel didn't want his daily pathway, the same treck from his flat to the railway station to the office, to change. Ever. He refused to believe it would. Ever. Consequently, a morning came when he found himself bumping into all manner of objects. A row of buildings was being demolished. Kel took exception to the obstructing workmen and their scaffolding. Jack-hammering startled him out of his somnambulance. Cranes jerked and teetered above his mornings. And trucks, backing up and winching down and speeding away with loads of debris, blasted his evenings.

Of course, a hole eventually filled up with water behind some meagre wood planking covered with graffiti by the kids and with posters by the alternative artists. The artists chose free advertising space whenever and wherever they found it available.

He didn't mind the graffiti and the posters. Not much. He was barely aware of their existence. In a state of torpor, he passed by the rudimentary markings of an emerging Modigliani or the crazy scrawls of a prepubescent and future Pollock, or the fluid hyperbole of a nascent Brett Whitely.

Just as he'd got used to the daubed and postered planking, he found himself negotiating sleepy morning steps around a construction site. And the awfulness began again - metal screaming on metal, electric saws moaning through wood, power drills grinding into cement walls - all at once and immediately after he'd just woken up and had breakfast!

Kel wasn't impressed by conspicuous progress.

At a fundamental level, he hated change.

Kel is not the kind of man you'd want to remember. His skin sweats from repressed anxieties, a nervousness palpable enough to have attracted him a little sympathy but no permanent affection. A waitress may have served him an extra large slice of cake, or she may have topped his cappuccino with cholesterol boosting swirls of cream, but the bar girl, pausing to hear him stumble through a story about an incident at work, would vainly stifle her yawns. Her eyes would wander involuntarily. Hurt, he'd splutter, redden, and angrily drain his glass.

In retirement, Kel lived by a routine. In the town he retired to, Alstoneville, you might bump into him at the pool table in the local pub or outside the Vietnamese restaurant where he daily reads the menu before choosing whether to eat in or out. On Wednesdays he can be seen carrying a bulging

plastic bag to the laundromat. On Mondays, it's the park, Tuesdays the bingo club, Thursdays shopping and Fridays the pub bar. Most weekends, he sits on the stoop. He is that man who does those things on those days in that way. Kel, and the people of Alstoneville, know he is Kel by this routine. Otherwise, for the people of the town, Kel wouldn't've existed.

And Kel? His perception of himself?

The local kids think he is a bit weird. He's too fat to sit comfortably on the narrow steps leading into his mobile home. He squeezes between the railings and he curls his lip, pouting and snarling at them. No one, not least a gang of kids, were going to ruin his retirement, the time in his life when he would choose to indulge himself in his favourite pastimes.

Over the years, Kel has forgotten what he loved most in life. I am convinced of this. He sits and looks and he watches the colours faze in and out. Sometimes he hears a storm rumbling a long way away, over the hills and out to sea. When I visit, I look at him in exasperation, believing he must be trying to remember what it is that has kept him breathing all these years. And when I ask him how things are, Kel relates stories from our childhood as if they happened yesterday.

The past, he implies, is with us forever.

Is he suggesting the continuous present is irrelevant?

The end of memory is the present, a consolidation of our pasts. The future is only a moment ahead of now. For Kel, the present is himself looking backwards down tunnelled time, his back against the door facing the unfamiliar, those future possibilities which may assault him with changes.

From my point of view, imagination distorts the remembered pictures Kel cherishes. The larger part may be shared, the sitting under a tree for example where a plaid rug is spread over prickly grass, but other details which are unimportant to me are honoured by him. I don't remember Bone Island being special. Kel frequently cites it.

Bone Island.

My Bone Island and his Bone Island are not the same.

When he'd told me about opting for early retirement during the recession of the early 1990's, life was not treating me too kindly. At that time, I lay awake watching the subtleties of shadows lightening and darkening the ceiling's matte surface. For several months, I'd been trying to sell my flat. It's dismal, its only drama the light and shadow games on the bedroom ceiling. No one had made me any offers. The ground floor flat with bars on its windows and the cement block garden graced by garbage bins and a rotary clothes hoist continues today, about ten years' later, to be my prison.

Light and shadows.

Well, not quite. Dark and light shadows, shadowings of shadows, are my companions.

Can you imagine a life lived, and I stress the word *lived*, with such immaterial shadowings? They hound you wherever you take up residence. A book about shadows buffeting shadows spider walking, crab dancing, wavering like anemones, fine tentacles brushing outwards then retreating inwards, would be a book about everyone's life and no one but the poets would want to read it. Poets aren't afraid of the truth. They take great pride in describing the banality that makes sense of life.

Story tellers want Bone Island. It has a ring of Peter Pan about it, boyish adventures experienced under an overbright sun. Or perhaps Tom Sawyer's adventures are the stuff story tellers love in their perpetual quest for avoiding the truth. Story tellers squirm away from reality. Life's too bold. And fantasies are easier to construct than imagining ways to relate how it is.

I was first introduced to the legendary Bone Island after the 1954 floods.

A raggle taggle group trailed along the banks of a swift flowing creek. Long grey grass lay flattened and stinking over a malevolent blackness, mould or mud of dank compost. Snakes!, I imagined and I trod warily, head bowed, eyes skittering nervously over the black stink. Kel and the neighbouring farmers' boys strode ahead of me. They were older and taller and they made no concessions for my skinny five year old legs.

I wasn't a pretty, beguiling girl. My dark hair was too curly and my skin was too pale. It never tanned. My skin yellowed and freckled over an unhealthy anaemic blue. And I was a whinger. Quite a disappointment, I was, a nervous little whinger pursuing boys.

To Bone Island.

Why, I don't know. I happened to be trailing after them, terrified snakes may suddenly slither out of the black stink under grey grass.

The Bone Island I remember, not the one of Kel's imagining, was not really an island. A large tussock jutted up on top of a rock near the middle of a creek meandering round and across the flat below our house. About twelve inches separated this island from its mainland.

Disgruntled, I whinged about this stupidity they, the boys, Kel and John, Rich and his brother, Jim,

honoured with the description *island*. Ignoring me, they struggled with a vigorously leaping hessian bag. Jim pulled out a frilled neck lizard, wrung its neck and threw it onto the tussock, their *island*. They laughed and grunted boy expletives at each other.

Bone Island was no adventurous, magical, fairy-tale venue. Bone Island was a lizards' graveyard!

The sun hurt my eyes. I squinted and twisted my feet into the flattened grasses and whinged about them cheating me.

Not an oiland!

You're ugly!

Killing's ugly!

John, wringing the neck of another frilled neck lizard, said, The flood washed their bones away. Can't be Bone Island without bones, can it!

He tossed the carcass onto the tussock.

Kel had a shot at killing a lizard. The group huddled over the bag. They seemed to help Kel, seemed to show him what to do, guiding his hands, one under the belly, the other up the lizard's back for a quick and final twist of its neck. The lizard snapped at and bit his hand. He winced and shook but he managed to tighten his grip with the other, wring the lizard's neck and, killing accomplished, tossed its body onto the island with the other corpses. He looked magnificently pleased with himself. He beamed. I studied the grey grass, my embarrassment at his idiot's beaming too painful to bear.

Altogether the boys tossed about half a dozen corpses onto the tussock.

The killings bored me.

Islands in swift streams flowing through paddocks a long way from school and home, a long way from the imperative bark of adults, invited me to indulge fantasy. I forgot my discomfort with murder and my disappointment with my companions and I became a pirate, a pirate sailing the high seas, leaping from tussock to tussock brandishing my sword then, magically, I became the princess, he the pirate who was myself rescued from the nasty black stuff lurking under the grey grass. My skirts ballooning from my narrow waist swished the ground. The sun blazed too fiercely. I fanned my face and swooned into my own arms when the bag crumpled lifelessly at Rich's feet. The boys' air of having accomplished an important task thwarted my rescue of myself.

Thinking their sport was over, I turned to walk home. I intended leading my princess self over the long route round the hill. I didn't want to be attacked by the unknown foes skulking on the odorous flat under supporating grasses.

I enhanced the protective good nature of my pirate self by thrusting out my chest, cocking my head to one side and goose-stepping when I was distracted by a single movement of unbuttoning shorts. Soundlessly, the boys hooked their cocks out of their flies. As one, four arcs weed over the lizards' corpses.

A swashbuckling pirate didn't wish to be left out of a celebratory moment. I dropped my panties and hitched up my dress and bowed my knees and pointed my pudenda at the island and weed too, from a standing position.

I remember them laughing. Guffawing, really. I remember insisting I had won the competition. I was the only one who pissed on the bank, not on the island, and I missed peeing into the creek water. I declared, therefore, my aim was true. I knew there had been no competition. To make their spontaneous act sensible to me, I had to make it one.

The flood had washed their sacristy clean of bones. The boys consecrated their island again for their mysterious and alienable and primitive purposes.

Bone Island is my memory of difference.

Bone Island is for me to remember I had to beat a war by re-inventing strategies.

Bone Island is to remember heterosexuality – to learn reality.

I didn't want reality.

I didn't want the pain of heterosexuality.

I didn't want to beat, war and politicise.

I wanted Kel's Bone Island, a boyish prank that had an edge of outlandish ritual about it. An adventure that was almost savage. An escape from the suffocating safe feelings that appall vitality and snuff life out of life.

I wanted to be included in Kel's games and adventures. I wanted us, him and me, to be companions in make-believe worlds. He turned his back on me, a girl, a whingey thing who absorbed Mum's attention in making fussy clothes and bitchy fights about hair ribbons, and he pissed a high arc and laughed at my daft assertion that I too could piss a contest breaking arc.

For him, Bone Island illuminated absolute phallic power. The one experience appeared to be sufficient for him. He curled, swaddled in shyness yet snug in his masculinity. No pirate would be so complacent.

I love Kel. It's just that he takes a lot of understanding.

2002, and my life is turning in circles.

I live in the same flat and I hold the same job as I did ten years ago, and I'm exhausted from

a year of writing reports about the homeless and the destitute. The sameness drags me down. Wasn't the first report I wrote, thirty years ago, about the homeless and destitute? The reasons for their existence had changed too little, the statistics had increased too much.

I'm trapped. I've had no promotions for years, and yet I need my bureaucrat's job, for the money to pay my way in life - food, clothes, winter warmth. Time, threatening to lassoo me and leave me wordless, winds around my heart with asphixiating malice.

For I judged this report writing a ghastly exercise in futility.

For I was going blind from the fatigue of looking at the same things and doing the same job.

When time won't release me, I need Kel. It's not that we discuss our problems. We are inhibited by too many small considerations and tacit understandings to be frank with each other. I can tell him about my boring job and the prison flat I can't sell, but I can't tell him about any feelings of desperation. In the way of ordinary families, I can't actually tell him why I need to visit him. I can't tell him how much I simply like being with him. Brother and sister. There's the divide that keeps us apart. There's the blood and the memories that draw us together.

I'll tell him comic anecdotes about my clients. I'll try to entertain him with vignettes from my overseas' holidays. He'll regale me with diverting and nostalgic tales.

Bone Island!

I astonish the ashen face under the ashen hair mirrored above the bathroom basin with the unaccountable clarity of a memory of myself trying to win a pissing contest which wasn't a contest at all.

In the permanent heterosexual war, I'd not got it right. Too large a part of me is baseless. Partnerless years reeled by. Others, I insist on believing, I loved with passion. I love glamour, fiction. The princess defeated the pirate, I guess.

I'd been a mistress - a married man's bit on the side, I mean. I quite liked being that. Up to a point. I liked the clandestine nature of the arrangement, the lavish and idiosyncratic gifts. (I mean, what was Ted telling me when he gave me a whip, a nice long whippy one, too? I preferred the crutchless, befeathered knickers. Dave gave me those. I think.) I liked the lack of responsibility.

And I loved having Christmas alone.

I know you're not supposed to. I read stories published in the women's magazines when I was a child about mistresses crying for being alone on Christmas Day when their lovers enjoyed traditional celebrations with their smiling families, doted on by dreamily lovely wives and mothers.

As I say, I'd not got it right. Christmas alone was bliss to me.

Unfortunately, a studied unconventionality was part of my fantasy, my constructed self. The social worker enmeshed in a crude bureaucracy and leading a slightly seamy sex life composed the face that dealt with the world. But faces, when dry, crack, when wet, crumble. Pain inflates a tear wracked body which, rising, spins and rolls with the shadowings, and I see blackness, reality, snakily slithering where there is mud and mould.

In the past I desired to trust my heart's desire to find a companion. Contrarily too anxious to permit others to see my heart's desire, too ashamed they should know it, get too close and follow me, I allowed sex and only sex to happen. Sexual desire and its gratification demanded less of me, less commitment, less.

Like Christmas alone.

Being a mistress was bliss - for a while. But I couldn't escape the writhings, wanting heart beats to make them whole. The anticipations, the failed appointments, the interruped dalliances, diminish the fun until it becomes a chore. Knowing you're a convenience and not a priority has that effect.

Nor was I very good at celibacy.

Therefore, for me, heterosexuality was and is a pain.

Kel doesn't understand any of this. And yet always, but always, I take refuge from my horror story, real life, with Kel.

A storm brews. It rumbles round the city. I pack my bags for a holiday up north. My car is beat up, a 1980's Volvo I bought in memory of Bo, a love dignified as the one true love. I didn't count on the car remaining forever mechanically sound.

When I finally fire the ignition the storm is hovering over the Iron Cove Bridge. I hope it isn't spitting lightning along the Pacific Highway. And I dread the slippery road surfaces up north, round Coffs Harbour. The road system outside the big cities in 2002 is rather like my homeless and destitute, forgotten; the government having developed diffidence to bureaucratic adroitness.

It all sits somehow back to front and inside out. As we keep on going until we get there, doesn't the past being with us forever translate into a search for the future, the glittering prize that blows away from our feet like sun dried soil? Roads once led to the future, broad ways breasting hills, a small figure, staring at the vacancy offered, faced in awe.

Empty spaces demanded to be developed. Filled up. With houses and other solid objects. Empty spaces are not meant to be left for the sun to heat and light up. And we, small figures all, are not meant to turn our backs on the future to stare at our memories, the past, which is neither empty spaces nor shafts of sunlight.

Nor rotten old roads endangering lives.

Things of the past are not supposed to be things in the future. Not in any form other than as curiosities. Like my car, a technological relic bumping northward. Like my memory of Bo, a worn-out cliché lending an air of enigma to the person I believe I am. Illusion, I hope, will disguise emptiness and wavering shadows.

Kel's house sits on four timberless acres, an unserviced block sloping down a hillside.

There is no driveway. I skid and slide the old Volvo up a muddy track. From the corner of my eye, I see Kel darting from a port-o-loo hideously perched above his gleaming aluminium mobile home and glittering in the sunshine. An old broken down utility, skewed at an angle between these two blinding flashes of light, lends his retirement residence a desolate, sluggish air.

Kel's huge body lumbers down the soggy hillside to meet me. His feet knot the grass and he stumbles and skids where the ground is wettest. Quickly, I heave the car door shut and stretch up to kiss him, pleased as ever to see him, and I am too afraid to look long into his apprehensive face. His shyness glistens painfully.

After an embarrassed hesitation, Kel bundles me forwards and into his house.

Kel hasn't owned property before.

He's always rented.

Cheap places.

Dank cupboard spaces.

I walk up the stoop, whinging about staying over at Byron Bay, the awful roads, the food at roadhouses, and I was anticipating a shiny newness pride in ownership would present. I didn't expect to fall over the stained, empty boxes of take-away dinners, biscuits, Weet Bix, cartons of milk and juice. Kel, in an effort to make space for both of us in his cramped home, smacks against the wall. A large quantity of used paper plates crash into the sink. They flipflop to the floor. Kel, his grin lopsided, ignores or doesn't see the mess. Tossing a dingy cloth on a hinged table, swinging it across the evidence of several breakfasts, he smears grease and crusty bits together into a dull sheen and, satisfied, falls onto a hinged stool.

His smile is sheepish. I try not to look too hard and critically at the squalor, but the smell of stale food, mould and dust after six months' occupancy alarms my nose. My professional and my sisterly conscience, too.

I notice a plastic drum of drinking water. Kel explains as he makes a polyetheurine mug of instant coffee that he's not yet been connected to the town water supply. My recent report in mind, I reserve the right to insist the town health inspector will connect Kel's house to the water supply, and that from time to time a social worker should come this way to check on the hygiene of his surroundings. I believe, at bottom, in benign tolerance of eccentricities. I don't believe, at bottom, in leaving people at risk to their own sloth.

Yet,

I sense in Kel a happiness I've not encountered before.

I ask him if he's been down to the flat to see if Bone Island still exists. He shoots me a side-long look of such surprise. A whimsical grin plays on his lips as if he's startled by a sudden memory of me making a fool of myself. Nah, Jacq! He says. After a pause he adds, But I went 'n' had a look where the old chook house usedt' be.

The chook house?

Was there something else I'd forgotten, another odd incident in a setting made remarkable only by the stories he told about them? Or had I, over the years, forgotten a significant place because I had forgotten how to say *chook house*, preferring instead to say *chicken coop*? Was this to camouflage my country origins?

I had grown away from my past. It was behind me. I had become a different person and my language had changed with me.

Did this different person want to remember a chook house?

I ask him what was that place, the chook house he went to see?

His hand gripping his polyetheurine throw-away coffee mug, Kel shakes and sweats. His jaw trembles. Kel jiggers expectantly, and I nod and smile in answer to his nods and smiles and, slowly, an image of the beautiful house comes back to me. As of old, I trail after him. Trying to keep up by going back. Trailing through the long grasses of memory, back to a place we, as children, called the chook house. And he begins a story. In this way we manage to pass the time as we usually do, avoiding disturbing each other with difficulties. We indulge ourselves to Kel's nostalgia - his pure imaginings.

When the time comes for me to go, I stand up abruptly and bump my head on the low ceiling of his house. Irritably, I ask him how he manages

not to de-brain himself several times a day in this miserable aluminium oblong he insists on living in! The words astound me. They bolt from my mouth, condemn him and, rising with the contemptuous tide, bite me back with guilty spite. Our delicate humour trashed, I watch the floor and how my feet carry me out into the fresh country air.

Always the whinger.

Kel's round eyes shine at me. I hastily kiss his cheek and, wiping his snuffing nose on his knuckles, he shuffles beside me to my car.

And I leave him, smiling and waving and backing towards the stoop where he spends most of his days, high above the flat where he once consecrated an island with sacrificed lizards, pissed anointing urine on reptilian cadavres, roamed hills and splashed through creeks and heard the crow caw as it flew across a vast sky. Kel's myopic eyes flood blue with the purplish mistiness of the far distant and undulating hills. His mind wanders upside down and through his childhood. Fake days. Powerless days he speaks of with exaggerated longing. He takes them into his future where his imagination changes them into something else which may be new. From the stoop of his mobile home, he looks across colours, unafraid of the empty space sweeping time backwards and forwards and away from his feet.

I CAN SEE

him
sitting quietly
adjusting
his eyes
to see me
in half light

I would call
him
by a name
he has forgotten

but laughter from
the dining room
flings her arms
about him

Soon he will
turn his back
and join
the others

and fill
his heart
with circumstance

I watch from
the window
like a sadhu
on a feast day

with this
begging bowl
of moonlight

GARY MALLER

JOHN HIRST

The Left and New Rights

Now that socialism is dead and Labor governments are privatizing with scarcely a pang, what are to be the distinguishing policies of the Left? Having as her first act sold off the State Bank, the new Labor Premier of Victoria offered greater community consultation (which wasn't offered on the bank sale) and government programs to help people claim their rights. These are important aspects of the social justice strategy of her government, in which the Socialist Left is the dominant faction.

'Rights' is the new language of the Left. In a recent British debate on socialism John Keane charted a future for the Left as the ultra-democratic party - it would secure rights for the people, not merely against the state but in all areas of their lives. Mark Taft, convenor of the Socialist Forum in Victoria, defines as one of the new objectives for socialism, "greater control of people over the institutions that affect them".

If people are given more control over institutions, the institutions will have less power. Institutions are powerful to the extent that those who belong to them accept obligations and forego rights. Trade union strength depends on workers being willing to go without wages if a majority decides to strike. Political parties are effective because parliamentarians agree to abandon their own opinions and vote as the party requires. An army can fight battles because soldiers obey orders even at the cost of their lives. Now there may be institutions which the Left should weaken, but should it weaken those which serve what used to be left purposes - to assist the working class and the less affluent overcome their economic disadvantages? Take, for instance, public housing and state schools.

Public housing is an outstanding socialist achievement - profit taking has been eliminated from the housing of the poorest section of the people and rents are set according to the capacity of tenants to pay. The creation of public housing authorities has not been the work solely of Labor governments, but the project is impossible to imagine without the socialist critique of the free market and its endorsement of a larger role for government.

When the Victorian Labor Government came to power in 1982, the Victorian Housing Commission was in poor repute. There had been a scandal over its land purchases and its high-rise towers were commonly judged to be social disasters. The new Government abolished the commission and put public housing directly under the control of the minister in the new Ministry of Housing. But the minister and his staff knew that no matter how enlightened their control of the ministry, it could be experienced as an oppression by the people it served. The minister immediately commissioned an independent report on the best means of enabling the tenants to contest his own control of the department. (These reports are independent in the sense that they do not emanate from the bureaucracy; they are prepared by outsiders who are nevertheless closely connected with the A.L.P.). The report acknowledged that the previous Liberal government had moved towards taking the views of tenants into account but this was through grace and favor merely. If tenants gave unwelcome advice, consultation could be terminated. "Consultation must be a right, and not a privilege." To enable tenants to exercise this right, their organizations must be funded by the ministry "as a right". The minister accepted this advice. Tenant associations on the various estates were brought into life by tenant workers (who were salaried employees of the ministry) and given financial support. In addition, funds were given to two state-wide tenant unions which enabled them to employ full-time officers who were not necessarily tenants of the ministry.

The new arrangements were all in place in 1984. In 1985 arrears in rent jumped alarmingly and in

the next few years they got worse. By 1988, when the ministry was renamed The Ministry of Housing and Construction, the arrears were two and half times the New South Wales level and five times the South Australian level, even though rents in those states were higher than in Victoria. The ministry was owed $19 million. To maintain its operations it had to sell off land, that is to forego opportunities to expand in the future. For several years in succession the Auditor-General rang the alarm on the amount of rent being lost. Other ministers, regarding the housing ministry as a basket-case, refused to countenance any increase in its budget.

Exactly why the blowout occurred cannot be definitely established. Enquiries into the matter have been produced by the government which presided over the fiasco and have not been rigorous in assigning responsibility. But it is clear that one important factor was that some ministry workers and the tenant unions and associations encouraged tenants not to take rent-paying seriously.

A new minister decided he had no alternative but to get tough and evict tenants for non-payment of rent. Eviction was resorted to most reluctantly in Victoria; in South Australia and New South Wales, as the Auditor-General's enquiries established, tenants were allowed much less rope. When Victorian tenants fell behind in their rent, the ministry organized an agreement with them which stipulated the (usually very small) amount which was to be repaid each fortnight to make up the arrears. Most of these agreements were broken, but even this did not lead automatically to eviction.

The tenants' union, led by salaried ideologues, fought the new minister's policy. It proclaimed that since housing was a right there should never be eviction. It denounced the minister, who was a member of the Socialist Left, for betraying socialist principles. The minister in turn declared that "if we say that rent is optional, we wipe out the whole concept of public housing". That is, the new socialism of rights was destroying the old socialism of provision.

In support of one of the tenants facing eviction, the tenants' union organized a prolonged blockade of the local office of the ministry. The employees of the ministry, complaining of harassment and intimidation by the tenants' union, put it under a black ban. They refused to attend any meeting of tenants where tenants' union officials were present. The minister announced that organizations supporting the blockade and the non-eviction campaign would no longer receive funding. When that decision was contested, the minister ruefully pointed out that no state was as generous as Victoria to tenants' associations - it provided them $2 million annually, ten times the sum paid by South Australia, the next largest provider. The housing ministry's financial management will stand comparison with any other in this administration - it paid out $2 million to produce rent arrears of $19 million.

The blockade continued. It received support from municipal councils in the western suburbs and local Labor Party branches. Gerry Hand, a federal minister and a leader in the Socialist Left of which the housing minister was but a member, visited the blockade site and gave his support to the tenant facing eviction. The blockade ended when the Salvation Army paid the rent owing on the tenant's behalf.

During this crisis the ministry commissioned another independent report on policies regarding rent collection. The language of universal rights was now modified and a more hard-headed approach emerged: the right to public housing carries with it the responsibility of paying rent; a minority of unprincipled people will exploit the system and refuse to pay even when they have the means to do so; agreements made with tenants to repay arrears should indicate in their wording and tone that the ministry means business.

All this of course is obvious to 95 per cent of the population, but these constitute discoveries for the new socialism of rights. However, the learning does not proceed very far because the report considers that rent arrears will diminish if there is a large-scale education program for tenants and ministry workers on the principles and practices of public housing. Victorian taxes are now at work on this project. This is occurring despite the report's finding that most tenants are not in arrears and the majority of arrears are for small amounts. The real problem is the hard-core defaulters and those who have been encouraged to become so. Will pamphlets, workshops and visits by nonjudgemental social workers change their attitude? South Australia and New South Wales collect more rent with comprehensive education programs. Victoria used to collect more rent without one. Education is embraced to avoid taking decisive action to uphold rules and impose penalties, for to do this may conflict with rights and be considered authoritarian. The moral consensus to support action already exists - it is the presently-named Department of Planning and Housing and its salaried opposition which need to be re-educated.

A similar paralysis is also evident in the department's dealing with its other major problem of recent times, security on public housing estates.

Here people live in close proximity to each other and have to share facilities. The tenants are now overwhelmingly welfare recipients and they include considerable numbers of disturbed and disruptive people. Tenants live with the din of alcoholic rage, discarded needles underfoot, and refuse of every sort in the lifts and walkways. The department's philosophy of consultation, participation and community building is poorly equipped to cope with this simple truth - that a few tenants are terrorising the rest. All the consultation brings this message, but the department is constitutionally unable to act. To move against disruptive tenants conflicts with the right of everybody to have housing. Tenants whose views have been sought are driven to despair by inaction and to rage by the suggestion that they are exaggerating the problem. Certainly the department has not been inactive on security - it has installed better external lighting, erected fences and instituted patrols. What it does not do is tell tenants they must behave if they want to stay.

The old Housing Commission was better equipped to act on this problem. It did not let its flats and premises as a right, but on terms and conditions which it set. There were rules on what you could and could not do on its premises. But when the last Liberal Government brought in a new Landlord and Tenant act in 1980, it put Housing Commission tenants in the same position as all others. Instead of the commission dealing directly with its tenants, it now had to proceed like a private landlord through the legalistic procedures of the Residential Tenancy Tribunal. I have attended a meeting of tenants when they were told that they would have to be prepared to testify against the neighbors who were disturbing them. They replied that they did not want their windows bashed in. If the Department of Planning and Housing did allow itself to be governed by what tenants want, it would recover the administrative power to act against disruptive tenants. Contrary to what the new socialism of rights affirms, public tenants would be better served by the housing department being a stronger, not a weaker institution - one, that is, able to make its own rules and willing to enforce them.

The Victorian state schools have also been reorganized by the Labor Government according to a philosophy of rights. The Labor Party has been guided in its education policy by the Secondary Teachers Union, one of its chief financial backers. Many union activists are now employed by the Ministry of Education and Training. The union has long been a proponent of progressive education, that is of a "democratic curriculum" relevant to student needs and of democracy in school organization.

It is a puzzle to know why democracy, which is a system of government among adults possessing equal rights as citizens, should be taken as a model for the control of a school. A school has inequality at its heart - the ignorant are being instructed by the learned. If teachers are to be effective, they must have power over students especially since so many students attend schools unwillingly. Any approach which pretends otherwise is fraudulent at base.

The first statement on school government from the Labor Ministry of Education and Training made a grand pretence of democracy: "Schools which are best at developing sound learning environments are those which accord equal status to all members of the school community and which have effected decision-making processes based on participatory, rather than authoritarian, models." From which one would assume that principals and teachers had no more power to make and enforce rules than a child in the lowest form. It turns out that when penalties are to be applied it is only teachers and principals who initiate action.

This statement was drawn up when the Labor government abolished corporal punishment in schools. On this matter consultation and participation were deemed not to be necessary. (A 1989 poll taken in Sydney and Melbourne showed that two-thirds of the population was in favor of corporal punishment in schools.) The punishments which could still be inflicted were detention at recess or lunch for five minutes (increased, a few years later, to half the period of the break); detention after school for half an hour (raised later to three-quarters of an hour) with parents to be informed beforehand and due allowance made when the child has to get home by school bus or public transport; and suspension.

The fatal weakness of these arrangements was not that corporal punishment was abolished, but that the school was left with so little that it could do of its own volition. The only sanction it could enforce without consulting other people was to keep the child in at recess or lunch. The parent has to be informed if the child is to be kept in after school and may not simply acquiesce in the decision. Once the child is suspended (the only punishment that is in any way formidable) parents, school council, and regional director have to be informed. Suspensions lead on to conferences and enquiries involving all these people and more with a complex administrative procedure whose definition occupies several pages in the official regulations. A wayward

school child is processed through a system more complex and protracted than an adult offender in a magistrate's court.

Throughout the process various rights are guaranteed to parents and child and all discipline takes place in the shadow of the rights of the child to be educated. This means that a child who is suspended must be supplied with specially designed school work for the period of the suspension. A presumption of guilt in suspension procedures lies on the school because it may not have supplied the child with a curriculum and disciplinary regime suited to the child's needs. During an enquiry the overwhelming concern must be "the educational needs of the student". If the child has committed such an offence that an enquiry considers that it should be excluded from the school, then another school must be persuaded to take it and this hapless institution must ensure that it possesses "appropriate curriculum and behaviour management strategies" for the offender. Nowhere in all the documents is there a hint that an erring child might have to change its behavior to fit in with the school; that a school must change to fit the child is a constant refrain.

The education ministry and the secondary teachers' union believe that such an approach to school management will produce "an environment of cooperation and compassion". Since this ideological commitment is so strong, we hear from teachers only short sharp cries and muffled complaints in code about what is actually occurring in some of the schools. One teacher who dared to speak out said: "In what other job does a person have to put up with the verbal and physical abuse that teachers do; being screamed at, spat at, punched and kicked, scratched and bitten and with little or no come-back?" That teachers do suffer such attacks is borne out by a report on the number of students suspended and their offences. Among the offences were the following (with the number of suspensions in 1985 and 1990 in brackets): swearing at teachers (468, 1379), threatening a teacher (87, 249), assaulting a teacher (83, 153). These, it must be remembered, are only the tip of the iceberg, for teachers and schools are under heavy pressure not to proceed formally against students.

Neither education ministry nor teachers' union will revise their fundamental principles for the management of schools. Both are now concerned with teachers' stress and breakdown in the face of chaos. Since the children cannot be controlled, teachers must now be taught how to manage their feelings and give each other support. The union encouraged an action by a teacher to sue the ministry for damages in regard to violence done to him by a student. What a counsel of despair! Instead of fixing the problem, the union uses it to make money for its members. Corporal punishment of students cannot be reconsidered (teachers hitting students being too high a price to pay to stop students hitting teachers).

Officially the ministry favors a school-based approach to discipline; in fact it has de-institutionalized the school in this matter. A school's judgement is not trusted and it is obliged to involve outsiders who may not have its interests uppermost. The parents, now so fully involved when children misbehave at school, may or may not encourage a child to change its behavior. In the past, a parent sympathizing with a child who had been punished at school may have been no bad thing; a parent sympathizing with an erring child over whom the school has no power is a disaster for the school. Schools can now have only the order which parents are willing to enforce.

It might be thought that regional officials of the ministry would automatically support schools in disciplining students. This is not so. Suspensions and enquiries mean work for them and too many suspensions call into question the policy statement that suspension is a last resort and a good school will be one that makes little use of it. Furthermore, if an enquiry should recommend that a student be excluded from the school, the regional officials have the invidious task of finding some other school to take the offender.

I have been informed of a case in which the regional office told a school to take no action against a student and also threatened no further co-operation on any other matter if it persisted in taking the action. The offender was a girl who habitually assaulted other students and abused staff. The school decided to suspend her after she knocked down a visiting woman teacher at a basketball match. At the time, the student was absent from class without permission. The girl's mother announced that if an enquiry was held she would oppose any action being taken against her daughter and would call on the assistance of the ethnic community to which they belonged. This is what overawed the regional office. The principal, backed by unanimous support from his staff, pressed on regardless.

Recently, a regional office enquiry directed a school to re-admit a student against the unanimous wish of parents, teachers and the local community. The boy had been discovered in the school grounds with a large quantity of marijuana. He had also

been caught stealing. He is to appear before the Children's Court but meanwhile the regional office thought his right to education should be exercised in the school where he had committed these offences. If that happened, the principal feared that his authority would be completely undermined and teachers were concerned that parents would take students from the school. The school's case was taken up in parliament by the opposition spokesman on education and was widely reported in the press. The Minister of Education and Training then overruled the regional office. To maintain minimal discipline and morale, the school had to make extraordinary efforts.

These have been revolutionary years for education in Victoria. As one pamphlet trumpeted to parents: "The legal rights of parents and students in education are expanding and changing every few months. A few are rights on paper only till the government has enough money and staff to make them real for everyone." One of the new rights proclaimed in 1984 was the right of every disabled child to be educated in a mainstream school. There may well be a case for some disabled children to move from special schools to ordinary ones. Care would need to be taken to ensure that the child would benefit and that the school could cope. But this is not the Victorian way. Rights were proclaimed which enabled parents to pressure schools into accepting handicapped children whom they could not handle. The Government appointed professional advocates to break down the schools' resistance. The schools were forced to take children who were not only physically handicapped, but severely mentally handicapped. The Olympic Games team might as well be obliged to take a quota of cripples. Finally, the Government had completely lost sight of what schools exist to do.

Institutions have a purpose, which distinguishes them from society at large which does not. Rights were first proclaimed to protect people in society against the State and to give them some say in government. If institutions are conceived of as mini-societies where people should enjoy the rights and due process which they have in society at large, then the institutions will not be able to fulfil their function and will in effect cease to exist. Some schools have now reached this point. Children and teachers attend at the same place each day but no learning takes place. An open institution - the ideal of much educational theory - is a contradiction in terms. Every institution must to some extent shut the world out and develop and enforce its own rules.

What may yet destroy democracy is its inability to leave subordinate institutions alone. If democratic rights are insisted on in the family, the school and the business firm, then their authority will be undermined and social order will have to be maintained more and more by the state and its agencies (the policeman patrolling the school corridor). The democratic state, respecting democratic rights and due process, will not be equal to the task—unless it ceases to be democratic.

No-one will pretend that in these times it is easy to run state schools or public housing estates. Nor that their problems in Victoria began with the Labor Government. But it is the Labor Government which has turned these places into nightmares: abuse and violence are accompanied by official pronouncements about rights and harmony. Until the official talk changes, there is no hope for improvement.

Labor must abandon its concern for new rights and concentrate on the interests and needs of disadvantaged groups and classes. Its rule has made conditions worse for the people it is meant to serve. The working-class kid who wants an education is being sacrificed for the lout who does not. On the housing estates, the old-age pensioners who always pay their rent are at the mercy of the rent-evading drug addict. Labor may well want to proclaim the universal right to education and housing, but one institution cannot be expected to meet a universal right. Students and tenants who won't obey the rules in the mainstream institutions should be accommodated on different terms elsewhere. This would, of course, contradict a central principle of Victoria's social justice strategy - that there should be no categorizing of people.

Meanwhile, capitalism continues its categorization of people by its unequal distribution of material resources. The well-to-do are not obliged to rely on services provided on universal principles. Their children attend private schools where students can be expelled on the instant and may even be hit. The report which ushered in the abolition of corporal punishment in Victorian state schools recommended that the ban also be enforced in private schools. Of this nothing more has been heard. Labor Cabinet ministers are not so silly as to interfere in the internal management of schools attended by their own children.

The service institutions of the state are now under attack from the New Right, which argues that they are inefficient and do not meet the needs of the people they are designed to serve. Under the administration of the Victorian Labor Government, this claim is increasingly difficult to refute. The New Socialists and the New Right think of each other as opponents, but they have a common commitment to the language of rights. The New

Right declares the right of citizens not to have to depend on government institutions for the provision of services. The New Socialists proclaim the rights of the beneficiaries of government services against the institutions which supply them. The one from the outside, the other from within, they are both involved in the same work of destruction.

John Hirst teaches history at La Trobe University. His new book, The World of Albert Facey, *is to be published by Allen & Unwin.*

A LIFE

I *Entropy*

Into the web he spins wider and wider
measuring tenderly every strand.
The slightest movement panics the spider,

can send him scattering, or bring him beside
a tangled victim his body will bend
into. The web he spins wider and wider,

beyond the core. A confused outsider,
for instance, straying, alert to withstand
the slightest movement, panics; the spider

prepares to pounce upon her, guide her
back to the heart, into his hand,
into the web he spins . . . Wider and wider

he circles daily, deafer, blinder,
the circle condensing - until in the end
the slightest movement panics. The spider

ponders. The spider is striving to understand.
The slightest movement panics the spider
into the web he spins wider and wider.

II *A life*

And as the dawn unnoticed crept
along the passageway, I gingerly descended
the rungs of memory until they froze
into my sleep. I softly slept

the entire morning away, rose
around eleven and stealthy as any bandit
(and as the dawn) unnoticed crept

thief-like the creaking upstairs floor to those
ridiculous banisters I'd so often blended
into. My sleep I softly slept

all over again while the soul chose
in a trance a dream discreet as the dusk is
candid
(and as the dawn unnoticed); crept

unconvincingly, and clumsily I suppose,
into that reverie; and from there - having bent it
in to my sleep - I softly slept

another hour, several more, awaking close
to midnight, dozing off. The night-time ended;
and as the dawn, unnoticed, crept
into my sleep, I softly slept . . .

III *The moth*

There is a knowledge indistinctly heard
Behind all that I know and all I am.
Behind the turning socket of the world

It coruscates like some shade harmony, stirred
In the pedalpoint of sleep: I understand
There is a knowledge. Indistinctly heard

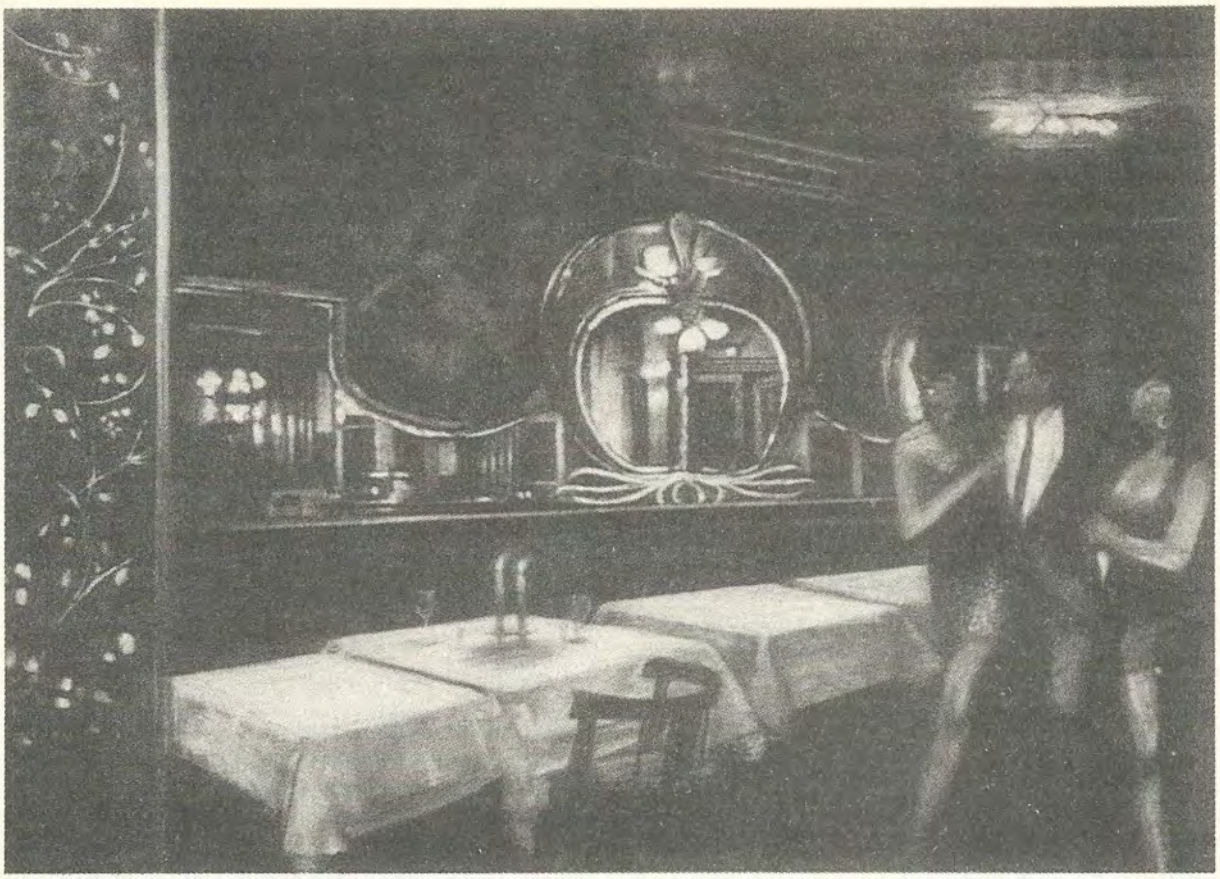
And brief, it splashes into colour, flag unfurled
To sputter in the wind - a wind whose chant
Behind the turning socket of the world

Can barely reach me. Yet the droning whirl
Of mind and circumstance, and entropy, demand
There is a knowledge, indistinctly heard

But true. And I'm committed, I am spider-held
To circumnavigate its soft command
Behind the turning socket of the world.

And as I write these lines, my syllables meld,
The music haunts the shadow of my hand.
There *is* a knowledge, indistinctly heard,
Behind the turning socket of the world.

ALEX SKOVRON



PETER NEILSON, The Politics of Lunch, 1991, charcoal and chalk on paper, 60 × 85 cm

SAINT FRANCIS AND THE ANGELS

It used to be said that they were cities
of the future, that in the next new age
they'd be seen as the first of their sort:
beacons on the West Coast, their light spreading
across cultures until highrises and freeways
were as common as kitsch Palladian copies.

But although a small country often copies
a big country it doesn't mean their cities
should look the same. Not everyone wants
freeways
and other products of the American Age,
like rows of billboards, spreading
into their environment and minds. The sort

of countries that find it hard to sort
out this mess of who you are when copies
of someone else's culture are spreading
all over the place via your big cities
are those new countries of the Post-Colonial
Age.
For them the future doesn't mean the freeways

of another country. It means the freeways
of Progress: a beautiful system to sort
and deliver new products from an age
that's best remembered for its copies of copies.
In fact, there's no reason that the cities
themselves can't be part of this way of spreading

the product. Aren't they made for spreading
as much as for containing? What are freeways
if not the trade routes of the cities
and they in turn just products of another sort?
It's an idea each new country copies
with vigour. They seem to be products of an age

whose philosophy is to develop but not to age.
There's no way you can stop it from spreading.
Momentum builds and the sheer number of
copies
carries through until highrises and freeways
and billboards are found in every sort
of location worldwide even though the two cities

of an earlier age are no longer the best cities
to live in. They're still spreading a sort
of original but it's copies that jam the freeways.

TWO POEMS BY PHILIP HODGINS

MILK CREAM BUTTER

He'd get up every morning before the sun
had cleared the treeline on his neighbour's
creek,
and while the sound of magpies trickled in
the slightly opened window of his room
he'd take whatever clothes he'd worn all week,
a pile of rags that mostly smelled of him,
and shake them out and put them on again.
That time of day the paddock by the house
was brittle with a covering of frost
so when he went to get his seven cows
it left a zig-zag trail of darker prints
where the silver grass got crushed beneath his
boots.
The cows would wander down along a fence
that led them through a set of open gates
and when they'd turn into the narrow lane
he'd notice how their cautious feet would mince
the gravel-filling with the mud again.
Arriving at the milking shed the queue
of weighted cows would always be the same.
They'd practised twice a day and now they knew
the sequence and the distance off by heart.
They knew the routine of the single bail
and after that how far to keep apart.
So there was nothing much he had to do
except to chain them in and wet the teats
then draw the lines of milk into the pail
between his legs, a tight metallic gasp
that changed into exquisite frothy breaths.
In less than half an hour he'd have them done
and while they sauntered back the way they'd
come
he'd go out to the separating room
and tip the previous morning's creamless milk
into two pig-troughs that used to be a drum
and then he'd pour each bucketful of warm
fresh milk into a metal cooling dish.
Beside them was a wooden butter-churn
that looked like some side-show magician's
prop.

He'd fill it up with sour cream and turn
the handle steadily until the fat
began to float in globules on the top.
A final rapid stirring firmed them up,
he'd slide a bucket underneath, then pull
the plug and let the buttermilk escape
before he'd fill the small vat nearly full
of water, rinse the butter clean, then add
some salt and take the soapy mixture out
in handfuls which he'd torture like a rag,
removing with a twist the final drops.
The rest was just a kind of copyright.
He'd press the butter into one-pound pats
with an emu imprinted on the tops
denoting him, and when the job was done
he'd notice that those blocks of golden light
were glowing deeper than the early sun.

AT CEDAR COURT

In a disabled world,
welded to chairs, frames, crutches,
we stream along the passage
to therapy, pressed to the utmost,
lift the weighted leg,
coax the new ceramic joint.
Deliberately we step over
bean bags and boxes,
balance on a mattress,
change a bed, walk crutchless
in the pool. Straighter feet
plod up and down
between the rails. An injured god,
the footballer stretches
on his Olympian couch. The family
flopped on beds and fed,
falls into a sleepy heaven, is roused
for a repetitive afternoon.
Miniature sculptures on a shelf,
ankle, torso, pelvis, a knee,
perfection fills the room.
The therapist's hand, the eyes say 'trust me'.

JOYCE LEE

[A Poem that was to be called]

TUNING FORK

That poem has driven me to pre-five drink
Its third stanza a problem child
Truant one day rebellious the next
Shirked the verse, would not acquiesce
And I had to admire it for that.

But I wanted to get it down
A poem about septuagenarian Mr Drill
Who taught me my Negro Spirituals
And whose tuning fork was an arcane tool
From the back row of Grade Four

And how with a 'ping' he'd launch us in on
O Lordy pick a bale of cotton
O Lordy pick a bale of hay
And I wanted to say
How when he sang Swing Low
I too was carried away in that Sweet Chariot
It was coming for to carry *me* Home

And how when he fell off the platform
Somersaulting clean onto the floor
We all thought that's just what old men did
And how Sister Kevin, no chicken herself
Hauled him up by the crook of her stick
Him carrying on as though nothing amiss

And how his heart gave out
In the front pew of Holy Cross
On a Saturday morning in 1969
And with Mr Drill dead, how much we missed
When she turned the radio on instead

VIRGINIA BERNARD

ALONG THE FAULT LINE

Along the fault line (give or take a little either
way)
a part of earth will break away, float off, to settle
elsewhere
in the Indian Ocean.
It could break off through the centre of a house,
some civic building
Though it could be light years before this
happens, before the ocean
is lathering all over new-found shores. And it
doesn't
matter what we think.
Any precautions we might take would be
irrelevant
as we are to summer sun bleaching our
emotions dry
like forgotten bones.
Should we stand still, lie still, and not strain
forward determinedly,
weeds or native shrub would grow all over us. In
time
amongst the tiny remnants of ourselves, some
small flower
lasting for a day
might spring up. One can never tell. And yet, the
brittle
bones (the skull, the not-so-supple spine itself),
the flesh,
skin, however coarse or fine, are no more fragile
really
than the fracturing earth
breaking at the weakest point, here along the
fault line.

FAYE DAVIS

TWO POEMS BY BARBARA BRANDT

BOY

The boy in the paddock
down the road
has frost on his eyelashes.

The hen was paralysed, dying.
He placed her in the nesting box
near the morning's eggs,
and closed her eyes
against the sunlight.
He cried on his way back through the trees -
"spider webs in my eyes".

The boy is watching the hen house -
breath, making mist, trails
through the railings of the gate.

DUCKS AND DRAKES

Ducks flee to bullrushes in Council Park
herded into bottlenecks by the crowd:
summer-flowered mothers discussing; dark
Sunday birds bubbling in fat-trays, white clouds,
and the new-mown grass.
Boys tumble and shout,
brown dogs snapping at their heels, the ducks -
their
noisy broods clustering.
Flushed girl cries out.
Boys tossing balls, teasing grass from their hair,
bring mothers from park benches.
Mallards stir,
wings flap; children laugh, spitting orange pips.
Drake, alarmed, musters ducklings.
Girl, her bird-
dog worrying at feathers on its lips -
crying, grazed kneed, downy fingered - walking
towards the side-gate.
Women are talking.

DRUNKEN CONCEPTS

In with a show but they dropped their bundle,
to make an educated guess.
Half your luck. You'd have to be joking
but, meanwhile, get us out of this mess.

There's a bit more mongrel in him now.
Gently does it. There you go,
lairizing down the edge of Being;
conceptually, you've got a show.

The country colt seems a wee bit toey:
a pretty penny was what it cost.
Intestinal fortitude is needed
otherwise we'll all be lost.

This argument has been shaped like a shovel.
I don't get it. Somebody would.
Put that in your pipe and smoke it,
but let me tell you, it better be good.

Bugger the verification principle,
dead like the argument from design;
the class of classes that contain classes . . .
rack off. Your shout, not mine.

From what distance does a cricket ball
look the size that it really is?
The English empiricists lurch in a tango,
pixillated on gin fizz.

Out of that fusty closet, sister;
head for the alien corn with Ruth.
"A mobile army of metaphors",
bloody old Nietszche labelled truth.

Not to put too fine a point on it
metaphysics passed out like a light.
At Moonee Valley the moral positives
just went galloping out of sight.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

from PRACTISING BREATHING

Suicide is not easier in spring - not on the bright
days
when flowers, spread dumbly too long upon the
earth,
suddenly let loose tongues of bright light
and cry out hallelujahs for the bees.
It is not easier then.
On your deck, floating under sweetpea
sopranas,
the heavy stocks hung loosely, setting free
pink and purple harmonies. When I stepped out
into the buoyant air, primulas in their pots
settled into whiteness,
preening for the day like peaceful doves.
Even the two caged finches
you had already bequeathed us,
continued sandpapering sunshine in their cages
- while you set up your noose, your welcome
wreath,
inside the front door.

It is supposed to have been over
quite quickly for you.
Only the house
heard the rope jerk.
Only the walls watched you slip
away. Silence accepted the punishment
you willed us. Silence and the floors
of all our rooms, waiting for night
to beat its drums of mourning:

footfalls footfalls footfalls . . .

till there was no spring left
in our dark heads.

JEAN KENT

TWO POEMS BY ROD USHER

RUINS

Two street sweepers on Rhodos town
Stop to chew the morning air
Hands and arms outspeak their mouths
Butts and carnations everywhere.

Last night a loud election rally
Papandreou's pap at full blast
party flags, peanuts, pastries
The crowd, we suspect, was rent-a-cast.

Efcharisto, kalimera
Thank you and good morning Greece
Land of drama, land of drachma
Of golden past and modern fleece.

We tourists feed like tick and leech
Hungry for our acropolis now
Packaged, rapt in conversion rates
The Griegos make silk from the sow.

Village goat and doleful donkey
Blink before relentless lenses
The "local" beer is German-brewed
The taxis all Mercedez-Benzes.

Hired jetskis scour the water
Motorbikes shatter the narrow streets
A "taverna" offers Harvey Wallbangers,
Tipple of the topless, with their fried-egg teats.

What would Socrates (PhD) have to say?
What would Dr Hippocrates diagnose?
What would plain Mr Plato think of playing host
to NATO?
Does democracy simply mean: anything goes?

No wonder the Colossus is no wonder no more
He hides on the seabed with the mullet and
squid
Safe from the Pyrrhic battle above
Armies of deutschmark, of dollar and quid.

We need the currency, the driver says
As we pass yet another shoebox hotel
His shoulders shrug, but his eyes say more:
You came, you saw, you souvenired as well.

Remember the feta, our host's free smile
Dolmades, retsina, the poppy's red cup
Fishermen's hard hands, virgin olive oil
The blinding white bread that soaked it up.

A Parthian toast as the plane lifts its nose
As the sun makes the Aegean glister like gold:
To the ruins of today, the ruining of tomorrow,
To the goose that's cooked and fast growing
cold.

FRANCISCO'S ARM

Francisco's arm wasn't made
For tennis or the cello
But he is game-set-and-match
The very maestro
Of the trowel.
This fellow's art
Against the very heart
Of Newton
Is to make wet cement fly.

Underarm, overarm
Around his neck
In tight corners
Bent double, on tiptoe
Allegro or slow:
Francisco's mortar goes
Where he tells it to.

He is a conductor
Of concrete
He's played his music,
When times were bad,
In Germany, France, Switzerland
His 57-year-old hand
Now directs his native
Spanish bricks
I labour as his paeon
And watch his light tricks
With that heavy sludge
Which he calls "pasta".

The veins on Francisco's forearm
Would turn an addict green
Sometimes, when he's not about,
I can be seen
Trying my novice trowel
The sloppy sight would bring tears
To Francisco's eye
"Hombre!," he would sigh,
"Six days a week,
More than forty years!"

ALL WILL BE REVEALED

In the nudist camp identity is lost
Behind disguise.
See, over all the fashions of the self,
Whatever size,

They're slipping on identical pink suits
Of nakedness.
On either sex there stretches, nips or droops
Its single dress.

Where have they gone, the friends who brought
me here?
Where are the strangers
Hiding? The eyes like bullets aimed against
Uncertain dangers

Ricochet from nudity's blank walls.
In such a place
One might devise a nightclub for dresstease
Where they could face,

To whistles, randy cries of "Get it on!",
Themselves as lewd
Performers who would strut their bump and
grind,
Beginning nude,

Discarding part by part their bare accord,
Till they finessed
The erotic climax of true self-display,
Completely dressed.

STEPHEN EDGAR

THE STUNT MAN

I am a blur
He is the close-up.

I exist after the cut
His agile shadow
Hanging by my finger tips
Or leaping onto a train roof.

I wear the same clothes as him.
You only glimpse me until my back is turned.
I am the one before the villain's dummy.

Don't ask me what a bed looks like
Or how to talk -
He has the lines which you remember
And by my efforts he wins the girl.

I try to get close to him
But always just when I think I've finally made it
I'm falling out of a building
Or under water
Or the car's about to crash.

When you pray for the star you really pray for
me.

DAVID BEACH

TWO POEMS BY ANDREW LEGGETT

TOAD'N FESS'N KARL

Toad'n Fess'n Karl went
drinking Friday night.
They looked like skinheads
in an angry band ex-naval
to the Blundstone bovver boots.
They found a spot of bother
where a gang of cutsnake Kooris
worked to kick an old man's
head in. Instead of kicking heads
they got their heads kicked in.
Toad went down'n Fess went down'n
Karl kept standing up. They kicked them
down but Fess got up again.
Toad could not get up again.
Toad stayed down, stayed dead,
did not get up again. A man
was charged. He broke a policeman's
nose. A murder charge. A black man
on a murder charge. A dead man
on a hero charge. He saved
an old man. Fester
is my brother-in-law'n Karl's
his brother-in-law'n Toad's not
anybody's brother anymore.

CHICKENMAN

My uncle runs a gun shop
in Toowoomba. In his spare time
he collates the family tree.
On a recent business trip
he found another cousin,
a chicken man in Texas, U.S.A.

Can you see the chickenman
in chickensuit, ten gallon hat
wingtip on the six-gun
struttin' round the chicken ranch
with rootin'-tootin' Uncle Cam
the pistol shooting' gun totin'
mercantile Australian businessman?

Yes, my seventh cousin
is a big American chickenman
with 17 million broody hens
all layin' eggs for
good ol' Uncle Sam.

A postcard from my Uncle Cam
told me of the chickenman.
In my sleep I tossed and cried
that I don't want
to be Kentucky Fried
but Chickenman won't listen
just lifts his leg
and keeps on pissin'
on my uncle's friendly hand.

BRUNSWICK POOL

At Brunswick pool, in forty degrees,
The Italian girl, as pale as bone,
Smokes while talking to her girlfriends.
One blotch disturbs the cream and blush.
She smooths it with her finger tips,
Sarongs two towels around her hips,
A fag juts upwards from her lips.

In shades and shorts, the boys appear,
Scanning the pool, in case it's here.
She rolls off her shirt and lifts -
As if checking that it still was there -
One white and perfect thigh into the air.
She won't be wet today.

RICHARD TREMBATH

PEOPLE GO TO THE RACETRACK

20 years ago
when I didn't know much
I was asked where I stood
and I said I stood nowhere.
So I was asked
what if I was forced
to stand somewhere
and I said
if I was forced
I'd stand with the socialists
the communists.
Well,
one of my friends wanted to kill me,
and a bunch of them wanted
to track me down
and beat me up,
and another
kept asking me
for the next two years
how my North Vietnamese mates were;
and another friend
the wisest friend I knew then, said,
all I know is
there's lots of people
escaping from the East to the West
but none going the other way.
And I had no answer to that
thought I just felt
there had to be something wrong with it
and I've thought about it
on and off
this last 20 years
and now
I know even less than then
I just thought of an answer:
people go to the racetrack
but it doesn't mean they win.

GRANT CALDWELL

FOR LLOYD REES
(1895–1988)

Rumours of wars leach to The Ministry as night
seeps through the gaps around the windows and
the doors.
The Chief Promoter of the School of Light
smiles wistfully and yawns –
takes up his instruments and makes the night a
lie.
The world is washed with light, light flickers
round the hills
and fills the Derwent with a tide of molten gold,
the evening sky
denies the dying day its right to die. All time is
stilled;
all sense of night, non-sense; all words for dark,
redundant.
So, stroke by stroke, his lambent art prevails.
And in the pale
translucent glow that always gives the lie to
night,
he smiles his wonderment.
The tide of lies ebbs from the room. Light floods
the panes.

Alone, he turns and sits to face his sun.
The endless journey has begun.

IAN SAW

FIONA PLACE

Categorically No Revisited

'Do ya think this is caj, as in cas-u-al enough?' Mia asks her flatmate Alice while prancing about in her spotted dress.

'Sure, I also note the way it happens to show off the leg.'

Alice and Mia coffee in the kitchen. As usual.

'I'll piss off when he arrives, I just want to see what he looks like,' Alice tells her. She also convinces Mia to book a restaurant for eight. For the two of them. To do *it* as *she* wants.

Eight arrives. And there is no sign of Max.

Alice suggests they open a bottle of wine.

Nine arrives. And there is still no sign of Max.

'You don't mind if I get angry at him, if and when he finally arrives?' Alice asks half-jokingly.

'No,' Mia laughs, 'go for it.'

Ten minutes later there is a knock at the door.

Mia half-suspects he will not be there by the time she opens it. He is standing as though about to leave. She acts as though she is unaware of this. Directs him through to the kitchen. And introduces him to Alice.

Alice suggests Mia pour him a drink. And then attacks. 'So why are you late?'

'Am I?' he replies, looking to Mia.

'I'd expected you at 7.30,' Mia says. Says quietly. Head down. Not liking to attack. Still wanting him to like her.

'And you'd booked the restaurant,' Alice adds.

'Yeah, have you eaten?' Mia asks.

'Yes, I have eaten.'

'Oh well, that's that,' Mia says looking up at Alice.

The kitchen falls silent.

'Look Mia, what do you get out of this?' Alice asks.

Mia doesn't reply. Instead she sinks visibly. Down into her chair.

'So why are you so late Max?' Alice repeats.

'I had to go home after work and get your address, I kept forgetting things. I guess I'm not in good shape this evening.'

'Sounds to me from the stories I've been told, that you're never in good shape Max.'

'Fuck off Alice,' Mia pleads.

'No, this is ridiculous Mia, you're not getting anything out of this. Look, I'm going to go out for a couple of hours and you two ought to talk this out.'

'I don't know what to say,' Mia says.

'I feel set-up.'

'I'd no idea she would do this,' Mia replies, knowing she is only telling a half or a three-quarter truth.

'What's your flatmate on about anyway?'

'Oh, come on, you know damn well.'

'I thought we'd resolved that.'

'Look, I'm too drunk to deal with this, I'm sorry.'

'You ought to know I've other things planned for tonight.'

'Oh,' she says thinking he's going to make out there is another girl.

'Yes, I plan to go back and do more work.'

'Fine,' she says wimping out completely.

'Well, let's redeem the situation, wanna dance?' he asks.

Mia is confused. If all is resolved why dance, why bring the physical back into play. But she doesn't dare ask. In case the asking will stop the physical. Instead she puts on the *Hard Line* by Terence Trent D'Arby.

'Not that,' he whinges.

'Why not,' she teases, half-wondering if she should change it. Change it back to the cool rock she'd had on previously. To impress. Impress him with her non-dag qualities.

They dance.

And she wonders if she should get close close, if touching is allowed. If his categorical no still holds. Instead she tells him he's really seventies and that she can outdance him.

He laughs. And asks her if she wants to come help him write his lecture.

'Sure,' she replies, hoping he is really proposing something else.

'Well, grab the wine and let's go.'

She does as she's told.

She has always liked his ability to take control. And his ability to do the ridiculous. To keep going all night. Spontaneously. Not that he has ever done so with her. She just knows that is what he would be like.

He drives to the city.

To his office.

She feels mildly depressed. But still thinks it could be fun, could still lead somewhere.

He asks her to photocopy some stats onto overheads. And starts to give instructions. Instructions she immediately recognises as incorrect.

She corrects his instructions and takes over. Sets up the machine herself.

'How come you know how to do this?' he asks.

'I have one at my work,' she replies, wanting him to realise that she too, work-works, she too, knows certain things. He goes back to his room to work on his computer.

She walks in with the overheads.

'Thanks,' he says, 'and could you do these also?'

'What's in it for me?' she asks.

'What do you want?' he replies, knowing full well she is too scared to ask him straight out. Ask him to sleep with her.

She storms off. Teasingly.

She returns with the overheads and sits next to him. And reads his lecture notes. Reads and reads. Drunk as she is, she realises their theoretical orientations are diametrically opposed.

He asks her what she thinks.

'Well, you know how I feel about empiricism and the definition of self through those means,' she replies.

He picks up the bottle, pulls out the cork and throws down some.

'Tacky,' she remarks.

'You'll get over it,' he replies. And continues to work.

Seconds later he tells her he can't do anymore.

'Why not?' she asks, hurt she hasn't assisted in any actual *writing*.

'Well, you keep interrupting me.'

'That's not true,' she says, 'I'm just sitting here quietly being the best of assistants.'

'No, I'll do the rest on the plane,' he says while shuffling the papers as though trying to make up his mind about something.

She half-hopes he just wants to get away. Go back to his place. And sleep together. But also knows she hasn't the guts to suggest it. That instead she'll just wait and see where he points the wheel.

They clear out. Clear out the way they do in the movies. She reckons he'd be the type who has enough imagination for a really over the top affair.

Sitting in the car she is silent.

He obviously intends driving her back to her place.

'What's wrong?' he asks.

'We should talk,' she says.

'I thought this was all resolved.'

She hates it when he makes out it is only her who needs to talk.

Although she too, doesn't feel talking will really help. At least not when he is in control of the venue, the topics and the placement of bodies – far enough apart for there to be no contact.

'Ordinarily,' he says turning into her street, 'I'd suggest some wine, some music and talk, but not tonight, I'm too tired.'

'Look, why don't you come in and talk just for half an hour,' she asks.

'But your flatmate is probably back.'

'So what, we can go into my room.'

'O.K.'

She knows talking will only damage the situation.

Will make her seem too involved. Too wanting. Or worse still, too needy.

But she cannot allow him to leave while it is still all his way.

She will wake up too depressed next day.

She opens the door.

'Meredith Monk,' he remarks.

She is impressed he recognises the music. But also angry. If he is not going to risk an affair then she wants him to be grossly unsuitable. Recognising the tape puts him back, dead centre, of the suitable category.

They go into her room.

He sits at her desk.

She turns on the computer to show him Word. And as she leans over to demonstrate the edit features he tickles her underarm. 'Don't do that,' she says, cutting short the demo, realising the *talking* has to start.

She sits on her futon.

He remains seated at her desk.

'I can't talk like this Max, with you sitting way over there.'

She tells him she wishes they could talk, lying side by side. A mutual side by side. Even if to a *no go* end.

He just swivels his chair and moves slightly forward, rendering her speechless. Creating a silence which she knows he will use to reject her.

'I thought we'd resolved this last year Mia,' he says seriously, 'it caused you and me a lot of pain.'

She is surprised to hear it caused him pain.

Pain in what way she wonders.

Keeping her eyes on the floor she can just see the tips of his hands and his feet. She is furious he doesn't want to lie with her. That he can remain seated.

'Well obviously, it isn't resolved,' she says, hating the way it is always presented as though it is only she who hasn't accepted it cannot be.

She doesn't dare tell him he keeps giving double messages. The night's dancing. Tickling. And wit. All seeming to point to an attraction. A mutual attraction.

She does know, however, that not all situations of flirting and attraction necessarily end up in bed, or meaning anything more than the glitter of the words as they fly through the air. And that maybe she is being unfair on him.

But she doesn't want to wake up the next day feeling dead. And angry that it was all on his terms. Not this time.

'I don't know Max, how am I going to get you out of my system? Sometimes I think the only way is to sleep with you, that sometimes you have to get *in*, in order to get out.'

'Mia, if I sleep with you you'll just end up wanting more.'

'If you think I think that if we sleep together it means forever then you're wrong. Who knows it might only last a week.'

'I don't want to hurt you.'

'I'm big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. I could survive no matter what.'

'No, I'm not going to sleep with you.'

'Why won't you take the risk, sure, it might not work but at least it would be resolved.'

'I'm scared.'

'Of what?'

'Of your intensity.'

'But can't you see my intensity is situation specific, that your denying any attraction towards me is what makes me so intense.'

'I have to go,' he says, standing up.

Mia stands up. And moves towards him. 'Why won't you ever say how *you* feel?' she asks, 'Why do you always throw it back onto how it might affect me?'

'I'm afraid.'

'I'm strong enough for both us us,' she replies with her feet wide apart and her hands on her hips.

'Why are you standing like that,' he asks. Puzzled.

'Because I'm strong,' she says, realising she is standing just the way a man would to indicate strength.

'I have to go. A hug?' he asks, his arms open wide.

She agrees.

He squeezes her. Tight.

She loves the way he alternates between squeezing her and not squeezing her. How the spaces in between are so comforting.

He goes to pull away.

But she tightens her grip.

'Mia, let me go.'

'No,' she says, smiling. 'No.'

She wonders if he will get angry. And whether or not it is fair to detain him. But decides she can no longer let him always be the one who gets his way.

He struggles.

But she keeps her grip.

He lifts her up into the air.

'Put me down,' she screams.

He places her feet back on the floor. She looks him in the eye. And smiles.

She decides to kiss him.

Kiss him on the lips.

Penetrate.

And risk rejection.

Their tongues engage.

Bodies gyrate. The way lovers do. And she feels his hard cock up against her. His hands exploring her body. Momentum seems poised to take-over.

But he does not explore-explore. He keeps to the fringes.

'Mia, don't do this, we'll end up hating each other.'

She wonders what she should do.

'Are you going to rape me?' he asks. Asks smiling. Asks meanly, trying to suggest desire comes solely from her.

'I would if I could,' she replies.

She wonders and wonders what she should do.

To avoid the hate. And the morning deadness.

She decides to try and edge him over towards the futon. And cause him to fall. Fall backwards.

She succeeds. And landing on top of him. Quickly moves to re-establish her grip, placing her arms around his chest and pushing her hands together under his back.

She looks him in the eyes.

And kisses him again.

He kisses back.

But not enough to make things happen.

She realises she doesn't want to do anything unless he is a willing participant. That without mutuality it would be depressing.

'I want to make love to you,' she says.

'No you don't, I'm too much of a fogey for you,' he replies.

'Rubbish,' she says.

They kiss again.

He pulls away and looks down. 'So they're white,' he says, with his hand pulling at her undies, 'no, I shouldn't do that,' he says pulling his hand upwards, 'I shouldn't play silly buggers.'

She twists both her legs around one of his legs.

He pulls his arms free. And starts to tickle her.

'Stop it, that's not fair,' she says, as though there are rules of fairness even within a detaining process.

'Smell my shoe then,' he says as though trying another break away tactic.

'Very funny,' she says.

They laugh. Both agree it is a funny situation.

He then grabs the phone.

'Who ya goin ta ring,' she asks teasingly, 'Sean?'

'Yeah, I'll get Sean to come save me,' he says, while playing at the phone.

They laugh.

'Hey Mia,' he says, 'go turn out the light.'

'Good try, Max, 9 out of 10. But I'm not that stupid, the ole trick command won't work,' she says, checking her grip.

'Mia, I want to go home,' he says. Seriously.

She knows she is being mean but she can't see any really valid reason to let him go.

'I'm rejecting you,' he says.

She wonders if he'll get really mean. And angry.

And wonders if she'll be able to cope with him hating her.

'Look, don't you know if you actually showed interest in me I'd run a mile,' she says.

He starts to eat her. Wildly.

'Good try Max but it won't work,' she laughs.

'Your hair is wild,' he says, twisting it up off her face and letting it go.

She remembers the time before when he played with her hair. And the longing for him to play with all of her.

'You didn't sleep well last night,' he says, running his finger under her eyes.

'Nor did you.'

'Have I got wax in my ears?' he asks, turning sideways.

'I don't care if you have.'

'Do you pluck your eyebrows?' he asks, his finger feeling the space between her brows.

'No,' she replies, slightly annoyed. Annoyed he has asked such a sexist question.

Her glasses fall off. He picks them up and puts them on. She laughs. And thinks it is weird how natural it all seems. He places them back on her and then removing them again says, 'No, your eyes look bigger without them.'

'Don't you know nothing about the laws of desire?' she asks, 'I mean half the reason I want you so much is because you always act as though you don't want me.'

'You really see our relationship in terms of power, don't you?' he says. Says with what seems genuine surprise.'

'Of course,' she says.

They kiss.

Again.

And he makes another escape attempt.

They wrestle.

He ends up on his stomach. With her on top of him. He then pushes his back upwards. Trying to dislodge her.

She screams out. Again. About the unfairness of his tactics.

And as they fall back down, somehow he ends up back on his back. With her on top.

Once again she looks him straight in the eyes. Teasingly.

'So what happens if I do this?' he responds, while beginning to undo one of her back buttons. But before she can answer, says, 'No, I shouldn't do that, you obviously don't need any encouragement.' And does it up again.

She wants to tell him that if he thinks she'd sleep with him without him being willing, then he is grossly mistaken, but it seems a too complicated concept to get across.

'Come on Mia,' he says, 'kick me out.'

'I can't kick you out,' she says, 'you can't kick out someone who wants to go.'

Realising he isn't going to come to the party, she wonders how she can let him go without losing power. Without being depressed. She decides to wait until a time of non-protest. A time relatively free of struggle.

'So you're going to let me go?' he asks. Asks

with disappointment as she rolls off him at the appropriate moment and stands up. 'Yes,' she says, business like.

He gets up.

And starts talking.

As though he expects her to be upset.

She decides to remain fine. Like a woman who did her darnedest but failed.

A woman who can joke, laugh, and take it like a man.

'Want a hug?' he asks.

She wants to ask, *But that's what started all of this off, do you want to go through this again?* Instead she decides to keep her arms folded. To not reach out. And avoid rejection.

He leans forward.

Tenderly kisses both cheeks.

And leaves.

Mia wonders how she will feel in the morning.

If there will be as much pain as the year before.

She takes off her dress. Cleans her teeth. And slips under the doona.

Twenty minutes later there is a knock at her window.

'Mia, Mia, it's me,' he says.

She reaches up and looks out through the bars.

'You can't get me out here,' he says.

'And you can't get me in here,' she replies.

'Listen Mia, we just have to be friends, that's all it can be, you have to go out with other men.'

She knows he has returned to gain power.

And that the longer they talk the more he'll get back.

She isn't so sure of herself and the dynamics of attraction that she can tell him to piss off. But she does manage to appear unflustered. Unflustered as he tells her, over and over, they cannot have a relationship.

He spends ten minutes resolving the unresolved. Once and for all. Before leaving.

She wakes up the next morning.

With a smile on her face.

on the line

Re-reading, or rather skipping through, Ernestine Hill's *The Territory* (first published in 1951, re-issued in a handsome new edition by Angus & Robertson, $16.95) I was jolted, yet once again, by how much Australians have changed in the last forty years. The blurb says *The Territory* is "timeless, because it is history", a naive remark; 'history' is almost never timeless. In fact *The Territory* is a museum piece, almost an antiquity in its attitudes to women (by a woman ahead of her time), to the aboriginal peoples she met, and to the land itself. Our sense of what 'history' is and could be has moved on apace and contemporary historians are beginning to incorporate in the mainstream much more than what was white, male, Christian and centred on English, Irish and Scottish cultures. The place of women in our history, the place of aboriginal cultures in our history, are increasingly recognised but I see little sign yet of a similar incorporation of our changing attitudes to land, its naming and its use.

Our local giveaway newspaper told the story of a young man, Marcel Cameron, 16, who fought to save a piece of outer suburban bushland from a housing development. Marcel Cameron was concerned that a wedge-tailed eagle nest would be destroyed. "We rushed out to the site at midnight when we heard that work was starting and we found bulldozer tracks leading right to the eagle's nest." The nest was in a beautiful pocket which was home also for the black wallaby, the koala, the eastern grey kangaroo, 70 native birds, 10 species of reptiles, and more than 200 species of native plants including rare orchids. The youngster got busy very quickly, a group was formed, established environment bodies drawn on for advice, local residents mobilised and, in short, the developers were forced to withdraw.

A small story which may or may not become part of local history. There are thousands of such incidents, thousands of individuals, small groups, which have their victories amid the overwhelming ecological disasters which form such a large part of living in Australia now. And they are not new of course, though their increase is inspiriting. Judith Wright founded the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland 29 years ago - and now has resigned as patron because of the Society's opposition to Aboriginal land rights claims to what is, in fact, a tiny proportion of Queensland. Judith Wright's contribution to our understanding of ecology is well-known. Bill Mollison and his advocacy of permaculture to replace agriculture is gaining more and more attention here and abroad. John Sinclair, who played such a great part in saving Fraser Island, is almost a local legend. Others are not so well-known, Kathleen McArthur of Caloundra, Queensland, has worked tirelessly for a lifetime to save from total extinction the coastal wild flowers of the area: she has lost more battles than she has won but, at least, she has preserved many of the plants in a special nursery. Her remarkable book *Living on the Coast* (Kangaroo Press) is not only a fine collection of her wildflower paintings but a key, human document in the history of Australian attitudes to land. As children we used to walk among acres of Christmas Bells in the lowlands behind the Caloundra sandhills. Now they are almost gone, a few plants and seeds saved by Kathleen McArthur. Many areas of Australia have their Kathleen McArthurs.

The changing attitudes are mirrored in specialist horticultural history such as that published in the journal of the Australian Garden History Society. Serious work is being published on the suburban garden, gardening without irrigation, the re-establishment of native vegetation especially native grasses, by writers such as James Hitchmough ('Flowering grasslands in the Australian landscape' etc.).

These random remarks about a few among many life-givers and life-savers, most of them local and unknown, are made not merely to instance a vital cultural change but, importantly, to ask that the records of this change, many of them local and fugitive, others in highly specialist publications, be preserved for the overview which future mainstream historians will most certainly have to make. The next great development in our written histories will be that of land use and our attitudes to it. The historians will draw on Judith Wright, Eric Rolls and other creative writers, they will have access to the archives (I hope) of the major conservation bodies and bureaucracies, but will they find surviving the grass-roots of the thousands of local efforts so essential to understanding our history?

I wrote recently to the Deputy-Premier of Victoria and Minister for the Arts, Jim Kennan, to thank him for gaining an increase in arts funding for 1992 and for the increase in funding for literature to $350,000 ($236,000 in 1991). Jim Kennan's advocacy means that literary magazines share an extra $26,000, *Overland* getting an extra $3000, and will also benefit from an initiative which will see literary magazines distributed to public libraries. Most of the literary magazines, including *Overland*, have been hard-hit by

the recession and are fighting desperately to survive so the extra help is keenly appreciated. I wonder if arts authorities in other state governments could consider extending the Kennan initiative by placing literary magazines in their public libraries. Of the 59 contributors to this issue only a minority are Victorians, writers from all states are represented, seven, for example, coming from Western Australia.

On 11 November at the State Library of New South Wales Thea Astley and Rosemary Dobson launched *One of the First and One of the Finest*, a biography of Beatrice Davis by Anthony Barker published by The Society of Editors (Vic.). *Overland* sent Beatrice some flowers and a note. We would have liked to have been there. Anthony Barker's biographical essay is a pleasure to read. With great skill and wit he captures some of the essential qualities of this great book editor and outlines her long and fascinating career. When Beatrice Davis left (or was she pushed?) Angus & Robertson in 1973 she had worked as an editor for thirty-six years and had nurtured many of our best writers. She went on to another distinguished career with Thomas Nelson, as editor, then as a consultant, until 1986 when she was seventy seven. Anthony Barker's essay is polished, concise, witty and modest which suits his subject. He tells some memorable stories. Beatrice once came up to the poet Roland Robinson, after a characteristic Robinson poetry reading (effective, theatrical and too long): "Well, Roland, I must compliment you [pause] - on your ability to mesmerise yourself." There's a great book, and a great chapter in feminist literary history, still to be written about Beatrice Davis. In the meantime Barker's essay will be a collector's item so write quickly to The Society of Editors, P.O. Box 176, Carlton, Vic., 3053, for a copy.

I've been browsing through *A Bibliography of Australian Judaica* compiled by Serge Liberman which I am glad to see has been re-issued in a second revised edition edited by Laura Gallou. You might find it hard to believe that a bibliography is a good read but, in this case, it is. It adds to our knowledge of early colonial history, of art, of literature and many other subjects. It is certainly a valuable tool for historians and essential for larger libraries. ($30 plus $5 postage from the Mandelbaum Trust, University of Sydney Library). There are notable omissions of course - bibliographies are never complete - including major works by the critic A. A. Phillips and books by the poet Laurence Collinson, two of which were published by *Overland*.

Beatrice Davis and Stephen Murray-Smith at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week

Published too late for inclusion is one of my books of the year, *Jewels and Ashes* by Arnold Zable (Scribe, $17.95). Two earlier works by Zable, both children's books, are included). *Jewels and Ashes* is not only a fascinating memoir but a finely composed work of literature. Growing up in Melbourne Zable gathered hints, intimations, fragments of a world in Poland his parents had left behind. He travels back to find that vanished world. His triumph as a writer is to recreate the complexity of time present and time past. He also has 'perfect pitch' for the vernacular and moves from the comic to the tragic with startling ease. Here is a book which, so far, has not been given the attention it deserves but which, I'm sure, will become a small classic of our literature.

Overland and David Martin have walked, strolled, run along together, with the occasional sharp elbow in the side, since 1954. This various writer, novelist, poet, essayist, has been our friend and critic, a useful combination. We published a chapter of his autobiography *My Strange Friend* (Pan Macmillan, $18.95) in our winter issue and were delighted by the responses of readers. It is good to see *My Strange Friend* getting such wide and favourable reviews. Congratulations to David Martin for his well-deserved Patrick White Award (and congratulations, also, to Richenda Martin) which was announced on 9 November and which this year is worth $34,000, quite enough to lead David and Richenda Martin into some more interesting adventures.

Congratulations, also, to another regular *Overland* contributor, Billy Marshall-Stoneking, whose first play *Sixteen Words for Water* opened in Sydney some months ago to great audiences (not many of his fellow poets though) and laudatory reviews throughout the major media. As is now well-known this two-act play is about the last months spent by Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's hospital for the mentally ill. The Sydney Theatre Company production will be followed by others in Melbourne and in Perth. Meanwhile the writer is attending rehearsals for the London production, which will soon be followed by another in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. Robert Harris will review the book of the play (Angus & Robertson, $9.95) in our next issue.

Barrett Reid

GEORGE PARSONS

The Confusion of Australian Historians: Some Thoughts on Geoffrey Serle

My old teacher, Geoff Serle, is right ("The Confusion of Australian History" *Overland* 123, pp. 8 – 10) to castigate the anachronism and antiquarianism, the shallowness and dishonesty, the lack of accurate research, which characterises the portrayal of the nation's past in films and television programs. Like Nicholas Bentley's Cecil B. de Mille, who:

> Rather against his will
> Was persuaded to leave Moses
> Out of the Wars of the Roses

we are confronted by badly written dramas in which second-rate actors posture in fancy dress, surrounded by artefacts of almost any period but the one they strive to bring to life. The very worst of these, *Against the Wind,* sponsored by the Australian [sic.] mining industry, has already done incalculable harm to a generation of NSW school students, who think that their early history was a conflict between honest, god-fearing, morally upright convicts, all with hearts of gold who stole only a crust of bread or who were politicals, and an oafish, corrupt, mafia of jack-booted military officers, who rampaged across the golden lands of the Cumberland Plain. Somewhere in between were kindly, yet incompetent governors, totally at the mercy of the master-puppeteer John Macarthur.

Programs like this should be attacked by historians, just as that irascible anti-communist, M. H. Ellis, corrected the ABC and the commercial television channels in the 1960s and 1970s, and labour historians pleaded for precision and truth in the *True Believers* in the 1980s. However, Geoffrey Serle lets his colleagues off too easily. Much of the confusion he rails against is the fault of the profession. It would be wrong to attack others when our own house is not in order.

The worst sin of Australian historians, especially those who write on the early years (to say 1850), is anachronism. Despite the distinguished work of A. G. L. Shaw, Michael Roe, Brian Fletcher and others, the European origins of this nation are mythologised and misrepresented. Why won't Australian historians incorporate the latest work in their general histories? Why, despite conclusive quantitative and qualitative evidence, do distinguished scholars write and teach that early NSW suffered a rebellion over a supposed monopoly of spirits? Why is the first interregnum still interpreted using only the evidence of a group of self-interested clergymen or evangelical sympathisers, at least one of whom, Samuel Marsden, lied continually and flagrantly?

Those of us on the Left are partly to blame for these perversions. It must now be clear that Evatt and Fitzpatrick, great men and impressive scholars, were wrong. This should not need saying; it has been demonstrated again and again. Nevertheless we still have the ridiculous thesis that Bligh was a defender of the small settler, a man who obeyed the law, a governor who suffered for his benevolence. The Left seems particularly anxious to befriend governors – it might remember what the Scottish Martyr T. F. Palmer said about Hunter – and those in authority who were authoritarian. It is all very curious.

All countries have myths; all national history is a battleground. But the source of confusion in Australian history arises from a failure to debate the key issues and to do the hard work. This has been Geoffrey Serle's strength in his splendid and magisterial volumes on Victoria – no short cuts, no simplistic statements, hard, slogging, often boring research, illuminated by incisive questioning and critical, analytical thought. Serle, Roe, Shaw, Martin and others write Australian history, they do not confuse their readers and themselves by attempting to import ideologies and methodologies from other places and other times. For example, George Rudé's work on the crowd, a *pre-industrial* crowd, was seized upon by certain Australian historians; the results were appalling. Similarly, Marxist historiography in this country is confused, vulgar and deterministic; and sociological attempts to chart the nation's past have served only to distort, earning a classic riposte from Professor John McCarty of Monash.

Then there is the "Butlin Revolution". What ever happened to this reinterpretation of the second half of the nineteenth century? Australian historians refused to learn how to count; a number of scholars indulged in the ancient art of nit-picking and, finding a few errors, denounced the whole project as suspect – (some of these same people, rightly I think, defended Manning Clark for making mistakes!) –; and still others mounted a futile defence of Brian Fitzpatrick's researches which were carried out in the 1930s. No wonder the public is confused; so too is the profession!

Professional historians – this writer included – seem to leave textbook writing to schoolteachers. Perhaps this is the fault of publishers, but if we have an educative role we need the views of Serle, Shaw, Hirst, Roe, Fletcher, Stannage, Kingston, Grimshaw and others in the schools. The influence of the work of S. H. Roberts and A. G. L. Shaw in the NSW education system in the post-war years shows what can be achieved by textbooks written by academic historians. The constant complaint of young teachers is that they have none of the latest research in a form which their students can understand. The matter is urgent. My first academic article on the NSW Corps, written in 1964, wrong in all important respects, is still widely quoted. My recent work correcting the article is ignored. How many years does it take to correct an error?

I am sure Geoffrey is right. Australian historians have much to say and this is exactly the time that the dominant tradition, the "Radical Nationalists", should be on the attack against the attempt

to destroy our welfare state, to hijack the ALP, and to import failed and dangerous philosophies from the Old World. However, let us do something about our own confusion first. My modest manifesto is that we (i) abandon antiquarianism – too many historians still love the past because it is the past; (ii) outlaw anachronism; (iii) prevent the mindless adoption of every new technique or fashion from Clio's European and American followers; (iv) prohibit the ritual denunciation of anything written by a historian who is not a card-carrying member of the ALP and (v) that some of us write school textbooks. When we stop being confused, the public might listen.

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Fit for Public Consumption: a Response to Geoffrey Serle

John Schauble

That many Australians remain fundamentally ignorant of their past is as much a product of the sort of dependent society we have become, intellectually and materially, as it is the fault of the messengers.

Geoffrey Serle's thoughtful analysis (*Overland* 123) raises almost as many questions as answers. There is much to lament in the way Australian history is delivered to the public. That history means nothing to a large part of the population is the failure collectively of all of us with an interest in perpetuating the past. To lump the lion's share of the blame for the general confusion about our history onto the popular media is to take the easy way out.

The media – be it print, television, radio or film – certainly has much to answer for and ought to be held to account. But how much are its failures simply a reflection of those of the education system over the past couple of decades? The popular media is dominated by people aged under 35. An editor, director or producer aged under 40 is the rule rather than the exception. A majority of those entering the print media since the 1970s and many in the electronic media have received a tertiary education. Moreover, a good proportion of them have formal training in the discipline of history. In 1983, for example, of the 14 graduate cadet journalists employed by the Fairfax organisation in Sydney, three had honours degrees in history and four others had pass degrees with history majors. That these children of the global village apparently know so little of Australia's history and compound their ignorance by spreading it, is surely not entirely their fault.

An undercurrent of Geoffrey Serle's argument seems to be an assumption that there is a 'right way' of looking at history, a notion which should have been consigned to the intellectual wastebasket a long time ago. To be sure, there are certain fundamentals of dates, people and places and so on – the raw factual material – that ought not be fudged or fiddled and for which ignorance is simply not an excuse for getting it wrong. But beyond this, history is an imprecise business. There is nothing entire, nothing complete, nothing absolute about it.

Take for example the "conventional assumptions" to which he refers. It is possible to argue, quite convincingly, that Australia did fight in overseas wars that were really none of our business. Australia's participation in Vietnam legitimately can be viewed as little more than the manufacturing of an obligation to stand by a powerful ally, in a sort of lap-doggish fashion. Such an interpretation is perfectly valid. Equally, it is possible to launch a valid, logical argument to the contrary, along the lines that participation in the Vietnam War was integral to the maintenance of our national security. The same antithetical, in principle approaches could be taken to every overseas conflict in which Australia has taken part.

The thornier question of the extent to which Australians are/have been unusually racist is less easily dealt with, partly because most commentators tend to internalise it. Just what precisely does "unusually racist" mean anyway? I hope the qualification does not imply there is a level of acceptable racism. Presumably it implies that Australians were/are simply no more racist than anybody else. Well, I suppose it is possible to argue that the deliberate extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines, on a global ranking of such episodes, would scarcely rate a mention. Nor would an immigration policy which for several decades simply excluded non-Caucasians on the grounds of race.

As for the subjective observation that these are days of "fashionable multiculturalism", there are many Australians who today regard the idea that Australia is a multicultural society to be an historical fact, rather than simply a bureaucratic invention.

Many Australians probably do rely on television and film for their first encounters and interpretations of our history. In the case of historical drama, whether or not the colour scheme on the wall in the background is authentic for 1927 is probably less important than the fact that a broader audience is being exposed to a version of what life was like back then. In the case of a documentary, one would hope the same attention was paid to the paint chart as to the "true story" being depicted. But ultimately, like all history, it will only be one version.

If in the process of relating a particular historical event, some dramatic licence is employed by a film or television director, that is not only to be expected, but also to be taken on notice. It may be preferable that it were not so. But if as a result the public becomes interested and involved in the particular period of history being dealt with, then perhaps this is an important achievement in itself. If the version of history presented in the popular media is more palatable to the public than that available through the traditional approach to the teaching and writing of history then it is the practitioners of the latter who have failed to make their work both accessible and sufficiently interesting.

Few Australians concerned at the intellectual vacuum into which the country is rapidly disappearing would argue with the proposition that the record of successive Hawke Governments on education, cultural and scientific research matters has been utterly appalling and almost unbelievably myopic. If ever there was a time for revolt on the part of

the long-suffering professional custodians of our cultural future it is now. The fiscal idolatry of the 1980s and the worshippers of mammon have been justly cast from the temple, leaving ordinary Australians searching vainly for new meanings.

Many will begin their search in the popular media, the same media which a few years ago trumpeted the virtues of the tin gods of the decade when greed was seen as good. The media has the advantage, in all its forms, of being cheap and readily available. If the searchers don't look in the history books, it could be that many find them inaccessable and unnecessarily intimidating.

As one who has spent a good many years attempting to render academic jargon into plain English, I would offer the observation that much of the blame for the public misunderstanding of history or law or medicine or just about any discipline lies squarely at the feet of the professional practitioners. Certainly there are many scholars who, aside from immense academic contributions, have the ability to make sense to the average mortal. There are others - the majority, one suspects - who do not even bother to make the effort. There is a third group who try and fail for no other reason than they either refuse, or have forgotten how, to express themselves in language common to all of us.

When all is said and done, the media in Australia is driven by the profit motive. The disastrous consequences of this are more evident today than ever before. It has led to the appalling concentration of ownership of newspapers and television in this country. It has spawned the true mass pap of 'infotainment' that clutters the presses, airwaves and television screens.

For all its faults, the media is wedded to history. It remains the ephemeral first draft. In its simplest form, it provides the basic facts of who, what, when, where and how. It is when it strays into "why" that the popular media falls foul of the sort of problems Geoffrey Serle has identified.

There are many within the media who respect, value and rely on the contributions of academics in all fields, particularly in coming to conclusions about the "why". Such prejudices as remain against academics among journalists do stem from the appalling jargons, but also the frequent pomposity of the former toward the latter. The two, in fact, ought to be firmly allied in dispelling ignorance and promting discourse beyond their respective ivory towers.

Professional historians, much as they might wish to, have no greater right than anyone else to claim a monopoly on our past. Moreover, history - however and by whoever it is presented - should inform, educate and entertain. If it doesn't meet these simple criteria, then confusion must surely ensue.

John Schauble is the Foreign Editor of The Sunday Age. *He holds degrees in history, law and politics.*

Montsalvat Salvo

Robert Kenny writes: In John Jenkins' article on the Montsalvat Poetry Festival (*Overland* 123, pp 41-44) he has me referring to my colleagues as "all these pickle onion brains." I protest! I said no such thing. I may have referred to the irony of a body such as the Brain Foundation sponsoring a gathering of professionals who (and I count myself amongst them) do not have a reputation for sobriety. Indeed I may have gone as far as to make comment on the brain damage many of us have inflicted on ourselves while experimenting (for the sake of poesy) with various chemicals. But never did I use the phrase "pickle onion brains" - it's too long for a start. "Pickled brains" would have sufficed. I hope my colleagues will forgive me for the words forced into my mouth as I forgive John for putting them there.

Mary Fortune and the First Detective Story

Lucy Sussex (University of Melbourne) writes: I am writing to you re Elizabeth Perkin's review of Mary Lord's *The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories*, which was published in the latest *Overland*. In the review Perkins states that Mary Fortune's short story 'The Dead Witness; or, The Bush Waterhole' (to give the tale its full title) is reprinted for the first time since its publication in January 1866. Perkins merely quotes from Lord's introduction, but such is not the case. 'The Dead Witness' was first reprinted in Stephen Knight's eponymous *Dead Witness: Best Australian Mystery Stories*, which was published, also by Penguin Australia, in 1989 and has recently been reprinted. In fact, an advertisement for Knight's anthology is printed in the endpapers of *The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories*.

'The Dead Witness' is fascinating not only as an example of an Australian detective story predating Conan Doyle by decades, but as one of the two earliest detective fictions written by women, world-wide. The same month as Fortune published the story, January 1866, the American 'Seeley Regester' (Mrs Metta Victoria Fuller Victor) had the first instalment of her serial 'The Dead Letter' printed in *Beadle's Monthly*, which was the first detective novel by a woman. I am currently engaged in research to establish whether some 1865 fictions were by Fortune; if so, she would then be the very first woman to write in the detective genre.

[*Mary Lord replies:* I am grateful for this opportunity to express my shame at making a false claim and to apologize to Stephen Knight and to those readers I unwittingly misled. The selection of stories was made and the introduction to *The Penguin Best Australian Short Stories* was written some time before Professor Knight's anthology was published. The publication of my anthology was much delayed by Penguin's need to find a suitable spot in their publishing program for it, a matter over which I had no control and, to be truthful, not much interest. I don't know how it escaped my attention but I was unaware of the existence of Professor Knight's vastly entertaining book until after mine had been published and damage done. That my introduction has been appropriately amended to rectify the mistake in future printings lessens my embarrassment somewhat but does not excuse the inattention which caused the silly and needless mistake. I am mortified.]

BRUCE ANDERSON

One Memory of Manning

I was there when Manning Clark taught for the first time, at Geelong Grammar School. He entered the classroom in his particular hesitant manner wearing a ginger, hand-woven tweed suit with four buttons down to a square return, over a white flannel shirt with homespun, electric green tie, plus black boots with white socks. We were startled.

It was 1940 and I had just turned fourteen. This was the beginning of an association that was to last more than fifty years, but I cannot recall when I first realised I was in the presence of a 'mighty spirit'. Manning had come to take us for German (our usual teacher was sick) after returning from Oxford and Bonn, and he was appalled at our pronunciation. Some time later he noticed me reading Victor Gollancz's *Guilty Men*, a famous tract of the day on the Munich betrayal. He asked if I was the son of John Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney. (I am not.) Somehow we became friends, despite this setback. Later, he taught me European and British history.

Gradually, under Manning's influence, I underwent a transformation. I was at an impressionable age, and even adopted many of his mannerisms. But he made my schooldays tolerable; more, he made them memorable. At one very difficult time he may have helped save my sanity. He was my present help in trouble.

His final-year history classes – part of what was called Leaving Honours in those days – were singular. There were about eight of us: scions of the Singapore and the Melbourne Establishments of which I was a fringe dweller; *of it*, you might say, but never quite *with it*. Manning liked to mock us. He would open proceedings with some reference to our morning's knee-bending exercises, or would quote from some radical periodical which we were advised not to read on the Toorak tram. This would be greeting with howls of: "Not another of your pinko pieces, Clark," or with groans and heavy sarcasm, "A monumental work of course". The lesson was seldom directly related to the subject. He would preface his remarks with some phrase like, "You will remember what Anna Karenina said about the many kinds of love"; or "We all know what the Viennese doctor would have thought about this." His ploy was to assume that our general mental baggage included Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Freud, Marx and so on, and it worked. He provoked us into reading like never before.

A kind of detached dialogue began between Manning and the headmaster. Dr (as he then was) Darling took us for English, intermittently emerging from or retiring to his study. The lesson chiefly consisted of his reading and commenting upon C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* or Robert Bridges' *Testament of Beauty*. Bridges, Darling let us know, was the only poet of consequence in the 20th century. The message was passed on and our next history lesson was taken up with Manning reading T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'. I can recall it still... "a cold coming we had of it". Then W. H. Auden's 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud'. I am haunted by those stanzas to this day... something about an "important Jew who died in exile".... "For every day they die/among us, those who were doing/some good/who knew it was never enough but/hoped to improve a little by living". Then the final lines:

> one rational voice is dumb. Over his grave
> the household of Impulse mourns one dearly
> loved:
> sad is Eros, builder of cities,
> and weeping anarchic Aphrodite.

But the mood was generally boisterous. I looked forward to it so much that I once arrived a period too soon. "Aren't you a little premature, Anderson?"

Manning asked. Then it got back to Darling that he had read us some A. E. Housman. "That mush!" the headmaster exclaimed.

Manning also coached the first XI. He made me twelfth man but I am not sure if this was on account of my skill at silly point or out of kindness. Trips to Melbourne to play cricket were highlighted, for the players, by visits to the cinema after the game. The coach, however, must have met his friends at a handy hostelry, as the train journey back would be enlivened by Manning reciting risque stories, or limericks such as:

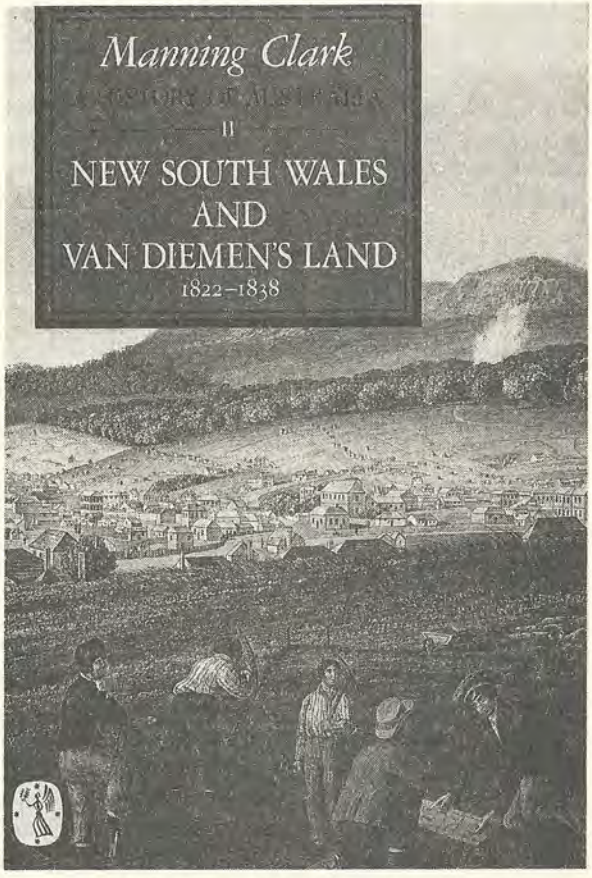
> There was a man of St Johns
> Languidly regarding some swans
> When up came the porter
> Said: Here take my daughter
> Them swans are reserved for the Dons.

And others such as 'The Policeman from Camberwell Junction', unprintable then and perhaps still unquotable. Later, when I was at the University of Melbourne, I would occasionally meet him if he came to town with the team. He would regale me with further, chiefly outrageous, stories of school identities. I recall him imitating one of their walks, down the aisle of the old Plaza Theatre. It would have delighted John Cleese, but have puzzled the patrons.

In my second year at university – where Manning took over the Political Science School after Mac Ball left to represent the Commonwealth on the Tokyo Four Power Control Commission – he invited Joan and me over to his study at Trinity College, treated us to a sherry or two, then left us with Vaughan Williams' 'Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis' on the gramophone, with predictable results.

We used to gather from time to time at the Mitre Tavern with cronies such as Brian Fitzpatrick, Bill Dolphin, Ian Mair, Mervyn Skipper, Camo Jackson and Justus Jorgensen. It was at the high tide of Melbourne's Bohemia recalled in *Rebels and Precursors* by Richard Haese (1981) and *Heydays* by Alister Kershaw (1991). Dennison Deasey, Max Nicholson and Arthur Boyd were also about, and Gino Nibbi of course, whom we often visited, as well as the booksellers Alice Bird and Margerita Webber.

After six p.m., when the pubs closed in those days, we often adjourned to the salon of Helen Chambers, on the corner of Toorak and Irving Roads. This extraordinary woman – old money, related to Mitty Lee Brown and Lucy Brown Craig, an aviatrix, *raconteur, bon viveur* and friend and correspondent of Neville Cardus, Sir Charles Moses, Anton Dolin, Malcolm Sargent, Bill Dobell, Syd Ure-Smith, Basil Burdett, Sir Keith Murdoch, Tristan Buesst and other celebrities – could be relied upon to serve good sherry while her dalmatian, and bulldog Tunka, sprawled in front of the fire. There was always a certain amount of 'I've kept the afternoon for you' about her, but she had a quick wit and sharp turn of phrase as she told stories about her acquaintances, revealing both their distinctions and pomposity.



Manning Clark's six-volume A History of Australia *has now been re-published with attractive new jackets.*

Helen's eventful life had been punctuated by violent death. She lost her first husband, a doctor, at Tobruk and never forgave the army top brass for sending him into the front line. She said she once asked Jimmy Mollison, another famous aviator of the day, what on earth he did on his long solo flight. "Masturbated, of course," he replied. Somehow she also knew that Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith had an extraordinarily large set of balls.

So the conversation at Helen's flowed until it

became too late to catch the last train to Croydon. Then, as often as not, Joan and I would drive Manning home, where we would be met – and not altogether warmly – by his wife, Dymphna. But we had anticipated her reaction by bringing a few records. She soon mellowed when we played some Brahms or Hugo Wolf songs. Then we would dance in the small hours of the night. So the good citizens of Croydon may well have caught the sounds of revelry to a background of Bach or Sibelius. Manning loved the trumpets in the 'Second Symphony'.

Manning asked Helen Chambers and me to be godparents of his second son, Axel, who was christened in the Geelong Grammar School Chapel. Helen later became engaged to Douglas Tooth and planned to move to a new property near Cooma while retaining her town house, an old Victorian three-storey terrace in Macquarie Street, Sydney – long since pulled down for some highrise – which overlooked the Domain and the Mitchell Library and had consulting rooms on the first two floors and her magnificent apartment on top.

We decided to give Helen a farewell dinner, and to do it properly. We booked a table at Menzies, which then had the finest dining room in the country, a copy of London's Savoy. As we swept in, suitably primed after a few snorts in Helen's salon, Manning greeted the head waiter: "G'day to you Ned Kelly." When we sat down he called over our table waiter and said "Waiter, tonight I don't want any sordid questions of money or the class struggle to interfere with the warm flow of human feeling between us. Carry on." On the occasion when we might take a taxi, which Manning very much enjoyed, he would address the driver thus: "Where are the snows of yesteryear, Driver? Aye, where are they?" Or else he would recite Auden: "Driver, drive faster and make a good run/down the Springfield Line under the shining sun./Fly like an aeroplane, don't pull up short/Till you brake for the Grand Central Station, New York!" Every occasion was an event. You never knew what was going to happen. It was exhilarating.

In *The Quest for Grace* Manning skips over these years and, setting his eyes on the Canberra hills, says he didn't want to be the buffoon of Melbourne any more. But that was not how I saw it. For me, a light went out. I was very disappointed when he went to Canberra, a city I detest, but I have stayed with Dymphna and Manning many times at Ness, their wonderful South Coast place near Bega on Lake Wopengo. On many occasions I witnessed their way with the children. One night at Ness I went out shooting rabbits with their sons, Benedict and Roland. One of them, in all the excitement, drove the car into a tractor. "You just don't know how to take enough care," said Dymphna. "Now we will just have to do without a car." And they did for some time. Manning was certainly a hard act to follow, but all the family have distinguished themselves in remarkable ways, and are an enormous credit to them both.

I have been fishing with Manning, shot rabbits on the Goodradigbee and played golf and badminton with him. I have seen him play cricket and with effortless grace flick a ball over the long-on boundary. To all these recreations he brought skill and style; he even drove with style. He also had a great sense of humor, which was often not apparent in his public persona. Being with him was constant rippling joy.

I once sent him a memoir of my school days. His reply was typical:

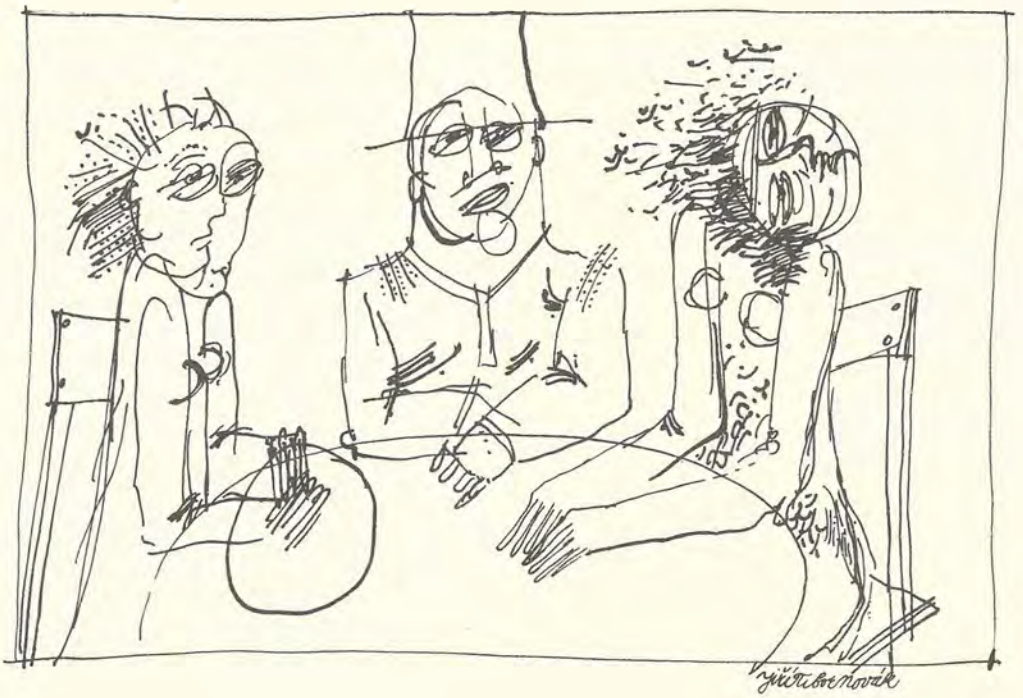
> My Dear Bruce,
>
> Thanks for your letter and the memoir. I am very interested in the remark – meaning thereof: Make to yourselves friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness. Why did Christ say that? Is that what he said? Your memoir is very powerful. As an indication of my feeling for you let me add that I will put both your letter and the memoir in my folder on which the words are written: MY GREAT FRIENDS.
>
> Ever, Manning.

We maintained a close friendship until around the mid-Sixties. He always stayed with us when he came to Melbourne. Once he arrived rather late in high spirits after imbibing a little. He threw a candlestick into the air and it fell back onto the table, and was rather bent, and the mark on the table remains. Perhaps I reacted rather harshly because he never came again, but we always kept in touch, although the friendship was never as close again. More recently, I noticed he looked very frail in a television interview and I determined to accept his oft-repeated invitation to visit. I drove to Canberra with my son, Scott, and stayed with them over the past January long weekend. We spent most of the time talking to Dymphna and Axel as Manning was very tired. As Dymphna said, he never refused a request for an interview or to make a contribution to some new book, or whatever. He was preparing to fly to Albany the next day to give an Australia Day address.

Driving back I mused how glad I was that we had gone as I did not think he was long for this world. I thought of all his many kindnesses to me and specially of his encouragement. He always managed to find something to approve of and perhaps that is the key, not just to his influence on me, but to a whole generation of those who came in contact with him. As he said in the Boyer Lectures: "The historian must make people feel they are capable of better things."

Then we exchanged a few letters. The last one from him is dated April 23rd and finished: "I am very low". I was in Vietnam when he died. When I reached Taiwan a few days later I received a telegram from my daughter Katharine: "Sorry, Manning died". A part of me then died too. He was one of the central facts of my life, as he was for so many others, who might say like me: "Manning made me or at least that part of myself I like the best."

Bruce Anderson, a long-time friend of Manning Clark, as a student at Geelong Grammar won the History Prize and a Leaving Honours Exhibition in British History. He has now retired from business and lives in Melbourne when not pursuing his keen interest in Asian affairs.



Jiri Tibor

TWO POEMS BY KATHY HUNT

THE WRONG WAY

He took a pillow to the city
every Monday for a year
and graduated top of his class.
His certificate hangs on the wall
above the oil and cotton balls.
Five people in a row
said they didn't know
what it is about the masseur . . .
they lie down and he rubs them up
the
wrong
way,
in the back room
where the air is cold.
There's a fair amount of fear involved.

ANYONE FOR TENNYSON?

There is a curse upon the Lady of the Lift.
Powered by the steam of flowers
at every level of delight
she sees pale worlds reflected in the glass
as she goes past.

On request she takes us down
through intonations of our choice
standing spellbound
in her cube of crystal mirrors
and dark dark wood.

I am half sick of shadows,
says the Lady of the Lift -
Going up?

REFLECTIONS

If you take the budgie, you can't take the dog.

And Lenin looked back surrounded by fuchsias
always looking – mainly posing
acting but little
I mean – if I'd been lucky enough to
die when he did perhaps we'd still have a
credit account in the pages of History.
Or was it a mercy? Nadezhda keeping a record
of events and the proletariat still clanking
about in their chains totally oblivious of their
chafing. (Go to jail. Do not collect $200.)
Break out the red shirts
untop the spray paint can and sail into the
Revolutionary Sea where we can all
pretend that anarchy is still a practical
alternative. Meanwhile – back at the palace
Lenin has applied for membership of the
Australian Labor Party, as Bob Hawke's deputy.

DAVID FARNSWORTH

MOTHER WAS A CHILD AGAIN

The cattle wait in the dust beyond the fence.
Their evening meal is poured from a sack
and they squabble for it like refugees.
It's the wet but it hasn't rained
for three months. Leaves die on the trees.
Today it smells like Coonabarabran not the
coast.
My mother called this a dying wind, she says.
Her mother says watching the ground harden
and the grass die and worrying is what . . .
We lie side by side, thighs sweating against
each other. It's 3pm. She tells me a dream
her mother had. They were on a train,
the two of them. But the daughter was
the mother and the mother a child again.
The daughter was trapped on board
the train after the mother got off. Bashing
against the window, screaming with tears,
she watched her mother disappear into distance
deserting her forever. An abandonment dream.
You pick them up as a child and they never go
away. This morning her mother rang crying,
the nurses trying gently
to coax her back to bed.

ALAN CLOSE

THE OPENING OF THE NEW PARLIAMENT HOUSE BY H.R.H. QUEEN ELIZABETH II.

1

The Queen looks down on Canberra and thinks
of Maya, Inca, Aztec... in a handful
of centuries this city will be a find –
the most impressive ruin in the land.
She puts her specs back on, looks
through her speech.
What will they make of it? Will tourists send
back postcards having done the major sites,
found burly symbols in the ancient plan,
and puzzled at its star and circle streets?
She wonders what this place will have
to teach.

Australian accents still surprise the Queen;
the tender handshakes they're so quick to release.
They treat her like the Doulton figurine
upon a packing-case board mantelpiece.

2

The Queen unlocks the door and frames her face
in plate glass ready to express delight.
Her famous face. Her smile. Her famous wave.
She feels as common as a two bob bit
and steps inside and only wants to laugh:
it's done up like a flash department store
in colored marble, wood, and shiny brass!
They've bought. Bought everything they could
afford,
like children with a parent's credit card.
She finds her voice, "It's not been done
by half..."

She understands the silly flagpole now –
its own apology, if rightly viewed.
The people of a squat land can't allow
their standards to have too much altitude.

3

The Queen unveils the Queen of years to come –
a pretty horrible herself in bronze;
the hard, shot-peppered visage of a woman
whose frown and wrinkled lip are not a sovereign's.
Look on their works! They have so much
to show:
a tapestry of native forest hacked
away to keep connecting doorways whole;
the two chambers; the gallery of chaps
whose consciences were also done in oils.
All built to mob-scale for the overthrow.

She likes Australians. They make no demands.
They build their castles with a childish pride,
upending pails on lone and level sands,
as blankly purposeful as wind and tide.

HOWARD FIRKIN

TWO POEMS BY PHILIP HAMMIAL

HEALERS

First, James, possessor
of that Total Ambience that makes
for the Perfect Whimper, & in
his footsteps, Clyde, as
always out on the molecular cakewalk
in his best baiting suit, &
in his, Sam, significant
with his woman's cane, poking
here & there, then
Bill, who knows
but will never tell
how best to man a child, then Boss-
boy tiptoeing by with a little
hypnogogic lamp that could, if
the conditions are right (but
they never are) light our way
through a thoroughly modern
poem, followed by
Cornelius, who no sooner over
one feeling than he begins
to feel another & it's all because
of that beastly wig that he wears &,
lastly, Serge, eater
of courage & sleek
of tail, all
with their healing at the ready
that they might, catching
me up, place it where it
will do the most good, on
my face, slap after slap.

ON GLEANING

O to glean it - the all that's here
that should be less,
the breather
in this game of O
Combustion Hard
& Soft if there's room for even
one more skin please cram
it in, thin
or thick, in sweet
proximity,
the shape (the shame)
of that funny furry thing that rubs
against my death in perfect
legal weather, not to stop
the fishing (the finger fishing
in my pie) is its aim & if
I'd have it otherwise I'd be
much harder served, perhaps
impossibly so,
the tooth
that hides (if there
is one) the smile,
the tongue & how
it's used for the body business & for
that other business also which if
not mine is nevertheless
of some concern,
the Word - O
to glean it - that having
been given it without a single
string attached, I'm unable
to put it into any practice
of a substantial nature,
the Name
of the man I am by any other.

AN EFFECT OF BLACK COCKATOOS

Early evening, and black cockatoos
cartwheel noisily above my house
as if some riotous spirit-hand
had spun them at cacophonous angles.
At times they dance a surreal flamenco,
dizzy in the casurinas, beaks like castanets,
a crescendo black as polished leather.
They scour the sky with iron wings,
in search of seeds and pods to strip,
hissing with the static of existence,
eyes electric, red as novas.
Their screeching is a zinc nail
scraped along the day's glassy-blue.
Far-off, they are a scatter of poppy-seed
gusted on a darkening wind.
Tonight, my blood is feather-black,
my throat like the shining birds',
full of kindred sobs and sadness.
Some evening I evaporate on wings,
scud and thermal in a warp of dreams.
They whirl their vortex at my ear,
the long call of grief against time.
Lately, I have seen them tumble
and cry across an orange moon,
then melt into the black margins,
trailing their corrugated voices,
a fading flutter of tin-foil sound.
It washes up in shimmers and shards
on the lake's opposite shoreline.
Night rises from the water's penumbra,
artesian, immense in its own image.
The birds skid across a flint-black sky.
What zodiac is coded in their brains,
their songs a gravel of lunar noise,
wings star-pocked and ragged aerofoils?
Their intention tonight is to shred
the kernel of a constellation or two,
leaving a scatter of smaller planets
embering on a bare horizon,
like gutted cone-husks from the pines.
They arc along the edges of my sleep,
trapeze insanely across the Milky Way,
eroding and gnawing at the moon,
until all that remains is a din of shadows.

TWO POEMS BY ROD MORAN

GOAT KILLING

The white goats in their stony fields
look suitably Biblical,
ready to be trussed, their throats
ruptured into warm red grins;
as if the slaughterman quipped,
from his store of gnostic aphorisms:
did you hear the gag God pulled
on Abraham and his only son?
His smile is a dedicated blade.
Here is death's strange coherence:
a scream of frenzied flies in chorus,
the cold sun like a golden-calf,
the goats aptly bewildered;
a day, surreal as an afterlife,
burning in their gaping mouths.

THE LANGUAGE OF EYES

To the princess of the desert:
I saw you
walking from the bore
balancing sand-dune, sky and desert oak tree
an easy grace
springing from your slim dark ankles
rising through the curve of your breast
pushing beneath that blue dress
tall, strong and full
as the water you carried
precious
is the view
and I held it
to the very last drop

and you turned
just once
to see who was this man with eyes
and let go a smile
that flushed like a bird
from spinifix
the colour of your hair
letting me see
your perfect teeth and the pink inside your mouth
your hand danced to cover
such desire

2.
I could not forget
the desert was too big to remember myself
that you were married was accepted
with some regret
as custom would have it
desire suppressed

but you kept a schedule
of appearances
peculiar to some secret
working there, in my photographs
desert scene 35, rain in the west, windblown the sky
but it's the girl in the foreground
with the eyes, kurulingku, really eyes
eyes that sought mine
from out of the crowd
at community meetings
at the checkout in the store
in the settlement around the town hall
in my line of vision when I drove out the road
all through the year I felt the heat
whenever you passed within reach
water flows underground
we drink the same time
and that's how I learnt
the language of eyes

3.
You appeared one day at my house with some women
I dropped everything
including the tea, you laughed
and stole glances above magazines
I stumbled about with broken Pintupi talk
someone explained how your husband went to court
your eyes looked at me and your eyes are really pleased
you're getting round with the single girls
and you're gettin round in my dreams

I woke that night to a furtive knock
opened the door to reveal you
the dream princess on my porch
eyes of jewels
teeth of pearls
and the moonlight
follows you in

bare feet on linoleum floor
a touch in the dark
soft explosions on my skin
you giggle
and say I'm tall

we surrender our bodies
with a relief borne of wanting
two years in the Wesern Desert
locating, tracking, hunting
the subtle hint,
the returning gesture,
orientation of sitting,
casual signals, seen at a distance
now we use our tongues
taste each other's mouth
and speak in language
new words for love
and I don't care about the danger
or the trouble to come

4.
After the football match
I park on the road
and watch people walking
home
through a late afternoon orange glow of dust
a gaggle of colours, children, dogs, blankets
I'm waiting for us,
for you to cross
this view that everyone else has passed
of a red dirt road through mulga scrub
away to distant mountain.

Finally you appear and step on the road
I watch and wait for you to look
I watch you walk
across
the mountains behind
and it takes so long
because you don't look this time
only
your hand comes undone
to hide your face
and that's how I learn
your husband
has returned.

NEIL MURRAY

LAMENT

(after Charlie Tarawa)

My heart's cracked.
  My boy, my boy . . .
we live under canvas now,
  under sheet of iron.
The rain
  never hits us when we sleep.
Tarlikarratja kulatju:
  that one in the sandhills,
you can't find em so easy.
  Not like in olden times.
Big mob kangaroo,
  karlaya tjurta - finished up.
We go to shop, now, canteen;
  catchem trolley.
Y-bone, tinna fruit, sugar & tea.
  Young men not interesting
in ceremony.
  How they gonna hold that Land
with motor car & flagon?
  Policemen don't care.
Big mobba name:
  My name, wife's name, son:
everywhere, wakarnu!
  Our names are speared on paper.
You can't trust that paper,
  wiya.
  Whitefella way different.
No shame.
No sense.
  Like counting money in the dark.

BILLY MARSHALL-STONEKING

TWO POEMS BY GEOFF PAGE

AFTER FLAUBERT

A light lunch dressed with chardonnay
and lighter conversation.
A *salade verte* with *vichyssoise*
and later she plays Mozart.
Her child dreams in a further room.
The wine demands a certain care,
Andante maestoso.
On the borders of her perfume
he sinks into a chair,
admires the spilling of her hair
and the ten subtle fingers
that would travel so lightly
on reaches of skin,
his own or the surgeon's
who's started the child.
He sees the scalpel, cap and mask,
a patient stilled upon the table...
and follows her fingers walking now
a slow, transparent logic of the keys
round which all else is pure abyss...
or sweet irresolution.

NOT FOR THE CARD

Nine weeks in another town...
Each day you feel you're getting thinner
And grow eccentric with your change,
Invite yourself each night to dinner.

Frail and plastic as the bag
You bear home from the supermarket
You supplement its small provisions
(One slight indulgence in a packet).

The room is dense with solitude,
The bed impatient for another.
The sheets are stale with singleness.
Repeatedly you smooth the cover.

And when your shoes attempt the street
Beside the traffic late at night
You see your shadow up ahead
Slipping sideways out of sight.

Remembrances inside the brain
Begin to repossess the bone.
The mind has time now for disease
And does it best when left alone.

Day by day the work goes on
And keeps you stiffened in a chair.
That frail white shirt across your shoulders
Encloses nothing more than air.

Solitude and loneliness.
You thought the differences immense.
The abstract nouns of fine distinction
No longer wear their separate sense.

Nine weeks in another town,
A diminution breath by breath
Prefiguring that final thinness –
The narrow exit of your death.

COVERING HIS MOUTH

Covering his mouth with a wooden hand
he walks past a bandaged gumtree
expecting an urgency to befall him
as a kookaburra blurts before dawn
as a kangaroo, orange-eyed and dazed, dies
in the thin hours.

Covering his mouth with a wooden hand
he walks past the leaning gumtree
sorry for the fires that riot in redfern
the severed aboriginal heads and penises
  pickled
in distant museums, like fruit
falling not far from the original tree.

Covering his mouth with a wooden hand
walking past our rotting treestump
inebriated with anticipation
his familiarity with its syrupy wound
is an historical shadow cut back, creaking back,
falling . . .

that he is
not saying a word, not daring, not walking on
  past
not crying

but covering his mouth with a wooden hand
and chewing the white ants down.

J.A. MATEER

BACKYARDS

for my sister Frankie

The radiance of everyday shines on
our backyards What sunlight strokes

your cat? Ah my sister I sing
across these swaying oceans

we have buried those cats that
rub against empty milkbottles

in my photo album and your
friend with the short shorts

never did pay attention to me
as I shot her beside the VJ a -

ground again in our backyard
beside the circular barbecue

Father had made in a riprap
design of stones like our days

black hose coiled around
the almond tree like a snake

and your window open above
like a yawn your cats always

coming and going all gone
now you live in France with

an ear open to the correct
tense my intensity with words

shared across these swaying oceans
leave your window open hear me sing

ANDREW BURKE

Esoteripuzzle - a quiz for the highly educated. By Lofo.

(Name the famous book titles pictured in each frame.)

The 7 Pillars of Wisdom · Les Fleurs du Mal · Coming of Age in Samoa · Schuhmacher: Small is Beautiful
The Woman's Day Cookbook · The New Testament · Gone with the Wind · Faust: Part I and Part II

KEVIN HART

After Poetry II
A Quarterly Account of Recent Poetry

DISCOURSE, IMAGE

The history of modern poetry is the history of the image. A change in poetic language, especially a renewed interest in metaphor, begins to be noticeable from the middle of the eighteenth century in Gray, Collins and Thomas Warton; but the obvious reference point is Wordsworth chiding Dryden and Pope for disdaining "those expressions which are not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul". With the flourishing of romanticism comes a recognition that poetry is centred on the image, not allegory. It would take some time to work out how the romantics conceived the relations between the imagination and the image, if indeed they believed them to be positively linked in the first place. Certainly, though, large claims of a metaphysical sort about the imagination have not been endorsed by influential writers since the high romantics. When later poets invoke the imagination, as they habitually do, they tend to be thinking of their experience and not speculative philosophy. (Wallace Stevens might seem a startling exception, yet it remains an open question whether for him philosophy was anything more than another fictive mode.) Just as the image got along perfectly well before the romantic theory of the imagination, so too it has happily survived the eclipse of that doctrine. Yet before the romantics the image did not enjoy a governing role in the practice or theory of poetry; while after them it seems almost impossible to dethrone it, weak and emaciated though it sometimes appears. The image features in competing poetics, and yet gains rather than loses credibility by that. Earlier this century, for example, it was roundly declared the prime mover of modernism at the same time that modernists were vigorously distancing themselves from romanticism.

Inevitably, then, talk about the image without close reference to an historical period leads to confusion. Yet even if one gets literary history right (hardly an easy task, perhaps not even a possible one), there are still difficulties ahead. 'Image' can mean a mental representation, or it can denote a rhetorical figure, or it can be used to signify a mode of immediate apprehension. All three senses of the word are common to romanticism and modernism. If that makes one wonder how modernism can be said to differ sharply from romanticism, it should also cast doubt on the feasibility of writing literary history as a narrative of breaks and ruptures. It would require more evidence than the image can provide to show that modernism is a stymied romanticism. However, I can point to some virtues of the image which people have been praising for almost two hundred years. The image is concrete, we are told; it immunises us against abstraction and generality. It makes us perceive the world more accurately; and it gives us, the readers, a place in the artwork: for the image, by is very nature, implies rather than states, and so solicits our creativity. In saying all this, people are generally thinking of the image as a visual and tactile representation; they have in mind a very narrow range of rhetorical figures, usually just metaphor and simile; and, when pressed for an evaluation of the image, most readers can be relied on to say that poets think in images, and so have a different, or maybe heightened, access to reality.

Different from whom? Why, from academics, the bourgeoisie, bureaucrats, the multitude, philistines, philosophers, scientists, society, or whichever group happens to be conceived as the contradiction or the contrary of the poet. We see here the germ of that romantic and post-romantic myth of the writer as necessarily deviating from the norm, whether that turn be marked internally

(the poet experiences life in a unique way, has a finer 'sensibility') or externally (by wearing green face powder, having a pet lobster, taking LSD). As Frank Kermode showed over thirty years ago in *Romantic Image*, not only is the image fundamental to modern poetry but also it bespeaks the poet's social isolation, even alienation. It follows that in this schema the non-poet and the anti-poet are those given to discourse, not the image. It is important to distinguish the two types. The non-poet is discursive in the sense of being prosaic: this sort may be safely derided by the literati because, after all, he or she represents the norm, and the norm services the myth. The anti-poet is discursive in another sense: discourse, here, stands for critical thought. For the post-romantic, a critical thinker (a 'literary theorist' to take an *au courant* example) is dangerous for a very specific reason. It is not because that person is indifferent to poetry – the exact opposite tends to be the case – but because he or she can expose false or inflated romantic claims to cultural authority, ideological neutrality or poetic strength.

It is no accident that A. D. Hope, who has consistently opposed modernism and tried to keep romanticism at arm's length, is also the author of 'The Discursive Mode'. In that essay he makes a plea for "the middle form of poetry", a style he associates with Chaucer, Jonson, Dryden, Smart, Wordsworth, Browning and Frost. "It was a form", he says, "which served without pretension the purposes of narration, the essay, the letter, conversation, meditation, argument, exposition, description, satire or cheerful fun. Its mood, like the mode, was discursive, not intense or elevated or passionate". For votaries of the romantic image, this is the voice of a non-poet, perhaps even an anti-poet. Hence the common view that Hope is what he says he is – a neo-classic writer. And hence the equally common reaction to this view, that he is a disguised romantic. One did not have to wait for his latest collection, *Orpheus*, to realise that neither view is fully persuasive. Hope's poems display all kinds of classical and romantic effects, all of which must be taken into account when reading them, but he is neither a neo-classical nor a romantic writer. If we have to blow to literary history, we should call him a modern poet or – it amounts to the same thing – a post-romantic.

But there is at least one good reason why we should not bow too low or for too long. The danger of using the labels of literary history is that they can all too easily categorise a writer before reading a line he or she has written. If we approach Hope believing him to be a neo-classic poet, kin to Ambrose Philips and Pope, then sure enough we will read every effect of classicism in his verse as an instance of the work's determining trait. Everything that complicates or modifies this view of Hope will be quietly passed over. Rhymes and rhythms that spring from Byron will be read as though they are imitated from Dryden or Gay. By the same token, if we firmly believe that Hope is a discursive writer we may not notice the roles that imagery plays in his writing. That Hope has a poor visual imagination is evident in all his verse; his meditative and narrative imaginations are considerably stronger. All the same, his work gains some of its characteristic energy from representations of the macabre and the scatalogical. The image of dismemberment, for example, is not uncommon.

That image dominates the title poem of Orpheus. The great archetype of the poet found his voice when young, and enchanted all who heard him sing, but to reach the highest reaches of art he had to experience grief and misery in all their keenness, which happened with Eurydice's death. "And it was only then", Hope's narrator says,

> The whole world answered, hills and beasts
> and trees

Danced and the god of wine, lest he ensnare
With that delirium even the race of men,
Crazed, in his wisdom, the women of Thrace
to seize
And tear him limb from limb. They rent him
there,

Maddened, not even knowing what they had
done.
It was too late! Even after his eclipse
His severed head still sang 'Eurydice'...

For Hope, dismemberment is commonly understood as a sacred act, one that leads to a re-membering and a celebration. This lyric ends with Orpheus's "fatal song" being continued, since "poets renew its deathless harmony". If readers have often overlooked that sacral dimension in Hope's writing, they have never forgotten (and often never forgiven) his studied dismemberings of the female body. Women figure frequently in Hope's poetic world and are almost always constituted by male desire; they seldom exist as subjects in their own right. 'Teaser Rams', 'Love and Poetry' and 'The Language of Love' add to that world, while ensuring that some readers will never stay there for long.

In an age when writers turn, almost unconsciously, to Freud for an understanding of love, Hope looks to Stendhal. Uninterested in psychic defences, Hope shares with the author of *De l'amour* a fascination with the social and mental rituals that accompany human desire, and also shares his tendency to reductionism. "The Gate of the Future", he tells us in 'The Oracle', is not "A triumphal arch, a grand and public portal" but "a tiny slit/Two inches long, fringed with a flurry of hairs". 'On the Night Shift' and 'A Swallow in the House' modify that reductionism. There is, he admits, "Something left out, not to be reckoned with,/Not conceived by science or adumbrated in myth". It is that unsayable something, that brooding negativity in or beyond language, which informs the strongest pieces in this new collection: a lyric such as 'Visitant', say, or the powerful 'Western Elegies'.

If the title of Hope's sequence recalls Anna Akhmatova's 'Northern Elegies', the five poems themselves remain distinctively his in their exploration of love and translation, celebration and isolation. Hope's sense of isolation has always been personal and metaphysical rather than 'social' in any strict sense of the word. Like Byron, he is a poet of spiritual emptiness; and, also like Byron, a poet who turns to discursive forms in an attempt to fill the inner void. From the second elegy:

Landfall! My plane dives two hours beyond
your sunrise;
Orion rides high but has not reached your
horizon;
Time like space sets a crystal rampart
between us.
Fire-keeper, phosphor, my phoenix,
my Fata Morgana,
Pray for us now and in the hour of our
reunion,
As I land on the desolate soil of an alien
planet.

What Hope once wrote of Judith Wright can be said also of him, "The last years of a poet are often stranger than anyone could have foreseen".

Les Murray's *Collected Poems* is in fact no more than an expanded version of his selected poems, *The Vernacular Republic*. Even so, it gives his readers an opportunity to re-read all that he wishes to preserve (except his verse novel) and to judge the nature and scope of his undoubted achievement. Like Hope, Murray follows the discursive muse. He is our best popular essayist, the closest thing we have to a G. K. Chesterton; and he remains an essayist in verse as well as prose, especially in recent years. One reason for his success is that his poems are ideal for discussion: they bristle with controversial opinions on life and culture. Another reason, related to this, is that he is read not simply as a poet but as an *Australian* poet. It is an approach he has encouraged within limits. "I am not European. Nor is my English" he says, a touch defiantly; and elsewhere, "It will be centuries/before many men are truly at home in this country". Murray's poetic depends on readers believing he is one of those people and, moreover, that he is one with the land (his Bunyah address is more telling ideologically than his longtime Sydney address). If some poems seem like set pieces about Australiana, it is partly because he has helped us to bring a certain view of the country into focus. For he can work any number of themes that lay claim to be 'characteristically Australian': from life on a NSW dairy farm to visiting the flood plains of the Northern Territory, from the Anzacs to modern police brutality, from Governor Phillip to Thunderbolt the bushranger, and from flowering eucalypts to the emu.

It is this public, discursive aspect of Murray which has helped to make him one of our prime cultural icons and certainly one of our most

popular literary exports. He names our country for us, and for the Americans and Europeans who gaze at it with nostalgia or desire. "I am looking at the place where the names well out of field stone" he writes, and indeed the very ease, fluency and calm of his voice can give the impression of someone reading the landscape and its legends as though they were a book. But Murray's relationship with the country is never passive. "My name will rub off out there", he says of the bush, and, in truth, it already has. By an extraordinary act of self-mythologising Les Murray is becoming for Australia what Robert Frost is for the United States: a monument to a way of life that is always and already past. Although he laments that Australia has "vanished into ideology" Murray himself remains the most ideological of writers. Perhaps no other Australian poet has so successfully naturalised a mystification of the country and our possible relations to it.

Christianity informs Murray's work, though perhaps more often at the level of ideology than of spirituality. At times he will refer, like St Paul, to "the world" as something fallen and stubbornly turned toward death. It is from here that we get Murray the sermoniser and the polemicist, the man who talks chillingly of how society cannot survive without blood offerings. And it is here that we find his weakest writing for he works more surely as an observer of manners than as a moralist. At other times he will make large claims about the relations between poetry and religion. "Religions are poems" he tells us. It is perhaps his favorite public credo, one that echoes and reverses Cardinal Newman's aside, "Poetry... is our mysticism". It also shows him to be a romantic poet at heart. And at still other times Murray will stop theorising about dreams, grace and art and let them work for him. Here he talks winningly of the "is-ful ah!-nesses of things", of "the unrevealed Torah of objects" and of "the ordinary mail of the otherworld". At its best it results in lines like these from 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle':

> People go outside and look at the stars, and at the melon-rind moon,
> the Scorpion going down into the mountains, over there towards Waukivory, sinking into the tree-line,
> in the time of the Rockmelons, and of the Holiday...
> the Cross is rising on his elbow, above the glow of the horizon;
> carrying a small star in his pocket, he reclines there brilliantly,
> above the Alum Mountain, and the lakes threaded on the Myall River, and above the holiday

Murray's idiom can be more aphoristic or baroque than this, but he never writes more convincingly than here. Oddly enough, his chief problem as a poet is precisely the fluency and charm of his idiom. It enables him to produce poems, sometimes quite long ones, that sustain attention because of their idiom and for no other reason. It enables him to confound opportunities for writing poetry with finished poems. While there are vivid pieces in the latter half of the book – 'The Future', 'Bent Water in the Tasmanian Highlands', 'Midsummer Ice', and the two essays on interest – they are obscured by inferior poems, often rather cerebral and prolix, which hardly deserve to be preserved.

Since the second world war many American poets have gone in quest of the 'deep image', those root metaphors which seem to rise directly from our psychic lives. Robert Bly and James Wright are two such writers; and while it is tempting to read Mark Strand alongside them, it would also be a distortion of his work. For all their interest in depth psychology, Bly and Wright ultimately look to the world outside the self, while Strand revolves around the self in ever diminishing circles. "For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said* but makes itself manifest". Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* could well stand as an epigraph to Strand's work; it is a poetry with no subject other than the self but in which the self can appear only in a rapid and disarming movement of negativity.

The Continuous Life is Strand's first new collection of poetry since *The Late Hour* appeared in 1978; and to celebrate the event Alfred A. Knopf has reissued his *Selected Poems* of 1980. Some of Strand's early poems are narratives generated by an image which the story tries, again and again, to capture and understand but always without success. The poem's apparent failure on one level is a sign of its rigour on another level. Thus 'The Accident' begins "A train runs over me", and spurns explaining just how that sentence can be said. Death, which always resists human comprehension, is figured by way of the narrator's relationship with the train driver. The poem's eerie logic requires that it conclude with "The end of my life begins", a line which can only restate what has been already elaborated in the story. In other poems Strand eschews

plot of any kind. Thus 'The Remains':

I empty myself of the names of others. I empty my pockets.
I empty my shoes and leave them beside the road.
At night I turn back the clocks;
I open the family album and look at myself as a boy.

What good does it do? The hours have done their job.
I say my own name. I say goodbye.
The words follow each other downwind.
I love my wife but send her away.

My parents rise out of their thrones
into the milky rooms of clouds. How can I sing?
Time tells me what I am. I change and I am the same.
I empty myself of my life and my life remains.

The lyric gains its power partly by the force of its images, partly by its structure of repetition, and partly by its rhetoric of statement: the poem's final two sentences are authoritative, not merely clever paradoxes, because they draw deeply from the preceding images. Throughout the poem discursive logic is placed in the context of the image and forced to respond to its pressures.

Strand's uniqueness, like everyone else's, is a result of a powerful fusion. In his case two signal influences are Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Edward Thomas. The polarity of Brazilian modernism, with its emphasis on *velocidade* and *totalidade*, and English Georgianism, with its muted colors and modest aims, is a hard one to negotiate. Yet Strand manages to do just that. In *The Continuous Life* the finest poems testify to the productiveness of confronting English and Portuguese, Georgianism and modernism. In 'Orpheus Alone' we hear of that singer's three great poems. "The third and greatest", Strand tells us, "Came into the world as the world, out of the unsayable,/Invisible source of all longing to be",

it came in the middle of sleep
Like a door to the infinite, and, circled by flame,
Came again at the moment of waking, and, sometimes,
Remote and small, it came as a vision with trees
By a weaving stream, brushing the bank
With their violet shade, with somebody's limbs
Scattered among the matted, mildewed leaves nearby,
With his severed head rolling under the waves...

Different as they are, if one drew lines through Strand's and Hope's poems about Orpheus they would meet, if not intersect, in Rilke, who is in some ways the exemplary poet of our century, the one to whom we turn or try to turn from.

In a review of *Child with a Cockatoo* A. D. Hope took Rosemary Dobson to task for writing so many poems about paintings: her images, he felt, were parasitical on other visual images by Calvi, Crivelli, Verelst, Vermeer and others. Twenty years later, in 'Rosemary Dobson: A Portrait in a Mirror', he recorded a change of mind: the genuine artist, he said, draws inspiration from anywhere; and besides, some of Dobson's lyrics are based on pictures she had imagined. Readers of this long-awaited and luminous Collected Poems will appreciate Hope's change of heart. Some of these poems represent images; others fashion new images; while yet others address the vexed relations between art and representation. All the same, I can understand why it took Hope some years to appreciate Dobson's writing: it is a poetry that beguiles over a period rather than bewitches in a moment.

One entrance to this collection is by way of three quotations from her poems: "To keep their memory from the rage of time"; "There is being alone in a crowd, a chosen withdrawal/A singling apart of the mind"; and "but I, who always find/In anticlimax pleasure". Memory, solitude and deflation: these three motifs weave in and out of Dobson's verse from fine early lyrics such as 'Young Girl in a Window' and 'In a Café' to exquisite later poems like 'Being Called For' 'Flute Music' and 'Folding the Sheets'. That last poem pictures two people folding sheets "Advancing towards each other/From Burma, from Lapland" as well as from India and China:

We meet as though in the formal steps of a dance
To fold the sheets together, put them to air
In wind, in sun over bushes, or by the fire.

We stretch and pull from one side and then the other –
Your turn. Now mine.

We fold them and put them away until they are needed.

A wish for all people when they lie down to sleep –
Smooth linen, cool cotton, the fragrance and stir of herbs
And the faint but perceptible scent of sweet clear water.

A poem of re-membering this; of gathering together different peoples in an ordinary task of daily living. What is remarkable here, as in so many of Dobson's poems, is the blend of formality and informality in the voice, the choice of words which is scrupulous yet seems casual, and a sense of economy that does not preclude an equally attractive air of openness.

If we compare Dobson's poem with Andrew Taylor's 'Sheets' more lustres of her lyric become visible. Taylor evokes a bed: "Nowhere more than here, before a body/becomes a ceremony of loss,/is emptiness heavier, thicker in the throat" he observes, then reflects,

This won't be washed out. This
is the sheet's burden. Each night
as our bodies lengthen into sleep,
each moment when they shine with the stunning
acetylene of sex, the sheets recall
what hasn't happened to us –
at least, not to us all, not yet.

'Sheets' is not the best thing in *Folds in the Map*; however, it is characteristic: it has elegance, perceptiveness, a feel for language – and yet no idiom. 'Folding the Sheets', by contrast, although it never draws attention to itself, is deeply idiomatic. Its singularity is forged not by a coruscating image ("the stunning/acetylene of sex") but by fusing several dimensions of possible experience in the one voice.

Effects of classicism are everywhere apparent in Dobson's work, not just in those poems which take Greece as their point of departure. Samuel Johnson once warned poets to avoid "the puerilities of obsolete mythology", and with good reason: no one is ever convinced by it. Poems such as 'Knossos' and 'The Three Fates' escape Johnson's censure, for the myths are invoked lightly and only by way of example. However, an otherwise fine and moving meditation, 'Callers at the House', flirts with danger in its concluding lines. After the speaker's mother is miraculously healed, we are told, "Near Epidauros is the shrine that Diomedes/dedicated to Clear-sighted Athene. I will go there/and pay my debt of thankfulness. Or should I/offer my thanks to the God of Doctor spurgeon?" Ironies flicker throughout the poem, ruling simple moral judgements out of order; yet I doubt that even the most nuanced irony can give the allusions to Athene the kind of weight they need in order to work effectively. Caveats aside, this *Collected Poems* is a permanent addition to Australian letters; its finest poems have a unique radiance and an inner strength that is all the more compelling for not being exhibited.

In his *Selected Sonnets* Jeff Guess also uses paintings as a starting-point, and even those lyrics that do not refer to Drysdale, McCubbin or Vlaminck none the less respond to framed situations. Guess's style of imagery belongs more to the tradition that joins Keats and W. C. Williams than that which links Pasternak and Craig Raine. Representation, not defamiliarisation, is his aim. Thus the opening of 'A Bowl of Pears':

There's a bowl of pears on a table
beneath the bay-window. Centre piece on
a white crocheted cloth. Plump golden
cupping curves of flesh, mocking trouble

this room has with light. Each one's able
on the voluptuous round of warm
and honey skin, to engage the open
hand and mouth...

If we place Wallace Stevens's no less painterly 'Study of Two Pears' beside this, the merits of both become more evident. Stevens's poem begins

Opusculum paedagogum.
The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base.
They are touched red.

Guess's key word is "voluptuous": he wishes to evoke and celebrate the sensuous world, something Stevens does supremely well in other poems. Here, though, his stanzas turn on "paedagogum" they propose to teach us a little lesson, that "The pears are not seen/As the observer wills".

We are used to reading Stevens's poems as images of discourse, in which the prosaic and the

critical are transmuted into poetry: we think of Mrs Alfred Uruguay ("in order to get at myself/I have wiped away moonlight like mud") and of those people in Paris returning "at twilight from the lecture/Pleased that the irrational is rational". With 'Study of Two Pears', however, we have a discourse on imagery, one that affirms the primacy of the object and that insists on the value of the particular. For Stevens, being a post-romantic poet means receiving romanticism as an inescapable set of problems which must be formulated, felt and answered in poems. By the same token, to be a post-romantic critic means, amongst other things, asking whether there really was a change in poetic language after the middle of the eighteenth century or whether it was an illusion. Both poet and critic are forced to make sense of the apparent polarity of discourse and image. Modern poetry moves between these two poles, as between many others, although it is an open question whether its distinctiveness is more manifest around points of extremity or in the complex spaces they define.

Rosemary Dobson: *Collected Poems* (Angus and Robertson, $14.95).
Jeff Guess: *Selected Sonnets* (Angus and Robertson, $12.95).
A.D. Hope: *Orpheus* (Angus and Robertson, $12.95).
Les Murray: Collected Poems (Angus and Robertson, $19.95).
Mark Strand: *The Continuous Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, US$18.95).
_____: *Selected Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, US$10.95).
Andrew Taylor: *Folds in the Map* (UQP, $14.95).

Kevin Hart's study of Jacques Derrida, The Trespass of the Sign, *has recently been re-released in paperback by Cambridge University Press. His most recent book of poetry is* Peniel *(Golvan Arts).*

D. R. BURNS

The Elitist Case For Equality

Patrick White's Pioneering "Visionary Monster" Novel.

Riders In The Chariot (1961) is the novel in which Patrick White turns the full force of his glare upon the typical Australian suburb and the average family dwelling there. "Everage" might seem the more accurate description, granted the violent categorisation practised in creating "Harry and Shirl Rosetree" of "Persimmon Avenue, Paradise East", and the presence of a super villainess-suburbanite who seems to have learnt much about public-private speaking from Edna herself. Here, though, the affectionate note that keeps creeping through in Barry Humphries' monologues is quite absent. Paradise East, a very new suburb, full of "texture-brick homes", is, like more established ones, such as "Sarsparilla", a place of bloody mindedness, of "strangled screams", of "gnawing" by "the rats of anxiety", and an ugly opportunism, especially in spiritual matters. The immaculate garden and smooth facade, while proclaiming so openly the moral innocence of the owners, their straight forwardness, their Australianness indeed, are actually a means of concealment. So Harry and Shirl previously Haim and Shulamith Rosenbaum of Vienna, are apostate Jews who, in ignorance of the local truth, now dawning on Shirl, that "people are Methodists (out here)" have become Roman Catholics. And so too, Mrs Flack, respectable Sarsparilla widow and good Christian, harbours a murderous hatred of Jews now living; they are the slayers of Christ. She has mothered secretly an equally bloody minded young bastard. With her prompting he organises the mock crucifixion of the Jewish central character who, as climax to the whole narrative, dies, apparently of heart failure, the day after the outrage.

This moral degeneracy, rampant in the spick and span suburbs, is matched by the physical squalor of the inner (Sydney) city area where "neon syrup coloured the pools of vomit and the sailors' piss".

> Sodom had not been softer, silkier at night than the sea gardens of Sydney . . . The waters of Babylon had not sounded sadder than the sea, ending on a crumpled beach, in a scum of French letters. (441)

This process of categorical reduction ensures the citizenry of Sydney, that new Sodom, exist at the furthest possible moral and spiritual remove from the four "riders in the Chariot". These are all visionaries. Each is absorbed in a reality which lies far beyond the narrow prejudices and material possessions on which suburbia concentrates its attention. Something like half the novel is retrospect, a looking back and outward to the influences which have formed them in the visionary mould. Mordecai Himmelfarb, formerly professor of English at a provincial Germany university, practices the rites of Orthodox Jewry as, now, the only real business of his life following the presumed extinction of his wife in one Nazi death camp and his own experiences in another. His allegiance to the Old Testament is matched by washerwoman, Mrs Ruth Godbold's to the New. She is of the evangelical faith into which she was born in the fen country of England. Miss (Mary) Hare, inheritor of *Xanadu*, the decaying, extravagantly proportioned folly which her father Norbert had built, now sited in an outer suburb, makes her way in and out of it by various semi-subterranean routes, burrowing assiduously in celebration of her allegiance which is to Nature. Although locally born, everything about her - name, lineage, blithely wayward habits - suggests the English eccentric. The fourth rider, Alf Dubbo, though also Australian born, in contradiction of that brutally localising name, is doubly alienated. He is half aboriginal and an artist, with an allegiance to painting of the European and, more specifically, the expressionistic sort.

The attention of all four visionaries, this is to say, is fixed upon what has come into being afar

off, in the rich cultural soil of Europe, Miss Hare's naive pantheism included, and *Xanadu* being a direct descendant of the Brighton Pavilion. These antipodes have the negative function of providing environments here, far to the south, which are the antitheses of what is found in the northern hemisphere; a social one of total philistinism, crudely material concerns and disorderliness, and a natural one in which the "scraggy native trees", "suffocating scrub" and "nondescript flowers", (none worthy of any more particularizing appellation), make even the most common exotics, the willow by Himmelfarb's rude dwelling, and the flowering plum before which he and Miss Hare first converse, suitable subjects of celebration in passages of extended lyricism.

Two sorts of prose are employed in this novel with two vastly contrasting subjects: one of celebration, evoking the spiritual power that draws the riders' attention always upwards towards itself, and one of condemnation which rates the local residents as a mere clutter, no better than the objects they use and so carelessly discard, that "scum of French letters" as one example.

The four riders are drawn, through a richly allusive use of language, into the context of sacred Literature and of other supreme (European) aesthetic achievements. The different creative fields, painting and Literature particularly, are woven into the texture of the prose setting forth all to do with the four visionaries, in wonderfully accomplished ways. Here, Himmelfarb prepares himself, through the Orthodox forms of daily worship, before heading off to his work place, "Brighta Bicycle Lamps", where, he seems to have some prescience, he will, today, face an old form of suffering, his "crucifixion", in a new land.

> And the shawl fell back from his shoulders in the moment of complete union, and the breeze from the window twitched at the corner of his old robe, showing him to be, indeed, a man, made to suffer the torments and indignities. The hair lay, in thin grizzled whisps in the hollow between his breasts; the thongs of veins which bound his scraggy legs, from the ankles to the knees were most arbitrarily, if not viciously entangled.

The vulnerability Himmelfarb shows to the ravages of Time but of nothing else places him securely in the company of the prophets of both the Old and the New Testaments. But the way that, here, the real is also the ideal, the fleshly the monumental, is a tribute, as well, to Renaissance sculpture and, more particularly, to Donatello who brought those wrinkled, unflinching prophets alive again. Just so, too, the chariot motif is, at various narrative points, woven into the riders' visual awareness, their devotions and their carefully modulated, pregnant exchanges, as a sunset study worthy of Turner's brush, the sun god's chariot of Greek legend, the four sided divinely radiant entity which caught the prophet Ezekiel's gaze, and the central image in the hymns which Mrs Godbold sings while busy at her wash copper.

The celebratory prose, as indicated, is restrained and infinitely careful yet, in tribute to the cultural richness of Europe, open to a variety of influences. The condemnatory prose, often comprises, conversely, a mere tirade, born not of anger, which can be a noble emotion, but of irritation, even peevishness, as the triviality of some of the targets suggests.

> (Harry Rosetree) had every reason to be proud of Steve and Rosie who learned so much so fast: they had learnt to speak worse Australian than any of the Australian kids, they had learnt to crave for icecream, and potato chips, and could shoot tomato sauce out of the bottle even when old black sauce was blocking the hole

For the true visionary, to be forcibly resident within Australian society, is to be confirmed in one's faith and spirituality by witnessing, close up, all that is the antithesis of these. From the dramatic presentation of this antithesis, in so violent and thorough going a way, is born that narrative subgenre, quite exclusive to Australia, which will dominate the local scene through the next two decades, the Visionary Monster novel. Only Australia, among Western nations, is so far from the cultural centres of Europe, so far and so vast, so lacking in limits of both the geographical and the moral sort, so empty, offering all the space, intellectually as well as physically, necessary to house the highest flights and the worst excesses of the human imagination. Both are certainly contained within this amazing novel.

Those master novelists, (by local standards), who essay visionary monsters have it in common that they do not embarrass easily. And this, the grand pioneer, in which, at opposing narrative extremes, the new Christ comes to His crucifixion, and the old black stuff in the neck of the tomato sauce bottle is shown to be a social blight, provides inspiration for all the monsters, composed of two totally discordant parts, to follow, for White's own *The Eye Of The Storm*, Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country*, and Ireland's *A Woman Of The Future* to

name the more magnificently monstrous.

Yet here too, at outset, in the very first published example, the fictional danger endemic to this narrative type shows up very plainly. The visionary monster consists, essentially, of two totally opposing states of being, one of extreme worth and the other of extreme lack of worth. But extreme states are apt, of themselves, as it were, to extreme changes. Continuous, full bodied laughter, as one random example, can begin to seem the sign of hysteria. Any such fictional state, or situation, or character is just as likely to begin to lean towards, to come to seem, at moments, something like its or his own opposite. This is precisely what happens with *Riders In The Chariot.*

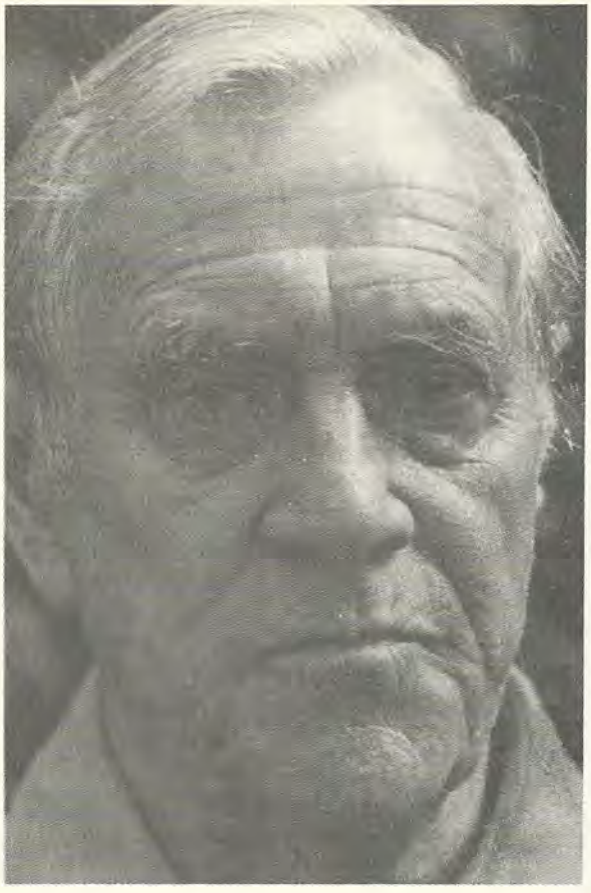
The riders themselves come to be perceived as possessing qualities which would certainly not seem any part of the nature of such gentle beings, dedicated witnesses to the life of the spirit. These qualities are, specifically, the competitive urge and a keen attention to the material side of things. They are most in evidence, among the four riders, in the matter nearest to the lower middle-class Australian heart, that of housing.

These four visionaries are not just witnesses to the life of the spirit. They are very demonstrative ones. Their dwellings, as an obvious example of this, do not just depart from the suburban norm but actively defy it. All are, in quite separate ways, its antithesis.

Mrs Godbold dwells, with her many equally wholesome and, culturally speaking, equally English daughters as well as her violently drunken, lecherous, wholly Australian and God hating husband, in a "shed" outside which stands her washerwoman's copper. Himmelfarb's dwelling is a severely neglected, worm-eaten cottage set among weeds containing "only several sadly material objects". It provides the space, shelter and privacy in which he may perform the rituals of orthodoxy each day. Alf Dubbo, obsessed with his artist's visions, has no need of more than bare, rented rooms. As background, these show, the more effectively, the stark, significant shapes and bold colours which pour out of his imagination onto canvas.

Mrs Godbold's and Himmelfarb's dwellings, with a bold visuality, question the suburban intention. They ask just what is it and what is it worth. If those whose total allegiance is to the Lord God Almighty can get along adequately with just roof and four walls, what purpose is served by all those mod. cons. and all the interior suburban space necessary to house them?

Miss Hare attacks, from the other side as it were,



but in an equally demonstrative material way. *Xanadu* was built in defiance of the anonymous and interminable landscape, just as were the immaculately straight up and down houses of Persimmon Avenue, Paradise Gardens very much later. But this structure was intended, with its baroque over-reaching, to defy any such functional notions as well. Now subsiding, intermingling more and more with the twilight area of trunks and roots and undergrowth, it is stating, like its owner, an allegiance to the natural state in defiance of that barren sort of cultivation, practised with lawn mowers and secateurs, in Persimmon Avenue.

The dwellings of all four riders are as varied as the spiritual ends, all outward looking, to which they devote themselves. This variety, of dwellings and activities, is very much in contrast to the pruning and clipping and cutting, the drably identical activities of all the property owners in Paradise East. These merely serve to enclose the narrow suburban souls more securely within themselves and their joint uniformity.

In the central episode of the Australian sequence, Himmelfarb is "crucified" by Blue and his mates

at the Brighta Bicycle Lamp factory, where they all work, on the eve of Good Friday. The Lucky Sevens, as they named their lottery ticket, have got themselves as "full as pissants" after a big win. When their enthusiasm has waned and Himmelfarb is lowered from the jacaranda to which they had roped him, he is persuaded, by Mrs Godbold, to let himself be bedded down in her really quite commodious "shed". There, when Good Friday has dawned, and the Jewish Passover begun, he assumes great visionary powers and a supra-multiple identity as both the suffering Jew, victim alike of ancient persecutions and near contemporary Holocaust, and the Son of Man. He dies thereafter, attended by Mrs Godbold and Miss Hare who have similarly assumed the roles of the two Marys. Watching through a window, Alf Dubbo takes, into his artist's awareness, the divine implications, "what had never happened before". He assembles the actors and the scene as a canvas in his imagination while watching. Though biassed towards a more contemporary, expressionistic form of statement, he is as creatively moved, as the great medieval and Renaissance artists must have been, visualising the story of the birth of Christ in just such lowly circumstances.

> So in his mind he loaded with panegyric blue the tree from which the women and the young man His disciple were lowering their Lord. And the flowers of the tree lay at its roots in pools of deepening blue. And the blue was reflected in the skins of the women and the young girl.

This event clearly puts Mrs Godbold's shed in context with the similarly unadorned, purely functional manger of that earlier, even more singular and equally paintable occasion. It puts the surrounding, suburban houses, as well, quite out of the running, in the very terms, of residential importance, which dominate their houseproud owners' lives. In all that drear waste of shaven lawn, new texture brick and wall-to-wall carpet, Mrs Godbold's humble make-do structure is the only one related to the model specified in Holy Writ, the only one to stand on a level with that humble structure captured in paintings by the greatest European artists. In terms of incorruptible substance, of Western European cultural riches, Mrs Godbold possesses the infinitely more valuable property.

There is this same confident physicality, visual objectivity in all to do with the riders' expression of their totally anti-suburban ends. Mrs Godbold singing hymns aloud at her wash copper, Himmelfarb manipulating the accoutrements while intoning, in daily practice of the Orthodox rites, Miss Hare wriggling a way through her green twilight, Alf slashing out the strongly coloured stark shapes which crowd his imagination, all these boldly visible ways of observing the life of the spirit beat the pruning, clipping, lawn mowing suburbanites, in terms of physical vigor, at their own game of busy-busy. The riders are bound fast in a unity that emphasizes the distinct individuality of each, unlike the suburban code which is a demand for complete uniformity.

But yet, again in contrast to the riders' state of unity, the suburbs are the place of disunity, of fragmentation. Mrs Flack of Sarsparilla, the ultimate cosy-cosy suburbanite, has two darkly personal, potentially quite scandalous secrets gnawing at her breast, one of them Blue. She forms an anti-rider front with the equally respectable Mrs Jolly whose daughter, defying the sacred notion of family while offering it as the reason, won't have her as permanent house guest. Mesdames Flack and Jolly fall out completely after each has learnt of the disunity figuring in the other's life.

Harry Rosetree, who is proprietor of Brighta Bicycle Lamps as well as Persimmon Avenue resident, is certainly at odds with his own Jewish identity. And, as with the residents of the better suburbs, so with those further down the social gumtree trunk. After the crucifixion, Blue and his mates, the "Lucky Sevens" are separately sick in reaction to the same force which, melded with the lottery win, created their brief unity, "the beer", ("it was the beer").

Riders In The Chariot is an impressively visual narrative. Nothing occurs, either on the spiritual heights or in that psychological cesspool, the Sydney suburbs, which cannot be seen. And one peculiar effect of close attention to all this visual detail is to gain in respect for the riders, not as gentle visionaries in the pursuit of spiritual ends, suffering at the hands of a rough, grasping populace, but rather as the members of a guerilla band working together, in perfect accord with each other and with the central command which has devised the sophisticated physical strategy, to bring about the complete humiliation and palpable psychological defeat of those who grossly violate the things of the spirit.

This inversion of the assumed nature of the four riders, so that they are seen to possess characteristics one would associate more immediately with their earthbound "persecutors", is the direct product of the extreme moral imbalance posited in this visionary script, that monstrous misassortment of

good and bad, in every way and at all levels. The narrative presentation is clearly meant to ensure that the four riders' superiority is so complete, in all essential ways, as to be something seen, immediately visually evident even though these are unearthly and ineffable ways. And that's where the peculiar alikeness begins to emerge out of unlikeness.

The same extreme moral imbalance leads, conversely, to a rather more favourable view of the bad jokers, the Sydney-siders, the gross violators of even their own moral code, than may have been intended. In terms of the narrative strategy, they needs must be not only villainous and/or cowardly but obviously, reductively and quite demonstratively so. This belittling entails, inevitably, a move towards the comic mode even, or especially when the darkest villainy is being portrayed. When Blue, being so elated as well as so pissed following the lottery win, rings his "auntie", Mrs Flack, she nudges him strenuously, at some length, towards the barbarity he will practise on Himmelfarb.

> Do not think I am bitter, as has sometimes been suggested. I am not. I am realistic that is all, and must bear the consequences of seeing things as they really are. And suffer every Easter to know the Jews have crucified our Lord. Again. Blue? Sometimes the young do not understand. Not while they have their lovely bodies. Eh? Blue? Enjoy boy, enjoy then. Bust your skin if that is what you want! It is only a game to let the blood run when there is plenty of it. And so red. Nothing is cruel if you don't see it that way. Besides it lets the blood out too, and I would be the last to deny there is plenty of that waiting to turn to pus in anyone's veins.

The slow, rather ponderous, considered quality of Mrs Flack's utterance, combined with the gruesomely imaginative word play, make of the whole piece an incantation, or a spell she is working on Blue. The same deliberateness, combining with the self-righteousness and the patronising approval of Blue's youthful intemperance, denote the suburban, properly Protestant housewife of whom Edna Everage is the prototype. The exclamatory querying interpolations. ("Blue?"), mark the very manner of Barry Humphries' super housewife, briskly in charge, demanding all of her audience's attention. This matching of modern and medieval, this assumption of a witch's role by a property owning member of the lower middle-class, is sinister. But because the two roles do seem in surprising accord, the two sorts of emphatically female authority becoming one, it is comic as well as sinister. It is comically histrionic indeed, villainy writ large, too strenuously demonstrative a display of double-barrelled evil for real life, more like a stage performance undertaken with a sense of audience, one that would warmly and happily hiss this suitably grimacing star turn.

It is in response to her barbed words that Blue organizes the crucifixion of Himmelfarb. This is certainly an act of unmitigated brutality, particularly as it is a mock-up, an explicit enactment of the most notorious one in history. Or, rather, an enactment of the outline, the overall form of Christ's crucifixion. There is no wounding of the victim, ropes and pulleys being used to haul Himmelfarb up, and then to have him hanging on the stumpy jacaranda. Realism is aimed at within the restrictions to be observed.

> There he was, nobody would have said crucified, because from the beginning it had been a joke, and, if some blood had run, it had dried quickly.

This naive apologia reveals the distance that these locals stand, in the moral as much as the geographical sense, from the centres of Christian and Judaic culture. They have only a residual, sketchy sense of that completely central event of the Christian tradition, that they can conceive of making it the stuff of this "joke". The more completely their make-do efforts replicate the real thing, with the mob of fellow workers actively applauding them, execrating the victim, faithfully playing its historic part, the better the joke, and, thus, the more plainly abysmal the moral state of this whole factory-full of antipodean slobs is seen to be.

The further extension of this equation, however, relates to the state of mind of the victim; the more devilishly accurate the job done by Blue and Co., the nearer Himmelfarb's state approximates to that of the prototype, of Christ Himself. His positioning on the "cross" is certainly the classic pose, central to medieval and Renaissance art.

> Hoisted high at the wrists, the weight of the body threatened to cut them through. The arms strained to maintain that uneasy contact between heaven and earth. Through the torn shirt the skin was transparent on the ribs. The head lolled even more heavily than in life.

His body having been forced so exactly into the legendary pose, Himmelfarb is vouchsafed, it would appear, the inner state, too, of the crucified Man.

> The head lolled even more heavily than in life . . . But the eyes were visionary rather than fixed. The contemplative mouth dwelled on some breathless word spoken by the mind.

A fusion is occurring here, within Himmelfarb's awareness. The past sufferings he has endured as representative Jew are phasing with those of Christ, "what had never happened before". Put shortly, the spiritually and historically unthinkable, the merger of Christianity and Judaism has begun to occur, in suitably obscure and provincial surroundings, thanks to Blue and his mates, those expertly improvising Aussies of the Lucky Seven syndicate!

This is no Passion Play, no mere acting out as practised by believers periodically in European centres of Christian tradition. This is an act carried out by the totally benighted, situated so far from those centres, that like the Roman soldiery of another time, they have no real notion of the enormity, the obvious, unequivocal, unmistakable enormity of what they are about. They have only some vaguely directive notion, these dwellers at the far, far edge. They are on their mettle as handymen, improvisers, casually correct, correctly casual Australians, to see that this piece of improvisation gets as close as possible, granted the limitations, to the real thing. They will evade the charge of inhumanity when the foreman, Mr Ernie Theobalds, having intervened to lower their victim, insists that he see the whole thing as the working within them of "the old sense of humour" and accept it as a joke.

This antipodean creed, to give it too grand a title, is what enables "the boys" to get such an enormity under way and working so satisfactorily. Anti-Jewish feeling alone could never have inspired something so arduously elaborate. As well as enabling the factory crowd's prejudices to come bubbling up, the job they do satisfies local standards of both handimanship and how to play the hard case.

By doing so it satisfies much higher ones as well. The crucifixion is accurate simulation enough, as indicated, to bring Himmelfarb's physical being into alignment with that of the suffering Christ. This is the necessary preliminary to the visionary state, the alignment of God and man which follows. In the earliest part of next morning, on Good Friday, when, at the point of death, Himmelfarb assumes visionary powers of what seem a divine sort, the seal will be set upon the effectiveness of the Lucky Sevens' handywork.

Thus, too, in the terms of this spectacularly polarised fiction, the most spiritually awesome event in the history of the West since the first Easter, will occur in the most remote and certainly least civilized province, fragment, outpost, end-piece of that civilization because the conditions there permit of it in a way that those nowhere else will. Its occurrence there will indicate, more vividly perhaps than any other in this, or succeeding novels of the visionary monster sort, how the state of total opposition, bodied forth in so many and such startling ways, is ultimately surmounted by a kind of accord growing out of the discord.

Here, in this remote terrain, far, far south of the civilized world, where limitlessness, in all senses, is the rule, extreme states of being are able to flourish, to confront each other in a total opposition which brings them oddly into a sort of alignment, of accommodation. Here, in the emptiest of atmospheres, physically and spiritually speaking, the chariot, that richly wrought signal of sacred intention, makes its vivid presence most real to the four riders. Here, in the vast vacancy inhabited only by totally artless antipodeans, Literature, supported by that great Art in which its most momentous themes are displayed, is able to take a firm and easy hold, finding new ground, for old themes, bringing a textual richness to narratives which survey all this untouched soil.

In Europe, crowded modern Europe, by contrast, where life is so significant, so real, the literary spirit has to grapple, strenuously and directly, with those contemporary and near contemporary events it seeks to capture and comprehend within the realist novel. As total contrast to most that will occur when the narrative moves to *Australia Deserta*, that part of *Riders In The Chariot* which concerns Himmelfarb's earlier life in Germany is both a reminder of the realist novel, as perfected by Tolstoy, and itself a wholly brilliant example of the form. It reaches into the very darkest episode of modern European history when Himmelfarb, following the loss of his wife and his pride, becomes just one of a trainload of Jews making their forced journey eastward, towards an overseas embarkation point and a new life some of them firmly assert. Himmelfarb sees one tiny cross section, (of *that* six million), in inescapable detail.

> There were others in the compartment of course. To tell the truth, it was rather tightly packed. There was a mother whose sick child dirtied himself repeatedly, and could not be treated without the requisite drugs. There was a widow in a stiff black hat, the father of two little boys who owned between them a wooden horse. There was a young man and a young woman, who plaited hands together

from the beginning, and would not have been parted, least of all by death. And two individuals so insignificant, Himmelfarb never after succeeded in reconstructing their faces, however hard he tried.

Here there is none of the great subjective sweep with which Literature will recreate its themes and bring its classic images to new life in the new land through the all surveying authorial presence. The only sign here of that presence is in the interpolated comment, the self effacing, uneasy little aside, "To tell the truth it was rather tightly packed". This certainly draws attention to *the* truth, that the superior passenger train, with its comfortable layout but increasing squalour, is actually being used for the same purpose as the innumerable cattle trucks everyone has heard a bit about. It is in no way disruptive, however, of the fearsome historical actuality, or the underpinning realist narrative convention. It, rather, reinforces this by emerging, such a hesitant half-observation, as the directly unspeakable suspicion forming now in the minds of even the most optimistic 'passengers'.

When these scenes figure again in Himmelfarb's awareness, in Australia, the experience which led him to the doors of the gas chamber has undergone a radical change. But so also has his awareness. Totally disregarding the culturally negligible social reality surrounding him here, his whole attention reaches now towards the visionary state signified by that all-encompassing symbolic entity, the chariot.

Ultimately, in his last moments, bedded at Mrs Godbold's, his powers of spiritual realisation reach their zenith. Put otherwise, Literature, assisted by Art, is here at its most potent, drawing all into accord with itself, with its supreme and sacred masterpiece.

> As the purple stream - for it was evening now - wound through the rather stony hills, there came to him thousands asking him to tell them of the immediate past, so that they might be prepared against the future, since so many of them feared they might be expected to return. The strange part was he knew, he knew. The cliffs of rock were his scroll. He had only to open the flesh of their leaves to identify himself with the souls of plants. So the thousands waited for him along the banks of the interminable river.

The panoramic awareness vouchsafed the dying man incorporates the sense of how his sufferings, all perhaps ordained, have given him the stature of Christ preaching to the multitude, and of Moses receiving the tablets of stone. The "thousands" has, along with "there came to him", an echoing Biblical warrant. It catches up, as one, all those who flocked to hear and question Christ, the Children of Israel in the Wilderness, and the victims of the Holocaust, as well as those now fearful of another. In particular, it confers a recognisable place and identity, within the terms of sacred literature, upon the members of that anonymous little group which huddled in the railway carriage. Doing so, it offers a rich compensation for the state of total exposure caught, by the earlier passage, in such an unvarnished, gut wrenching way. The victims are dignified here, too, by Art, drawing inspiration from sacred literature, in what rather seems a richly-peopled canvas, a spectacle painting after the French master, Poussin. Secular is absorbed into sacred, contemporary into classical, present into past, direct experience into aesthetic formulation. Here the victims are lifted, spiritually and aesthetically speaking, out of the reach of horror. Yet the railway carriage details given by the other passage were, in the ordinary sense, the real thing, and the sparse, nervous prose which made this clear was the greater writing.

The spiritual process, represented, throughout the Australian narrative, by the chariot and its riders' attentiveness, is revealed as indeed one of transcendence, of carrying off, of removal, from the field covered by realist fiction into that ordered by Art, from three dimensions, to two and, alternatively, from fleshly life to sculptural representation. Mrs Godbold, the survivor, thinking, at the chronicle's elegiac close, upon the other three, "grew cold at times for the Gothic profusion of her vision (as) the stone figures she had laid upon their tombs would struggle inside the armour of eternity". Once he has been drawn up into the highest area of all, by passing into death, Himmelfarb is removed even from his earthly name, assuming that, as well as being absorbed into the identity, of Another.

> Now (Mrs Godbold) could approach her work of living, as an artist, after an interval, will approach and judge his work of art. So, at last, the figure of her Lord and Saviour would stand before her in the chancel, looking down at her from beneath the yellow eyelids, along the strong, but gentle beak of a nose.

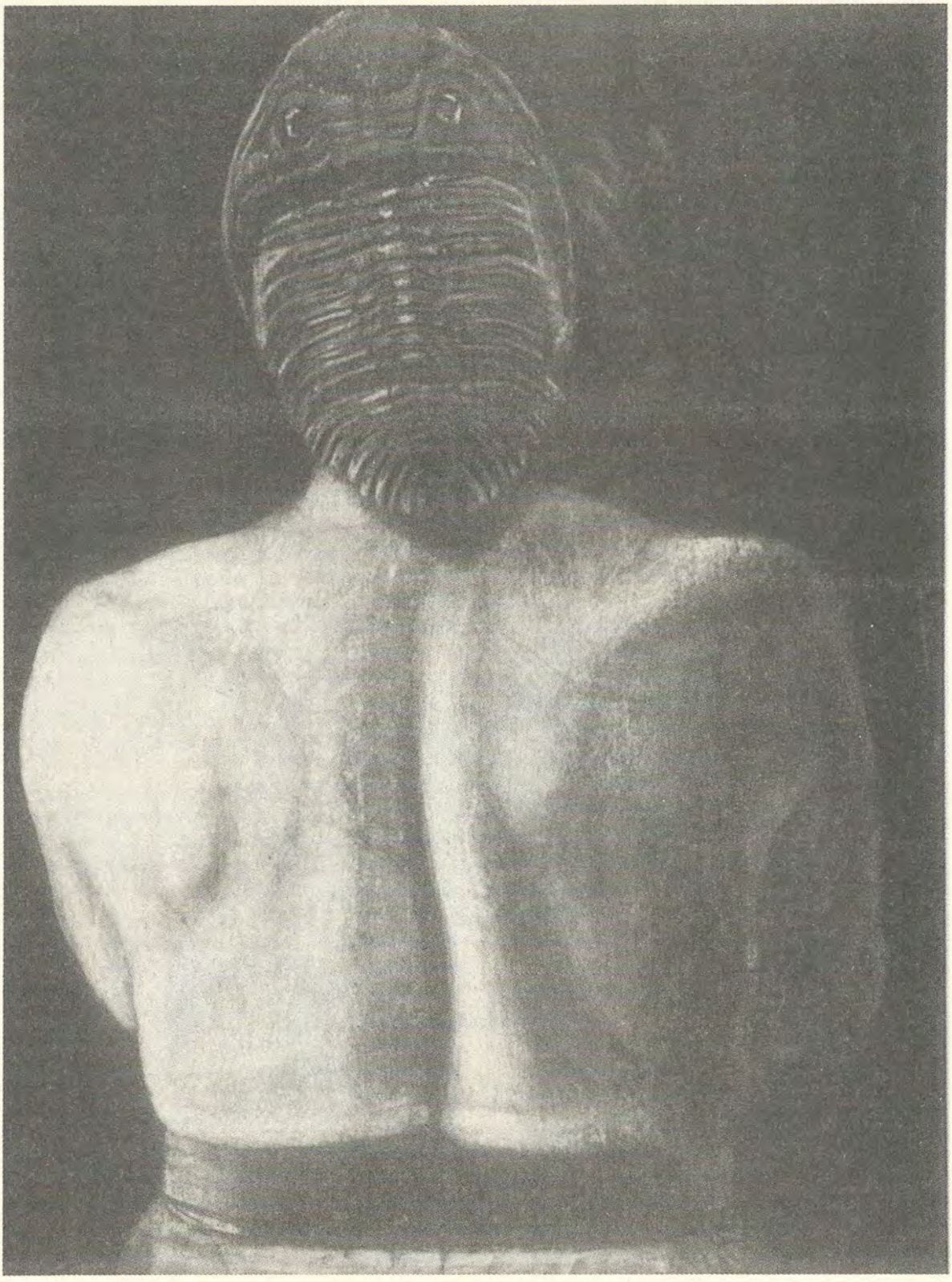
The converse of all this passing up and out, through the agency of a poetically wrought prose, is the way that the local populace, dismissively categorised as standard products of the mass-

produced sort, mere objects, remain right here, just where they deserve to be. Which means they must be seen, using that appropriately populist term of approval, as the stayers, those who are irremovably, stubbornly still on the ground, too thick to be caught up and carried off by Art, and thick enough to hold the eye of any realist novelist, any new Tolstoy looking for a fresh supply of peasants.

Because there is no up without down. So runs the great primal axiom energising the All Australian Visionary Monster Novel. Up and down, good and bad, the four riders and the Lucky Sevens, are shown existing on the one wide flat plane in a state of complete and cooperative opposition. The utlimate, overall example of accord and discord in alignment, standing together is, thus, the way this obsessively élitist novel presents the case for equality.

D. R. Burns, author of The Directions of Australian Fiction, 1928-1974, *is making a survey of some genres prominent since 1970, particularly the Visionary Monster Novel and Fixed Limit Narratives.*

Dennis Nicholson: Trip of a Lifetime



PETER NEILSON, Man with Trilobite Mask (Homage to Picasso), charcoal and chalk on paper 75 × 55 cm

TWO POEMS BY MYRON LYSENKO

HE TRIES TO LOOK DIFFERENT

He tries to look different
& still fit in.
He admits to liking Madonna
& he gets away with it.

He rides to school on a motorbike
without a helmet
to give his hair a daily blowjob.
He's cool: talks low & walks high;
he's the idol of all the students.

He's dyed his hair white -
he played a transsexual in a school production
& got all the laughs.
The students want to be like him
or be seen around him.
Even the teachers admire him.

This boy's got a future -
he could be anything.
He has teeth like glittering medals;
when he smiles
you know he's a winner.

In winter he looks warm enough
to heat the classroom
& in summer he's a tidal wave of cool.
He manages to look dignified
when he's eating a vanilla slice.

He knows how to stop
an Alsation barking;
knows how to split wood
with a slight twist of the handle.
He's the best singer in school.
He must have enemies
but nobody admits,
He barracked for Hawthorn in the 80's
but is about to change his allegiance.

He wants Labor to win the next election
because he hates the Liberals
but he thinks all popular politicians
are manic depressives.

He says he looks forward to being forty
because that's his favourite number.
He thinks his parents are good role models.
He keeps his problems top secret,
he doesn't even know what they are
altho he's sure he must have some.
He almost had pimples once.

When he was born his mother heard
the crowd cheer at the M.C.G.
His father was there
trying to help his team win;
the baby wasn't due for another hour.

Everybody knows his name
yet everyone calls him Spike.
Nobody remembers why
except the family & they're not telling.

He writes with a purple biro.
His mother taught him how.
She learnt from her grandmother.
Nobody can copy his style.

WE WON'T ROT

We try to be happy
because we've planted a tree
but we know that every day
in many ways
we're getting warmer & wetter.

In the train we suck
each other's lips
with graffiti in our eyes.
We scratch ourselves
to be sure we're valid.

At the beach we sunglass & sunblock
& bury our heads in our walkmans.
We stay on the sunless side
of our umbrella
sucking on our lips.

We're studded with false teeth
& see nothing to smile at.
We buy some stuff called food
at the kiosk, trying to ignore
the numbers of the additives.

We wonder if the food is irradiated.
Will it brighten our teeth
& help us glow in the disco?
We console ourselves by saying:
When they bury us, we won't rot.

ROB FINLAYSON

It's Because He Loves the Telephone

It's because he loves the telephone more than me. Of course it's a cliché, but just about everything is in these days of soap operas, sports comedy shows and psychoanalysis. What isn't? I mean, really, can you tell me what isn't a cliché? I wear myself out, I'm like an old rag, thinking is this clichéd or isn't it? It doesn't matter whether it's clothes or television shows or books or hairstyles or what I say to the analyst. Yes, yes I know, it's a *fin de siècle* malady and will pass as surely as the millenium but do I have to wait that long? The thousand-year cliché. Even the theory I read is clichéd. Wherever it comes from, they haven't yet cooked up anything new, just rehashing the same old stuff in ever-decreasing circles of relevance. I can just see them. There they all are, sitting around on some café terrace discussing the latest idea, jotting a few notes, they've given up buying tickets to foreign places so there's nowhere to rush off to because it's already here, has been all the time, when along comes a new kid with some new ideas and that new kid's sitting in another café farther down the boulevard with their friends, all of whom have the new ideas and the new ways of discussing the same old things from a new angle, a new way of making us think about the way they talk and the way we live, a new show on at the theatre, a new drama vivant, another piece of us we haven't yet bothered to encounter or discuss or reveal or whatever it is, and the new kids are wondering how to get into print and then they do, and before long, maybe a few years, maybe five or ten, their works are in translation and then another few years and we're all talking about it like those French ex-colonists in Marakesh going on boar hunts and watching Cocteau movies. That's it, I'm keen on a boar hunt and the odd Cocteau flick. Jaded? I suppose I am, dear, I suppose I am. The telephone? Ah, the telephone. Yes, it's true, he loves it more than me. No, I'm not being metonymic either, I'm just giving you the fax. Sorry, dreadful, but that's what he's driven me to. You don't believe me, do you? Alright, what do you make of this: I'm wheeling the baby along past the post office, I'm meeting him at the café, I'm already late, maybe ten minutes, you know how I hate to be late, and hate anyone meeting me to be late, and I glance in at the public telephones as I speed by, the carriage wheels spinning backwards the way they do in cowboy movies. Why do they do that? No, neither do I. I must find out. So it's top speed, passersby falling off on either side of me, when who should I espie, and I think that is a most appropriate word, whom should I espie in one of the booths? Of course, him, talking on the telephone. I know that one incident is hardly overwhelming but it must, my dear, be seen in its awful context. The man's addicted. I'm dreadfully frightened that he's going to spend our tax return on a mobile one. He's already jokingly suggested it, and once I would've laughed along with him, but not anymore. Imagine that, they even have waterproof ones. Even the shower wouldn't be safe. Don't you two shower together? Really, why not? I don't think that's really a good enough reason, there must be a way of stopping him from behaving like that? And what about all the waste of water? Yes, I suppose so, it does seem to be a matter of discussion and personal taste, I'm sorry if I was a bit pushy but this telephone business is driving me completely mad. Thank you, you're so sweet. I probably will feel better if I tell you all about it. It just goes on, you see, he's never off the telephone. If he's not ringing someone, they're ringing him. I woke at five thirty yesterday morning to the sound of muffled tones emanating from his side of the bed. He'd bought an extension lead home the night before, after I'd gone to bed, the baby had been particularly exhausting, I went early and didn't wake when he came in, so it was a complete surprise. I thought for a moment he was talking to the pillow, and then I thought he'd brought a lover into bed with him! Can you believe it? Of

course, I was right. I don't know who they are. He's always got some scheme or another going. He has to, to pay the telephone bill. It's enormous. Now that he seems to have overseas contacts it's even worse, they have no idea of the time here, they're a bunch of ignorant bloody foreigners. Yes, even the eastern staters, I wish they'd all bloody well drop dead, or a massive thermonuclear explosion on some atoll in the Pacific wipe out every electronic device. What a relief it'd be. I don't know how he'd cope though. I suppose he'd adapt, he wasn't always like this. Well, I did suspect he was having an affaire with another woman, of the conventional sort, but now I know it's with la belle téléphone. There need be no intermediary. The telephone is a thing in itself. What's worst of all is that he's taken to ringing me to see how I am. Yes, I know that's impossible. You're starting to do it too, it must be contagious. You see how humour is the only recourse now? That's why I wanted to meet you here, it doesn't have a public phone. O dear, I hadn't thought of that, of course they'd have one for their own use. How stupid of me. But I didn't tell him where we were meeting. No, there aren't that many places to choose from, are there? Let's go. No, no, you pay and I'll wait outside. I'm not being paranoid, if I hear a phone ringing I'll kill someone. Exiting quickly is a neat way of avoiding an unpleasant court appearance. What? A what for me? A phone call? For me? Did they say who it was? O yes. And did he say what he wanted? That all? He just wanted to talk to me?

Jiri Tibor

books

Birth, Death and Taxes

Veronica Brady

Peter Carey: *The Tax Inspector* (University of Queensland Press, $29.95).

So, they say, Peter Carey has gone from being playful to being perverse. Certainly *The Tax Inspector* is darker, more serious and less ironic than anything he has written so far. Its ending particularly takes us into the realm of the gothic and the terrible, and the secret of the Catchprice family which takes us there, child abuse, is perhaps the ultimate indecency.

The Tax Inspector, then, is set in dangerous territory, the territory of taboo, of things forbidden because of the danger it represents. But who is to say that writers should not affront taboo? And why should we expect them to be predictable? Carey does not exploit taboo here, the violence of the novel is not as great as in the average murder mystery. What is troubling is that he takes us into hitherto forbidden territory. But the real subject, once he gets us there, is less the individual than society, in this case its hidden disgraces and fears and its public corruption. True as usual, there is also a great deal about its decencies, however badly expressed they may be: a dedicated tax inspector, for instance, a developer if not with a heart of gold at least with a heart which is basically kind, and a somewhat bemused young Hare Krishna prepared to come from the ashram to the rescue of his granny and his younger brother, though as it turns out, it is an oddly explosive rescue.

Carey, after all, has always been preoccupied with history, with the state of events, places, institutions, memories and habits. Sometimes, as in *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda* he parodies this state; sometimes, as at the end of *Bliss*, he dissociates his characters from it and at other times, in the stories especially, he escapes ahead of it into an imaginary world of his own, a kind of counter history which nevertheless has an uncanny, often eerie and sometimes funny resemblance to what we choose to regard as the 'real thing'.

The only real difference in *The Tax Inspector* is that it is more weighed down by the burden of the past. The Sydney which opens out here before us, from the car yards of Parramatta Road to the Opera House and the Eastern Suburbs and to Kuringai Chase and the luxury houses of developers on the other side of the Harbour, is shadowed by its history, "the only big city in the world that was established by convicts on one side and by soldiers on the other". The characters are aware of this too. The crucial character is a woman tax inspector with a conscience, a "very tax office person", as she tells the one rich Catchprice, Jack the developer, who has fallen in love with her. When he takes her to a fashionable dinner party transporting her

from her one-bedroom cottage in Balmain to an elegant garden by the Harbour where she stands drinking Dom Perignon, she is troubled rather than delighted.

> That she should like the too-good-looking man, that the setting itself - terra-cotta tiled terrace flapping striped awnings, elegant men and women in black dresses - should be actually pleasant was disturbing to her.

So she goes home early and when Jack follows her, she lectures him with the fervour of a latter-day Savonarola or a politician in the run up to an election.

> I see all these skunks with their car phones and champagne and I see all this homelessness and poverty. Do you know that one child in three grows up in poverty? You know how much tax is evaded every year?

Even more surprisingly, Jack responds by saying that things can and must change since after all she has changed him; "If we cannot affect each other's lives, we might as well call it a day. The world is just going to slide further and further into the sewer."

This kind of earnestness is not what we expect from Carey, of course. But set it against the macabre ending and the dark secret of the Catchprice family and you begin to see what the novel might be getting at. He is interested still in the crazy and the bizarre. It is just that he has transferred this interest to the matter of values, to the craziness of our current obsession with money and with what it can buy in general and cheating on taxes in particular, and to the bizarre aspects of the troubled and repressed sexuality which becomes the fate of the Catchprice family. Why, after all, should we not have a modern morality set in Australia? What with Royal Commissions, N.S.C. investigations, media beatups, collapsing millionaires and crumbling governments, maybe we need one.

Not that the tone is censorious. Carey plays it cool at first, with a series of hints, of what is in store. But even when the Catchprice secret is out, it is dealt with by understatement, even irony - until the final explosion, of course. In this way he cuts across stereotypes of disgust and outrage on the one hand and of pathos on the other. Instead we see the successive Catchprice generations as part of a long chain of anger, fear, disappointment and self-disgust which in each his/her own way keeps going until the climax comes, the struggle between death and birth in the cellar where, indeed, Carey pulls all the stops out. The terror and agony of the scene is as powerful as anything he has done, and it is perhaps his version of the end of the world though anything but one a hot-gospeller would write.

That is not to say that he has "gone religious", like Vishnu. The novel's concerns are ethical not ecstatic, and the mode is ironic right up to the last disastrous moments. If they mimic an end of the world, the "triumph of the beast", this beast, Benny, also plays at being an angel, and a pathetic one at that rehearsing a game imposed upon him by his father's fantasies. But it is a nice thought, I think, that a visit by the tax inspector precipitates a last judgement, however parodic this may be.

As usual, too, there are the personal signatures and jokes - Carey's father, for example, ran a car yard. Characters like Bazza Manzoni with his "orange, red and yellow hair, a huge star earring, maroon boots with black straps and a fence chain wrapped around his ankle 'checking for change' in the public phone box which held up the boot-maker's collapsing verandah", also have a familiar ring about them, as does the story of Maria's Greek uncle who bicycled ten miles along a dirt road to bring her an expensive tin of Nescafe - the niece returned from Australia could not be asked to drink Greek coffee. Then, too, there is the name of the family, Catchprice. The Catchprices are as bizarre as any family Carey has invented. Granny who collects dolls and trusts in dynamite, who had to exchange her dream of a flower farm for Catchprice Motors where the husband "Cacka" brought her to live with "the smell of rubber radiator hoses, fan belts, oil, grease, petrol vapour, cash flows, overdrafts and customers whose bills ran 90, 120 days past due". The rest of the family live on, at and by Catchprice Motors, except for Vishnu (who has gone off to the Hare Krishnas) and Jack the successful Catchprice, a developer who not only talks to but calmly misses appointments with Lend Lease, drives a Jaguar and has his own custom built house at Kuringai Chase. Gran's daughter Cathy and her husband, Howie, run the place, that is, they hire and fire. The rest of the family dislike Howie who came in pink shirt and charcoal grey suit to a job in Spare Parts and stayed on to marry Cathy. They see him as a kind of virus who infected her with his passion for pop music, turning her away from Catchprice 'value'. Yet this is probably not the reason why she drinks Benedictine in tumblers which leave sticky rings on the kitchen table, nor even perhaps why she composes pop songs and registers them in USA at ten dollars a time. As for Howie, he is, it seems, really the kind of husband

who goes out to get a Wettex for his wife without being asked, the kind Benny despises. The morning Cathy sacks Benny, however, is the beginning of the story and in a sense the ending of everything for the family. It is, however, a typical Catchprice action; before doing it she leaves three soft boiled eggs outside his door "That's who she was (the narrator reflects) Mort's sister. They were big ones for kissing and cuddling; but you could not predict them".

Mort, Cathy's brother and Benny's and Vishnu's father, is the one who actually does the work and he leads us to the guilty secret, "A wide and burly man, spilling with body hair, and with a rough wide nose which had been broken twice on the football field", he is permanently angry, especially with his son, Benny. The clue, however, lies in his lips, remarkable not only for their fullness but also "in that bed of black and blue stubble - for their delicacy." Another clue; his wife walked out on him years ago when Benny was very small, having tried to shoot him. As for Benny he stays on even after he fails his apprenticeship and has been fired. Catchprice Motors is his place and the Catchprice family his inheritance. Besides, he intends to become the world's greatest salesman and to live out his dream of vengeance and power. As for his older brother, Johnny, he becomes Vishnu, the Hare Krishna.

This is all very familiar Carey territory, ludicrously and even grotesquely inventive but also strangely familiar. But the mood, as we have said, is more sombre, preoccupied much more overtly than usual with questions of good and evil. The world here may be the charade it usually is for him. But the mask the writer puts on is a moralist's as well as a joker's. He is concerned with corruption, at the social as well as personal level. This is why the crucial character is a tax inspector with a conscience who is also pregnant and manages despite everything to have her baby.

Those ethical concerns, however, are social rather than metaphysical. This is not the world of conventional morality spun, as Foucault puts it, by the divine spider. It is more like the world of Greeks, divided between the realm of human will and some larger cosmic folly which is ruled by "the hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance". In the long run, however, will prevails. Benny's madness cannot prevent the baby being born and Granny lives out her own strange version of Armageddon - presumably to her satisfaction.

This might sound melodramatic. But there is nothing schematic about the novel's profusion of events. True, the space is clearly organized, almost schematic: the car yard with Granny's room upstairs and Benny's cellar below, the tax office and Maria's world and the world of Jack and his friends. His custom built house with its arched roof which opens "like an eyelid" to the sky is the anti-type to Benny's cellar, for instance. But there is also an abundance of surprising detail: eating at the Blue Moon Brasserie Maria's friend, Gia, for instance accidentally insults the man at the next table and arrives home to a death threat - Dial A Death is at work. Then there is Granny Catchprice's passion for dolls and dynamite and Benny's horror-comic games with his fellow salesman whose mother's only wish is for him to keep his job. Places have their oddities, too, the plastic-painted walls of the Hare Krishna ashram develop "water bubbles which ballooned like condoms" and its leader, Govinda-Das, has a passion for bleach. And so on and so on.

Despite its subject, then, this is a fundamentally cheerful book. True, the cheerfulness comes not from the subject matter but the way Carey is able to control it, giving what is otherwise amorphous and menacing a clarity of outline and turning it into a story about human resourcefulness. Maria's friend succumbs to mystification, for instance, when she is threatened by Dial-A-Death. Feeling, as if she has been talking "to something with scales . . . like some slimy thing you think is mythical". But Maria fixes that with the help of Jack. Evil is not something vague or mystical here. It has to do with people and the kinds of choices they make or do not make, though it is time that the Catchprices are paying for the preferences of their grandfather, "Cacka". At the same time the fact that evil is about domestic things, family hurts, fears and disappointments and its effects, and cheating on taxes, and exploitation, shoddy real estate deals and arrangements with politicians, makes it perhaps more rather than less threatening.

Yet in the long run, people can and do make headway and history turns into genealogy. To understand all is to forgive all, so that by the end we have a good deal of understanding of the Catchprices and the array of characters who come in and out of the car yard. Benny's madness is the other side of his father's self-disgust and the result of his father's abuse. Similarly, it is Granny's disappointed longing for a flower farm which lies at the beginning of the trail that leads from "Cacka" to the apocalyptic ending of the story. Not angels and devils, then, and a vivid sense of the "privilege and panic of mortality", even in sleazy old Sydney. Carey knows that fiction is fiction, not politics or religion, so the world he shows us is one we all

recognise but also what might be. Possibilities are open not closed, it's a world in which anything may happen and decency may yet survive.

For all these reasons, *The Tax Inspector* is both timely and provocative. If, as Nietzsche says, "we have art in order not to die of the truth", reading it may help us through the current spate of Royal Commissions, company collapses and the prevailing madness of the economic rationalists. It is, in short, a good if sometimes disturbing read and anything but a moral tract. Indeed, the best description of it may be that it is like the cocktail Maria's friend, Gia, orders at the Blue Moon Brasserie, "Like something in an art gallery whose level of irony you might puzzle over."

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A Sea Not To Be Seen

Paul Carter

James Bardon: *Revolution by Night* (Local Consumption Publications, $16.95).

Most novels offer us light and shade. Characters are created who occupy the foreground; places are described which supply the background, the theatre of action. Linking foreground and background, providing the unifying chiaroscuro as it were, is the narrative which, on the one hand, gives the landscape a human, sometimes psychological meaning and, on the other, gives the actions of the characters a physical and historical context. In large part the readability of such novels depends on our ability to visualise what is happening. Novels of this kind are judged on their success in creating one or a multitude of points of view, in manipulating perspective.

If *Revolution by Night* appears obscure, its style relentlessly flat, it is simply because Bardon has decided to write a novel that does not resemble a European painting but imitates instead the aesthetic and compositional properties of a Central Australian sand-painting. What would it be like to write a narrative without characters, without points of view, without near and far, light and shade - a novel that treated both states of mind and historical memories as physical gestures unfolding in the present?

This, in effect, is the challenge that Bardon has set himself. His obscurity (understood non-pejoratively as darkness) is deliberate: he does not want his readers to see what he describes, he wants them to trace out the line of his meaning physically, perhaps by reciting his words aloud, perhaps by breathing in the same long, deep breaths as his prose breathes.

The story of Geoffrey Bardon's role in initiating the Papunya-Tula painting movement in the early 1970s has been told more than once - most recently by Bardon himself in a catalogue essay for the National Gallery of Victoria Mythscapes exhibition. In that essay Bardon recalls how, as he transcribed the circles and markings made by children in the sand, he attracted the attention of the elders, who expressed their desire to "paint"; how gradually he experienced an extraordinary revelation: "It seemed sometimes as if that sand itself, the very earth, was the real creator in that place. It provided the consciousness of where you were or what you did, wherever you were. It seemed that all the hieroglyphs came out of that apparently childish sand drawing, whether onto a human body or tjurunga or painting board."

Bardon comments: "It is hard, even now, to understand how those first sights I had of the extraordinary sand-writing should have become an art-perception which seemed to embody all the great visual and gestural imperatives of twentieth-century modernism in painting."

This resemblance (or otherwise) between European abstraction and Papunya "mythscapes" has been the happy debating ground of art critics (and markets) for the best part of twenty years. But Bardon has another story to tell: not of burgeoning renaissance but of impending apocalypse.

The cultural benefits that might have been expected to accrue from the commercial success of dot-and-circle painting were not forthcoming. "When I returned to Papunya in 1980, the settlement had been forever changed. The settlement, it had been decided, should be left to fall, as it were, upon itself; it was meant actually to auto-destruct, to be let die, and never be what it was. I had come back to make a film about the life of my friend Tim Leurah Tjapaltjarri, but the extraordinary atmosphere of an entire, intentionally white town falling to ruins and oblivion in that desert was like some vision of a world to come."

It is this "vision of a world to come" that Geoffrey Bardon's brother James has now set out to describe in *Revolution by Night*. Twice white government policies had threatened the Pintupi's destruction: in the 1950s by moving them off their traditional lands to nowhere places like Papunya; in the 1970s,

by dismantling that policy and still refusing them land rights. But for James Bardon, and for the figures in his story, these tragic vicissitudes are only a part of the much larger historical nightmare which may be said to have begun with the advent of Europeans and, more fundamentally, with the imposition of a different way of seeing the land, naming it and possessing it.

The issue, for the speaking voices in *Revolution by Night*, is only superficially political and moral. More profoundly it is ontological, a question of conflicting views of what constitutes reality. The European's determined representation of reality in terms of images, the residue of living gestures, as writing, the reliquary of voices, as historical dates, the coffins of the present - all this strikes the Pintupi elders as a desolation of the spirit. What is the nature of this people who substitute disembodied signs for sounds and gestures? As Don Luther Tjapaltjari remarks, "I would kill the white man . . . if I could see him, but I can't see ghosts . . . I cannot kill ghosts, cannot kill the dead."

Bardon interprets the ghostliness of white culture as a historical, as well as spiritual, miasma. Zig-zagging through the revolving meditations of the elders, as they contemplate the imminence of dying, is the dream narrative of the explorer Sturt. Bardon has recast the story of his fruitless search for the inland sea as the pilgrimage of a ghost desperately seeking a home, a birthplace where, perhaps, it might spring up and be alive. Sturt's true confrontation was not with the landscape but with the figure of Death; but Death was not a feature of the country but a mirror of his own metaphysical enclosure: "That Night-Continent was too vastly large for those rivers we had ever seen, its silences were like an error in the imagination of the world."

To counterpoint this spiritual journey there is another death narrative thoroughly this-worldly in its implications, an account of one of the survivors of the Willioura Massacres "believed to have taken place in South-West Queensland in 1939-40" and which, whatever their factual basis, represent the Aborigines' repeated fate at the hands of Europeans. As in the widening circles of a sand painting every narrative element is drawn into a single mesmeric rhythm, so in *Revolution by Night* the murders at Willioura belong, ontologically-speaking, to the same plane of world reality (or Death) as Sturt's voice-ridden meditations in the desert.

As Jack Dutruc, the only white survivor of the Willioura Massacres, records in his journal: "So then what is his face like, this Satan's, Tjapaltjari had asked, so that I might know him when we meet? And Charles Sturt had replied in the journal I read

James Bardon, Western Desert, Northern Territory, 1991

that no man had seen his face whole, but only by sharpnesses, glints, uncommon lights in the dark, but that it was he. He, this Sturt, sees his spirit-soul perhaps, Don Luther Tjapaltjari said to me, this Satan, and again he drew, some unnamed part of the sand where its stillnesses were within its voice."

Passages like those I have quoted will have made it clear that Bardon is no antipodean Chatwin borrowing Aboriginal perspectives to enrich his own stock of stories. Instead of the sharp-eyed, detached, ultimately self-interested narrator of *The Songlines*, *Revolution by Night* offers us a kind of internal dialogue: long paragraphs are constructed as a series of breathless assertions constantly subject to contradiction, constantly requiring reassertion and greater elaboration. If such baroque exfoliation has a point of view it is that the meaning is inseparable from the movement of the prose, that the act of telling the story must be repeated in the act of reading the story if the meaning is to survive.

We may legitimately object that Bardon's book, no less than Chatwin's, projects white spiritual longings onto Aboriginal people, but this is perhaps to miss the point. For Bardon has understood what Chatwin failed to understand: that the sand-drawings and the recitations that go with them do not correspond to ideas but are those ideas themselves. Consequently a book that seeks to translate them, to render them readable in western terms, must not imitate the content (the picturesque stories about myths singing their way down tracks) but the gesture, the process of patterning the surface (whether sand, skin, or board).

In an Appendix to his book Bardon takes up his brother's suggestion that Papunya-Tula painting can be linked aesthetically and spiritually to the work of such Modernist masters as Malevich. I think he is greatly mistaken in this, not least because of what he himself tells us about the nature of sand art. The sand art motifs are, writes Bardon, "both the fullness of a gesture and the graphic expression of that gesture". By "the fullness of a gesture" Bardon means that the hieroglyph corresponds to a composite physical gesture, comprising in the Aboriginal case, a simultaneous movement of the hand and the tongue.

Drawings are not only drawn but sung into being. So, while we may find Bardon's style at times disconcertingly portentous, we should not therefore conclude that its vision is facile or ill-thought out. When Dutruc reports that again Tjapaltjari drew "some unnamed part of the sand where its stillnesses were within its voice," the metaphor is used with precision. To create shapes in sand is also to create sounds in air: to draw is to speak. It is this equivalence between voice and design - what Bardon calls "the totality of the gesture" - which makes it possible to contemplate writing a novel that is structurally akin to sand drawings.

The key point, though, remains to imitate the rhythms of the voice, the measures of the teller telling. Which is why Bardon writes as he does, aiming at what, to borrow his own phrase (applied to sand art) "the fullness of a gesture and the graphic expression of that gesture." Understood like this, it is clear that, among other things, the title of Bardon's book precisely describes his own writing method: an overturning of generic conventions, that, by transcribing the patterns of the voice rather than offering pabulum for the eye, effects a revolution by night.

Once Bardon's premise of a complete equivalence between voice and vision is grasped, the baroque elaboration of his writing turns out to be a set of variations on the simplest of themes. Far from representing an addition of meaning, a humanist rationalisation of tragic events, his book attempts to do away with metaphysical baggage. The tragic dichotomies in his book between Sturt and the landscape, between European and Aboriginal, would, it seems, disappear, if only one paid attention to the sounds of things.

In a sense our way of writing (and reading) silently represents the death of the voice. The strategies we use to make the country speak in fact condemn it to death. As Bardon's Sturt reflects, "Understand also that whatever cannot be put to death outright is pardoned by us with a name. This sea was perhaps never meant to be seen, and I have called it in this understanding "Ocean" only because words actually die as they speak." To keep alive such spiritual places it is necessary to write different kinds of history, ones that do not record the past (name it and murder it) but instead incorporate it into the total gesture of hieroglyphic writing.

When I reviewed *The Songlines* in these pages (*Overland* 110, p. 73-75) I remarked that it contained more thoughts than thinking. The reverse is true of Bardon's book: *Revolution by Night* is bare of ornament because it is well-grounded conceptually. Its opaqueness is the expression of a sensibility at once intimately familiar with the people of his country, at once appalled by the lack of communication between us. It is an opaqueness that profoundly illuminates.

Paul Carter's new book Living in a New Country *will be published by Faber next year. He is the author of* The Road to Botany Bay.

"Stretched Tight Across the Skies"

Geoffrey Dutton

Don Charlwood: *Journeys into Night* (Hudson, $19.95).

This is one of the most moving books to come out of World War II; no reader without a heart of ice could fail to become involved with the young characters of its dreadful story.

It is fifty years since Don Charlwood began his initial training for the RAAF on Course 15 at Somers in Victoria. In the odd way that chance rules so much of little or big things in wartime, I was also on Course 15, though we never met. Charlwood was unlucky enough to be posted to Canada to complete his training as a navigator, and then to Bomber Command with the RAF in England. The average life expectancy of aircrew in Bomber Command turned out to be about eighteen weeks. Of the twenty who trained together with Charlwood in Canada, fifteen were to die.

One is haunted by this appalling statistic right through the book. What makes it such a good book, apart from the skill and modesty of Charlwood's writing, is that it is about his friends as much as himself. With the cooperation of the few of them still alive, and of the families of those dead, the book is rich with extracts from their letters and diaries. Their voices, like themselves, are highly individual and one soon shares Charlwood's gift

of friendship with them. This is particularly true of the Lancaster aircrew with whom Charlwood miraculously completed his tour (grotesque word!) of thirty operational flights. There were many other flights which were almost as terrifying, which had to be aborted from engine or other mechanical failure.

The reader becomes part of the family of the crew, sharing their fears and jokes, their superstitions, (the two gunners always insisted on pissing on the tailwheel before take-off), and their spells of leave in the beautiful, hideous British Isles. And their liaisons with the WAAFs and other young women, which flourished despite "the bitter Australian complaint, 'A man can't make much progress with a girl in this bloody country - in summer it never gets dark and in winter it's too damned cold' ". Haystacks were a help; "they held almost as many aircrew and WAAFs as they held mice". Despite honestly admitted lapses, Charlwood himself obstinately hung on to his intention of marrying his Canadian girl Nell East if he survived. He did, in 1944, and they are still happily married.

Journeys into Night is not only about those vividly described flights over Europe. It is full of interesting incidental observations. The innocent Australians were revolted by the English class system. It even extended to RAF aircrew. Those who flew in Charlwood's Lancaster were all Sergeant-Pilots, some Australian, some British. It was certain that the airgunners, a jovial pair of poachers of the local lord's game, would never be commissioned; their voices were enough to proclaim that they definitely weren't gentlemen. It is a comedy of English voice snobbery that colonial voices were baffling; damn it, you simply couldn't tell with those chaps which were gentlemen and which were not.

There is of course a legendary hostility amongst Australians to touching the forelock and saluting. One of the most intelligent and attractive of Charlwood's friends, Johnnie Gordon, wrote home: "We get on quite well with the civilian population. It's the professional soldier type, the military careerists who were born standing to attention and have worn a uniform ever since, it's that kind of generally dull-witted creature who dislikes us".

One of the key attitudes which Charlwood brings out in this book is that the colonials and the British, whatever the gaps between their backgrounds, were perfectly disciplined when they were together as the crew of a bomber. They suffered together from the dull-witted creatures. Charlwood and his friends were unfortunate enough to have had a Wing Commander who was definitely of the type born standing to attention. Charlwood's pilot, Geoff Maddern, several times let off steam about the Wingco in his diary. What especially enraged him was being accused of failure of nerve when he refused to take off in an aircraft (at night!) in which the blind-flying instruments were unservicable. "No man, no matter how many rings on his arm, is going to cast any aspersions on my name and get away with it".

Bomber aircrew who allowed themselves to think about what they were doing could not help being deeply disturbed that they were slaughtering civilians. Even visits to bombed London or Coventry couldn't make it possible to hate German women and children. And like everyone else, they knew almost nothing about concentration camps and the holocaust.

The slaughter of civilians was of course not the personal fault of the bomber crews. What Charlwood quietly drives home by his use of later documentation is that often on raids more bomber crews died than Germans, so ludicrously inaccurate was much of the bombing. For instance, in a raid on Mannheim, which was totally obscured by cloud, the bombs fell in open countryside and the only casualties were twenty-five sheep and four lambs. But about sixty aircrew lost their lives. In another raid, this time on Berlin, about 120 aircrew were lost while most of the bombs fell in open country six miles south-east of Berlin. On a raid on Stuttgart the bombs fell far off the target on villages in open country and killed 200 people; seventy-seven aircrew were lost. The history of aerial bombardment is one of the most shocking proofs of the insanity of war.

In one extremity of disillusion, Charlwood once thought that the solution to the problem might be for the RAF to bomb England and the Luftwaffe Germany.

Geoff Maddern, Don Charlwood and the rest of the crew survived their thirtieth op. The crew broke up and most of them went on to become instructors. In 1944 Charlwood was sent back to Australia, one of the five of his group of twenty to survive.

Among Geoffrey Dutton's latest books is Kenneth Slessor (Viking). *Among his earliest was* Night Flight and Sunrise *(Reed & Harris, 1944), poems which included those of a World War II pilot.*

Doubling Writing/Bracketing Women

Marion J. Campbell

Brian Castro: *Double-Wolf* (Allen & Unwin, $19.95).

The text of *Double-Wolf* is enclosed in two large round brackets, the typographical sign of the Wolf-Man's obsession with female buttocks and the hollow in between, the site of his fantasy of "riding her immense brackets in a huge aside" (p. 66). The parenthesis is also the place inside which the text is written, the Wolf-Man's story "an aside, subsumed by Freud" (p. 18), just as Brian Castro's new novel is a stunning supplement to the long history of Sigmund Freud's most famous case study. With a novel twist to a familiar trope Castro connects writing and sex via a visual pun on brackets and buttocks and hence focuses his readers' voyeuristic attention on the empty space of loss and desire which is also the space of writing:

> I've been thinking that two halves never make a whole because there's always a gap in between. The world and the word. The devil is in between. In between there's a hollow, an abyss into which desire falls. The in-between is represented by a pair of brackets: () thus. A pair of buttocks. Yoked bullocks delivering an infinite aside. If you penetrate the aside, you discover the apostrophe of truth, which is empty. (p. 65)

The resolutely phallic nature of this fantasy is indebted to the visual structure of the Wolf-Man's dream, which in Freud's analysis is governed by the reversed exchanges and pleasures of looking. So the models of sexuality and writing that Castro examines need to be identified from the outset as both masculine and masculinist ("Formalism or feminism", we're told in a jokey aside on p. 36, "it had the same effect of detumescence.") It's no surprise, then, that empty brackets also signify the proscribed word "rub", "a word [the Wolf-Man] cannot say. A word made flesh, an image which in turn hides and distorts the word forever" (p. 45). Masturbation is neurotically linked with the bad luck which "inevitably" follows it, and possibly because an acknowledgement of the dangers of bracketing off the neuroses of a phallic sexual economy: "A little () and the world went bad. Onanism was a kind of omission, you see. It left out the world, its content, swerved into the backside of the universe, and when the world caught up with me it let me have it with catastrophe" (p. 198).

Double-Wolf, then, is a novel fuelled by desire and filled with an infinity of signs which multiply narratives, characters and interpretations: never sidetracked by a search for a unified Truth, it is always presenting the Double with its hollow space in between. This is the significance of the parable of Herr Truth the storyteller and Herr Cunning the writer of signs: "*You had to be initiated into the truth*, he said" (p. 87). Castro never asserts the priority (chronological or epistemological or ethical) of truth over sign; one is always the other's double, "a pairing that describes a paradox; a prehistoric unconscious which makes civilisation possible". This is the sign of the wolf, for a "wolf is always a double" (p. 24).

The novel is structured around a series of doublings. The story is in the hands of two main narrators: Sergei Wespe, Freud's patient in Vienna from 1910-1914 and the subject of his study "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", known by its famous subtitle as "The Case of the Wolf-Man", and Art Catacomb, once a member of the international psychoanalytic set but now living derelict in the seedy boarding houses of Katoomba, the decaying Blue Mountains resort town whose name eerily echoes the subterranean obsessions of his own, and which becomes the physical landscape of the Freudian unconscious. Art is ostensibly the ghost writer of Sergei's life, out to protect Freud's reputation from the independent writings of his patient. Sergei, whose open secret is that he was a writer *before* he ever went to Freud, and hence may be the author rather than the subject of his own life-story, is supposedly writing a secret book which "will explode forever the myths of the Wolf-Man" (p. 191). Catacomb is an Australian academic on the make and on the take, faking his credentials in pursuit of a career which turns out to be not just second-rate but secondary, funded and scripted by mysterious others:

> "What do you want me to do?"
> "Act as his double. Get all the copies and originals of his writing. Befriend him. Act as his ghost-writer. You know, the irrefutable psychological principle of the ego is that when self-love is overcome, the idea of the double becomes the signifier of death."
> "You want me to kill him?" (p. 157)

In casting Catacomb as both murderer and sleuth, *Double-Wolf* mimes the structure of the detective story, the formal genre of detection and revelation which is the model for the processes of psychoanalysis itself. Wespe tells us that "Freud thought he was Sherlock Holmes, and I was Watson"

(p. 167); Freud tells Wespe that "I, as the reader, am the detective. You, the . . . ahem! writer, are the criminal . . . irresponsible, confessive, hiding in your text" (p. 42). The most significant doubling across gender lines occurs between Sergei and his sister Anna, the woman whose name is a palindrome and whose body similarly folds back on itself, "kiss[ing] at both ends" like "a snake swallowing her tail, a tongue with a new tale" (p. 31). The novel keeps multiplying the connections between detective and criminal, reader and writer, teller and told, masculine and feminine, until they become indistinguishable, the Wolf-Man not just doubled but mirrored in the infinite regressions of embodied writing: "Subject and expression. Content and form. It wasn't like that at all. The Wolf-Man was the formal substance of bodily expression" (p. 187).

These narrative games also point to some of the historical and political significances of Freud's own work. The Wolf-Man case develops his theory of infantile sexuality: Freud's interpretation of the patient's wolf dream uncovers the aetiology of his neurosis as a primal scene of parental intercourse (*coitus a tergo, more ferarum*, as Freud puts it) which leads to a castration complex. As in the notorious case of his theories about the seductions of daughters by their fathers, Freud was led later to fudge on the question of whether infant sexuality was fact or fantasy, grounded in the external world or already part of the child's unconscious. The contemporary sexual scandal of psychoanalysis was later rewritten as the intellectual scandal of Freud's own recantations which had the effect of freeing psychoanalysis from responsibility to material circumstance and historical fact. Castro understands the institutional and economic bases of psychoanalysis, just as he is acutely aware of the historical significance of the life of the Wolf-Man, brought up in aristocratic affluence in pre-revolutionary Russia, living through two world wars in impoverished exile in western Europe, subsidised first by the psychoanalytic establishment and then earning a living in an insurance firm, dying in a mental hospital in Vienna in 1979. *Double-Wolf* is thus able to ask important questions about the relationship of the unconscious to the spheres of politics and economics in the course of its speculations about and demonstration of the interconnections of theory and narrative, fact and fiction, authors and texts.

I am quite happy to be cast as Castro's detective/reader, or indeed as the theorist of his story, or even the reviewer forced to try and construct an intelligible narrative from his endlessly inventive speculations and sharp and sardonic writing. *Double-Wolf* is likely to go on providing me with all these pleasures for a long time yet, knowing as it does that the true doubles of the text (as opposed to all those doubles in the text) are its readers. As a female reader, I don't feel excluded from its critical engagement with masculine models of looking, knowing, desiring and writing; but as a feminist reader, I wish Castro's novel had been less implicit in the still culturally powerful and politically oppressive fantasy of woman as man's double.

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The Next Fifty Years?

Max Teichmann

Michael Dugan *ed.*: *Furious Agreement; 40 Prominent Australians Focus on the Next Fifty Years* (Penguin with Australian Institute of Management, $14.95).

This is a collection of essays commissioned by the Australian Institute of Management to celebrate their 50th Anniversary. The Institute is "vitally concerned with planning for change", according to the Editor's Preface, so forty prominent Australians were invited to examine what they considered to be vital issues over the next fifty years, to outline developments or complications they considered might occur during the next half century and to suggest strategies for management that would be in the best interest of the Australian community. The book is to be used as a basis for a "management stocktake"; forthcoming discussions with the symposiasts, and the issuing of a policy document. All very logical.

We should not hold our breaths in fear or anticipation of radical proposals, or revolutionary changes in the pipeline, if indeed this were to be the pipeline running towards 2040. Very few of the essays tackle anything like fifty year spans; many don't make it till 2000. There is a wide measure of *agreement* here, but very little fury. So much so, that odd intrusions by chaps like Andrew Hay and Hugh Morgan refresh, although they may not convince.

One of the causes of this concatenation of opinions emerging as somewhat bland, even predictable, unexciting, and finally as predictably unexciting, may be the homogeneous character of the contributors. Too many belong to that New

Class castigated by Senator Walsh – some would say, the Cognescenti, others the Nomenklatura. There are very few Conservatives, no farmers (what's farming?), nor too many individual non-collegiate voices.

Barry Jones, one of the few genuine individualists, says somewhere that when the Commission for the Future approached a number of people to provide scenarios for possible Australian futures, the results weren't very good. Australia suffers because of our obsessions with short term and individual events rather than longer term integrated perspectives. [Some say because we are too practical, or utilitarian; whereas an inability or refusal to evaluate possible long-term futures is a mark of high impracticality; or else denial.] Few of the symposiasts get their feet wet in that river of the Future which flows right past our doors.

But then neither do they dally in too many areas of the Here and Now.

One could not imagine from reading this book that we are in a Depression, that our financial and corporate systems are in disarray and considerable discredit, our agriculture, so crucial to our wealth and international viability, being demolished by friends and allies. Very little is said about the worsening structural problems of youth unemployment, and the wisdom or otherwise of liquidating the 15 – 19 age group unemployed – 27% – by giving them all "an education". The basic problem of not enough jobs is shifted to the end of the freeway. Our foreign debt – fifty years hence, or even ten – doesn't appear in the crystal ball.

The Free Trade versus Protection issue – one of monumental importance, is not canvassed. Our symposiasts still live in a world of sunrise industries, foreign tourists and the ineffable benefits of mass migration.

Hereabouts, William Keys puts in a quite unreflective puff for maintaining present migration numbers, and singles out the Business Migration Scheme as the real humdinger, speaking of an annual gain of $4.5 billions p.a. from it alone. I've never been able to track down the evidence for this figure, nor for many of those produced by the ethnic industry.

Flowing from that, what will be the size and character of our cities fifty years hence: those polluted conurbations of dreadful day that we've produced by the same method as you use to make *paté de fois gràs?* Not interesting?

Nor, apparently, is poverty, and the rapidly widening gap between Haves and Have Nots we've observed over the last decade. Then there are the persistent murmurs of an Australia where 30% of us will be really poor, but a small number very rich. Like Argentina. Will we be another Argentina in fifty years time? Or twenty? Hollingworth talks about poverty, but in an understandably one-dimensional way. One could continue exhuming the contents of this Too Hard Basket, but why bother?

The collection contains a sizeable section on Capital versus Labour, with John Elliott Capturing the Opportunities (Ahem), and a Troika of Andrew Hay, Bill Kelty and Russell Lansbury on the Future of Work. Kelty's piece has some good things in it, but Hay plucks the Lark Ascending by pointing out that only 42% of the labour force is unionised, while 50% of unionists say that they would drop out were membership not compulsory. When closed shops are opened, as they probably will be, the faces of our society, economy and the labour movement will be totally changed. Kelty might have talked about *that,* and the fact that Germany and Scandinavia remain solidly unionised. Have there been big changes in our political culture; or in the nature of work?

Lansbury says that 20% of the labour force is part time, another 15% casual workers, a further 10% self employed. Not too many unionists would be found there. If we pretend (for party political purposes) that unemployment is only 10%, then at best only one in two working Australians may be in full-time employment. Add to that low productivity, and the spectacle becomes quite chilling.

Like the Mikado, different writers have lists of toilers of hand and brain who wouldn't be missed. Fred Emery thinks middle management needs only one-third to one-half the number of middle management positions required by the existing bureaucratic system. Shades of the last days of the Hapsburg Empire! June Hearn fears that by the middle of next century, unless current trends are reversed, most Australians are likely to be aspiring managers, because business management offers the richest rewards – money, status, fame and power. (A change from everyone wanting to be a lawyer, an accountant, or a Labor politician.) But still, she's right.

Our tendency is to siphon off highly skilled tradespeople and professionals into administrative roles for which they may have little aptitude, and leave the hands-on tasks to less than competent people. Hence our ever-increasing skills shortages, whether in trades or the professions (including the arts).

Hugh Stretton points up this whole unlovely materialistic spectacle with a sharp piece on

executive salaries. The more poorly the firm performs, the bigger the salaries the directors award themselves. The directors have separated themselves from their managers, the shareholders, and the public, and are now a law unto themselves. Stretton identifies one Australian corporate invention, the private company, whereby directors transfer funds from the public company, for their own use. And all legal; in Australia, at any rate.

Green sentiments are widely shared by our symposiasts, but there is a formal confrontation between Christine Milne (an excellent piece), Philip Toyne and Hugh Morgan, in which I think Hugh rather goes over the top. Morgan believes that once the public realize the link between the non-negotiable environmentalist agenda and "sustained declining living standards" they will desert the Greens and so will bodies like the ALP. I suspect matters may be less simple: in any case many Australians have been experiencing such a process of decline for some time, and for quite preposterous reasons.

Then there is a reasonably foolish piece by Carillo Gantner. The English theatre is dead, and the American dying. We should be replacing it all with Asian works, for after all, we *are* part of Asia... Our trendies are splashing the terms 'Asia' and 'Asianation' around like long soup. There is a far greater variety of cultures, art forms and social traditions in the great area called Asia than in the European-Anglo Saxon world, and they should be approached, and graded, individually. We haven't advanced further than talking of the Orient, or the Mysterious East. In any case we don't have to choose. Let a hundred flowers and weeds bloom. There are many things wrong with Australian theatre, and theatricals, but the ethnic origins of the stuff being put on stage is not one of them.

On the other hand, there are some quite praiseworthy cameos in the book; Pennington, Wood, Scutt, Camilleri, Susan Ryan, Nossal and Sykes all saying interesting things. But the shortage of space – forty contributions instead of fifteen or twenty, defeats the purposes outlined at the beginning. So, we get a kaleidoscope of one-minute parking, with too many rusty old jallopies on display.

A great opportunity missed; but then that may be Australia's valediction fifty years hence.

For many years Max Teichmann taught Politics at Monash University. He has edited or co-written seven books on politics, and is now a freelance lecturer.

The Expulsion of Motive from the Poetic Garden

Robert Harris

Ken Bolton: *Two Poems (A Drawing of the Sky)* (Experimental Art Foundation, $10.00).

Ken Bolton's poetry is sometimes criticised for a lack of meaning and often enough by people who would like to like his work but are sincerely puzzled. And he does come as a jolt, in form, in diction, in the sheer abundance of his language. The title poem of this fourth Bolton volume is 75 pages long, it appears with only one other and much briefer work. Where so many words are assembled there can of course be no lack of meaning but there is a startling (and refreshing) lack of motive. In a time when poets are increasingly asked to endorse political ideologies, health awareness and other good causes, Bolton just isn't interested in fabricating a lyrical catharsis, bolstering religious feeling, committing his country to an encomium or declining into any other kind of sub-contract labor. He is interested in the poetry which arises in his problematic mental traffic and which he addresses to his readers':

> There were signs all over about
> No feet on the seats. These seats tho
> were slashed and gouged from end to end,
> springs &
> stuffing
> bulging out all over the place, - comic in a way
> in the presence of the
> signs (almost). What is the meaning,
> of (wanting to make) these jokes?
> undue, disproportionate empathy? with
> people's
> (attributed) embarrassment? the extension (who
> wants it?)
> of my own sense of tragedy

Stream-of-thinking rather than stream-of-consciousness, discovering in itself a corollary with his writing "bulging out all over the place". Is this the self-referentialism that was the all-singing, all-dancing token of Australian Modernism in the late 1970s? Yes, in the sense that the writing can be compared to an architecture which displays internal pillars and beams, no, in the sense that Bolton has gone far past the original assertion of a principle. Apart from endowing it with a festive air and insisting that perishable speech be fully admitted and granted the status of a natural form, Bolton

has added ambivalences. The poem's intention is not just to independently produce itself in language, but to register the fine degrees of emphasis which Bolton's ear picks up. One passage concludes with the phrase "the years between dentists", Bolton's ambivalence lying between the modernist anti-poet laughing at clichés about time, and the real sigh. There is no lack of feeling, but Bolton is diffusive and almost civil about it, a practitioner hammering out the "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" enjoined by Wallace Stevens.

Bolton is intrigued as to how others think and why they organise verbal expressions as they do. When Sal, a house-mate, hoses their place down because of a fire next door, Bolton finds himself wondering whether the fire brigade who eventually praise her as "Very Plucky" would think of her as he does, as a "Sort of Zen terrier". "(Would they think this?)" he asks, meaning, in these words, with this kind of enjoyment (and distance), with this kind of conceptual play? One of the recessionary regrets of this reviewer in leaving the Construction Industry was the loss of its verbal play. Outside seemed a desert where few people joked and fewer still laughed freely. Firefighters are a more sealed community, in some States as much so as watersiders, and this might make them tardier. They might see a Zen terrior in Sal. If anything, the difference would be in the spin on the phrase. Zen, rather than terrier, would be the axis of the joke, the joke would then be zen, too, and self-referentially aware. A counter-question can be asked: how would poets encourage people if their professional tasks involved routine contact with people who might be very shocked or frightened, or even, as happens, over-elated at the proximity of danger? Bolton's question is about verbal expression and thought across lines of income, occupation, ideology, gender and *class*. In Bolton, the question is nominated as an image for the isolating effects of the division of labor, he then plunges on with a description of Sal, the kind of person who is always first on the bus and whose companions, if any, usually get on about a dozen people behind.

Mercifully, Bolton doesn't explain the people in his populous poem. He quotes them, writes to them, observes them but accounts of relation and bases in exchange are eschewed. He gets on with enjoying his friends and has a novelist's ear for the personality:

> Millie I think
> is being ironic about ecstatic
> . . . .
> Sometimes I think she is
> 'provisionally' ironic.

In fact, his ear is so well tuned to contemporary speech and problematics that it can mislead. "Poem" has to be read with attention to artifice. For example, where Bolton says that Melbourne "is an Irish-Catholic town" it helps to be aware that he is deliberately reproducing aimless city comparisons. They are part of current social discourses and these are formally represented in Bolton under the heading (or something like it) of Actual Speech. To keep this in mind helps to forestall the querulous response, Tell them that at the Melbourne Club. Partly, Bolton holds up a mirror to the ennuis of an artistically literate urban subculture which relies on verbal aptitude and associative thinking to bridge the chasms which underly and marginalise it. Yet what sometimes comes through is the more primitive theme of place, and that Bolton has been working in considerable discomfort, balancing place against place as poets of his generation have had to do, working against the storm of disparagement and silence, the amazing credentialism and cartel poetics that did for a renaissance in the boom years.

Bolton's aestheticism, derived from O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, re-formulated and advanced in the search for freedoms he is conducting through his voice and style, makes an alternative to the dark Australian pre-occupation with metaphysics. As a colorist Bolton recalls the Schwitters of 'Anna Blume' and of Schwitters' chiaroscuro. The primaries are vital but shaded tentatively here and there with a personal wistfulness that the ambivalence method doesn't always hide. Given his deflationary outlook and superb ability to include the most perishable language in his flexible form, given his expulsion of motive from the poetic Garden, his sense of tragedy is of the greatest interest.

Some time is spent re-hashing old conflict and bagging other poets, not always without justification, but the ancient dispute about inspiration has really become a sedative by now. There is a solid pay on Literature Boards which have ignored him (what, one asks, was the money originally intended for, if not a talent like his?) and for once the tone on this subject is properly critical rather than, as it so often is when people take it up, invidious. There is a mocking encounter with a barman in 'News of the World/ Faces in the Sky' which is touched with a cultural superiority as well as a spot-the-quote-it's-good-for-you editorial now and again. And maybe he's right about that.

Comedy and rigor go hand in hand as Bolton considers his relation to feminism:

So, from memory I go thru the poem
:it criticizes a woman artist, it
makes some jibe at feminism – the two earliest
things I worried about
Then I try to be more methodical
as other things come back. –It approves Sandra
Dee,
I'm sitting home with Mill, watching television.
Am I in a female 'position'?
I talk about two 50s/60s hero cult
figures – both gay –
& I prefer them to Monroe . . . (*and* to Bobby
Darin). And
I criticize another man to end with.
(And I talk about Michael Jackson.) Does it all
'add up'?

As this passage continues, the feeling that the tally does matter to Bolton grows, and then it begins to divide. As a political and a social being he wants it to come out justly, or at least roughly even. But the poet (and anti-poet) are engaged in a satire of each other and of prescriptions about how they should write. I quoted Stevens above, from his 'Reply to Papini'. The same poem offers another line which applies to Bolton, "he shares the confusions of intelligence", the intelligence of the present as it tries to make sense of competing demands. That's what I really like about this book over and above its broad, fully extended style and why I think Bolton is so valuable. He doesn't try to transcend anything but barges in and moves around. His problems and concerns belong to a generation and he is not ignoring them. Here he is in full attack against the subornation of art:

('Integrity'. The art world loves a bit of
validation.)
what integrity did it especially have? A
small restrospective, or sampler, each piece,
pretty much,
addressing a currently 'correct'
area of debate. Which Jude correctly
characterized
as 'Identifying' an area of debate
(("discourse")) As *opposed* that is to contributing
to it
– why did this stuff on landrights
have more integrity, less
Opportunism, than Bowie's film clip-concern for
aboriginal causes? – Both
of them were British. If it had
integrity, it was the integrity of consistency, the
consistency of the dutiful. What's
to admire in that? the cult of the (decentred)
personality
(Wow! look at that waiter serve dishes!!
hardly a mistake. Ever.)!

A fifth book of poems by Robert Harris Jane, Interlinear & Other Poems *will shortly be published by Paperbark Press.*

Poetry Centre Stage

Anne Lee

John Ashton, Kerry Scuffins, Myron Lysenko and Lauren Williams: *Live Sentences; Works by Four Performance Poets* (Penguin, $14.95).

A performance poet seeks out audiences to demystify the poetic process and to counter the alienation between creator and audience. A sense of audience participation in the reception of the poem has resulted in performance poets considering the entertainment value of their poems and experimenting with artistic techniques to develop a poetry that works on first hearing. Performance poetry is oral poetry; the everyday speaking voice and its cadences are the basis of this poetic form. The poem functions much like a playscript in the sense that the poet uses the voice to reveal its speaker. The poet's voice is never neutral and the presence of the poet in live performance acts as subtext to the poem adding a new dimension to meaning.

The performance poet writes for centre stage. These poets are performers who have developed oral stylization to challenge and entertain. The performance element of the poem cannot be accommodated by traditional publishing techniques. The autobiographical detail and the notes on performance that preface the collections in this volume indicate that each of these poets want the power and significance of their words to entice the general public to an understanding that poetry can have meaning for them. The poets' aim is to reinstate poetry to its original popular cultural milieu and to articulate what is true about our collective experience by illuminating a particular detail of that experience. The 'works' of these poets question and explore the contemporary Australian cultural environment. The subject matter is derived from direct observation of outer reality and is centred on concrete social situations and the immediate practicalities of daily life.

The term 'performance poetry' is somewhat of a misnomer as it implies limitation to a specific

category. To focus on public performance alone is to ignore the skill of the poet in capturing the oral dimension of language on the page - the real source of a poem's energy.

Emotions are never far from the surface in Myron Lysenko's ironically titled collection of poems *Pets & Death & Indoor Plants*. Laughter, tears, screams, fears, insecurities and confusion are evoked as the poet explores lifestyle in the late twentieth-century and searches for substitutes for sex and drugs and rock and roll. All this while still trying to learn to make love properly and to cope with pets that die and indoor plants that refuse to grow. The Chaplinesque 'I' of the poems travels through a world where consciousness is raised, separatist feminists are "trying to build a better world", people are protesting about excess and the 'I' is in mourning:

> 17 students executed today
> Everything is denied.

Along the way, poems such as 'Romance', 'Living Together', 'We Make Love' and 'To Be or Not' chart the progress of a relationship that culminates in the central image of the collection - babies and how to make them. In a world of "glorious collapse" babies are a source of optimism and the poem 'You Enter' is a celebration of procreation "while so much shakes loose in the world". The final poem of this collection is an autobiographical account of 'Life as a Clerk' in a monolithic government department. The poet as detached observer narrates in a matter-of-fact voice the waste of the daily life of a worker and achieves a fine balance between absurdity, humour and pathos.

> I tried not to tell people I was a clerk
> but when they pressed me
> I said I was just filling in time
> until a proper job came up;
> I was only doing it for the money.
> They weren't surprised.

After reading the poems by Lauren Williams there is a sense of resolution, of the poet having arrived at an acceptance of life's condition. *Driven to Talk to Strangers* is the arrival of a poetic voice that confidently challenges sexual roles. 'Reflection', the '2 Weeks Late Lament' and the delightful 'Sex Haiku' are the works of a woman consciously celebrating her gender. The poet has an ear for the sexist stance in speech and plays with the rhythm of speech patterns in the poems that deal with her 'Lost Years' as a singer "with a few bands".

> I'm speared in the spotlight
> safe to fantasy feel
> a real baby doll
> up there with the big dick guitars
> pumping the custard with the rest of the boys.

The poet cannot quite conceal her amorous disposition or her sense of loss in a world without euphemism in her poems 'Disembodied', 'Heartbreak' and 'Gods of Happiness'. Beneath the disillusionment with romantic interludes there is an inescapable yearning that maybe there is some new illusion that can eradicate even for the moment the inescapable knowledge that is the poet's fate in 'These Weird Years':

> We didn't think, we didn't think
> that love is as necessary as trees
> So quick, let's fall in love while there's
> still time
> Show me your heart, I'll show you mine
> Let's warm our hands on each other's skin
> before the Ice Age comes.

The poetic style is "a reaction to/the accumulated mass of literature/bearing down with Greatness on us all" and the recognition that all has been said and done before.

"Elements of music and theatre - tone, tempo, gesture, expression - expand the toolkit of the poet . . ." With her expanded toolkit there is no doubt Lauren Williams is a skilled performer, yet on the page these works do not reproduce the quality of her work in performance; her speech rhythms, her sense of timing and theatre and her close attention to phrasing.

John Ashton's *Angst is the Colour* is a collection of scripts for oral delivery in the manner of dramatic monologue or stand-up poet. There is a loudness and brashness about the words that demand freedom from their sentencing on the page. The declamatory style is a denial of the finer shades of meaning.

> The message stated as loud as the silence
> - No emotional content in here.

The poet is under siege beneath a barrage of superficially clever words, endless adjectives and the banality of rhyme. The poems paint a picture of an urbanscape of tabloid trash, cars, identikits and clones; where the sleek inherit the earth and the guide to modern living is on Page Sixteen. Talk is an idiolect of headlines, advertising jargon and echoes of popular cultural artefacts. The poems are

full of angry invective and yet there is a curious poignancy in the denial of emotion, the high gloss of the words and the refusal of all sentiment.

> But arm in arm we walk in vain
> Through a neuromantic acid rain
> We drive around in holograms of holocaustic scenes
> Saying 'Isn't art amazing, I wonder what it means?'

Kerry Scuffins, speaking from desolation street, has the last word:

> Falcon, aloft on the icy breeze
> takes the updraft and leaves the rest
> lifts her wings to the wind and flies
> looking for bright skies.

The poems in *The Collingwood Song* collection are an expression of the endurance of the Utopian dream and the inability to cope with the bars that come down between our dreams and the world. Her poetry is the blues-cure balm "to counteract the mania and manage the insanity" and come to terms with the bittersweet pain of life and death.

> and time is taking you
> time is breaking you down
> Time is fueling your panic
> Time is making you manic
> Time is the whore of the reaper
> and the spice of the knife
>
> Time is the line of your life.

This is poetry crying over the uncertainty of life and the sureness of death, yet the poet embraces "the secret singer of the sacred spark." The poems are meditations on creative compulsion and destructive obsession; the poet a renegade circling the themes of motherhood, marriage, divorce and drug addiction.

There is not much to laugh about in Kerry Scuffin's poems but there is much to admire in their honesty and their craft. They demonstrate the advantage of the poem on the page; the opportunity for the reader to reflect and to return to rediscover. And yet something is lost . . . The poet as performer can contribute an emotional commitment to the poem, give an energy to the interpretation of the voice of the poem and feel for the spacing of the silences between the words.

Anne Lee is currently writing her doctoral thesis at the University of New South Wales on the social significance of Australian performance poetry.

The Theft of Tasmania

Michael Roe

Cassandra Pybus: *Community of Thieves* (Heinemann Australia, $19.95).

Cassandra Pybus is becoming a person of weight in Australia's intellectual life. Under her direction *Island* Magazine maintains a worthy place in its genre. Her contributions to *Australian Society* give sense and life to the intricacies of Tasmanian politics. Pybus is active within the conservation movement. As editor of *The Rest of the World is Watching*, a series of essays on the greening of the island, she has affirmed that thereby "Tasmania . . . spawned a revolutionary political vision".

The present book has a complementary thrust. Its driving concern is with the expropriation of the Aboriginal Tasmanians from their land. Pybus feels this the more deeply as the descendant of an 1820s gentry settler, who received a sizeable grant on Bruny Island, a key locale in the Tasmanian tragedy. Only in recent years, she relates, and this despite her having studied History and English to doctoral level at the University of Sydney, has she realised that democratic and egalitarian standards have been far from pervasive in Australia since 1788 and that Aboriginals have suffered abominably. Her response to this enlightenment is to urge granting of land rights to the Tasmanians. Only thus, goes the argument, can the island's European community redeem itself from being a "community of thieves" (those words being Xavier Herbert's).

On this base, Pybus writes a most graceful and interesting essay on the dispossession of the Tasmanians. Her emphasis is on the activities of George Augustus Robinson, the 'conciliator' who gathered surviving Aboriginals and virtually coerced them into settling in Bass Strait, finally on Flinders Island. The chief sources for such research are Robinson's journals, as edited by Brian Plomley. Pybus pays due homage to Plomley's work, and has studied it with perception and assiduity.

Her most positive and characteristic contribution is to suggest how Tasmanians viewed their situation and, more particularly, how they interacted with Robinson. While granting the latter some empathy, Pybus argues how narrow and self-serving were most of his roles, including that of journal-writer. Reading between the lines she finds that Robinson was far less master of the situation than he sought so to persuade himself and his potential audiences. Robinson's Tasmanian associates, by contrast, were

men and women of judgement, determination, and power.

Few readers will dispute the thrust of Pybus's argument. "Community of Thieves" is no mere rhetorical phrase. Such was the nature of colonisation in Tasmania, that shade more crudely and fiercely than in most places. Here was one example of the capacity of the place to emphasise the norms of widespread experience. It is this capacity which Pybus sees as operating (in creative mode) through the local conservation movement.

"Not a work of history so much as a personal meditation on history", goes Pybus's view of her own work. Such candour must not inhibit one from applying an academic critique. On the cover the publisher declares this to be 'history'. The boast should entail provision of index and references. The latter are more rather than less appropriate where the writer is 'reading into' the documents to an unusual degree. The absence of apparatus strengthens doubts as to the solidity of the infrastructure on which *Community of Thieves* rests. In all these and other matters a remarkable contrast subsists with Jan Critchett's *A Distant Field of Murder. Western District Frontiers 1834-48* (Melbourne University Press, 1990). Like Pybus, Critchett is Tasmania-born, but her departure came after University study and she has worked ever since in mainland tertiary institutions. The two books are fascinating in both parallels and variations.

Pybus differs from many academics in evaluating subjectivism. To her this is no shame, but a source of inspiration and purpose. Philosophers of history from Vico to Croce and onwards have endorsed something like that position. The history of Tasmanian history adds its weight. The two pioneers in that field were Henry Melville (1835) and John West (1852). Both wrote under the spur of deep-held convictions about Tasmanian society and politics, Melville being vehement against Governor George Arthur and West against the continued transportation of convicts. Surely by no accident, both made worthwhile comment as to the Aboriginals. More generally, both wrote what most of us would esteem good history.

Pybus has a place in this tradition. Melville helped to diminish Arthurism and West to end transportation. Maybe she will likewise assist the grant of land rights. That would make most Europeans feel better, and perhaps some Tasmanians would be generous enough to accept it as an act of goodwill.

Michael Roe, author of The Quest for the Authority in Eastern Australia 1835-1851, Nine Australian Progressives *and other books, teaches history at the University of Tasmania.*

Mates of Mars

A. M. Hertzberg

David Foster: *Mates of Mars* (Penguin, $14.95).

I have particularly admired and enjoyed nearly all David Foster's novels, because although an acquaintance with scientific method is not essential to appreciation, it certainly enhances it.

David Foster's brief introduction to *Mates of Mars* outlines "the premise - expressed in the terminology of Toynbee - that informs the following work." Accordingly, the characters in the book, who are often brutish, self-centred, and destructive, are also bound to a chivalrous discipline.

Behind the camouflage of exciting, and sometimes disgusting adventures, are elegant, logical commentaries in the classical Western tradition, and then passages reflecting Asian mysticism. Superimposed are some sad and savage thrusts against excessive material greed, which Foster perceives as a plague endemic in both cultures.

David Foster combines his skills in science and the arts with rare humor, and is a meticulous researcher. He conceals art and science cunningly, and writes on and below the surface. For this reason some of his books have to be read with more than passing concentration. That is difficult to do if you want to relax, and the result is that some readers I know, and for that matter often his blurb writers, miss the essential wit, as distinct from the comedy of books like, *Testostero* and *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross.*

Foster is profound in the same way as Umberto Eco. Indeed *Foucault's Pendulum* and *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross* are independent samples of the hermetic world presented by very modern men. In *Mates of Mars*, Foster uses the style which, I think, falls into the category Eco called Cogito Interruptus.

There are six mates in the book - seven if you include the fierce Wolfgang, who, however, really loses his head quite early in the story. As in some other Foster novels, solving the murder is one of the sub-plots in *Mates of Mars.*

Steve Overton lives with his mother on Overton's Chicken Farm in the Outer Western Suburbs, and is in nominal charge of Overton's Security Services, even though he is now a cripple in a wheel chair, unable to use his legs. Through exercise and determination he learns to propel himself on his knuckles. Steve loves his mother, who makes scones for afternoon tea, and baked dinners: he respects motherhood. When Cyril, one of the Mates, delivers a back-

hander to Tilly, "Your mother," says Steve, turning pale. "Me best mate just decked his own Mum."

Cyril, a full-blood aboriginal, came south from the Top End to play Rugby League for Wests. He is hired by Steve as a bouncer. Cyril had been around for as long as he could remember. Later when all the mates are together with Steve's people, the Djiripawooramurra, they encounter Nipper, Cyril's opposite number of the Iwoorramurra. Nipper "the kidney fat man from the Gulf, wearing dark glasses and a black canvas dobok with a gold monogrammed black belt" had been around for as long as Cyril, and "was" Cyril said "de bastard put me off my game de day I knocked on from de kick off."

Bruce Nonnemacher is professor of Chemistry at the College of Knowledge. He wants desperately to achieve a high grade in Taekwondo; never makes it, despite his name. Graceless and irritable, he cancels his attendance at the Inaugural Dinner of a conference in Singapore at which he is a plenary speaker in order to go to a Taekwondo training session. There he meets Dr Cheng Siong Fai - Vincent - , a medical graduate who, unknown to Nonnemacher, works in the same building at the College of Knowledge, though in a different department, where he measures behavioral responses in experiments with monkeys. Vincent, subtle, graceful, and a master of martial arts, and Bruce become mates.

Sven Scrimshaw works as a male model while studying mining engineering. He drops out after failing his year because he chose to skip practical chemistry, conducted, of course, in Professor Nonnemacher's department. A friend of the late Wolfgang, and a black belt, he applies for a job with Overton's Security Service. Sven travels the road from libertine to saint, doing harm on the way. In that state, and having been exposed to AIDS, he writes to Vincent and Jade that the AIDS virus is a living creature and deserving of our love and forgiveness. He also dobbed in his mates.

Jade is a feminist, who runs classes in self defence for women. She and Vincent meet when they both go to watch Master Kim of "Kim's Taekwondo. Classes in Self Defense for Mens Womens and Childrens a Specially". Sven desires Jade, but this is not to be.

Some of the events in the book are too barbarous to be called entertaining; but they are all told brilliantly. Foster is Bacon's man. He has read deeply and widely and *Mates of Mars* is full of dissertations on martial arts, the behavior of men and prawns, the prison system, and throw-away themes. Writing also makes him exact. As for wit, here is Steve's opinion of Foster beer cans compared with VB. Steve places the cans on the verandah "as though they were Grail hallows."

> "I want you to look at these cans, he says to the two academics. "First, I want you to look at this blue can. Ugly, ay. That big red F, it's like being given the finger. So vulgar. And yellow and blue would have to be the 2 ugliest colours in the world. Reminds me of a Japanese motorcycle, makes me think o' some tinpot brass band conductor with nylon epaulettes. It's not the colour of the sky, ay, more the colour of household kero. It's the colour of a cheap pool, the colour of the scraps of fishin net you find washed up on the beach surrounded by jelly blubber and stinkin seaweed. It's a cold, unfriendly colour. You wouldn't want to drink in a bar that colour or sleep in a bed that colour. And the gold's not a real gold colour either, more a cheap, tinny fool's gold. Sort of colour you might find on a candlestick you won at the coconut shy or the yolk of an egg from some chook hasn't been fed proper. No, there's something obscene about a big red F in a golden weddin ring. I couldn't think highly of any man who could put a thing like that to his mouth."

Mark Hertzberg has a PhD in Chemical Engineering. He received an AO for services to the Australian sugar industry, and was President of the Library Council of New South Wales 1986-1989.

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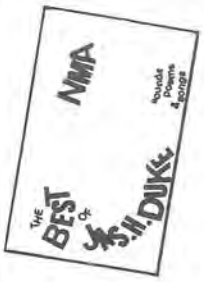

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