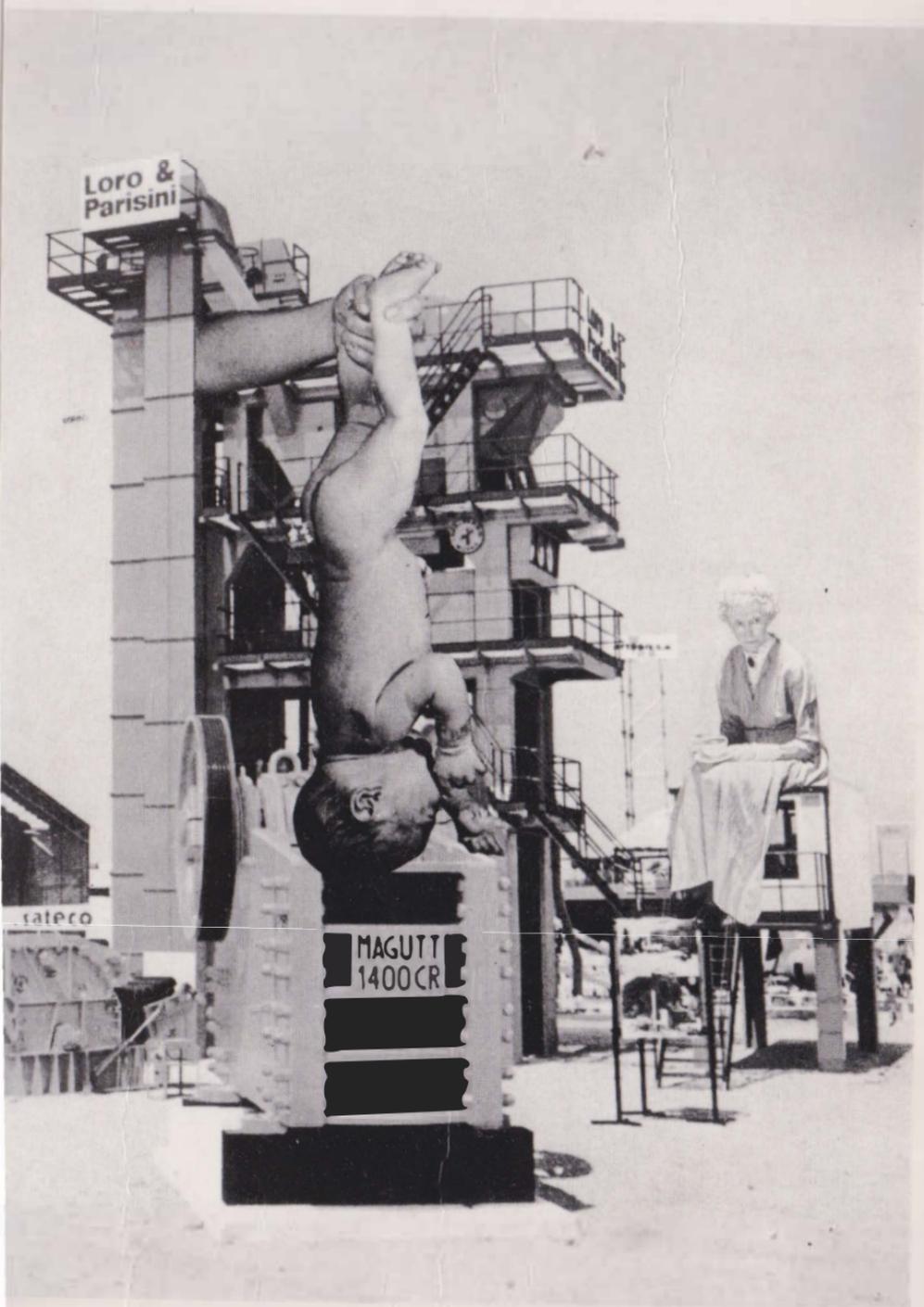


# GOING DOWN SWINGING

ISSUE 10/11



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# GOING DOWN SWINGING

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All contributors receive a complementary copy of the issue in which their work appears. The editors regret that they are as yet unable to pay writers what they deserve.

The editors would like to thank the following for contributing to the production of this issue: Clare Brophy, Carol Carter, Michael Clarke, Andrea Lloyd, Tim Miller, Kevin Morgan, Margot Nelmes, Lauren Williams, AND ALL WHO HELP.

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**GDS is a Hit & Miss Production**

# EDITORIAL

GDS has now survived for a decade, a rare event for an independent lit mag.

We have made this a double issue in order to fit in interviews with Geoff Goodfellow, Bev Roberts, and Gerald Murnane, a remarkable novella, *Eyeglass*, by Kevin Morgan, as well as a swag of stories and poems that testify to the life and diversity of writing in Australia. In the absence of a new book from Eric Beach in the past decade, we have included a suite of his prose and poetry.

We let writers know that we wanted a record of their reactions to living through the 80's & this is one of the themes you'll find in GDS 10/11. One of the striking things about the 80's was that very little seemed to be going on & then suddenly everything happened at once.

We received many more submissions of a higher quality after GDS #9. We wonder if this was due to our improved look, favourable reviews, word of mouth, or an increased enthusiasm for writing. Whatever the reason, we continued to reject 95% of submissions and yet still found that we had filled almost 300 pages.

GDS #10/11 includes some work from writers in Canada, USA, Malaysia, and England - Robert Kenter, M.A.C. Farrant, Gail Schilke, Robert Raymer, and Erica Wagner. This is not the first time we have crossed national barriers. The growing international contributions are a sign that we are becoming part of a global community. Information and reviews about even the smallest and most obscure lit mags from Australia reaches an interested audience of writers and readers overseas.

Once again, we're excited about the work we're presenting from over 40 contributors in this issue, and we've already chosen work that we're keen to include in our next.

We realise that a double issue takes more money out of the pockets of subscribers, so we have aimed to give you an extra bargain bonanza extravaganza of an issue. In addition, we're offering a bonus free book to the first two hundred subscribers who send in renewals, or new subscriptions.

The editors gratefully acknowledge support from the Victorian Ministry for the Arts.

Editors: Kevin Brophy & Myron Lysenko  
Associate Editor: Nolan Tyrrell



“That happens when you punch it through glass. You should think about that kind of thing ...”

“Don’t ...”

“And you should also think about the fact that we don’t have an extra storm window and we shouldn’t go the winter without one.” Gradually, my voice had got quieter but I didn’t look at him when I forced the rest of my sentence on him

“Jenny, I’m sorry I broke the damn window, all right? But I’ll get us another one. Don’t get excited.” He was still at the sink, flexing his hand so that the blood began to show through the gauze.

“You’ll get us another one? How? It’s been snowing for a week already. We’re probably snowed in now, and it isn’t supposed to stop. You come in here, mad at something I don’t have a clue about, and when I try to get it out of you, you turn into some sort of monster, screaming at me and breaking the window! I hate this house, Jeremiah, I hate the snow and the storm windows and the rust in the pipes and nothing is right any more! God, I wish we hadn’t lost the other place ...” I stopped, because suddenly I was sick with talking.

“Don’t, Jen.” He was still looking out at the snow, through the broken glass. The air had gone out of him; one hand deep in the pocket of his jeans, his shoulders rounded. It had been six months since the first house we had owned together burned to the ground. One of Jeremiah’s welding torches had started it off, or at least, that was what the fire department had said. It was an old house, and beautiful, with gnarled rafters that spanned the large central room. We hadn’t had much to put in it, and some of the stuff was a little broken down, but Jeremiah had promised he would fix it up for us. He spent all his free time in his workshop, hammering and sawing and welding. I used to joke with him that sometimes I didn’t know whether he was a man, or whether he was made of iron and wood.

Luckily we had both been out of the house when the fire started; the fire chief told us that it must have been a real inferno. Still, maybe it was worse to have driven home and found all the engines, and the neighbours standing among the ruinous blackened cinders. I became hysterical, crying with my head leaning against the dashboard of the car. Jeremiah got angry. He jumped out, slamming the door so that the whole car shook and told them all to get the hell out of there - the fire was over, wasn’t it, their entertainment for the day was finished, and they had no business standing around gawking at other people’s problems. Didn’t they have anything better to do? And he raged at all the firemen: yes, you have done your job well, he said, is this what job satisfaction is all about? Tell me, did you put it out or did you start it?

They all just backed away from him slowly, as if he was crazy, which he was right then. They had done their best; but that would never be good enough for Jeremiah, not if their best didn’t succeed, and he wasn’t going

to forgive them for letting that house burn. Later when they told us what they thought about Jeremiah's torches, he told me they just wanted to pass the buck. We went about the business of trying to collect insurance, of trying to find another house, of trying to reorganise things - as if all of this was normal. We never spoke of misfortune, or hard luck: we just got on with the inevitability of it all. Jeremiah wanted to prove to the world that nothing was going to conquer him, and something in him vanished. He wouldn't drop everything to go for a walk in the woods or make love on a hot afternoon. His persistence was baffled at every turn by insurance men and a lack of money, and his misery was silent and dogged.

We bought the new house up north because it was what we could afford and because we convinced ourselves that it would be good to be alone together after all the hassle, and that being away would really let Jeremiah concentrate on his work. He was a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and could build anything. My wedding present from him was our wonderful, wide oak bed that had been lost in the flames, but he had promised me another one, as soon as he had made a dent in the orders that had piled up. He was just about able to make a decent living because of his skill and reputation.

"The driftwood for Helmer's table was no good," he said abruptly. "The cold, the snow - it split. Right down the middle. But it was so beautiful! I guess I knew it was lousy, though - beautiful but lousy." At last, his face relaxed a little and he smiled at me, tightly. "I'll get more wood and more glass, Jen, that's all."

Jeremiah's ability to cope with the unpleasantnesses of life while still managing to ignore them always amazed me. He didn't say anything about emerging from the cellar like a fire-breathing dragon, his face a monstrous parody of itself. He hadn't been raging at the table or the wood or himself but at the whole world and its cruelty to him, and when I had tried to find out what was wrong he had turned on me.

"Nothing is worth this, Jeremiah," I had said to him. "Nothing is worth wasting your energy this way!"

"You don't even know what's wrong!" he had shouted. "You always do that: you tell me, 'we can fix it, we can fix it,' before you know the half of it. Ever since the fire you've been trying to convince me that things are wonderful" - his voice was like a knife - "to pretend that we're all happy and safe and secure in our ice-infested haven. When are you ever going to look at things, Jennifer?"

"When am I going to look at things?" I had said, dropping my work onto the table. A ball of slate-grey wool slipped down to the floor and rolled halfway across the room. "I'm not the one who's been pretending that things are just fine. It's not me who acts as if lawyers and burned houses are all part of the course of everyday life. You come up here and you'll scream at me like some crazy ass, and in ten minutes, this moment in time won't have existed. You can make things disappear,

can't you, Jeremiah? Someday I think you'll make me disappear." Even then I ended up talking to the floor.

"Fine," he said quietly. "Fine. All right then, Jennifer, everything is not normal. Things are going wrong. You see? This is not normal." And he smashed his fist into the thick glass.

The next day was clear and bright and very, very cold. I didn't want Jeremiah to go into town, not through all the snow and on the icy roads. We didn't have a short-wave radio and I know that he wouldn't want me to come with him. Jeremiah was treating this journey as a penance. He had lain awake all night, half on his back, half on his side, his face turned to the window and his bandaged hand pulled into his chest. For a while, I had lain close to him, whispering to him, but his immobility was as unforgiving as stone. Once, he reached out to touch my hair, but the way he moved meant that I should leave him alone now.

I woke often; and each time I saw my husband staring out the window, his face rigid and pale in the cold light of the moon. Since the fire, Jeremiah had started to become the variable factor in my life, where once he had been the rock. He was never predictable, of course; but up until now his extremes had been glorious and soaring. If he was moody in the midst of a project, I think even he was amused at his poetic glower, and it never lasted long, anyway. This was different. The fire, the lawyers, the cold and snow, even the split table - struck him in a way I think he didn't expect. Jeremiah liked to get what he wanted, but he was a force to reckon with - on top of being usually right - so it had never been a problem. I knew he prided himself on being able to convince people to see things his way, and he would glow when they told him he'd been right all along. "It's the Irish in me, ye see," he would say in a thick brogue, "the gift o' the gab. Not to mention" - he would pause dramatically - "being damn clever."

But for all this, he was superstitious. He told me once not to worry about the reportedly violent weather we would find when we moved: When your number is up, it's up, he said, and it wasn't our time yet. A little snow would never get Jenny and Jeremiah. Now, as he loaded the Jeep with hot coffee and lots of extra gas his sense of fate must have weighed heavily upon him. His eyes were dark and sunken from his sleepless night, and more than once I looked out the kitchen window to see him peering intently at me through the milky, veined glass.

"Once I get the window and the wood, everything will be fine," he said, not to me, but out to the trees. "I just have to put things back . . . in order, Jennifer. Build them up again. At least I'm a carpenter, Jen, and I can see what to do. Table, window - and then I can build that cabinet for Dr. Merehaven." He was talking quickly, quietly, still not to me. I had come outside and was standing in the snow in jeans and a sweater.

"I could make you breakfast, Jeremiah," I said. "You didn't sleep, you haven't eaten - I won't let you go like this."

"It's not that far, Jen; I'll be fine." He came over to me and took me in his arms, and gave me a spine-crushing hug, the kind that scared me the first time he did it. It made me feel as if I were caught in the coils of a boa constrictor. "I love you, Jen. Really, I do." He sighed as he kissed me and climbed into the Jeep. "Don't worry. I've got coffee, I've got gas, I just have to get this over with. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said, and maybe I did, at the time.

"Good." He started the engine, with some difficulty, and cursing because it was cold, but eventually the Jeep bucked and coughed, and white vapour poured out of the exhaust. The snow was coming down in gentle occasional flakes from the white sky, and as Jeremiah drove off the Jeep became a dark cloudy smudge against the naked whiteness of everything else. The smudge disappeared around a bend. I thought that this place was swallowing us up, or making us devour each other. It was just like Jeremiah to pull us out of the fire into this place of such cold.

It began to snow harder. By noon I couldn't see the trees on the hills outside for the snow, as I sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and trying to read. I was pretty confident in the state of the Jeep, but I was not as confident in Jeremiah's driving, which was pretty reckless. I guessed the visibility to be something like ten feet, and I only hoped that there was no one else stupid enough to be on the roads. As the day wore on, I began to be angry at Jeremiah for leaving me at home to worry about him. It was easier to be angry than to be worried, about him or myself or both of us, and I sat there stewing as the snow became deeper. I actually started to forget that he was in any danger. I made a casserole for dinner, which I left in the refrigerator; I would cook it when he returned. I made the bed, gave the house a good going over for the first time in a while, and as the morning faded into the afternoon, I lay on the sofa in the living room, reading and poking at the fire.

After a time, I looked at the clock. The sun was long gone and the moon had risen, making the snow sparkle like blue Arctic ice. It was almost six o'clock, and Jeremiah had been gone for eleven hours. Under normal conditions, it was a two hour drive into town, but even if the snow had doubled that, he had been gone for too long. I picked up the telephone, but I knew that the lines would be down from the blizzard. I cursed our innocence in not getting a short-wave, but Jeremiah's bravado had always reassured me, and it hadn't even occurred to me to question his decisions. Jeremiah had had me in his thrall from the moment I met him. I had given up everything to be with him. I had learned to cook and sew and knit, so I could have the elegance he had in working with his hands. And unlike so many men I had met, he had noticed and appreciated what I had done. "You have so much," he would say. "You can't throw it away

for me.” But his eyes told me he was delighted, and his kiss told me I had no other choice.

Now, for the first time, I wondered if I had lost this new life of mine to the blizzard. I had rescued it once from the flames, and now to have it smothered in snow seemed cruelly unfair. I didn't want to think that way because I knew I could become paralysed, so I jumped up off the sofa and ran to the kitchen. I took the blue casserole dish out of the refrigerator and put it into the oven, hoping that if I began to cook dinner Jeremiah would return. The isolation of our house began to be oppressive, and I felt like a prisoner of its safety and warmth.

When the dinner was cooked, I turned the oven off and went back to my chair in the kitchen. I sat there, frozen still for an hour, as the draught blew over me and numbed my face and shoulders and hands. The loss of Jeremiah began to unfold in my mind. I would wait here until the blizzard stopped, when I would be able to see through the snow: two days, a week from now, I couldn't tell. I would pack one of the large rucksacks, gear myself up, and set off on snowshoes on the road Jeremiah had taken. Would I encounter him, frozen in the Jeep in the snow, half-buried along with panes of glass and thick oak boards in the deadly white powder? Perhaps I would then crawl in beside him, and we would lie, Romeo and Juliet beneath a brilliant pall of snow - having tricked fate only once. I started to cry, but I was cold and tired and lost in the romance of it, and my fantasy ceased to have any real meaning.

I awoke feeling disembodied from sitting in the same position for so long. The fire in the living room had died, because the house was morning damp and chilled, and a mist seemed to cling to the beams. A thin, wan light was just beginning to appear through the trees and the couple of birds that hadn't left this place for somewhere warmer were chirping, their solitary voices desolate and plaintive. The snow had stopped. I had bruised my shin on the table, because I had woken up very suddenly, and I limped to the stove to put a kettle on.

As the water began to boil, I heard the rumble of the Jeep. That's what must have woken me, the distant sound I had been listening for all night. Through the window, I saw Jeremiah driving up to the house.

The Jeep and the things in it were pretty frosty, Jeremiah included. Plates of glass stuck out of the back and a line of icicles hung off their edges; snow had settled on and nearly covered the big boards that lay half on Jeremiah's lap. He brushed it off gently as he pulled the handbrake and extricated himself from under the wood. I wanted him to run to me and hold me, and tell me he was safe and that everything would be all right now. But he approached the door slowly, and I could see that he was quite pale. He wrapped his arms around himself to keep his hands warm. His pallor only accentuated the mottled darkness beneath his eyes, and he gazed out from under the shadow of his brow with a tired emptiness.

Walking stiffly, he looked at me and blinked once, as if clearing the ice from his lashes.

"I stayed in town for a while. Then I got stuck in the snow coming back. About an hour up the hill and the thing wouldn't move. It was cold," he said quietly. Finally, I jumped at him and threw my arms around him, but his own stayed locked around his chest. He kissed me on the forehead and pressed past me into the relative warmth of the house. "I got the wood and the glass," he said, a hushed, stubborn pride in his voice. "Was Eberhard surprised to see me." He laughed, and the sound barked harshly against the walls and back out to me, too loud and too angry. His straight shoulders defied the weather, but he trembled with cold. I shut the door behind me as I walked in, to keep the freezing air from burning down our house.

We never spoke about that. Jeremiah hardly said another word after he got into the house: He peeled off his wet clothes and climbed into bed. He slept for about five hours, while I managed to get the boards and the panes of glass down into his workshop. I hardly know how; I almost fell down the stairs three or four times, but by that point I was beyond exhaustion. All I could hear was Jeremiah saying, "It'll be fine, Jen, don't worry," over and over in my head, and hoping he was right.

When I heard him stir in the afternoon, I cooked some eggs and bacon for him. He must have smelled them, for he came out quickly, wearing a bathrobe and socks, and kissed me wearily. "Thanks," he said. I sat down at the table with him and watched him eat: slowly, pushing the food around on his plate with his fork.

"Aren't you hungry?" I said, taking the plate away at last. "I don't think you've eaten in a long time."

"Not really hungry. The cold, I guess." He laid his right hand flat on the table. The bandage on his knuckles puckered and lifted. "I'd better get a new one of these," he said, and ripped it off as he got up to get gauze and tape. "Is that masking tape holding?" he asked, looking down at his hand and cutting the gauze.

I went to the window and felt it. It was damp, and beginning to slip. "Just about," I said.

"All right." He brought the tape around his hand so that he looked like a boxer. "I'll get to it then. There's just -" he stopped and looked up.

"What?"

"Never mind. I'll just do it. I'll just do it." He began to walk away, but at the doorway, he turned again. "You should have seen the woods, Jennifer." Suddenly his voice was gentle. "The snow really was like a blanket. Even on the tops of the trees. At first, when I couldn't get the Jeep started again, I thought - well, I was scared, Jennifer, I didn't know what to do. I knew I'd got myself into this mess and that I had to get

back to you, but I didn't see how I ever could. I had to sit still, and think, and as I looked around at all the snow, it was as if I'd never seen it before. It's always been an obstacle, hasn't it, Jen? Like everything else. Makes it hard to get food, hard to keep warm, hard to get into town - everything thwarting us from every direction, no matter what we do.

"But it was so quiet, Jen, I could hear my heart beat. And all this whiteness, trying to . . . keep me in the woods. And I thought, maybe there's a reason I can't get away, maybe I'm meant to stay here. I knew it would be easier, anyway. I was so tired, Jen, all I wanted to do was sleep, and maybe stop fighting for a while. I'm still so tired, Jennifer."

He said all this staring through the window at his blanket of snow. I didn't like his blank face. Jeremiah should be railing against fate, he was meant to throw water on fire and make fire in the snow. Now, there was no fire. There was only Jeremiah sleeping in the woods, thinking that life was easy that way. I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

"I know you're tired, sweetheart," I said. "Why don't you get some more sleep? You did what you had to do, after all, now we're all set. Now it's okay."

"Is it?" He smiled at me with half of his face.

I made myself say yes: firmly, insistently.

"Do you love me, Jen?"

I was taken aback. "Of course I do."

He got up from the table. "I love you too, Jen," he said as he walked away.

After he had got dressed, he took the wood and went straight into his cellar workshop. I had thought that he would take care of the window first because it really was cold in the kitchen now. The temperature outside had dropped, and the fallen snow was being driven up by an easterly wind. Jeremiah had made it home just in time, I thought. I didn't say that to him; now he was absorbed in the table he was building downstairs. I knew it would go quickly - he had already built it once.

But he wouldn't let up. At midnight I went down the stairs to see how he was doing. The door was open, and he was bent over his long bench at the back of the cellar. He stood in a puddle of sawdust, and it hovered around him, diffusing the light of the room. He hadn't heard me come down. "Jeremiah," I said.

He spun around, and I stepped back when I saw his face. His deep set eyes were in shadow, but the set of his mouth was hard. "Don't you knock?" he asked.

I didn't know how to answer. I had never knocked on his workshop door for as long as we'd known each other. "No, I didn't think to, actually," I said. He looked the same way he had when he had raged upstairs and broken the window: coiled and dangerous. A chisel turned in his hands, the only thing about him that moved.

"Please do, next time." His voice was ragged.

"All right, I will." I tried to see his eyes, but I couldn't. "Don't you want to come to bed?"

"No." He stared at me for several seconds and then turned his back.

"Coffee?" I said.

"No."

"I don't understand you, Jeremiah." I will be sensible, I thought. I won't get upset again. "You spend a day lost out in the snow, come home, take a nap, don't eat - and that's it? I don't know, maybe I should expect it. Lately, anyway. But I don't think it's human. You'll kill yourself, or both of us, Jeremiah." And I could see him, worked to death in his cellar, and it didn't look much different from the death I had imagined in the snow, both obstinately self-inflicted, Jeremiah tangled in his own complex wire. The image was clear and strong and cold in my head, like the wind outside, and down here, talking to this frayed man who became more strange to me every hour, it was the only thing that seemed real.

"Please leave me alone," he said. He hadn't heard me.

"Don't do this to me, Jeremiah."

"I have to finish this," he said. "I don't know how long it will take. I've done most of it already."

"How many more things do you have to finish, Jeremiah? Besides your life and our marriage? Why is this damn table so important to you? It's only a table! It was only a house, only a window. We're both alive, Jeremiah, that's what matters, isn't it? After all?"

He sat still as if carved, in the sawdust and sharp smell of resin. He was sweating and his face gleamed dully in the light of the cellar, like luminous, threatening marble.

"Yes, Jen. We're both alive. Indeed we are." He was silent for a minute. "I'll be up soon," he said.

Not a concession. A dismissal. He turned around and sat at his bench, and began to sketch rapidly. There was no use trying to continue the conversation. Something in his manner made me believe that he was no longer seeing me or talking to me: that my words had only been an intrusion, nothing more. He had to get the table finished, and the window, and then he would come back, and apologise, and everything would be fine. Standing in the dim light at the edge of the cellar, I didn't even realise how confused and desperate my thoughts were then, or how much they echoed his own hollow words. But it was all I had. I stood there for a while, watching his shoulders move under his shirt as he drew, the pencil moving quickly, his arm jerking erratically. Now he was alone in a world where he had to use all his strength to stay in control.

I didn't think I would sleep, but I did, more heavily than I think I ever have. I was grateful for that deep and dreamless sleep when I awoke, if

only because it had allowed me fourteen hours of escape. The other half of the bed was cold, but I had slept so long that Jeremiah could well have got in, slept, and got out again to work.

I shivered when I got out of bed: the house was very cold and I thought that Jeremiah might have removed the broken pane to fix the window. I climbed into the clothes I had left lying at the foot of the bed, though they were sawdusty and none too clean. I wanted to get downstairs to Jeremiah: I thought that things might have improved with the light of day.

Downstairs the house was even colder, almost as bad as outside. I hadn't put on any socks or shoes, and the floor was painfully cold, making my toes curl as I walked. A sharp wind curved around the walls, and it blew against my face as I followed it to where it entered, through the open kitchen door.

The door was wide open, banging against the jamb in a slow rhythm with the wind. Snow had blown in, and there were little crystals scattered far into the room; I could feel them, crunching wet under my feet. It was only when a hard gust came up, making the door thump violently and throwing prickles of ice in my face, that I really awoke, and I stepped back, shaking my head and clearing my eyes. Jeremiah must be in his workshop, I thought. The upstairs door to the stairs was shut, so maybe he didn't feel the wind.

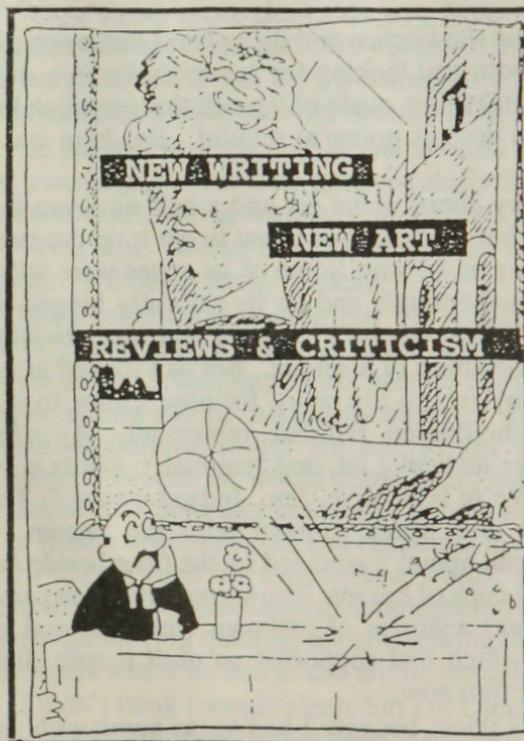
The box was lying between the kitchen and the cellar. I had missed it, coming down from the bedroom and looking for Jeremiah. From a short distance away, it was a beautiful thing, made of the oak that Jeremiah had just brought in, for the table he was going to rebuild. But here was a box instead.

It was really a long, heavy chest; about six and a half or seven feet long, and it must have taken Jeremiah a lot of sweat to get it up the steep cellar stairs on his own, strong as he was. Some of its edges were still a little rough, but it was finished enough, and on its carefully hinged lid Jeremiah had carved an elaborate floral "J", leaves and birds twining gracefully with the letter in the space of a square. But as I looked at the box, the cold shot up from my feet to my heart, for now, closer to it, I could see its shape: broad-shouldered, familiar, repugnant. My mind closed inside it, trapped under its heavy lid, and Jeremiah's words were again in my head, saying, "We're both alive, Jen. Indeed we are." The wood of Jeremiah's coffin was bitter, stained with the venom of everything he could never speak about; it squatted on the floor beside me to mock all my platitudes and cups of hot tea. The horror I felt then came not only from this box; it was a horror of my own weakness and of Jeremiah's brittle strength, which had supported us until it split, like driftwood. I didn't call out for him now.

I bent to lift the lid of this thing, because I had to, so numb with the cold of the house and myself that the fear was flushed out of me. I shoved

it up hard so I wouldn't suffer any second thoughts, but the box was empty - like the house - and when the lid fell all the way open it jarred against its hinges in time with the kitchen door. There was a dusting of snow inside, very white against the wood, feathery and delicate. It was gathered up at the head of the coffin, and I decided that Jeremiah must have put it there before he closed it. I ran my finger through it once, and got up, leaving the lid gaping like a starving mouth.

More snow had come into the kitchen and had settled on the wood floor. It is an odd feeling to have your bare feet crunch on snow inside your own house, but that strangeness was at least a texture I could understand. I walked up to the door to close it, and as I did, I saw the footsteps, half covered by drift, going down the steps and out to the woods. In this wind, Jeremiah's tracks would be gone in another couple of hours. Brushing some of the snow out of the house, I shut the door. As the house grew warmer, the snow in the box would melt; and I wondered if it would warp the wood.



## Otis Rush

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# FAMOUS EYES, TOES, ETC.

JANE MESSER

**That** morning they entered the cafe at their usual hour of ten. He was broad bodied, not very tall and slouched so that he lost height. He kept his hands in his pockets. They flopped there as though he was unaware of them altogether and had forgotten they could be used. He always went to the same table.

People approached them outside on the street. He wouldn't stop to talk. She would stand outside the cafe answering questions and signing books and that's why she often came in minutes after him. Her posture was admirable, her straight back lifting up her shoulders, chest and diaphragm. Her hair beautifully dyed, she kept in a coloured turban. She continued to hold herself straight in her seat, crossing and uncrossing her legs. Their table was the last at the back.

I heard a lot from their far table, at my station behind the counter handing out coffee, receiving payments, providing directions to passing tourists and generally keeping the pests out - those people that wanted to come in and hang around near the famous table without buying coffee and something to eat.

There were incidents.

Facing the aisle and cafe tables they could easily watch people enter from the street; their manner of approach, the hesitations, choice of table. Sometimes the pair only glanced up; at other times Paul would stare fixedly, charging the room with his presence. Nearing their table the visitors sometimes held onto the chairs that flanked the aisle, as people often do in a crowded cafe, but as if they were on a hurtling train and needed to grip for balance: or so I imagined.

Paul liked a variety of dishes in the morning. Sometimes he would have milk coffee with bread, other times black coffee with a warm semolina dish that he had discovered somewhere else. We made it especially for him. Selena almost always asked for coffee and croissant. Sometimes we chatted about politics, more often about the weather or their affairs: the coming holidays, their hot water service, a new book.

All sorts came in to see them, like this one.

"Oh hell man, bad time, bad time - How are you? You look so determined, so certain, you must be feeling good!"

This was said to Paul. He didn't answer immediately, but waited to see what else would spill out. Selena watched the young man calmly. She liked to touch things - now she was slowly stroking her hands.

Gently, her eyes slid to me. Where was her coffee she seemed to be saying.

The young man who had spoken was an American. Tall, thick thighed and blond. Altogether handsome in that way. A clean shirt, not ironed. Sleeves buttoned at the cuff. His face beaming - certainly his voice booming - and the striped shirt stretching tight across his broad back as he leant forward.

Paul's round and bulbous eyes examined the American youth. Puffy from working late nights, his eyes strained with each gesture that this young man offered. He was irritable.

"I agree man, I certainly do totally with you. Bad days, lack of will power, lack of faith - you put it in a nutshell. I gotta live - I know! Vive! Liberty! But you know the *Americas* don't understand it yet, they want you to go through the authority, the Establishment. Like you say, a bad fake!"

"Bad faith." said Paul.

"Absolutely! I mean I am so glad to be here to look at you -"

"You haven't looked at me." Paul said with certainty.

"But I have, I take in your every gesture, your every book. And yours too Miss Selena."

She smiled, glancing across at him while eating her croissant. Selena didn't like to talk while eating. At breakfast she usually read the newspaper.

But you haven't looked at me, not for more than a moment," said Paul.

He blinked slowly. His large head did not move but stayed oriented towards the young American like a great, steady - toad!

Selena then pulled out from her handbag a notebook and started to write things in it. Breakfast was over. I went up to the table so that she could order her second coffee.

"But Sir, if I were to look at you now, properly, like staring ... I mean you're looking at me ... and our eyes, well they'd be locked and ..."

"Yes, I know."

Both men shifted. The youth retreated towards the back of his chair. Paul straightened himself, took out from his breast pocket a packet of cigarettes.

"Would you prefer one of mine, Sir?" asked the young man. He brought from his back-pocket an American brand, the usual Lucky Strike. Paul lit his own and released from his mouth a great wad of smoke, courteously turning his head away from the youth while emitting it.

A family entered the cafe. The woman strolled in first, talking over her shoulder to the eldest child, a sulky, swaggering adolescent girl wearing jeans. The woman glanced around the cafe, looking for a table that would fit the family's requirements. Behind these two trailed a

skinny boy of about twelve, a younger boy of maybe four and their tall father. They all had dark hair and looked like tourists because the man carried a camera. The woman and youngest boy faced the door. The others sat facing the back. Their table was only a dozen feet away from the enthusiastic youth, the now surly Paul, and Selena: who had managed to engross herself in her writing despite the mens' conversation and other disturbances, all of which she was able to ignore either through her nature or daily practice.

The girl looked as one might expect an adolescent to look when out with her family. Bored. Certainly I recognized the symptoms from my own experiences, when I would try to walk down the street as many feet away from my parents as possible. I could see her head bent sullenly over the serviette. Perhaps she was ripping it to shreds.

I took their order and went back to the counter to get the drinks.

On seeing her, Paul's attention moved away from his admirer. He stared at the girl. Immediately, the young man's posture shifted. Now he leant forward across the table, talking more volubly and quickly. The striped shirt stretched across his back again. Paul didn't react, so intent was he on the girl in the family configuration. Selena's sitting posture also changed: a slight shift and turning away of the body as she continued to write.

After some time the young woman must have noticed his stare for I could see her lowering her head either down over her coffee or away to the right. She didn't look directly in front of her: Paul was staring at her so deliberately. Much as I liked him - he was indeed special - he could be so insensitive! (I'm sure he believed that after consideration of who he was and what he had produced, it was his right to assert himself in these ways: it wasn't that the 'world owed him' anything but that it was his already.) The girl shifted towards her father so that the mother partly blocked Paul's view with her body. But then Paul moved so that he could see her from an angle. Very determined!

The young woman then did an extraordinary thing. She got out of her seat and in a few quick strides was standing beside Selena who was seated nearest to the aisle. She leant right across Selena and the young American towards Paul.

"Leave off!" she said in a fierce voice.

He adjusted his expression to one of charming benevolence. She turned back to her seat, cheeks flushed, appearing both satisfied and mildly embarrassed. But now her parents were wondering what had happened and the father had got out of his seat and was approaching the back table. The woman turned around to watch and the boys were saying, "What mama, what?"

As the father and daughter met she said, "Forget it papa, ok!", but he wouldn't listen and went on up to the three at the back. She sat down in her seat and watched gloomily.

“What’s going on!?” the father demanded. Paul raised his eyebrows archly and thrust his chin forward slightly.

Selena stopped writing. “Do you want a punch on the nose? Why don’t you apologize?”

The shocked young American alternately ran his hands through his hair, shook his head and moved backwards and forwards in his seat. Despite his obvious ambivalence about the situation if there’d been fisticuffs he would have defended his mentor. (Yet I don’t think either Selena or Paul were too worried. It wasn’t the first time this had happened and as far as I know there’d never been a fight.) The father stood leaning across the table glaring at Paul who stared back without blinking. Selena then apologized for Paul. Paul looked away and pulled out another cigarette, offering one to the man. The father said no gruffly, paused a moment and then went back to his table. The family rearranged themselves so that the parents faced my three.

“Now you’re a woman darling!” the woman said drolly.

“Huh!” replied the girl.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” said the father.

Another day a woman came in whom I knew was a poet or a novelist because one of my regulars had told me. She was poor and her name was Violet. She sat at the table nearest to the door. She slowly ate her breakfast while reading a newspaper that someone had left behind and frequently lifted her eyes from the page to watch Paul and Selena at their table. (I wasn’t sure at first which one fascinated her more. Everyone had their favourite.) After finishing breakfast Violet continued to watch them, but left as the cafe filled up for lunch.

She came in each morning and the next week she sat at a different table and gradually in this way she moved table by table closer to them.

Paul may have met Violet somewhere before or perhaps he just felt kind towards her (she’d been watching them for weeks). He nodded at her as she sat in her seat with her back to the wall and one of her big, loose bags across her lap covering and protecting her. She nodded back at him nervously. She seemed pleased that he acknowledged her, but I didn’t think then that it was Paul that she was after.

What was she like? I couldn’t help but like her: she was so polite and apologetic, but she said witty things too. She really was poor, scruffy even on some days, with her clothes a bit torn and not clean. One morning she came in looking very fresh. I said to her, “You’re looking nice today!”, and she laughed saying, “Laundry day.” That’s what I mean about her being modest. She was funny about herself.

Paul was writing somewhere else most days. After breakfast he would leave Selena with her workbook and go off, probably back to his apartment. She would write, drink coffee, leave and come back with a new book, a bunch of flowers, or groceries for me to keep in the cooler.

Friends came in and visited her in the afternoons. She'd have a glass of wine every so often.

Violet wanted to go up to her table, but was too terrified. One day I saw her rise to walk up the aisle to Selena, but just as she stood up a friend of Selena's came in. So Violet sat down again. Violet's responses were so easy to read: everything she felt crossed her body, and her face was like a play of its own. Selena's friend was confident and funny and quickly had her laughing heartily.

Both knew the other was there. I think Selena was waiting for Violet to take action. As the older woman came and went she too acknowledged the young poet with a simple nod. Violet could have just stood up and grabbed her in the aisle. But for Violet nothing was simple.

The next day Violet gave me a letter.

"You can read it," she said. I sat down with her and read it. It was a kind of poem.

"To the woman who writes in a cafe. You don't know of my existence, you wander up there in your heavens. Knowing that you might read these words they go to my head! My gestures, my tics, my impulses, my moments of dismay, my cries, my crises, my astonishments, my treasures, my ordures, my falls, my leaps, my waverings, my returns to stability, my ecstasies, my agonies, my collapses, my recoveries, my abasements, my errors, my humiliations, my crashes, my soaring ... words that from this moment on might belong to you. I am a bee on your flower."

Violet blushed as I read it. "Did you mean it to be a love poem?" I asked.

"Well yes, partly. But I also want her to read my work!" she said excitedly. "If she of all possible people likes it, well, I would be so pleased! Take it please. Take it and give it her!"

Violet put the note into an envelope, handed it back to me and left. The next morning Selena arrived with Paul. When I took their order I gave her the envelope.

"The woman who has been coming in lately gave this to me to give to you," I said to Selena.

"The woman with red hair? asked Paul. "Do you know her name then?"

Selena was reading the note. She folded it back into the envelope. "I'll ask her over when she comes in. Do you think she'll come in today?"

"She usually does," I said.

"I'll read it," said Paul.

She laughed. "Oh, you'll only get jealous! And maybe she wouldn't like you to see it? Hmm ... read it, but kindly."

After reading the note he said without a hint of feeling, "She's in love with you."

"Not just that. She's a poet too. I should have realized before and invited her to sit with me."

Violet arrived late that day. She came in hesitantly and sat down near the door. Her eyes slid up across the tables to the last, to Selena. I wanted to rush up to Violet and tell her she had succeeded. But Selena was faster still, and motioned to me to come over.

"Would you give her this?" she said and handed me a folded note.

"It's an invitation to have a coffee with her," said Violet flatly when she had read it. Then she smiled. "Would it be better to live or vanish?!" She got her bag and coat and went up to the far table. Selena looked particularly cheerful that day. Swinging one of her red shoes from the end of her foot, workbook and fountain pen in front of her, her lavender turban perfectly suited to the gentle afternoon light, she seemed very calm and alert.

"Shall we have coffee or would you prefer a glass of wine?" she asked.

Violet couldn't decide. "Whatever, you choose." She sat with her shoulders hunched and her hands under the table.

"So tell me about yourself."

Violet was slow to speak but Selena was genuinely interested and asked many questions. Yet Violet was still uncomfortable. At last she said what she needed to say before anything else.

"You know I really admire you," she said with difficulty. "Your work, what you think ..." She trailed off and sat slumped.

"It's kind of you to say so. But there's no need to feel terrible because of it!" Selena smiled.

"Actually," said Violet after a pause, "I have a book with me. It's typed - maybe you could read it?" Nervously, she brought from the voluminous bag a folder containing a thick manuscript. She slowly pushed it forwards until it was beyond her mere plot and in Selena's kingdom.

"Oh good. I shall read it tonight. I did like your note so much - you are a poet."

Selena had ordered food. As I was placing it on the cluttered table Violet tried to help me arrange things but instead spilt a drink. The liquid was running in all directions at once: towards Selena, Violet's manuscript, Selena's workbook, a purse, bag, newspaper, books. We were all hands picking things up, wiping and clearing. Soon it was done: the tablecloth changed, the drink replaced. Violet was mortified; Selena consoling.

"But where's my pen?" asked Selena suddenly. "My fountain pen? Maybe it's in my bag?" She searched in her bag.

"Maybe it fell on the floor!" said Violet and promptly got down onto her knees looking in the darkness around the seats for the pen. "I think I see it!" she said and crawled under the flap of the tablecloth where she couldn't be seen at all. Selena's legs were hidden by the cloth. She glanced downwards but then looked ahead of her as if nothing was happening. Her cheeks became a little flushed. She opened Violet's manuscript and tried to read. She started laughing. Was the manuscript so comic? Was Violet stroking her calves or simply appreciating the childish dark and dustiness and odours of the underside of Selena's table.

Just then Paul sauntered in, very cheery, calling for a coffee as he went to the table. He sat down. Selena was laughing away, shaking her head as if to say, "Oh no, not him!"

"What's so funny?" he asked, then quickly stood up, looking down appalled as Violet rose out from the gap between seat and table. First her red, dishevelled hair then all of her struggling with the narrow space, fountain pen in hand. She looked at him: startled, embarrassed and triumphant.

"What the hell? What is it?" he said to the blushing Selena, but laughing himself now too. Violet gave her the pen and sat down.

"Indescribable!" exclaimed Selena, fondling the dusty pen. "Thank you."

*fine line*

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# DID YOU EVER SEE INTERIORS?

JODI GALLAGHER

I met her because she was the friend of a friend. You get to meet most people like that ... at a party, or in the street, or somewhere. Usually I prefer to have people come to me ... I don't tend to cultivate friendships. Eventually they get tired of the constant courtship, and leave me in peace, but this one was more persistent than most. She was always there, telling me her life story, about the current boyfriend, or the current lack of a boyfriend. Before I knew what was happening, it had been ten years and she was my best friend, my oldest friend, the only person I really talked to. Or so she told people we met at parties, or on the street, or somewhere.

She was one of those people who reflects, like the moon. During her famed feminist period this became very useful ... she'd stress her lunar aspects while she read her cards and had her chart done ... her sensitivity to the seasons, some deep, dark connection to the earth that qualified her for politically correct status. The only effect I could see was that she could copy people, their tricks of speech. The way she dressed was always something that she'd seen someone else wear. Generally me.

Other friends of mine tended to forget who she was, call her by different names. She'd complain about it to me ... she thought it was a deliberate insult. I think it was because they couldn't pick this week's mannerisms and connect them to the last time they met her, and they were genuinely confused.

She was really good at it. People would mistake her for me when she answered the phone. I used to fantasise that she wanted it that way, imagine Agatha Christie scenarios. She'd pick up the phone and say "Hello," and the poor sod on the other end would pour out their latest scandal, their psychological traumas, the details of their court case ... whatever. She'd listen, smiling, taking notes. And then go away and tell everyone she knew about it. I'd get the blame, naturally, and eventually come face to face with the betrayed. Take the rap ... 'tis a far far better thing I do ... I never got the chance to be heroic, however. She was too smart, or too honest. I never decided which.

She always had money, money to go overseas, money for her copycat clothes, money to take me out to drink and see a band. That was where the attraction lay for me in the long run ... it's fun to be with someone who always pays. After a while I realised that she was paying for more than just the drinks ... the money was for the bits of me she took when I was drunk. She'd use them later, at first when I wasn't there. As she got

bolder, though, she'd do it with me standing right next to her ... stories about my childhood, my family. And she'd smile at me with the sense of a shared experience.

I suppose I could have blown her cover ... but I understood her too well. I know about image-mongering, I've done a fair bit of it myself. She did it so well, she was so convincing that most of the time I'd just smile back. It didn't seem that high a price for an audience that was so appreciative ... and so lucrative.

When she went overseas it was like having a mirror removed ... you didn't really miss it until you needed to check out what you looked like from the back. She sent me postcards, London, Paris, Rome. All the places you'd expect ... the Tower of London, the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum. When she got back, she showed me that she'd bought a silver spoon in each place. Seemed like when she was removed from the environment she'd become so adept at reflecting she reverted to some pre-artistic incarnation. All the borrowed pretensions bled away and you were left with a nice suburban girl. I got the feeling I might have liked her better like that ... a lot of the time it was painful to be with someone searching so hard for connections with the world she admired so much. If you saw a movie with an artist character named Kate in it, she'd jump at it, telling you that her middle name was Catherine. Or that she had an aunt called Katherine. Anything would do. A second cousin once removed who was born in the same town as Hockney ... that she'd been in a night club at the same time as David Bowie. We all do it ... brushes with the famous ... but there was an edge to this that took it from the commonplace to the obsessive.

She came home from England sooner than expected. I was doing my suffering artist bit at the time ... one of my better numbers, if a little hackneyed. I can't remember if it was rock and roll, or the great Australian novel that particular week ... it doesn't really matter, the accoutrements are always the same. Lots of black, closed curtains, and the world will be really sorry when they see that they let my genius go unrewarded. To die so young ... so talented. Not original, but effective. She latched on to it with a gleam in her eyes.

By this time, unfortunately, the gaps had started to show. It's like that with any role you write for yourself ... if it reaches a point when you can't convince yourself, you've got no chance with the public. Maybe in the nights when she lay there planning the next day's conversations, she hadn't done too good a job on herself. Because with me in my suffering artist phase, she really blew the plot. Took to telling people she was planning to do a degree in wall hangings. I think she meant textiles ... but she hadn't researched carefully enough to have the vocabulary pinned down.

She wrote poetry ... full of nice images with nice points to them. The incandescent sun rose over the city skyline a lot. She was always in

love with someone ... someone she had no chance with ... they were married, or living with someone, or they lived in Sydney. Lots of good, usable angst in impossible relationships ... and you never have to follow up or take the blame for them. When she was in love, the sun moved over for spider's webs in the poetry, webs across people's faces ... 'filling my mind with their complexity'. I suppose she felt she knew a lot about weaving webs.

Maybe that was the macrame connection, too.

During the day she worked in an office, doing the usual sort of stuff people do in offices ... filing, typing, avoiding the boss. She complained to me about the people she worked with ... they were so ordinary, she had nothing to say to them, they just didn't understand her. She could have been right about that ... I didn't understand her either. I could never see why she picked on me to hang around with ... if she was so good at playing games herself, how come she didn't pick up on the way I was doing it ... all the other people I knew were doing it too.

She got to be big on Jung and the collective unconscious. It earned her intellectual points at the office, maybe, but she still hadn't realised that she could have come up with the theory of relativity around my place and no one would have been impressed. The people I see most of the time disdain the proverbial book-learning ... it has to look as if you got it through some sort of osmosis at an early age. I used to picture her sometimes, memorising the titles on my shelves ... going out and buying them, reading them through at night so she could mention them intelligently in conversation when she got the chance.

It depressed me sometimes, seeing someone work so hard at it and not get anywhere. Maybe that was the secret of the friendship. I liked to see someone work so hard at being me and fail. Made it seem as if being me were more worthwhile.

But, as I said, she started to screw up. Buying the wrong records, wearing the wrong clothes, throwing away years of work with one admission of ignorance after another. Never, ever, say that you haven't heard of the latest band ... everyone's current favourite writer ... it just doesn't pay. Bullshit baffles brains. She suddenly stopped playing, turned honest ... and she was getting to be an embarrassment. You couldn't take her anywhere anymore, even if she was going to pay. After all, I'd been working at it as long as she had ... longer. I had my reputation to consider.

So I worked out a way to tell her ... you know those old advertisements, even your best friends won't tell you? They're right, I couldn't think of a nice way to get rid of her. So I took her to see a couple of my favourite movies. She was really pleased when I asked her ... I think she knew that she'd lost the plot and was looking for something new to borrow from ... she was sadly trusting me to guide her to the latest intellectual necessity. But they were old movies, even she'd

seen one of them. Annie Hall and Interiors. Playing on a convenient local double. She was a bit surprised, but she hadn't seen Interiors ... so along we went.

You see, I hoped she'd recognise herself in Interiors. I hoped she'd do what she always did, look up at the screen and IDENTIFY. Either realise that she wasn't very good at it, or start playing the game again, covering up her inadequacies with the whole panoply of convenient crap that we all use. Despite myself, I'd been cringing for her every time she made a mistake ... I wanted her to look at the three sisters and see that she was the one in the middle, the one with all the angst and none of the talent. And she understood the movie, none of it missed her ... she didn't even lean over to me and ask stupid questions all the time. She was riveted to the screen.

She was silent until we got outside. Then, "Wasn't it sad?" she said. And I agreed, still full of hope. She thought some more as we walked home.

"Wouldn't it be terrible to be like that? To have no talent, and keep hoping anyway?"

And I agreed, again.

# FIGHT NIGHT

## ARCHIMEDE FUSILLO

When they carried the mauled dog out past him, Des wondered at the efficiency of the jaws which had ripped open its neck. Blood had soaked the fur to a pulp, and it was difficult to believe what a savage mess a few swift bites could manage.

Des watched as a hessian sack was held open and the dog's legs bound with twine. When asked to hold the sack while the corpse was pushed in Des obliged without thought.

"Thanks mate," the shorter of the two men said and shouldered the bundle.

"What do you do with 'em now?" Des asked, nodding to the other sacks bunched together in the tray of the blue ute.

"Take 'em out to the Merri Creek and dump 'em, mate. Unless *you* want 'em." The taller man laughed and went into the shed again, leaving his companion to drop the sack into the ute.

Des rested against the iron fence at his back and looked down the lane, the cigarette he had come out to smoke still unlit between his lips.

There was a thud and then the ute settled again.

"Your first time, mate?" the shorter man asked, offering Des a light.

Des nodded. "Came with a friend."

"Oh yeah .... He likes the dogs then does he?"

Des shrugged his shoulders.

"You'd wanna get back inside. Sampson's next. You don't wanna miss Sampson."

"Sampson?"

"Yeah, Charlie's terrier. Top dog, great fighter. Nothin' more than a scratch in eight fights. Bloody champion dog."

Des drew on his cigarette and watched as the ute was driven off. He wondered who was driving it since he hadn't noticed anyone get in.

"Charlie's on a good thing with ol' Sampson. Last week he polished off six hundred bucks. Bloody dog's still a pup too." The man gave a low whistle. "Imagine when he's fully grown."

"Six hundred bucks," Des repeated with some scepticism.

"Yeah, six hundred bucks in one night. Com'on lets get inside. We don't want no neighbours taking a perv do we?"

Considering the neighbours were all present the last possibility was irrelevant, but Des followed quietly.

The shed was crowded with men jostling for a vantage spot around the corrugated-iron ring set in the middle and lit by two heavy-duty flood lamps from above. In the ring a stocky man with a pendulous belly was raking fresh saw-dust onto the floor. Around him the spectators barely noticed him and went on talking in low voices.

Weaving slowly in and out of the men walked a woman. She was tall and thin with peroxide-red hair and dressed without concern for appearance. She carried an old tram-conductor's bag across her shoulder and collected the bets from her customers.

She and the man in the ring were husband and wife. This was their shed, in their backyard, and these men were their neighbours, their friends, their associates.

Des puffed at his cigarette and when it came his turn to bet he found he needed information on both the contenders.

"Sampson's undefeated," the woman told him, "So that explains his odds. Caligula is new, unknown. We give her the benefit of the doubt. Now what's your bet?"

Karl, Des' mate, put ten dollars on Sampson and urged Des to do the same. Des obliged.

"Wait till you see Sampson," Karl said excitedly. "He'll rip the bloody daylight's out of Caligula. Last week they had to rope him he went so flaming banana's on his opponent ..." He paused and nodded toward the door. "That's Charlie there. Sampson's his dog."

Des looked over, and there in the doorway stood a heavy-set man with the biggest head Des had ever seen. He was bald-headed and wore dark spectacles, and stood grinning at something the householder's wife said to him. Beside him stood a very frail-looking girl, barely out of her teens. She looked puzzled and uncertain, keeping very close to him. Rugged up in a waist-length duffle-coat she gave the impression of someone who had been out in the cold for too long and now suffered from exposure.

There was a loud round of whistling and clapping as Sampson was led in. A massive, muscular dog, he paced up and down on his lead and head-butted Charlie's leg with little regard to the kick that followed each such action.

"What d'you reckon eh, some bloody dog or what," Karl said with undisguised admiration.

"What's he worth?" Des asked.

"They reckon about twelve, fifteen hundred, something like that. And worth every penny too."

"Who's the shiela with Charlie?"

"Dunno, some tart he takes along every week." Then Karl sat back and looked off toward the ring where the challenger was being settled by her handlers.

"They reckon Charlie's got another two just like Sampson waiting to come out. At that rate he'll make a killing and retire soon."

"From what?"

"Works for Gas and Fuel. Shit job he reckons. Soon as he cracks a thousand a week from the dogs he'll chuck it in. Go full-time in this."

Des narrowed his eyes, looking closely at the challenger. He felt glad now that he'd backed Sampson.

"And he can make good money doing this once a week you reckon," he said after a few moments. In his head the idea of chucking in his own job as a bank clerk asserted itself again.

"No, no way, not once a week. Charlie lets Sampson fight three times a week. Friday night here. Thursday out bush ... Big business out bush. Plenty of bloody farmers with sweet F.A. to blow their cash on, so this is the big lure ... And Monday's across the border."

"How long's he been in ... this?"

"Couple of months ... he got Sampson off a bloke who got busted and had to sell off his dogs. He turned up here one night, bloody dog rips the shit out of the reigning champ, and suddenly Charlie's got himself a fighter ..."

Des wanted to ask more questions but the man with the pendulous body called out for quiet and introduced the dogs and their owners. Half an hour later, Caligula was bound and put aside, her owner cursing and swearing and blaming a bout of dog-influenza as the excuse for Caligula's defeat. And though he argued unfair advantage against Caligula, he had to content himself with cleaning up the mess and paying out his loss.

Charlie on the other hand held Sampson in the air and walked out without comment. Des was impressed.

A few minutes later and the householder's wife was back, begrudgedly paying out wins and yelling at her husband to stop the men from putting cigarette butts into her potted plants.

And though Karl stayed on, Des left after collecting his meagre winnings and hitched a ride in the ute which by then had returned to collect Caligula.

\*

Waiting in the car wasn't Des's idea of passing time, so he got out to help with the sack, nestling Caligula comfortably on Jack's shoulder.

Jack led the way in the dark, guided by repetition. The ground was steep and densely vegetated, but Jack moved swiftly, parting branches with one arm while holding onto the sack with the other.

At the foot of the creek they stopped and Jack dropped Caligula without ceremony.

“Get us some rocks will you. Just there by the reeds,” he told Des, who did as asked without comment.

“Bloody things bloat and come bobbing up to the surface,” Jack explained as he opened the mouth of the sack and dropped rock after rock into it with sickening thuds as they crushed Caligula’s head. “But weigh them down some with a few rocks and you’re right ... Grab the rope from me back pocket. Good, now latch it round here twice and then just hold the ends and pull tight.”

Des worked the rope quickly and handed the ends to Jack who secured them and then heaved the sack as far as he could toward the middle of the creek.

They waited a moment in case the splash should attract attention then returned to the ute.

“Did you win anything?” Jack asked without inviting reply.

“Some,” Des replied nonetheless.

“Charlie’s got the thing in a bag ... if you’ll excuse the expression,” Jack smirked and reversed the ute quickly. “It’d take a bloody bull, literally, to knock Sampson out ... Tell you what though, just between you and me, it’s a mug’s sport. Only the bloody owners make any real money. If I had me the money I know a real bloody dog that’d make everyone stop and take note ... Wife and three kids, a man just can’t allow his-self the luxury. Old lady wouldn’t understand any-way. She thinks I go to the hounds of a Friday,” he laughed, turned into the street. “Ain’t no bloody sport them dogs chasing a pretend rabbit. It’s like bloody golf, a pretend sport. You know what I mean?”

Des nodded, but not because he understood about pretend sports, or golf even for that matter.

“How much you need for that dog you’re on about?” he asked.

Jack whistled. “I got five hundred put away, so I guess ... about another six or seven hundred ... Why?”

“Just wondering, that’s all”, Des replied, then settled back and gave Jack the directions to his bungalow, where he lived alone save for an adopted turtle he’d found by a storm-water drain several weeks earlier.

“Hey Des”, Jack called as Des shut the car door and turned to go. He leaned across the seat and held out a piece of paper.

“What’s this?” Des asked taking the paper.

“Me phone number. Just in case you wanna talk over what’s going through your mind”, Jack replied with a knowing grin. And with that he left.

Des fingered the paper, rolled it between his fingers absent-mindedly then shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. Down the street he watched as Jack’s ute stopped then made a swift left turn and was gone. Other than the cats chasing each other next door the street was barren and

Des stood rocking on the balls of his feet until he became conscious of the cold and went inside.

He'd made up his mind that Sampson wasn't unbeatable.

\*

It was three weeks before Jack called back that they had won the bidding and Anzac was theirs. Des splurged on a few cans and together he and Jack celebrated until they fell asleep in the vegetable patch behind Des's bungalow.

In the ute Anzac sat up and let his claws find exercise in ripping the stuffing from the seat.

The following Thursday Jack left his wife after a violent brawl over Anzac. They both moved in with Des, and while Anzac made his own the mattress Des salvaged from his landlady's garage, Jack contented himself with Des's solitary armchair and foot-stool.

Taking turns walking and feeding Anzac, Des and Jack elaborated their plans, Jack figuring on how he would win back his wife by becoming the success he had threatened her he would be, and Des hunting out all possible venues for Anzac's domination.

It was apparent to them both that Anzac could not only beat Sampson, but dispose of him. The reason had something to do with gut-feelings, and Jack said over and over that he always acted on gut reaction.

"Just like when I gave you my number, Des. It was a gut feeling. Something about you. Dunno what though", he'd remind Des.

"What about your wife?" Des would ask just as often.

"I'll invite her to the celebration booze on," Jack would laugh.

And with Anzac pacing outside on his lead they would sit and scheme, and let themselves be consumed by the passion for glory over Charlie. It became their obsession, and they were lost to it.

They'd made up their minds that Anzac was unbeatable. And so were they.

\*

Karl was in the shed already when Des and Jack walked in, leaving Anzac in the car. He looked at Des and grinned.

"Taken a liking to blood-sports have you," he said and passed across a bottle of gin from which both Des and Jack took a quick swig.

Des grinned, sat down and looked around him at the same parade of men, the pendulous bellied ring-master, his wife, their young son who collected the entrance fee from the participants and at Charlie, who as

usual sat with his girl drinking from a can and nodding his head as though calculating his thoughts.

Beside him Jack sat, hands gripping his knees, eager to get on with it.

"Not driving the ute tonight Jack?" Karl asked.

Jack looked at him, then at Des, as though for support. When Karl went on Jack was relieved in not having to answer.

"I heard me some rumours," Karl said slowly. "You reckon they might be true Des?"

For some minutes Des didn't answer but waved pendulous-belly's wife over and placed a bet on the next fight. She took it and smiled at him coyly.

Des realized he ought to have let Karl in on Anzac, but had decided on a whim to keep it a two-man venture. Now he could only stand his ground and not be intimidated.

"Seems someone reckons they can knock off old Sampson," Karl went on. "Strange if you haven't heard about it; word gets around so easily." He sat back, lit a cigarette and grinned to himself. "Better be a bastard of a good dog to live up to what they claim it'll do. Charlie ain't happy about it that's for sure."

Des kept quiet and concentrated his attention on Charlie who sat now with eyes fixed on him. How word had got around Des had no idea. But beside him with his hands gripping both knees in an anxious stupor was probably the best clue.

"Relax Jack," he said in a comforting tone.

"He don't look none too happy Des," Jack replied hesitatingly. "None too bloody happy at all."

"Yeah, relax Jack, Charlie's not a bad bloke. Bit of a mean bastard when he's pissed off, but otherwise he's all right," Karl smirked, obviously enjoying himself at Jack's expense.

Des looked at Karl a moment then back at Charlie, who was sitting forward now, eyes still fixed steadily on him. Des felt an odd sense of bravado at the thought of tackling Charlie, more-so because his lady friend was with Charlie and had even now smiled at him.

"Part of the spoils you reckon mate," Karl observed. He sat forward. "You could have her now mate. It's the dog he worries about, not that cheap tart."

"We'll do it eh Des. We'll do it, what d'you reckon," Jack began, rocking now slowly back and forth, his eyes glazed with tension. "I'll show the old lady I'll show her. Never amount to much eh ... We'll do it eh Des?"

But Des didn't answer. He merely sat and stared across at Charlie, resisting him, blocking out his fear. No one had ever come right out and

said what they were going to do to Sampson, no-one. That was the situation, the problem.

Jack's problem was lack of faith. Des's problem was Jack.

When the dogs were finally called up it was Des who went to retrieve Anzac, not Jack as planned. Jack sat where he was and drank freely from Karl's bottle of gin, while Karl sat and watched the proceedings with amused detachment.

Anzac was restless and snapped viciously as Des led him into the shed. There was a swift taking of breaths when they entered, but no-one uttered a word until Sampson was brought in muzzled and with legs bound, his eyes livid with pent up anger at being so constrained. Then the crowd began talking amongst themselves and kept pendulous-belly's wife busy taking bets against Anzac.

Once in the ring the dogs were held back only by their leads as they pulled and tugged, and snapped wildly into the air.

"To the death?" asked pendulous-body of both owners.

Charlie nodded immediately. Des looked up at Jack, but he was busy swinging the gin.

"Yeah, all right," Des replied in a voice asserting, but not quite achieving, total conviction.

A moment later the dogs were released. They butted and snapped, turned, bit, dug in with all four claws, and let out howls of pain and hatred that stopped all talk and movement in the shed.

Even Jack sat in stunned silence, his eyes unable to pick Anzac in the flurry of limbs that spun about the ring.

Later he couldn't recall the second shot, only the first deafening reverberating echo that shattered under the tin of the shed. But Karl told him about it, about how Charlie stood up, pulled a pistol from his belt and shot first Anzac and then put a bullet clearly through Des's forehead.

They were standing by the bank of the creek when Karl told him about the second shot and how it actually came about. At his feet Jack had two sacks, both weighed down with rocks. He was dazed and afraid, his eyes like shiny copper, glazed. He worked mechanically, without thought, his blue ute parked up in the scrub behind him.

"Go home to your wife, Jack," Karl said gently when they had started back for the ute. "Charlie's got nothing on you mate."

Jack climbed into the car, on the passenger side, Karl got in at the wheel. It was cold and raining, and the air was close and threatening.

"But what do I say to her?" he asked slowly, hands resting on his lap, staring straight ahead at the frosted windscreen.

Karl turned the ignition.

"Tell her you've given away the dogs. Tell her you'll be home from now on."

# SEEING FAT-ARSE AGAIN

POLLY SEDDON

I saw Carol in the subway. I saw Carol, disappearing up one of those cement ramps in the tiled tunnels marked DO NOT SPIT. I recognised her by her bottom. I am sure it was her. Carol and I used to be very close.

She's married to a gardener and has three children and a dog. The dog is pregnant. They live in North Balwyn in a house raised up on posts, as if it should have been part of a holiday village but the architect missed. Carol's husband is in crisis. Carol herself isn't too well either, or at least, that's what I heard. I prefer not to gossip. You never know if it's lies. Lies, lies, lies. Carol may be married to a computer programmer with a face like a stuffed anchovy, for all I know.

But I'm sure it was her. We used to borrow each other's jeans. She had very fat thighs. They were *very* fat. When Carol returned a pair of jeans you could stick a couple of poles down the legs and use them for a tent. Anyway, according to Esme, and who'd believe her, Carol's going through a bit of a *rough patch*. Her parents were both killed at Flemington, Esme says. By a horse. And they were the only animals Carol didn't like. At High School she refused to sit on one, which was very unfortunate, considering it was a pony camp. We spent most of the time photographing each other feeding the pig.

According to Esme, Carol should have been a vet. Esme says Carol has a natural affinity with animals. That's about all she has an affinity with, Esme says. And who knows if even that affinity exists, now that her parents have been knocked off by a horse. Esme says it *stampeded* through the grounds, crushing bottles of champagne.

I really couldn't tell how Carol was feeling, though. Not just by looking at her bottom. I think it was the same pair of jeans. You'd think she's have put on even *more* weight, after squeezing out that string of brats she had. She already was a fat old sow. In fact, I'd swear those jeans were the ones I lent her, the ones she stretched with her enormous bottom when she went out with *my* boyfriend, the gardener, without telling me. Esme told me. Then Carol disappeared.

As a matter of fact, the last time I saw Carol she was pashing on with some faceless male at a new years party. Right into it, she was. Stupid cow. Wearing *my* jeans. Esme says Carol's *been up to things*, and *fooled the lot of us*. That's what Esme says, anyway.

I really liked that boyfriend, the one fat old Carol stomped away with, with her oversize posterior crammed into my jeans. No wonder I

recognised her disgusting overblown wobbling arse. I think she owes me an apology. I'm going to *ask* Esme about that.

So, Mr and Mrs Fat Arse Gardener. I wonder if Esme knows where they live. I could ring information. They might have heard of Esme. Who does Esme think she is, anyway? Carol and I used to be very close. Once. Before Esme turned up. Esme sticks her nose into everything. At least Carol wasn't a gossip. If she had been, she'd have known not to talk to Esme.

I wonder how those two know each other, anyway. Perhaps they borrow each other's jeans. Esme couldn't, though. Not on Esme. Not big fat enormous boyfriend-stealing Carol's jeans on little beaky Esme. Esme'd disappear, we'd be saying, oh! Jeans, where'd you get your Esme? They'd come right up to her viola. Poor little Esme. Which reminds me, there's that concert. With Esme in it. In the second row, at the back, she said. The very back. But Esme didn't put it that way, you don't when you're at the Conservatorium. Esme says *Music makes up for everything*. She ought to teach Carol and I to play duets, then.

If Esme thinks Carol's so awful why do they keep seeing each other? Big fat Carol and little beaky Esme. Esme must see her a lot, to know all this stuff. Esme must babysit. She must know all Carol's children, how tall they are, how old, how many teeth they have and which one burped first. I bet she knows Carol's husband pretty well, too. I used to know him well once. I wonder how well Esme knows him? She couldn't know him *that* well. Let's see, she's known Carol oh, about, oh, would be about, just about the time I stopped seeing Carol, about three years. About how long I knew Mr Average Gardener before I met Carol.

Where *is* that invitation? There it is. The Late Night Philharmonic Plays Vivaldi at the Civic Centre. 8 p.m. Soloist, Esme Prendergast. 8 p.m. Esme - that's her name, isn't it? Is her name Prendergast? Does she come from a family of Prendergasts? She told me she was *last* in the line of second violas. Just what is her game, anyway? Soloist Esme Prendergast, Melbourne Conservatorium. Well there couldn't be two of them. Imagine the phone bills. Well! I don't think Esme *wanted* me to see her being soloist. I think Esme is a teensy-weensy selfish. Perhaps I can catch the second half of the program. Well, well. And what do we see here. Layout, Carol Burton. *I'll* say. That's what she was doing when she was supposed to be popping babies. Layout. She must have done three years to get graphic experience like that.

I suppose they're all sitting there, Mr Average Gardener next to circular Carol, Carol squashed into her seat like a frilly cupcake, followed by a line of dribbling Fat Arse Gardening Cherubs. All watching scrawny old Esme saw through solos on her viola. Mr Average Gardener with his eyes firmly fixed on Esme's slender wrists. On the capable muscles in her upper arms. It says here she won the Yehudi Menuhin Travelling Scholarship for Single Women Under Thirty. Is Esme *that* young. Esme

really doesn't look that good, not for someone under thirty. She's aged a lot in the last three years, she really has. I wonder how much Carol has aged. Or Mr Average Gardener. I really shouldn't call him Mr Average. I might meet him one day. I might say, oh! Mr Average, how are Fat Arse and all the dribbling cherubs? Max, is his name. Max Williams. Carol obviously hasn't taken his name. She's obviously a rather different Carol than Esme let on. In fact, I wonder about beaky little Esme. I think Carol may be a good deal more captivating than little shrivelled Esme likes. I wouldn't mind seeing Carol again. We were good friends, before Esme turned up. I wouldn't mind having a look at Max, either. Max was really very cute. I can forgive Carol. Esme is in for it, though. I'm getting a fair idea what Esme's up to. I wonder if Carol knows about Esme? I wonder if Carol's still got that pair of jeans?

# INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF GOODFELLOW

Wakefield Press, a South Australian publishing house, has recently issued the fifth impression of *No Collars No Cuffs*.. Not bad for a poetry title that Friendly St. Poets were originally hesitant to get into print for Adelaide Writers' Week, March, 1986. But Friendly St. did take the initial gamble and the book received excellent reviews in *The Advertiser* and *Australian Book Review*. Within six months a second impression of a further 1,000 copies was produced - again by Friendly St. Notwithstanding the fact that the book received little more in the way of comprehensive reviews, a third impression, again by Friendly St., was released in March, 1988, coinciding with Goodfellow being awarded the inaugural Carclew Fellowship at the South Australian Festival Awards for Literature; along with the announcement that he was off to tackle Canada, U.S.A., U.K., Europe, and China with live readings.

In March, 1989, Michael Bollen, a former Tennyson Medal winner, sold his Adelaide hills home and bought Wakefield Press from Christopher Pearson (who still runs the prestigious *Adelaide Review*), deciding that Adelaide needed a serious book publisher. Bollen realised that he was tackling a difficult market and enlisted Goodfellow's support. He was aware of Goodfellow's ability to not only write and perform his own poetry, but also to market his product.

He signed Goodfellow up on a three book contract; taking the Friendly St. logo off *No Collars No Cuffs* and immediately issuing a fourth impression of 1,000 copies with the Wakefield logo (it went to a fifth impression in October, 1989); then engaged Graham Rowlands to edit Goodfellow's prepared manuscript and launched *Bow Tie & Tails* in a first print run of 2,500 copies, appropriately enough at the Old Adelaide Gaol, on Sunday, August 27, 1989; the third book, a novel, tentatively titled *Larrikins In The Lounge Bar* is scheduled for a 1990 release with a minimum print run of 5,000 copies.

**Geoff, how are sales going and where are the buyers coming from?**

Well, *No Collars No Cuffs* has certainly moved. I guess there are about 4,250 copies spread around the place. Of them, I suppose I've sold around 3,000 personally at readings and workshops. And *Bow Tie & Tails* has taken off like a beauty. Even now, only eight weeks after the launch, more than half of them are sold. My publisher, Michael Bollen, has been responsible for most of those sales though. Michael is on the

ball, he's young and he's keen. It's a big relief for me knowing that he's got reps. out there knocking on bookshop doors. We've struck a deal which still allows me to sell books - and I need to be able to do that - but I do want more time for writing and performing. I guess I've sold about 400 copies of *Bow Tie & Tails* personally while I've been touring over the past few weeks. My sales are mainly to non-traditional types; men and women who may have never bought a book in their life before - and who'd probably never ever considered buying a book of poetry. But I guess most of my stuff can be understood easily - people buy it because it's familiar and recognisable and it uses their language.

**What turned you on to poetry? When did you begin writing and why?**

I was incapacitated in 1982 and spent a lot of months on my back. By 1983 I was really bored and picked up the first book I came across. It was poetry. Banjo Patterson's *Selected Verse*. After reading it a couple of times I thought I had something to say and I thought poetry would be a good medium for me. It seemed you could say a lot in just a few words. Because it is a compact medium it didn't seem a daunting challenge - of course I've woken up since then that it's a bloody hard slog.

**Where did you give your first reading, and why?**

I'd heard about Friendly St., so I went along to check it out. I suppose listening to other people gives you an idea of where you may stand in a pecking order. I didn't think that I had a lot to lose by jumping up. That was in 1983 and Friendly St. was a pretty interesting place. Eric Beach, Jenny Boulton and Neil Paech were all regulars - and supportive - and I met and heard people like I.I.O., Shelton Lea, yourself, and a lot of others who would breeze in to Adelaide. It was a good platform to share ideas - and a good place to be able to pick up small press publications to see what others were doing.

**Which have been some of your more memorable readings?**

That first reading I did at Friendly St. is one I'll never forget. I read one poem while hiding behind my sheet of paper, red-faced, wondering if it was in fact a poem. But it didn't take long for my confidence level to jump.

I really enjoyed reading at the 1984 Montsalvat Poetry Festival. That was my first interstate reading and it went down really well. I enjoyed it as much as the audience - and it got me other engagements. I recall it as my 'coming-out' reading. The Harold Park Hotel is another favourite venue for me - I always look forward to appearing there when I'm in Sydney. I think it's because I see the audience as just that, they are an audience - not a bunch of performers waiting for their turn.

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### **Which poets do you like to listen to or read?**

If I'm reading American poetry I'll put Bukowski, Raymond Carver and Etheridge Knight on the menu. I like stuff that's accessible and says something about working class people. Naturally I like the same style in an Australian tone. Without singling out the locals I think it's fair to say I enjoy most of our performance poets. It's only when they jump up and start reading poems about advertising for a fuck that they turn me off. Bukowski loses me at times with his sexism - but he always wins me back with his overall humanity.

### **Which prose writers do you enjoy reading?**

Tim Winton and Helen Garner both rate highly with me - as does Barbara Hanrahan. Robertson Davies, the Canadian, is another favourite. I really enjoy biographies. I'm a dead-set lover of social realism. My life revolves around people so my reading is geared very much around seeing how other people run their races.

### **What do you think are the differences between poetry and prose?**

I think poetry is like mathematics. For me, it's the compression of language back to its lowest common denominator. And it allows words to take leaps and bounds. Prose fills in a lot of the gaps that have to be avoided in poetry and gives the writer more scope to convey detail.

### **How do you tell the difference between good and not-so-good writing?**

How do you tell the difference between restaurants? You eat from a lot of menus until you build up a list of restaurants that suit your taste and palate. But you don't avoid going to the new ones just because they are new. Some of the up and coming apprentices are pretty sharp. You can miss a treat through being a snob. And I suppose you can read the food columns too as a guide.

### **How do you react to (any) uncomplimentary remarks by reviewers? Do you think reviewers in Australia do a good job?**

I've been lucky so far and haven't been driven to the point of despair by a reviewer. I suppose it will happen. No one likes to be criticised - I suppose we all want praise and recognition for our efforts if we're serious. But we can't expect everyone to agree with us one hundred per cent. I haven't had to deal with much written criticism so far - I hear a bit of verbal every so often - and I take it to heart I suppose. I retreat into myself, curl up in the foetal position in a dark room and sulk; carry on like a big kid after slamming a few doors and yelling and screaming ... but I come good the next day. I think you need to analyse what's being

said and then make a judgement as to whether it's valid or not. We can all make mistakes - even those who criticise. Personally, I like to hang on to stuff for a while after I've written it to make sure myself. My old man always used to say to me, "hurry slowly." I think that was good advice.

Generally speaking I think reviewers in Australia do a good job. Everyone has some bias I suppose - but if a reviewer has a personal bias against a writer then I think that he/she should return the book and allow a more independent assessment to be published. Critics are in a very powerful position and I don't think they should abuse their power. But well reasoned, constructive criticism obviously has its place.

**You'd have to be one of Australia's hardest working, most organised poets? Where did you learn these skills?**

I'm hardworking because I enjoy what I'm doing. I like interacting with people. I guess I'm organised because I was socialised in a household where organisation seemed important. And if you work for yourself - as I've done most of my life, you have to hone those skills finely to be effective. I used to be an employer and had the responsibility of organising a dozen men working six days a week for some years. You learn from that. My old man is very organised. I used to watch him work when I was a boy and learnt a lot from him. He was a fairly patient man and would always demonstrate why he did things a certain way. I'm similar to him I suppose - without being quite so patient or pedantic.

**Do you have a writing routine? How often do you re-draft a poem - many of them are well-crafted; does this come naturally or do you have to work at it?**

When I'm hot I'm hot and when I'm not I'm cold. I don't have a routine for writing poetry, I don't know how anyone could have. But I am prepared to get out of bed at 1.00am, write until 7.00am, then shower and go out to do a reading at 9.00. If I resist that urge then I'll lose the thrust of what I was going to say. I don't think a poem can be put on 'hold'. Poetry demands to be written. And my poetry demands to be re-written. I find it essential to re-draft and shape the poem. Seldom does a poem get published under seven or eight drafts. My poem, *Time After Time* is in its thirty-second draft in BOW TIE & TAILS. That's perhaps a bit unusual - but it goes to show the energy that I'm prepared to invest. I believe that if you're going to put yourself on the line you've got to be prepared to back yourself up. You've got to believe what you've said is right. By the time I publish a poem I'm prepared to defend it vehemently.

**When I read my work in public I'm often nervous before a reading, generally in control during the reading and left with "the shakes" after a reading. How is it with you?**

Generally speaking I'm not nervous before a reading. I do feel a bit anxious though when I step out the front, until I've got the first poem out - and if I can see the audience connect, I'll really enjoy the performance. I often feel lonely after a reading - probably because my stuff is so confrontative it can isolate me. I think a lot of people see the anger and aggression that I portray and think that I'm that third party. I also feel I perform better as a solo artist among non-poets. In a festival or on a big program of readers I'm always aware that I'm being judged by my contemporaries. I also think there's a school who deliberately try to put you off your game - before you read or while you're reading. And it's hard to put your finger on the pulse as to why. I think sometimes it's because they know you're going to draw a good audience response and they want to try to take that away from you. I think that can certainly be said about some of the more esoteric poets. With others who are more into the performance scene I think it's often a reaction to your delivery and style - or I suppose it may even get back to your content and the fact that they have seen the same thing yet have missed the opportunity of covering it. I guess I could go on theorising but it's not going to change things. I think it's a sad reflection on the scene though and I don't believe I'm paranoid in thinking it's a reality. I've discussed the issue with a couple of accomplished performers who agree wholeheartedly and we all agreed that it's there. I think it may even be an Australian trait. America is certainly different. They try to pump you up and boost you and that's a much more wholesome way to work I reckon.

**Performance Poets have tried to reach out to new audiences in order to give poetry back to the people; they have gone, like yourself, into prisons, schools, markets, factories, music venues, etc. What effect do you think this is having in Australia?**

I think it's having a big effect on a lot of ordinary people by showing them that their lives are worth recording. It's also showing them that art is achievable by ordinary people - men and women just like themselves. It's breaking down those elitist barriers, barriers that have often been created and perpetuated by educational institutions. It's also providing proof that some people are deriving an income from writing - and that gives credibility to artists as well as hope to others. And it serves to strengthen our culture when Australians see their colloquial language and speech patterns being recorded and published and marketed as literature. It expands the book buying public too because all these people are potential customers once they've been exposed. They can see the connection points and that pleases them I think. Suddenly they're no longer just a clock-card number, a cell-number or another forgettable face on Bogan Street. But I'd be having myself on if I were to say that everyone can be won over to the idea of poetry. There was a bloke in the carriage of a train I was

reading on as we travelled interstate. I was trying to entertain the passengers for ANR. This bloke kept calling out all through my performance, "Do you know any jokes - I don't like poetry." I was ignoring him but he wouldn't go away. After the third poem I said, "Well I met you ten minutes ago - I reckon that qualifies me." That shut him up. I don't think any poet would win that bloke over - but I'm writing now to a bloke from Canada who was just amazed that ANR would employ a poet to entertain the passengers. He and his family just lapped up my performance and bought books to take home with them. I think Australia is ahead of the world in a lot of ways. It's still an adventurous country populated with risk takers - and we shouldn't lose sight of that.

**Are you optimistic about the short-term future of poetry? Do you think the 1990's will become the decade of the writer?**

I'm optimistic about the long term future of poetry too! Providing one is prepared to invest energy, time and commitment, anything is possible. Australia is such a young country that I believe the 1990's can become the decade of anything for anybody. Stepping outside of Australia for six months during 1988 convinced me that Donald Horne certainly got his words right. We have to live with optimism - if we have to wear pessimism, let's have it in reflection.

**In a recent newspaper article you say that violence, boredom, sexual harassment and racism are major problems in our society. Do you think a poet (or any writer) can change people's attitudes?**

I don't think writers can change people's attitudes directly, but I do believe they can challenge people's value system by honing in on particular areas. I think writing has the power to stimulate people and take them past known boundaries. This is not to say that poetry or prose can change the world - but I think it can and often does provide a mechanism to allow change to occur. I often use a poem in this way in workshops. I go in to state and private schools, youth detention centres, gaols, youth shelters - a whole range of places where there are both victims and perpetrators and winners and losers - and I often see my stuff open the doors to debate. The discussion that follows a reading often causes healthy and unhealthy attitudes to surface - but the safety of the environment allows issues to be used in a passionate way. I think it's through such discussion that change can really be facilitated.

But just words on the page mightn't be enough. I think the performance of those words is equally important: it shows the audience what a powerful force language can be.

**What are your plans for the future? Did Ken Kesey teach you about novel-writing?**

I'm keen to see schools, colleges and universities adopt the style of poetry written by myself and my peers. I'd like to give that a push. I'd also like to publish a novel next year and I'm working towards that. I stayed with Kesey for a couple of weeks in Eugene and he's convinced me I can do it. He's also suggested I should write it with a view to it becoming a film script. He believes I've got a natural knack for handling dialogue and thinks I can show Australians to a lot of people. He's a confident man and he exudes confidence to others. I think that's an American trait. He told me back in 1986 when we first met that if I kept writing poetry I'd be living in a trailer (sic) when I was sixty. I'm starting to draw up plans for a house now. And right now I'm off to find my scale ruler.

*Interview conducted by Myron Lysenko by correspondence during the summer of 1989.*

# THE LIFESTYLES OF PREVIOUS TENANTS

BARBARA WELS

## I CAN'T LIVE WITH THIS DAMN DOG

You're coming out of the shower when one of your housemates announces, oh by the way, I'm moving to Guatemala. Or: I can't live with this damn dog any longer. Or: I guess I should tell you, I'm pregnant.

Before you find some deodorant and decide what to have for breakfast, everyone who isn't moving to Guatemala, or sick of the dog, or pregnant, finds a good reason to move out too. Suddenly the ceilings look stained and the landlord is not such a character anymore. You notice that no one has cleaned the stove in months.

You are filled with new bourgeois desires. You want to live somewhere aesthetically pleasing, without broken windows and abandoned cars under the washing line, with matching coffee cups. Somewhere with room to have dinner parties which will attract flamboyant and creative people. You have an unfulfilled longing to master Argentinian cooking. You admit the truth. You only moved into this house because you had a crush on the person who moved out two months ago, the one who promised to collect their dog as soon as their new lease was signed. This time it will be different.

## BOURGEOIS LUST

A group of you band together, talk, plan. You have a crush on at least one of them. Someone efficient makes notes. You want a house with character near the city, four bedrooms, a dining room, decent lino in the kitchen, a hot-water system, fireplaces...you want this, you want that and it must be cheap.

On Saturdays and Wednesdays you get up early to steal the paper out of your neighbour's garden. You devote space on the kitchen table to the real estate section, which you initial with coffee stains and cigarette ash. At first you're interested in particular suburbs, then the number of bedrooms, then prices. Your eyes go funny after a while so you do it the other way around, prices, number of bedrooms, suburbs.

At every house you see the same prospective tenants. At the good houses you smile at one another and then, armed with charm and good intentions, corner the landlords in laundries and wood-sheds. Some of your rivals produce character references and marriage certificates. At the bad houses, united in your resignation, you compare notes: What do you think?

Is that man the owner?

Is that blood on the ceiling?

Small hot-water system for a four bedroom place.

You find a house, it's not actually bad. It has potential. You weigh up the pros and cons. The garden's great, you could grow vegies, kitchen's big, fireplaces, train station, deli, phone...the bathroom's a bit scungy but bathrooms are always scungy and the carpets could do with a clean.

You say: Yes we're very interested.

The landlord says: I've got lots of people interested, you'll have to let me know now.

Under that gorgeous willow tree in the front garden you confer. What do you *think*? What do *you* think? It's not actually bad. It has potential. And there is a fan in the toilet.

## THE COURTESIES OF LANDLORDS

This time you're going to be really assertive. You meet at the new house, you call it by street. A Street, B Road, C Avenue. You meet the landlord. They have the lease. You have the list of demands. It is very political. You negotiate your demands while one of you, the efficient but unassertive one, stalks the house discovering new cons: peeling paint, broken locks, leaky toilet. It's hard to be assertive and charming at the same time.

The landlord says: Oh but the last tenants, look at the mess they've left. Some people never pay their rent on time.

You say: We're not like that.

The landlord says: And look at this, like pigs, disgusting, but you seem like nice people. You're reasonable. I'm reasonable.

You say: Yes, we're reasonable.

The landlord says: I'm a reasonable person. You see it works two ways and you sign here and the bond's six weeks rent. The last tenants, oh you would not believe it. I came in here and would you believe! I said to my husband/ I said to my wife, I can't believe these people. Like pigs. Disgusting.

(You all shake your heads and make clicking noises.)

You say: And the window?

The landlord says: I'll come around this week, fix the windows mow the lawn, just haven't had time you must understand how it is. The lock's not a problem, it's very safe. No-one's ever broken in here.

(You mutter).

The landlord continues: Terrible people nowadays and the toilet's not a problem, my toilet at home is like that. See you do this and it won't do it anymore. Simple.

You loathe looking for houses. You sign the lease.

## **FOR THE LAST TIME**

Moving is a problem, this will be the last time you swear. How did you come to own all this stuff? Funny how your room looked bigger before. But you'll put this here and that there no maybe over here a blind and when that window's fixed...

You get some milk, acquaint yourself with the milkbar, the fish and chips shops. There's a restaurant on the corner. It looks great, the menu seems to be written in braille and there's also a dentist. It must be three years since you've thought about dentists and there's a shop nearby which sells nothing but cameras from 1954. You're also around the corner from that cafe with the gluten-free cakes and the experimental bands. You introduce yourself to the neighbour, seems nice, interested in cacti.

You notice a thing in the garden. It would be good for wood for the fires, also there's an aerial on the roof. Maybe you can watch SBS without one of you holding the antennae. But that television is someone else's, the one who you had a crush on, the one who left the damn dog behind. If you ask them to collect the dog they're bound to take the television as well.

## **TALKING SAFELY**

You go to your landlord's house to pay the first rent in freshly rolled fifty dollar notes. You act friendly and you are invited to stay for lunch, something with meat in it. You are a vegetarian, at least the last time you ate meat was at lunch at your ex-landlord's house which was the first time you paid rent there. You say delicious. You and your landlord talk safely about families and the weather and growing capsicums.

## **WHERE THERE ARE KITCHEN UTENSILS THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE**

You plant a vegetable garden, the landlord helps, and someone else starts a compost heap. The kitchen tiles are newly shiny and friends come around for short guided tours and baths and one dinner party at which you discover the oven door is held on by paper clips. You arrange your room and rearrange it. This time it's going to look truly artistic.

Why is it when you move out of a house it always turns out that the kitchen utensils belonged to someone else? You buy fifteen coffee cups for five dollars. They all have pictures of the Queen on them but at least they match.

## **YOU SAID YOU LIKED GARDENING**

You said you liked gardening but the landlord said it would be taken care of. It is done, the second week you are there, on a hot day and the landlord wears a handkerchief against the sun and refuses drinks of water.

The willow tree which was on your list of pros falls victim to a chainsaw.

You reclaim your Saturday afternoons and think no more about gardening, but now the dog has been missing for three days in the front garden and you have mentioned at least twice, on rent days, that something must be done about the grass. The landlord arrives in an automobile of ecologically unsound proportions and produces a sack from the boot. Suddenly there is a goat tied to your washing line and the dog is still missing.

## **RENT IS A PROBLEM**

The goat remains, the landlord goes overseas. The neighbour's cacti is annihilated by the goat in an early morning bid for freedom. The zucchinis are taking over and the landlord sends you a postcard from somewhere sunny. The toilet is still blocked. Autumn makes rude faces at you through the hole in your bedroom window. Your room is strewn with leaves, your carpet resembles a swamp.

You lose the phone number of the landlord's brother-in-law's father, the one you are supposed to be paying rent to while the landlord's overseas. He turns up one evening when your household is assembled in the lounge having a game of Jump-Over-The Goat. You are all stoned and the goat is wearing someone's dressing gown and eating vegetarian lasagne from a yellow bucket. You pay the rent, mostly in dollar coins from the telephone kitty.

Later that night, you hear a crashing noise in the kitchen. One of your house-mates, the one you have a crush on, has broken up with a lover but can only say: And these cups have always given me the shits, while throwing them at the ceiling. You save three images of the Queen and offer comfort.

## **SMALL COMFORT AFTER ALL THIS TIME**

The landlord returns with a sun-tan. One of you refers to the broken window, tenancy tribunals and a halt to rent until it is fixed. And the toilet. The landlord is heard to say the word pig repeatedly to the goat in its sack on his way to the car. The window is replaced with chipboard and then, fourteen days later, observes the unassertive but efficient one, with glass that does not match.

The house-mate you have a crush on accepts your comfort and then takes up with your best friend.

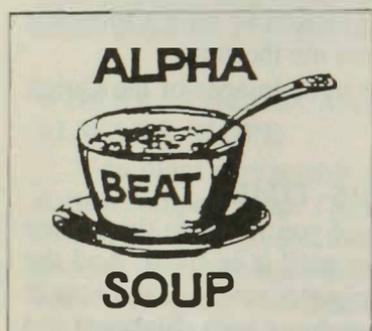
## **STILL LIFE WITH LEAKING TOILET**

The usual things happen, small dramas which make up for the disappearance of the television and the fact that the dog came back and won't leave. Winter finishes as you decide to be reckless with heaters and

you finally find a coat which costs less than twenty dollars and stop worrying about whether the lapels will look ridiculous or not. The toilet still leaks. You think about painting your room, you buy the paint, you paint half of it, the half you can see from your bed. You decide you don't like the colour.

### **I STILL CAN'T LIVE WITH THIS DAMN DOG**

You're coming out of the shower when one of your housemates announces, oh by the way, I'm moving to Guatemala. Or: I can't live with this damn dog any longer. Or: I guess I should tell you, I'm pregnant.



A Journal  
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**PAST CONTRIBUTORS:** Charles Bukowski, Diane di Prima, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Janine Vega, Diane Wakoski, Joy Walsh, Peter Bakowski, Carl Solomon, Joan Reid, Belinda Subraman.

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William unfolded the lawn chair, sat down and was about to sip some ice-cold lemonade when he heard the fence rattle.

It was the Miller kid.

"Dad needs your hose."

"Pardon me?"

"Dad needs your hose."

He looked at the boy. Last Saturday it was the shears. The week before, the hammer. He had yet to get back the hammer. What's wrong with these people? He had a good mind to say no. To cut them off here and now. Otherwise this could go on forever. Bad habits, he knew, were hard to break.

"Tell him in a little while," William said. "I just sat down."

"He needs it right now."

He would...

William carried the glass of lemonade with him into the garage and set it down on the Volvo. He had bought the car second hand several years ago and was proud of how well he had maintained it - not a scratch nor a rust spot anywhere. The garden hose hung along the wall, coiled neatly around a wooden peg. The hose - dark green with white stripes - was nice and thick. The nozzle, like new. He had paid good money for it. He believed in buying only the best when buying tools; in the long run it was inevitably cheaper. He looped the hose around his shoulder. When he came out, the Miller kid was gone.

Well, he had no intention of going out of his way... William returned to the lawn chair, and after sitting down, remembered the lemonade. He started for it, then heard the fence being rattled. In disgust, he changed direction.

*Why does he always send over the kid? Too proud to ask himself?*

William thrust the hose at the boy.

"By the way, is your dad through with the hammer yet? It's been two weeks."

The boy struggled beneath the weight of the hose.

"Don't know," he said.

From the lawn chair, through the steel wire-mesh fence, he watched Hank attach the hose to the tap in front of their house. Ginny stood beside him, wearing a pink, sleeveless dress that she often wore on the weekends. The dress clung to her body, showed off her bare arms and legs and reed-like figure. He couldn't tell if she had a bra on or not. Either way, the dress made her look cheap. No doubt she got it at K-Mart. He

had seen them at K-Mart once. The only reason he was there himself was because it was late and it was open and he needed a gasket for his car...

Hank tipped back his Pirates baseball cap and laughed loudly about something Ginny had said. He was laughing so hard he had to bend over. Ginny was laughing too. They were always laughing about something. Laughing and horsing around - setting a bad example for their kid. No discipline at all, William thought.

Hank's sandy hair strayed in all directions beneath his cap, badly in need of a haircut. And that beard of his - if you could call it that - made him look scruffy, like he hadn't bathed in weeks. Ginny, at least from where he sat, appeared clean. She kept her black hair cut short, cropped close to her head. Though she would do better to grow it long. With those freckles she looked like a regular tomboy.

He tried to imagine how they met. Probably in the backseat of Hank's battered Ford. The kid, most likely, was the by-product. William could see it all now... Smiling to himself, he took a swig of lemonade.

The Miller kid came out of the house and deposited on the front stoop a six-pack of Budweiser. He sat down next to it and propped his head up with both hands.

"Get the bucket," Hank said, pulling the tabs off two beers; he passed one to Ginny. "Now go on. Get the sponges, too."

Ginny glanced over. When she saw him watching, she waved her hand. William pretended not to notice. After finishing off the lemonade, he set the empty glass down on the lawn and turned his thoughts to the book he had been rereading - Orwell's *1984*. He had first read the book as a freshman, and now he assigned it regularly to his freshman comp. class. He went inside to retrieve it, and while he was at it, refilled the glass.

By the time he returned, the Miller clan were all in various stages of washing their Ford. The boy was inside wiping clean the front windshield; Ginny, in a squat position, sponged over the left front hubcap; while Hank, holding a beer, hosed down the rear bumper. Soapsuds were everywhere. Even their mongrel, Samson, stayed busy shaking them off.

"Now where's the sponge?" Hank cried out, a while later. "It was just here for Christsakes!"

He searched around the car, and when he turned around, Ginny tossed it. The wet sponge hit him in the back of the head and knocked off his baseball cap.

"Brilliant, Ginny. Brilliant," said Hank, picking up the cap. He wiped it off on his cut-off shorts.

"Don't be such a sourpuss," she said, and threw a handful of soapsuds at him. The suds landed on the car roof, about midway between them.

"I'll sourpass you!" Hank grabbed the hose which he had left running and sprayed Ginny across the chest. She shrieked. Taking ahold of the bucket, Ginny chased Hank around the car.

"No," Hank said, "Ginny, no!"

"You started it." Ginny stopped and feigned left, then surprised him by going right. She heaved the bucket and Hank ducked...but too late. Water splashed all over his back.

"Damn you," Hank said, and came after her. Ginny dropped the bucket and fled. They zigzagged across the lawn, while Samson barked in pursuit.

"Get her, Dad! Get her!" the boy shouted, flailing his arms. He chased after them.

Hank finally caught ahold of Ginny's waist and tackled her. He climbed on top and pinned back her shoulders.

"Say, Uncle!"

"Aunt!"

"Uncle!"

"Aunt!"

The boy and Samson pranced around them like Indians, whooping and barking nonstop.

William couldn't believe what he was seeing. They were worse than kids. It was impossible to read. He folded the lawn chair and stored it in the garage, and retreated back into the house, for some quiet.

A week had passed and still the Millers hadn't returned the hose. As far as he could tell they hadn't used it since washing their car; the hose remained right where they had left it, across the driveway. Every time they had driven over it he cringed in anger. *How could they be so careless with other people's property?*

Someone was rattling the fence.

"Yoo-hoo, I'm returning your hammer." She held up the hammer for him to see.

William rose slowly from the lawn chair.

After passing him the tool, Ginny asked, "Whatcha reading?" She interlaced her fingers through the fence. Painted blood red, her nails were chipped in several places, in need of repair. "Must be boring reading all alone like that."

"Actually...I enjoy it," William said, inspecting the hammer for signs of abuse. "You should try it sometime...for a change of pace..." He knew she wouldn't pick up on his sarcasm; her kind never do.

"Hank and me subscribe to *Readers' Digest*," she volunteered. "Got some fine reading in there. Learn all kinds of things. Just the other day read a piece about fingernails. Fascinating. Did you see it?"

"Uh - no." William cleared his voice. Ginny wasn't wearing a bra. Her nipples showed through her pink dress, erect from its tightness. If

she wasn't married, he would think she was a slut. It was bad enough the way the freshman students waltzed into class braless. And here Ginny was...a mother!

Since William had her there he went ahead and asked, "Are you through with the garden hose, per chance?"

"No, not yet," Ginny replied. "Hank's out buying Davy a swimming pool - they're on sale at K-mart. We'll need the hose to fill the pool with water."

*Why doesn't Hank buy a hose while he's at it?* William wanted to ask. He smiled weakly. Ginny smiled back...and her freckles danced across her face. For the first time he noticed her teeth, surprised at their good condition. When people have bad habits, teeth were the first to go.

"Next Sunday we're figuring on having a barbecue," Ginny said. "You're welcome to join us."

William bit back his tongue. All he could think about was that they were going to borrow his grill. Probably his charcoal and lighter fluid, too. And while they were at it...his hot dogs and hamburgers...his buns, ketchup and barbecue sauce.

"It's Hank's idea to invite you - said he couldn't see why not. Think you'll make it?"

"I...I don't think so," he replied, and grasped desperately for excuses to get him out of this mess. The last thing he wanted was to become chummy with these people. God only knows what else they'll borrow! Perhaps his car...if theirs breaks down. He consoled himself that Hank was a mechanic; for now the Volvo was safe. Maybe they'll borrow the yard for Davy's next birthday party. Or...his house! That's what they really want - if they had his house they would have access to all of his possessions. They could then borrow anything they wanted... He's had enough of these people! Why don't they go back to where they came from. Take their paltry lives, their K-Marts...

Hank honked, as he entered the driveway. Leaning out the window, Davy called Samson, and Samson barked in reply. Strapped down on top of the Ford was the swimming pool...

"You think about it," Ginny said. "We'd like to have you."

"Pardon me?"

"I said we'd like to have you."

William took a couple of steps back. He glared at Ginny, and then at Hank, who was climbing out of the car.

"Well you can't!" William said. "You can't have me!"

deb still showing off her babies, triangles of coloured glass  
 'don't call me wedge' she yells at the young bloke in black  
 as I buy her a drink, as vi watches jealously, vi once told me  
 'don't buy her one, she's got \$7000 in the bank, I saw her book'  
 vi rings up th council, tells them to cart away deb's babies  
 there was a body in th room next door for a week, Danny  
 blamed it on his socks, new paint job, same old tar, emphysema  
 & camels & the sweet port snowy used to stow in the garden  
 for the serious drinkers who disdain th black cat for th perseverance  
 or th provincial & still call th punters th moonee valley  
 perusing th turf digest consulting th form running th laundromat  
 with perks from th parlour next door, vern played one too many snookers  
 restaurant tables where th pool table used to be, bert chatting to curly  
 about straining metho through a loaf of brown bread, brown bread,  
 th bloke who put his girl on th game well he got another housekeeper  
 but th girls told her to stop th clock at 12.15 well she did he did  
 his block hasn't lived with anyone since that's when he did in his  
 first reckoned he got away with it, set th clocks at 12.15 th girls  
 said, see what he does  
 syringes & condoms found at st. marks, yeah, he's me mate alright  
 tapped on my window I opened th door if th other bloke's gun  
 hadn't misfired I'd be gone, do anything for a hit, tickets on himself  
 & one on his grandmother he swears he's going to go straight & get  
 her out of hock  
 jack grew up on brunswick street went to perth with his girl but he  
 jumped parole now he's trawling remembering th obscene finger of th  
 cop stuck down his back pocket from th paddy wagon to th court he  
 lets men blow him he's saving up her fare & picking fights with  
 strangers barred from every pub in th street he took a knife to  
 a junkie's wife just saw his mother worried down th street  
 a long time since th counter lunch was a dollar in th provincial  
 bouncers on th door to th poetry readings ensure that nobody over  
 thirty gets in & men whose names are found only when they die Mr  
 Jorge Dobrovnik was killed by cold brutes or brute cold last night  
 send to th Herald Blanket Appeal  
 th untouchables have been given plastic coated brown paper bags to  
 sleep in a new use for waste paper th young brahmims in black call  
 them bogans th fruit-eaters versus th pie eaters expensive organic  
 vegetables sitting in th cafes discussing the fat content of th  
 passers-by

what's a non-secateur? you ask...it's when an australian army platoon is ordered to cut a hedge without clippers : they go out, get pissed, come back, piss on th hedge...hedge dies...non secateur...dead australian at th early opener...a bot with a butt & a beer belly...it's a bit soldiers...a moustache wearing a cane & a pork pie down th frog & toad...it's th law, son...steak & kidney with a coat -hanger...want to be an acta...go to nada...eraser head for a close shave...use a gillies...blade dropper...stone th pram...eating soup with holes in it...th almost jealous company...sewing up new york in carlton factories...phillip adams got stapled...lange got stapled...robert helpmann got manicured...john laws came out in hard-back...derryn hinch got community service...went to adelaide...bloke at th bar asked ; you a soccer player? ...not since school I said...circus O.S. ...rearrange th words 'no animals' & you get maoist...country women's association made salad rolls then threw th tomato fillings at them when they heard dirty words like ; chile...east timor...whitlam gap...at th old pram factory we laughed until our fillings fell out...barry dickens extracting laughs like a dentist...phil motherwell's teeth in pure shit & mad max...shelton's false teeth spewing out of car windows & down lavatories ; I left them on the soap, man, I turned round & they were gone...th flying milkman taking th footscray phantom in raincoat & sunglasses & hat then they wouldn't let him on with his dog...toothless versus ruthless...la mama bling poetry...th women's movement went from schism to cleavage...middle-class men re-married, glaring at their vasectomy scars & coming to terms with other people's children...working class men thought vasectomy had something to do with breast cancer...derryn hinch came out in hard-back

th labour movement has always been closely identified with th dead australia policy ... we can't have th living coming over here and taking our jobs ... greeks & italians & whatnot coming over & signing up on th dole with false death certificates ... flightless kiwis winning th melbourne cup & ending up stuffed in th melbourne museum in a glass case ... chinese wore pigtails which were to be seized at th advent of heaven : dead australians cut them off ... they saw through this weak attempt to assimilate th dead australia policy ... vainly, th chinese smoked opium, th italians ran funeral parlours, th greeks gutted fish, workers became balts in th snowy river scheme & railway station cafes advertised tortellini mussolini ... we knew that th dead australians were good at best sellers with th dust inside th covers, death-saving, shooting holes in signs warning of dead animals ahead, rucing most things, & spot-lighting 2 beasts with 1 bullet ... th industries of dead australians require subsidies & superphosphate bounties ... unfortunately th living work more cheaply & are made in taiwan ... dead australians voted for I.D. cards - 16 million cards for 15 million dead australians, dead set ... sex is sold with carrots & confused with being a big stick man, sexual congress being a form of 2 up, & sexual excitement only being whipped up in crowds ... dead australian women swapped shroud patterns & wrote into th 'dead male' column with petite bits of vicious humour ... advice columns were full of problems with dead mates & football testicles ... we enthuse over th road toll at christmas & easter, whilst scanning the obituary columns for dead friends, sentimentality meandering amongst th remaindered in th personal ads ... a pro in th dead heart became famous for paintings which aged as you watched

I was singing down th mall in bourke street  
when it came to pass  
a drunk with flugelhorn staggered over & said  
move on boy  
you're cutting my grass  
you're mowing my lawn  
shift yr arse  
yr cutting my grass  
so I sloped down to th post office  
clicked on a capot  
adjusted my strap  
stuck my cigarette up on a fret  
left some money in my cap  
& this drunk with a flugelhorn staggered over & said  
move on boy  
you're cutting my grass  
you're mowing my lawn  
shift yr arse  
move on boy  
you're cutting my grass  
he had a coat that had seen better years  
& a brown paper parcel  
that clinked



lygon street, nowgone street  
carlton cemetery's asleep  
she says she's fine  
don't know much about her life  
doesn't seem too interested in mine

lygon street, nowgone street  
hello pizza head why hi raw meat  
she says she's fine  
needs time - hope yr life's upbeat  
there's not all that much happening in mine

lygon street, nowgone, go  
walking past delmonico's  
joe put a sign  
*Luigi Pinarelli \$274 owed*  
he got back his debts I can't collect mine

lygon street, nowgone street  
these streets were ours now they're not mine  
me? fine, thanks, fine  
watsons chucked out th tribune  
no more poetry in th albion

lygon street, nowgone street  
no fish & chip shop, no cheap wine  
it's only too  
easy to get out of line  
no more vacant lot for sleeping off time

lygon street, nowgone street  
king & godfrey's five & dime - wine?  
she says she's fine  
don't know much about her life  
doesn't seem to be interested in mine

you can stay here / while I'm gone  
but I'll have to / lock th door  
if you use a towel / the red one  
please don't spit / on th floor

keep th blinds down / because th neighbours  
please don't / answer th phone  
I've another / sometime lover  
if he knocks / don't be at home

have a nice day / I'll be back  
I'm so sorry / there's no milk  
third drawer on th left / there's clean socks  
th woollen / not th silk

don't play records / because th neighbours  
please don't / answer th phone  
keep yr voice down / in th shower  
please do make / yourself at home

you can stay here / while I'm gone  
but I'll have to / lock th door  
if you use a towel / th red one  
please don't spit / on th floor



# THE HOUSEKEEPING

ALLAN ERIC MARTIN

for Ellen Ruth Martin

Whenever the time work was short  
and the old man was short a quid  
the old woman gave it no mention,  
instead kept house out of silver  
she'd collect in preserving jars  
hid beneath old hats and dresses  
packed up in boxes under her bed;  
and minding working women's kids  
or ironing their pleated skirts,  
ten bob per a head or the basket.  
But when time was he had a quid  
she'd put in her two quids worth,  
'Little enough to make ends meet  
never mind shoes for three kids,'  
and talk him broke till she'd be,  
'Like other women and get a job,'  
or, 'Just to get out the house,'  
and he'd fork over housekeeping  
blueing, 'No wife of mine works!'  
Your place's home with the kids!  
until she'd relent and instead  
iron and look out for another's  
or a 1930 penny amongst silver  
out of the old man's pockets.

## SCARY LADIES

KRISTIN HENRY

Sandy tells us how she spots them:  
in The Theatre they'll be wearing men's hats.  
Harriet says in Film today  
it's measured in shoulder padding.  
The bigger they are, the bigger *they* are.  
Harriet should know.  
She has one for an egent -  
26 inches across  
and not the sort of woman you  
tell when the baby's sick.  
We three, who threaten nothing  
but Sandy's carrot cake,  
laugh and pass the teapot.  
Talk like this is becoming rare.

Instead of lunch with friends  
life is meetings, colleagues.  
This afternoon at the Ministry  
they click, stilettoed,  
or stride tight-skirted  
over leagues of shining floors.  
Such purpose here  
beneath these low acoustic ceilings.

I've come too early  
and take a seat in the 21st Century  
conceptual chair  
to watch one of the next generation  
setting up her tripod for a P.R. spread.  
Too young for *PORTFOLIO*  
but give her time.

Today she's dressed in mourning,  
white faced and hair the shade of grapes.  
Victorian College of the Arts  
I bet, and know I'm right  
when she frowns and asks  
if I'd mind moving out of shot.

I make my old bones small  
against a wall, behind a rubber plant  
and remember how I tip-toed long ago  
through the back door of everything  
in sneakers with soles like  
used chewing gum.

At 4 o'clock I slip  
into the Conference Room,  
aware that I am dressed only for poems.

## 10 GOOD REASONS TOM THE STREET POET

Let me name him  
Jim Cairns  
it was a plan then  
the next revolution  
consult the grand old man then  
at Narre Warren  
so we pilgrimaged to the feet of the master  
that man in the market place  
and we talked  
and we listened to him  
and we nodded in reverence  
wasn't he the soul of the Moritorium?  
didn't he stop Vietnam?  
and when treasurer/Junie Morosi  
gave new meaning to the term "headlines"  
and now/down to earth/new age  
festivals and communes/  
his track record follows him forever  
what would the wise man say?  
whatever he said I don't remember  
I have read his books like a prayer  
but I have brought my friend Ian Simes to him  
they had met over many a year  
and Jim and Ian were warriors  
each respecting the other's skill and strength  
but no warrior ever follows another  
and their collision would leave a few dents  
so Jim ordered Ian to leave there  
but Ian, like a brave man, stayed  
and when we left we were all new atheists  
with no one to follow these days  
I remember the bravery of Ian  
standing up to his friend Jim Cairns  
and saying, "What you are speaking is bullshit old man.  
This is no longer Vietnam."  
of the two  
both patriarchs apart  
one chose politics and the other chose art  
I know which one has claimed my heart  
as always it's done in the leaving.

Listen you man with two first names  
Who do you think you are anyhow?  
Coming into my life with your big spoon  
And stirring up the elements  
Bringing up hope from the bottom of the stew  
Making the stew taste like caviar  
Well never mind you man  
I don't like  
Never have never will caviar  
And I don't eat that shit  
But I will for you (sorry  
That just slipped out)  
Look here you man you  
Leave me alone  
I want my hope back where it belongs  
And I'm not dining at this table  
(Can I borrow your spoon?)  
You southern sweetbread  
You man with two names  
As if a man with one name  
Weren't already one too many  
So don't offer me this  
(Did you offer by the way?)  
I want to forget you  
I want to memorize you  
I want to stop wanting  
(Can you help do you think?)

# HOLIDAY FROM ROME

ALAN JEFFERIES

(FOR POPE JOHN PAUL II)

Leave the Vatican  
leave the Vatican  
leave the Vatican alone

that's what He said  
that's what I read  
leave the Vatican alone

I'm sick of travelling  
I need a holiday  
I need a holiday from Rome

where the sun shines  
in the night time  
where I can drink wine  
far from the headlines  
I need a holiday  
I need a holiday from Rome

How about Australia  
by the sea shore  
A place I can call my own

no more kissing aerodromes  
no more Saint Peter's Dome  
no more religious tomes  
I'm on a holiday from Rome

Send a messenger  
to Uncle Sam  
tell him where I am  
I'm in a strange land  
sending postcards  
of the Boulevards

South Pacific back yards

that's what He said  
that's what I read  
leave the Vatican alone

no more wretched catacombs  
no more Saint Peter's Dome  
no more hallowed tomes

I'm on a holiday from Rome

## ONCE WE WERE SEPARATED

ALAN JEFFERIES

Once we were separated by hallways  
once by bridges, once by walls.  
Once we were separated by sea shores of  
screaming gulls  
by a fleet of sperm whales  
by ten thousand miles of Pacific  
by the international date line  
by points on the compass, by borders and border  
guards, by airports and alsatian dogs and taxis  
and taxi drivers and hotels and foreign  
exchange and money and bills and

once we were separated by chemicals  
once by blackouts, once by osmosis  
once by a crowd of spectators  
once by the police  
once we were separated by  
    left wing agitators  
    by Iranian extremists  
    by used car salesmen  
    by second cousins, by second lovers  
    by second sense

and now ...

now we are separated by the stock exchange  
by spiralling world debt  
by a rising tide of consumer confidence  
by the Greenhouse Effect

now we are separated  
by the Constitution  
by great acts of wisdom  
by years of being apart  
by starting a new life  
(by re-starting an old one)

now we are separated  
by ourselves  
just you and me  
nothing else matters

"Hi dad."

"Hi son. How was your day?"

"Good."

"That's good."

"How was yours?"

"Oh, good."

"That's good."

"How's the writing going?"

"Good."

"What have you been writing lately?"

"Oh, nothing much. How's your work?"

"Pretty good."

"Enjoy it?"

"Yeah, it's, aaah ... OK. How's yours?"

"Oh, good. What's for tea?"

"Don't know. What do you want?"

"Nothing much."

NOVELIST & POET  
OVER A BEER

MIKE GREENACRE

The reason you feel  
you can't just  
get down and write  
a poem  
is that you're too hung  
up about form - stanza length  
style & meaning, whether  
a sonnet or cinquain  
should grow out not  
close you in I said.

The basic building block  
of a story  
is the paragraph  
and anyone can write  
a sentence he  
said but the poem  
is highly stylized  
and clings to  
images like a monkey swinging  
through lattices  
of meaning.

But the poem offers  
more freedom - there is  
no precise form  
or rules that  
tick inside like a fuse.

Some editors  
say things like  
"W.B. Yeats  
re-wrote his poems  
30 - 40 times - I feel  
you stop work too  
soon" while another  
accepts because it's  
raw and you.

It sounds like you  
leave too many things  
open to chance  
he said, I'm more  
careful -  
people like  
you don't exist  
in my book.

Good, I said  
then it must be  
your buy.

**THE NIGHT HAS SET  
HARD AS BITUMEN**

**JULES LEIGH KOCH**

The night has set hard as bitumen  
and moves slower  
than a country funeral procession

In the corridor  
a cat senses the heartbeat  
of a mouse

The moon hangs  
on a meat hook  
in the cold room

My bedroom is as dark  
as the eye sockets  
of a dictator

Stars slowly  
gather  
for an uprising

I turn on the radio news  
and count the dead in Tiananmen Square  
to put me to sleep

# THE CAPTURE OF THE BREATH

WARWICK ANDERSON

you may think it is all a matter  
of chance but let me  
assure you  
that every moment  
he selects the pattern and improves  
his disguise: on one occasion  
he might take the pulse  
and then again  
not  
one day he will listen three times  
for the heart sounds and then again  
not  
one day he will say breathe  
breathe in and out a deep  
breath  
or sometimes he tells you  
ninety-nine say  
ninety-nine  
or even  
cough to me  
but whatever he does remember  
to observe him closely  
for at some point  
he will crouch down  
and approach softly  
ready  
at any moment  
to cut  
the rope  
and drop the cage

Tonight there are only six of them  
so it could be said that one more baby  
was turned off.

This could also be called freeing  
a ventilator

and it frequently is.

Electricity is a marvellous thing:  
its instruments reconstitute  
the whole world with a switch.

Decorously the nurses  
unravel the veins and catheters  
of an enormous reticulum that seems  
more spun out from  
the incubating bodies than  
zeroing in on them.

In the fading light the visitors look through  
the steamed-up hospital windows and find themselves  
enmeshed in an endless birdcage of twigs and leaves:  
in the criss-crossing of snail trails along futile paths:  
in the mazdas streaming home ever so slowly  
and sometimes leaving tracks.

Day after day it seems  
even to wake  
is to find oneself at the centre  
of the labyrinth.

But tonight there are only six of them.

So how could one baby have generated a whole city  
and then turn it off.

Just like that.

# HUNTER'S STEW

ROBERT KENTER

It's not so bad here  
There's no jobs.  
But what can you do?  
It's not so bad here  
At night you come home coughing.  
It's not so bad here  
There's toxic sludge in the river.  
Someone from the Ministry of  
the Environment says we may all  
be at risk to develop cancer.  
It's not so bad here  
The unemployed are  
everywhere.  
There's lots of company.  
Even if there aren't any  
companies.  
There was lots of work around  
here for so many years.  
What do we care about the environment?  
So what if when we go hunting  
we are killing too many moose  
there's plenty of ducks left.  
And a goose is the best kind of  
Thanksgiving dinner you can get.  
So what if we are  
fighting the good fight  
in vain.  
Weather permitting  
Spring will come around again.

## MARKET FORCES

(A PARABLE OF THE 1980s)

JAS H. DUKE

A bus is travelling along a mountain road  
The road is on the edge of a high cliff  
The bus carries 100 passengers  
They are rich and can pay  
Among them is an economist  
Who knows the working of Market Forces  
Suddenly the bus swerves  
And plunges over the cliff  
The passengers are terrified  
Except for the economist  
He is not perturbed  
He knows the working of Market Forces  
He knows that a busload of anti-gravity belts  
Will instantly materialise  
In response to the demand  
That has just been created  
Market Forces triumph  
Once again

# LOOKING BACKWARD (A POET IN THE 1980s)

JAS H. DUKE

The 1980s  
Said the United Voice Of The Media  
Which in the Last Days of 1989  
Examined the previous 10 years  
Through the wrong end of its collective telescope  
The 1980s were The Time Of The Me Generation  
Individualism was triumphant  
The Free Market would solve all problems  
Collective concerns were no longer important  
Equality, Justice and tolerance were obsolete and archaic  
Socialism was in a wheelchair  
Greed was good  
Greed was the driving motor  
Of every worthwhile human endeavour  
The lifestyles of the rich and famous  
And their cousins the rich and infamous  
Were marketable quantities  
Morality was unimportant  
Debt was unimportant  
Business confidence was all important  
Great leaders were everywhere  
These leaders were not poets  
They were something better  
They were Great Communicators  
Incredible virtues were discovered in simple acts  
President Reagan handed round jelly beans  
Praised ice cream  
And warned of the Evil Empire and Libyan Hit Squads  
Prime Minister Thatcher's biographers exulted  
That she had smashed the Argies and the Coal Miners  
Because she was a grocer's daughter  
And knew how to use the bacon slicer  
Other leaders followed in their wake  
Deng Hsiao-Peng, Mitterand, Kohl, Gorbachev, Gandhi, Hawke, Marcos,  
Shamir  
Rupert Murdoch

And various faceless Japanese  
All proclaimed their kinship with the rich and famous  
And their indifference to the poor and helpless  
They congratulated themselves on their toughness  
They were as tough as old steak  
They consulted economists and consultants  
As the potentates of the past  
Had consulted priests and soothsayers  
And the entrails of goats  
The economists and consultants  
With the aid of computers  
Produced mathematical models  
To predict every eventuality  
There was a place for Art in the 1980s  
It was a suitable investment  
Business leaders who were as tough as old steak  
Bought Van Goghs with borrowed money  
And thereby raised their prestige  
To dizzying heights  
Where were the poets to be found in this  
They were in their usual ambiguous position  
'Poets' P. B. Shelley once exclaimed  
'Are the unacknowledged legislators of society'  
While Famous Poet W. B. Yeats had once moaned  
'We have no gift to set the statesman right'  
Poets were only needed  
By the Brotherhood of Greed  
If they could write fatuous nonsense  
Like 'It's The Celebration Of A Nation'  
Or 'I Was Born In The U.S.A.'  
Which could have just as well been written  
By an economist or a Great Communicator  
The 1980s was also the time  
Of the AIDS epidemic  
Of the Iran-Iraq War  
Of the Ethiopian Famine  
Of the Destruction Of The Rain Forest  
Of Chernobyl and Oil Spills  
Of The Hole In The Ozone Layer  
Of Terrorists and Pogroms and Riots  
Of unfavourable Exchange Rates and Trade Deficits  
Of Drugs and Wars On Drugs

And other problems  
All of them insoluble  
By Great Communicators  
They were insoluble  
Because the Free Market was insufficiently free  
The Good and Greedy insufficiently good and greedy  
The Nation insufficiently celebrated  
The Mathematical Models insufficiently mathematical  
Business leaders with their hands caught in the till  
Blamed it all on the Tall Poppy Syndrome  
What did I do in all this?  
I was not a Great Communicator  
I talked to myself in dark corners  
I was not a Business Leader  
I was not as tough as old steak  
I felt some sympathy for the poor and helpless  
I was a wimp and a wet  
What did I do in this miserable decade?  
Well (like the Abbe Sieyers in the French Revolution)  
I survived  
But (again like Abbe Sieyers in the French Revolution)  
I survived as a lesser person  
Than I was when I started  
Be not too hard  
For I went out  
Not nearly as wise  
As I came in  
Be not too hard

# LOOKING FORWARD WHILE LOOKING BACK:

## AN INFORMAL SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN FICTION IN THE 1980'S FROM A MELBOURNE POINT OF VIEW.

KRIS HEMENSLEY

In 1982 when I sketched *The Experimentalist Paradigm* (published in *Going Down Swinging* #5), some of the published fiction of the past few years would have been unthinkable. Both the verve & volume of Eighties' Australian fiction is astonishing to contemplate. However it occurs to me that although Australian fiction has, in a real sense, come of age, achieving the polish which seemed formerly to be the prerogative of overseas writers, it's a market-oriented accomplishment. Of course I share everybody's pleasure in the confidence & consequent competence of the Eighties, but I wonder if the success isn't diminished by local conformity to a decorous universalism? Intellectual entertainment there is, new knowledge there aint (to paraphrase Heisenbuttel): My jeremiad is, informed by a belief in the superiority of personal expression over decorum, where either or both the force of testament & fictional ingenuity (including thematic & stylistic elements) demands the reader's respect.

The domestic promotion of Australian fiction in the Eighties has been bolstered by the multinational publishers' (in Penguin's case, distributing the local houses UQP, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, & McPhee-Gribble) as well as its own recruitment of Australian lists. The lists' eclecticism suggests that Australian fiction is much more diverse than ever before. And yet an anthology apparently claiming a radical domain with such a title as *Transgressions* (ed. by Don Anderson, published by Penguin, 1986), is actually tailored towards the promotion of some writers who would be comfortable in any mainstream packaging. The best that's kept for last, as the editor confided, comprised Beverley Farmer, Helen Garner, & Frank Moorhouse: an enigmatic conclusion given a company featuring Jolley, van Langenberg, Hampton, Walwicz, Malouf, Brooks, Bird, Murnane, & Couani amongst others.

The cause of radical or new writing runs a poor second to the successes of the feminist & ethnic advocates. The Spender sisters are emblematic of a militancy which has produced a plethora of women's anthologies, albeit to balance the books. Paradoxically, although the mainstream is broadened thereby, its literary tenets aren't necessarily

challenged. One can imagine Mary Fallon's political dramatiques ( in *Working Hot* for example, published by Sybylla Press & the winner of the Victorian Premier's New Writing Award in 1989), being received as new women's &/or feminist writing though not as "new writing". The tortuous relationship of politics & art contained in Finola Moorhead's equation of "writing woman" & "woman writing" will remain current for as long as the particular social deformation exists. Politics will authorise all manner of conflation. Anthologies justifying these strange syntheses will actually delay textual liberation, in which attention to the components & consequences of an infinity of forms & contents will be restored as the particular truth of art.

The clearest distinction between such a stalwart of contrary modes as Anna Couani & myself relates to definitions of experimental or non-mainstream writing & the state of the mainstream itself. At the beginning of the decade it was comparatively easy to contrast radicals & conservatives as both Kate Ahearne & I did in *Going Down Swinging*. Not so nowadays as the experimental impulse has separated from the increasingly debased notion of the Avant Garde, permitting the study of writers of diverse disposition without the pressure of homogenising theoretical & political references. However, in *Telling Ways* (Australian Women's Experimental Writing, ed. Couani & Gunew, 1988), Couani writes: "Experimental writing in print in Australia is virtually synonymous with the small presses & both are virtually synonymous with (in varying degrees) self-management, grass roots leftism, economic disadvantage, lack of funding, migrancy, & feminism (as distinct from female). The exceptions to these generalizations are small presses which are part of the Establishment or which hold more or less reactionary views." This is a dubious & highly problematic conflation in which writing's own revelations & subversions are overridden by rule ideology, almost as if the casualties of a past era's ideological warfare have made a laurel of the same abuse. Couani's own, often brilliant, writing has, in *The Harbour Breathes* (Sea Cruise/Masterthief, 1989), combined the lyrical urgency of her previous small collections with a polemical line reflecting her political critique. Because poetic fiction is quotational as much as it is authorial, even Couani's leftist patoise doesn't qualify the overall effect of the City as an existential site of far brighter illuminations & much darker mysteries than any dogmatic language can ever deliver. The book is, in fact, a collaboration with the photomontagist Peter Lyssiotis, & the paradox of the explicitly political artist's intention subverted by either brilliant mode of unintended agit-prop, is nowhere better demonstrated than in his own excellent contribution.

Anna Couani, Ania Walwicz & Kevin Brophy are examples of writers associated with the small press scene to have maintained their fire as it were, where others have seemingly disappeared. Happily most remain as

talents, & the Nineties would be poorer without them. In Melbourne, for instance, one has seen enough already in the small collections & magazine & anthology fragments of Antonia Bruns, Julie Clarke-Powell, Des Cowley, Tony Kidman-Schier, Jurate Sasnaitis & Jeremy Stock to look forward to the future. In every case they are poets in prose or simply writers: creators of what we accept from the French as the category "text", that composition which is word perfect because it isn't a yarn in any shape or form. Brophy's second novel of the decade, *Visions* ('89), certainly has this 'poet's touch'. Although only published this year it was completed some years ago. It recovers the best of his earlier novel's operations, advancing them this time in an entirely coherent & often marvellous manner. Although he does tell a "story" it's mythical rather than naturalistic, so that its mysticism is harnessed by the direct syntax of testament. Unlike other times when one's concluded with the comment, "one looks forward to his/her next book" this time one really means it!

One has also seen enough of Walwicz's writing now, of which *Boat* ('89) affirms the mode of her breakthrough volume *Writing*, to pose her the same question Jennifer Maiden asked of Couani at the beginning of the decade: "/would she/ be able to take the technical risks necessary to develop beyond the discrete genre she had mastered"? The rhetoric & defensiveness Maiden also discerned in *Writing* may or may not be what's at stake, though, certainly, in 'fiction' implies an analog for authentic encounter with self & world, Walwicz's *tender buttons* (a la G.Stein) are recipes for dissembling however purple a performance they provide.

Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many In One* by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray edited by Patrick White ('89) is hilarious, exotic, crazy & totally accessible. It hangs over his oeuvre &, indeed, the entire corpus of recent Australian fiction, like the odour of one of the foul farts which not infrequently punctuate the story. It's a work that cleans out the vast house of novelistic pride that's withstood the author's essential sound until *The Twyborn Affair* of & against which *The Many in One* is a belated & poisonous jest. Notwithstanding his editorial gambit, it's a piece of writing almost ready to follow Beckett's into the fiction of oracle, in which confession is subsumed & properly abandoned; & it's a more than appropriate resistance for the elegant phantasmagorias recently created by Peter Carey in *Illywhacker* & *Oscar & Lucinda*. Likewise, White's *Three Uneasy Pieces* (Pascoe, '87) are both gentler & as mischievous. Although they own a genre credibility, their force has nothing to do with "the short story". Even then the genre is ambivalent: *The Screaming Potato* is what the aphorism is to the poem, *Dancing with both feet on the ground* what the poem is to the story, & *The Age of a Wart* the fable that disowns the novel without reduction of the subtleties of design, mood or character.

Both books' erudite serendipity effects a suspension of their author's case, their panache & lucidity informed by an utterly personal rather than professional commitment. It's this personality which is often absent from the decade's fiction. If I only mention White & Carey in passing then I merely nod in the direction of the legion of newly commercial Australian fiction.

Reviewing that legion I wonder what there is to say of Bird, Brophy, Burke, Campbell, Castro, Condon, Disher, Garner, Hall, Henshaw, Jolley, Jones, Johnson, Johnstone, Kenny, Malouf, Morgan, Miller, Moorhead, Murnane, Savage, Shapcott, Winton *et al*, that hasn't already been hollered by the market-place (in the press, journals, academy, & street)? Perhaps that's the first thing to note, the interest that does exist for contemporary Australian writers. But just as an unfortunate consequence of confidence is self-satisfaction, so a by-product of public dissemination is the promotional industry. Writers' festivals become publishers' bashes & readings publicity performances. The scene at the end of the Eighties is remarkably different from that of the latter end of the Sixties when all kinds of tendencies characterised as 'new' began to cohere. Those who set off in the Sixties & before would have to agree that the new & beginning writer of today has it made. The rub is that although there are plenty of agents for marketable product there aren't very many lost souls seeking the ultimate word!

The natural repetition following the nadir of a movement may be ebullient or desultory. When the movement in question is modernism, its supposedly parodic extension after alleged death from exhaustion may in fact be another zenith! The collapse of authority enables equivalence to prosper across modes & for modes to become categories with appropriate authority. Mark Henshaw's novel *Out of the Line of Fire* ('88) is the first substantial local work which seeks to exploit 'postmodernism'.

The publicity for the novel has been astonishing &, ultimately, counter-productive. For Don Anderson it recalls Abish, Calvino, & Handke. But this is our middle-aged author's first book & has the feel of one. Any mature writer, let alone a writer of international calibre, would have shed the clever-dickery, though a postmodernist might not be a *writer* (might not be able *to be* a writer) at all. One kind of postmodernist conceives of a book as marginalia of the current (& therefore final) shape of history & philosophy. Though mistaken, Henshaw's lifelessness is exemplary postmodernism. If the story hangs on the philosophical thinking about the status of consciousness & its acts, then a homage/pastiche of Borges might have served better than the manuscript-in-the-bottle conceit. Incidentally, Wolfi's story as read & explicated by the narrator, is interesting in itself, as rewarding as Eco-like detection. But the philosophical notes, an insult to the German doctorate quality they affect, & the banal portraits of Holderlin, Wittgenstein & others, amplify the problem of criticism leading literature by the nose.

When the critical theory founders or is misapprehended then the works it has permitted begin to crumble.

Eliade, in the second volume of his *Autobiography* reports that "In Heidelberg, the landscape suddenly ceases to be itself, becoming in this area a "philosopher's lane." Anyone who doesn't feel obliged to walk here, meditating solemnly & academically, doesn't have the vocation of philosopher." The book does have an academic air, so perhaps Henshaw's postmodernist Heidelberg romance does justice to the German town & to the philosophical vocation! But nowhere does his language emulate a natural writer's or philosopher's. "What is the real mystery of language?" the narrator enquires. The answer isn't defined in any annal of logic but chanced upon in the condition of writing: mind *does* figure, but only heart, breath & voice audit that space (Heidegger's oblivion) in which the return is guaranteed. Of course that may be an indigestible paradox to swallow, though I hardly think postmodernism will live to tell the tale.

To balance the cerebralism there is pornography. Henshaw repeats the conventional Anglican male version - almost entirely vicarious, voyeuristic, incestuous. Whether or not he's showing confessional shirttails, the banality of the language (its transparency?) is a postmodernist badge of honour. As anyone knows from a reading of the contemporary canon of world literature, all the bits are there but they do not satisfy as a whole. Henshaw's was a good mistake to make. In typical Australian fashion, he had a go. Hopefully his example will dissuade a multitude of reader-writers from taking the same tack.

Henshaw's whodunnit had, to an extent, been anticipated in Robert Kenny's *The Last Adventures of Christian Doom : Private I* ('82); or rather, the thinking into which one's led by Henshaw's book reminds one of Kenny's earlier & largely unsung achievement. Although Kenny would deny the credibility of 'postmodernism', his novel features the same kind of textual disclosure & reflexivity (which we've understood as 'self-referentiality' or 'writing writing' since the mid 70s in Melbourne) that's supposed to characterise the current mode. For instance, the equivalence the author proposes for his literary leads (from Conan Doyle to *Dagnet*, Samuel Beckett, & the artist-writer Jochen Gerz - the type of contemporary Kenny would have enjoyed had he lived & worked in Europe) is postmodernist in its confusion of popular & esoteric reference. But it's distinguished from Henshaw & postmodernism in general by its genuine poetic resonance & the stylistic playfulness which disguises the rather darker currents. In fact, the writing contains a deal of that 'uneasiness' coined by Patrick White: confession's infiltration of the fiction on account of the seriousness of the act (writing) to which the writer is committed.

One must make both head & tail of Kenny's *Last Adventures* to realize the whole story. "Something within him, deep and semi-felt, sympathized, not with the woman, but with the sentence." When literary

ambition swarms (-- "Christian Doom thought of many things at once."--) writing is the only anchor. The story contains convolutions of pulps & zee-grades, bizarre & hilarious diversions, & poignant authorial asides & meditations. The nostalgic reverie on Richmond in which the Yarra "acted as a moat preserving and heightening the division" of the working-class population from the powerful & wealthy, is a culturo-political analysis popped into the mouths of his characters (Doom & Des O'Lasion) & into the book as an excursus, as though the book was a journal which included a novel.

Melbourne as definitive place, both mythic & historical, is an important ingredient of Kenny's pot-pourri. Australia (& Australianess) contrasted by the European 'other', also appreciated by Henshaw, facilitates the oldest available reverie regarding the nature of life, in which dream-state & lived drama deliver consciousness as the "innocence to judge & bear witness in a dream of questions". Popular postmodernism's cross-media gambit is evident in Kenny's production of his novel as cinema, for his characters are no less ghostly (as any dream's or film's dramatis personae) than his structure & design. The whodunnit becomes a whoami when the mysterious detective's assistant, O'Lasion, confesses, "I don't even know who I am anymore. I wonder if I've become Doom now." It befits the character as a reader of Lewis Carroll that back in his apartment he "was stunned to feel himself wondering if any of it had ever happened."

The "private I" of the title is both a trivial & instructive pun. Perhaps only in fantasy can essential faces be revealed. In addition, Peter Cilothac might be the most crucial code-name in the novel. Almost a perfect acronym, this dyslexia of fiction is a clue to Catholic disturbance on a grand scale. It's not surprising that Catholicism's dialectic of angst & ecstasy has much to claim in contemporary Australian fiction. Murnane, Bird & Brophy are other weavers of often marvellous tapestry, whose fine madness is founded upon definite method.

It doesn't really matter whether Gerald Murnane read Robert Whyte, or both of them read Robert Kenny, or that Murnane & Carmel Bird read each other! There is a family tree of texts which ramifies common sources, attitudes & practice without implicating the legatees in any collusion whatsoever.

Robert Whyte's *Manacles* ('85) is indebted to the James Joyce of *Ulysses* & Flann O'Brien's amiable ingenuity. Notwithstanding its license to entertain from the *Melbourne Paragraph of the Senate of Pataphysical Representatives* & its dedication, therefore, to the literary exposition of philosophico-scientific propositions, it does express a local's pleasure in place & a regard for speech and character sufficiently sprightly to sustain a reader. Unlike some of his betters (Quenneau, Mathews, Perec, Calvino) who get on with their fiction, Whyte determinedly argues the toss of the novel's *raison d'être*, Reality,

Consciousness, Mind, & the meaning of life. And where Murnane develops the personae of writer (like Whyte, the writer of *these pages*) & reader (like Kenny, a habitue of the Library) as the substance of a fiction which is more historiography than modish deconstruction, Whyte's prefatory separation of powers qualifies him as the same kind of fictioneer as Henshaw, more poet than critic, assuredly, but not yet committed to the poet's plunge. And yet *Manacles* remarkably maintains interest for its strange scheme: the day in the life of characters dedicated to the writing of novels of this day in their lives! It is a microscopic *Ulysses*, Gallic & Celtic in equal measure!

Carmel Bird's *Cherry Ripe* ('85) is not only the pinnacle of her achievement thus far, overshadowing most of her short stories & fulfilling many of the themes of her first collection *Births, Deaths & Marriages* ('82), but it is a useful contrast to both Henshaw & Murnane in respect of its sensuality & palpability. The seemingly guileless narrative is an immensely productive gambit. "Watch & listen as Agnes tells her stories, as she swims in the river of blood." Tasmania manifests as a Deep South Land of that grotesquerie of Gothic realism which is in all truth normality's amplitude, reminiscent of the strange province of Faulkner, Welty & company. "Things happened in the night, like dreams & murders, & sweet little kisses on a perfect burning heart." Bird's family history is also an annotation of Fantasy. The marvellous details of small town lives are iconised in mystical Catholic illumination just as the Catholic motifs are corporealised. The fairy-tale narration both assumes & deplores the amnesia of the world, for this is her justification for telling everything that's important to know. *Cherry Ripe* isn't dictated by civilization's common-sense but by its elanial antidote, mythopoeia.

The link between *glossarial* & *glossolalial* might be found somewhere between Carmel Bird's & Gerald Murnane's practice. The concentric rings of their narratives are studded with names, dates & measurements. Bird is methodically obsessive where Murnane is obsessively methodical. There is a maddening logic to both *Landscape With Landscape* ('85) & *Inland* ('88). I don't mean the logic that makes a repertoire of exercises of Bird's recent stories, but the doggedness of purpose which renders clarity without its customary satisfaction. Clarity softens the rudest truth & discloses it as just. Although Murnane's narrative style points the reader in the direction of fiction's natural disclosure, his insistent present-tense doesn't deliver it. Murnane's indefatigable philosophical pilgrimages are completed without one datum of conclusion, regardless of the immense human data he collects along the way. His realistic imperatives insist a prosaic detail the very mass of which actually sinks naturalism's illusion of normal life. His clarity leads to fiction's best opacity. I'm reminded of Gilbert Sorrentino whose literary inclination is baroque (e.g. *Mulligan Stew*) despite regular realist

interludes (e.g. *Aberration of Starlight*). Murnane's fusion of these modes also recalls Patrick White's current momentum, sowing the same admirable unease within one. It's the direction I expect to continue within Australian fiction for some little time to come.

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## GERALD MURNANE INTERVIEW

Born in Coburg, February 25, 1939, six weeks after Black Friday when the bushfires raced across Victoria. Baptised in St. Ambrose's in Brunswick, Sydney Road. Many schools, too many to name. Lived at thirty different addresses before thirty years of age. Lived at only one address since then. Went to six or seven State or Catholic primary schools, and the one Catholic secondary school De La Salle College, Malvern. From 1944 to 1949 lived in Bendigo. Jobs: primary teacher, editor in the Education Dept., earned a B.A. at Melbourne part time. Resigned at the time of first novel being published in 1974, then lived some of the time on Literature Board grants, sometimes on free lance editing, and since 1980 lecturer in Professional Writing at Victoria College.

### **When did you decide that you wanted to become a writer?**

Very early on. The power that poetry had over me as a young teenager - I wanted to write poetry. I felt there was a power in words. The idea of being a full time writer never entered my head. I just imagined I would be a school teacher or a farmer, or some sort of vaguely professional person, but in the evenings or in some quiet time of the day or some nice quiet time in my holidays I'd sit in my room overlooking some landscape writing poetry... Anyway, the idea was that I'd have this leisurely job where I could write. I sent poetry to magazines in the early sixties when I was in my early twenties. After a year or two when nothing was accepted, I began writing a novel. It's still in there (pointing to filing cabinet), hundreds of pages of handwriting, and that novel and seven or eight other beginnings of novels occupied me through most of my twenties. When I was about thirty, I wrote what became my first novel. I put it away when I had finished writing it. I don't remember the reason for doing this. I brought it out again two years later and had it typed. It was published when I was thirty five. After writing *Tamarisk Row* I wrote nothing for about two or three years. I just sat and thought about it. I just had it in the cupboard and thought about it. Probably I was a bit frightened to take it out and show it to anyone.

### **Was it a shock to you that a book of yours was published?**

There were times when I thought that *Tamarisk Row* was of outstanding merit and ought to be widely praised and so on. There were other times, it could be an hour later when I wondered how anybody could ever bother to read any of it. While I wrote the book I was convinced it was one of the best books written in Australia during my lifetime. But obviously when I was finished with it I was in the other mood and

thought it would be rejected by anyone who saw it. The typescript was huge; it was twice the length of the published book. It fills that top drawer. I've got six filing-cabinet drawers each filled with manuscripts and typescripts and hundreds of pages that were never published - six drawers for six books so far. I don't think of myself as someone who's written a great deal but when I want to cheer myself up I look in those drawers at what I've written in twenty five years. I wish I'd kept my younger writing, what I wrote in my teens. I've kept an intermittent diary I wrote from the age of nineteen to about thirty. That fills another drawer. So there's a lot of unpublished writing. It's probably worth a few dollars.

### **So will you be selling off any of that to libraries or collections?**

Not while I'm alive. I've had a request from the Defence Forces Academy, but I look at my papers often and I like to have them near me, I suppose in the way a wealthy man likes to have his Alfa Romeo in the drive, to remind him of what he's achieved. Also, I've kept my papers from a certain meanness - I'm moving into my optimistic mode now. My books will be read for many years and the value of the papers will probably increase, so why should the bastards get them cheap when my sons (who are bits of bastards themselves) might benefit?

### **Your early influences?**

One of the first poems I remember reading was "The Lotus Eaters", by Tennyson. I didn't read a lot of the things other children read. I mostly read my mother's library books. She'd borrow these threepenny romances and I'd just read them without her knowing. I'd pick them up while she was down the street. I'll name you one book. In 1962 (this possibly had something to do with my beginning that novel instead of going on with poetry) I read the first English edition of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. Suddenly it made me see that novels need not just be semi-realistic accounts of what people did and said and looked like. Here was this extraordinary book about extraordinary events. Naturally enough, when I read my first Borges I was bowled over. I'll tell you my three greatest works of fiction, in order - the order changes at times: *Remembrance of Things Past* first. Second, a book called *World Light* by an Icelander called Laxness. He won the Nobel Prize in 1955. Third would be *The Man Without Qualities* by Musil, and *Ulysses* would probably be fourth. The thought of what Proust did is one of my greatest inspirations, though I don't think I write under his influence.

### **So writers like Dostoevsky, Beckett, Camus aren't on your list?**

I've never read Camus, I've read a little Beckett. Dostoevsky bewilders me. I read him like an ignorant reader, to see what's going to happen next. The moral issues and things fly over my head. I've read hundreds of books once only, and I'm at an age now when time doesn't stretch limitlessly away. Nowadays, if I read twenty pages of a book and it doesn't interest me, I stop reading it. I may as well go back and read Proust again. I've read him twice already. I'd sooner read something again that worked on me.

**I'm interested to talk to you about your teaching. Has teaching made you more self conscious as a writer?**

No. It's made me more thoughtful. Ten times a year, I suppose, I'm sitting here with a student who says, "Why do you say my writing isn't good writing?" and I'm put in a position where I have to say what is good writing and what isn't. Now that makes me more thoughtful. When I talk about writing I don't make smart literary judgements like saying, "This is a book of tremendous power," which is a comment you might read in *The Age* on a Saturday. I say, "This sentence or paragraph shouldn't be there", or "You should have taken all the adjectives out of this sentence." It's that sort of talking that I've developed as a teacher. But at home writing I'm still the same sort of person that I ever was, making a great struggle to get some words down on the page.

**How do you tell the difference between good and bad writing?**

Well, any sentence that seems to put me in touch with human thought or human feeling satisfies me. If I read a sentence that seems to be blurring ... (takes a book from the book shelf) ... I've just grabbed a book: "Then suddenly with the force of revelation he knew exactly why he was here." That's not a bad sentence, but the phrase "with the force of revelation" is something that blurs. It's a smokescreen of words that come between me and the thoughts and feelings of the character. "The force of revelation" is thrown in for effect. That's not by any means the worst example I could find. Bad writing is pretentious writing. People try to add emphasis to what they're writing. In most cases you do better to suggest rather than state something, especially in fiction.

**So is simplicity one of the keys?**

Well, yes and no. Simplicity of words, but aiming at a profound effect. It's a funny thing that even in a very badly written student story the second-last paragraph is often very well written. Why didn't I say the last paragraph? I'll tell you in a minute. The second last paragraph might be about a funeral in the rain, or a doctor telling a woman her child has died, or some tragic event. When the student feels that the event only has to be described for the effect to reach you, the student will simply

describe what happened, and you get fairly well the significance of it. Then the last paragraph usually goes on to describe the philosophical ramifications; it tells you what the story was about, in case you didn't understand.

**Do you find that the beginnings of student stories can often be edited out?**

Yes, and it was Chekhov who first recognised this. The first paragraph is often a nervous kind of sidling up to the story. That's one fault. Another fault, something which could be inherited from Nineteenth Century fiction, is the opening paragraph that describes a landscape, like a Thomas Hardy novel.

**Do you find students adopting your style of writing?**

I haven't always written in the same way. You might see a development in my writing, which I hope is progress. It's a shock to students when I show them a photocopied page from *Tamarisk Row*. The man who's telling them to write straightforward sentences once wrote sentences hundreds of words long. People can always find ways to justify themselves. I say that if you had a mountain big enough to stand on you could see half the world, and if you had a mind able to grasp that sentence you'd see it's a simple sentence after all. *Tamarisk Row* sentences have to be read from a great height. Coming back to your question, yes, it does happen. I'm happier when students find their own ways of writing.-but I hope they learn from me to be clear rather than obscure; to work with concrete rather than abstract words.

**You've been teaching for ten years now. Do you find that working has helped you keep writing, or has it taken time away from that?**

I began to teach because I needed the money. I had one year when I went short of money, I mean really short, and I couldn't write then. Every year I complain about the huge amounts of time this job takes up. I read three or four hundred student stories a year, and I go through each story giving detailed comments. That cuts out my writing time almost completely for six or seven months a year. But comparing it with the year when I was short of money... I am someone who needs to feel comfortable and relaxed to be able to write, and since I began this job I've written the equivalent of four books in ten years. That speaks for itself.

**Your aims as a writer?**

To have a shelf of books. I've had five published, the next one is coming out next year, I'm writing the seventh now, and I have in mind four other ones. My aim is to see all those books in a uniform edition.

They are in a way all parts of the one book. So I want to see them all in a uniform edition.

**So do you see yourself as trying to change people's perceptions of the world?**

No, but I want to make my perception of the world clear to them, which might amount to the same thing. I'm not interested in philosophy or sociology or even psychology - I'm only interested in the images in my mind. If that seems a narrow range of interests, let me remind you that I have in my mind - and so does everyone - the images of a whole world. All I try to do when I write is to learn the meaning of the images in my mind. Some people get a bit impatient because I don't seem to have any political ideas.

**So do don't see your writing as political in any way?**

No, though I suppose you could be clever and say that I work from certain assumptions. One of the assumptions I work from is that everyone ought to be allowed a certain amount of time to themselves to sit down and read and write. I've often wondered how I would go in a country where things were censored. It's our privilege to be sitting here today, not in hiding from anybody, talking about writing. I can remember when books were banned. *The Catcher In The Rye* was banned in Victoria in the late fifties. But now, I'm lucky enough to have the freedom to write whatever I want to write and it's never occurred to me to write about anything else but the experiences of individual characters from my mind.

**Do you think your books are more about the experiences of males than individuals. In a sense, they're men's books.**

Yes, they are. Because a man wrote them. I said to someone the other day, if you look at the ending of each of my books, there's nearly always a man or a boy standing alone and reflecting on his experiences. When I go home tonight I'll be writing in the same way again, writing as you say, a man's book.

**Have you ever considered writing from a woman's point of view?**

Now, you've asked me an interesting question. Half an hour before I came here I was looking at some notes I use for teaching. These were about the origins of stories. I divide writers in a rough and ready way into two: the observers and the obsessed. The observer, to put it simply, could be sitting here, and next door there is a female, and one day this writer decides to write that woman's story from her point of view. Now the

obsessed writer in this case would write a story about being a man sitting here observing the woman next door. That's the sort of writer I am.

**Are your works then pretty closely autobiographical?**

Well, yes, but there is a story, "Stone Quarry", published in Meanjin in 1986 which is probably the least autobiographical work I've written. It began with a view from a verandah where I was sitting. Many of the characters in my books are the people I might have been.

**Do you begin a story or book then with a plot or with an idea or feeling?**

I begin with an image that I feel strongly about. I have here in this folder, notes for future books. (Opens folder at random) I was going to write a book called *Barley Patch*, but the other day I made a list of books I'm going to write, and *Barley Patch* wasn't on it, so obviously I've changed my thoughts. I'll just read what this note says, I hope it doesn't turn out to be something I don't want to read out: "The horse turns its head. It has no notion of the layers of meaning around it. One day we too see what we've meant. Compare the *Readers Digest* story ..." There are hundreds and hundreds of notes in this folder, and I suppose many of them would mean little to me if I looked at them today. But just suppose I was going to write that book of fiction called *Barley Patch*. I'd go through this folder looking at all the notes that seemed to be connected with *Barley Patch*. Then I'd put the relevant notes in a new folder and start writing a few pages. After writing a few pages I might never look at the notes again. In fact, I'd probably put aside the pages that I'd written and never look at them again either. I might make half a dozen beginnings. That's how I've filled those filing cabinets with manuscript pages - writing one beginning after another for each of my books. I might write half a million words before I've got a book of fifty thousand words.

**Do you have trouble editing your work, or do you look for advice from someone?**

The first editorial advice I had was from Hilary McPhee when she first read *Tamarisk Row* when she was an editor at Heinemann Australia in 1973. Her advice was to cut the typescript in half. That's a fairly severe bit of advice. I did take that advice and cut it nearly in half. Most of my later books have been just about word perfect when I've handed them to the publisher. I'm my own editor, but I still worry about whether each sentence I write is good enough. One of the things I learnt from *Letters To A Young Poet*, by Rilke, is that the only books worth reading are the ones that had to be written. That's something else you might say about good writing - it had to be told. The urge to write must be pressing. When I get home tonight, I'll be wondering, "Is this writing

really all that important? Should I expect people to come in off the street or come in off the golf course or turn their televisions off to read this? When you become uneasy with the merit of what you're writing, that's the best sort of editing.

**I find your books very funny.**

I'm glad you say that. When I read from them sometimes I read in a deadpan way.

**Sometimes when you read you say that what you're going to read isn't funny.**

Yes, that's just a trick, it's a comic's routine. It's amazing what you learn. You get the feeling suddenly that if you drop something on them they'll laugh. I'm a nervous person reading in public, so I tell them beforehand it's not funny. Thank goodness some people have said they find humour in my work, even in *The Plains*. No one can define humour, but I suppose you could say it refuses in some way to fulfil expectations the reader has. It's that sort of mild humour I like. I can't think of an example while I'm talking to this machine, except from the film (*Words and Silk*). Gerald Murnane says, "I've hardly ever been to art galleries, but sometimes I look at works of art in books." I just said that, but the director put on this kitschy looking picture which probably some people thought was a great work of art, but it's only a picture from the history of horse racing. It comes on and people sit there solemnly looking at it. I always laugh. It's just a picture of all the great horses that have ever raced all gathered in one paddock.

**There's a naivety in the tone of voice in your writing, which is part of the humour.**

Yes. But that's a kind of obsessive thing that I have to watch to see that it doesn't get out of control. Arnold Bennett, I don't particularly admire Arnold Bennett, but he said writers need to see the world through the eyes of an idiot. Imre Saluzinszky puts it somewhere that I refuse to entertain preconceptions. I'll try to give you an example. Someone praised me once when I was writing for a children's magazine. I wrote that when Cook and his party were coming ashore a man standing on the beach threatened them with a spear. Someone who read that said ninety nine out of a hundred writers would have said an aboriginal was standing on the shore, but I called him a man. You could call this naivety - writing 'the man who is the chief character of this story' or 'a suburb named Coburg' as though I refuse even to entertain the possibility that my readers would know already that Coburg is a suburb of Melbourne. I seem nowadays to want to stand at a distance from my readers - to avoid being chummy with my readers - to force my readers to see that I'm not writing about their world but about my own peculiar world.

**As a reader my reaction has been that the writing has become more stylised.**

I wonder what you mean.

**There is the repetition of phrases and sentences.**

Does that disturb or bother you?

**No. It has become a distinctive feature of Gerald Murnane's writing.**

Well, it's not done to provoke people. Well, in a way to provoke, but not to make them put the book down. It's the writing of someone who wants to keep drawing the reader's attention to the fact that things are rather strange, that I am writing about things that have never been written about before. I'm not trying to develop a style, though obviously I am developing a style. Thirty years ago I thought I had to develop a style. Now, I'm trying to write only about what matters to me, and a man comes into my office and says I've developed a style. So I've done in thirty years by a completely different process what I thought as a twenty year old I could do in the space of a few weeks by writing pretty sentences. I confess to being always on guard against the reader who will say my writing is autobiography. By making my main character somewhat naive, I can do a shuffle and move over here, closer to the reader, so that we can both watch this character, and I won't be accused of saying the things he says. This mild humour at his expense is a protective move. That word we use, 'distancing', has something to do with it.

**As well as the naivety, there's paranoia in your writing.**

Give me an example.

**In the story in *Expressway*, it's the women who know too much about the world who are feared.**

I've been very pleased about most of the things that have been written about my books in Australia. Obviously you can never have enough praise and intelligent comment. But oddly enough, my enemies, and I have a few, have not picked a particular section in *Landscape With Landscape*, I won't name it, as being almost an explicit statement of where he, the character, stands in relation to females and art and landscapes. It's all arranged schematically, well why not name it, in "Landscape With Artist." I felt a peculiar pride when I wrote that. I had finally said it for this man, where he had got to. If people wanted to say about my books that they are immature or at fault or nasty, or whatever, I thought there'd be some ammunition in that passage, but no one ever

took it up. You're getting close to a matter that's crucial. Paranoia, fear, suspicion. First of all, and you haven't made any such comments so I'm not rebuking you, it should be the writer's right to write about any sort of character the writer chooses to write about, including much worse and much nastier characters, or much stupider or much more fearful characters than my characters. So there should be no suggestion that a writer should write about characters that have the approval of the reader. It can be far more fruitful to write about characters that the readers disagree with. In my sort of writing, the writer sets out to discover what the writer didn't previously know about the writer himself or herself. My characters have a wonderful way of teaching me things. Sometimes I get the feeling that writing about characters is not very different to that sort of psychodrama where people loll about giving birth to one another and crying on each other's shoulders. That's as much as I want to say about that. I regard myself as a pretty ordinary person, but it can be a wonderful experience to postulate characters and watch them in action and then to learn, even if it's to wait until someone comes into your office and tells you that some of your characters are afflicted with paranoia. So I don't apologise, nor do I say that these characters are my heroes or the people that I would like to be. These are areas where a writer has to be silent.

**Do you ever get embarrassed about some of the things you write about?**

I'm embarrassed now. Yes, indeed. I haven't used that word up until now, but it's understood this is what I'm talking about. I mentioned enemies before, and this is where the paranoia might come in. There are three reviews that were written with what I can't believe was anything but malice. And one particular review attacks me as a writer for being an immature person. I'm wondering now what my enemies will think of this. What is out there in the world is having its effect on what I'm saying now. The common word for this is embarrassment. My enemies are fools, but fools can be dangerous.

**Have people reacted to your work generally in the way you would want them to?**

I have had reviewers liking my work for the wrong reasons, and I've had the other response: after a reading in 1986, a woman came up to me and said, "I get from your books something I don't get from any other books. I get the feeling that I'm listening to a voice that's talking to me in a very urgent way." I'll never forget that. It's worth all the bad reviews in the world. I think, and this is a big thing to say, people don't realise at what a simple level I've been writing. It's all right to say that *Inland* has about six different narrators and the text seems to stand on its head, but it's really one human voice in different modulations telling one simple story.

**So you don't see *Tamarisk Row* as your most accessible book?**

No, I don't. It's because of the long sentences, because of the fact that there are no paragraphs in it. It's just a bit visually daunting. It's strange I should say that because no one else has said it. If anyone wants to accuse me of being inaccessible, it's *Inland* they hang around my neck.

**How did you feel when you had your first book published?**

Well, I had this manuscript and I showed it to a man called Bruce Gillespie. Years later, Bruce was a director of Norstrilia Press, but in the early 70's he was a workmate of mine in the Education Department and we became friendly. He was a few years younger than me. I let him read the whole manuscript and he was amazed by it. He really encouraged me. Then I showed bits of it to Barry Oakley, who was the only writer I knew. Barry said the best bits in it were marvellous, but he said parts of it were hard to read. But he was good enough to say a few words to Hilary McPhee. He said to her, do read this manuscript. That's a marvellous thing to have anyone say. So she did read it.

It's a good record, my first full length book published. A feeling of immense pride, to think that such seemingly simple matters were now in print, the dreams of this little fellow in Bendigo, his father's betting and standing in the church yard, the sun beating down. The feeling that the world was now going to read about these seemingly small things. I remember driving down a street after this and having to stop the car, the feeling was so overwhelming. *Tamarisk Row* was well received. It was the runner up for *The Age* Book of the Year award, and, by the way, the book that beat *Tamarisk Row* has been out of print and forgotten for years. But some reviewers dismissed my book. I was looking through back copies of *Meanjin* the other day and found a very unfavourable review of it saying it was a narrow and self-regarding piece of writing. It's the hardest thing in the world, I find, to get any idea of the standard of a book, whether it deserves to be read, from a review of it. I have to go into a book shop and read ten pages of a book to know whether I want to read it.

**What do you think reviewers should do?**

Well, when I've reviewed books I've tried to describe the experience of reading them.

**Sometimes your reviews read like stories themselves.**

Suppose someone sends me a novel to review, and I read the first page and enjoy it immensely. I don't have much time, so I begin to describe the experience. After enjoying the first page of, say, *Tendrils*, a

novel by so-and-so, I put the book aside and I ask myself why. I just try to reflect on my experience, I don't worry about hanging fancy adjectives on the book. A few years ago, I canned a book because the first page just threw me completely. The writing was cloudy and pretentious. I stopped and tried to say why I, as a human being, was being turned off by the book. That's as much as I can do.

### **Would you finish a book you weren't enjoying?**

No, and I wouldn't pretend to. Maybe once I did pretend, but I don't have to pretend nowadays in the way I might have pretended when I was currying favour as a young novelist. I have judged competitions where I haven't finished books. I would read say chapters one and two and the last chapter, and if I couldn't conceive of that book getting onto my shortlist, why should I finish reading it? I know there's an argument against this, but I believe I could reach for a book on the shelf there and decide on the basis of ten pages whether I want to read it in the future.

### **What do you think of a writer like Peter Carey then?**

I've never read a book of Peter Carey's, I've read some of his short stories, and I've sampled his novels. I regard them as high quality entertainment. You might ask me what I mean by entertainment. It's writing that leaves the world unchanged. After reading it you've been diverted, perhaps in some ways stimulated. But you don't go away feeling haunted and changed.

### **Murray Bail is a writer who locates himself in a place in something like the way you do. Have you read him?**

We've met a couple of times, and Murray has been good enough to declare himself publicly an admirer of some of my books. My review of his book *Holden's Performance* would answer your question. I enjoyed the first hundred pages of that book immensely. I was fascinated, but I was disappointed with the end of it. But that sense of Adelaide as a place, there's one part I won't forget. In a man's back yard, I can't remember the character's name, there's a place where the Mount Lofty Ranges rise out of the Adelaide Plain. It's a bump in his back yard. I'd love to have written that.

### **Do you finish most books you begin reading?**

Well, I keep a record of all the books I read. I keep my books at home in alphabetical order on their shelves, A to Z in order of author. Right now I'm reading a book from the shelf where the 'J' books are kept. The book I'm reading at the moment is the life of Richard Jefferies by Edward Thomas, that's a book I'll finish. I keep a record of every book I read in this diary. Here's an interesting entry. On the twenty fifth of October,

“Abandoned *More Pricks Than Kicks* by Beckett because of the absurd punctuation.” I don’t know who translated it but I just couldn’t finish it. “Finished *Ham On Rye* by Charles Bukowski,” I never thought I’d enjoy that but it got to be a very interesting book, I’d had it for years and never read it. “Finished Hindley, *A New Life Of Chekov*, finished Blixen’s *Out Of Africa*..” They were books I finished. I finished *The Fortunes Of Richard Mahoney*, that was the second time I’ve read that. I’ve had a good year. Where’s one I didn’t finish? Read Kerouac. I’m always looking into Kerouac. “Skimmed ...” Oh yes, this is a book I looked forward to reading, it was so well reviewed, by a man called Goytisoló, a Spaniard. *Count Julian*. Read a few pages with mild interest. I skimmed the book, that means I looked into each chapter.

### **Have you read Calvino?**

Yes, Calvino is a wonderful writer. Reading those books makes you want to stop writing. I could never plan a book in the way that *If On A Winter's Night* must have been planned.

### **I thought *Landscape With Landscape* was similarly constructed.**

It’s nice of you to say so. but I know in my own heart that that book was cobbled. In the early 80’s I thought I was writing what would become a collection of short stories. But the first two stories that I wrote were very long, and the chief character of each story seemed to be the same character. I wrote that book, on and off, for four years, and for most of that time I was trying to work out how to fit the pieces together. As you know, the pieces fit together neatly, and I’ve never heard of any other book that fits together in that way. Yet I waited for one of my enemies to shit on me for copying someone else’s idea. I had the guilty feeling that some other well-known writer must have used my device before.

### **How do you see the 1980s?**

Well I don’t see them at all. For most the time I was at home with my head down trying to write about the 70’s or 60’s. If you ask me this question in the year 2000 I’ll probably give you a better answer. Certain things about the eighties will stick with me. I go around with my eyes half closed, but all the same, certain things stick. I like the quote from Alfred Jarry. A character in one of his prose works - a poet - is accused by someone of going around with his head down when he should be looking around him and taking notes. He answers that a man must have a pretty poor opinion of his unconscious mind if he has to tell it what to observe. *Questions by Brophy and Lysenko, Malvern, February, 1990*

# KARMA CONDITIONING

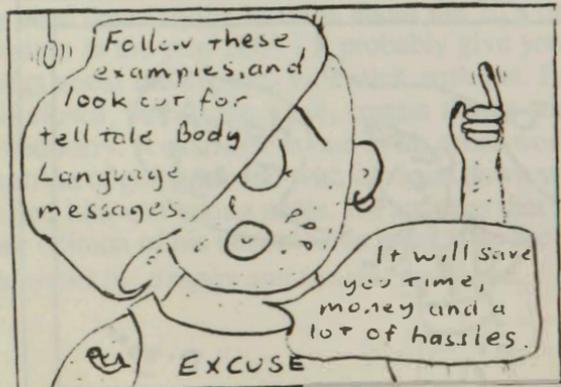
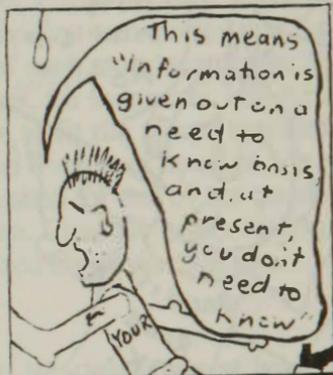
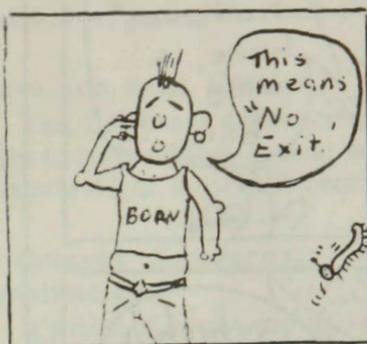
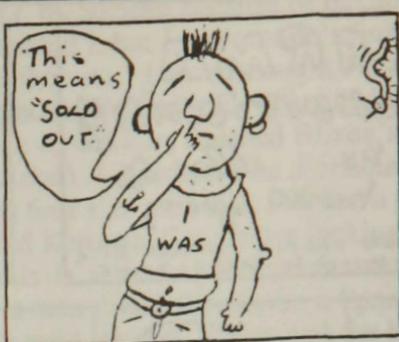
By **No. 4**  
hankO grady

A NON PROFIT PEARLS OF  
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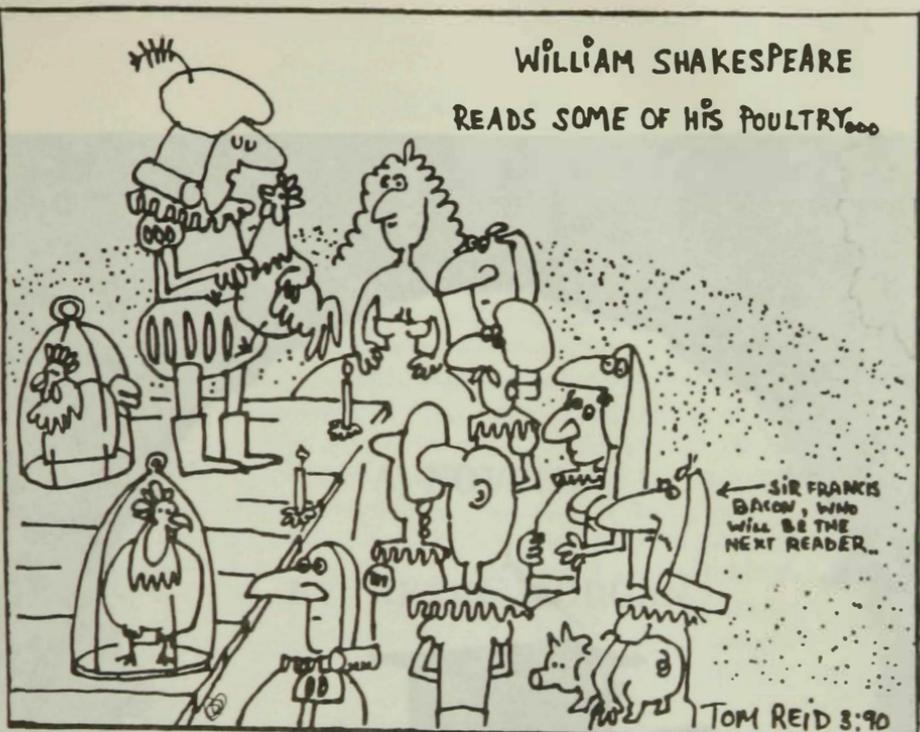


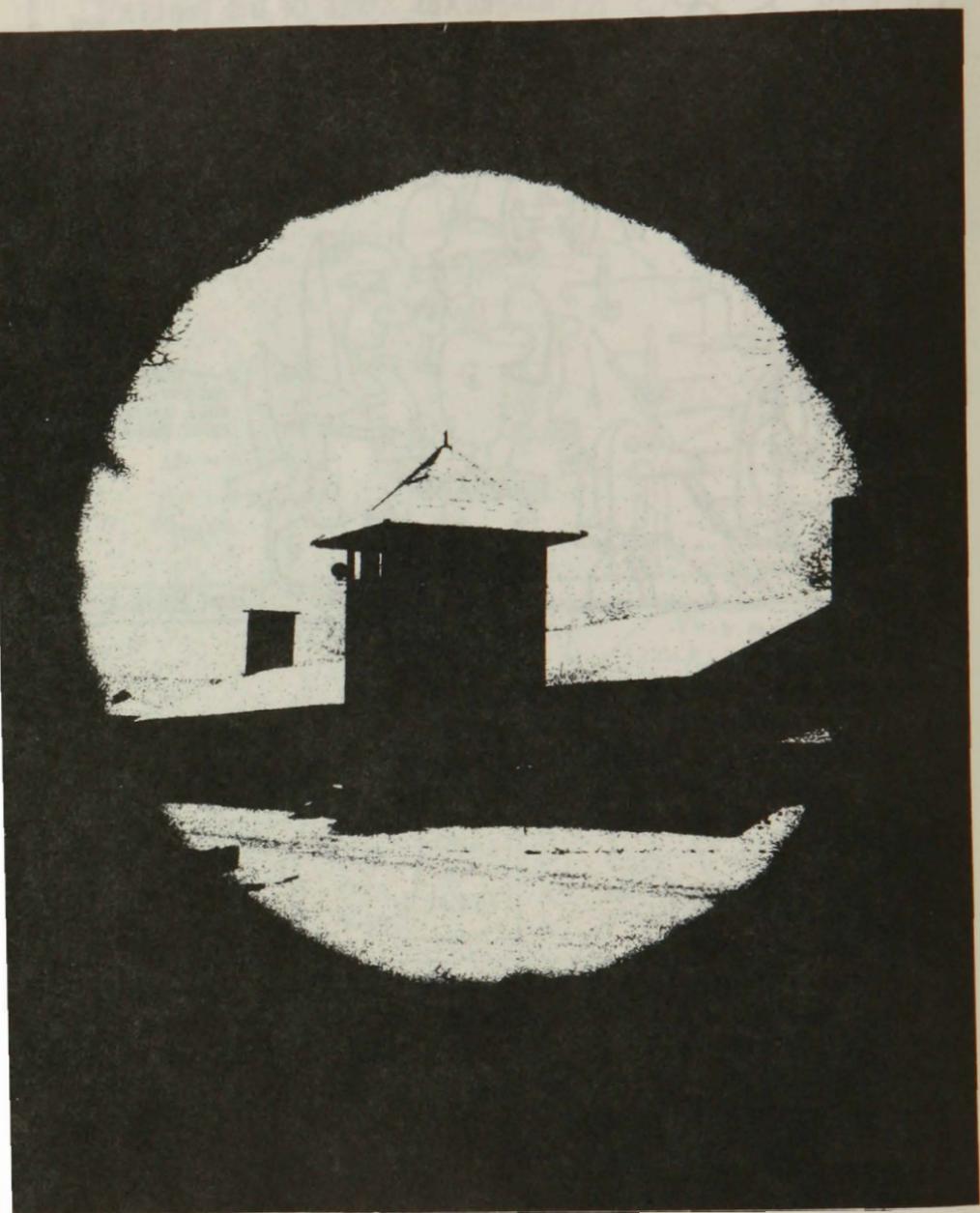
# BODY Language

By   
hanko grady



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
READS SOME OF HIS POULTRY...





# EYEGLASS

A NOVELLA

BY KEVIN MORGAN

*Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.*

T. S. Eliot: *Burnt Norton*

for Tilly

## Paper Wraps

*Coroner's findings :*

The body is of a nine year old Caucasian girl with rigor mortis having set in. The body is in a fresh condition and shows bandages around the upper left arm and around the right elbow. Catheter is in position in situ. A drainage tube is also present in the mouth. Multiple small abrasions are present over the shoulders, right side of the chest and the face. A compound fracture is present of the left humerus with extensive laceration of the adjacent muscles. The face shows a large incised wound over the forehead about three centimetres in length. The most significant finding is very extensive fracture dislocation and lacerating wound of the left side of the face involving fracture of the mandible with exposure of the teeth and complete tear of the lower lip. Adjacent maxillary bone and part of the temporal bone are also fractured. There was bleeding from both nostrils.

*Oswiecim, Poland, Sunday 6 January 1980*

When I arrived it was dusk and the darkness gathering, so I had only a short time to locate my shelter.

It was my 24th birthday.

As I trudged through the snow towards my hotel, the dark grew deeper and, as it seemed to me, even palpable. I could feel it settle on the shoulders of my coat, and when I breathed it entered me. The taste of darkness in my throat and mouth: elemental, mineral, like frozen charcoal.

Now, even as I get some warmth from the little bulb that burns beside me, the taste remains. No amount of hot or bitter coffee takes it away.

*Thursday 12 April 1984*

these children  
God  
give them a teacher

a good teacher  
a teacher  
they can trust

*Oswiecim, Monday 7 January 1980*

Eventually last night, I took from the bar of my hotel a tumbler of some raw spirit. It was a schnapps I suppose, or a Polish cognac. It took away the ashy taste and in the end, I think, helped me to sleep.

I am on the third floor but there are no showers here, no baths, only washbasins and lavatories. For a shower this morning it was necessary to go down to the hotel's basement, where I found that a large cement chamber had been constructed for this purpose. Designed for group showers, it was an austere and cavernous room. Thin pipes ran the length of the walls and were attached to old and rusted shower-heads. The room was unheated; and dark, despite the efforts of the one electric bulb.

I undressed and stood there a moment, alone, the cold aching in my tight scrotum. Like a piece of litmus I was changing colour, turning blue; and I wondered if it was ever like this in those other chambers not far from here.

*Friday 20 September 1985*

'Anna.'

'Yes.'

'What are you supposed to be doing?'

'Reading silently Mr Thomas.'

'Exactly. Why weren't you doing it?'

'I was. But Mirjana was asking me about...'

'You were the one talking Anna. Not Mirjana. How old are you?'

'Eleven.'

'Are you old enough to do what you are told?'

'Yes Mr Thomas.'

'All right then; go back to your seat and read silently. If you can't do that like the rest of the grade, I'll treat you like a five year old and you'll get my hand.'

By this it was understood that I meant a slap.

'Have I made myself clear?' I asked.

'Yes, Mis-ter-Thom-ass!' The syllables came out of her like bits of metal. Extruded. And as Anna turned to resume her seat, she gave me the

foulest look; an expression so prussic I could have slapped her then, but I didn't; I held back.

Did I like her that much?

Cheekily, she pulled a grin for the class as she went back to her chair and sat down. There, she at once began speaking to her neighbour...

'Anna,' I said, and now all the class were watching. 'Come here.'

She had an audience now, so she turned up her eyes (in her best exasperation) and sighed: 'Not again!'

Then she came to the front and stood before me.

'I told you,' I said, 'that if you were to speak again you would get a slap. Now that's exactly what you're going to get.'

I could tell from her face that she still didn't believe me. Even as I took her by the arm and drew her round in that fateful half-turn, she did not resist. Her leg was bare and my slap was sharp. And when I faced the child again I recognised her. This was Anna. And in the moment before her face was crumpled up in tears, she looked at me. It was like she wanted something; a scene perhaps, or a show of temper. But all I said was: 'Anna, go back to your seat and read silently.'

And the girl was humiliated.

In the eight months of my teaching this class I had not punished a child with a slap. She had become the first.

Anna went back to her chair but she couldn't read now. Instead she covered her face with her book and cried. The class got very quiet then, becoming silent at last.

Except for the occasional turning of a page and the nosey noises of this child, sobbing

*Monday 7 January 1980*

Auschwitz, the former concentration camp, is not more than a kilometre from my hotel. But I had to take a taxi to get there; the temperature outside is well below freezing and doesn't invite unnecessary exposure. When I arrived I supposed it was because of this - the intense cold - that I had the whole concentration camp to myself.

I went into the chamber next to the crematorium. The door was steel, about four centimetres deep. Set into it was a thick glass porthole about the size of an eye. If you were on the outside of the chamber you could look through this porthole and see what was happening on the inside. I put my camera to the eyehole and photographed the view looking out: a guardhouse. Then I looked around. The floors, the walls, even the ceiling of this room were solid cement; rough concrete. I took off my glove and touched the wall.

The adjoining room was the crematorium. It was cold in there and dark; but I could make out the ovens, their toothless mouths gaping. 'Topf und Sohne, Erfurt,' they said. And I decided to go outside.

In the yard it was colder still. There was ice everywhere. I didn't think it could get much worse; but although it was almost noon, it grew dark as evening and began to snow.

Then I saw a familiar thing. A raven. It was perched between the barbs on a length of taut wire. Its beak and its eyes were little mirrors of black; and for a moment through a drift of snow we regarded each other.

Noon.

I went to Birkenau, the women's camp. There were barracks and chimneys there and rusted barbs in the deep snow.

I pushed my film to a thousand but the light was useless. These pictures, I realised, would be dark and grainy. They would be like the ones I had seen of her. A smile like a crash of dots, a face like a field of grain.

### *Friday 20 September 1985*

'Do you know why you got the smack?' It was recess so I could talk to her alone.

'Mm-hmm.'

'Tell me.'

'Because...' Another big tear rolled from her eye but she wiped it away with the back of her wrist. I offered her the Kleenex from my table. She accepted some tissues and blew her nose. 'Go on,' I said.

'Because... I didn't do what you said.'

'Part of it. There's more.'

'I was being rude,' she answered. Her eyes were ringed with red now and I could smell her tears.

'Are you sorry?' I asked.

'Uh-huh.'

'So am I,' I said; and Anna looked at me, again, as if she were trying to find something. Was it something in my eyes or on my face?

After a moment she said: 'It's okay.' She was, after all, in no position to argue.

This much was easy. I had to make up with Anna or I would lose the grade's respect as well as hers. But I'd played the trump card; a smack will work once, perhaps, but rarely twice. I had to be certain there would be no more confrontations with Anna like today.

And there was, as well, another problem.

In the present day, no teacher is allowed to punish a child physically. Let alone a girl child. By giving Anna a slap I had broken the law. What would happen if she said something to her parents?

Chances are there would be no problems, for I am on the best of good terms with both adults. Yet, I thought, it would be safest to make sure Anna said nothing. I decided to meet the problem head-on; to get in first and turn things to my advantage.

'How do you think mum and dad will feel about today?' I asked.

'What do you mean?' she said, and this was good; she was worried.

'Well,' I replied, 'if a child's conduct is so bad it deserves a slap, shouldn't parents be notified?'

'I don't care.'

Careful now, I thought, or she'll get sullen. 'Would mum and dad be pleased to hear about today?'

'No Mr Thomas.'

This was better; now I felt some progress. 'How do you think they would feel?'

She thought for a moment. 'Very disappointed.'

'Hmm...' I considered; and this was the crucial bit; mustn't run in too soon. Let her hang for a moment on the uncertainty of quarter....

'Well then,' I suggested. 'Since you really are very sorry, Anna... And if you promise that this is the last I'll ever see of your bad behaviour... I'll make a promise with you to forget what has happened today. What do you think?'

'Okay,' she said; and she was smiling already .

'Well?'

'What?'

'Promise!'

'I promise not to be rude or answer back. And I will do what you say Mr Thomas.'

'And I promise,' I said, 'not to speak about this matter again. It will be our secret. Okay?'

'Yeah,' she said. She was beaming.

'Okay then. Get out of here.'

'Thanks Mr Thomas.'

As she left the room I heard her blow her nose again, and as she closed the door her friends outside asking: 'What happened?'

*Bergen-Belsen, Friday 4 January 1980*

It is a field. A plain of many large snow-covered mounds. And attached to each mound is a metal plate with a number on it.

Here, there are 6000 people interred; at the next mound: 8000. In all, there are some 30,000 dead in this place; and one of them is the child, Anne Frank.

Persistent snow fell while I followed the memorial path, changing my lenses and film with frozen fingers.

*In transit. Wednesday 9 January 1980*

Departed Oswiecim at 6 p.m. yesterday. The temperature about minus 5.

A black hole, yes; but not just in the sense of anus mundi. In the astronomical sense as well. Like a black hole in space where the darkness is of such gravity that light itself is drawn in and swallowed up.

Now, travelling away from there, I have another taste in my mouth. It is the taste of something - rancid, like grease. Like congealed fat. And in my stomach there is this tightening, a turning over; like a change...

*Thursday 19 August 1982*

At St. Damian's last night, I addressed the parents whose children I'd prepared for First Holy Communion. I was nervous before I had to speak, but once I got in front of the microphone I felt more confident. Chose as my text: Mark 10: 13 - 16, where Jesus welcomed the children.

How practical the disciples were. How very helpful: sending the children away so that the Master would be spared trouble. But Christ was indignant saying: 'Let the children come.' Not later, but *now*.

Children so easily discouraged by the *not now* attitude of adults. Perhaps Christ understood this, and realised the immediate importance of recognising their needs. Ourselves. How do we regard our children?

And on educating the children. Matthew 18: 6 - *Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone round his neck.*

The responsibility we are given, the task, the duty we are charged with. Can we take it lightly?

*Wednesday 2 January 1980*

Amsterdam, my last day.

In a square near the Westerkerk I found the statue. It was streaked with rain, the little pearls of it hanging from her lips and fingers.

I'd brought some flowers with me; roses, pale yellow things; and I left them there.

*Friday 18 February 1983*

My class this year is a lively handful.

Coming home late on the bus I felt in need of a vitamin pill; but, once home, settled instead on a glass of whisky.

*Wednesday 2 April 1980*

For special rewards, I keep in my classroom, on a top shelf there, a canister of coloured beans. In bold type the jar is labelled: *Positive Reinforcement*.

When it first appeared on its shelf, little Joanna came up to me and asked: 'What are the jelly-beans doing?'

It seemed to me that, unsupervised, she thought they were conspiring together... or multiplying secretly.

*Thursday 31 March 1983*

While reading a story to my grade threes about life in the country, the word *manure* cropped up.

Being city kids and only eight years old, most of them had no idea what the word meant. They were bewildered by the half dozen or so who did know, and who were giggling among themselves at the prospect of caking their boots in it.

It was no good to go on without clarifying the word, so I put down the book and asked: 'Who can tell us what manure is?'

A few hands shot up at once. But went down again quickly as their owners reflected on what it was they were going to say.

I supposed they needed some encouragement, so I said a few words about how we should always speak our minds and not be shy of what other people thought. And, anyway, wasn't it in the best interests of our education that we learn what manure is? And how could we get on with the story if we didn't know? So come on, hands up, let's get to the bottom of it!

And that did the trick. A ripple of glee ran through the room, and little hands went up again.

I chose Daisy.

She blushed with the pleasure of being picked. She grinned and giggled an inaudible word into her hands.

'Pardon?' I called to her, and the fun was heightened now because she had to repeat her performance. This time her reply was not only distinct, but fortissimo as well.

'Pool!' she cried.

*Wednesday 27 October 1982*

Usually now, the care I take is painful. I mean meticulous to the point of boredom. The slightest trace of sediment and I filter the whole bottle. No risks where they can be avoided. But still the problems come.

The water here, for example, runs with different colours. Some days it is clear and safe for the washing of photos; some days it is light blue, also fairly safe; but other days it runs with rust, which can be difficult to notice when working in the dark. The result has been that some photographs dry with a coating of red rust on their surface. A gentle brushing does not remove it, nor force-washing with much success. A careful swabbing of each print with moistened cottonwool has proven the most effective remedy; but then to agonise over the scratches!

Needless to say, the effect of rusty water on negatives is beyond remedy. Once the red stain has settled into the delicate emulsion nothing can remove it.

*Sunday 30 October 1983*

Behind my front teeth, crushed my Eucharist into a paste of dough; and walking home after Mass, observed that, between the stones of the gutter, lush green weeds were growing.

*Thursday 26 March 1981*

*I will plant a flower in the soul* - on a line in Fiona's exercise book. I noticed it as I passed her table and remarked to her: 'What a beautiful thing to write!'

'What?' she exclaimed, and with great surprise began looking in her book.

'There,' and I read to her what she had written: 'I will plant a flower in the soul.'

'Soil!' she corrected me.

'Oh,' I said, trying to cover my disappointment. 'Then you spell it like this...' And I wrote the word for her.

She looked at me.

'What's a soul?' she asked.

*Wednesday 23 January 1980*

Just a shadow.

There are sounds too, but I suppose they are the wind; the roof and walls here ache with it.

I am making the photographs of Auschwitz. I have to make them at night since that is the only time my rooms are dark enough. During the day I sleep when I can, but it is a sleep full of dreams. I dream of smiles and cobwebs and...

These shapes are not the wind.

When night comes I lay out the trays. One each for developer, stopper, fixer. I prepare the chemicals and pour them out; everything is in its right place. Then I choose the negative: a barb of wire, a guard tower, a barrack's window, whatever, and slide it into the enlarger. When I turn off the white light and switch on the safety lamp, it starts.

There are shadows.

When I look there is nothing. Nothing moves. But it is this distinct absence of anything - of any movement - that feels suddenly...

Apologetic.

Like I've been distracted, but - unintentionally. And then the dark and the quiet seem to fill up with such a deep regret.

Last night, though, it was different.

I was leaning over the enlarger, trying to focus it, when something brushed my face. It was like hair or cobwebs it was so soft. And then I realised that it was nothing. And that I could do nothing and change nothing. But I stood there in the dark until, without warning and for no reason, the word came out of me.

'Anne...' I said.

*Thursday 6 August 1981*

This morning Reiha was late for school; only by a few minutes but I asked her why.

She answered: 'Mum took a long time getting the knots out of my hair.'

Playground duty. But the senior yard was deserted. Most of the children had gone out to play in the paddock (or *oval* as we at St. Damian's call it) and two bus loads, I realised, were away on excursion. Today there would be no arguments to sort out, no sudden squalls of temper. Just forty minutes on sunwhite cement.

But that's when I noticed Polla, who is eleven.

She was coming from the tuckshop with an icy-pole and was peeling away the wrapper to get at it. I could see the appetite in her big eyes as she pulled off the last sticky bits of the paper. But what she found underneath was something quite unexpected.

Her icy-pole was deformed.

Apparently it had melted, and then reset, with the result that it had a striking disfigurement at the top. The shape looked like a sort of stumpy paw; it had what appeared to be a thumb and several stubby little toes sticking out of it.

Polla's first reaction was disappointment. It was an icy-pole she had wanted; it was an icy-pole she had asked and paid for. Instead she had been given this - this thing. For a moment it seemed she would take it back and ask for a refund or an exchange. But then, all at once, she was full of glee. She laughed aloud at the disgruntled thing in her hand. For who among her friends would believe it - this mitt of frozen goblin - unless she were to show them? She spun around to locate a witness but her friends were nowhere in sight. Instead she found me, watching.

'Look!' she squealed, her face alive with the wonder of it. And coming over, she held the thing up for me to look at.

Like an archaeologist I took it from her; but instead of examining it, bit off one of the little toes; and saying thank you, returned the icy-pole to Polla.

'You bum!' she said. 'What cheek!' For she had intended only that I *look* at her icy-pole, not that I start eating it.

I put on a look of dismay but Polla was equal to the trick, I knew; and my punishment was not long in coming. She hung on to what was left of her icy-pole, and with her free hand gave me what I deserved: a very good whack on the arm.

I reacted to the injury on cue, and with enough mock pain to spare me from a second whack. Happy with this revenge, Polla bit into her icy-pole. She turned from me and walked away, the bits of coloured ice and laughter spilling from her mouth.

*Friday 18 March 1983*

Notions of where the universe began. Nadine aged ten: 'When I was little in my mummy's stomach...'

*Saturday 12 April 1980*

I visited my family and stayed on for lunch. Then afterwards, that traditional Catholic prayer, the rosary, which today it was my turn to lead. For this, we remained at table, the uncleared table in the kitchen of my family home...

I began the angel's half, hailing the Virgin, when, irreverently, I noticed on the table in front of me - the fig conserve. How stiffly it stood in its jar and how fecund it looked. The thousand tiny seeds in their sticky preserve.

*Monday 19 September 1983*

I was late home last Monday and the flat, having been closed all day, seemed in need of an airing; so I decided to open the windows and doors.

When I stepped out the back, however, I was hit in the face by an incredible smell. At my feet on the cement step was a flayed and eyeless fish head, dropped like an omen by some feline scavenger.

For a while I just stared at the thing and held my breath, wondering how the cat had known to drop it on *my* doorstep. It gave a smell so strong it was like a memory. Of things I didn't know and couldn't name, but which somehow were familiar. Was it the condition of flesh perhaps, or the stench of centuries?

The head stared blindly and was crawling with ants, but expressed no malice as I wrapped it in old newspaper. There was, after all, no other course to take.

And so all week the smell of death inhabited my rubbish bin and would not go away, filtering even through my door and standing in my rooms.

But he is gone now.

Last night I put him out in plastic for collection; I bound the bag up tight to spare him the indignities of further felines.

Bachelors both, we know well the other's wish.

Monday 26 May 1980

At six o'clock this morning the winter term began.

Showering, my dreams go up in steam until I turn the tap to cold. Then everything is shattered and the icy shock of it, my morning prayer: 'Jesus!'

I am conscious suddenly of the frozen paddocks and the timeless stars and -

'Wash away my iniquity...'

I shake the water from my eyes.

June 1980

It's early and the morning's still asleep. We've pulled up at traffic lights but not even the bus wants to be here; it's impatient; it's cold; it's engine is turning over and everything is shaking. The windows are vibrating furiously.

*Light maggots the panes.* But it's like trying to write with the D.T.'s so I give up; I put away my notebook.

Interests, in the end, are simple. The cinema occasionally; sometimes the theatre. A paragraph or two from some book before the day is closed.

Tuesday 26 May 1981

Reading, eyes burn with strain. Keeping awake until the hour for bed. A few quick flicks of the wrist and it is finished. Then there is the darkness; the silence; the oblivion of sleep...

The wages of sin.

July 1979

'Bless me Father.'

'Eh?'

'Bless me Father, for I have sinned.' It is dark in the confessional but the old priest looks at me. Can he see me? Can he see me through the grid? Surely it's too dark. But can he see me? Perhaps he recognises my voice. 'It's been two months since my last confession.'

'Good,' says the old priest.

'And these are my sins,' I say, making the usual admissions to which, when I have finished, the old man replies again that it is *good*. 'Is there anything else?' he asks.

'No Father.'

'Eh?'

'No Father.'

'Good, good; and for your penance say a decade of the rosary eh?'

'Yes Father.'

'Eh?'

'Yes Father.'

'All the bad things that could happen. Think of the murderers and rapists and say a prayer; Fraser and Whitlam and Idi Amin; and what about the communists eh? Carlton and North Melbourne and the souls in purgatory. Don't forget about them now will you lad?'

'No Father.'

'And the young fools at Mass eh? A bit of scripture before you go to bed and an Our Father; a bit of help in the garden, planting some trees. What about doing the dishes? And holy water? Watch the Hare Krishnas and get plenty to eat; saying the Hail Mary and wash your elbows eh?'

'Yes Father.'

'Eh?'

'Yes Father.'

'Good; now, Oh My God?'

I recite the Act of Contrition; but coming out of the confessional wonder to myself: is this some strange sort of joke? Or just senility?

*Thursday 18 October 1979*

'Mr Thomas! Mr Thomas!'

It's schoolyard supervision with the juniors.

'Mr Thomas! In the girls' toilets there's a poison-moth!'

'Oh, come on Susan; moths aren't poisonous.'

'This one is! It's big and fat!'

'Susie, if I were big and fat would I be poisonous?'

'No... But...'

'Well?'

'But you're not a moth!' She gave up on me with that, and ran away.

*Sunday 18 April 1982*

Today, while I walked to morning Mass, a snow white butterfly fluttered across my path and, as if to remind me of something, settled on a forelock of my hair.

Cynically, I flicked the thing away; it regained its flight at once and was gone.

*July 1978*

The tram is full tonight. But still the passengers make room.

Bony, black-stockinged, a gaggle of convent girls gets on, flapping for inspection their concession cards.

Small dry flakes of green paint curl back from the tram's old wooden ceiling. (Does it also suffer the scourge: chronic dermoid eczema?)

I look at my hand and observe it has five fingers.

*Thursday 7 June 1979*

Some things have crystallised but most have turned to bone.

I've bought a room-mate; a paperweight; a human B-grade cranium. *Theodore* I've christened him, *a thing from God*; he shares the shelf above my bed, laden now with books and bone.

His worth from Ramsay's Surgical Ltd was \$65.00. How much more must we be valued who are flesh as well as bone?

*Saturday 20 February 1982*

Last night I dreamed. I dreamed that little white grubs with tiny black faces were wriggling through my hair.

*Friday 16 October 1981*

It has been my intention to photograph some portraits of my children but my camera has been sitting idle in my classroom's cupboard for the past five weeks, while I have not made a single picture. Not because of any apathy on my part (God knows my passion) but simply because time would not allow it. Recesses are full of playground duties, curriculum

meetings, classroom preparations, student teachers, and sometimes, incredible as it seems, even eating lunch!

*Friday 5 February 1982*

I prepared myself a meal for dinner tonight, but within half an hour of consuming it, was furiously ill...

*1 April 1979*

Evening lectures in fourth year curriculum studies, I head my foolscap pages *Education IV* in much the same way as I should write *Sputnik I*.

The reading, at least, is not so bad as it first appeared to be. Last night for instance, while browsing in a book to do with curriculum planning, I discovered that: *Curriculum evaluation is rather like the comparison of two varieties of compost.* (David Hamilton, *Curriculum Evaluation*, Macmillan 1976, p.3.)

Suffice it to say there are synonyms for compost.

*Wednesday 10 February 1982*

Mornings, I've taken to reading a cookbook on the bus. To little advantage. I vomit so frequently the experience is almost enjoyable.

*Wednesday 17 June 1981*

I introduced Theodore to my grade threes today, and they fell in love with him at once. When I removed his sectioned cap to reveal his interior bones, it must have seemed to these children as if they were gazing into a delicately constructed sea-shell, for they announced with little gasps of genuine surprise: 'It's beautiful... How lovely!'

*Saturday 6 February 1982*

Sometimes the prospect of my own death excites me. It will be something completely new and unfamiliar. When I'm dead none of this will matter. I won't have to eat anymore.

But it's the manner of dying that disconcerts me.

Imagine water: the diaphragm sucking, the lungs coughing in the depths of green...

Imagine the knife: the cut and pull, the ebb and pulse of warm fluids...

But haven't we died already? Haven't we all? Didn't we die in Auschwitz? In Hiroshima? Didn't we drown on the Deutschland?

Death has always been. Yet still it seems there's enough to go round.

*Saturday 5 June 1982*

Spent the day reading and neglecting an essay whose submission date is growing depressingly imminent.

Although a clear and sunny afternoon, I did not go out of doors. Instead, I drew my chair a little closer to the window and read *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*.

Later someone knocked at my door. But I remained where I was and at last they went away.

*Saturday 3 July 1982*

With its hammer-flattened head, the bent nail in its long shadow. The grey, frosted fence-paling.

*Friday 13 January 1984*

The dream I cannot clearly recollect, except that I noticed her brown throat; and the tiny blue crystal that hung there, winked once in the light like an eye.

## Stone Blunts

*Coroner's findings (continued):*

The scalp is extensively bruised on the right side and mildly so on the left. The skull shows a linear fracture of the left temporal area continuing with the middle fossa of the base of the skull. This is in continuity with the fracture of the mandible and the maxilla as seen externally. The brain shows marked bruising of the left parietal area with some softening.

In the abdominal cavity the liver shows a very extensive rupture, about six by four centimetres and about five centimetres deep in the right lobe. The spleen is generally pale. The right kidney shows a tear at the hilum. Free fluid blood is present in the pelvic cavity. The intestines are generally unremarkable but the omentum shows areas of bruising. The pancreas, gall bladder and adrenal glands are unremarkable.

In the thoracic cavity the significant finding is extensive bruising of the soft tissues in the posterior mediastinum. The left lung shows small areas of bruising on the anterior margin.

*Monday 25 August 1980*

*The sexual abuse of children is found with uncanny frequency among school teachers. (Freud)*

On the tram last night, while reading a chapter on paedophilia, I became so absorbed in it that had the conductress not called out to me, I would have journeyed well beyond my intended destination.

*Monday 24 March 1980*

Pigtails and freckles, she discovers the taste of salt on her knee.  
Her eyes catch the light and her teacher's glance.

*Tuesday 21 February 1984*

Children flock to me as I unlock the door and enter the classroom. They carry me in on a wave of chatter and cluster about me: this one

explaining his neglected homework, that one her inability to cope with long division. Notes for absence are thrust beneath my nose, and sticky coins get squeezed into my hand for minding until recess.

The room is full of noise but I hear Noelle's voice clearly. She is standing beside me and saying: 'Mr Thomas, I have something to tell you.'

This is Noelle who is wishing for a little sister because her mother is three months' pregnant. To acknowledge her, I place my hand on her arm and hold her there, to indicate that she too must wait her turn.

I answer the children who press around me and send them to their seats. This clears a space of about ten seconds for Noelle, before I have to settle the children and start school. I expect she has had some trouble with her homework, so I ask bluntly: 'Yes Noelle, what is it?'

She says: 'Mum lost her baby.'

And now for the first time I notice her eyes: how ringed about they are with red. She tries to say something else but it won't come out. There is only a sound like bubbles and a wet smell, a sob. She wants to hold on to me but I won't let her. I keep my hand on her arm.

There's not much I can say. 'Do you have a hanky?' Always a good line at times like this. And finding that she didn't have one, I send her to my desk for some Kleenex.

She mops her eyes.

The class is beginning to settle.

'And Noelle...'

She looks at me.

'Take out the books you will need for this morning.'

She gives a nod. I watch as she collects her things and goes to her table. I try to believe that I have, after all, given her something to hold on to...

The grade is ready. I begin school. And Noelle's day proceeds without further event.

*Tuesday 17 September 1985*

Each week I allow my pupils thirty minutes for research. I take them to the school library where they're expected to use the catalogue system and encyclopaedia to explore and research a project of their choice. The children may sit at tables or spread themselves out on the carpet, whatever arrangement best gives them the comfort to work well.

Today, as usual, Shelley was taking a long while to settle down. She's not a lazy child; it is, I think, only a lack of confidence in her own work that makes her hesitant to begin. With every chance she gets, she puts off the business of getting started. And today was no exception. I

watched as she shuffled about the library, choosing at first to sit on the floor; then moving over to a chair and table; then, finally, resuming a position on the carpet beside a window, she noticed the fragments of broken glass.

I need to explain here that our library window was, this morning, shattered by an in-coming football. While a glazier had since restored the window, it appeared that not all of the fragments of broken glass had been swept up. Shelley now had another excuse for delaying her project work.

'Mr Thomas,' she said, coming up to me. 'There's glass where I am sitting.'

The proper thing to do, of course, would be to sit somewhere else. Shelley knew this as well as I did, so I was not going to remark the obvious. Besides, I was getting tired of her game.

'Ouch,' I said dryly. 'That could be rather painful.'

'Oh?' she wondered, not expecting this response from me. But then she brightened up smartly and announced: 'I'd have *two* cuts then, wouldn't I?'

And Katie, who was standing nearby leafing through a textbook, burst at once into a noisy cackle. This confirmed Shelley's joke, and I could do nothing but watch as both girls clutched their bellies and sank in a deluge of giggles to the floor.

I tried in earnest but could not, myself, restrain a smile.

*Thursday 23 July 1981*

A child's face below my hand, the luminous negative etching into paper. Around her scarf of hair I burn the blackness in. Only her face must light this picture: a pale, proud flame in a pool of dark.

*Friday 21 September 1984*

Since term resumed I've been making the effort to expose a roll of film each week. My subjects are the children. And once a child has agreed to sit for me, I bring her into my classroom at a recess (when all other children are out of doors) and place her between the window-light and whichever backdrop I think most appropriate.

This last week however, I have taken no photographs because the rain has continued every day. It has scarcely let up for more than ten minutes in the entire week, with the result that not only has the light been inadequate for photography, but I've had my class indoors with me for five, whole, consecutive days. Recesses included!

*Monday 9 December 1985*

My umbrella is one of those extendable ones which telescope and open when a button on the stem is pressed.

In the middle of the street tonight, I found myself caught in a heavy rainshower. While passers-by with good sense scattered to nearby shelter, I smartly unfastened my briefcase and withdrew my broolly.

On pressing its button however, I was surprised to see its upper half launch off like a rocket and descend, unopened, several metres away in the gutter.

*Wednesday 19 September 1984*

Pissing rain all day.

At the railway station I met up with Stevie and Kate (pupils both), and seeing that they had no shelter and were getting wetter by the minute, I offered them some cover from my broken umbrella. They were grateful, so we clung together in the drizzle and waited for our train.

When it finally arrived, I stood back to let the children get on first. Kate had got on when, unexpectedly, the carriage lurched and began to roll forward. To Stevie, who is only five years old, it must have appeared as though his older sister were leaving without him. In an attempt to get into the moving carriage, he stepped out over the edge of the platform -

And his foot was already going down into the dark gap between platform and carriage wheels, when I realised there was a decision that had to be made. The boy would fall and face certain injury (and possible death) unless...

My movement was instantaneous but not quite instinctive, for I remember giving thought to the alternative. But within a moment I had gripped the child. I caught the hood of his jacket and drew him up on to the platform where he was safe, the rain matting his hair.

The train had stopped moving. It had rolled only a few centimetres.

Stevie jumped into the carriage. Alive and grinning with mischief, he went up to his sister and shook his head. The drops of rain flew from his wet hair.

'Don't!' she admonished crossly, being wet enough already without his contribution. She took him in charge and sat him down in the train.

Things had happened so quickly that neither child had seen any danger. Kate had been preoccupied with the movement of the carriage. 'Stay there,' I said, when she looked to me for assurance. And it was then that Stevie stepped out.

Little more than a baby, Stevie is accustomed to being dragged about, pulled this way and that by his mother or older sister. It was, therefore, of no account to the boy that I too should pull at him.

As for the dark crevice opening at his feet, it seems only I had seen it.

*Tuesday 26 November 1985*

The class was working quietly so it was a good chance to mark the roll. I cast an eye over the children to ascertain the number present, but found myself distracted by Shelley. She was sitting with her dress bunched up around her waist and her foot up on the seat, knee under chin, her socks off, scratching.

'My mossie bites,' she complained, when I asked her the trouble.

So I emptied out the class's first aid box and discovered some calamine. This Shelley accepted and applied with little dabs. I watched until she had finished; then, as I packed away the calamine and cottonwool, I happened to inhale, quite without intent, the warm and grubby odour of her small white feet.

*Thursday 29 June 1979*

A carnival of headlamps; coloured lights in watery panes. I fill the bus with long division. It is winter morning twilight.

Now everything begins to shake. It is the choke and shudder of a cold bus. Fractions, decimals and long division spill into the aisle. Passengers begin to stare but I have no answers for them.

And the bus leaps forward suddenly, wiping its spectacles.

*Sunday 14 June 1981*

My reading lamp is a dim one; and this afternoon as the sky darkened and spat rain against my window, it was not sufficient to light up my whole room. But I stayed where I was in the puddle of its light; at first reading because I wanted to write but couldn't; and then just looking around at the shadows, at the shelves, at the cracked walls...

The rain collected in a roof-gutter. I could hear its steady trickle down the outside drain. It seemed to be saying 'chutney, chutney, chutney...' as it fell.

I am a cold thin man with spectacles and bony fingers.

*Wednesday 16 November 1983*

She limped up to me in the schoolyard, a child of about seven years. She'd cut her knee on a small sharp stone, and having shed the obligatory tears, was now expecting me to do something about her injury.

I took her to the schoolyard sink and got a length of paper towel. But before I wiped it away, I noticed how the thin, red trickle had crept all the way down to her white sock.

I remember that her limb was warm and that my hands were cold; and that later, during the staff-meeting, when I looked at my fingers, I saw them smeared with her blood.

*Monday 2 August 1982*

Cold tonight. A tram driver calling words into the wind that I could make no sense of.

I saw her in the schoolground today; she was wearing her winter dress. My black coat flapping in the wind.

*Wednesday 8 August 1984*

Schoolboys, leafing through a magazine, sit opposite me in a bus. I can see the magazine; it has pictures in it of women and girls, naked.

And I remember, a few days back, in the very middle of the busy pavement: her chin raised, soft throat throbbing to the motion of his tongue within her mouth - a girl of about fourteen years with her schoolboy.

*Tuesday 21 September 1982*

I wake in the night and hear the children call my name. I have answered them to go away before realising that they're only a dream.

Remaining quiet.

Suffocating many and varied impulses.

*Thursday 14 October 1982*

'Mr Thomas.'

The train is crowded but I can see the boy, a pupil about ten years old, who gives me a wave. He is seated beside an elderly man.

Passengers observe as I excuse a path among them to the boy and greet him: 'G'day Michael; how are you?'

'Not too well,' he replies, dropping his gaze to the floor.

'Oh?' say I. 'Been to the doctor?'

'No,' says Michael, lifting his eyes to the old man.

'Gawn, you tell 'im,' says the old man.

Michael looks at me again. 'Mum died last night,' he says; and then, looking at the floor: 'A quarter to ten.'

For a moment it strikes me as ridiculous that he should know the precise time: as though he had been standing there with a stopwatch.

But passengers observe. Vacant eyes have focused. The carriage is full of people but no one speaks. Everyone has heard the boy and now I'm aware they're awaiting my reply.

'Oh no...' I'm saying, and I look to the old man. His eyes begin to rim with tears.

The whole carriage knows my response is useless. Including me. I feel the blush rising in my face.

'My daughter,' the old man says, and indicates himself by beating his thumb on his heart. 'My daughter.'

'I'm sorry,' I say, but the train has arrived at my station.

Michael looks up.

'I'll see you later,' I say to him; and I brush his hair just once with my hand.

Gone.

Gone.

*Sunday 24 April 1983*

From nowhere a white moth; it flits past, brushing my face with its wings.

*Monday 19 July 1982*

The music lesson was still in progress so I took a chair from the side of the room and brought it over to where the little pack of kids, my class of eight year olds, was sitting on the floor. I sat down behind them. Behind Shelley who turned around to look at me; and there was mischief in that look, I should have realised; for she hopped up from the floor at once and stuck herself on my knee.

Miss Evans was winding up the session with a talk on rhythm. She was holding up different sorts of instruments for the children to look at.

Shelley, sitting on my knee, peeped over her shoulder to see what I made of her unusual show of affection. She was in a good mood today, I could tell, as she tested me with a cautious smile.

But I looked at her resolutely and pointed to the floor.

She knew where she belonged and she began to shift. Then she put her head on tilt and pouted.

I was unmoved. *Hurry up*, I frowned.

And her face said: *Please?*

I folded my arms.

*Please?*

I looked at her.

Miss Evans was finishing her lesson and the class was listening attentively, so I gave a nod to the front. Shelley understood. If she paid attention she could stay where she was for the last few minutes of the lesson. She turned her face to the front, and for a few moments I looked at the curls on the back of her head.

So now we had percussion instruments. Banging things. Castanets and maracas. Cymbals and tone blocks. The things for giving rhythm and movement to music.

But my thoughts were elsewhere. I'd covered the blackboard in subtraction sums and today we were going to change hundreds into tens and tens into -

Shelley.

It was Shelley.

It was the weight of her body shifting with a restless tension; a movement from side to side. It was casual enough to pass unnoticed; just a slipping this way and that; but elastic and slow. She looked to the front like a good child should, and paid attention. Her face was glowing with the effort. Did she know what she was doing? Her legs tightened. I felt the heat of her crotch, a moisture...

And I was afraid.

I tried not to panic but I had to do something; I gave her a shove.

Shelley got on her feet at once and looked at me. She was surprised.

Bewildered.

I said I was sorry and made some sort of an excuse. I got up quickly then, and got out of the room; leaving the child, leaving the class...

Outside the winter air was cold and bright; and the sunlight a stern reality.

*Tuesday 15 November 1983*

It was a dream.

I stood in the kitchen of my family home and the table before me was stacked with crockery. There were towers of cups and tiers of plates; bone-white basins, bowls and jugs...

But as I looked, a glint of something silver stabbed my eye; moved, there on the table. It struck again and this time even the teacups were startled. I put out my hand to steady them, when something silver - a living thing! - glanced out and under a plate.

It was beautiful. A thing of light. A running thing like mercury or water.

I lifted the plate and it flashed again. It had a hundred legs to carry it: a blade of light the length of a teaspoon; a centipede of silver! It was like a bracelet or a chain unfastened; and it shot like a dazzle across the china. It ran about the rims and handle-loops of teacups; a trickle of lovely light.

So taken was I with its prettiness that I thought to trap and keep it. I watched until its movements stopped; until it rested on the table in the shadow of a jug. Then, careful so as not to disturb the animal, I took from the table a bone-white basin. I turned it upside down...

And brought it down fast to cover the creature!

But the diameter of the basin was less than the length of the centipede; and in my haste to trap it, I had crushed its back.

It wriggled in pain; and feeling a dreadful remorse for what I had done, I lifted the basin enough to free the animal's tail.

When it was free I lowered the basin again - but was too slow- and this time I found that, as the creature tried to escape, I had cut it into two suffering pieces!

I awoke horrified.

*Saturday 10 July 1982*

Opening the cupboard to replace a bottle, it fell from behind my hand - the coffee jar - to shatter on the kitchen floor.

And yesterday at school, a glass door was slammed by the wind. It fractured at once but was held by its frame and remained intact; a graph in the glass, cracked up in its pane like a skeleton.

I thought, however, that I could get out that way. And like a fool I tried.

Then everything fell out on me, stalactites and jagged pieces christening my feet. I couldn't get clear in time so I just stood there,

dumbly, and waited for the bleeding to start; but it didn't. In fact, I wasn't even scratched.

Scattered crystals of the broken jar.

This morning I am still discovering pieces in my shoe.

*Friday 19 March 1982*

I turned in time to see the boy. He was running across the playground when he tripped and fell and his head hammered the cement with a sudden thud.

He was one of the juniors, about five years old, so a good yell was to be expected. And when it came I took it to be a good sign since it proved he was not unconscious. But then he lifted himself and I saw the cement around him blotting out with a rain of big drops.

*God!* I thought, and grabbed the kid. I picked him up and carried him to the school office where first aid is kept.

But how he bled!

Bled all down my shirt; sobbing out of his dark pain; blinded by the clotting web that stung and stuck his eyelids shut.

'Okay... it's okay... we'll fix you up... there's a good boy...' while the deepening stain seeped into everything.

Eventually first aid was found and the boy patched up. He was sent home for the remainder of the day, three stitches in his crown.

But later, washing off the blood and thinking of the boy, I couldn't work it out. I could not remember. What it was that made me turn - in time.

*Friday 24 August 1984*

The child quite literally falling over herself with mischief, slipped on rain-wet linoleum; and resisting neither me nor the rule of gravity, fell back into my arms. I caught her, and by lowering her gently to the floor, spared her the hard landing.

A tangle of brown legs, she reposed a moment, trying to contain her laughter.

*December 1985*

The shutter snaps; like phosphorus light flares across my film.

Monday 27 September 1983

For a moment today I took her hands in mine and held her fingers.

'Mum's gone,' she said.

'Where?'

'Dunno.'

'What do you mean she's gone?'

'She's away until Wednesday.'

'When did she leave?'

'Sat-dee.'

'But... why'd she go?'

'To get away for a while; sick of us prob'ly.'

'But who's looking after you?'

'Dad.'

'And who's looking after mum?'

'Dunno. Cutta maybe.'

'Who?'

'Cutta. A friend of mum's. He goes away with her sometimes.'

Thursday 17 July 1981

As part of an exercise in letter writing, I took my class to the local post office. There we bought postage stamps for our letters, but she complained to me that hers would not stick. I took it from her to see what the problem was and found she had licked away all of the gum. It was only with a fair bit of care that I managed to stick the sodden fragment to her envelope. I remember: she smiled with pleasure.

Monday 18 July 1983

She has brown skin. She is slender and, for her ten years, quite tall, which sometimes makes her self-conscious among her friends. In fact they've given her the nickname *Sticks*, and she takes refuge now in an almost constant silliness. This has spoilt her reputation with some of the teachers, but I suppose it is her way of sustaining a peer group identity, and deflecting their possible rejection. At the present time she is in a grade five and, since next year I'll be taking a grade six, I'm hoping that she will again be placed in my class.

Thursday 15 December 1983

She visited me in my classroom today and gave me a Christmas card. It had a thank you message on it for the photos that I'd given her this year, portraits of herself. I was pleased to receive it, and to delay her a little longer asked: 'And whose grade will *you* be in next year?'

'Won't be here next year,' she said.

'Why? Where are you going?'

'Mum's looking for a house.'

'A new home?'

'Mm.'

'Where?'

'Dunno yet.'

When she left the room I watched her go. Until she vanished in the glare of the summer yard outside.

'Goodbye,' she said.

Wednesday 22 December 1982

Melissa White, a grade one pupil of St. Joseph's School, was found in her bedroom yesterday, dead. During the night, it seems, she was sexually interfered with, stabbed, and strangled by an unknown intruder.

The newspaper has published a picture today, taken only hours before her death, of the child sitting on Santa Claus' knee.

Wednesday 28 December 1983

I looked at the pendant for the last time, the tiny sapphire resting on its white cushion. Finally I closed its case, which shut with a little snap, and folded the letter once around it.

I placed her gift, and the letter embracing it, into a small box which once had contained photo-paper. This box was larger than the pendant's little presentation case, and, when wrapped, would comfortably accommodate her address on its front. Around the pendant's case I packed blistered plastic to reduce the effect of bumps and shakes; then, having secured the photo-box with a measure of adhesive tape, I wrapped the package in brown paper. On the front I wrote her name and address in black texta, and then in biro the words: *with care*.

The result was quite trim and tidy and I thought she would be pleased to receive it.

But then I looked at the words *with care* which I had written beside her name. And I became worried that her parents would think of this as a

moral directive, when I had intended it only as a postal direction. Rather than risk any such misunderstanding, I at once removed the paper, then rewrapped and readdressed the package.

My enclosure read:

*Thanks for being a cheerful pupil.*

*With this letter there's a small goodbye present. Don't go swinging from trees with it because the chain isn't that strong.*

*I will not forget you.*

*Friday 31 December 1982*

I was alone yet it seemed the night might give reply. 'Melissa?' But no answer came.

*Saturday 25 December (Christmas Day) 1982*

The walls here. Are opening.

*Saturday 4 December 1982*

The wedding of my cousin, Sarah.

No one loves a photographer, but being family the job was expected of me. Craning around the chapel with the discretion of a giraffe and the attitude of a piranha (snapping), I became the target of many a wizened glance. (Who wants to photo weddings anyway?)

I earned my grandfather's scorn when I photographed a family group - from behind.

Groups. What can you do that's creative with a group of aged and wedlocked relatives? The most I could manage was to pose them beside a litter-bin, the incongruity of which escaped even my grandfather. But the duty's done. I am relieved to be home. The gabble, the glasses, the grins - blurring into four unsmiling walls.

*Tuesday 26 October 1982*

In my classroom; alone. And her voice from somewhere outside. There is sunlight everywhere and she is going home. 'See yaa...' she cries. Her words drift up and dissolve in the late afternoon. Then

everything goes quiet and I can hear only the sound of traffic somewhere, and the burr of a blowfly in the hot room.

*Sunday 5 December 1982*

Migraine. The aura first of little spinning lights, then the dull ache driving its long nail in.

Dreamed. My grandfather pursuing me with a bayonet.

*Saturday 10 July 1982*

Last night someone rapping at my door, then on the panes. Who? Remaining still and quiet, I surmised for a while; but no matter; after some minutes the disturbance removed itself.

*Monday 19 July 1982*

I had no sooner dismissed my class when she visited my room. She came for no reason. Just happened to be there when my door was open.

We talked together.

When she stood beside me I inhaled from her hair some light perfume. Like scented soap.

*Tuesday 20 July 1982*

Awoke during the last night, and was startled by a cracking sound in the ceiling. I supposed it was the plaster splitting; for, over the past two or three months, many large and extensive cracks have opened in my walls. Day by day I observe them widening and gradually travelling towards the floor.

My hands and my fingers too, are developing cracks. The grooves of my fingers split and reveal the tissue below. It is a condition aggravated by photographic solutions.

But these cracks.

Am I to suppose my rooms and this flesh are hatching?

*September 1983*

She stoops over the schoolyard sink to drink from the bubbler. The action lifts the hem of her school dress. The tender, almost bruised appearance of the dark skin behind her knee.

*Wednesday 19 December 1984*

the wound grows its crust and the tissue knots

*Friday 20 November 1981*

Am feeling more apprehensive lately. Perhaps it's the summer coming on.

In fact, while leafing through corrections in the moody bus this afternoon, I had such an intuition of impending gloom that I actually looked over my shoulder to see if it were creeping up on me.

Imagine my surprise when I saw, above my head, a crazy stain of blackness blotting out the light.

It was oil or grease I presume, splashed up onto the window by some passing vehicle.

*Thursday 6 June 1985*

A bus, turning to confront the morning. Sunlight moves on glass.

*Monday 30 January 1984*

There has been a motor accident.

Annette, a little girl from school, a child whom I have taught, and whose photograph I have taken, is dead.

Suddenly her smile is so vivid. I can see her face now with a piercing clarity.

*Wednesday 1 February 1984*

Annette's funeral Mass was at one o'clock this afternoon; and because they knew her well, many children from my class attended.

But I could find no voice for answering the Mass.

Her coffin was so small and white.

*Thursday 2 February 1984*

The night is made of dreams. A mosaic of fractions. Angles of sound and colour.

I wake, remembering her smile.

*Wednesday 15 February 1984*

On a wall opposite the school, in full view of the playground and all the children, a graffitist last night painted an enormous penis. His work he has subscribed with the single word: *cox*.

Today very hot.

Distracted by considerations of the baked earth; of her body bloated and changing colour.

How is it that her face and smile, her mouth and eyes can come to this?

*Monday 29 March 1982*

Travelling home on the train from Broadfield, what seems like gunshots resound about my carriage. It is a rain of rocks hurled at the train by schoolboys; I catch a glimpse of them high up on an overpass bridge.

Suddenly the windows begin to shatter and the carriage is strewn with fragments of glass and stone.

The train continues.

*Monday 25 October 1982*

Hot. And the children all about me. Longings that are difficult to define, and some to which I daren't give a name.

*Wednesday 8 February 1982*

Supervision in the infants' yard, and a little girl is calling my name. 'Mr Thomas... Mr Thomas!' she gushes excitedly.

It is impossible to neglect her any longer, so I approach the platform of concrete steps on which she stands.

'Yes?' I ask, as I take her hands in mine, and look into her big eyes where the whole bright schoolyard is reflected.

'I'm as big as you are!' she announces, and her pupils flash like knives.

'Oh yeah!' I challenge. 'And who are you?'

Her face alive with fun, she answers: 'I'm Annette!'

*Tuesday 26 October 1982*

33 degrees.

The sun strikes my face, lighting half the image of it in a pane of glass.

Another train flashes past, causing my reflection to flicker...

am/ not/ am/ not/ am/ not/ am/ not.

### III

#### Scissors Cut

##### *Coroner's findings (continued):*

Bruises were also present on the lower lobe of the girl's right lung. Her heart was unremarkable.

##### *August ?*

a slash is ineffectual but deeper it spurts

##### *February 1979*

There are things which remain indelible beyond words and time. Things which transcend forgetfulness; that are neither erased nor clearly recollected but which become the pieces and parts of being. Death falls into this category of experience; as do voices calling your name, bits and pieces of sentences, blunt pencils, sexual feelings, dreams, anger, leaves, violins, candles, fingers, spiders, hair, worms, wheels, bubbles...

An awareness of the symbolic nature of things can lead to a type of paranoiac prejudice wherein nothing means its actuality, but takes on a greater or lesser meaning according to a person's schema of associations with the object. The floor of the world gives way underfoot. And a single thing divides into a thousand parallels. Nothing is static. Realities are multiple and each event displaced by its alternatives in meaning. A pair of scissors for example, that just happen to be lying on a table, are glanced from the corner of an eye, and become a deliberate attempt on behalf of fate to seduce you into an act of suicide.

##### *Saturday 2 November 1985*

A child's crying was coming through the wall. It was Tracie, aged nine, who lives next door. Her mother had just stormed off in the car, yelling out that: 'Tonight young lady you're going to bed at seven o'clock!'

I heard Tracie's father come into the front room, the room next to my study. He said: 'I'll teach you...' and the child began to whine: 'No-o... Dad-dy...'

There was a sound of scuffling (of her jeans coming off?) and slaps delivered to bare skin. Eight slaps delivered with a moderate intensity. But Tracie began to scream. 'I hate you! I hate you!' she sobbed.

Her father walked out of the room and left her there to cry. I know he left her there because I heard his voice elsewhere in the flat. 'Shut up!' he called to her. 'Shut up!' he yelled.

And Tracie answered back.

It was something half-smothered in a sob, but it was fatal. Her father came back into the room and said to her: 'You fuckin' little bitch.' And I heard a belt unbuckle and unsheath itself.

The child was screaming already. 'Daddy! Daddy!' she bawled.

There was another bout of scuffling and then the snap of a belt on bare skin. Snap it went. Snap and snap in quick succession and with no restraint. Tracie was hysterical; I could hear her thrashing about. 'Please!' she screamed. But the belt didn't stop.

I covered my head with my hands. I tried not to listen. I tried to block it out. But her punishment went on forever. Or seemed to.

And then at last it was finished. And the child was choking on her screams.

'Shut up!' her father said, and this time she did. The silence was profound without so much, even, as a whimper.

All this happened an hour ago. Since then I've seen the little girl. She came out of doors where I watched her from my window.

I thought about the weals beneath her jeans and skivvy.

*Sunday 29 July 1984*

A dark day with a cold wind.

Lunch with the Ramirez family which turned out to be dinner since the barbecue refused to light. I'd had no breakfast but was drinking straight whisky with Mr Ramirez. (Well, straight except for the ice.) Mrs Ramirez was preparing a salad in the kitchen but sometimes she would come to the table where her husband and I were seated, and join us in the conversation.

The children were watching television: Anna aged ten years and Elizabeth, eleven; both of whom I've taught and photographed at various times. They make good subjects for the camera with their freckled faces, and their jet black hair which is long and wild as spiders. Elizabeth is presently in my grade six class, and on Friday she invited me to come round for Sunday lunch. This was a pleasure I would not refuse. So now

I sat at the dining-room table while her parents made conversation with me; and she and her sister watched a movie on TV...

Did I have a car?

'No,' I said.

'That's good,' said Mrs Ramirez. But she was much too obliging and we both knew it, so now there was a case to put. 'Much safer,' she said quickly. 'There are too many accidents.'

There was a pause and the ice in my glass made a cracking sound.

'An accident,' said Mr Ramirez, taking up where his wife left off. 'There was an accident this year.'

'Oh?' I said. 'Yes...'. And the children - I sensed it - were suddenly alert and listening to us.

'Yes,' said Mr Ramirez. 'That little girl. What was her name? From school...'

'Annette,' said Elizabeth, turning around from the TV to face her parents; and Anna, rising from her beanbag, came over to my chair where she stood beside me. Mindfully I took her hand.

'Annette,' said Mr Ramirez. 'Yes, that's right. It was such a pretty name.'

I said that she was a pretty child.

'You taught her,' said Mrs Ramirez. 'How old was she?'

'Nine,' said Anna, intervening; and I felt the cold of her dark eyes as she looked at me.

Since their friendship with Annette had developed over many years, it was not my intention to exclude either of these children from the talk. I turned to Anna, meeting those black eyes, and asked did she have a photograph of her friend.

Should Anna have had a picture I would gladly have viewed it. If she had no picture, it was my thought to offer her one from among those I had, myself, made.

But it was Mrs Ramirez who now intervened. She answered on Anna's behalf. 'Yes,' she said. 'Anna did have a picture; but it upset her so much that I took it away. It's hidden.'

And I saw in Anna's eyes, for just that moment, the blade of her resentment flash.

I wanted to say something. Very much I wanted to say something. But I felt so constrained by the propriety of this occasion that, in the end, I said nothing. I let go of Anna's hand and reached for my glass.

'More ice?' asked Mr Ramirez.

Anna looked at me.

'Yes,' I said.

1979

A sparrow pecks at rotting fruit; the dead apple hanging on its thorn,  
its belly bleeding syrup.

*December 1985*

'Ter-ry.' It is a whinge in the wall. A name in the night. She squeals  
it again: 'Ter-ry...' lifting his name in a playful complaint.

I am alone. My eyes are opening. I can see the particles of darkness  
and I feel their weight...

'No Terry.'

Still he persists.

'Terry! Stop it!' Her whisper cuts the dark.

I cannot tell the time; but I am here, somewhere between midnight  
and morning...

And she gives him a handful of giggles. 'Ter-ry,' she says. 'Ter-rrry,'  
she whines. 'It hurts... Ow! You're hurting.' She is angry now.

But no, I am mistaken. Her giggles spill again; like coins into the  
night, silver coins. And I cannot go back to sleep.

*Wednesday 19 January 1983*

Reminders.

A glass of milk for instance. Or the egg I break at breakfast. The  
milk, a feminine excretion and in colour, chaste - virginal. The egg, an  
ache of yolk stung with its little speck...

I cannot but think sometimes of whom it will be. Who will love *her*  
? Whose will be the kiss to delight *her* ? And whose touch?

*Tuesday 27 December 1983*

Reading at my window I glance up, and through the glass perceive a  
child on roller skates.

*Monday 28 December 1981*

This morning I sharpened my pencils. All five of them.

*Monday 16 September 1985*

Fresh from the paddock she came in to be photographed; Lisa, still panting from the heat of her fun, speckles of mud on her short summer frock.

Placing her before a backdrop of black curtain, I began to arrange her limbs... The stains of chlorophyll upon her dress; the rectangular impression of old adhesive where once a band-aid patched her knee... And from her warm legs the slightly sour emanation of bruised grass.

I wonder if, when you are dead, it is possible still to see the sunlight.

*Wednesday 15 December 1982*

Though one pain may cease might another not begin? I mean the eternal retribution for making my own quietus.

But if the body has died and the nervous system is dead, how can there be any pain at all - in Hell?

Sometimes, from the corner of my eye, I see things resembling insects or thin fingers encroaching on my vision; yet when I look there is nothing.

*Friday 9 July 1982*

A child ambling ahead of me in the street, singing in staccato squeaks:

*Ba-ker's-hat  
just-your-size  
when-you-put-it-on  
you-im-pro-vise...*

over and over.

*Tuesday 28 February 1984*

Looking at her picture and the dull sense aches.

Now I understand why the plaster falls from my roof and the walls begin to gape. Its the thoughts I am having.

*Saturday 4 August 1984*

A magazine was lying in the street and the wind was raffling its pages. I saw the colour of skin among its leaves and darker things I hadn't seen before. So I picked it up and brought it home. There, looking over the photographs, I saw for the first time the thing I'd been afraid of for so long. It reminded me of nothing so much as a stringless purse, the lips sealed and the fur still clinging to the skin. But at the sight of it I felt very angry and disappointed, because I had always thought it would be something beautiful.

I laughed. But where did the joke begin? So far down I cannot find the place. But I laughed until the tears came.

Then I took a scissors and cut the pictures up into as many little pieces as I could make.

*Friday 16 March 1984*

The graffitist has been at work again. His sign and his slogan are daubed all over the Broadfield railway station. It is prominent there among the work of similar minds.

And in this respect the trains too, are well illustrated. The carriages are scrawled with words, with drawings - mostly in texta, black and indelible; but sometimes in excrement.

*Wednesday 18 July 1984*

It was in the junior toilet block. The block reserved for boys under ten.

One of the children reported it. 'Mr Thomas,' he said. 'Someone's been wounded.' So I went to see.

And yes, there was blood. Little spatters of it in one of the washbasins and a handprint on the wall. Next to the handprint someone had used their finger to leave a message. It was just the one word smeared there in angry capitals. Written in blood, it said: *CUNT*.

I guessed this was some teenager's joke. The school hall had been used by the youth group last night for a disco, and one of the kids had

probably had some sort of an accident. A nosebleed, maybe; or perhaps there had been a fight; hard to say. But why traipse all the way across to the junior block when the hall had amenities of its own?

Whatever the reason, this wouldn't take long to clean up. It was still early and most of the children had not yet arrived. By nine o'clock the mess would be gone.

I was about to go and speak to the cleaner, when I noticed something else.

Propped up for display on one of the paper towel dispensers was a used sanitary napkin. It was soiled heavily with blood.

*Thursday 19 July 1984*

Last night I dreamed.

The images and their sequence I do not now recall; only the vague notion remains of something concerning lips and wounds, bleeding and death.

Something so far down. A panic, sometimes, as though I am drowning.

*Thursday 13 December 1984*

A huge rock catapults from nowhere and slams into the side of the train. It has struck the outside of my carriage barely five centimetres from the window at which I am seated.

*Saturday 6 August 1983*

A strong wind tonight so penetrated my scarf and coat, that I wondered if Melissa White wept, or had time even to cry out, as the long cold splinter pierced her breast.

*Wednesday 12 May 1982*

Upstarts and endings. Sparks in a dim skull.

When the eye stops and lifts from the page, the loss of something that I've never gained recurs to me, severely.

Friday 6 May 1983

So much blood in my egg this morning that I couldn't bring myself to eat it.

Monday 1 March 1982

It's autumn. Autumn and the leaves are whispering. Everything is falling down.

I've bought another skull. A companion-piece for Theodore. There's no reason for it but I call him Oscar.

There are no reasons.

But there are flowers. I've put flowers in my rooms. Roses. Dark red and light pink petals litter my tables and shelves.

There are no reasons.

But there are children.

?

In the crevices of my walls faces are appearing to observe me

January 1986

36 degrees.

The cold tap running and I cup my hands beneath it. I splash the water on my face.

But lifting for the mirror's eye, my face is rusted red. Not *my* blood but something in the pipes. I look to my hands and they are stained with the stuff; it swirls to a froth in the basin.

Here among these rooms, veined with ancient plumbing, the very faucets bleed.

Monday 2 April 1984

Her fresh limbs and the awful sickness in me, growing.

Later, remembered from the sonnet *My Love Is As A Fever* the fragment: *desire is death*.

Through some miracle I have refrained from touching her. But I am afraid. I cannot be relied on. I should not be anywhere near these children. I should not be anywhere.

*Saturday 8 December 1984*

Last night I dreamed that I awoke in my bed and discerned an object lying under the covers beside me.

Imagine my distress when I drew back the bedsheet and disclosed the torn and mutilated body of little Melissa White.

*Saturday 17 March 1984*

What is it that troubles me?

Is it the graffiti? Is it Broadfield where the walls cry out? Is it the children?

The one way to stop all of this is to stop myself. All day thinking about it, but am such a coward that I cannot do it.

*Sunday 18 March 1984*

The sickness eating me up with distraction. I mean the limbs of little children, burning me.

*Saturday 24 March 1984*

this is the wrong planet and these are the wrong shoes

i am misfitted

relating to no one

children excepted

and praying for death i am insured against it

or so it seems

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staring a long while at the codeine tablets  
small  
so small  
but  
in the right dosage  
would not his scattered being  
inhabit them?

*Wednesday 4 April 1984*

Were there no children in Gomorrah?

*Wednesday 11 April 1984*

One hope: to create a ripple. A mark of protest. A little piece of metal  
to lodge in the brow.

*Thursday 21 June 1984*

The graffiti is poisonous and grows each day more plain.

*Wednesday 11 April 1984*

At the edge with nowhere to go but over yet I cling wanting but not  
wanting to let go.

Today was a warm bright day and the children were in short summer  
dresses. My colleagues, who imagine me to be normal, must suppose I  
did not notice.

*Thursday 5 July 1984*

Noelle has become of late rather a precocious child, the heat blooming  
in her cheek. Tonight was cold, very cold, and I spoke at length with her  
mother; but afterwards wondered why, when, in a hundred years, what  
will it matter - she and I and her daughter's steaming breath?

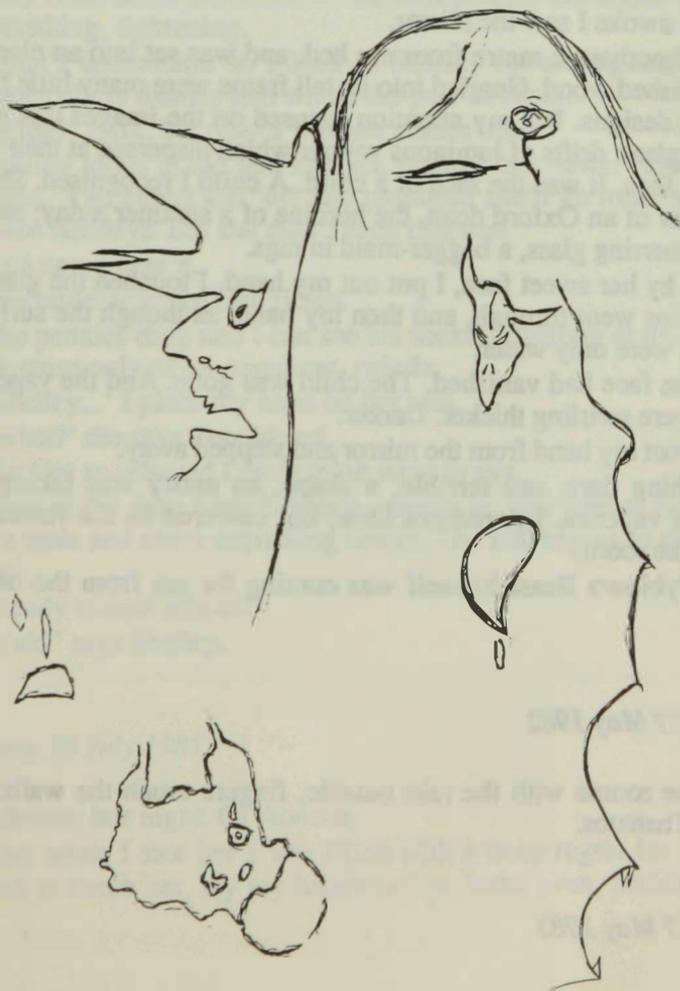
Monday 23 August 1982

Marked the end of term with 900 milligrams of aspirin.  
On vacation I see no one, hear from no one. I lose myself in books,  
listen to certain recorded sounds: Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* or the small  
Berlin school children singing *Die Jugend Marschiert*.

Saturday (night) 20 August 1983

Recollection: there were dark places in Germany that I dared not enter.

Thursday 12 May 1983 - Faces from my wall



*Tuesday 17 May 1983*

Afflicted lately by many sudden changes of mood. Anxiety. Feelings of guilt. Moments of euphoria in the darkness, or when I happen upon her picture among my photographs. Then depression for long intervals, more anxiety, more guilt. Discomfort at being in the company of anyone. Am seeing no one.

It is so black.

Not the colour alone, but the press of it. Tangible in grams, it weighs on mind and body; the pressure on my back and shoulders; and in my mouth the taste of black, of bitter charcoal.

*A dream, August 1985*

When I awoke I saw the mirror.

It stood perhaps a metre from my bed, and was set into an elongated oval of polished wood. Gnarled into its tall frame were many little figures and ornate designs. But my attention focused on the images that moved within the glass: drifts of luminous vapour which dispersed at their centre to reveal a face. It was the face of a child. A child I recognised. She was the daughter of an Oxford dean, the heroine of a summer's day; and as a focus for unerring glass, a beggar-maid in rags.

Drawn by her sweet face, I put out my hand. I touched the glass; but my fingertips went through, and then my hand, as though the surface of this mirror were only water.

Now the face had vanished. The child was gone. And the vapours in the glass were swirling thicker. Darker.

I drew out my hand from the mirror and stepped away.

Something dark and terrible, a shape, an entity was taking form among the vapours. I dared not look, but cowered in the furthest corner of the room.

The Flyblown Beast himself was coming for me from the mirror's glass.

*Thursday 27 May 1982*

In these rooms with the rain outside, fingers touch the walls. Fear. Eros and Thanatos.

*Monday 27 May 1985*

Second term is about to begin. The children are coming into class. They perch on table-tops or mill about in little groups. The room's an aviary, a squall of colour. But in one corner there's a chair untouched; the one child's absence, persisting.

Shelley comes in. Without being asked, but with the intention of being helpful on her first day back, she climbs up onto the blackboard's ledge, kneels there, and reaches up to write the date.

To show appreciation of her helpful gesture, I ask: 'How was your holiday?'

'Awful,' she replies, blunt as ever.

'Oh?' I inquire. 'Why was that?'

'Tracie's dead,' she says.

And that's all she says. *Tracie's dead*. Just the two words. But they stick in me like bits of glass and everything goes cold. How can it be? Another child dead? But there are no stars just the blackness, and the grip of something, tightening.

I don't understand so I look to Shelley for an explanation. She is oblivious of my dismay and writes the year in chalk.

'What?' I ask, but only a whisper comes out.

Shelley looks at me and repeats, plainly, her news. 'Tracie's dead,' she says. 'I'm gunna kill 'er! She promised she'd go roller skating with me these holidays. But she didn't even ring me!'

And now I hear it.

The rattle of a mocking rictus.

The pennies drop and I can see his sockets gloating at the trick. *Dead* in the sense only of *an imminent rebuke*.

'Shelley...' I place my hand on her arm.

'What?' she says, bewildered.

But I'm so relieved I can't think what to say.

Over at the door I see Tracie's coming in. She dumps her schoolbag onto a table and starts unpacking books. The bell begins to ring. It's nine o'clock.

'Ready to start school?'

'Yuk!' says Shelley.

*Tuesday 30 July 1985*

I dreamt last night. Of Annette.

And when I saw her I was filled with a deep regret for her death. I wanted to touch her, lay my hands on her, hold, even, perhaps, embrace her.

She was beside me.

I began to speak, telling her how much I wanted her to be alive again. But she cautioned me, saying that I was mistaken; that I loved neither she nor any of the children. 'You are possessed,' she said.

And I awoke afraid. I wanted to ask her what she had meant. By what did she suppose I was possessed? By my feelings for the children? By an entity other than my own spirit - a demon? By madness?

I want to speak with this child again. I want to be in her company.

*Thursday 9 June 1983*

Tonight, wrapped up against the cold wind, coming home late in the dark, I heard approaching me from behind, the familiar slap-slapping sound of a child's feet, running.

I walked to the side of the pavement to allow the youngster room to pass, but as I turned my head to discern the child, the sound ceased, and I saw only the empty street behind me, and heard only the titter of the wind among leaves.

*Sunday (evening) 3 June 1984*

Thinking of her but no answers come. Only pieces of injustice. Fragments of metal.

*Monday 16 January 1984*

... a good teacher. I want to be a good teacher.

*Undated*

An eleven year old. Her hair was long and golden-blonde and her skin was light and fair. She stood in a pale green room, a washroom it seemed to be, because the wall behind her was lined with tiles. She wore a green checked frock, her school uniform. It had short sleeves and her pretty arms were bare.

When I opened the door of this room, the girl looked at me. And at the sight of me, her face filled up with an immeasurable distress. In her hand she held an object. It was a kitchen implement. A potato-peeler. She held it up for me to see, holding it before my gaze for one long deliberate

moment. Then suddenly and savagely she began to flay her forearms with it. Until her wrists were hanging skinless to the bone.

*Friday 27 December 1985*

I wake in my narrow bed as if in a coffin and, from between the sheets, my smell comes up to me.

*Sunday 11 December 1983*

Time once was, I believed God would save me from the dark. But I do not understand how I can be lifted out of this. Wasn't it he who made me? Formed me, body and being? I am what he has crafted me: with a little patience, dying.

When I approached to receive Eucharist this evening, my lips moved to speak the *amen* but my voice did not come.

*November 1983*

It was a photograph of a little girl. The surface emulsion had flaked away from her face so that the void opened there, between her eyes. I estimated that about a third of her face was missing, and lacking the hand of an artist I was reluctant to touch it. But I made a copy print and had a shot at that.

The result surprised me.

Gradually, through some patient fluke of chance, my fine retouching brush healed the face, and made a flawless restoration of the picture.

*Tuesday 18 May 1982*

*Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones would be better drowned in the depths of the sea with a great millstone around his neck.*

Still I love her.

But I remember once in class, while I was marking sums in her exercise book, she stood beside me and I placed my arm around her - a common thing to do when correcting a child's work, for it affirms the worth of the child regardless of their work. Yet - I felt uncomfortable when a passing colleague noticed.

The price?

It is heaven and earth, I think. And all the stars between.

*Saturday 15 October 1982*

Because I could find no easy means of escape, a dinner with staff-members concluded late; and in the company of Jill and John, colleagues both, I found myself speeding past *her* home at 3 a.m.

I recognised the house and I recall that, as the car flashed past, I looked back through the vehicle's glass, through the haze of street-light, through the mist, to the place where she slept, safe, and not knowing of me...

*Tuesday 9 June 1984*

a ripple of the wind stirred in her dress

*Saturday 30 November 1985*

Two thousand milligrams of codeine, when taken orally, comprise a lethal dose.

*Thursday 1 November 1984*

I close my eyes. Tightly. To see nothing. I want nothing. Nothing lighting my skull.

*Thursday 7 June 1984*

Half-light; not yet morning. In the bus, jolting over the freeway, a teacher pursues his craft. Below him, the sodium flares in its golden lamps, the lights of the freeway.

*Friday 27 July 1984*

A cab driver whose mother had been interned at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, whose baby sister was thrown into the fire.

*Thursday 12 April 1984*

sunlight in the train  
reflects in glass  
his face  
the hairs of his beard  
red-hot and golden

children  
these children  
God...

*Saturday 16 November 1985*

Teaching grade six in a Catholic school means preparing your class for the sacrament of Confirmation. Last evening, Monsignor Connors visited the church of St. Damian's and bestowed this sacrament upon my children. One at a time they came and knelt before him, and on each brow he marked Christ's cross in chrism, saying: 'Child, be sealed with the Holy Spirit.'

This was the high point of the grade six year. The final moment in months of preparation. I knew that each of my pupils had worked very hard for this; and as each one was called forward to receive the blessing, I recognised their achievement and shared their pride.

Afterward, some of my pupils invited me to their homes to join in their family celebrations. These were privileges I would in no way decline. So I visited the homes of Elizabeth and Anna; of Marco and Amanda; of Jennifer; and finally, at 12.30 this morning, Mirjana.

The girl's father met me at the door, brought me in, and introduced me to the whole party. Mirjana was still wearing her beautiful white frock; and although the party was in her honour, I could see that she was being kept busy with her guests. This household was Croatian and this daughter knew her place. Busily she would fix a drink; orange juice or soft drink for the little cousins; whisky, beer or shandies for the older guests; then she would take a tray from the table and offer savouries.

Here too, was a culture that still respected the school teacher. I was made to feel very important by finding that I had become the subject of a number of snapshots.

When the pictures were taken, I was given a place at the table, and Mirjana's father unscrewed the cap of a fresh bottle of whisky, setting it down before me with a large crystal tumbler.

Within a few moments, Mirjana had settled into the chair beside mine; and for the next several minutes the party appeared to take on its own concerns. Mirjana's father had moved on to offer whisky elsewhere, and everyone in the room seemed engaged in their own particular conversation. Mirjana was let alone for a while with me. 'How are you?' she asked; she was the perfect hostess.

'I'm fine,' I said. 'But I know someone who is very tired.'

'Yeah,' she replied, and for just a moment the weariness showed in her face. 'But it's good,' she added, recovering fast; and with a glance she indicated her little cousins. Two of them were laughing excitedly and playing chase around the sofa.

'What have you been doing tonight?' I asked. 'Since school finished.'

'Um...' she said. 'Well, I came home; had a shower; got dressed; helped mum to get the party ready; went to church. Then this...' She gestured towards the party foods and glasses on the table. And it then occurred to me that, at some later time tonight, this same eleven year old would probably be doing most of the washing up.

'When will you get to bed?' I asked

'Pardon?'

Talk swelled in the hot room and it was difficult to be heard; Mirjana moved closer.

'When will you get to bed?' I asked again.

'I dunno,' she said. 'Maybe two o'clock.' And I felt her words brush against my face like air. I tried, I remember, to gather some trace of their scent. But though our lips were now almost touching, I could take no secrets from her breath.

So I looked at her.

At this child, my pupil.

And did she understand?

She returned my look, held it steadily, and for a moment neither of us spoke.

What happened next I cannot clearly remember. So taken was I with the look of this child, that I did not recognise the inevitable distraction when it came. Was it the girl's father returning to refill my glass? A little cousin demanding the attention of the hostess?

I can't recall.

I remember another blur of snapshot flashes; a movement toward some door. Voices saying goodnight in the cool darkness; headlamps on bitumen. A key turning in a familiar lock; my own rooms and myself to sleep; alone.

*Friday 29 July 1983*

Standing in the wind at Essendon, I await my train.

A patch of blackbirds wheel in unison against the clouds and drop together, like a handful of peppercorns, from the white sky.

*Sunday 2 September 1984*

At Eucharist, taking him; and does creation gild my teeth? Where are the children now? Their hearts beating, measuring with me the same time.

*Thursday 29 July 1982*

In this shell of cracking walls, in the hollow that I call a heart, I am sometimes conscious of a space broadening. It is the absence of the child; an emptiness, certainly; but I must seek it and make it grow as far as I am able. Because to have her fill that space is unbearable.

*August 1982*

Shall I remember, aeons from now, how I stood upon Broadfield railway station and stared up through the wires into the high blue afternoon?

Aeons from now among the dust of stars, what will it matter - the colour of the stones between the tracks, the oil stains on the asphalt platform, the sounds somewhere of traffic...

The smiling of a child?

*Friday 14 March 1986*

Having graduated from my care, Shelley is now a year seven pupil at Morning Star College, the regional Catholic school for girls.

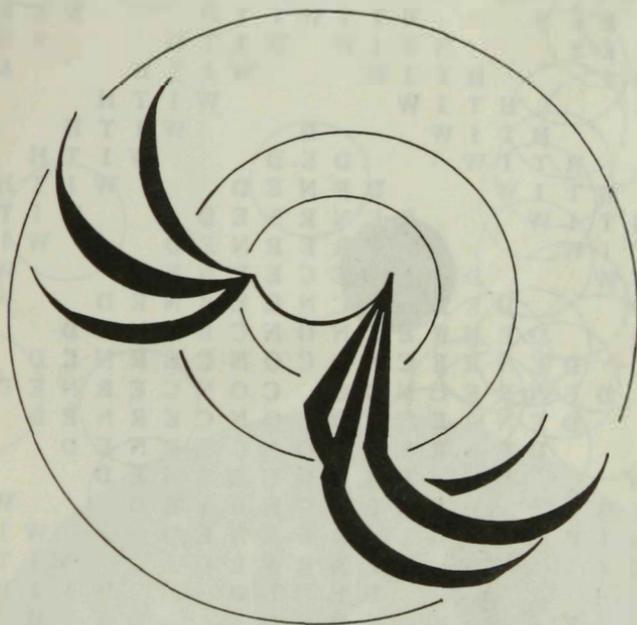
I saw her today.

I was coming from my train in a press of alighted passengers. Shelley was standing on the other side of the gate waiting for admission to the train. But when her eyes met mine she turned away at once; and although we passed within inches of speaking, she did not look again in my direction...



*\* Grateful acknowledgement is made to WEBBERS magazine, in which a short passage from EYEGLOSS appeared in 1989, #1.*

# AVENGING



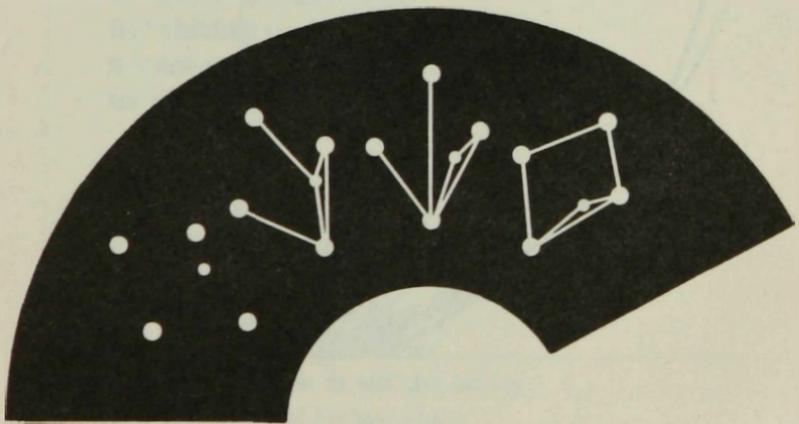
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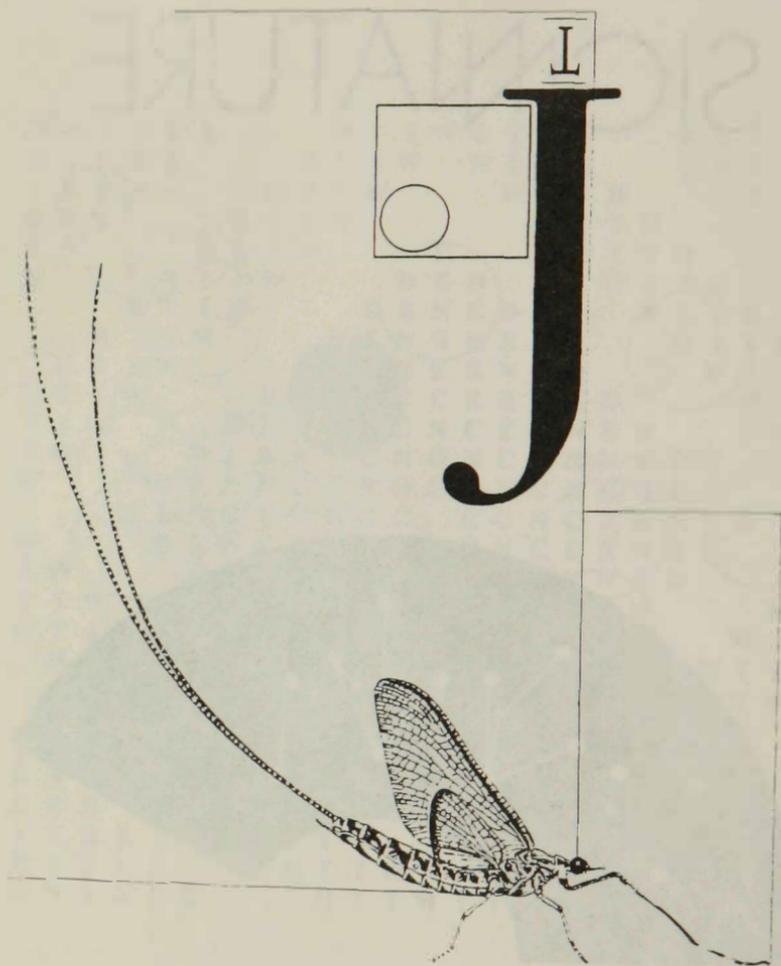
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# SIGNATURE





# LESSONS MY FATHER TAUGHT ME

LIZ HALL

my old man always said  
'if you can pour a good beer  
and make a decent cup of tea  
you'll be okay'

my mother taught me  
how to cook, dust, clean, wash, iron  
and anything else to do with  
serving men. she said  
it's the way to catch one.

the man she caught gave her  
twenty bucks a week, enough,  
he said, to feed and clothe  
five children (and I know now  
it's not enough, even allowing  
for inflation)

but he could pick a horse  
(twice a year)  
and he could pour a beer  
(at the expense of his career)  
and he knew how to fight  
for his life when in a corner  
and he knew how to win the hearts  
of women ... and his daughter.

now  
i pour beers that look like icecreams  
and my tea is weak as bat's piss.

# THE STANDARD SEDUCTION TECHNIQUE

LIZ HALL

he's mr respectable and julio iglesias  
rolled into one, this  
wouldn't-be-this-way-if-only-i'd-met-you-ten-years-earlier  
con-artist of the highest order;  
so clingy, so super-smooth peanut butter tacky  
you need a stiff drink to wash him down;  
all these god-how-beautiful-your-eyes-are's  
and smooth talkin' good lookin'  
baby-i-can-make-you lines  
like  
'i insist.'

well  
i'm a cynic met too many  
suave boys good boys hey wanna fuck boys  
but let them take you home and you're  
an automatic toy, and they're too sly, too shy  
want to father babies with you  
big talk superman super-doper intellect ...  
till they get you into bed

then it's one notch two notch  
see who's got the top notch  
conquer stomp her quick this  
smart-assed bitch

but for now, he's humouring me  
and i laugh, say i'll be his friend  
analyse his game plan  
- is he on the wing or in the centre?

it's all so futile, wish  
someone would tell him  
he's totally attractive.

i could even envisage us entwined  
on some sunny afternoon ...

but he's trying so goddam hard  
it's ping-pong in the rain  
thinks i can't see that old long shut-down pain -  
the bankruptcy, the private pact  
to never try to love again.

# THE HYPOCRITE

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

Yes, son, I know you  
learned them all from me  
& your mother. I'm  
buggered if I was going  
to stop swearing  
just because I was  
feeding you yoghurt  
in your highchair.  
That's when I swore most.  
No, of course I'm not saying  
I didn't swear before  
you were born. You don't  
think I learned them all from *you*  
do you. Bloody ridiculous.  
I wasn't born yesterday  
even if you were. Christ!  
I know you weren't born yesterday.  
I was there. I'm sorry.  
Let's get to the point.  
You can say anything you like  
*here*. This is your *home*.  
You can probably get away with it  
in the playground too - depending  
on which teacher is on duty.  
But everywhere else, son  
(are you listening?)  
everywhere else  
I want you to be  
a fucking hypocrite. Okay?  
(HYPOCRITE)

From the first twinge of belly ache  
to the wriggling bundle in my arms  
was 40 minutes  
that's the way she is  
sudden, explosive, direct, present.

She's supposed to be incurably ill.  
Bugger that is all she says  
6 weeks was the official medical prognosis.  
She's 16. I rest my case.

She won't grow properly the doctor told me  
but if she makes it to four and a half feet at least  
she won't be classified a dwarf.  
When she was 5 feet 1 she told him  
I'm 3 centimetres taller than Mum's friend Lyn  
and she's 37 and an adult.  
So eat shit.

She knows pain. Yelled at me once  
why didn't you kill me  
when I was a baby if you knew  
it was going to be like this?  
There are no easy ways out for this one.

I offered Hans Anderson and Marigold at Godmother's.  
She chose Richard Scarry's Cars and Trucks and Trains  
and The Ladybird Book of Automotive Assembly  
and her favourite outing was to construction sites.  
I read poetry while she watched the cranes.  
Later she decided there was nothing she wanted  
from books but at 15 she relented and read  
My Place and a book on metal fabrication.

She has not religion - my omission. What  
do you say to a child like this about God?  
Christians are dorkheads, she declared

but Bhagwan's cool  
he stirs the shit out of everyone  
(she watched it on TV).  
So did Jesus once, I ventured.  
But they killed him, she said.  
Baghwan's smart  
he's got armed guards.

Tells me a weird story she heard at school  
about a flood. Noah's Ark I say. All  
the native people know that one.  
That's OK then, if it's a blackfella's story  
it's all right.

Hates babies and small children  
they're such disgusting little gromits  
but if I want to have another one  
she'll look after it she says.

At age 11 she told me  
what you don't understand is that  
if I die I'm still all right so stop worrying about me.  
An hour after surgery she climbed off  
the recovery table and said let's go.  
A month before the drip comes out they said.  
She was back home in 10 days.

I dressed her, as a toddler, in white vyella  
offered dolls, tea sets, dress-up clothes.  
She chose chooks, a football and a mouli grater  
with all the attachments and took her duck  
to bed with her, Mr. Walker.  
Sad story that, he was a cot death, but it saved  
all the extra washing of the sheets.

Don't you want to play with Mummy's dolls  
I asked. All right she said and hanged them  
after she'd cut their hair off.  
Then she went out and painted everything  
in the shed in green enamel, even the vice.  
I gave in and got her a motor bike (plastic  
K-Mart special) and a donkey. She rode the donkey

bareback and when he threw her she laughed  
and got back on.

At three she'd help her father kill the chickens  
even former pets. Lump in throat I'd dress  
a loved one but she'd peer through the oven glass  
and say didn't Rosie cook up well?

Drools over arc-welders, dreams of having  
her own workshop, and of inheriting  
her grandfather's tools.

We all combine to help her  
with her grade 10 essay, on Lady Macbeth's guilt.  
What a vegetable she says.  
If she wanted to kill them all  
why didn't she get on with it  
and forget the rest? That's the point  
Simon tries to tell her (he's grown up enough  
to have acquired the adult ambivalence).  
She finds it hard to grasp the story  
it's like Days of Our Lives  
but with a bit more guts she says.

She worries about having such a helpless parent.  
I suppose I'll have to build you  
a house one day, she sighs, and give you  
some money for travelling  
and then I'll have you off my hands.

I asked her whether there was anything  
she wanted to say,  
as subject of this poem:  
I've got a face full of zits  
and there's nothing good on TV  
since the Olympics finished was all she said.

## FOLLOWING

CATHERINE JOHNSTONE

HAMBURG, GERMANY. NOV 1978. A woman, 22, travelling alone, has Australian brand blue back-pack. Wearing an Indian scarf, long earrings and a coloured skirt. Medium height, long fair hair, blue eyes.

Following  
on the flat  
road  
in the flat  
night  
he  
with  
slow  
steps  
watching  
and she  
wanting-to-run-  
knowing-that-if-she-ran-  
he-would-run  
she  
walking  
with  
branded back  
he  
following  
and she  
alone  
in the flat night.

ONE

My poems  
such as they are,  
just memos.

I watch from the window  
some bug  
or a wood nymph  
in the neighbour's rose.

TWO

I keep my words in a tool kit, don't keep  
them sorted by  
philosophy or alphabet ... there's no need to be anal  
over things  
trivial as these.

The couple next door a  
tied up mess of lust and murder  
fight  
like cats (cliche). I joke  
loins and tigers.

3.

If there are answers, I don't know them  
(all)  
my "vision"  
?

The words  
incomplete as a desk.  
Enough for many.

I saw a Christmas beetle  
in slow motion  
peel open its wings  
and expose its secret  
fleshy underparts

It bounced into mid-air  
and laughed in circles  
at my bashfulness  
its wings whirring like coloured  
windmills on cane sticks  
held in children's hands

**FACE OF GLORY****GAIL SCHILKE**

why not eat yourself asked shiva  
and opening your mouth wide  
you start with your feet  
salty sweaty dirty feet  
calloused and bent and tough  
and you consume the beast  
wholly your own  
till you are up to your neck  
in your mouth  
and smiling a greedy smile  
with fiery mane surrounding  
eyes luminous and bulgy  
you chomp and gnaw and spit  
out the remains  
belch and lay backwards  
you close your eyes and dream  
of the next meal  
of juicy lips and scaly tongue  
and the diners at your table  
raise their glasses  
to salute you

I dial your eight digit number slowly  
from a country town call box where  
someone has left their keys. I jangle these  
and grind my teeth like that old goat we laughed at,  
tethered under red frangipani, the day we swam to Susan Island.

The public phone is on the corner of Prince Street.  
Probably you don't remember? Opposite the  
nineteenth century post office? Frangipani here too:  
old and clenched and no scent, as I grip the  
phone hard and still no answer.

A teacher from high school, my husband's best friend,  
waves and wags his finger and parks at The Crown.  
I notice he's grown suddenly fat. Like my husband.  
With silvery coin type tits through a drip dry,  
powder blue shirt, his wife has carefully ironed.

If only you'd pick up your phone,  
I would tell how your nipples, as hard and pink  
as a cold child's, were in my dream again last night.  
And how in sleep, I sank teeth into my husband's  
well fleshed chest. And made him cry.

Ages later it seems, (I've dropped every twenty cents  
and all his commemorative Lady Diana fifties down the  
greasy slit), I hear your voice. *Hello*, you say. *Hello?*  
If only I could hug the question from your voice.  
It's meant to be cheaper phoning Sydney after six.

But above my head, the tubed fluorescence blinks and blinds,  
as the phone steals all my money and *click*, your voice is gone!  
A small hand knocks the dirty door: a girl in pink,  
my baby on her hip. My daughters. They clutch fat chips and  
wave me out through glass with salt smiles and sauce chins.

# THE BEST EXCUSE

KRISTOPHER SAKNUSSEMM

You walk into a strange neighbourhood.  
Each day is infinitely long.  
Emerson said the world is emblematic.  
A lot he knew. The world is mnemonic.  
It spends its whole life counting on its hands  
Trying to remember some Right Sequence, to bring back the  
Dead haze of moments, to improvise an orbit around  
Each point of dust and desire.

The great adventure is that the world is forever  
On the verge of forgetting itself entirely.  
We must all do what we can. But  
Despite all I've said, despite my reminders,  
You take your bag, and say you're going downtown -  
You'll be back in an hour.

Quick, here's a pencil.  
Write down everything you know.

All my current fantasies involve motels -  
firearms, women  
and cash.

You'd think I was still young enough to  
believe in the tawdry religion  
of the movies. You'd think I actually craved  
the euphoria of a dragnet-haunted week  
at the most. I think of something a girl  
told me.

We were driving back from the boardwalk in  
my convertible and a grassfire burned down  
across the freeway, bubbling the paint on  
the passenger door. We'd been gone so long  
I wondered out loud what my mother would say.  
And Sue piped up, "There won't be anything  
left of you when my father gets done. So relax.  
And floor it."

# OF NIGHT AND THE WORLD

PETER BAKOWSKI

*PAINTING OF NIGHT WALK  
RICHMOND TO ST KILDA 1987*

the moon waits at the bus stop  
traffic lights wink at cats  
factories are crying on the shoulders of rivers  
but babies are sleeping  
beautiful music playing in the forests of their heads.

dogs bark in the plumbing.  
old houses wear their bandages of amber lights,  
nursed by the stars.  
cleaning ladies are emptying ashtrays,  
thinking of butterflies.

in the crumpled sleeves of cafes  
the coffee-brimmed are plotting  
and the jails and mothers toss in their sleep,  
worried about their sons and daughters.  
and priests are dreaming of sermons like the ocean  
- that will fracture us from sin.

stars fall from the purse of heaven,  
the prostitutes pitch in their beds  
speaking only of nightingales' blood  
and the Turkish sword moon sharpens its blade  
upon the flanks of statues ...  
but the tulips and fire-stations and wingless-hearted  
as ever, as ever  
are snoring.

# MARKET-DAY IN AM DAFOK, SUDAN

PETER BAKOWSKI

Here the hours trek slowly:  
in the dirt-floor cafes  
the small wealth of tea and shade  
is sought,  
and the men talk of money  
as men often do  
and slam dominoes  
with a sabre flash of gold tooth,  
and the women sit  
by their pyramids  
of fruit and herbs and dates  
or a small boy sits all day under a tree  
with a rusty tray of six eggs, not selling one,  
with the patience of a camel;  
and the old herdsmen sit cross-legged in the sand  
unbothered by the sun,  
trading cattle, camel and donkey -  
some are butchered right there in the sand  
by the purchaser.

And I, white with rucksack  
stumble through all this,  
as vultures wheel and carve  
as one hundred camels kneel in the vicious sun  
and an old raven-clothed woman  
smears charcoal around her toes ...

there's an aquarium in my wallet  
there's grass stains in the beer  
I sit here darning old cigarettes  
my jacket plays the saxophone.

I am composing a piece  
from recordings of radio static I have made -  
the piece will be called  
"Music for bent-prong fork" ...

I have written this poem in peanut butter.

*The bloodjet is poetry,  
there is no stopping it.*

Sylvia Plath

Loans from the living can't be returned to the dead:  
your *Ariel* shelved in order between my books,  
Plath's bloodjet image in your slashed italic  
blue above the half-title.

Shall I bring you  
the TV retrospective of the decade  
whose first spurts you scraped from your last canvas:  
famine, progress, special guests, forest  
and human chopped, new-tech, a world blur focussed  
now, here, to homeless children, corruption,  
plummeting millionaires like flaring blimps  
engulfing crew passengers acres of country,  
plus Great Moments of Sport? No, not your style.  
Your design sought more centre, more coherence.

Quick and painless they soothed letting no one see  
until the morticians had finished. I touch again  
your hands turning these pages, brushes and knife  
and poetry shelved. Haemostasis. Painless quick  
the centre forever crying out to hold  
the body decades scattering into chaos.  
Whose death is this you have left me?

# JANE FONDA KILLED MY GOLDFISH

BILL FEWER

hey - my goldfish are anorexic,  
it's no surprise.  
they saw Jane Fonda's workout video  
& their attitude to life has changed.  
now they're into aerobics,  
they're pumping iron till their gills bleed,  
they benchpress with the treasure chest,  
play volleyball with the snails.  
they sweat - you better believe it -  
you should see how they avoid each other  
after the breakfast, lunch, & evening jog.  
they never talk, they have Walkmans.  
they wear Reeboks on their fins,  
Adidas on their tails.  
& i suspect they're scoring steroids  
- ever seen a swimming walnut?

first it was the musclebound,  
those called  
Rambo numbers one two three.  
they swaggered around,  
lost all flexibility,  
their stupid heads bumped into everything.  
thick, clumsy, they drowned.

the aerobics fish  
became obsessed with diet.  
they ate less & less,  
their leotards hung all baggy.  
then they went on binges  
terrible to witness,  
like sharks in feasting frenzy  
at some mid-ocean airline disaster.

then, like ancient Romans  
bloating at the banquet,  
they would retire to the vomitorium  
& expel the spoils of greed:  
the Sara Lee, the chocolates,  
the lashings of whipped cream.

that's when i stepped in,  
to put an end to my pets' health kink.  
i dropped a blender in the fishtank  
& gave them a jacuzzi.

& after the threshing subsided  
i scooped them out & towelled them dry,  
then into the teapot sauna they slid.

i poured them on the rub down table,  
i got my granma's rolling pin  
& straightened out their tension.

& when they were so relaxed  
they all became quite listless,  
i lowered them in  
to their flotation tank,  
to free them from their senses.

there they floated  
weightlessly,  
at one with the universal aura,

reliving their birth  
with dreamlike clarity,

which was really very beautiful  
considering they were dead.

which is,  
when you think of it,  
the perfect cure for health.

It was a conspiracy from the start  
the guarded words about labour,  
something like weeding the vegie patch.  
No one said it was like shitting a watermelon  
and that  
on average  
labour took longer than the average time  
mentioned in antenatal classes  
where couples sat  
relaxed as rigid worms.

I tried all positions  
as the contractions intensified  
thought of Lady Macbeth.  
'Out damned spot. Begone.'  
Breathed fast  
Breathed slow  
the barrackers shouted  
"Not long to go"  
but the final siren didn't come  
dilation stopped.  
Forget this natural birth bullshit  
give me everything you've got.

Some eighteen hours later  
my husband nearly missed the birth  
eating breakfast  
and browsing  
through bookshops in Brunswick Street.  
I felt like a lump of meat  
on a butcher's chopping block  
probed and patted as they  
cut and extracted  
my baby son.

Two years later

I know all about the joys of motherhood  
of not looking like the ideal mother  
in New Idea  
of having bags under my eyes  
that sag more than the leaking breasts.  
A dusty house is testimony  
to this not so prestigious occupation  
that has no high paid consultants  
that offers no pay  
or career restructuring  
and how do I trade off  
the increased productivity?

Motherhood is an industry in demand  
a life governed by another's clock  
where the time to be sexy  
ticks by,  
past the pile of nappies  
waiting to be washed  
and who comforts the mother  
when she's grumpy and cross?  
One minute cook, mind reader,  
retriever, vacuum cleaner.  
"It's yummy darling, watch mummy.  
No! Not on your head."

Motherhood is worrying  
about saying NO too often  
about emotionally disturbing your child  
being too strict  
too lax  
too neurotic  
being guilty because you are back at work.  
Will this cold go away?  
Do I take another day off work?  
I consult the baby book  
temperature: taking, see convulsions; fever.  
That's as reassuring  
as the father who walks in the door asking,  
"What have you been doing all day?"

Motherhood is full -

of arguments as dirty as the nappies.  
In fact, the shit flows faster  
when the dishes aren't done  
the meal unprepared  
and you haven't made love for over a month.  
A candle lit dinner degenerates  
into a feast of discontent.  
Who does work harder:  
the breadwinner or the breadbuyer?

I've discovered, that while loving  
my husband and my son  
I'm not cut out to be a supermum.  
This industry of motherhood  
is under rated, under paid and over stated.  
A labour of love, yes.  
Next time I'll grow my watermelon  
in the vegie garden.

ON THE OCCASION OF MY DAUGHTER  
BEING DENIED A RAISE BY BURGER  
KING

DAVID P. REITER

You are not  
smiling enough  
the manager says  
smiling down on you

you have not  
learned how important  
a smile can be in distracting  
customers who'd really prefer steak

you are not  
singing the praises  
of soggy lettuce, mealy tomatoes  
and imitation bacon bits as you should

you do not  
pretend to enjoy  
the tedium of disposable  
forks and knives as you must

you cannot  
change your attitude  
as easily as a starched uniform  
surrenders its wrinkles to an iron

you will not  
get ahead to oblivion,  
my dear, if your tongue denies  
their cheque like some greasy wafer

will you  
join me in the ashes?

## KITCHEN MEN

CATHERINE BATESON

They were the clumsy men who drove the wrong cars and didn't own sunglasses. They never wore tight jeans or leather jackets and always looked slightly rumpled as though they had come reluctantly from someone's bed. You could pick them at parties, she thought, because they always had one child, not necessarily theirs, claiming their attention. You didn't actually meet these men at parties, though, you met them at someone's place or at dinner where they would spend as much time in the kitchen or putting the children to sleep as they would later arguing politics or the finer points of bouillabaisse.

If you got close to them she imagined their fingers would smell of garlic, their beards of curry powders and nutmeg, and their sheets of basil and rosemary. They would make love the way they cooked, with the same urgency to please and be pleased. She knew this because she had watched them as they sat with their lovers, had watched their lovers with them.

She wondered now if her father hadn't been one of these kitchen men. She remembered him making her sandwiches after school. And the afternoon they had eaten omelettes with plum jam when he had pretended to be Ivan the Russian chef, slopping the sweet, red jam from the tin.

They were dangerous men, she knew. They pulled you to them, tugged you in closer than a breath's distance and then, when they left you were suddenly and completely orphaned.

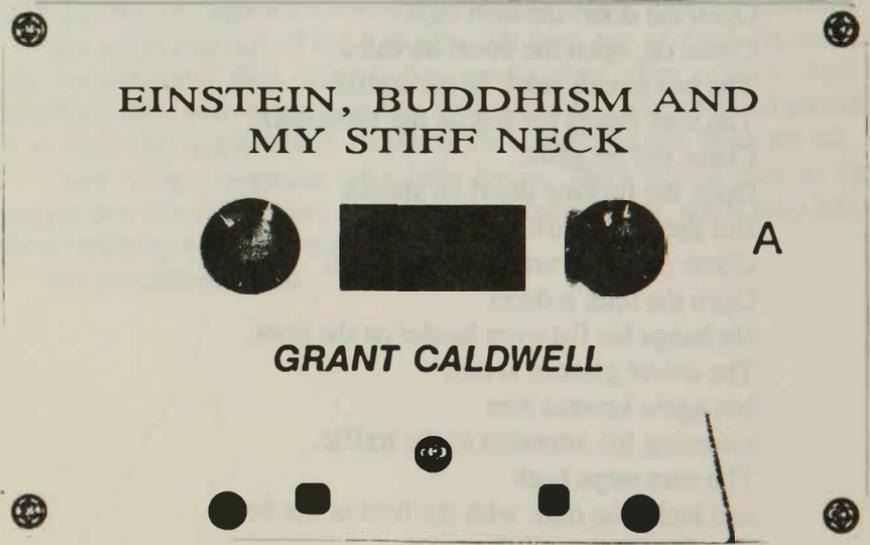
She remembered that.

**BUS POEM IV  
(the passengers)**

**GRANT CALDWELL**

The bus is stopped in traffic  
just past the bus stop.  
A man  
thirty  
or mid twenties  
caucasian  
carrying a didgeridoo  
runs up to the door  
and knocks  
loudly.  
The driver glances at him  
but then looks ahead.  
The man knocks again  
this time harder  
more urgent.  
The driver ignores him.  
Open the door! the man says  
Come on, open the door! he calls.  
The bus is still stuck in the traffic.  
The man bangs his fist on the glass door.  
Come on! he yells.  
Open the fucking door! he shouts.  
But the driver still ignores him.  
Come on, you cunt! the man yells.  
Open the fuck'n door!  
He bangs his fist even harder on the door.  
The driver glances at him  
but again ignores him  
returning his attention to the traffic.  
The man steps back  
and kicks the door with the heel of his boot.  
The door gives a little  
but doesn't open.  
He kicks it again.  
Same result.

Open the fuck'n door, cunt! he shouts.  
The traffic moves.  
The bus moves.  
The man reaches for a pen and paper  
quickly looking for the number of the bus.  
Some of the passengers now look back at the man.  
The bus reaches the next stop.  
The man has run the distance  
but by the time he gets there  
the door is shut again.  
He kicks the door again, saying nothing now,  
reaching instead for his pen and paper  
and looking for the number of the bus.  
The bus moves.  
It reaches the next stop.  
Some of the passengers turn their heads  
looking for the man to arrive again  
but he doesn't come.



**EINSTEIN, BUDDHISM AND  
MY STIFF NECK**

**A**

**GRANT CALDWELL**

He had read in books that art was not easy, that in its ignorance the mind repeats the vision of others. But this vision of his, sketched out in insubstantial scribbles and blocks of colour, always seemed to take on a life of its own. If it could have belonged to those who went before him, then it must also be the possession of others who were still to follow. In fact, when he thought about it, there really was no reason for any of these things to belong to anyone in particular. It always felt as if everything he did came from the heart, was in some way a true expression. But when he looked back, the memory of what he had made never quite matched the object he saw before him. As if to confirm this disjunction between his work and his sense of himself, he frequently came upon images of his own works in magazines and books. On reading the text however, he would be unable to locate his name. What puzzled him on these occasions was that, rather than feeling as if he was a thief who had caught a glimpse of himself in the act of stealing, he found himself overcome by a curious sense of relief. It was as if the whole creative direction of his project had been confirmed, as if he was not alone in his way of experiencing the world. In searching for what was truly original, he had stumbled upon forms which for some unknowable reason were constantly repeated by others. He could not recall engaging in a conscious process of copying, nor for that matter could he remember seeing these things before. Like everyone, he had his moments of self doubt, but the memory of these doubles, the knowledge that there was something other than his own uncertainty that endowed his work with meaning, was enough to drive him on. Inevitably, after making one of his little discoveries he would return to work invigorated, his production taking on a new vitality.

Outside 83 Gertrude St  
men watch dust grow into their shoes

where a bottle-cracked head bloodies  
as speech out of gutters.

The ambulance hurts inside.

The daily attempted robber, Old Delerio,  
ejects from the Commonwealth Bank

to camouflage with his hessian bag,  
gathers schizo plans for tomorrow.

Closed circuit cameras recognise  
each stumble across the nature stripped

lonely crowds. Tram bells shift them awake  
if they are ever;

in Atherton Gardens High Rise flowers bend  
smelling of Rose gone wrong.

Leaving aside for the moment  
speculation on the motives  
of those who choose -  
on a windy Sunday morning  
at an hour when  
all over the suburbs  
decisions are being made between  
croissants and toast -  
to run from Frankston  
to the city,  
let us consider their  
crazy achievements.

As they pass in bobbing waves  
up-down up-down  
let us not think of lemmings.

Let us search for a meaning  
in the sound of  
two thousand pairs of Reeboks,  
Pumas, Adidas, Nikes,  
pounding in urgent disharmony  
on roads measuring a distance  
the rest of us regard as  
too far to drive.

Let us search for meaning in  
the sweat streaming,  
the air steaming with huff-huff  
breath charging elbows and knees,  
the fixed fanatic eyes  
glazing with the ecstasy of pain.

In the crowds and cheers  
at the finishing line  
there is one answer.  
But when a poet appears,  
bearded, bespectacled  
and not out of place,  
striding it out in a fine sprint  
towards the tape,  
there are still some questions.

## OUT OF THE ORDINARY

BEV ROBERTS

*for Helen Daniel and Robert Dessaix*

It's not perverse  
to be pleased by  
finding a Hill's hoist  
in the lawn of my new house.

More than a symbol  
of conformity  
or reminder of old Mondays,  
it has the promise of  
an unfinished merry-go-round  
waiting for horses.  
It has the power to transform,  
whirling the familiar  
into strange dimensions.

No longer mere fabric  
our clothes become absurd,  
sometimes sinister,  
moving without us  
egged on by the wind  
into parody of our gestures.  
Sheets enact nightmares  
they have borne,  
snapping with menace,  
rippling and billowing  
as storms or waves.

And then there is  
the unsuspected seriousness  
of towels -  
staid in their pegs,  
even when dry,  
resisting the wind's play  
sobersides  
spoilsports  
Fred Niles of the laundry,  
condemning the errant behaviour  
of frisky sleeves and socks,  
the lewd prancing of knickers.

## THE ROAD TO ST KILDA

*or: You've Got a Lot to Answer for, Jack Kerouac*

BEV ROBERTS

One day I just walked out of the typing pool,  
covered my Adelaide middle-class  
private school, tennis club, Young Liberal  
life with a black duffel coat  
and hitched on a truck to Melbourne.  
I was on the road to St Kilda,  
HQ of Bohemia and that alluring  
stuff called Vice.  
I had my carefully bought Bohemian outfit  
(a kind of trousseau, but mostly black),  
and a few volumes of San Francisco Beat poets  
carefully placed in my coat pocket.  
Cool, man?  
I was a little glacier of hip.

St Kilda was disappointing -  
though I did meet a jazz trumpeter,  
a painter who lived in a stable,  
and an infamous lesbian with a Harley-Davidson.  
And once I let myself be picked up

by someone whose home turned out to be

a dirt-floored tin shed,  
shared with a snoring drunk.

In a thrillingly notorious coffee lounge  
called 'El Sombrero',  
in the midst, at last, of low life  
and feeling proudly at home,  
I was beckoned by two plainclothesmen,  
given fatherly warnings about  
a nice girl like me  
and a place like that.  
That duffel coat seemed transparent.

To celebrate my 19th birthday  
I had six slices of sausage  
from a deli in Acland Street,  
a chocolate stolen from the deli counter,  
and a bottle of milk  
stolen from the verandah  
of a house in Blessington Street.  
I ate this feast and cried  
in a small, grimy, boarding-house room  
in Tennyson Street.

I cried, too, when my friend  
borrowed my clothes  
and went off for good times  
at the Village Belle,  
while I stayed in bed  
shivering in my singlet and orange socks,  
crazy with the smells of frying and grilling  
from the kitchen next door.

Oh yeah, man,  
St Kilda was disappointing.

# WISH NOTES TO FAIRY GODMOTHER

BEV ROBERTS

With a motor bike and sidecar,  
a leather helmet and goggles,  
I could ride round Australia  
with my fox terrier, Patch,  
both of us utterly fearless.

Standing high for a kick start  
I would soar into life,  
silencing my family with the glorious noise  
of my going.  
At the gate I would wave  
and throw back their gifts of maps.

Learning the logic of roads and tracks,  
I would go and stop at whim,  
travelling out of time.  
There would be tales of an old woman  
glimpsed in remote country  
leaning on a bike, rolling a smoke  
or eating from a tin.

At Christmas or on my birthday  
I would buy drinks for all the boys  
in the pub at Inaminka or Andamooka,  
tell jokes about my husband  
and sing country and wesern songs.  
At dawn, after bacon and eggs,  
Patch and I would stroll to the bike  
and ride off into legend.

# INTERVIEW: BEV ROBERTS

Bev Roberts was born in Adelaide; proud to have been expelled from M.L.C. for being a rebel; went to business college as punishment & worked in various offices; went to London for 5 years where she worked for the British Labour Party as research assistant; at 30, went to Melbourne University to do an arts degree; became a lecturer there; assistant editor of *Meanjin* during the early 1980's; her first book of poetry *The Transvestite Next Door* was published by Abalone Press in 1986. Roberts worked for the Victorian Ministry of the Arts for two years as Literature Field Officer & resigned from that job on the morning of the day of this interview.

## **What turned you on to poetry?**

My first poem was published in *Possum's Page* in the Adelaide Sunday newspaper when I was 10 - it was a hideous poem about fairies & elves...& I kept writing poetry, altho it was a secret - I used to write in a book & keep it under my mattress; recently I was going thru my stuff & found some poems I wrote when I was 13 or 14 & I must say I was horrified at how good they were. So I really have been writing poems all my life. My first serious poem was published when I was 18 or 19

## **How did that make you feel?**

Terrific, it was great!

## **Did that change your perception of yourself as a poet?**

Not really; that poem finished up in an anthology & I was surprised, when I read a review, that on the strength of that one poem I was referred to as one of Australia's promising younger poets & I had difficulty in making the connection.

## **Why did you want to be a poet?**

When I was a teenager I heard Dylan Thomas on the radio doing a reading & it was like a bunch of dynamite blowing up in my head. When he finished I just thought: I don't know what that is but it's what I want to do, what I want to be.

## **Did your parents read poetry to you as a kid?**

No. When I was a small child I was given lots of books but then it got to the point where they said reading is not a good idea - that I was supposed to go outside & play. I grew up in a bookless household.

## **Where did you give your first poetry reading?**

At *La Mama*, in about 1972. I'm a *La Mama* veteran.

## **How was it?**

Terrible. That was back in the super-cool all-the-boys-days. Michael Dugan & Garrie Hutchinson were reading & I just felt out of it. Everyone

cheered the great heroic chaps & I didn't even get a polite clap when I finished my reading so I went away in mortification.

**Had you prepared yourself?**

I prepared myself in the sense that I was tremendously excited about doing this reading; I think I was incredibly nervous, & I'd spent hours & hours working out what I was going to read & rehearsing & all that kind of stuff so, it was a real let-down when nothing happened.

**How did you hear of poetry readings?**

I was organizing poetry readings on campus & a student writers' workshop & I guess I became known as a student poet, which is why I was probably asked to read at *La Mama*.

**How many readings have you given?**

No idea...Let's work it out...Maybe about 50. I've drifted in & out of the poetry scene because in the 70's I was doing lots of readings before I found that it was having an adverse effect on my poetry because it got to the point of writing the slick stuff to appeal to the audience. So for quite a few years I dropped out of sight; however over the last five years I've done lots - to the point that I feel like dropping out again for a while.

**I've seen you read over the years & there seemed to be some change when you began reading the Ms Bee poems: your work became accessible & powerful & you seemed more confident in presenting your poems.**

I feel more confident but it might have a lot to do with the kinds of things that I'd been writing over the last couple of years. The stuff in my book collects together about 10 years of writing & I just feel that in the last couple of years I'm much freer. I think it's got a lot to do with inventing the Ms Bee character. But in the early days I was aware of the great difference between what I was writing & what was being read by other poets & I used to feel I was a bit stuffy so I guess I was lacking in confidence.

**If you were reading work from *The Transvestite Next Door*, was it because those poems were sad & lonely & family poems?**

I guess a lot of them are sentimental & there are sad things in it, like the death of my father, so when I'm following some raunchy performance poet I can hardly say: Now excuse me, would you please be quiet & listen carefully because this is a different kind of poem. But I guess what I'm writing now is better in a reading than that earlier personal stuff.

**& it's more humorous now?**

Yes & it's getting worse by the minute. I read a poem at Montsalvat during the Women Poets Festival & it was an evil poem which was my response to what I saw as the macho-male domination of poetry & the way male poets read & all that kind of stuff.

**Oh, do you want to talk about the macho-male poet?**

A good example of the kind of thing that pisses me off was what happened at La Mama during the launch of the anthology; it seemed very much like a male celebration, altho there were of course some women poets reading. Feminists tend to do counts & I think 20 males read & about 8 women. Men seem to get more space & more of a rap-up introduction from Mal (Morgan). I've written about this sort of thing; like an essay I wrote on female poetics in a book that was published several years ago; it was the first collection of Australian Feminist essays. It really is something I've been interested in, not just in that superficial "bloody blokes dominate everything", but really getting into the poetry & still pursuing those old questions about whether there is any difference between male language or female language; looking at the different kinds of images & metaphors.

**In the 1980's women came to the fore in Australian writing...**

They've particularly done that in fiction, but I think that poetry is still one of the areas where there isn't that similar equality. It was quite interesting that when Judith Rodriguez was appointed to be poetry consultant at Penguin, & we were discussing the possibility of her editing a new Penguin anthology of Australian verse, we both realized that it would be the first time that there would be a major anthology of Australian poetry that was edited by a woman.

**So will that go ahead?**

I think so; I'm not sure when it will be published, but I'm sure Judith wouldn't go the other way & stack it out with female poets, but at a guess I'd reckon there would be a better representation of women poets.

**OK, who were your early influences in your writing?**

Strangely enough, the San Francisco beat poets - they were my great heroes. I'm horrified to admit that now because being a feminist I should be referring to all the women poets, but it's the perfect example of what the feminists write about, because I don't think that I was really aware of the fact that there were many women poets, that there ever had been many women poets.

**So who did you like out of the beat poets?**

Ferlinghetti & Ginsberg were my favourites. They were really odd people that I stumbled across, because bearing in mind that I stopped going to school when I was 15, what I used to do was go into the public library in Adelaide & I set myself this goal of reading thru all the books, from A to Z ... I can remember being enormously impressed by a volume of Chinese poetry I found; Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot & then the beat poets.

**That was a whole new experience for you?**

Yes.

**They talked about modern things in a modern language. Did that affect you?**

Oh yes, I think it was this wonderful freedom, this informality of real language as opposed to formal ideas of poetic diction. There's only been one person who's been a friend & influential & that was Vincent Buckley; I was very close to Vin & he helped me a lot in my early years as a student poet & helped me a lot with the development of my own poetry. He & Gwen Harwood are the two Australian poets that I most admire & who have been directly influential in my work.

**So would you say you had one-to-one workshops with Buckley?**

If you can call them workshops; I'd call them extremely long conversations about poetry that would typically start at 3 o'clock in the afternoon & end, depending on how coherent we were after a couple of bottles of Irish whiskey; so it was at that informal level, but we used to send each other poems & make comments.

**Feedback is very important isn't it? It's good to find another writer to talk to when you're young & afraid to tell people you're a poet in case they laugh at you.**

Well, that's my experience too. The way that my poetry first came out from under my mattress was when I was a kid & my mother was making my bed one day & found it & said: What's this, what's this? I didn't know this had happened of course & about a week later I got a letter from Max Harris, who was running Mary Martin's Bookshop & was also editing with Geoffrey Dutton a periodical called *Australian Letters*. Max wrote this letter saying he was extremely interested in my poetry & would like me to come & talk with him with a view to publishing some of it. I couldn't believe this. I thought: How does this guy know what's under my mattress? So I went in & saw him & said: How did you know I was a poet? He looked surprised & said: Your mother brought your poems in for me to read.

**How did that make you feel?**

Furious!

**Are you grateful to her now?**

Not at all.

**No?**

No.

**Because you would rather have done it on your own?**

Because I'd rather have done it myself; but I suppose I can reluctantly say that I am grateful to her for having introduced me to Max Harris because the up-shot of meeting him was that I got a job working at Mary Martin's so I was plunged immediately into what was then a focal point for literary cultural activity in Adelaide.

**Was your mother a writer?**

No.

**How did she know Max Harris?**

I guess she just knew him as an Adelaide poet & someone who ran a bookshop.

**OK, which poets do you like to read or listen to now?**

Well in terms of listening, I can only give a fairly silly answer to that & say that I'm interested in listening to most of the people who are giving poetry readings.

**Do you have trouble concentrating on other poets when you know your turn to read is coming?**

Only if I'm not turned on by their work. In those early times when I was still quite nervous about doing readings, I used to really concentrate & listen to the other poets & I have to confess I get a bit bored if I'm not on till towards the end of the program; I find it difficult to listen with polite attention & keep on clapping. But in terms of reading poetry I'm fairly eclectic; I can't say I have particular favourite poets. I tend to read lots of anthologies; I'm very interested in American women's poetry.

**What about Australian poets, Susan Hampton for example?**

Yes, I like her work very much.

**Did you read *White Dog Sonnets*?**

Yes, I enjoyed it ... I should be able to mention more names like that ... I like Judith Rodriguez, I think she is a very intelligent, a very interesting poet.

**Barbara Giles?**

Yes, I especially like Barbara's latest book, (*A Hag In the Mirror*) it's just wonderful; I think it's very brave & gutsy poetry, & as I'm not getting any younger, it's almost as if I can see Barbara Giles as a role model.

**What about Australian fiction writers?**

I read a great deal of Australian prose; one of the reasons for that is I've never had very much money & in the early years when I was working at Meanjin, all these review copies were sent & I had access to everything being published in Australia.

**Who stands out?**

Thea Astley & Elizabeth Jolley are two of my very favourite Australian writers.

**Helen Garner?**

I liked *Monkey Grip* a lot, but I had great difficulty in making the same sorts of noises about her subsequent books.

**I liked her later books, because I think she became more poetic...**

I think *Children's Bach* was the other one I really enjoyed ... There's a crazy English writer that I'm very fond of called Janette Winterson - I like her surrealistic black humour - & speaking about black, I like to read

some of the black American women writers. I'm much more interested in women writers than what I call 'chapbooks'.

**Do you have a writing routine?**

I wish I did. I write in sporadic ways, where there can be months where I don't write anything & then something will happen & the poems would start zapping into my head & they just get written down. I don't have any sort of routine. This will all change I hope during 1990 as I start a completely new phase of my life where I intend to devote four days a week to serious writing, while working at the Writer's Centre for the other 3 days.

**Do your poems go thru lots of re-writes? Or are they quick?**

Most of them don't go thru very much re-writing; I think I can safely say that the poems I think are the best ones arrived in that mysterious process where the automatic pen was zapping & I was just holding on to it & when the poem is finished I read it & think yes, this is interesting, I like this.

**Do you see reading your work in public as an editing process?**

Yes, very much. In some cases I don't think a poem is really finished until I have read it to an audience because it's in the reading that you can easily pick up the things that are wrong. In fact, a couple of times, with a new poem I haven't read before, I will suddenly make a change because what I've written doesn't seem quite right. The poems have a life of their own; some of them change in the process of being read on a number of occasions. It's a polishing sort of thing that happens - anything a little clumsy will get smoothed out. I've been tempted to lop out whole bits of some of the older poems but I don't think that's fair on the poems because they relate to whatever I was back then, whatever I was thinking & writing, then.

**How do you feel before, during & after a reading?**

Before, I'm still trying to decide what I'm going to read, because I might, before I leave home, work out what I'm going to read & the order but I never regard that as final until I get to the place & check out the atmosphere; the kinds of people who are there, the kinds of things I think would be most appropriate for that audience; that's usually what's occupying my mind before I'm standing up to read.

**Nervousness?**

Depending on the place & situation. I have to say I was nervous when I read at Harold Park; I was overawed at finally being at the famous Harold Park. I read at Mietta's & felt nervous there - I think it was the atmosphere of the place: it just didn't feel like me, with all the glittering chandeliers & coffee cups & little cakes around.

**So during a reading?**

Unless I feel the poems are going down like lead balloons - if I feel the audience is responding I get totally engrossed in the reading, so I'm not aware of thinking anything.

**The poems take over & push you into the background?**

Particularly with the poems I've been writing recently. I feel there's something more powerful about them. I think I'm learning the right way to read them, the right way to present them. With some audiences I've certainly been aware of the poem really taking over & a couple of times I finished up with goose-bumps.

**What about after a reading?**

Enormous relief.

**Really?**

And looking for a drink (laughs).

**What do you think are some of the differences between poetry & prose?**

This question gets harder & harder to answer. I think for me it's got a lot to do with rhythms, metaphors; I don't think these days it's as easy to say poetry is more about that nice concise condensed use of language because a lot of prose writing also does that; I think that great gap between poetry & prose has been narrowing every year, so that there's just interesting kinds of writing.

**So does the look of the poem make a difference?**

Yeah, that's part of it but again if you look at some modern poetry & some modern prose, the distinction blurs.

**What about the sound of a poem being important, because it comes out of an oral tradition?**

But there's also the story-telling tradition which is part of that oral thing of telling the narrative. I don't know, where do you put something like Alan Weare's *Nightmarkets*?

**Well it says poetry on the back cover doesn't it?**

It's a big fat book; is it a poetic narrative, is it an enormously long, prose poem, is it poetic prose? It's very interesting what's happening now - there's getting to be imaginative, good writing. I don't think this implies that I don't give a stuff about poetry & I'm happy for it to just become merged with prose writing because I think that there will always be something that's special & poetic, some special kind of writing that in various ways will differentiate itself in its concerns.

**How do you tell the difference between good & bad writing?**

This is a curly one for me because a few years ago in my radical challenge to the literary establishment I was trying to put forward arguments to the effect that there was no such thing as bad writing. I don't think I'd say that quite so strongly now; I can come clean & say I was making those statements with the purpose of a very much bigger

argument. But of course there's bad writing. Sometimes I think that bad writing just happens to be writing that I don't like. No-one who has worked on a literary magazine & has seen the stuff that's been submitted can refute the fact that there is some kind of universal standard by which some things are bad & some things are good. You just know when a poem doesn't work; you just know when a poem's bad; you also know when a poem is good, because it makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up or something happens deep inside (laughs) or in here (pointing to heart). In editing literary magazines, particularly in prose writing it's just a case of reading something & saying: Yeah this story has got that little bit extra that makes it different from all those other well-written, well-crafted, reasonably good stories - this one's got something that jumps up at you off the page & I guess that's the indefinable quality of the writing.

### **How do you apply that to your own writing?**

What's bad finishes up in the rubbish bin. In terms of what I was trying to achieve, a few of the things that I've written I'd say are good; the ones that have actually worked or done what I hoped they would do.

### **Which magazines have you worked on?**

*Meanjin* and *Fine Line* are the two main ones. Also, *Writing* magazine.

(Tape runs out. Time out for coffee).

### **Performance poets have tried to reach out to new audiences, in order to give poetry back to the people; what effect is this having?**

I'm sure it has had an effect; I'm not quite sure what sort of influence that movement has had on what I know to be an enormous increase of popular interest in poetry. This really up-front thing in poetry, becoming democratic & actually going out to the people has given people licence to be able to admit that they are also writing poetry & to encourage people to have a go themselves, if they hadn't already been writing it.

**Do you think performance poetry has had an effect on prose readers - so that prose readers have become more rehearsed in their readings? For instance in the '70s I used to hear prose writers & they would read down at their manuscripts, & it was obvious they were nervous & thought of themselves primarily as writers.**

I'm sure that performance poetry has had that kind of effect on prose writers, but I think it's also tied up with the fact that writers in general have become more public; it's almost obligatory for anybody who publishes a book now to go off somewhere to do readings; so writers I guess, have become performers in order to help sell their books. For example when Fay Weldon was reading at Mietta's, at the end of her

reading people were rushing out the door to snap up copies of her book & it was all to do with the way she came across as a performer, apart from the interest & amusement in what she was reading. It's kind of unfair really, because having been on the programming committee for the Spoleto Writers Festival - when we were going thru that awful process of throwing names around: What about X? People say: X! Oh well his book is terrific but he's such an awful reader. So poor old X gets crossed off the list.

**You wrote about that in *Australian Book Review*?**

Yes.

**Did you get any comments about it?**

Yeah, a lot of comments - I didn't get anybody disagreeing with me which was a bit of a disappointment. I always like to do a bit of stirring.

**In that article you said there should be more readings, rather than writers talking.**

Yes, well, I was moving away from what I firmly believe is getting to be a very tedious pattern at all these literary festivals of having panel discussions, so 4 or 5 writers are given a topic & they each talk for 10-15 minutes, at the end of which the people get to ask questions. The gap between the writer & reader would be maintained because they didn't really get a chance to talk about their writing in any detail, & that's what mostly the audience is interested in. So what I've been suggesting is (& we tried it at last year's Spoleto Festival) a lot more of what you'd call 'meet the writer' sessions, where we had pairs of writers, each given half an hour to do what they wanted, but the main thing was that they engage with the audience, with the readership.

**How did it go?**

In some cases, very well; maybe we had too many of those sessions on the program: I've always been an extremist.

**Which have been some of your more memorable readings?**

I guess Harold Park was - it was a terrific night & I enjoyed being there. I found myself reading in the company of Elizabeth Jolley, Fay Zwicky & people like that ... There have been some particular La Mama readings that I've enjoyed. I can't say that the time I read at the Spoleto Writers Festival was enjoyable - it was hideous, upstairs in the grotty old Atheneum, with noises all around & a very lukewarm audience.

**What about other readings where you didn't have to read yourself?**

The most memorable was in the late '60s in London at an International Poetry Festival hearing people like Robert Lowell, Pablo Neruda, W.H. Auden. I also remember going to a reading at the Albert Hall, which was full -

**How many people?**

Thousands.

## Thousands?!

Yes. Robert Graves was reading - & it was disgusting because he was sitting on this dais, with this wonderful hat on & his long white hair & brightly coloured scarf & all these women draped at the bottom gazing adoringly at him & I thought: Yuk!

A particular favourite English poet, who's been dead for a few years, Stevie Smith: I actually got to see her read a couple of times & she was a kind of Elizabeth Jolley figure, you know, this little unassuming old lady who came shuffling in with a long cardigan, carrying a shopping bag which she put down in front of her & shuffled around & pulled out a few papers & started to read & then stopped & said: "It occurs to me that it might be better if I sang some of these." Her famous poem *Not Waving But Drowning* was given a wonderful song rendition, which was great - I hadn't realized she was an early Performance Poet (laughs).

### **Do you see yourself as a performance poet?**

I don't pin that label on myself; I'm a poet who sometimes performs, in the sense that I stand up & become a performer by reading my work to an audience.

### **What is a performance poet?**

Probably somebody who gives more emphasis to the performance than to the poetry.

**I agree with Eric Beach saying he thinks a performance poem is a poem which reads well out loud.**

Well that covers a huge range of poems.

**Yeah.**

There are people who play to the crowd; they are actors, they are performers & then there are people like say Alex Skovron who stands up very seriously & reads his very serious poetry ... There are two poems I've written like a poetic script, which I wrote specifically to read out loud; whereas other poems I write without thinking of an audience.

**The poem comes first & then you work out whether it's a good one to read?**

Yes.

**Are you optimistic about the long term & short term future of poetry in Australia?**

I'm extremely optimistic about it. It's a very exciting time for poetry. There's more being written, being read; the audiences are there for poetry & there's interest in it. I'm not too sure about poetry being written in Australia at the moment breaking new ground & showing an exciting new development, but just in terms of the whole poetry scene, I think it's wonderful.

**What about the 1990's being the decade of the writer?**

The problem with the 1990's is it's also going to be the decade of the gobbling multi-national publisher & I think a lot of writers are going to

be disadvantaged. Tho the other side of that is there will probably be more small presses. You see what happens when someone buys out Angus & Robertson; then they decide they're going to do away with the imprint. I think it's going to be like the television networks or the newspapers - all controlled by one or two people.

**What part do you think the various literary magazines are playing in the publication of poetry?**

An incredible part, they always have; let's face it, without those literary magazines, most of us probably wouldn't have our poetry published & they wouldn't ask us to read at poetry venues, because they wouldn't know about it.

**I have a list of 52 Australian literary magazines & there are probably another 50 I don't know about...**

Yes, well they're springing up all the time & I think that the cultural worth of any society is directly measured by the proliferation of small magazines.

**Why does Victoria have so many literary magazines?**

I believe that Victoria is a very literary state. I spend a lot of time moving around the countryside as well as in the city, finding out how many people are writing in one form or another. There's got to be some outlet for all of that writing & I think that the number of magazines is a direct response to what people perceive to be the extent of the writing that's going on.

**Can we talk a bit about your role with the Victorian Ministry of the Arts?**

Yes, I'm happy to talk about it now that it's getting towards its conclusion.

**You resigned this morning?**

Yes. It's very exciting. My connection over the last two years has been fairly indirect - when I had the job as Literature Field Officer the position was funded jointly by the Ministry & the Australia Council. Six months ago, when the Literature Executive resigned I was reluctantly co-opted into taking over that job as well as the Field Officer job, on an acting basis, so it's been pretty hectic trying to wear two hats.

**What do you see as your main achievements there?**

I think that it's no longer necessary to keep saying to the bureaucrats: What about literature? I hope my legacy there will be a re-defining of the literature executive position so that it becomes the Writing & Publishing Officer. Literature sounds too intimidating & exclusive & I feel it's important for the Ministry to get a lot more involved in the supporting & promotion of publishing in Victoria. I also hope I had some influence on funding allocations on things like the Victorian Writer's Centre.

**How did that begin?**

It's an idea that's been floating around for (probably) the last ten years. Nobody ever picked it up & ran with it. In 1986 the Ministry commissioned a report on the feasibility of establishing a Writers' Centre & the report said a lot of people thought it was a good idea but it was too soon, so the main recommendation was the creation of the Field Officer position; part of that brief was to continue the consultation with the literary community with the possibility of setting up a Writers' Centre. There were some meetings with a whole range of literary people & there did seem to be a growing amount of support for it so the Literary Executive & I tramped around Melbourne looking at various sites that were offered to us. Tasma Terrace came up as a possibility & we had a look at it & thought: Wow, terrific.

**So you've been instrumental in setting up the Writer's Centre...**

As Field Officer, a lot of the hard work negotiating & making the thing happen was left to me because it was part of my job; it's been a great interest, almost an obsession of mine for at least the last two years. The building actually opened in October, & the Field Officer position was transferred to the Writers' Centre to provide an interim co-ordinator, in order to get the place set up & get the furniture & equipment in.

**What role do you see it as playing?**

First of all as a place people can regard as a sort of writers' headquarters for both formal & informal things, so there'd be things like workshops & discussions & readings, as well as a place people can drop into & have a cup of coffee & sit around & read or talk.

**What about something like photo-copying?**

One of its main purposes is to provide a resource for writers, organizations, writing groups & all sorts of people. So space is available & photo-copiers, typewriters & word processors will be here for people to use.

**Free of charge?**

Photo-copying will be about 5 cents a page, but the place is run on a membership basis so there'll be concessional charges for members. There will also be space for a writer to get a desk to work at.

**Do they have to bring their own desks?**

No, the centre will be fully furnished.

**How does one become a member?**

It's very simple. They get hold of an application form, put their name & address on it, send \$30 for full membership or \$15 concession, or \$60 for an organization. The address is 12 Parliament Place, East Melbourne 3002. I should say that we also want it to be a place where writers can earn a bit for themselves by doing things like workshops that they would charge for.

**Is the arrival of the Writers' Centre a sign that the Vic Min of the Arts is prepared to fund writers & writing, or will the centre be expected to be self-supporting?**

The Centre can never be self-supporting. It does represent an acceptance at least by the current government of the importance of writing & publishing in Victoria; so there's a firm commitment to the funding for the next 3 years.

**Do you have to be a writer to join?**

No. It's for anybody involved or interested in writing or reading or bookselling or publishing or whatever.

**Ok what about the Community Writing Scheme; how did that start?**

In 1985 a literary committee was established & given a budget to do something for literature in Victoria as part of the 150th Anniversary. I was a member of that committee & at that stage was terribly excited about what was happening in England with the Federation of Community Writers, so I put up the daring idea that instead of spending money on the usual thing like producing a leather-covered commemorative volume & other sorts of wank things, they should use the money to support popular literary activity. So we devised this scheme, saying: OK we'll find out if there are any writing groups in Victoria & what sort of things they would like. To our amazement, writing groups came out from all parts of Victoria & they made it clear that they were most interested in getting writers to come to talk to them & take workshops. So we put together a program. We also used some money to fund a supplement Cliff Smyth did, publishing community writing in a local newspaper & we used some money to establish the Writing Officer position at the Footscray Community Arts Centre. Kristin Henry was the first person to do that job & then Sherryl Clark took over. So it was a radical idea to spend money down there rather than people at the top. At the end of 1985 it was obvious the whole thing was a booming success so we put in an application for funding to continue. At that stage it was still difficult to extract money from both the Ministry & the Lit Board because they weren't keen on this idea of community writing & they were saying things like: We don't want to encourage those sorts of people to write - there's enough writing going on already, what we need is people to read it. So then we got smart & were able to tailor our submissions by talking about these activities as not only encouraging new writers, but also expanding readership. At the last count there were something like 70 writing groups that we've helped. These groups have an average membership of 10-20 people, so that's a lot of people. We've also provided a Manuscript Assessment Scheme & a Small Publications Loan Scheme which offers small grants of up to \$500 to enable writing groups to meet printing costs for their anthologies. One of the things that surprised us was the willingness of people from the country to come to

Melbourne for Workshop Weekends. The first one was at the Victorian College of the Arts & when I got there on the first day I found people had been queuing up for two hours because they were so excited there could be something like this for them. I think that what's happened thru the Community Writing Scheme is one of the most important & satisfying things I've ever been involved in.

### **Have you seen a writing explosion taking place?**

Well, this is part of it - the Community Writing Scheme has been very much involved in democratising literature & made it OK for people to write, or to admit that they write or to have been encouraged to have a go at writing; particularly in small country towns where people have discovered a writing group & learnt that the butcher writes poems then confessing that they do too.

### **What changes have you noticed in Australian Writing during the 1980's?**

That there's more of it; more poetry being written altho I'm not sure if more poetry has been published. I think the 80's can really be described as the decade of the short story; there's this huge outpouring of short fiction. I think it's also been a decade which has seen the real flowering of Women's' Writing, particularly in fiction. I hope it's also true to say that Australian Writing in general has grown up & stopped being pre-occupied with that terribly chauvinistic Australianess.

### **Have women taken over in the writing about sex too?**

Very often women are writing about love or intimate relationships while men are writing about sex. Women's erotic writing is just starting to emerge & the couple of anthologies last year were the first steps to recognizing this genre is actually appearing in Australia & not just in France, Germany or America. It reflects the differences between women's experiences & men's experiences; male views often put women's writing down because it's concerned with daily life, whereas men's writing is about 'great' philosophical arguments about the meaning of life.

### **Has feminism helped bring women to prominence?**

The women's movement, at its strongest during the 1970's, has been the major factor in the increasing prominence of women writers & women's writing. I'd need to talk for another hour to cover all this! There was the intellectual revolution where feminist academics not only retrieved masses of neglected writing by women over a couple of centuries but also produced new readings, new interpretations, of the known or established literature. And there was the social revolution which encouraged more women to write, to find new ways of writing to express the experiences of women, & to have a wide readership for their work.

### **Have you noticed an increase of submissions from women in your roles as poetry editor for *Meanjin*, *Fine Line* & *Writing* ?**

Definitely. *Fine Line* is interesting because it was never aimed at a female readership or particularly invited contributions from women & I don't know whether it's because the two editors are women that this encourages women to submit more to it; certainly there's no conscious policy of favouring women's writing.

**Has your work as editor helped your writing?**

I'm not aware of editorial work having any effect on my writing. Altho it's probably made me reflect more on what distinguishes really good writing from the mass of competent work I've had to read. Maybe I'm more self-critical than I used to be. Actually I find being a poetry editor for magazines is often stimulating & exciting: reminds me of the reality & the vitality of the scene that all poets are engaged in & contributing to.

**What are you working on now, in your own writing?**

My top priority is on spending as much time as I can on poetry - trying to write all the things which have been floating in my head for a couple of years but kept there because of work pressures taking up most of my time. I want to write some critical articles developing various ideas & arguments which have also been dammed up in my head...but mainly it's the poetry I care about. I'd like to publish another collection of poetry next year.

**So your plans for the future?**

Not to have any plans for the future! I'm fed up with not having any time for myself - I've been working for about thirty years & now it seems like I've been on the proverbial treadmill for ever. So all I can say is that I'm moving into a stage of disengagement, a kind of semi-retreat. Moving away from Melbourne to a beach house is the first step. At the moment I just want to be able to walk along the beach & not feel guilty - not feel that there's something I *should* be doing.

**Great! Thank you very much, Bev.**

Thank you.

Interview conducted by Myron Lysenko at the *Victorian Writers Centre*, December 1989.

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# SICK PIGEON

M.A.C. FARRANT

So I found this pigeon, eh? Lying beside the sandbox in the park. Whimpering. Trying to flap its wings. Looked like it'd been hit with a rock or maybe a dog did it. And all kinds of people around too. Everyone walking around it like it was a turd or something. Didn't want nothing to do with it. I couldn't figure it out. I mean there should a been a crowd around that bird all deciding what to do. I mean, there's this poor, sick pigeon in front of them probably going to die and nobody's doing a thing. What's happening is a big fat zero. What's happening is worse than nothing. I mean what's happening is a crime. The way nobody cares. Just like them mice in cages and them poor, harmless bunnies. Doing experiments on them like some weird horror movie. The way nobody cares about them either. Killing for no good reason.

SO YEAH, YEAH, SYBILLA. IT'S A ROTTEN WORLD. FULL TO OVERFLOWING WITH CRAZIES. SO WHAT'S NEW?

But Jesus, I'm thinking, leaving a bird like that to die. In broad daylight. I mean people. They make me sick.

I started to cry when Christian first showed me it. Then he starts to cry so now there's two of us crouched over that bird bawling our eyes out. Mommy is it going to die? he says and I says, no way ho-zay, not if I can help it. That kid has a heart like mine, can't stand to see a thing suffer.

So we brought it home, eh? Then all those jerks in the park started staring at us. Where before we could a been dirt. I'm wrapping the pigeon in the baby's blanket and I'm putting it on the baby's lap in the stroller and everyone's giving us these disgusted looks like we was packing home a live rat or something. Moving away from us like we had the plague. Looking down on us. As usual. That's nothing new. Everyone's always looking down on us. Excepting maybe that worker Tony from when I was thirteen at the Treatment Centre. He never thumbed his nose at me but then after a while he went away, never did hear from him again.

SO WHAT, SYBILLA? TELL US ANOTHER ONE. YOU GOT SOME IDEA THAT SHIT AND HEARTACHE AIN'T THE PRICE OF ADMISSION?

Enough already, I says to myself, and pushes that bird out of the park, dragging Christian behind me. So there I am, eh? Slaving away with this buggy and not one of its wheels working right. And trying to shush the baby, she's got some bright idea that limp pigeon on her lap is a toy for playing with and all the way home she's banging at it with her bottle of Kool-Ade and screaming at me when I tell her to stop. End result is red

Kool-Ade all over everything, ass to tea kettle, the baby, the pigeon, the blanket.

Then the sun starts to come out so suddenly it's a heat wave and Christian's whining he wants a drink and we're three blocks from home and me, I'm sweating buckets and cursing myself, why'd I have to go leather today? Why couldn't I a gone shorts and thongs like all them other mothers in the park, those ritzy bitches who wouldn't give me the time of day even if I went begging for it.

YOU'RE UP THE CREEK WITHOUT A PADDLE, SYBILLA. LIKE ALWAYS. YOU AIN'T RUNNING ON A FULL TANK.

So now I'm thinking, I hope this pigeon is grateful, what we're going through to save its life. It can thank its stars the day Sybilla found it and brought it home. And made it live. I make everything I find live. One way or another. Usually.

Live, you sucker. That's what I tell them, all the poor sick things. Take Gimp, for instance. Found her by the side of the road. Left for dead. AIN'T THEY ALL, YOU IDIOT? AIN'T THEY ALL LEFT FOR DEAD SOMETIME? WHAT ABOUT YOUR OWN MOTHER? LEFT FOR DEAD IN A MOTEL ROOM. DRUNK AGAIN. CHOKING ON HER OWN VOMIT.

Be quiet, I says to myself, I'll get to that. Right now it's animals I'm talking of. I'm talking of Gimp and how she'd been run over, her back all mangled. Can you picture what it's like to be run over?

S'CUSE ME WHILE I THROW UP.

Yet there's cats all over the world regularly dragging themselves out from under cars, panting and gasping for air, looking for some kind person to save them. Lucky for Gimp she got me and not some creep who'd kick her into a ditch, not caring one small bit about her, probably even getting a thrill out of watching her die. Lucky old Gimp. Took nearly all my Welfare cheque for the Vet bills and we had to eat canned soup for a week but I pulled her through. So now she can drag herself around pretty good. Even had three litters which explains all the cats I got around my place right now. Seventeen of them. Not including Gimp. Plus a couple of strays. I got a way with animals; they gravitate to me like shit to a blanket. They know I'll look after them, one way or another. They all know Sybilla's here when they need her.

But anyhow, back to the pigeon. Time we get home this pigeon's not looking too good, got red Kool-Ade all over its body and breathing funny. I was getting real worried. I don't like to lose them. So we gave it a bath, eh? Figuring that might help. And Christian who's a gentle kid for being only three years old held it in a towel and patted it dry. The baby I threw in the tub.

We was just getting ready to find a bed for the bird, somewheres the cats wouldn't get at it, and maybe try to give it some water when I looks out the kitchen window and catch sight of Miss Hope, the Public Health

Nurse, hustling her buns up the front path. Come for a visit, eh? Oh shit, I'm thinking, here comes trouble. So I says to Christian, quick Christian, take this bird and hide it somewheres in the bedroom away from the cats, we don't want Miss Hope finding it and causing a stink. She sees a sick pigeon in the house she won't shut up till Christmas. Next thing Miss Hope's rat-a-tatting on the kitchen door.

ARE YOU CRAZY, SYBILLA? HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MARBLES? THERE'S GARBAGE EVERYWERES. MISS HOPE TAKES ONE LOOK IN HERE SHE'LL BE YAPPING ABOUT DISEASE AND GERMS LIKE ALWAYS.

Jesus, I'm thinking, looking around the kitchen, what a holy mess. But that's the piss-off. These Miss Hope's and their like and every Social Worker I ever had the bad luck to know, they all figure when you're on Welfare they can drop in on you any old time. They're like those surprise bombers in the TV war movies. Come out a nowhere. Can't wait to drop their bombs on you.

BANG. BANG. YOU'RE DEAD, SYBILLA.

No letting a person know. And they really got it in for single mothers. At least I could a gotten rid of the cat dishes, maybe cleaned off the counter, make the place look decent. But no such luck. It's like they want to catch you with your pants down, always checking up on you to see if you're beating your kids yet. That's the one thing they live for, grabbing your kids. Like what happened to me. Grabbed from my mother when I was only eight years old. Just because she drank. They got no respect, all these do-good workers. I get about as much respect from them as a flea would get. Maybe less. How about that? Maybe they figure Sybilla's not even as good as a goddamned flea.

STOP IT. YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART.

So rat-a-tat goes this Miss Hope on the door, eh? And I'm stalling and calling, just a minute lady, and grabbing the baby out a the tub and making sure Christian's hid the bird good enough and find he's stashed it under the pillows on the bedroom floor.

Then again this Miss Hope's rapping on my door, only this time it's louder and she's hollering, Sybilla open the door please, I know you're in there.

Of course I'm in her you dumb broad, I'm thinking, you figure this is a bank robbery you're the cops got the place surrounded? You figure I'm holed up inside? Like when I was at the Treatment Centre, the way I used to barricade myself in the girls' dorm. All those workers making me do stuff like I was a slave or something. Wash the floors. Clean the toilets.

So I just get enough time to grab the bird and shove it under the kitchen sink and while I'm racing with it I'm noticing it's stopped breathing and I'm thinking, oh shit, I think it's dead. And this is really upsetting me,

this is really twisting my socks. I mean I hardly get a chance to work on it and already it's croaking?

And this damned banging on the door, it ain't quitting. So then I finally open the door, got the baby hanging off my hip, still wearing my leathers, never did get time to change. And what does this Miss Hope lay on me but: I've come about your animals, Sybilla, we've been getting complaints again.

So there's this Miss Hope standing on my front porch, eh? Wearing this pink pant suit, looking very shit hot, got about a ton of make-up covering her wrinkles and red blush on her face about as red as a Valentine card. And moaning at me about having complaints again. And I'm going, Jesus, which one of these assholes around here finked on me this time?

I told them down at Welfare last year when they first got me this dump, I told them then: I shouldn't be living in this prissy neighbourhood, you should a gotten me a joint in that new housing project where all the poor people live. Not shoving me in with all these high class snots, always breathing down my neck, telling me how to live. I should be where all the real people are, in the housing project. They understand about saving sick animals and all the real problems of life.

But oh no, the Social Worker strung me some line about how this shit box was all that was available and I was lucky I didn't have to live in some sleeze bag motel. Yeah great, I go, the only shit box for miles around, stuck in the middle of a class act subdivision and I got to get it. A left over shit box at that. What they call an eye-sore. Walls like paper, the roof leaking and none of the locks on the doors work right. Last winter it was so cold and wet in here black mould started growing on the walls.

POOR OLD SYBILLA. THEY FIGURE THAT'S ALL YOU'RE GOOD FOR.

So I says to this Miss Hope, like who for instance ratted on me this time? I know for a fact who did it last time, that bitch down the road got shit for brains., Can't even control her own kids, always giving me the finger every time I go by. Talk about emotionally disturbed. And they said I was emotionally disturbed? Eight years old and thrown in a Treatment Centre for five years. Who wouldn't be disturbed?

Anyhow this Miss Hope says she can't tell me who complained, it's confidential information. CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION! She says she's just come to tell me the SPCA inspectors are coming around any minute now to make an investigation, there's been complaints, she says, of a large number of dead or dying cats lying in my front yard. She says, she says. Gimme a break.

So I slam the door in her face, eh? Get out of here you douche-bag, I'm screaming, my cats are all in beautiful shape, you got the wrong house, the only thing that's not in great shape in here is me and that's because bitches like you won't get off my back.

That fixed her. She took off then, got into her car slamming the door and drove off.

YOU TELL HER SYBILLA. WHAT DOES SHE KNOW? THINKS SHE'S SO GREAT IN HER PINK PANT SUIT. YOU TELL HER WHERE TO GET OFF. YOU TELL THEM ALL WHERE TO GET OFF.

I will, I'm thinking, pissed right out of my tree. I mean, no one's telling me how to live.

So what happens next, eh? but the baby starts howling and pretty soon there's Christian hanging off my leg and starting to cry. And that's all I'm needing. I start bawling too. Me and Christian and the baby, we're sitting on the kitchen floor, leaning against the cupboards and we're bawling our eyes out. It just ain't fair. Why can't they leave us alone? Just because I'm a single mother. Just because i'm only nineteen. Just because my kids got different fathers, a couple of hit and run artists, I don't even want to think about those jerks. Just because I've got a kind heart.

POOR SYBILLA. GOT AN 'M' ON YOUR FOREHEAD THE SIZE OF A BILLBOARD LIGHT. POOR, POOR GIRL.

And then the cats start coming round us, there on the floor, frantic like, some of them purring, some of them hissing at each other. I know they're hungry, they finished the last bag of crunchies a couple of days back and my cheque's not due till Thursday. But I never have enough money, it all goes on these animals. Someone's got to look after them. All the SPCA does is kill them, right? Someone's got to care.

So then I'm remembering about that pigeon, eh? And I'm feeling real bad thinking it's dead. I take it out from under the sink and have a look at it. Got to keep pushing the cats away, they're thinking it's something to eat. But that bird is so pretty, kind of a silvery grey color with blue flecks in it. The sun's shining on it through the window and it's almost sparkling like it was covered with tiny blue lights. So I start patting it and stroking its back. This makes Christian and the baby get real quiet and stop their bawling. So there we are on the kitchen floor, all looking down at this bird on my lap. The cats cruising round, still trying to get at the poor, harmless thing. And I'm thinking, we'll have to bury it, have a little ceremony. Christian likes having a ceremony. He always puts one of his toys in the grave, a Hot Wheels car or something he's made out of Lego. So then I start thinking how everything's so sad. I mean, there's my poor dead Mom, never did get to see her much after they took me away. There's those guys who knocked me up then buggered off. You know. I'm thinking on all the miserable junk that passes for some kind of life when all of a sudden the pigeon gives a shudder and starts flapping its wings, trying to stand up. And now I'm so happy, I'm going, it's a miracle. This pigeon is alive after all, he's going to live. And I say to Christian, Christian we got to get him some water, it looks like this

pigeon is going to make it. Maybe it had passed out or something before, maybe it was only just sleeping.

So then I get the pigeon a drink, eh? I fill up the baby's bottle with water figuring to put the nipple into the bird's mouth the way I do with the sick cats, give them their water that way. And I'm feeling so great. I'm saving another life, this pigeon's going to live. I'm feeling so great, eh? that I only get mildly twisted when I see the cop car pull up in front of the house, got its lights flashing red and blue. Then the SPCA van. Then Miss Hopeless in her dinky blue car. All of them crowding in front of my house.

And I'm thinking, it looks like I'll just be getting enough time to push the kitchen table against the door before they all come storming up the path. So I go to Christian, quick Christian, help me shove this table against the door, we don't want anyone busting in and bothering us when we got important work to do. There's a sick pigeon here needing water and what do all these assholes know about that?

## **KANGAROO**

An annual lit mag specialising in poetry.

**CONTRIBUTIONS:** Poems, short articles on literary and cultural topics, graphics and prose of less than 2500 words.

### **THE EDITORS, KANGAROO**

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# WOLFIE'S MISTRESS

MARY ANNE BAARTZ

The piano keys were cold and hard. Meredith prodded Middle C. Gently at first then she thumped. Her index finger ached, the sound reverberated through the house. Something splashed D flat and E natural. She left off bashing Middle C and dabbed at the tears, sucking them back into her body. She'd be damned if she'd give away anything.

When the notes were dry, Meredith stretched her fingers and let them lilt over the keyboard. They worked independently of her, gently drifting through Mozart's early pieces, minuets in F, C, and G major. The notes fell easily off the tips of her fingers, the staccato bouncing. The scherzo was fast, loud, and colourful while the contradance sped along the keys, clipping an edge off F sharp. She was in the house alone. George had gone fishing with his mates. The kids were at Grandma's. Alone at the piano, playing tunes belonging to a dead person, harmonies she hadn't thought of since she was a child.

Meredith the child huddled in a wet, shivering lump outside her parents' bedroom door. She ran her fingers over the wood, quietly, afraid they'd hear, afraid they wouldn't. She'd killed her brother. Gave him Leukemia. Their lips said it wasn't her fault, but their eyes blamed her for being alive while he was dead. Meredith played Mozart's Allegro in Bb major on her parents' door. She drummed the bass more loudly than the treble. Still they wouldn't answer. She knew they were awake, she heard her mother crying and her father clearing his throat. Double forte in the panels and crescendo up the D-mould. Were they deaf? She played his Boursee, lending the crotchets an extra beat, holding the minims a breath longer. It was all right that she played Mozart in the middle of the night on the bedroom door, because Mozart was dead, like her brother.

But a dead person couldn't run around her bed. He waddled on fat, toddler legs, curled a rosy mouth and stretched pudgy fingers out to her. She sprang up, tossing off the covers, her face breaking open in a wide smile. He giggled, running towards her outstretched arms. He was a few inches from her grasp when she noticed the bruises under his baby eyes, the needles growing out of his arms. His limbs weren't chubby at all, but sticks awkwardly angled from a wasted body. Her fingers toppled through andante in C major. She disregarded pianissimo and played strongly. It must be loud enough to drown her screaming.

She drifted into Mozart's Viennese Sonatinas. Her fingers were nimble, the fearsome images were left behind with his minuets. Just as Meredith began to relax into the rondo of the second sonatina she felt a

cramping in the little finger of her right hand. She tried to ignore it, but it quickly spread to the ring finger of her left hand. She glided along a white corridor, floated up on to a hard wooden bench and was covered with a white sheet. White frocked figures in white gauze masks bore down upon her and hitched her legs into stirrups. There were razor blades inside, scraping the life away. *All over now*, someone said, *all gone*. They'd scratched it out. She was into the third sonatina, the minuetto to be played allegretto. She staccatoed back through the dirty grey corridor. There were smudges around the doorknobs and blood stains on the hem of the white coat. Meredith was empty inside and George was crying. *You shouldn't have done that*, he said, *we're gonna get married sometime. It might as well be now*. But the others had frowned and shaken their heads. *You're far too young*, they'd said. She'd bowed to the fear of scandal she'd glimpsed in their eyes. Too young to bear a life but old enough to take one. *It's all right, dear*, they'd said, *you can have other children*. But they screwed up their eyes and tilted their heads and she sensed them silently accusing her of murder number two as she staggered through the trio of sonatina number three

Meredith jumped. Her fingers shot off the scorching keys. Someone had giggled a shrill, girlish trill. There was no one but Meredith in this room. She dug into the cracks in the ceiling, prodded the pedals, ferreted through the piano stool. Nothing. Again she heard it, cold, wispy, demoniacal, slightly muffled. Her heart hammering, she jerked the lid up. Her eyes popped, she jumped back and yelped. He lay sprawled out amongst the notes, his powdered wig fallen over one eye, his white hose sagging around his ankles, his pumps scuffed, the bows in tatters.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my piano?" She squeezed the words through a constricted larynx and around a fat tongue.

"Give me a hand out of these wires, will you, Sweet? It's most uncomfortable in here." He spoke English with the hint of a German accent. He reached up his small white hands. Meredith found hers were shaking.

He bent a couple of the pins in the sound board, ducked the hammers, squashed the felts and trampled the keys, as she pulled him out of the piano. There were callouses on his fingers. Deceptive fingers. He grinned at her, hitched his stockings under their garters and straightened his wig. He pirouetted and stretched like a fat tomcat. "Danke, that's so gooooot. It was very cramped in there, not to mention the spiders." His bones creaked and he flicked a cobweb off his earlobe.

"Who are you?" she asked quietly, afraid to blink lest he disappear. "And why were you hiding in my piano? And what's the meaning of that ridiculous outfit?" He immediately stopped prancing, rose to his full stature which fell short of Meredith's five feet five by an inch and sniffed.

"Of course you must know who I am! You are, how should I say, jesting with me, are you not?" He smiled condescendingly. Meredith's

return smile was tremulous. He frowned. "But, my dear, how could you not recognise me? I am the greatest composer the world has ever seen!" He tilted his head, flared his nostrils, expanded his chest.

Meredith burst out laughing. "You're delightful!" she squealed. "Just what I needed," she rocked, "but you can tell me now," she squeezed the words through the laughter, "who you are, and where you hired that crazy costume." He looked down at his clothes, bewildered, then, taking a step back, hand on hip, he took a moment to appraise her.

"It is you who are dressed strangely." There was a husk in his voice she hadn't noticed before. "Though who am I to complain if a beautiful woman chooses to play the piano in her underwear."

"Well then," she lowered her eyes, "I won't complain that you chose my piano to lurk in while masquerading as Mozart." She smiled, raising her eyes in time to see him huff and square his shoulders.

"Masquerading? I? He shook his head, sighed and plonked despondently onto the piano stool. He swung his short legs. He was so slumped Meredith leaned across and patted his hand. He sprang to life, grabbed her fingers, pulled her to him and planted passionate kisses over her eyes, nose, mouth and ears, sucking the strands of her long dark hair. His breathy *my angel, my poppet, my sweet* swelled her senses and she was filled with purple passion that stung her eyelids. She clawed at his shirt, popping the little pearl buttons, pulled the sash of his pantaloons and fumbled for his body. He rose to the occasion. Many times. They made love on the keys, the stool, the floor, the music stand, against the wall, on top of the window sill.

Meredith zinged. Her skin tingled. Her beauty cracked the image in the mirror above the piano. The same mirror which had that very morning loudly declared she was thirty four. It bitchily presented an aging, scaly monster with greying hair and unseemly pouches of fat under its upper arms and at the tops of its thighs. She heard the thing crack and she laughed. Meredith was beautiful, he'd said so. She snuggled into his arms.

Something disquieting occurred to Meredith and she bounced upright.

"What is it?" he frowned.

"Um," she hesitated, biting her lip.

"What, my darling?" He touched her hand, she jerked it away.

"I don't know how to ask," she whispered, but there were all those warnings on TV. He took her hand firmly and brought it to his lips.

"Don't be shy. You may ask me anything."

"You don't have, um ..." her voice cracked.

"Have? Have what?" He leaned very close, his breath hot and sweet.

"AIDS?" There, it was out! She chewed her fingernail. He threw his head back, the laughter rolling across the ceiling.

"Aids?" He leaned back on his elbow. "Well, yes ... I do have some. To copy the scores and such. I'd like more but the Emperor is slow to pay

me for my work ..." He pulled her to him. "But, liebschen, why are we talking of such silly things? For you I need no aids. I will copy the score myself. You are my inspiration. I, the great Wolfie Mozart, will immortalise you, Meredith, my love." He fell to nuzzling her neck. She whispered wicked things in his ear until he was aroused to such a pitch that they wrestled on air.

A scratching and wheezing spluttered up the stairs interrupting their love making. Meredith leapt to her feet and threw on her clothes.

"What is it?" Wolfie asked, curling his toes.

"Quickly, Wolfie." She tossed his garments into the piano and tugged him to his feet. "In here, quick! George is home. He'll kill you if he finds us together."

"Oh," he giggled nervously, springing nimbly into the piano, crashing against the notes. "I've an aversion to death."

Meredith had no sooner banged the lid down when George flung open the door.

"You in here, Merry?" George slurred, trying to focus his red laced eyes. Meredith squirmed against the piano.

"Where'd you think I'd be?" Guilt pinched her vocal cords, snipped the words. He staggered towards her, clumsily offering his hand. She slapped it away, pruned her lips.

"Aw, come on, Mer. How about it, Honeybun?" he leered, touching her cheek. She jerked her head away. He dropped his hand. "You never want to any more. Now's a perfect time with the kids at Nana's. Come on, hey? Remember how it used to be?" He moved closer, tentatively reaching for her breast. She shoved him against the music stand. He landed on the floor, covered in sheet music.

"Don't ever touch me again!" she shrieked. "I can't stand the stink of your beery breath!" which wasn't exactly what she meant. She was afraid the smell wouldn't be strong enough to cover the other. The words shredded his pride. He scrambled to his feet, kicked the music stand aside and as he slunk from the room, mumbled:

"Don't see why you blame me for the piss or for stayin out. I got nothin to come home to."

She felt sorry she had no tenderness to offer George but it had long ago been locked in a safe inside and the key was lost. She heard him wheeze through the house, flake out on their bed. She could offer him her breast, but she wouldn't. She'd lost the key.

Meredith collapsed onto the piano, her sobbing crescendoing against George's tortured snoring decrescendoing along the hallway. Another sound echoed through the movement. The thing in the mirror was mending.

Meredith wiped her face with the hem of her dress. She took a deep breath and pulled open the piano lid. Her face crumpled as all she saw

were hammers, felts, strings, and pins. She crashed down on the keys. A groan from the piano's belly struggled through the discordant sounds. Again she yanked the lid up.

"You're in there, I know. I heard you," she whispered, afraid George would wake. "Wolfie? Come out. Please, Wolfie," she begged.

It occurred to her she was mad. A frustrated, lonely woman who'd conjured up a dead person to fill the emptiness. This time she slammed the lid, sat straight-backed on the stool, cracked her knuckles and played. She'd be damned if she would succumb to a middle age crisis. It was far too early. The mirror was faulty. She'd take it back to K Mart tomorrow.

Meredith played. She began with Bread and Butter Waltz, glissing over the keys like a Maestro then moved into Sonata in C, not once stumbling up the scale. She rounded off with Turkish Rondo, careful not to lean on the quavers. She felt better and was about to close the piano when her fingers took flight and played a piece with which she was totally unfamiliar. The music contained the lilt and power of Mozart but there was more. Someone had forced his way into her inner ear, jemmied open the lock on the safe containing her tenderness. So, she smiled, he'd crawled out of the piano without her knowing and had done exactly as he'd promised.

For every story there is a working copy. This is a working copy for something else. Perhaps not a story. Perhaps this is a working copy for a life, not yours, not mine, but someone else's. The sort of person one puts into a story. These people always have a sort of insularity. If they have neuroses, the neuroses are always interesting. They never have months and months worth of correspondence unanswered. They do not calculate how long it would take to answer all that correspondence only to realise that it would take more days than make up a month, or two months, not counting days off for picnics, family occasions, having babies, filling in forms, laziness, etc. Their jobs are either interesting or so profoundly boring as to become interesting because of that. Very rarely do any of these people have the sort of harassed lives that the people I know have. I try to live like a character, but my friends think that I am being anti-social, that I don't like them. I am developing 'character', although it's a very difficult concept to explain, especially over the telephone. Characters rarely have telephones except those which ring with exquisite purpose. My friends and I rarely have telephones that ring with any interesting purpose at all. Jobs if we're lucky, not if we're not. People asking favours.

One of the reasons that monks become monks, and nuns nuns is in an effort to put this sort of purpose into their lives. These days it rarely works. Nuns, I know, are just as harassed as other people. They have phones which ring to no particular purpose too. It is important to give up all this irritation in order to become a character. Cat ladies are characters I expect. I've never really spoken to one, although I remember seeing a cat lady in action, but only once.

So what if I invent a character, Elizabeth, say, and think of a story entitled 'Elizabeth meets a most interesting man'?

#### ELIZABETH MEETS A MOST INTERESTING MAN

After finishing first year university, and finding that I did not like it, I decided to leave and make lots of money and visit exotic places. Well I got as far as the north of India where I lived in a one roomed stone hut in the foothills of the Himalayas. The hut looked over a deep gorge, with a river at the bottom of it, and in the distance one could see the icy peaks of the Himalayas. In the nearby town there were many Tibetan refugees, many of whom I became very friendly with. One of these friends told me of the Lama with whom, I was told, I should go to request an audience and I would have good luck and would be enriched etc.

On the journey to Delhi I was accompanied by an Indian man, my 'self-appointed chaperone' in fact. When we reached the place where the Lama was there were many people. We were, eventually, granted an audience.

We were let into a small room, furnished sparsely, and in which were two people, an attendant, who would act as a translator, and a man, seated in a lotus position and wearing the gold and maroon robes of a Buddhist monk. As we entered the room someone gobbled wetly into a spittoon nearby. This man was apparently the Lama himself. As we prostrated ourselves three times on the floor in front of him I thought to myself 'What an obese man this Lama is' and felt the uncomfortable feeling of one stared at - then, a woman I had not noticed, started screaming out the very thoughts that I had had only seconds before. On regaining a more normal posture I looked about, but saw no woman. Puzzled, I reasoned that they must have dragged her out - no sooner had this crossed my mind when the walls echoed in nightmare fashion 'Dragged out, dragged out'. In confusion and dismay, I looked at the Lama who stared at me; a gaze which I could not escape - in indignation I asked the attendant 'Why is he doing these things to me?' to which the attendant replied, 'Surely you do not want this to be your first question?' 'I most certainly do' I answered, acting my part as an enraged Westerner. The Lama softened his gaze and replied that he would not answer my question now and that I was to think about it. My Indian friend thought that we had gone the way of all Tibetans and foreigners - that is, he had serious doubts as to our sanity.

On returning to my mountain home I questioned my friend, a woman who had the status equivalent to a yogi, about these matters, telling her of my experiences with the Lama in Delhi. She appeared to be unamazed at the feat of mind-reading - giving a peculiarly Eastern shrug which explains all and nothing. I wondered, privately, whether all Buddhists could do these things - but before I could verbalise any such notion the yogi had replied 'No not all, some of us may do it sometimes, some most of the time, it depends on your state of purification.' I was told that I should be flattered that the Lama chose me to use his powers on. My friend also told me that the powers of this Lama are so great that a blessed photograph of him would provide protection to the holder of it against weapons, or instruments of a sharp nature. I could not help but be sceptical about any such claim.

Several months later after leaving my Himalayan home I met and made friends with an Indian doctor, who, while I was there, attended a Tibetan woman who required the administration of antibiotics. My doctor friend filled up the syringe and attempted to inject this woman with drugs but found he could not pierce the skin. The needle eventually sliding to the side and much of the drug wasted. The

Tibetan woman realising took off something which she had around her neck. The doctor handed this to me, refilled the syringe and injected the antibiotic, saying as he did so 'I don't know what it is but it happens all the time.' I looked at the object in my hand - inside a small locket was a picture of my Lama.

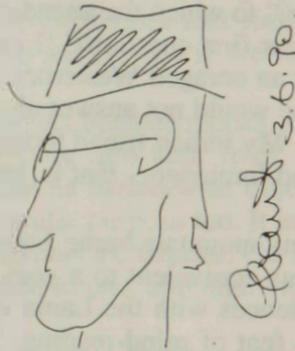
\*

But this is a true story. Not my story. Elizabeth told it to me, and I to you. Somebody else has already become a character. Perhaps we should be satisfied with this.

*Einstein, Buddhism  
& My Stiff Neck*

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# IN MORNING COLD

MARY DADSWELL

- Mumma didn't allow the clarinet to be played in here.
- Mumma. Complained about the morning cold as she watched a wagtail dart about the rose bush.
- Mumma didn't allow the clarinet to be played in here. Made me sad.
- Wretched woman. More interested in the wagtail kicking up a fuss of feathers.
- We didn't care what she said -
- Played that damned thing anyway ... as defiant as the show-off wagtail in the face of a despairing magpie.
- The dark silky timbre of the clarinet ...
- We were wrong. Like the magpie yawning off the morning, she just wanted to sit it out, to yawn us off.
- You're not wrong.
- So richly wrong. She was confused as we jiggled through childhood faster than the wagtail through the branches.
- Our studied breaches of her rules and regulations.
- How she could jiggle a teabag. But Mumma was not in touch.
- Mumma was never in touch with us. Devoted to Pan. God. The Devil.
- Sitting there allowing and disallowing. In her old cane rocking chair on the front verandah. The passionfruits splatting and splashing from the vine as her whole body, chair, vibrated in her anger.
- Didn't allow the oboe.
- Didn't allow the fiddle. Vibes. A joke, back and forth. Rocking back and forth through her own distance and space.
- Would rock over your damned foot and break it. You didn't speak back when she was allowing and disallowing.
- 'Course not. She had all the say. Control of the money.
- True.
- Every time we wanted to buy a comic or something, we had to go to her and beg for money.
- Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Depended on the colour of her moods.
- Mauve. Warm gold. Police blue. As strange as her paintings. Paintings of light and winds, mirages, of silence, refraction.
- Mauve mood that had her thrown into the clink that time. Cells. They smelt like myriads of underground caves.
- Concealed weapons. Well, what can you do?
- Hardly concealed. Carried a .22 daytimes and a 12-bore shotgun evenings. What could we do?

- Mumma didn't let anybody put her down. Nobody.
- She just didn't give a damn. She didn't care what others thought. Remember those stories in *Australasian Post* that thrilled everybody? I hated going to the barber's shop. He always had them on display.
- I thought she cared. There were moments.
- She never cared. Not as much as a Kleenex.
- You could even cry, she wouldn't come.
- I tried that, remember? Cried and cried. Didn't do a damned bit of good.
- Lost as she was in the Eleusinian Mysteries and the art of love. *Post* called her a Satanist. Somebody had it mixed up.
- Cried my little eyes out. The sheet was sopping. While she sang like a magpie perched on the gate post, its voice up and down, up and down cleaning its conscience.
- Mumma was not to be persuaded. Unswayable.
- Smoking her long, graceful pipe with its porcelain bowl painted with violets. Purple violets.
- Staring into the linoleum cracks. Experimenting with self-hypnosis.
- She had a lot on her mind. Pan. The Mysteries. And Dadda, of course.
- Let's not start on Dadda today. Dadda and his scandals.
- Agreed. Remember Mumma jerking the old nervous system about with her electrifying Talking Tongues? And how she used her guns on those posh people from the brick veneer with English shrubs and manicured lawns hugged by the ribs of an iron fence when they stormed in here, complaining about her screeching at passersby in her Tongues? How fascinated we were when they accused her of being a Devil worshipper?
- Could Christ have performed the work of the Redemption had He come into the world in the shape of a pea? That was one she'd pop on us.
- Then she'd mark your homework.
- Gave me a C once.
- What did we know? Nothing. What could we know? Only what she taught us. No school. No friends. No television. No radio. "All outside people are bad." Remember? "Outside, it's all go, go, go and promiscuous curiosity everywhere everywhere. Outside, everybody's instincts suck others for echoes and it causes confusion."
- What do we know now? Nothing. We wavered when we should have run out into the dark.
- Not true. I have decided I am mature.
- You.
- Yes. Fully mature
- After all these years. Congratulations.
- Absolutely mature. So mature that today I know she would be a top tourist attraction.
- I am proud of you.

- Of course, it may not be true. Entirely.
- I know. I still find in my discourse that damned self-congratulatory strain, faint insinuating self-praise begging for little pats on the head -
- Ych. I know. Makes me feel as if I'm trading a smile for a street pickup  
...
- Continuous stream of auto-massage: 'You did that well, little one, you did that very well, poppet, you didn't do that badly, my lovely, it could have been worse, dumbo.'
- She dyed my beard blue, on the eve of my seventh marriage. The night she made me go to bed in the sleepout.
- Not backward in coming forward with a comment, Mumma.
- Damned stuff wouldn't come out. Had to wear one of those white face masks. Pinched it from the hospital down the road. Raised a few eyebrows; marriage celebrant asked me if I was a marked man. Said she wouldn't marry me unless I was a free agent.
- Grew pretty damned tired of that old woman, pretty damned tired of her. Gangs of ecstatic monks hanging about with begging bowls beating on pots and pans. Us serving them one type of food at a time in one bowl at a time. What a farce.
- Trying for a ticket to The Mysteries.
- When we wanted a little money to go into town or something you had to say, Mumma can I have a little dough to buy some trash so I can learn about life?
- She was often underly generous.
- Give us eight when she knew the fare was ten.
- She had her up days and down days. Like most.
- Out for a long walk one early evening one thing I noticed in the bare brown paddocks down the road a couple copulating in the shade of a car, a green Plymouth. A thing I had only ever seen in old sepia-toned photographs taken from the air by acrobatic flyers, and somebody's old brown dog snuffling at their faces while they did it ...
- And what else?
- Mumma. Sitting out in the middle of a paddock. Rocking.
- That time she'd lugged the old rocker all that way. In a mauve mood.
- I waved. And coo-eed. She ignored me.
- Just thinking. And meditating on her anguish for all her children's mortality.
- Said my discourse was sickening. That was the word she used. Used it repeatedly.
- I asked myself: do I give a bag of navy beans?
- This bird that fell into the back yard?
- The south lawn.
- The back yard. I wanted to give it a fishcake.

- Mmm?
- Thought it might be hungry. It couldn't fly. It had crashed. So I went into the house to get it a fishcake. Then I was trying to get it to eat the fishcake, holding the bird in one hand and the fishcake in the other.
- She saw you and swiped at you. I saw her looking like a great overgrown cat hunching, its eyes radar, and creeping closer toward its stomach ...
- Then she became Mumma again and gave us that line "The bird is a friend and we never touch the bird because it hurts the bird." Huh?
- That's it.
- Then she threw the bird away.
- Into the English garden. The bird landed in the prissy woman's hair.
- And Mumma wondered why the police came.
- Mumma. You'd ask her how she was and she'd say "Fine." Just like a little kid.
- Some still say "Fine."
- That's all you get out of some. "Fine"
- Boy or girl. "Fine"..
- Telling you not to come too close. Mumma.
- Mumma loved the zither.
- Remember the hours we spent strumming away at our zithers. Fingers darting together. And the singing. We'd grin through the shock of her unpredictable generalisations.
- Mumma sitting there rocking away. Painting on three-ply. Rocking. Dosing herself with exotic booze while the wagtail danced the grass ...
- Gingered scotch rickeys.
- Gold Coasters.
- Rob Roys.
- Tia Marias.
- Brandy Alexanders and Strawberry Rainbows. How could she drink that stuff?
- An iron gut. And off her rocker.
- Mumma was not in touch.
- Mumma was never in touch. The dancing wagtail flew low at the window, attempting to dive in to the reflection of the rose bush; Mumma flew at dreams more perfect than reality.
- 'Course she had things on her mind.
- Her crimes.
- Her crimes against us. Our beatings. Her crimes and her hopes.
- I never knew she had them. The specifics escaped me.
- Wrinkled hopes. Had to do with getting the hell out of here, mostly.
- To where?
- Away. Away.

- To where?
- Away.
- Just away?
- Wanted to get away from us. Wanted out of here. Always reflected in those amazing paintings. Saw us as tittle-tattles, spreaders of secrets. Hoped we would fall off the edge of the world.
- She did. She shoved hard enough.
- Sent herself telegrams saying "DARK SHADOWS IN A TEACUP REQUIRE YOUR PRESENCE. LOVE WINKY."
- Who was Winky?
- Fictitious. She'd leave them lying around, little fear-spots on various tables and chairs. Come on one and it burned your eyes. Then you'd have to pretend you hadn't read it. But she always knew you had read it.
- Where was I during all this? I don't remember.
- You were chasing after Rosalie. Sweet Rosalie.
- Mumma didn't allow Rosalie into her space.
- Absolutely true.
- Mumma didn't allow Suzy.
- My Suzy.
- She was bit hard on Suzy.
- I remember.
- You still see Suzy?
- Once in a while.
- Do you good.
- Saw her Saturday. I hugged her and her body leaped.
- Suzy was fifteen years ago.
- Longer. About '70.
- The wind takes people in different directions.
- The wind. It's like being in a yacht with a bloke who doesn't quite know how to manage the sails. Doesn't know how to tack. It's like that. But when I saw her on Saturday, I hugged her and her body leaped. I felt it leap.
- How did that feel?
- Wowie!
- The body knows.
- The body had a mind of its own.
- Words can't say what the body knows.
- Sometimes I hear them howling from the hospital.
- The detox. ward.
- Do they have to tie them down? I always imagine they're tied down with beige sheets.
- It stinks.

- Like when Mumma played Scrabble. She played to kill. She would use the filthiest words, insisting they were real words. Shocked every Eleusinian Mystery sleuth each time.
- In her robes of deep purple.
- Seeking the ecstatic vision. That which would lift people clear off the floor. Four feet.
- Six feet.
- Four feet or six feet off the floor. Persephone herself appearing.
- The chanting in the darkened telesterion.
- Persephone herself appearing, hovering. Accepting offerings, balls of salt, solid-gold serpents, fig branches, figs.
- Hallucinatory dancing. All the women drunk. Lustful Pan teasing the women dancing through the paddocks, trying to capture him.
- Dancing with jugs on their heads, mixtures of barley water, mint....
- Knowledge of things unspeakable.
- It's not easy, being both subject and object of the Mysteries. Of Pan. Of the Devil.
- And a Mumma.
- Still, all I wanted to do was a little krummhorn. A little krummhorn once in a while. I never took sides. She can't confuse me, accuse me ...
- Can open graves, properly played.
- I was never that good. Never good, really.
- What can I say? Who could practise?
- And your clavier.
- Mumma didn't allow the clavier.
- Thought it would unleash in her impulses better leashed? I don't know.
- Her dark side. They all have them, mummás.
- I mean, they've seen it all, felt it all. Spilled their damned blood and then wiped mushy spinach off tiny chins meanwhile telling the old man that he wasn't No.3 on the scale of husbands ...
- Tossed him a little sex now and then just to keep him on his toes.
- He was always on his toes, spent his whole life on his toes, the old devil, pulling one scam after the other in the city.
- We said we weren't going to start on Dadda.
- I forgot.
- Old Mumma.
- Well, it's not easy making the tomatoes grow.
- Asparagus too.
- I couldn't do it.
- I couldn't do it.
- Mumma could do it.
- Mumma. It's been better just keeping out of the way, taking no sides.
- Want to put on a record?

- Yeah. Maybe. It's easier to play records. The morning cold is weighing in. And the wagtail, the memento from the past has died. Flew against the window. Mumma threw it on the mulch. The past digesting the future - a sour edge like the smell of autumn.

## **Mattoid**

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The flight from Heathrow to Jan Smuts finds me unslept for 48 hours, speeding on National Health Dexedrine and a hundred caps of acid hid in a condom, like a severed finger up me ass - wouldn't you, Bull Hubbard, indeed?

I stop off in Egoli to give Gabriel some of the harvest and spend a night in psychedelic rut. After a spicy curry meal, a couple of pots of Earl Grey and several chillum of mellow poison, we go through the whole earthy repertoire of gay abandon - sucking, fucking, plucking, kissing and pissing - I even rim him, slowly circling, licking and tickling the short and curls, deep into the shudder and twitch of his sphincter muscles pulsing. We have no shame or loyalty - except to the moment and the realisation of urges allowed and appreciated by one whose fantasies are equally dark and ... fundamental.

Still speeding and wasted after our debauch, I cast my bags and chattels onto the Grimmstown train with a whole crowd of conscript troepies and head south, chook-chooking through the night. I encamp myself on the top bunk with William Burroughs' *The Wild Boys* while these short-haired kids, newly out of their three-month bastardising basic training, go *jolling* in jeans and T-shirts to try and score a *dop* at Bloemfontein Station round midnight, milk churns clanking, unseen cattle in trucks abattoir-bound with mournful 'mmmmooooos!', and silent blacks, balaclavaed, huddled in blankets with their suitcases and cardboard boxes, heading off to labour deep underground in doomy mine tunnels.

But a minute later the *troepies* are back in the compartment, changing into their uniforms.

The angriest, most bull-like and belligerent of them wants an audience - me - for his rage: 'That *blerrie* MP caught us in our civvies on the platform. Says since we're under orders from the moment we get on the train we've got to be in uniform. *Kak! Fokken moer!* But check this ...'

He takes out a chromed .45 pistol. 'Now I'm going to show that *donnerse moer* MP he can't fuck around with me. He can't *sig* a raught with this *gat*.. I'll plug his fucking balls off!'

And it takes ten minutes for his buddies to dissuade him from his undoubtedly noble intentions. By then the train is creakily pulling out of Bloem, chugging throatily towards Grimmstown. But he's made his point, created the desired effect - he's the oke with the gun. So his buddies

have to listen to his bar-flight and chick-screwing stories until they all crash out in the early hours.

Thank God it ain't my calling or duty to join these guys on the border, slotting terrs and cancelling carbon copies.

Naturally the next morning the wash-basin is filled with slopping vomit and I've got to be careful where I tread to avoid the splashes. Fortunately they leave the train in Craddock or some such forsaken place and I can muse on the year ahead at Wodes with only one credit to do to complete my journalism degree - should leave a fair bit of time for extra-curricular activities.

Shortly after lunchtime the next day, the red roofs and white-washed walls of academe post-card colour in the sun on the hill overlooking the rest of Settler City and its many spires.

I dump my trash at my digs in Prince Street - I've arranged by post to rent a room from Nadine, the single-parent sister of Commercia Woolsworth, one of Grimmstown's more worthy radicals - and I head for the campus and a smoke. The first cat I bump is Nico, the neanderthal *roker* who looks like the 'after' photograph in a 'Scope' magazine 'Toll of Drug Abuse' shocker - a tall, gangly figure with a kind of cheery Frankenstein Monster shambling gait, lank hair that looks as if it's been cut by rats' teeth, and the weirdest manner of speech: grinding and muttering a mixture of warped English and skate *taal* through thinlipped pillarbox-slit mouth above jutting jaw.

'You're late again, ya bastard. Coming for a *rook*?' he chuckles and we go off to find Gwar and catch a pipe out by the quarry. Gwar is a new one to me - a kind of greaser Sal Mineo prettyboy with some worthy biker scars and an adrenalised metabolism - all hot leather and electricity, glorying in verbal grossness and the skate idiom.

'Let's go north Leonie and score some *pille* off her. She's got 15 milligram Valium and Artane for her schizophrenia - fuck but they are weird. Nico spent one whole night driving in his Mini, sitting on the beanbag in my room, kept making like he was wiping something just in front of him, so when we asked him what it was, he tunes: "Fucking mist on the inside of the windscreen." He must have driven all the way to Durbs by dawn - non-fucking-stop!'

Sitting on piles of fractured bacon-striped rocks, we crack a Tassies bottle for a pipe. Wads arrives, a note file under his arm. He's a kind of darker version of a rough-trade James Dean, with clean speed-freaked features and a twisted smile which is fractured by a lip-splitting scar. He tends to werewolf through the night, subsisting on Bazedrex inhalers, which he cracks and dissolves in a soup plate full of dry red Tassies, which turns an ominous, gut-rotting black as it is infused with the cheap electric flash of benzedrine and foul-tasting menthol from the inhaler.

There are a few others on the circuit:

Like Rufus, my prime Irish boyo buddy, loquaciously rapping endless poetry and black liberation politics, to which he devotes much of his time and intellect. Gretchen, his Germanic-Canadian lady, is working in Toronto and waiting for his return - so he's at a bit of a wild, loose end.

There's Ashford 'Roachclip' Smithers, the laid-back literate with the classic good looks, who has a part-time graft as the sports centre and swimming pool attendant, where he reads Conrad and smokes dope in his Sherlock Holmes briar between bouts of vacuuming the pool and handing out squash balls. His brother, Jimi, was bust for involvement in producing and distributing subversive pamphlets for the ANC, did time in Pretoria Central and then took an exit visa to London, where he penned *Tronkvoel*, now a banned classic of prison literature.

Kippy splits his time between his postgrad Dip Ed, dope and testing the adhesion limits of the tyres of his Norton Commando.

And Lee, a white-blond waif who wafts after Nico but don't say nothing - yet.

Depending on availability we breathe dope smoke, drop acid, crank ourselves up on speed, lubricate on tequila and cheap wine, and experiment with the cumulative effects of Artane, Mandrax, Librium, Valium, Romilar, Doloxine, Vesperax and any other assorted pille which come our way.

One summer night Wads and I are feeling our way through an Artane fog on the way to somewhere else. Communication is somewhat confused 'cos you're never sure whether the other guy really said something or you imagined it: 'Hey, check those snakes!'

He points to a spot near our feet where scaly coils writhe and iridesce green, red and electric blue in the streetlights.

'Yeah, wow!'

'You think they're real? Or maybe just like, you know ...'

A pause, it's difficult to focus and they keep evolving, growing legs and heads and shedding them, copulating in a twisted mass of reptilian lust. 'Naa, they must be an hallucination.'

'Right, if you say so ...' and we stumble on.

Nico and I go quite often to score off Durban Pete, this skate greaser who's living with a dark lady in the coloured township. Halfway through the second bottle of wine, one of Pete's mates, Stompie, arrives, whistling Slim Whitman numbers. He's a really faded oke in half-mast shiny pants, a cowboy-print shirt and suede boots. The last roundup. Pete is assembling his bong, a primitive kind of hubble-bubble water pipe made up of a plastic milk-bottle, rubber tubing and Presstick putty to seal the joints.

'Now check,' says Pete proudly, 'If the law comes upon any of the separate pieces of this bong, which I stash indifferent places, he's not

going to know that this is bits of a pipe unless of course he finds the actual chillum.

Nico goes through the fireman ritual lighting two matches held together, waiting until all the sulphur has burnt off, then applying the flame in a circling motion to the mouth of the chillum bowl, while Pete drags and bubbles mightily at the mouthpiece. Fireman is the privileged position because you get the next hit, the sweetest, after someone else has bust his lungs getting it going. Serious *rokers* have a great deal of regard for the niceties of the rites.

'You boys play rugby,' Stompie asks.

'Christ, no!' Nico laughs.

'Should, you know, good for the lungs.' He takes a heavy hit on the pipe. 'You know, when I was your age I used to be *skakel* for the Duikers' team. I'm a Duiker from Dwarshoek!' And he leaps forward to throw an imaginary ball down the line, landing heavily on the ground.

'Take it easy Stompie, that was 20 years ago, a *moerse* long time, hey? Have a dop.' Pete offers the bottle as Stompie examines the weeds in the dust at close range.

Pete slaps his thigh and grimaces, 'You know the feds are really giving me grief. Whenever I come here to the Coloured side, they ask me where I'm going. "Going to see my granny, is that a crime?" I don't take no *kak* from the law.' He spits.

'Hey, *jong*,' says Nico, 'if that's the case, you's better dig up some of these *boom* plants and move them next door. The *kerels* might check them out and bust you for cultivation - five years minimum.'

Stompie staggers up unsteadily and then asks, 'How old are you okes?'

'Nico is 20 and I'm 23.'

'Well,' he studies us blearily, 'in that case I give you 13 years to live,' he jerks a finger at Nico and then at me, 'and I give you 10.' Then he dives to the ground again in a long-forgotten rugby epic. The way things are, he could be right - but 33 seems a long way off, so who cares?

But there is the little red-haired girl ...

I first met Helen at Emma's place just before I went to the UK. Short, curly red and copper hair, green eyes and bushy brows, a shrewd, mocking taunt to her voice, mouth twisting askew when she smiles, and a crowing laugh. I was captivated - ball, chain and shackles - never thinking we might meet again. But here she is, sitting at the back of the first journalism lecture I attend.

'What are you doing here? I thought you'd never come back.' Like she was expecting me perhaps - or the Midnite Rambler?

I gobble speed, drop acid and cruise the back lanes, whitewalled midnight moonlight, cypresses and oaks singing low windsongs, black cat squeezes silent through the white picket palings and tread softs the

shadows as the cathedral clock bong! bong! bong! bong! bong! bong!  
bong! bong! bong! bong! bong! bongs! the witching hour and I'm back  
three years in the same academe walking stoned alone. But that was before  
I met Ruth and now she is long gone, teaching little black kids in  
Botswana, living happily with Larry, that Coloured cat.

But Helen's car, a bright red Mini with a white stripe down the side,  
isn't outside her place, so I wander over to Nico's for a quiet smoke, only  
to find Gwar, Rufus, Wads, Ashford and Nico are working out on a bottle  
of tequila, some Artane tabs and the Byrds' 'Eight Miles High'. Don't  
mind if I do.

'What are you writing these days?' Rufus asks - at least he's literate.

'While I was in the UK I wrote 40,000 words of *The leper's kiss*.'

Gwar chokes halfway through a deep lungful. 'Fuck! The leper's kiss -  
that's really off! Smoochy, smoochy, don't give me any lip baby, don't  
leave your tongue in my mouth!'

Gwar digs that which is off, but he means well.

'And now I'm working on this gay play, *One Man's Meat*. It's a  
monologue by a guy sitting in a wheelchair and slowly stripping.'

'The Hell's Moffies ride again!' Gwar takes a heavy swig on the  
tequila and mashes the lemon into his mouth. 'Give my trolley a push  
and I'll chase you all around the fucking pissoir!'

Nobody takes it seriously, but I really am writing again - late hours  
with my typewriter and the cassette recorder. Speaking the words of my  
gay encounters, loves and obsessions to an audience to whom I relate my  
experiences as 'you' - 'You did this, you sucked that, you felt that, and  
between that, and under this, inside me, and you felt oh so void, you  
kissed and slept and fucked and sucked and were sucked and felt so fucked,  
and fucked again and you were alone when the pillow cooled and the sweat  
and semen dried and the fundamental odours faded and the memories  
merged together into ill-defined desire and a ragged yearning to fill the  
abyss with feeling.'

My play, the most vulnerable words I have ever written, spoken,  
gouged in razor lines of blood droplets on white tape-recorded flesh.

And why, in this third weird war of the sexes, do we spend our time in  
such detours of the mind, seeking the edge, that ragged blade of feeling  
whose touch against our throats we accept because we no longer care,  
because pain is just reality? And we feel beyond that. Aaaaaaagh, Sister  
Ray and Severin had it so easy!

And what would Helen think if she read the pages of my play or saw  
beyond them into my mind? And, in a way, she does. When I bump her  
in the library, she's looking for some Tennessee Williams plays and asks,  
'I hear you're working on some kind of g-g-g-gay opus, are you going to  
perform it some time?'

'Yeah, a thing called *One Man's Meat* ...'

She almost flinches, but a shy smile is developing in spite of her obvious embarrassment.

'And I was hoping to do it during Arts and Science Week.'

'I'd love to see it.' Then kind of conspiratorially, 'Could you, can you ... get me some grass?'

Indeed! Perhaps she's not after just my body, or my mind, she also wants my connections. So I go round to her room on a balmy Saturday afternoon and teach her how to roll about an ounce - three bucks' worth - the the best local *boom* into one-blader joints. She's an eager student, and when we've tamped and flattened the last tail, twisted the last tip, and concealed the stash in a tampon box - trusting that the MCP *kerels'* innate respect for 'wimmen's matters' and general squeamishness will pry no further - we wander off into the bush and I instruct her in the art of correct breathing for maximum absorption of the THC resin. Perhaps it's her slight paranoia, or the strange new, wavering perception, anyway we're both friendly like never before - almost like kids playing together for the first time - but wary, almost shy of exposing anything deeper - not yet, not yet ...

I do get to dance with her on odd festive occasions and end up sharing a joint on the back lawn afterwards. Will she take a walk on my Wilde side? a stroll? a run? a stumble? a tumble? But that ain't all she or I want, and I don't intend to spook her, so I don't press it.

Then, after she leaves, driving her red Mini with the white strip down the side, I go home to work on my play. If anyone is the muse for this disjointed epic, it is Helen, the out-of-reach presence at 2 am or beyond. It is the same, shy longing unspoken. Not just bodies, but time together ... or alone just knowing that the other is also thinking ...

Wodes U is sending a contingent of plays up to the Aquarius Arts Festival, staged by the National Union of South African Students during the July vacation at Wits U in Egoli, so I figure on trying out 'One Man's Meat' up there in the more decadent, and hence tolerant, metropolis. My fellow thespians are doing 'The Gladstone', a bit of pseudo suedeo - soft and floppy - Beckett absurdism by Antonius P. Brandt, the celebrated dissident *Sestiger* writer, and a piece called 'The Hooker', a torrid monologue about female sexuality by dear Hanley, who is as camp as a row of bell tents - but, since 'One Man's Meat' will be on after this bunch, the contrast should be suitably extreme.

Nevertheless I am as nervous as hell, because it's not just words and feelings I am going to expose up there on the stage, but also real people - including myself, in the blood-dripping flesh. Who was it that lent me Peter Handke's plays and turned me on to the nature and value of dramatic confrontation that transcends mere play acting? Was it Joanna?

I hunker down in the shadows at the side of the Wits U Great Hall, dragging up lungsful of Durban Poison to take the edge off the speed and adrenalin - my mother is going to be in the audience, not knowing just

what it is that I am about to lay on the world. She has watched me going out into the garden with my tape and script to learn the words and rewrite portions, ever changing as I work over and over these tacky, trembling anecdotes which are my secret glories and puddles of bitter regret sweat. My mother and I have always had this almost telepathic emotional understanding - but there is so much I have never stated openly. I don't want to hurt her withit, but I know she will be hurt and even frightened, like taking off on rainslicked highways on my motorbike at midnight, bound for the terrible unknown ...

But the drama is already rolling before I hit the stage. Lee, Nico's beautiful lady, is directing Hanley's 'Hooker', and would she and Hanley have decided that the chosen actress, Veronica, is just not going to pull it off, the steadfast Veronica is damned if they're going to steal her moment of glory and literally runs onto the stage to prevent Lee taking it over. Lee, Hanley and I are gathered in mild Titanic-deck hysteria in the wings, watching this errant actress trashing the character and mangling the monologue. I really feel sorry for Hanley. I'm my own writer/director/actor so if it turns into a soggy ball of shit, I have only myself to blame. The only help I need is Luke doing my lights and taped music. He's also helped me track down a real dinkum geriatric wheel chair from the Wits dental school to use as my central prop.

I hit the stage wearing my most beloved and bepatched corduroy pants - which have faded over the years from deep chocolate to a thin wintry veld brown - tiedye shirt, leather biker jacket and gauntlets, wide-brimmed Hendrix-type hat, junk-dealer shades and my face bandaged like the Invisible Man - only eyes showing. Slouched in the wheelchair I speak slowly, I strip ... discarded clothing and pretences pile up around me - romantic longings removed to expose naked lust. The heat of crude encounters melts off my reptile scales to reveal patches of pale, virginal joy. Every cast-off item of clothing confirms that all of my body is pale, gaunt and hairy; every illusion about finding someone is shown to be naive, childlike trust confused with naked lust justification, until finally I am wearing only my Jockey scants and a twisted smile.

'Tis not a pretty sight.

'... The rest is silence.'

Alone in the spotlight - red and blue spotlight - while Baez's unbelievably pure voice spells out 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' on the tape, I cut strips of elastic adhesive bandage to tape over my mouth (to silence my own fear?), leaving only a hole for the cigarette. I draw on it until the end is glowing, raise my left hand so the back is facing the audience, spare a thought for Oscar whose pain brought me to this desecration of the flesh, then with slow deliberation I grind the white-hot, pain-quenching kiss of the cigarette out on the back of my hand-flesh.

Too much adrenalin to feel anything, just brush off the powdery ashes and crisp flakes of burnt skin before unpeeling a fresh razor blade from its

paper wrapper, then extend my forearm to the audience, and with tense, trembling resolution I trace the blade down my skin. No blood, so I repeat the line. No blood - blade must be blunt, but it's new! So I make several deliberately deeper hacks - easy, for by now it isn't really my own body, but some representative piece of flesh, a stage prop which simply refuses to bleed on cue. Then, as if to prove to myself and them that fear and reservation are truly just all in the mind, I sink the blade even deeper in my self - hoping for some red droplets to prove something, even if it is merely that blood is a slow witness. It's all in the script, but by now I am ad-libbing cut by cut to coax my veins to speak for me. A few more lines which my audience still can't see - much less read between - because my thin blood must be frozen.

So, finally, I drop the razor blade and raise a ten-inch butcher's knife - my mother's - above my head, pull down my briefs and hold out my penis for ritual emasculation.

As the blade comes down ... darkness right on cue.

'Stop him!' - my mother's voice, almost a shrieked suspension of disbelief, from the audience. Does she really think I would?

There is a frozen silence in the dark void out there. I leave the stage before the lights come up slowly to the steam-roller dirge of the Velvet Underground and Nico intoning 'All tomorrow's Parties', and the audience are left with an empty wheel chair and no focus for their emotions. They are frozen, unsure, unable to respond to my brutality. A few confused, nervous claps before they flee the hall.

Backstage I'm wrapping a bandage round the dozen razor cuts on my arm, which are now oozing crimson, when Smokie, who happens to be working for a newspaper, comes up, kinda whitefaced but casual. Already I can read the scoop headlines in his eyes: 'First full-frontal male nude on SA stage mutilates himself.'

'Did you really ... did you really cut yourself?'

Even my brief nakedness has not been as shocking.

'Wanna taste the blood?'

I locked up the car and made my way down the rocky path to the house, typical of the area, large square white weatherboard with huge verandahs and a tin roof perched on the side of the hill. The path wound down through an overgrown garden, the colour and texture of a Rousseau jungle. As I approached I could see light streaming out through the slats of peeling painted wood which hung from the windows of the kitchen. This light was wonderful: warm, yellow and invitational, it made the distant people occupying the room into figures in some alien nativity scene; as I drew closer I could hear voices. The voices of angels; and as I put my foot on the first step I could see inside the golden kitchen and I could see the angels. Real live angels, with soft down on their brown angel arms. They were sitting each side of our rough kitchen table and my flat mate Andy, his face and eyes alive and glowing sat at one end smiling back at each angel in turn as they spoke and laughed.

"Hi," said Andy. "This is Clare and Bronwyn, they're student teachers out at Aquinas College. I met them in the caf this afternoon and we started talking. they're doing a paper on alternative life-styles and I told them what an authority you were on that and they couldn't wait to meet you ... So here they are."

Andy looked more pleased with himself than he had in a long time. The two of us living here by ourselves without much alternative company had been the source of some tense conversation recently and our own efforts at the academic life were not exactly shining examples of scholarly research. His statement about my authority in relation to alternative life-styles left a certain emptiness in my stomach. I wondered if he had qualified this with the truth that my authority came from a disastrous experiment the previous summer when I had purchased fifteen acres of leech infested rain forest in Kuranda; built myself a shaky, inadequate and leaky lean-to and settled down to find enlightenment only to find instead an endless trail of rambling inarticulate Christ figures pushing bad dope at extraordinarily high prices interspersed with barefooted under-age women who "knew we were right as soon as I hear your star sign," who invariably ate what little food I had, smoked my extraordinarily high priced bad dope, and left, taking with them various books, records, cassettes etc. because they knew I wouldn't mind, because: "being hung up on possessions is such a drag." Well, not to them it seemed.

The only actual figure even slightly approaching a nodding acquaintance with enlightenment was a visiting Indian Buddhist who brought with him only two sets of clothes. One he wore and the other he washed. After staying with me a week his contribution to my spiritual well-being consisted of two pieces of advice: avoid stressful relations with

women and don't wear tight underwear. I reveal these now to the world because I believe the world is ready for them and because at that stage in my spiritual and material development I had already failed these two crucial tests.

These are the thoughts that went rapidly through my deteriorating mind as I looked down into these youthful eager facers and knew I was doomed. "Exactly what aspect of alternative life-styles are you specifically interested in?" I began carefully. The angel called Clare began to speak as I tried hard to control my breathing and simulate concentration.

"Well really, we're trying to find whether there is really anything new in thinking coming out of these communities that could practically be incorporated into our Western system that might permanently change it for the better or whether it's all just utopian nonsense and when they've all finished playing their games they'll get their hair cut and go back to work."

"God, you sound like my father," I said and immediately regretted. "But it's a very intelligent question to put and incredibly important if we're to understand the sociological significance of these changes on our society as we now know it." A good save I thought under the circumstances.

"But isn't that what Clare just said?" interceded the angel Bronwyn. Things were beginning to look dark. "Yes, I suppose it was, more or less, but I was attempting to reframe it, give it a broader perspective so to speak, rather than simply polarise the options, which occurs too often in the social and political rhetoric of this country don't you think?"

"Oh yes I do," saved the lovely angel Clare. "And it's so difficult to get a clear picture of what's happening because the ideas are so new and most of the participants relatively young and inexperienced while all the power of reporting lies in vested interests in the media and much of the power of comment is given over to cynical politicians." "Yes, that's so true," I affirmed, "and that's why it's so important to get some good research that maps the parameters of alternative ideology in practice and gives us some hard data to hold up against the obvious mess our traditional system is in at the moment."

"Well that sounds like what we want to do," revived the angel Bronwyn. "How should we go about it?" I could see the angel Bronwyn was going to prove particularly difficult.

"Well Andy and I have already gone some way to laying a basis for a beginning haven't we Andy?" Andy did not stop smiling but he did manage to nod. "In our own work we have been to the major functioning centres of alternative life in this country; Nimbin, Kuranda, etc., and we think we have come up with some distilled essence out of our interviews which constitutes the core ideology common to these communities which differs or appears to be lacking in mainstream society." I was beginning

to flow. Even the angel Bronwyn seemed satisfied with this; but I was determined that Andy needed to work harder to win his share of the positive possibilities of the evening. "Why don't you tell them what it is Andy?"

"What? Oh yeah. OK ... ah ... Well I suppose the major difference is that traditional capitalist society is based on a non-altruistic view of the selfishness of human beings - greed if you like - and that this view is used to justify the exploitation of human beings by others to the point where there is obvious advantage to one individual or group to the explicit cost or disadvantage of the other group or individual being exploited. Whereas with the new or alternative communities there seems to be a view of human beings which is fundamentally altruistic and has as its basis a common notion that human life is a shared experience to which we can all contribute our various skills in a much less structured and more relaxed system for the eventual betterment of all."

"Great," said the angel Clare and there was obvious enthusiasm from her companion in perfection. From the corner of my eye I noticed that Andy was adding extravagant amounts of wine to glasses that already stood in front of our revered guests.

"So what do you think the practical operating elements of the alternative communities are?"

"Well," continued Andy, "put simplistically they are essentially notions that resources, human or material, ought to be shared and that rather than seeking individual or immediate reward that the reward from the input of these resources should also be shared equally and so the reward would come from benefitting by the increased richness of the whole community."

Yes. They were nodding, they were smiling, they were leaning forward, they were rapt. The evening grew focused and humid in the effort of their positive attention.

"So," continued Andy, warming to his theme, "there would be no need for the concept of ownership. All resources would be shared equally and nobody would have more than anyone else. All the land could be shared and worked by teams who would benefit from the end result. All the tools of everyday living - cars, houses, etc.- would be owned and loaned out by the local community according to need ..."

At this point Andy drew breath and as he drew it, it was as if a greater breath was being exhaled somewhere else; and this breath became a cloud inside the room. The cloud moved inside the room over both the angels and slowly came to rest on the forehead of the angel Bronwyn where it formed a frown. "But that's *Communism*," she screamed as if she had been violated beneath the table as we spoke. Andy was oblivious. He had not seen the cloud begin to form, caught up as he was in the power and glory of his story as he reached its climax. He only seemed pleased that our listeners had grasped the point before he had reached it. "Yes," he

exploded, beatific and beaming. "That's it!" But when he looked down back to earth again to receive his confirmation the hearers were gone. Only I remained at the table looking longingly out the door into the now solid night where the angels had fled to escape our evil.

When I looked back to Andy his face hadn't changed. He knew they had gone but there had been something more noble in his mind that evening than there had been in mine and he was laughing. He was looking at their absence in the air in our holy kitchen and was alive and glowing and laughing, and that is how I will always remember him; glowing in the yellow light of our Queensland kitchen on the night of the angels.

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# EXPLAIN WHY YOU'RE DRIVING A CAR

LYNDON WALKER

I'm not driving a car. I sit here in the writing group not driving a car, writing an exercise that forces me to explain why I'm driving a car. This is all a bit bizarre. This is the first time I have come to one of these full of love and happiness and the response, from the men at least, has been total aggression.

Before, when I was lonely and miserable, I would come to these and everyone would be nice to me. Tonight both Nathan and Mitchell tell me they don't like what I have written. When I was unhappy they were great. We just got on with writing. But tonight it is different. Tonight the women's voices are soft and unequal and the men's are harsh and uncertain or certain with threat and we are in the deep end of the eighties and I am worried. Tonight there is a new woman here who I have not seen before. Perhaps she makes things different just by being here. Maybe we all turn into cavemen when an attractive woman walks in the room. This is terrible if it is so but I am not unaffected either. I will not pretend I am. I fantasize about her boyfriend and their life together in the new world. After all she is a new woman but she cannot drive a car. I am thinking of this having recently spent twenty-four hours driving a car. I drove up in one night and back in one day; all of it; two thousand kilometres. Twelve hours per thousand kilometres.

Tonight Lenore told me that a lesbian friend of hers told her at a tree-planting yesterday that the greenhouse effect is happening now. Not in ten years' time; and that the ultra violet radiation is already beginning to burn out eyes. We humans, who did all this, we will be all right. We will put on glasses. It's the animals, who can't protect themselves, who will go blind first. The insects, the birds, the animals all going blind. Flying into walls, falling off the edges of things, dying. The whole natural world falling apart, caving in, fucking up, now.

There, that's better. Now I'm miserable again. I'm nostalgic for the time they used to like me. Us men are so utilitarian.

- from: 'the writing group' 1989

*\* The first instalment of this intertextual novel was published in SOUTHERLY Vol 50 #2.*

i am a beast underground i come up after thirty five years of being hid i look at her wedding in my feather bed a cave in puffy swells in my soft body of hers in a dark place what do you see i see stars of miss stern what do you think there's lots of stream streaming i just follow that i flow along with what's saying she is saying me now the phantom talk of mum the ghost in my red dressing gown you don't know this one the phantom goes to wars you can't stop anything it won't be long now she is going to see me again over hills and the valley over desert and jungle until at last it reaches the deep woods and the skull cave at the lake bottom she works frantically tying the case to a rock with a dangling sleeve of the raincoat for rain then suddenly the searing stunning impact of the thin concealed charged wire she doesn't twitch she doesn't tremble she doesn't even seem to breathe she stands like a figure carved from granite if the phantom makes the slightest movement or even breathes both rifles will fire at once talk just talk i'll go there and untie her i ring her up but they say you can't talk to her now but i talk i flow along with what's saying here my mum talk with what i find she comes to me along in her red dressing gown out wool she closes with fish pins a stick in that little black things words that stick into a click but wouldn't some something not really underleaf she says everyday you must attend to me i am coming down hard i'm in bed with rails off a mine there's baubles up top to cool my head i am laying down she is sleeping away said that she couldn't for year like in a twilight time zone in between thought come she gives me cocoa we were happy drinking cocoa on blue velvet armchairs a suite she bought we were happy drinking cocoa in big mugs piping hot on blue velvet lounge suite she bought in the lounge rooms while father gets me angry why did you just buy they put me to sleep of an afternoon then they wake me up they tell me i must stick something together i must stick something so i do here i am sticking together i am attaching with glue out of bits i am making a mother she tells him i'm much younger she always makes things up i am in a cot with wire a in a hotel there's creamy walls around she said she can't sleep me ever little thinks come i have to put down she can't sleep or ever just very lightly on top of

thoughts they swim a river in a house in hilton hotel in pink rooms in  
my office hours to think in her bed in be sheets tousle tousled tangle in  
a mangle in mangel she washes having servants girl servants for  
domestic flights domestic in a plane stewardesses hand me trays and  
drinks there's nothing else i think about only her to come back to only  
you only you only only you she is abby i'm trying to find a writer her  
heart drumming abby flushed she couldn't help it abby buttoned her  
coat against the cool october air last year at this time she recalled she'd  
honestly believed she was beginning her final year as head technical  
librarian what was happening to her abbys cheeks began to burn in that  
moment with her blue eyes flashing abby looked as dangerous as she was  
beautiful i'd do anything not to break her heart yes daddy i'll be right  
home next time i try to help anyone I hope you'll spank some sense into  
me oh it was horrible just horrible abby walked through a snowstorm to  
work then anxious to the happiness she'd found to get to the happiness  
she'd found abby got up and walked quickly and proudly straight into his  
arms she said that if you'd love them only if you'd love a suitcase for  
england she sews up a honeymoon for me she was reading love notes i  
say i love my teacher but she was jealous she went to school to tell me  
that you must love me too i'd like to say that you're fine i'd like to say  
i'm going to miss you just as much as you miss me when will i see you  
again she said i was her golder golden i don't know i have a feeling that i  
shouldn't go i'm afraid let me stay please that wasn't like her to be afraid  
nothing must happen to her nothing must happen oh darling don't you  
know that it's you i don't want to leave night comes the phantom  
remains with bitter hopeless thoughts of what might have been she can't  
sleep at all she chases me around tables in my bed is mountains she is  
living on hilltops only a princess queen now in my bed is mountains oh  
montagne in white crushed linens in a lay down coat there was a mouse  
under my bed last night something scuffling scuff about biting a mouse  
gets into my room at night i yell to stop it to scare she runs out in a  
gallop her legs like horses buffalos the stampede that mouse that ate my  
mother she ate her the stampede of baffalos get out of the way kids it's a  
stampede call the police the army they broke out of the stockyards run for  
your lives gulp we'd better jump into the bushes run for your lives what a  
stupid way to die but unable to see the lead bull digs in his hoofs what  
happened to the dead eye duck officer don't know boys she seems to have  
vanished i am writing a letter to you i am writing a letter to mother those  
girls are going to learn fact from fiction if it takes all day that shows how  
much you know what gives they're still singing her praises what is the  
phantom up to at the munition dump the phantom takes a german hand  
grenade she was decorated by the croix de guerre virtuti militari she is  
writing letters to herself she is writing letters to mickey mouse missy  
mouse mickey it's a helicopter come back here with mickey gosh i am  
being kidnapped in broad daylight allright mickey goodbye and good luck

colonel doberman said something about planes cracking up when they landed she was planning to go to europe overseas she was asking should i go what do you think i am saying it's your own money anyway whump crash are you alright she says it's better not to see me you have to earn a living i am on the telephone talking while they're closing library yes but i don't understand it was just like my plane was jinxed or something explain by a car crash hm another crash i told you the ghosts don't like strangers dad blame this dad ratted floor my my that's too bad guess i better go get somethin t'break thuh lock with don't fret i'll be right back gorsh i'm sleepy say my bag looks like somebody gone through it can we leave the lantern on burning all night mickey don't be silly goofy omigosh it's disappearing right through the wall gosh it flew right through us she was going to europe i was saying goodbye too the last time we met she was waving through the window in her dressingown she was always laying down i came to get my certificate of birth didn't feel a thing except a kind of tingle there goes the ghost plane watch out mickey she wants to get away from him so she's leaving on a trading container to holland after dark have you seen a shovel around here goofy poof gulp it's gone pph ghosts don't scare me i'm gonna search for i found em loudspeakers four loudspeakers the voice came from several loudspeakers at once that's how it sounded so hollow and strange that's why i took it on so said mustn't bite yourself too much i am on the phone with her saying i was among and in between i set up four loudspeakers to speak to me she is saying that i'm naughty do you know what he did giving terrible diseases to me i'm just going to a spa for my heart away i'm not getting clothes for her either she's a naughty child she annoys me she says i was twenty six i was no longer young i never know how old she is she introduces me to mister cutlet a graduate in doctorate of economics in london but she gives him a wrong address why you do it she spoils it while i have to take him to clubs and a kindergarten a duty i'm not frighten that's why my legs shaking they make her put the water on to make a surgery in the garden and a staircase from the balcony i'll just put out a sign saying don't worry it's really nothing i'll build a staircase from the balcony if you like you can stay with us and bring men why not now that teacher didn't like you so i bring him wine i suck thump dump to put in my mouth she wasn't breast or anywhere i'm from a bottle really i'm really an orphan her mum dies a wicked stepmother takes away my drawings i wasn't even hers i was a daughter of barons they left me on her doorstep i was born an egyptian princess that's how i felt i have nothing to do with her or this she won't feed she's at hairdressers fixing her hair she is at a spa away a health resort in mountains for years that's why she's never around won't even give me key so i wait outside hours manicurists do her hands and hold them with brushes from little pots painting her nails may i kiss your hand madame may i kiss your hand she was mrs doctorowa mrs doctor she was insist she never liked me but now

she finds me interesting on our family estate in king island she is pretending always walk stalk with a stick to make me eat a feeble baby you are a witch i know i appear guilty but it was the quickest way to reach mickey dear mickey mouse what can i do she said why don't you stick around and make me eat a no good guest i have to drive around i am preparing lunch chicken soup with corn when i feel sick how can i eat when it is my opening night at the odeon she stuffed me up insisting that i while i always wanted to go away i want to go but this girl won't let mickey sure'm glad you're safe don't worry i'll rescue you but i never did you had your own things to do she puts me on a potty in night garden to carry out she said always put your bonnet on not to burn her head with sun what time to come home a plan for a day she's really good this way she plans the whole day for me just wouldn't leave my mum alone did i i'm at beach with fat man i'm all naked i'm lost girl in the bush she lets me wonder away but then she finds me you must go home immediately you must come home with me where why did you go missy mouse i didn't do that they told me they'll take me to zoo but they leave me all lonely they promised me but she wouldn't do i am waiting to go for a walk spaciren i am walking with mummy she said i was born in german territory while brother was away oh she likes to worry i will give you egg yolky a chick chick she gets me witchy i screw up just twitch boo hoo boo hoo she leans out windows to look or isn't there much really quite on the stairs they squeak the crying mother of the bride crying when she heard the news having to have all the bridesmaids dresses worked out the kindness the insight the sense of fun beside the seaside her skimpy bikini her diving prowess she was dazzling it was obvious she was having a marvellous time then they always married rich girls my father was an admiral an owner of hotels she was an opera singer then i'm not the sort of person who goes to nightclubs and music biz things i never wanted my name to appear in gossip columns i just go on my sweet way quietly a holiday that went horribly wrong a three month holiday ended in a tragedy i knew that she didn't have anything like a fifty fifty chance but i wouldn't let myself think the worst i didn't feel like her mum at all more like a girlfriend really i devoted my life to her to the exclusion of everything else she used to come in a lot pop in and have a meal sometimes and a chat real lace transformed into fine porcelain a song for gabrielle in the romantic eighteenth century tradition of authentic lace set within fine porcelain sculpture and enchanting hand painted figurine embellished with pure gold a fine porcelain figure rich in rare filigree lace the figure is extravagantly gowned gracefully adorned with accents of ruffle and ribbon there is no more sumptuous porcelain than one draped in lace delicately sheathed in porcelain and applied by hand in the tradition of artistry dating back to eighteenth century house of meissen a song for gabrielle will be crafted the notion of intertextuality i am making a collage montage a composite image

## REVIEWS

### POEMS FROM MT. MOONO Anne Kellas

Hippogriff Press, 1989, \$9.95

6 Rattle St New Town Tasmania 7008

These poems were partly written in South Africa, the poet's homeland, and partly in Tasmania, her new home-in-exile. They are at one level then a record of displacement and transition.

Anne Kellas's book is broken into three sections. It begins "in the shadow of Mr. Moono," a remote, fatherless place:

You could hurl whole  
tombs full of sounds  
at the mountain  
and it would make no difference.

These are lines that go for the power of a gothic image, lines that are sparing and emphatic in the way they group themselves as blocks of alliteration, and shape themselves according to the pauses and breath of the spoken word. It is not just the strange and gothic that inhabit Kellas's poems, but the way these large, impersonal dramas connect with the mundane elements of existence:

I am scared of knife blades  
and people who read thrillers

and ultimately the way nature and domesticity work on inner landscapes:

the land of her mind  
a blasted landscape  
resembled a moon  
so she named it Mt. Moono.

In the poem, "Night comes to me", Kellas lets loose her power as a writer who can focus on the way terror within us perceives the night:

walking on the ears of crickets  
on the pin points of dew  
it shaves the grass as it comes  
swathes the moon  
brushes away everything  
with the blood-intimacy of the dark.

Like the hob goblin stars  
in the interstices of the sky  
I hide my weakness from the dynamo in the night.

After these opening Mt. Moono poems the book moves more firmly into a contemporary South Africa, with its political and cultural complications; and along with this 'location' of the poems there is a dislocation - the poems seem to be records of insanity or breakdown. However, rather than a narrative account of events, we receive reports of perceptions that are attenuated, drained, desperately small, in lines that are taut, clipped, incoherent, and sometimes reduced to one word. Once again, Kellas' sure hand with strong images of fear and horror give these poems an authentic voice. There is a final suite of Mt. Moono poems where the poet's madness is closely tied to the political madness of living in South Africa:

The land I live in  
is mad  
the people, mad  
the police.  
A familiar kind of  
darkness rules  
in the hearts of the rulers.  
People fall from windows  
down stairwells, down  
building blocks  
- they  
try to make it  
look like lemming-madness ...

There are no windows  
in the cell  
of a dead planet.

There is a bridging section between the Mt. Moono and the Tasmania poems, a brief flurry of pieces that explore the image of the Tiger. These include "Somebody let the tigers out", a poem which heralds a new, wry note in Kellas's images of bleakness and fear with its final lines:

No one knows  
where they are  
but all the police  
are out trying to catch them  
and it's not safe any more  
to leave milk on your doorstep.

The Tasmania poems that follow are more relaxed, more ready to explore thoughts and connections, stretching lines across the page, and rooting themselves in the details of learning to live in a new country. The dead, metallic Mt. Moono is still present in the poet's inner landscape, but now she can also say, "I'm flanked by forest wet with morning rain,/and hear how mountain calls to mountain - Change!"

Anne Kellas's first book begins in the bleakness of a world that threatens to close off in death, suicide, or murder, and then strangely flowers to a new beginning in a place as odd and unlikely as Tasmania. Kellas does not so much recollect this process in the tranquil moments of writing, as give us white-hot points of experience from within a life. I am one reader who hopes that this record of personal and cultural change will continue in future books.

- Kevin Brophy

**THE SNOW IN US** David P. Reiter  
Five Island Press 1989 \$8.95  
Box 1946 Wollongong NSW 2500

It is probably not a good idea to pay too much attention to the notes on the cover of any book, let alone a book of poetry. These little meta-texts enclose the book, frame its contents as surely and anonymously as the sheets of card they are printed on. Here, on this back cover, under the gaze of a photograph of David P. Reiter, the future reader is told that *The Snow In Us* "immerses the reader in the life and culture of the Inuit, the native people of Canada's Arctic;" that this is verse of "sensitivity and perception;" that (somehow) these poems depict "life" and "entice the reader to explore boundaries at once foreign yet hauntingly familiar."

All this seems to push the work towards some notion of a universal poetic experience, as if every reader's response is the same, already determined by the shape of the poems and the things that they are 'about'. While it may well be the case that certain interpretive norms do exist within reading communities, these stock responses always seem to be run through with the deviations of "personal circumstances."

For me, and I think it is crucial here to pull away from the universalist claims of the cover notes, these poems do not present a familiar world. They do not depict anything I know, I don't understand the world they create - like a TV documentary they make world and by their description of it assert that it is so in 'life'.

They squat along a channel of blue water  
that seems a shelf of ice soon to be a floe  
in spring: a father with steady line,  
a mother with sharpened blade,  
a child wishing the myth of seal

might shatter the surface calm.

I begin to read this first poem, "Breath Channel", waiting for the bus in the afternoon heat of a Brisbane summer. In the end, the whole book, all these documentary sequences, takes me a long way from where I actually am - the language is frequently cut across by foreign rhythms, and the landscape seems impossible.

Their hands fat with sticks,  
two Inuit girls, dwarfs,  
stretch a sack between them:

"We camp," they say, glinting  
for our camera, "since summer."  
I see South in their clothes -

sandy joggers and jeans -  
and wonder about their kindling.  
"Where are there trees?" I ask.

(from: "At The River's Mouth")

- Peter Anderson

**MEMORIALS** Jeff Maynard  
False Frontier Press 1989  
Box 2361V GPO Melbourne 3001

**MARY MAGDALEN SINGS  
THE MASS IN ORDINARY TIME** Joy Walsh  
Alpha Beat Press 1989 \$10  
5110 Adam Street Montreal Quebec  
H1V 1W8 Canada

These books are very different but by the chance of being given to me at the same time to be reviewed they appear here together. The only similarities I perceive between them is that in the opinion of this reviewer both authors should have waited to publish until they had a more substantial body of work to present and that both are "theme" books. Jeff Maynard's work depicts the environment both human and physical in a run-down inner western suburb of Melbourne and Joy Walsh's takes a modern working class Mary Magdalen character through a series of "road poems" in Canada and the USA using the hip jargon of the streets. I found the Joy Walsh book to be far superior but then I repeat that it is only by artificial circumstances that they would be being compared.

Jeff Maynard's book *Memorials* stands the greatest chance of being dismissed as "slight." Its 17 printed pages contain only 8 pieces of

writing variously falling into the categories of poem, prose and that nicely indefinite category of prose poetry.

As a writer myself, with friends who are writers, I know what it's like to be told that sentences you've worked hard at are cliches but many of these are. But it is more than that; or to be really rough, less than that. It is that the writing never effectively engages the reader; never rises above a certain level. Basically I find the language so mundane I end up caring as little about this writing and its content as people do about the suburbs which are its subject.

Maynard does not make his language work hard enough. It is simply embarrassing to read boring bar scenes such as those depicted in "The Mayor of Seddon" in 1990 when all the while shining in the mind is Eliot's brilliant re-creation of such a night filled with characters we care about speaking convincing language in a poem written in 1922. If we can't do it at least as well after 67 years then we shouldn't be doing it. What's more, Eliot knew that the fundamental concerns of these people were the concerns of us all. He did not patronise his working class characters by making their inner lives drab and impoverished just because economic circumstances forced this condition on their outer lives.

One doesn't need to go back to Eliot to make the case stick. I can put any number of P.O.'s *Fitzroy* poems, writing about similar people in similar suburbs and not only see them stand their own ground but get up and take over the territory with tough real language living here and now.

A lot of the writing simply suffers from the fact that there is better writing, often better contemporary writing, around on the same subject. If you are going to attempt characterisations of Raymond Chandler detectives as Maynard does in "Albion's Postman" then you had better (even out of literary courtesy) be bloody aware of fine writing in that genre over recent years in the same city by Robert Kenny.

In "Mary Magdalen Sings The Mass in Ordinary Time" Joy Walsh presents us with the perennial enigma, Mary Magdalen: at once whore and holy, within contemporary context, with Jack Kerouac as a hero, the strange ranger as her lover and the litany of the Mass for her titles and .... brings it off! Succeeds well in producing a coherent work in the post-modernist tradition which is comfortable with (not overwhelmed by) the talismans of modern culture (like Kerouac, Eugene O'Neill, Sheena, Tina Turner, etc.) which are her reference points.

The voice in which the modern Mary speaks through all of these poems is for me the outstanding success of the book. It is wonderful. It is like a cross between Allen Ginsberg, Patti Smith, Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski looking at life through the eyes of a character in a mid-sixties Bob Dylan song. At the same time it is speaking the preoccupations of a real woman; a real woman trying to stay off the booze and coming to terms with the fact that she's been treated like shit by men for the last fifty years.

As I have said, all of this is presented within the structure of the litany of the Mass which is valid here because it works. It works because Joy Walsh is sure of herself and her deft handling of language and voice. She succeeds superbly where a less confident and competent writer would be sure to fail and fall badly into the trap and possibility for pretension set in the sophisticated biblical literary structure.

Thus the straight main titles include "Kyrie", "Gloria", "Opening Prayer", "Responsorial Psalm", "Homily", "General Intercessions" etc. but the atmosphere, humor, and the trick of creative invention are only revealed if one includes the subtitles or the first lines (which are often one and the same). We then have a list that includes:

Reverence To The Altar

(Mary Magdalen stops at the roadside novena stand)

First Reading

(Mary Magdalen dreads dagger rum)

Homily

(Mary Magdalen is not sure it's gonna work with her mother)

General Intercessions

(Mary Magdalen writes a position paper)

Silence After Communion

(Mary Magdalen finds the Strange Ranger messing around in the middle of her mid-life crisis)

The poems then proceed in their own right. All of them successful and complete. Thus the book and its central idea becomes fully realised.

I will quote particular elements within the literary tradition but warn this does not do justice to how these work within their context.

Supporting the power of the voice in the book is the power of the narrative. The narrative is at once old and vital in its modern setting. The major engine supplying power to this narrative is the tension set up between Mary Magdalen and other characters and those forces with which she continually wrestles.

These tensions are introduced with the first poem and touch on the early patterns of life, hinting at an incestuous relationship with the father. In this first poem:

Mary Magdalen wanted to talk

To her Dad, but couldn't

With the other woman around

So she and her Dad

Sat on the porch a lot

And swung on the glider

They had to make sure

They didn't look like they were

Getting along all that well  
So it was strained

.....

But it was hard  
To get him alone  
Because the other woman  
Stuck to him like glue

After all  
she knew  
what to expect

Walsh writes with convincing intensity so that the reader feels the experience even when the language is understated.

It is not just problems of the purely personal on which Walsh is so good. In "General Intercessions" she provides a chilling catalogue of facts on nuclear power plants.

Her feminism is not as fully realised as say Adrienne Rich or as anti-male as Gig Ryan but its power is often equal to both these writers:

She goes for men who don't want her  
So that she can go through the world  
An open gash bleeding like raw hamburger  
Through fur

("Prayer Before Communion")

Echoes of Plath are unmistakable but the determination not to make the mistakes Plath made, is still more unmistakable. Walsh's book demands more and gives more than many contemporary efforts. I urge you to read it.

- Lyndon Walker

**ON THE MENU** Graham Rowlands

Friendly Street Poets 1989

PO Box 79 Unley SA 5061

I'm an unabashed fan of Graham Rowland's poetry. For me he's one of a few poets I turn to first, when I see their names in the contents page of a new magazine or anthology.

What draws me to his work is the subject matter. It's usually on a contemporary event, as in this book - the death of Mrs. Gandhi, the Bicentenary, Bob Hawke, or taking a look at some icons - Ned Kelly, Anzac Day, Federation, and so on. All of these in Graham Rowlands' usual style of sarcasm, with, mockery, anger.

These aspects are the bulk of Graham Rowlands' poems - poems political (also the title of one of his eight books), but there are other

types - wayward and idiosyncratic and humorous and playful poems. For instance, "Luke's Lost Penis", "All About Periods", "Ministerial Statement on Odontology", to name a few.

The thing about Graham Rowlands' poetry is that he's relevant. It's not just a contemporary relevance though. Even in a hundred years, when Bob Hawke, Ronald Reagan, Gaddafi, Mrs. Gandhi and others are all forgotten, the sting of the words and the point of them will be there for other situations:

Rear-gunning  
my aim's not shit hot  
but my front gun's a laser  
lined up in a Cyclops' eye.  
It's the only thing left  
men can do better than women

except having soldiers.

(from, "Reagan vs. Gaddafi")

- Robert Habost

LA MAMA POETICA edited by Mal Morgan  
Melbourne University Press 1990 \$19.95

One of the poems I've kept returning to after a couple of readings of this generous poetry anthology is Bev Roberts' "Ms Bee Coming Home From Carlton". It describes Ms Bee coming home in an inebriated state from the Albion Hotel in a taxi.

I cannot help but be attached to the idea that this poem is something of a metaphor for the book and more particularly the poetry readings from which it derived at the venue called La Mama Poetica.

Coincidentally, La Mama Poetica, as in the above mentioned poem is located in Carlton, Melbourne, and the Albion Hotel is in close proximity to it. I should highlight, however, that the poems are not necessarily Melbournian. although there is a great image of Melbourne in "Ms Bee ..." - "Melbourne moves past the windows/in a brutal collage/of toppling buildings and/the bunched fists of trees,/glittering with tram sparks."

This poem like the others, simply happen to be a sampling of 5 years worth of poetry readings at La Mama Poetica. In this respect the anthology is similar the the excellent *Friendly Street Poetry Reader* where poetry readings have regularly occurred in the Box Factory since the mid 1970's and selections regularly anthologised.

In this anthology the origins, preoccupations, occupations and ages of the poets vary enormously. One slight quibble is that of the 87 poets represented only 36 are female.

You will find a wealth of poems by poets known and unknown and in an order that I could not define, and then later found myself unconcerned with. My own tendency in reading anthologies is to dive in to the middle of the book somewhere to some poet, or poem I know, and then to start reading backwards, and then to leap forward sixty pages, or to be caught by the unusual name of some poem, and then so read swallowing up poems, and sometimes diving to the back for the informative notes on contributors.

Mal Morgan the editor, however, suggests that there is an order to the selection, "...it unwinds in a sequence where I feel some poets need to be read one after the other, then a pause, a breath taken, something mild and dreamy, or a complete contrast - a shout in the street, where something sharp enters and something soft succumbs. Just like an evening at *La Mama Poetica!*" (from the introduction).

This is a highly stimulating collection. You will find yourself on reading it becoming agitated and enlivened. The writers among you taking up pen and waiting for these moments on paper.

*La Mama Poetica*, like Ms Bee's arrival home will have you, "shaping a smile, arriving in triumph" at the joy of poetry.

- Robert Habost

#### THE PARTIALITY OF HARBOURS Manfred Jurgensen

Paperback Press, 1989, hardback, \$35.00

Distributor : Tower Books, PO Box 213, Brookvale NSW 2100

Manfred Jurgensen's book is entered via two quotes, one from Vincent Buckley and one from Pablo Neruda. The quotations affirm the importance of remembering everything, and the importance of the passion that "inheres in all substance." There is this double element of a mercilessly observing memory and a commitment to passion present in this poetry. In the first poem of the book, "beirut, mon amour", we read:

... the rebels occupy the roads as we are on our way  
to witness yet another execution. we trade in passwords, nursing  
a chance communicate. victories turn to defeats, bodies in a  
state of siege. screams are hoisted to salute a prisoner's release.  
the night's survivors plead in sobs of gratitude, then get up  
to fetch the morning's milk.

Many of the poems are written not in lines, but with gaps that indicate their rhythmic building blocks. For me, this gave Jurgensen's poems an urgent, inward voice. They are not so much concerned to appear as poems as to breathe and speak their words to the reader. The poems are often built up with phrases that string metaphors together until any attempt at paraphrase becomes a complex nonsense and the reader

must submit to the force of images that can be surreal, achingly beautiful, passionate, and memorable:

dreams descend to beds,  
the world breaks open, shelled voices hum around deserted  
honeycombs,  
cathedrals drown, skin sails on blood, bone trees are dancing  
with their roots. the soulscape of the damned is painted by the brush  
of anonymity, the spare parts of eternal life. immortality ceases  
to be a metaphor, it triumphs in theatres of human engineering.  
there is no pact. (from "the operation")

There are more urbane moments, such as the poem that recalls an unexpected meeting in Florence. In this poem the poet is intent on remembering everything, including the passion. It is the remembered details that tell the reader so much in this poem:

he smoked with pimpish grace, i looked away. we walked  
among the crowd, driven by its aim. entering the cloister of

san lorenzo, he showed me how to steal from the tourists. i tried to  
understand how someone so physical could make things disappear.

While reading this book I have not wanted to review it because it is a book to read and read again, to live with until favourite poems become old friends, and images are evaluated for their strength as companions over years. I have read many of the poems several times, and I am putting the book away now thinking I will return to it and read a number of these poems again.

- Kevin Brophy

## THE HARBOUR BREATHES

a collaboration by Anna Couani and Peter Lyssiotis  
Sea Cruise & Masterthief, 1989, paperback, \$17.95  
28 Queen St, Glebe, NSW 2037

This is a stunning book. The photographs prepared by Peter Lyssiotis are expertly reproduced on art paper while Anna Couani's text weaves its own patterns of association, passion, and reflection between them.

With such a book there can be a tendency to look for the way the text and photographs illustrate each other, but here Couani and Lyssiotis exist independently, creating their own interest and impact while each of them leaves us looking at the modern city, and Sydney in particular with new eyes. In *The Artificial Hill* Couani writes: "From the artificial hill in Moore Park, the hard green, the lack of trees. The eeriness at night.

Smoke and steam drifting around the brewery across the big Resch's sign. The endless traffic. In the day the groups of mounted police riding along the fence on their way to Centennial Park. The tidiness is eerie. This chronic orderliness .... We were walking along the edge of Moore Park on the footpath and a football spectator ran up and pushed him onto the road almost into the path of a car because he had long hair. This was normal." These are the opening and closing observations of this piece, and the photograph that accompanies this piece reveals a city skyline seen from the edge of the world where the sea pours over into chaos.

Coming at the end of a decade this book presents us with a vision and mood that takes us out of the eighties, and looks back at the way we have come. While anti-war images redolent of the peace movement of the sixties and seventies survive (a soldier in battledress with the face of a skeleton) there is a step towards a cooler, more formal and darkly humorous vision of protest in the couch foregrounded against a mushrooming explosion in a lounge room. There are hints of another way of seeing in the white geese rising from a filthy city lane. Where the city is presented in these photos, it is the rectangles of high rise buildings we see set against natural formations that seem to act as prophetic counter-balances to a world that has become a universe of real estate.

As in her other work, Couani brings a personal vision to her political stance, and returns in her writing again and again to questions of passion. Couani creates and maintains a voice that is strong and convincing, a voice capable of pointing out to us how the eighties might have felt:

stick around and things change with you as a constant

this itchy, sticky feeling of waiting

not daring to hope for something reasonable

maybe the USA will bomb Europe

and things will get really bad

but it'll be seen like a relief

at last something's happened

to take our minds off our own situation

this horrible manoeuvring towards the Right

(from "The Eye")

- Kevin Brophy

**BOW TIE & TAILS** - Geoff Goodfellow; Wakefield Press: 43 Wakefield St Kent Town SA 5067; 1989; 83pp. \$12.

Some of the world's best batsmen are said to have "a great eye"; Geoff Goodfellow proves he has "a great ear". He rarely appears in his poems as anything but an ear - listening to stories by down-trodden: people who have made their second homes in bars, or behind prison bars. Goodfellow chronicles their anecdotes, as well as their idiosyncratic use of language.

His style is free-form narrative, the poems are well-crafted & accessible. He has a clear, sharp mind & likes to incorporate clever word-plays. He uses sustained metaphor. His poems pack a mean punch & are often spiced with bleak humour. One of the best poems is "Time After Time", dedicated to poet/bank robber, Allan Eric Martin.

i remember playing Trivial Pursuit  
six months ago & asking him  
    *what does a notaphile collect?*

& he looked blank  
    then shook his head  
& i flipped the card & grinned  
    then said     *bank notes*

Goodfellow writes for the disadvantaged & underprivileged & they are the ones buying his books, because they can associate with his observations & insights. Others, who may feel apprehensive about coming into contact with the characters who stalk thru this book, can observe them second-hand.

Goodfellow's poetry is vivid, forceful & to the point. The lines are often loaded, as in this excerpt about a woman married three times:

& she looked on while friends  
got diamond rings  
    & learned to hide when she got  
black ones

In *Tailor Made* a lout propositions the barmaid by saying that he'd love to get into her pants, to which she responds:

*i'm sorry but i've got  
one cunt in there already  
i DON'T need another*

The poems are like mini-stories, telling much in a few words. Goodfellow explores family life, prison life & street life, all in his own curt manner. Not everybody will enjoy his vision of Australia or his vision of poetry - but who cares? Australia needs more poets like Geoff Goodfellow - poets who are prepared to take poetry back to the people, where it once belonged.

**Myron Lysenko**

**THE FERRARA POEMS** - Ken Bolton & John Jenkins; The Experimental Art Foundation: PO Box 21 Nth Adelaide SA 5006; 1989. \$10. 181pp.

The first collaboration by these two poetic wits, *Airborne Dogs*, was a sell-out success, even tho it received few reviews (see GDS#9). This time they have given us a verse novel, expanding upon one of the poems from their previous book.

This is a very readable book about a group of youngish people holidaying in Northern Italy. It is full of quirky characters - Karl, part German part Australian, owns a chain of gift shops; Giselle is a tour guide, bored with her job, but still enjoying it. Greg is from Sydney on his first O/S trip; & Roberto owns a quarry which he is trying to sell. These four spend their time talking, drinking, dancing & tripping over new friends. They meander thru their holidays & nothing much seems to happen, except for the obligatory holiday romance. But the writers hint at mysteries & menace to keep the reader interested.

The writing is clear, sharp & concise; nothing is ever examined in great detail - rather we get snippets, anecdotes & quick summaries. This ensures that the pace never slows; the reader is led down many paths, never having time to take in the detail of the scenery as the story moves on, often breaking off in cheeky, punning lines of dialogue.

*The Ferrara Poems* captures the unreality & hedonism of holidays. It is set in Italy, but could well be anywhere. As a lighthearted book it's a success & is a welcome addition to the small band of verse novels in Australia.

Myron Lysenko

## NOTES ON BOOKS RECEIVED

**BAKOWSKI**, Peter; *thunder road, thunder heart*; Nosukumo: GPO Box 994-H Melbourne 3001; \$7 post free; 1988.

A beautifully produced chapbook by much-travelled & widely published poet, written with pure passion & owing a debt to the Beat Poets. It explores addictions to wandering, loneliness & the ocean - all done with great energy & perfectly picked words.

**DARGAVILLE**, Michael; *Statistic For The Plague; & 50 Poems*; Outlaw Press: POB 671 Belconnen ACT 2616; \$3 each; 89/90.

Political, didactic, stream-of-consciousness poems full of fear, panic & anger. Dargaville is prolific & has published two handfulls of chapbooks during the 80's. Needs a good editor to produce a Selected Works.

**KAVANAGH**, Paul (ed); *Pictures From An Exhibition*; Uni of Newcastle: Newcastle Uni NSW 2308; 1989. \$12.

An anthology selected from entries to the Mattara Poetry Prize; including 13 sonnets by winner John Bennett, the highly commended Martin Johnston & Under 25 winner Gabrielle Daviau. Also: Jill Jones, Dorothy Porter, Jan Owen & more.

**LAWRENCE**, Anthony; *Dreaming In Stone*; Angus & Robertson; 72pp. \$14.95, 1989.

At 16, Lawrence was driving his mother mad with his obsession with poetry so she packed him off to attend workshops in Sydney conducted by Robert Adamson. She has been rewarded with this earnest, slightly mystical first book - packed with references to death, poetry & wildlife. A promising debut.

MANN, Chris; *Tuesday*; Collective Effort Press:GPO Box 2430V Mdhoume 3001; 1989; unpriced, unpagged.

More enigmatic words from Mann - this tiny publication reads like a rave on language, ideas & meanings. Trouble is, I don't know what he means, but I'm sure he means well. It's brave new writing deserving brave new readers.

**MILLER**, Mark; *Conversing With Stones*; Five Islands Press: POB 1946 Wollongong NSW 2500; 64pp. \$8.95; 1989.

The style is free-form observation; the subject is usually the surrounding country-side; the language is precise; the tone is calm yet sad. Life in this book is slow & mannered & punctuated by death. The title is apt - there's nobody to talk with.

**SMEATON**, Ken (ed); *Night Club Poetry*; Street Poetry Lab: 2/24 Chomley St Prahran 3181; 61pp & cassette; \$12, 1989.

Text & audio released in conjunction with the 89 Fringe Festival in Melbourne. Projectile poetry at its best! Includes seasoned poets Beach, Boulton, Duke, Roberts, Stoneking as well as 80's newcomers Goodfellow, Hall, Henry, Loughrey, Scuffins & Williams. Exciting, vibrant & committed. A video will be released soon.

**Myron Lysenko**

## LITERARY MAGAZINES

During a decade which did much to publicize the established writer, many new writers found an increasing number of editors willing to publish their first works in a literary magazine. With a list of over 50 to choose from, it was easy for writers to try the editors in turn until eventually the **work** was accepted.

Mags came & went quickly; some lasted only a few issues, while others managed to struggle on bravely despite financial problems. The saddest losses include Aspect, Big Bang, Compass, inprint, Meuse, Ash, Fling!, Image, Migrant 7, "r" & the most influential mag of the decade - 925 which lasted 5 years & 20 issues.

There wasn't much time to grieve over dead mags, because new ones were born to replace them. These include Otis Rush, The Small Times, Redoubt, The Phoenix Review, Prints, Blast, Fine Line, Outrider, Scarp, Verandah, Brave New Word, Island, Scripsi & Bruce Pascoe's highly successful Australian Short Stories.

Of the bigger mags, all survived the decade as they continued to receive funding from institutions & Funding Bodies. They remain: Overland, Meanjin, Southerly, Westerly, Quadrant.

It will be interesting to see what happens to the lit mags during the 90's. Will they procreate or slowly die off as printing & distribution costs escalate? If the current Writing Boom continues, the mags will survive; if the Writing Boom turns into a Reading Boom, the mags may even prosper. Here are a few short notes on some of the mags.

**OTIS RUSH #4** POB 21 Nth Adelaide 5006; \$28x4. Edited by Ken Bolton, all the work is contemporary, innovative & beautifully laid out. Highlight is Jenny Boulton's long, extremely sad & exploratory *Lies*. Offsetting Boulton's pathos is a zany Ken Chau/ Michael Clarke collaboration *Javed Double Century*. Rae Sexton translates several poems by Alain Bosquet & newcomers Moira Fahy & Felix Hill impress. The issue closes with articles on the art scene in Adelaide, Melbourne & Sydney.

**FINE LINE #5** POB 274 Nth Carlton 3054; \$14x2. Edited by Helen Garlick & Bev Roberts. This issue contains more poetry, with significant contributions from Diane Fahey, Barbara Giles, Javant Biarujia, Mal Morgan & Graham Rowlands. Barry Dickins is at his hilarious best with a story about the Reservoir Baptist Tennis Club; Anna Bianke's tension-laden *Spoilers* is remarkably evocative; Janette Turner Hospital's *The Chameleon Condition* is a comic put-down of the timid nature of (some) men. Dinny O'Heam provides a celebratory round-up of the best of the 1989 novels in which he rightly attacks pretentious reviewers who are confused about the healthy state of Australian Writing. This magazine has improved since its rather shaky start & is one of the few to publish more women than men.

**MATTOID #34** School Of Humanities, Deakin Uni Vic 3217. Has come a long way since its humble beginnings in the middle 1970's & is now one of the best value mags around. Jean Thornton provides the best of the poetry with *Hospital Room-Mate*, about an ugly husband who puts his wife in hospital to beautify herself. Of the prose, Michael Rawdon's black comedy of a modern gay Bonnie & Clyde team is a delight; Jeri Kroll explores two blood donors shyly courting each other; & Carolyn Bell contrasts women in a restaurant in a poignant story of sad relationships. Also contains an interview with an arrogant John Forbes who says that 90% of poetry everywhere is terrible, & to prove his point gives the reader 6 of his own poems to digest.

**EDITIONS #1-5** POB 1558 Potts Point NSW 2011; \$25x1 l.

A 36 page mag similar in size to the late *Age Monthly Review*. Features book reviews, interviews, articles, a national calendar of literary events & a discerning column by Mark Roberts reviewing lit mags & small press publications. A welcome mag which is perceptive & informative, without being smarmy.

**REDOUBT #6 & 7/8** POB 1 Belconnen ACT 2616 \$16x4. Edited by David Reiter. #6 has funny, clever prose writer Leah Nischler writing about the value of daydreams; while poet Timoshenko Aslanides covers the mysterious death of a former Prime Minister. Double Issue 7/8 is dedicated to "new directions, new art" & contains 26 men & 12 women; which is surely not indicative of the current state of new writing. The good thing about this mag is that it's prepared to publish long poems -

unfortunately some of the first readers on the editorial staff (which is comprised of students) frequently veto many of the better contributions

**SCARP #14**, POB 1144 Wollongong NSW 2500; \$10x2. Edited by Ron Pretty & coming out of Wollongong Uni, *Scarp* has a new desktop publishing format which looks great. Susan Hampton, Ruth Thompson, Bill Fewer, Barbara Wels, Margaret Curtis & Peter Lugg provided the material in this issue which sparked & rejuvenated my reading.

**HATBOX #1** POB 336 MILLER NSW 2168; \$15X4. Edited by David Zarate, this issue was funded by selling chocolates! The highlight is a rambling interview with Dorothy Porter who says that poetry is about to make a comeback, as long as poets don't insist on writing for other poets; later Porter says "one of the most ludicrous anomalies is that far more poetry is written than read" & she urges poets to read more in order to discover poetry's possibilities. This mag is an interesting one to keep an eye on - the editor is open to traditional & experimental work. Sean Peters, Peter Skrzynecki & Zarate provide the best creative bits.

**WEBBERS #1**, 15 McKillop St Melbourne 3000; \$10x2. Webbers Books was a favourite shop of mine for years; I'd go in there to look at & buy the latest in lit mags. Last year they stopped stocking them, then in Spring brought out their own, run by an editorial board of 5 men. The first issue has prose, poetry & 4 reviews of expensive books. The editors describe the mag as "intelligent without being esoteric, thought provoking without being pretentious." They forgot to say it's conservative. Best of the work comes from Kevin Morgan, Rosanne Musu & Anthony Lawrence.

**THE PHOENIX REVIEW #4**, GPOB 4 Canberra ACT 2601; \$20x3. Edited by David Brooks. First published in the summer of '86 & appears irregularly, but is often worth the wait. This issue has work by Sara Dowse, AD Hope, Chris Mansell, Kay Waters & Kate Llewellyn.

**OUTRIDER Vol 6 #1**, POB 210 Indooroopilly QLD 4068; \$15x2. One of the best lit mags to come out of the 80's, it's just got bigger & better. Seems multicultural at its roots & Australian in its outlook - a great mix! Contains a novella by Walter Kaufmann titled *Death In Freemantle*; as well as work by Michael Wilding, Antigone Kefala, Rosa Safransky, Alex Skovron & Maria Lewitt. Edited by Manfred Jurgensen.

**KANGAROO #10**, POB AU129 Uni Of New England NSW 2351; edited by James Vicars & Gregory Shortis. Free on request, Print run 9,000. This is an annual literary supplement from the Uni of New England. Lots of poetry, news on poetry, reviews & gossip & articles. Began in 1979 & is concerned with providing more space to newer, younger poets as well as the more established ones. I loved the poetry of Catherine Bateson, Liz Hall, Michael Sharkey & Jules Leigh Koch. All poets should get a copy of this mag, & all you have to do is write to the editors & ask for one. Tell them I sent you.

**Myron Lysenko**

# GOING DOWN SWINGING

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## POETRY, PROSE, REVIEWS & GRAPHICS FROM:

Peter Anderson Warwick Anderson Mary Anne Baartz Peter Bakowski Catherine Bateson Eric Beach Kevin Brophy Mark Brophy Grant Caldwell Geoff Campbell Cerebral Shorts Mary Dadswell Jas H. Duke M.A.C. Farrant Bill Fewer Archimede Fusillo Jodi Gallagher Mike Greenacre Robert Habost Liz Hall Kris Hemensley Kristin Henry Giles Hugo Alan Jefferies Catherine Johnstone Vince Jones Aileen Kelly Robert Kenter Jules Leigh Koch Myron Lysenko Peter Lyssiotis Chris Mansell Allan Eric Martin Gillian Mears Jane Messer Liz Murphy Cheryl Paul Robert Raymer Tom Reid David P. Reiter Bev Roberts Graham Rowlands Kristopher Saknussem Gail Schilke Polly Seddon Alex Selenitsch Pete Spence Thalia Tom The Street Poet Erica Wagner Lyndon Walker Ania Walwicz Barbara Wels T.A. Whitebeach Les Wicks

## INTERVIEWS:

**GEOFF GOODFELLOW  
GERALD MURNANE  
BEV ROBERTS**

## CONTRIBUTIONS :

The Editors  
PO Box 64  
Coburg  
Australia 3058

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