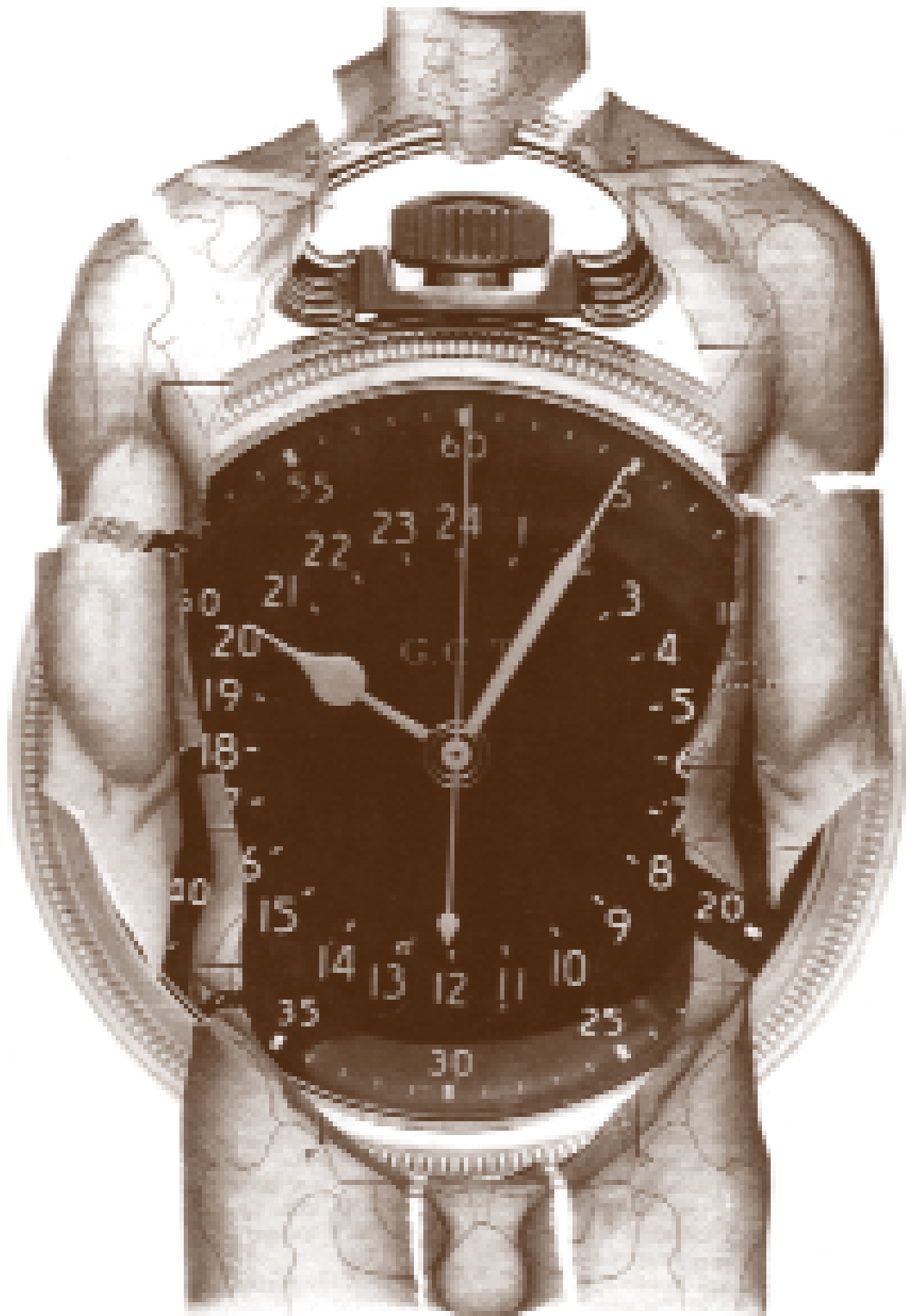


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cordite

Poetry and Poetics Review



Denis Mizzi, Untitled.

\$5

Adam Aitken interviews **Martin Harrison**

Kevin Hart on **Experience and Transcendence**
and the poetry of **Tomas Tranströmer**

Simon Patton on **Jennifer Compton's hammer!**

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Editors

Adrian Wiggins, Margie Cronin & Jennie Kremmer

Review Editors Margie Cronin & Dominic Fitzsimmons

Interview Editor Bruce Williams

Performance Editor Phil Norton

Picture Editor Sue Bower

Managing Editor Adrian Wiggins

Associate Editor Britta Deuschl

Founding Editors Peter Minter & Adrian Wiggins

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The Editors
CORDITE
PO Box A273
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The aerial view . . .

Adam Aitken interviews Martin Harrison

Martin Harrison's latest book is *KANGAROO FARM*, released by Paperbark Press in mid-1998. He speaks here with Adam Aitken about his work...

AA How has your work in radio influenced your thinking in poetry?

MH I've always been interested in electronic media and I also realised early on that I would work in radio—it has all sorts of connections in my life to do with childhood; radio is often a childhood experience for people. Your love of things starts there. Also because I feel that a lot of writing is just not for the page. Writing is something that goes on in film and television, and other forms of electronic media as well. It's part of the environment I live in.

AA You seem to use images in a linear way, as TV would.

MH Yes. I am trying to write poetry that lives in the same world as watching TV, listening to radio and watching movies. And I've been thinking a lot about what the poetic image means these days—the classic Horatian definition of *pictoria poesis* has to be rethought from generation to generation. I'm trying to make my work coexist with contemporary ways of perception. I'm interested in the kind of detail that the camera can provide that the writer can be intimate with. If you take a room or a scene or a person there is something about the way those images cover the object, and something about the lingering attention you can give to what's produced there. It defines a contemporary sensibility. I like that kind of attentiveness.

AA People think that the way TV and radio influence poetry is a very contemporary phenomenon but in fact in your work you owe a lot to Roland Robinson's aesthetic. He says "the thing is to keep moving". I'm thinking of your poem 'Moon Gazing in Sorrento Dusk'. You call the moon a "break-through moon", "moon of eternal knowledge", and you also say that "everything about it was the opposite of how I felt". How are these ideas sourced in Roland Robinson's poetry?

MH I wanted to write an elegy for Roland. He published some of my first poems, I admired his work and I enormously liked him. He was one of those great generous human beings basically. A man of incredible memory and resource. He was someone who in a subtle way changed your mind about the

nature of local experience. In the poem I wanted to bring out the aural and the hearing basis of Robinson's own work. I regret never having managed to record him, do what we're doing and record his conversation. He would move from talking into poetry and poetry into talking. He spent a lot of time travelling up and down New South Wales—the south coast and north coast and some of the inland areas—during and after the war, travelling and meeting mainly local Aboriginal people and writing down their stories.

AA There's a sense that in your poetry the "I"—the poet—is on a pilgrimage through various landscapes—a pastoral surface—but not in the way David Campbell writes pastoral. What's your sense of writing the Australian landscape as a certain unravelling of myths rather than a reinforcement of, say, the country-city divide?

MH That dialectic has worn itself out. I'm not denying that there are regional differences in Australia, city Australians underestimate that. City-based Australians have very little understanding of what the place looks like from some of the bush areas. But I agree I'm not interested in arguing that the country is a kind of idyllic space. I'm interested in talking about the country as no less a technological invention than urban space. It's an aspect that's constantly underestimated. Its importance is not understood. It seems to me that in this country you have *got* to have a many-levelled sense of place. I know this can be very troublesome, because memory and attachment is many levelled but not in the sense that there be several

different stories running side by side. I mean your attachment to a house or a room or a view is yours and it resonates in a thousand different ways. But that is a little different form what I'm saying, which is that you have got somehow to have this double vision of spaces and places. They do have multiple histories—they have Aboriginal histories, early settler histories, contemporary histories and so on. You've somehow got to keep those sides of things together. And so I try to keep that possibility open in the poems.

You mentioned the elegy to Roland Robinson. That is one of the reasons why the moon became important in that

poem. I was trying to tell a version of the moon. It is in some ways an aboriginal story. I'm trying to have two moons in that story—the moon of Diana and the reincarnational moon of many—not all—but many Aboriginal stories of the moon.



Gig Ryan

Rameses

Pillar after pillar towers my name.
Not all of these could express the life I feel
flash through me.
My ideas span the earth

but now tours litter at my feet
folding their waxy guides.

Here, I watch life fall apart in front of me
as we hurtle towards death.
I hope you'll last
but every monument freezes.

◆

My Anatolian agent writes to complain
of my negative review.
Words cut me to the bone,

I wear what I wore to your wedding
but then the day glittered in sunlight.

Tomorrow I'm reading out loud
in services to hedonism.
I write my plaque on the spongy world
and hail the puny days.

joanne burns

shelf life

from 'skim reading'

in the churning waters of the auburn municipal pool a boy is swimming like chairman mao in cheap goggle. mickey mouse donates his top hat to a rock at lourdes. awaiting instruction in the art of patient multiplication a moth prostrates itself at the foot of a fleamarket buddha. lisa simpson spins the globe on her thumb as she plans her trip up to road to oxiana with robert byron. from the comforts of their hot air balloon babar and queen celeste wave to the blue of the ocean and promise to remember its birthday. somewhere between miami and bognor regis daisy duck is preparing yak butter tea. this is a story of one eye among many. dust finds its own level.

John Ashbery

The Pathetic Fallacy

A cautionary mister,
the thaumaturge poked holes in my trope.
I said what are you doing that for.
His theorem wasn't too complicated,

just complicated enough. In brief,
this was it. The governor should peel
no more shadow apples, and about teatime
it was as if the lemon of Descartes
had risen to full prominence on the opulent skyline.

There were children in drawers, and others trying to shovel them out.
In a word, shopping had never been so tenuous,

but it seems we had let the cat out of the bag, in spurts.
Often, from that balcony
I'd interrogate the jutting profile of night
for what few psalms or coins it might
in other circumstances have been tempted to shower down
on the feeble heathen oppressor, and my wife.

Always you get the same bedizened answer back.
It was like something else, or it wasn't,
and if it wasn't going to be as much, why,
it might as well be less, for all anyone'd care.
And the ditches brought it home dramatically
to the horizon, socked the airport in.

We, we are only mad clouds,
a dauphin's reach from civilisation,
with its perfumed citadels, its quotas. What did that
mean you were going to do to *me*?
Why, in another land and time we'd be situated, separate
from each other and the ooze of life. But here, within
the palisade of brambles it only comes often enough to what
can be sloughed off quickly, with the least amount of fuss.
For the ebony cage claims its constituents

as all were going away, thankful the affair had ended.

CORDIE

Adam Aitken and Martin Harrison...

I do not think that I can write for everyone. I don't believe in the notion of "the core" or writing of the core of the country or a sense of the land. I am trying to writing a poetry which is very much that of the person I am—an essentially European Australian. But I am trying to write a poetry where anyone—particular indigenious Australians—could actually read that work and not feel that they are reading is colonising work. And that might be one of the differences between much of the pastoral poetry that I've read in the past that I admire, and what I think I'm trying to do in *THE KANGAROO FARM*.



AA I'd like to talk about your Version of A.D. Hope's 'Australia'. You've re-written Hope, critiqued Hope, but also there's a sympathy with Hope's poem.

MH I'm a great admirer of the poem. It's one of the most politically expert poems anyone's written. But clearly it's a poem that from a contemporary viewpoint looks like a poem by someone who is still standing in a virtual space, mapping the country externally, and the

whole trope of the poem is about going "over there" to this foreign space and then being gladly able to return. But you can ask where exactly does Hope return to? He returns to an imaginary philosophical space. This other, this third country, neither here nor there. My poem is not just a parody of the poem but I'm trying to re-situate it. I literalised it. I put myself into the plane as a sort of intellectual art critic flying out, thinking about the abstract effect of landscape beneath you, and wondering if you can look at natural form in Australia with a traditional realist eye—whether it will actually ever add up.

AA The 'Australia' poem is definitely an aerial view. You pay a debt to the sixties painters. In the poem 'Rice Fields Near Griffith' you take a ground-level view but the aerial view is an Aboriginal view of landscape which you were playing with.

MH Yes. In fact my own travels in areas where the antipodean painters travelled gave me a completely different sense of the land. And I became puzzled as to why they decided to get in the air to look at it. It took me a while to realise that their way of looking at the land was as artificial as anything else and is influenced by international trends in flat surface painting and in abstraction as it is by anything you can encounter.

AA Back to the 'Australia' poem for a moment: there you write "a realist wouldn't have it that way" which puzzled me because your poems are chock full of literal detail, but you wouldn't call yourself a realist.

MH No, I wouldn't. The poem is written to Robert Gray, who would call himself someone who was interested in the object, and in a certain kind of realism. I was saying look there is so much that occurs up front that seems not to fit any of these categories. You have to find the most bizarre and extraordinary ways of talking about what is literally going on in front of your eyes. I talk about it as the "odd perspective of 20th century travel". I'm not saying that this way of looking at things is better or worse

but it has to be acknowledged. I always have a problem where the “obvious features” are left out. Like the way we see things from a moving vantage point—like the fact that we have this way of looking that lingers over detail, but at the same time is extremely rapid. Other forms of moving image like TV and film do actually influence our perception. We don’t see the world in the same way as people who live in a primarily painterly or static print image culture. There is also the question of accuracy to what is there in front of you, to movement space relationships between small and large in this sort of country which occurs nowhere else. It’s totally specific to itself. Everywhere is literally different and you have learn to look at things.

AA Your poems seem to revel in the facts of the place—especially the dryness of the country which Australian poets find difficult to do, as they’ve idealised a certain European ideal of the land. In the ‘Icons’ series of poems especially the poem ‘Prodigal Son’, a farmer comes back to see the land in a state of decay, and you finish the poem by concluding “unblinded he saw the place again”.

MH Some years ago I felt that the state of the country began to worry me enormously. In the poem it was the given of being able to see again for the first time—not as something different, but as something fresh. It’s a sense of things renewed. It doesn’t have to be about things in nature.

AA In the fourth poem of that series ‘Portrait of True Republican’, “True” is used in an ironic way, and the voice seemed nostalgic to me; the poem’s not advocating anything as modern as a republic in Australia.

MH The word “True” is both ironic and not; obviously it doesn’t fit the bill as a republican poem. It’s interesting how few republican poems have been written in spite of all the talk of a republic. My republican poem is about the nature of memory and how memories are what you grow from and they are what mark a particular path in life, they are what you grow from and also what you grow into. So whatever a republic is going to be about it is going to be based on a genuine openness to our memories. It’s not going to be about inventing an idyllic republican Australia, but about what we treasure at a personal level. It’s about the memory that is necessary for a republic.

AA The original title of the book was *The Bestiary*. I remember hearing you reading one of your “animal poems”—I especially remember ‘The Platypus’. As you introduced that poem you mentioned *The Bestiary* as a possible title.

MH *The Bestiary* was originally the title for a sequence of poems, not the whole book—but I decided that I did not want a title poem.

AA Why was that?

MH I wanted the whole book to add up to the title of *THE KANGAROO FARM*.

AA ‘The Platypus’ is a very important poem in this book. The platypus is that quintessentially Australian animal adapted to its environment. You say “The platypus combines worlds in its metaphor of doing several things as well.” I saw this an icon of your poetry—it’s well adapted to different environments: it’s clever, it’s a hybrid as well!

MH Yes, that is what I’m interested in—that ability to cross media and to be a composite, but also an animal that is extremely lithe and extraordinarily acrobatic and elegant. In that poem I make a rude comment about postmod-

Andy Kissane

On the Highway

after Dorothea Lange

The road takes your eye.
 Dave stands in front of me
 on the loose gravel, his gaze locked
 on the bitumen, following the curve
 past the last tree to the haze of hills
 in the distance. His arm is extended,
 ready, prepared to make a supplicating arc
 whenever a car approaches. There’s no sign
 of a car. There haven’t been any cars
 for fifteen minutes and the last one
 was going in the wrong direction, back
 to Arizona, back towards our abandoned car,
 back to the old farm, the sweeping furrows
 ploughed right up to the verandah by now,
 the vegetable garden and chicken coop gone,
 replaced by furrows as far as the eye
 can see, as far as a tractor, that bright
 new toy of the bank, can make them.
 It’s hot. The sun is burning Dave’s neck,
 burning up through the leather soles
 of his lace-up, pointy-toed white shoes -
 his favourite shoes—not the sort of
 sensible shoes you’d wear on a country road
 in the middle of August 1936. At least
 I’m resting, sitting on our suitcase,
 my girl asleep on my lap, her hot breath
 gluing my dress to my skin. My son squats
 beside me, feet bare, cap tilted, his hand
 under his chin, musing, supporting his father
 who is still gazing down the road in search
 of a lift. Dave says there’s supposed to be work
 around Bakersfield—grapes, more cotton,
 oranges, even some regular jobs at the cannery.
 He keeps saying it—there’s work in Bakersfield,
 as if simply repeating it will make our luck
 change. California. The name used to be as sweet
 as sherbet on my tongue, but now it’s a parched
 growl stuck in my throat. I smile. For my son’s
 sake, for Dave’s, I smile. He’s humming
 some tune to himself, the girl’s sound asleep,
 my boy’s dragging a stick through the dirt,
 making another picture. Nothing to do but wait.
 And then go on. No point telling them
 what I really think, what I know.
 Our luck won’t change.

Brendan Ryan

Argyle St

The sky fractures like a windscreen
the blue Mobil Mart sign keeps the intersection alive.
Somewhere a tram, dance music.
A council worker weaves
out of a pub doorway.
The idea of living here

amongst slabs of 70s red brick
where developers slip you 300 to move out
and walk away from your vegie patch
making plans for concrete, fake grass,

in a landscape of reclaimed mansions
where a man walks the streets reading *SON OF ROSEMARY*,
others shuffle in pyjamas past traffic jams—
ciggies dangling, eyes glazed, talking to trees,
making milk bar owners nervous.

I meet my neighbours at the clothes line
the small talk falls between us
like pegs in the basket.

Nights glow in passing planes,
the honeycomb light of the Commission Flats
towering above the antennas, chimneys,
a rubber tree concealing a shopping trolley
and our compost bin watched over by cats

who track my movements in this fibro sun room
where I'm often at sea leaning against a door jamb
that's seen better days, with the changes
sweeping in from the bay
the way a memory leaves you in its wake.

Dan Disney

...I once asked a deaf magician the famed question: if a tree falls in the forest, will it always make a noise? He wrung his hands wretchedly, then signed "yeah; but what's a man to do?" Earlier, he'd pulled me from his velvet hat, lipreading the gasps of a gathered crowd...

...if I was going to burn a hole into the night my inventory would include starlight, & a magnifying glass. Once the hole was made big enough, I'd scaffold it so as to hold it in place. Imagine that. Then I'd crawl in. What would I find there—the cure for madness? An undiscovered number. Simplicity. Perhaps the perfect shade of blue? Who knows. But I do know I wouldn't take too many people in, because they'd just fuck it up. I'd take you, though. That's for sure. I'd take you.

CORDIE

Adam Aitken and Martin Harrison...

ernism, to say that this is something that occurs in nature, not something you have to invent—not a "strategy" a "tactic"—all that awful language people use.

AA "Positions"

MH Yes, that right—"positions".

AA You write that the platypus is "no post-modern, it benefits from natural history". It's interesting to see how the European naturalists are finally realising that Australia is not a primitive country low on the evolutionary scale and which stopped evolving millions of years ago, but it's a place of highly adapted flora and fauna.

MH Yes.

AA In the poem 'Poetry and Paperbarks' you write:

Some Australians still live in imported European fantasy,
and we've writers who'd rather live in yesterday's New
York.

I too use images as linear as TVs, and don't insist upon
the past
or on the way the land intrudes its myths of ownership

For me this raises two questions—one: what is this imported European fantasy and secondly: who are these writers living in yesterday's New York. I mean do these writers still exist?

MH Yes they do. They exist in several different ways. We could not have an age in which there is more European fantasy than we have now. Some forms of European theory have become extraordinarily well-adapted to the Australian intellectual environment. There are also the kinds of hankering that people have for the kind of artefactual and institutional culture that defines Europe, that does not necessarily define anywhere else in the world, and may be inappropriate for this country. Earlier you talked about the term Avant Garde and I immediately ask the question, whether this is the place for the Avant Garde, or whether this is anything other than a foreign idea basically. There has been an enormous investment in American poetics of various sorts that has detracted attention to what the construction of a local poetics is all about, which I think is a much more exciting adventure.

I am sometimes puzzled by the amount of time spent arguing about theory and methodology that has entirely to do with European ideas, concepts that exist only in European languages. This is at the expense of trying to discover an ontology here—a sense of Being which is to do with the relationship between inherited cultures, indigenous cultures and contemporary cultures. In other words it's a form of up-market cringe. A lot of theory is look-a-like to what was developed in the very local circumstances of Britain or Germany in the 1960s which seems to undergo no transformation. Marxist theory, or Economic rationalism for example—is it appropriate to this country?

A better way of talking about it is in terms of a lot of the poetry that around at the moment, particularly the younger poets are writing in a form of translationese, in a state of absence from its own local histories, its local origins, where people feel they can just pick up the Spanish poet or the German poet or the Swedish poet or the East European poet without any sense of the language or the history and take it on board as a way to write in this country. I'm not saying ignore everything

outside the local instance but it's just vague soft-edged internationalism which thinks it can pick and choose everywhere but doesn't know how to pick and choose at all.

AA What do you mean?

MH Everything is available but you don't know why you might prefer this one to that one. You have no authentic reasons for getting engaged with one work as opposed to another work.

AA Your poem 'Leeches' starts off in that naturalist mode but the last line's great: "text-book leeches right now though I see them as false climbing friends". You're talking about the shape-shifting organism—is that the problem with internationalism or poets who appropriate any other foreign body perhaps and live on that?

MH I wasn't thinking of any poets or other writers in that poem. I actually do have a strong aversion to leeches! A lot of people who have read that poem say to me "But don't you think leeches are very good, very nice!" But to me there not. I have an aversion to parasitism of various sorts. That parasites are killing an organism. The leeches in that poem fasten on to you and deprive you of life source and life energy, and they are amorphous, shapeless, have no form, and by definition, are uninteresting.

AA But highly adapted to their function!

MH Yes in that poem highly adapted to their economic rationalist function: they do nothing, believe nothing, say nothing, a do-everything function.

AA I found 'Tasmanian Tiger' to be an interesting poem. . .

MH 'Tasmanian Tiger' is one of those poems in the book reflecting on creativity in various ways. I started writing it in Sorrento during the winter. Again, it's a poem I did literally spend a year or so trying to get to work. There were two things in that poem. One of them was to do with the nature of the feeling I was trying to express which I had enormous difficulty getting there into the language, and the second thing was trying to find a way of talking about this simplest and most natural of things, of looking up at the window in a particular sort of late winter light and seeing these casuarinas against the window and the particular effect of that light. I really did spend a lot of time trying to get that detail vivid, the many-sidedness of that detail, and ultimately to try to acknowledge the intensity of what that was about, that movement, as the object comes into view and there's a particular energy, a drive that occurs at that point. Exactly at that point, it's there, and then it's gone.

Which is why the tiger could not be a living tiger roaming in the jungle, it's got to be in some way extinct, it's dead in some way. It's about trying to compose in microscopic detail. I'm trying to get that very detailed, that everyday moment, to have it there and not to overlook it.

AA The tiger poem is adjacent to another set of poems, the 'Closeups'. You're trying to do what the Imagists were trying to do—get inside the object—but what's interesting is that you use a completely different syntax to do it. Your lines go right across the page. I noticed that when I was listening to some of the lines, the actual object, and subject of the sentence disappeared or was lost, but it didn't seem to matter. Bob Adamson mentioned to me that, at reading that, he tried to get you to edit down

Patricia Prime

Artist at Work

This is the story
of Picasso's painting
'Woman in an Armchair'.

To exalt Eva's sexuality
he portrays her,
proudly and tenderly,
but also monstrously,
in terms of her genitals.

Inserted into the voluptuous
violet of the chair
the soft pink architecture
of her beauty beckons us
into the painting.

Her face is a vertical slit.
Her lap is covered by a chemise
draped immodestly
so as to attract
attention.

When it comes to her
beautiful pointed breasts,
so redolent of tribal sculpture—
he nails them to her body
with another set of nipples.

Deb Westbury

Metropolis

Latin from greek; meter: mother, polis: city.

Something very precise
had sawn her almost in two,
and she lay under the green sheet
like a fish half-gutted,

suspended in the amniotic sea
that pumped and pulsed
and breathed for her.

A single white line
measured her equilibrium;
the distance between heartbeats.

◆

A monitor divides the metropolis
into meridians of light,

two lines of pulsating colour
build up around an obstacle;

a telegraph pole,
the wreckage of an ambulance
and the donor's heart
still vacuum-sealed
and packed in ice

◆

The white line falters
and she succumbs
to the blocked and loaded arteries of her heart
wondering, at the last
if this is what her mother meant
when she said
"I'll kill you."

Keri Glastonbury

Rent Boy

We started
to watch Alien
on video
but it was dubbed
not subtitled.

We had already
talked each other
blue in the face.
So spurred on
by a dose
of male pheromones
and inspired
by a Sony installation
and a porn room
at the gallery
I got to
rummage around
in those
white
Bonds
boxer shorts.

Only entertainment
failed us.

Tricia Dearborn

schlieren lines

imagine you pour a stream of
sugar solution into a beaker
of water, or pee into a bathtub
you see the twining translucent trails
as each solution curls around the
other, prior to their coalescence?

these are schlieren lines
my biochem honours supervisor,
the one who gave me to work with
radioactive compounds so old
they had no hope of giving me
cancer, let alone decent results,

taught me this much. I don't quite
forgive him the dodgy materials
or for telling me in detail of his wife's
travails with cystitis, over a cup of tea
and a plain biscuit at 11, the old
laboratory ritual, with the autoclave

busily hissing steam and the smell
of dilute ethanol drifting from ranked test
tubes in gradated hues of pink but I grant
that he gave me that unique pleasure
of having at last a word for
the thing I could never name

Adam Aitken and Martin Harrison...

those very long lines.

MH I did go through the book after Bob had seen it the first time and it was in a somewhat different state. It went through a lot of change in that process. I'm not trying to be obscure. I went through the book to ensure that every line was clear, and that there was not a single line I did not agree with.

But, yes your comment is a good one. It's hard to ignore the nature of the Imagist image—that specificity, that precision and openness to sensation, that sense of immediacy, that up-frontness, the colour, the vibrancy of it. You need to have that I think. But I also think I am interested in connectives—in how things connect. How the eye wanders from here to there. How when you are looking at someone having a coffee in the street at the same time you're having a conversation with someone else. And maybe the radio is on in the background. They are ambiances as precise as the Imagist image. Therefore you have to go about them in a different way.

It was a breakthrough point for me between this book and the earlier book *DISTRIBUTION OF VOICE* to realise that though I agree that a poem must be precise, highly economic and all the things we are regularly told about poetry that what a limit it was not to be able to go for length and put in all of those details, which, if we believe the story, Ezra Pound carefully after weeks and weeks deleted in the making of the two line poem 'In a Station of the Metro'. I felt that the poetry I was reading and writing was less rich than what was going on around me. I wanted to put in as much as I could, so that they'd have that energy resource.

I am a sort of Imagist who lives seventy or eighty years after Imagism in a completely different intellectual and cultural environment and a different poetic environment.

AA We could say you're going back to pre-Imagistic poets like Apollinaire—not in the sense that you're writing about what you see in the city—not even celebrating Australia as fecundity.

MH The poets I particularly admire are poets of that generation. Apollinaire is one of my

CORDIE

favourites still. I also feel so close to Blok, and Machado. I find Browning interesting too. Writers who are still able to tell stories, who are not totally obsessed with modernist purity and fragmentation, interest me a great deal.

AA You want to get everything in there, but you would reject certain L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry strategies, where putting everything into the poem is a gesture of egalitarianism I suppose. Why would you reject the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry aesthetic.

MH Because I think such statements confuse politics and aesthetics. They try to make language theory do what politics should do. The idea that if you use language anarchically or chaotically you are in some sense contributing to social change or anarchy. It's a delusion. A category mistake. I want my poems to communicate to ordinary people. I feel that if you have to have a theory before you open a book you are immediately excluding the reader.



AA The book's first poem 'Eels' have the lines "myth gets us nowhere", and "the mythos of peninsula light is that it drifts rich as snow". I wasn't sure what you were getting at here.

MH It's a controversial line: it's saying that myth will run out, and realities won't.

AA It's ironic. Or in 'Australia' you write "Call it Australia, call it perhaps a well off, livable Argentina with its shards of myth set up in export mode".

MH Yes, and again, there are shards of myth constructed media-wise for tourism. I have nothing against tourism, but I think the business of trying to make a local art will have to bypass that stuff. I also think a genuine politics will bypass that stuff. I wrote a lot of that book during the early nineties when it seemed there were too many convergences between political movements and mythic belief systems.

I find your question about Imagism really interesting because one difference between anyone writing now and an Ezra Pound or the other Imagists is to do with scientific theory, that the Imagists live in a period where the notion of atomic structure, and the refinement which gets you the kernel, but a kernel which operates in a relativistic system, is very much what you expect in the age of Einstein. But I think the age now is of living systems.



John Mateer

Towards Wilpena Pound, South Australia

When salt- and bluebush country
gives way to the small yellow constellations of
wattle, the mind enters existence. Then

native pines stand, where rabbits had cleared the undergrowth
and where they themselves were wiped out by an island virus,
echoing plantations. Further, in the sung wind,

subtle bodies are a glimmer, fluid as the invisible river
over broken rock geometry, as extinction.
The sentence, then, is an unrealizable mountain.

Ouyang Yu

untitled for a number of times already

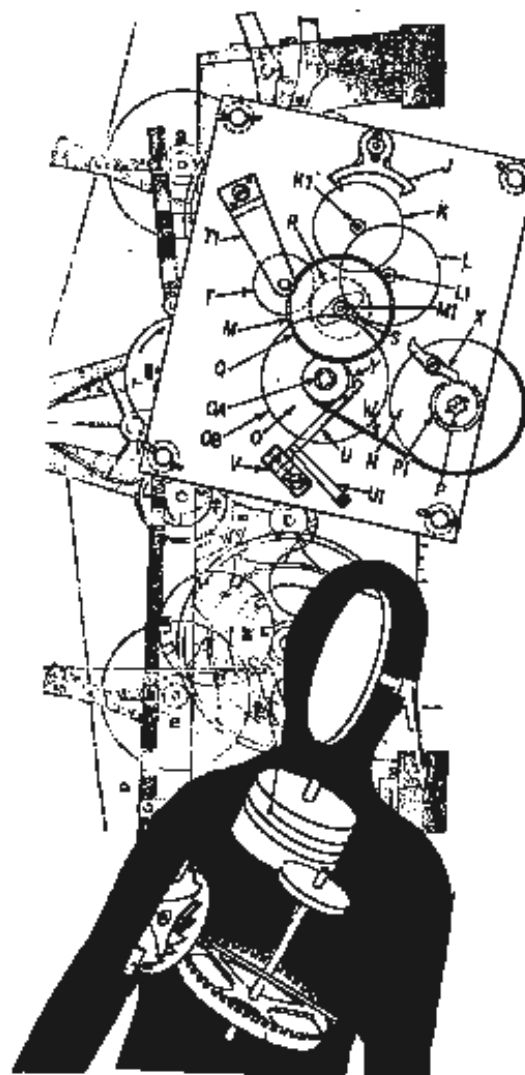
i sold a poem today
 at the junction of plenty road and dunn street
 where they used to sell age in the mornings to passing cars stopped
 before the red light
 or waited to collect coins to fill in barrels of charity
 or wiped a few coins out of the unconcerned window screens
 but i sold a poem today
 believe it or not
 to an australian
 a bloody australian
 who looked like a greek
 spoke like an asian
 smelt like a middle eastern
 behaved like an adolescent
 average man
 who said:

pom? what ya mean, pom?

i shouted in his grey hair of y/ears:
 i'm going broke and mad today
 this is all i've got
 a poem of pants
 not punts
 nor puns
 that i had picked up in a garage sale
 for a couple of bucks
 that i had worn though thick and thin
 in a lot of fucks
 i'll just give it to you
 for a cent

(here it is
 i have the cent
 he's got the po(e)m
 i don't know what to do with it
 nor does he)

you understand?



Denis Mizzi, Untitled.

Ouyang Yu

The Other Eye

when i was getting in the clothes aired on the umbrella wires in the garden
 the other eye watched me
 through its post/colonial window
 curtains
 saying in admiration
 one must really have such guys for mates
 for they are so womanly

when i was backing my car out of the driveway slightly clumsily
 my front wheel rolling over the curb
 the other eye turned away to the grass being cut beneath
 its noisy lawn-mower
 thinking to himself:
 these people are really no good at such things

so it was the same when i let my garden overrun with flower-dotted grass
 for the other eye would simply show contempt
 for such heathenish practice
 or snort at my sometimes yelling to the boy
 ughhhhhhhhhhhhh
 those bloody cruel animals

the other eye is omnipresent
 wherever you go
 whatever you do
 it keeps its vigil over you
 wordlessly

until you see it yourself
 in your heart:

an eye white

Someone says, "Poetry is about experience". Then someone else says, "Poetry is about transcendence". No sooner are these two statements allowed to engage each other than a vast, complicated world begins to form. Fierce conflicts arise between the advocates of experience and the defenders of transcendence. "Poetry holds a mirror to life", we are told. "Poetry is no reflection", we hear in reply, "it is a 'furious ascension'". Meanwhile, disputes break out over "experience". For some, poetry is confessional, while for others it is a passage beyond the opacities of personality, a quest for a deep self or an escape from self. Other arguments rage over "transcendence". One group affirms transcendence by way of the vertical. "Poetry is an illumination of the heights", they

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Let us pause for a moment before agreeing completely with Grossman. Is art like a house? Does it contain experience? A poem may seem to be a verbal construction, yet this appearance is misleading. Although it usually belongs to the world of paper and print, a poem is fundamentally an act of understanding. It may be several or many related acts, not all of them complete or able to be completed, and it may involve understandings and misunderstandings of different acts or objects in distinct ways and to various extents. Some may have been seen, touched or tasted; some may have been imagined; others may be intellectual realities, like geometrical figures. (Eugène Guillevic wrote a number of charming lyrics about squares, triangles and quadrilaterals that he called Euclidiennes.) When talking about poetry one gets on the right track when seeing that 'experience' des-

Experience and Transcendence

KEVIN HART on Tomas Tranströmer

say, "it may disclose the meaning of being, reveal there is no meaning to being, or in questing beyond the world may undermine itself by disparaging language". Another group figures transcendence as horizontal movement: poetry leads to places we never knew, and in doing so changes the author.

This strange world with its assertions, arguments and bewilderments is our own, the world of modern poetry. After living here for a while, one begins to pick out individual voices that are more subtle, more intriguing, or more commanding than others. Under the guise of Malte Laurids Brigge, Rilke observes that "verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings [. . .] they are experiences [Erfahrungen]. In order to write a single line of verse, one must see many cities, and men and things".¹ Were this literally true, we would dismiss the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Arthur Rimbaud. However, Rilke is not aiming at those who experience the world in little but at 'beautiful souls' who refuse to engage with the world at all. At first, Wallace Stevens appears squarely in Rilke's sights when he says, "Poetry is the expression of the experience of poetry".² But his point is quite different: Keats found himself in reading Spenser, Yeats in reading Shelley, and so on. To look closely at any scene of authorial formation would doubtless be to find evasions in what poets say about becoming poets. Did T. S. Eliot discover himself in reading Dante, Baudelaire and Laforgue, as he leads one to believe? Or were his most significant encounters with Browning, Tennyson and Whitman? The latter, says Harold Bloom, while urging us to accept that one poet can escape the tyranny of another only by a perverse and violent misreading. It is an uncomfortable truth, but one seldom looks to the truth for comfort.

If Stevens is right, no poetry simply reflects experience. At the least, a poem answers to experience and poetry. When pondering this situation, and wondering how a poem connects with its author's life, it is salutary to listen to Allen Grossman meditating in the *Summa Lyrica*. "There is no poem of the experience at hand", he says, while adding, "art is about experience (in the same sense that a cat indoors is "about" the house)".³ The thought that a poem might be "about experience", an exterior reflection on what has happened, is dismissed. There is no naked fact that is later covered with interpretation: an event is constituted as meaningful while it occurs, and later interpretations extend or modify this constitution. So, for Grossman, a poem is "about experience" in that a body of experience is somewhere in a poem, although exactly where we cannot say.

ignates what a consciousness registers, not what a person physically encounters. And one begins to walk down this track when recognising that the important thing is not the poet's consciousness but what could be called the "consciousness of the poem": a work's ability to signify in the absence of its maker. In poetry, experience does not abide within an organising intelligence; it is bespoke by a poem that, once written, has no further need of the poet. Poetry cannot be conceived simply as a representation of an experience, even one that includes a good deal of reflection. For in its dealings with forms, genres, languages, tropes and traditions, none of which can be fully controlled by an individual, a poem may present experience that the poet had only while writing or not at all.

Having come this far, we are in a position to hear what Maurice Blanchot says of poetry and experience.⁴ The act of composition, he tells us, leads a poet to risk losing everything: the poem's unity, the poet's self-identity, even the poet's faith in God. One writes in order to name reality; but the "I" that appears on the page differs from the writer's consciousness, and the immediacy of what one wishes to represent is destroyed by language itself. So language, even when rigorously used, is not the vehicle of *la clarté*, as French classicism teaches; rather, it embodies the nocturnal, the absent and the veiled. Yet language also reveals itself as reassuringly material: perhaps one can take it as the end of one's quest, thereby regarding night as a simple modification of day. Almost immediately, though, the poet becomes aware of language as a play of rhythm and form that anonymously co-operates in writing the poem. Gazing into the heart of language, the poet beholds an immemorial and interminable combining

Keri Glastonbury

Pulp

In love
I'll usually effect a threshold.

Usually a stream.

And there we splash and banter.

The threshold is my flattened-out organs
without a summit.

Or sometimes I dig holes
and think that I'm clever.

It's a method of frustration
and deferral.

Although when I'm in love
like I am with you.

I'm a citrus orange
plunged chest first
on to a stainless steel juicer.

Waiting for a pure form
of domestic violence
to turn delicious.

Footnotes

René Char, *FUREUR ET MYSTÈRE*, pref. Yves Berger (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 101.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE*, introd. Stephen Spender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 19.

² Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, ed., *WALLACE STEVENS: COLLECTED POETRY AND PROSE* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 904.

³ Allen Grossman, 'Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics', in *THE SIGHTED SINGER: TWO WORKS ON POETRY FOR READERS AND WRITERS*, Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 268.

⁴ What follows is a paraphrase of Blanchot's *THE SPACE OF LITERATURE*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

and recombining of words that has no significance in itself. Here words no longer refer to things; they are empty images. In the grip of a fascination that resembles insomnia, the poet risks all identity and unity. Only by shaking itself free of this impersonal and strangely lucid gaze, older than all creation, can the work be saved from ruin. Indeed, “the work is this leap”.⁵ This passage from consciousness to the very limit of indeterminate being is what Blanchot calls “experience”.

Writing for Blanchot is therefore a doubled event, at once active and passive: it begins in experiencing the world but is quickly diverted and becomes an “experience of non-experience”.⁶ The two events are lived together, not as a unity but as a neutral relation. In seeing things this way we have passed from experience to transcendence, although it must be said to a transcendence of a very dispiriting kind. Blanchot himself would prefer the word “transgression” and even then would surround it with many qualifications.⁷ Certainly what draws Blanchot to his favourite writers from Sade to Beckett is that they brush against indeterminate being. In the last analysis, his readings of these authors are oriented by how this limit experience occurs and what consequences follow from it. Of particular interest to Blanchot is that writing leads one to glimpse not a state above or beyond the world but a condition before the world. Writing leads one to encounter the flux anterior to human existence, not to experience the most determinate being, transcendent being, Being itself, or the Wholly Other, all of which surpass human existence and which form the main western conceptions of God.

I think that Blanchot overstates one aspect of his case and then underexplains its central move. Is it true that language destroys whatever it touches? To be sure, Hegel observed that when Adam named the animals “he nullified them as beings on their own account, and made them into ideal [entities]”.⁸ That is, since language involves the mediation of concepts there can be no immediate presentation of anything in words. Yet particularity is not thereby lost to speech or writing. When Marianne Moore describes an ostrich in “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron” we may not grasp a bird in its immediacy but the poem nonetheless presents us with a singular creature, and does so in a unique manner. Blanchot’s crucial move, however, is that the work responds to the flux of primordial being by leaping away from its paralyzing gaze. Putting aside the questions why he shifts from author to work, and whether a poem can properly be said to have this kind of agency, one may still ask how and why the work escapes its condition of fascinated passivity. No explanation is given. At the very least such a leap presumes a tacit affirmation of being as a horizon if not an assembly of entities. If poetry draws us to what precedes human being, it also stirs us to return to the world about us.

Blanchot is right to emphasise that experience is double. In his terms, we name the possible and respond to the impossible.⁹ The impossible, for him, is the limit of the possible, the site where power, truth and unity finally crumble. Perhaps so; yet the discovery of indeterminate being in no way precludes the experience of determinate being, transcendent being, the Wholly Other, or anything else. I therefore propose a broader understanding of the word “impossible”, one that allows a more uplifting experience of transcendence. Let us say that the possible is the other that yields to the same, while the impossible retains its alterity: only its approach or withdrawal can be expe-

Michelle Taylor

Paris

Paté like dogfood from a tin
stale baguette
white cheese want for ripening
makes me long for the glamour
of my backyard.

Brian Purcell

Rita Coolidge Plays Mt Druitt

1

The minarets of Auburn’s mosque
are topped by shining metal cones.
Calm, early afternoon—

Dirk Hartog bangs a nail
through the sky’s pewter dish.

Land the colour of dried sponge,
razor grass—a white flame
sputters in the wind.

2

Fences fall like theatre
props. Mount Druitt expands,
LA obsessed cars

stretched by the tar’s
tightening belt

where in-between houses
hover in heat:
Speer the architect.

3

The carriage judders
the glaze from
a passenger’s eyes;

and Rita thinks of fame,
can almost roll

that kernel beneath her tongue:
a signature song that could shake
any audience to its feet.

4

Instead she scans
newspaper reports
that read as obits:

*Delta lady achieved her fame
in duets with Kris.*

Under her breath she croons
watching the Nepean’s algal blooms
from the sluggish, half-full train.

5

She knows the audience loves
her casual dress
as much as her songs.

The way she flicks her skirt the way
young arsonists flick a match
to thunderous applause.

rienced. Now an experience to be faced is always marked by the possibility of possibility: what happens may be anticipated, and its outcome conceived in advance. Yet it is marked also by the possibility of impossibility: what happens may be singular, groundless, unable to be readily assimilated to consciousness. To describe this event we use words like “enigma” and “mystery”, and to name its effects we say words like “calm” or “distress”. Sometimes only one possibility is realised to any considerable extent. Daily life is characterised by the triumph of the possible: I reach for a cup, drink from it, then put it down. Yet I may reach for the cup and be seized with wonder that it and I exist. At that moment my experience is constituted with the possible and impossible as more or less

...a poem is fundamentally an act of understanding...

equally distant vanishing points. Perhaps, as with Blanchot, this moment conjures the approach of death; if so, the distribution of these vanishing points changes, and impossibility becomes sovereign. Or perhaps the moment becomes an affirmation of the God who disposes being and nonbeing. Once again, the impossible is broached.

These are extreme examples in life though not in poetry. In life or art, however, “to transcend experience” does not name the impossible, as people sometimes say. The expression merely indicates that experience is not the same in all regions of being. Experience is especially complex in the region we call poetry. Of course, most verse, of whatever school, abides almost wholly in the realm of the possible, and even so-called experimental poetry often does little more than rearrange formal possibilities. Fulfilling or destroying a form can expose one to the unknown, but it is the passage that is important not the vehicle. Despite appearances, devotional poetry has in itself no privileged relation to the impossible: the word “God” usually falls fast asleep in literature. A memorable poem, whether about a cup or God, passes from mastery to mystery, if only for a moment, though on rereading it one finds that the relation between the two cannot be narrowly specified.

2

Were I to continue these reflections with Yves Bonnefoy in mind my comments would differ from those on other poets to whom I feel close: Philippe Jaccottet and Roberto Juarroz, for instance. Each speaks of the impossible in his own way.¹⁰ If I choose to read Tomas

⁵ Blanchot, *THE SPACE OF LITERATURE*, 244.

⁶ Blanchot, *THE INFINITE CONVERSATION*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 210

⁷ See Blanchot, *THE STEP NOT BEYOND*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992), 27.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *SYSTEM OF ETHICAL LIFE AND FIRST PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRIT*, ed. and trans. H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: SUNY, 1979), 222. Blanchot quotes this passage in ‘Literature and the Right to Death’.

⁹ Blanchot, *THE INFINITE CONVERSATION*, 48.

¹⁰ See Yves Bonnefoy, ‘But no, once again | Unfolding the wing of the impossible’, *POEMS 1959-1975*, trans. Richard Pevear (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 63; Philippe Jaccottet, ‘The side I take now is that of the impossible’, Seedtime: *EXTRACTS FROM THE NOTEBOOKS 1954-1967*, trans. André Lefevere and Michael Hamburger (New York: New Directions, 1977), 23; Roberto Juarroz, ‘Celebrating the impossible. | Is there another path for celebrating the possible?’, *Vertical Poetry: RECENT POEMS*, ed. and trans. Mary Crow (New York: White Pine, 1992), 25.

Experience and Transcendence

Kevin Hart on Tomas Tranströmer

Tranströmer, whose work is equally close to me, it is because his poems not only open themselves to the impossible but also meditate on it without using the word.¹¹

Tranströmer lives in the wake of what Friedrich Hölderlin calls the “double infidelity”: God has turned away from human beings, leaving us to experience His absence, and we have turned from Him, no longer regarding this absence as significant. The poet abides in the space created by this twofold abandonment while remaining open to the chance of a new revelation of the divine. Certainly Tranströmer does not thematise this openness by way of an uncritical endorsement of Christianity. The Church is “the broken arm of faith”, and the Cross is “like a snapshot | of something in violent motion”. The latter image suggests that Christianity has attempted to domesticate a spiritual energy that overruns all limits. Although Tranströmer affirms “the great unknown which I am a part of”, this mystery is not simply benign in its effects. Thus ‘Golden Wasp’:

The divine brushes against a human being and lights a flame
but then draws back.
Why?
The flame attracts the shadows, they fly rustling in and join the flame,
which rises and blackens. And the smoke spreads out black and strangling.
At last only the black smoke, at last only the pious executioner.

To write “the divine” [gudomliga] is already to claim more imaginative freedom than the word “God” [Gud] generally allows. Yet “God” is used now and

then. In an earlier lyric, ‘Solitary Swedish Houses’, Tranströmer asks that the people he sees walking outside in autumn may,

feel without alarm
the camouflaged wings
and God’s energy
coiled up in the dark.

The final image recalls the tremendous force pent-up in the Cross, yet the telling word is “feel” [känna] rather than “energy”. A mixture of the Modern and the Romantic in his poetic stance, Tranströmer inclines to the Romantics in his theology while avoiding any show of piety. One poem ends by describing itself as “my inside-out psalm”, and the expression is a fitting emblem of Tranströmer’s work as a whole. His poems are songs of consolation, hope and praise that - for all their “finish” as works of art - show the knots, loose ends and seams of experience, not the faultless pattern dreamed by a beautiful soul.

An early elegy proclaims “There’s a crossroads in a moment”, and a later poem about revisiting a childhood house tells us, “It’s always so early in here, before the crossroads”. There is a sense in which all Tranströmer’s poetry seeks a moment before decision, before the consequences of our choices can make us into adults. At the same time, this is a poetry that honours the “Beautiful slag of experiences [Erfarenheternas]” that compose a life, even when viewed from the perspective of death. There is a lost innocence we mourn, and a higher innocence we long for and strive to attain. More potent than the image of the crossroads, however, is that of the border, frontier or wall which pervades Tranströmer’s writing. The lines separating one nation from another, dreaming from waking, life from death, creation from self are all investigated and shown to be divided and equivocal. One might say of Tranströmer’s poems in general that experience courts transcendence, whether “horizontal” or “vertical”, and that the strongest poems affirm, ponder and explore a “vertical transcendence”, a mystery that can

Matthew Zapruder

Unfortunately I’m Dead

A little portrait of me lies in the flowerbed
making allusions, watching her comb her hair.
She sings into the shattered mirror:
“But you will last as long as the rose,
as long as the glass, glass tulips. . .”
A can-opener smiles derisively on the night table.

Each humid, endless afternoon
I hacked the encroaching bamboo,
unstrangled the weeds from our bedposts,
and made little repairs in the canopy.

I remember she loved and feared the dark.
Whenever the horses broke loose and threatened the begonias
her heart trembled under my hand like a bat.
We’d huddle all night in bed, counting.
The horses filled us with the ineffable grandeur
of their silent pounding, or something like that.
Mostly I liked not knowing what to expect.

The sun looms angrily, high above, stranded.
She walks, or rather meanders, towards my portrait, chanting
“Phillip, your green thumbs, the envy of all Wales.”
Each wisp of her hair grows larger, they wave and shine
like snakes you can see through. How strange. She bends
over me, blocking the sun.

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“neither be written nor kept silent”.

When I use the expression “vertical transcendence” I think of Jean Wahl distinguishing “transcendence” from “transdescendence”: an ascent to the heights, and a descent to the depths.¹² Tranströmer writes of music having a way of following us “up | the depths”, and his images have a remarkable ability to reach up and down in the same movement, to be, as he says himself, “at the same time eagle and mole”. Indeed, his poems maintain close contact with the earth while gazing down on it from a great height, putting it in a broader context that enriches the physical world and does not devalue it. In their larger sweeps, his poems testify that “The other world is this world too”, that the impossible touches the possible, arises out of it or reaches out to it.

To keep this thought in play for a little while, I would like to cite an extraordinary poem by Tranströmer, one that names an artist whose work resonates with his own in certain respects. ‘Vermeer’ is a poem about walls, or rather about our abilities and inabilities to cross apparently clear dividing lines: inside and outside, madness and sanity, art and life, childhood and adulthood, life and death. We are told of,

Pictures that call themselves ‘The Music Lesson’
or ‘Woman in Blue Reading a Letter’—
she’s in her eighth month, two hearts kicking inside her.
On the wall behind is a wrinkled map of Terra Incognita.

Art historians say that the painting most likely represents a creased map of Holland not “Terra Incognita”. Yet Tranströmer’s point is precisely that the everyday and the nearby are an unknown country. An common event like having a baby requires the woman to balance what she knows with what cannot be predicted.

The chairs in the painting are covered with an “unknown blue material”. We are asked to consider how the fabric is fixed to the wood:

The gold studs flew in with incredible speed
and stopped abruptly
as if they had never been other than stillness.

The tension between energy and calm recalls the Cross that “hangs under cool church vaults” and that nonetheless seems to be “in violent motion”. The pressure in the painter’s studio comes from “the other side the wall”, the noise from the street outside: art is sustained by life. But “wall” quickly takes on wider connotations when we hear that “It hurts to go through walls, it makes you ill” and that “the wall is part of yourself”. Once again, experience is leagued with transcendence.

What kind of transcendence? The poem’s final lines enrich the question rather than attempt a definitive answer:

The clear sky has leant against the wall.
It’s like a prayer to the emptiness.
And the emptiness turns its face to us
and whispers
“I am not empty, I am open”.

The Annunciation is quietly evoked then withdrawn: there is no angel, only daylight; the child is human, not divine; and conception occurred months before. Only emptiness, certainly not divine plenitude, characterises our world after the “double infidelity”. Even here one may risk a prayer, however. No mention is made of God or the divine, yet the answer to the prayer is impressive and mysterious. There is no easy assurance—the voice does not whisper of fullness—and to be offered openness is an opportunity for further experience and further transcendence. In the words of a lyric that speaks more directly than ‘Vermeer’,

An angel with no face embraced me
and whispered through my whole body:
“Don’t be ashamed of being human, be proud!
Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly.
You will never be complete, that’s how it’s meant to be.”

¹¹ See Tomas Tranströmer, *NEW COLLECTED POEMS*, trans. Robin Fulton (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1997).

¹² See Jean Wahl, *EXISTENCE HUMAINE ET TRANSCENDANCE* (Neuchâtel: n.p., 1944).

CORDITE would like to thank the New South Wales Government Ministry for the Arts for supporting this essay with a grant for contributors’ fees.

Editorial

As some readers may already be aware, Peter Minter has left *CORDITE* to pursue other poetic projects—which should result in more interesting poetry publications in the near future. Peter's vital founding involvement set *CORDITE* on a path of growth and improvement that saw a good idea leap from the drawing board to become a popular national poetry review with over two hundred subscribers and a strong body of contributors in only three issues and two years. Needless to say, this has been a rich learning experience for the both of us! I would like to thank Peter for his editorial input, ideas and energy, and wish him well with his future projects.

Congratulations are due to *CORDITE* co-editor Jennifer Kremmer, on her winning the 1998 Australian / Vogel Prize for her novel *PEGASUS IN THE SUBURBS*.

Recently I was unpleasantly surprised to find a poem published in *CORDITE* N°2 also published in an issue of *another literary journal* released last year. It's worth noting that journal editors, somewhat addled by pride, are so possessed of the idea that their journal must be different to every other journal that they will usually insist on being the first and only publisher of a given poem. More bewildering still, editors, once they have selected a poem, are nearly as keen as the writer to see the poem in print. Contributors, please be careful with your editors—try not to double-dip—we may just send your next book to a dispeptic novelist for review!

Poems published on an internet poetry e-zine under the imprimatur of an editor are also considered by most editors to be "previously published". This topic of internet publication was hotly debated on John Kinsella's popular poetry list—worth a look (www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/8574/). Also, have a gander at the well-tailored *JACKET*, edited by John Tranter at www.zip.com.au/~jtranter/index.html.

Dear friend of *CORDITE*, amongst the number of revolutionary artistic issues jostling for space in the *CORDITE* thoracic cavity, few are closer the heart of this poetry publisher than subscriptions. *CORDITE* will grow or recede based on the strength of its subscriber support. Please pass the enclosed subscription form along to a friend. Sing the praises of *CORDITE*, and as ever, you will be greatly appreciated. I hope you enjoy *CORDITE* N°4.

—Adrian Wiggins



CORDITE N°3, The Next Wave Issue, is launched at Gleebooks. From left, Joanne Burns, Juno Gemes, John Tranter, Pam Brown, Arabella Lee, Adrian Wiggins, Nicola Hawdon, Justin Ellis and Ewan Isbister

Letters

Peter Minter writes!

I would like to thank all those poets and readers of poetry who have made my time at *CORDITE* so successful by having extended to the review their financial, moral and textual support.

I have chosen, after two years of hard work establishing one of Australia's best new poetry publications, to move on to my own work and some new, exciting projects.

I also extend my best wishes to the new editorial team, and trust you will continue to enjoy *CORDITE*.

Peter Minter
Faulconbridge

Bucked Off

I write in response to Jim Buck's review of *SUB DEE* N°3 in *CORDITE* N°3. Buck obviously didn't bother to read the issue so why write about it? Is this personal? Most peculiarly, why was a magazine containing 95% fiction reviewed in a tabloid devoted to poetry? Normally I'd take any publicity, but this is wholly sloppy, unprofessional review and I feel compelled to respond.

According to Buck's review, "*SUB DEE* professes to be punk". Not since I last checked, although we did include back-issue information containing a quote from *FACTSHEET FIVE*, who described our first edition as "punk and in-your-face". It wasn't us, Jim—honest.

Apparently, Adam Ford and myself had two poems in that issue, there were in fact four. Jim thinks they're to do with "Ballard, Crash and auto-erotica", but ultimately is unsure, as it "all seems a bit thin". He fails to mention the five-page interview with JG Ballard adjacent to one of the poems, which provides a bit of context if one cares to delve.

Perhaps I'm being petty, but I can't escape the feeling that Jim's work-method is equivalent to the lazy reviewer's trick of reading the blurb to a book and faking the rest. The effect is cumulative. Buck's jolly bon mots and careless penmanship serve to trivialise and undermine the philosophy of *SUB DEE* and that of its contributors.

Buck states that *SUB DEE* is "a publication for boys", full of "dicks sticking into things", and there's a flippant remark about Dungeons and Dragons and *PENTHOUSE FORUM*. Chortle.

Snigger. And look mummy! that boy's showing his willy! . . . And that's it—with our work ripped cruelly out of context, the review ends. As I would very much like to counteract the childish implications of Bucks review, I will quote from one of the stories in *SUB DEE*:

He had nothing but contempt for the male species, felt ashamed to be counted as one of their number; anger bitterness, frustration at the male-hybrid traits of mate-ship, tests of strength...

...

When finally she had come with an ultimate, memorable shudder, she reluctantly rolled over and agreed to let him inside her, but he was soft as butter. He needed to be touched now and she was sleepy, couldn't be stuffed. He was male, right? Horny as a toad (and all that crap) 24

hours a day—ready to stick it into anything with a heartbeat. Right?

But he could never perform on cue, it seemed so obscene. So. . . abstract. Your turn, now mine. Confessions of a soft-cock.

—Jherik Zarathustra, 'Confessions of A Soft-Cock'

We live in a sex-saturated, hyper-commodified society. As a male, I don't mind admitting that I feel threatened and bullied by mainstream representations of masculinity: disembodied, disconnected from desire. I'm not the only one! I write about it, but it's a sad state of affairs when honest discussion of sexuality prompts such nonsensical tittering at the expense of relaxed, constructive criticism.

continued on page 23

Paola Bilbrough

Canvastown

That spring we lived in Canvastown
there were mushrooms the size
of dinner plates in the fields,
frayed at the gills with lice.
My mother wore a feather in her hair,
naked, in profile, always painting.
My father, stringy pony tail,
pink shirt, threw pots in a cow shed.
I half wanted to be the neighbours' child.

She, fat and breathless would seat me
on top of their enormous freezer,
a mortuary of animal carcasses, feed me
bright yellow pickle, doughy bread.
The odour of Basset hounds,
mutton gristle and hot vinyl.
She created nothing, sat indoors eating
melted cheese from a dented frying pan.

Furrows on her husband's brow
ploughed deep, skin red as raw beef.
Yet he could listen with the trees,
make a willow stick dance
to the song of an underground stream.
The flick of my mother's brush on canvas,
buzz of mason bees building white clay houses,
the dull roar of my father's kiln.
Across the road the weaver at his loom,
weaving a poltergeist's footfall
into a vermilion carpet. Sound gradually
drinking in all its listeners.

The fat woman and I didn't listen.
She was bored with the water diviner,
resplendent in a green chenille housecoat
she turned afternoon into evening
by watching Bewitched on TV.
I liked to lie in her overgrown garden,
watch crab apples pull malevolent
faces from the tree, poke out
their wormy tongues at passer-bys.

Reviews

Tiara Lowndes

Ben Brady & DJ Huppatz, eds.

AUTOMATIC Textbase Publications.

Free (PO Box 2057, East Brunswick Vic 3056. T 03 9149 0084)

Justin Lowe, ed. **HOMEBREW**. ISSN 1329-3748. \$20 for 4 issues.

This little unassuming journal with its black cover and raised textbase logo is very deceiving. It sat on my desk at home for days hiding behind the matt black, with just a tongue of a title protruding from the contents like a pipi at the beach. *AUTOMATIC* it said. And then I opened it.

AUTOMATIC is another activity from Textbase, based in Melbourne and originating around 1995 as a focus for textual activities and writers' projects within the art world. This dynamic little journal aims to develop fictocritical and experimental writing and to explore writing as a visual medium—and broader questions of writing and how it works.

Issue N°1 is a powerhouse of interesting and challenging works, from fiction pieces to essays, interviews, and reports. The great content is offset by thoughtful and unusual layout, from different typefaces, to curves, triangles and other shapes appearing in text. The journal has a kinetic energy, with numbers leaping at you from the contents page, and the text taking a visual journey around the pages throughout the journal.

N°1 has some wonderful highlights. The first piece titled 'the voice of Robert Desnos', is a lilting work that relives the final moments of French Writer Desnos. Weaving together the facts of his life with dream-like moments, it is a superbly mastered fictocritical essay.

Occupying the centre of the journal is the bold font of the Annie Walwicz interview, one of Australia's best-known experimental writers and performers. The interview is short and precise but asks some very pertinent and interesting questions of Walwicz, and is accompanied by a fabulous piece of hers called 'The Fountain'.

Perhaps my favourite piece in the journal was second to last, with no title. A visually challenging work and a great piece of automatic writing it seemed to embody the very essence of the textbase aims. Layering handwriting over type it plays with both the process of writing and the words themselves.

Dara Weir

The White Boat

The birds are sleeping, it's far from morning, except for the birds who rightfully haunt the dark, and the low-life, lazy geese who've given up their fly-way rights to live at ease around the man-made pond below the ridge. They come around the hour of the wolf and wake me up. I can't help but love their haunting, honking grief.

It sounds like grief tonight.

A white boat in full moon light is rocking on the lawn. It rocks and rocks like a giant's cradle or a mammoth's bassinet.

It rocks like a cradle for a god or a devil.

The white boat doesn't want to go home.

Peter Boyle

Everyday

You go to a restaurant and you eat a meal and you choke and die. It happens like that. You feel horny and you visit a sauna, get careless, and you catch AIDS and die. You open a present while straphanging on a tram, miss your stop, get off in a hurry, don't notice a truck, get hit and die. Or you breathe the mould of your own body for a lifetime, day after silent day, and you turn white and die. Or you open your hand and the lines suddenly go walking off in different directions over the edges of the world and this puzzles you and you can't understand it and out of such perplexity you die. One day the face of the sunflower deity is splattered on the bedsheets and you grow prickly and are never visited by the bees that carry sweetness in their thighs and from the hunger for their soft release you die. You construct a house of stone underneath a well of pure skywater and there you bring the pillars of every deity and the offerings for every cult and you crush flowers and the tiny hands of the newborn dead and, forgetting how substanceless is sacred food and ritual water, you reincarnate as gesture without body and die.

On a Saturday during the football on an airplane over Antarctica in galoshes in a business suit on the holiday of a lifetime tomorrow and yesterday after five minutes of thinking and a decade of acceptance passionlessly as oxygen from a mask in this room which has grown as small as a child's crib you open your mouth to all that exits and all that rushes in and wanting so much to speak you start to mime the opening of a word and you begin to understand how the silence that fills you and the passion for words that overflows is your own private and chaotic death.

The last page is a review of another Textbase activity, an exhibition called Concrete Poetry. This, along with the introduction in the journal gives an insight into other Textbases activities. The exhibition is interactive with vending machine that hand out words and "information." Cans and boxes on shelves hold abstract notions like "gist." There is a catalogue of Textbase activities available through the journal, which from the works so far would be well worth having a look at.

AUTOMATIC, by Textbase, is an interesting, thoughtful work that leaps past the notion of journal as a collection of works bound into small book, and instead creates a small and intense space where the ideas and aims of Textbase live and breathe. This journal is a must for lovers of the word, and explorers of its place in art and the world.

HOMEBREW is a traditional journal format, currently in its second issue. Based in Newtown but featuring writers from as far afield as Tasmania and New Zealand, it is a strong collection of poetry, prose and pictures. Editor Justin Lowe says "Like Newtown, *HOMEBREW* seeks to actively promote the right of the individual to play". And play it does, with free form poetry, haiku and prose.

Lowe has assembled an impressive group of writers, from established poets Peter Bakowski, Brian Bell and Jeff Guess, to Tim Freedman of local band The Whitlams, to some less experienced contributors, such as six-year-old Jeff. The illustrations are scattered throughout the journal, and range from pastiche pieces to drawings, with a great contribution from AT Barnum, 'Fallen Victim' which is definitely worth a peek.

The subjects tackled in *HOMEBREW* are diverse, dipping between play and more serious issues. There are some great moments along the way.



'Emerald green and ironing steam' is a powerful piece of fiction, entering the private world of the lover of a working girl, and finally, 'A bathroom soap' is a great little reverie of the life of that soap bar in the shower.

HOMEBREW captures the essence of Newtown in this eclectic collection of works in one small journal. *HOMEBREW* is

raw and accessible, bringing you a wonderful mix of artists to browse through.

Jennifer Kremmer

Hugh Tolhurst *FILTH & OTHER POEMS Black Pepper 1997 63pp \$15.95*

Filth: 1. foul or disgusting dirt; refuse. 2. extreme physical or moral uncleanness. 3. vulgarity or obscenity. (Collins Concise, 3rd edition)

Why does Hugh Tolhurst feel the need to begin a book with a gesture of expansiveness rendered only faintly ironic by what he's 'giving' (as if it's possible to give what's not actually owned):

I give you what is beautiful in my city,
the brake-fluid rainbows, the rosy urinals,
the kisses among the litter on the fore-
shore

finishing with: "I've locked myself out and I'm not going home"?

Filth is the rejected's realm. Filth is shit; hell; to give it is to express the ambivalence of a child in the face of another's apparent power. Hugh's gift to a gentle reader is entirely gestural; even as the opening poem sets a tone of masterful poet giving the gift of a city's darker charms, he is also "locked out", and Hugh later parodies himself as a fallen angel:

I had this bad dream,
spent all my money on fucking Reeboks,
ran into a level crossing
& lost both my wings

Hugh sometimes asserts that he's fallen (or lost his wings) due to hubris. But at other times, and perhaps more significantly, he engages in banter with well-known editors and poets, and it's obvious that this prince of darkness also suffers from a heightened sense of embanishment (mind you, he still manages to rub shoulders in Lit Board soirees). But what else to make of:

& where to tender my Catullus now
to you dear John, my ten-speed bankrupt,
Forbes?

The brave so soon become the editors & scandal fucks but quarterly by vow

not to mention:

I was at University House once, loose on my end, having failed to back a winner in the writer's grants, when Wallace-Crabbe took a shine to my company. I think he thought her an escort

The latter and similar barbs are Hugh's "filth", despite his claims to "give" what is beautiful in his city's underbelly early in the book. In a gentle, bantery way, Hugh does fling a little bit of shit: "Tranter asked for cocaine & had to sit in the corner". In fact, however, the tone is so playful that it really does render pointless accusations of sour grapes for not having gotten a grant. Hugh's grapes, if anything, are botytic; he not only does not wish harm upon the rejectors, he still tries hard to win entry into their realm:

...so you'll allow submitting this one poem without cause

Filth in a child's terms is about rejection, but since the child's well-being depends on the parent, filth can only ever be symbolic. Note, for example, Hugh's self-instruction after his "glacier bitch" (many apostrophes are phrased in the possessive: "my friend", "my Lesbia", etc) in the face of romantic dissolution: "& you, Tolhurst, face north, make like stone". The poem is addressed to the departing love and thus the instruction by its very terms already admits to failure.



Behind Hugh's work is a belief of himself as a brooding Byron; a grand, lovable, dark and at times demented child. Friends are co-opted into a high order of poetic address to populate Hugh's underworld with subjects: "Spend it, my Lesbia, live our love hard"; "Brooksy, you'd have told Tolhurst"; "Arlan, of all my friends"; "Jim & Gene, Tolhurst's mates"; "Spaced-out Alex"; and "Dine like the suburbs, Gordon, at my place". There are also eight references to the poet by name: "Misfiring Tolhurst," etc. Like the poems addressed to editors or other poets, these can seem obscure.

In the end, it is exactly hubris in the sense of heightened ambition that for me is Hugh's failing as a poet. He needs his underworld because it's where he obtains people like pub audiences; he wants the limelight because it's so well-lit (it is the Lit Board, after all). He might be, as John

Forbes apparently said (rear cover blurb), "witty, talented and accomplished", but he's also genuinely convinced he ought to be where the successes are, and to get there he can often seem to talk above other people's heads (a sometimes necessary Lit Board party trick). I suppose it's a little like a ladder. Above Hugh's head are the poets and editors he must either supplant or tickle the feet of in order to ascend; below is a diverse and sometimes competing audience. Hugh Tolhurst seems to want us to crane upward along with him; to watch and valorise his ascent for the wit and gestural grandness of his tactics. But, Hugh, there are other things to look at in the circus than the trapeze.

Geraldine McKenzie

Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, eds. POEMS FOR THE MILLENIUM: THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BOOK OF MODERN AND POSTMODERN POETRY, VOLUME TWO. University of California Press \$50

This is the second volume in an ambitious project, superbly realised by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. They have attempted to do nothing less than give a sense of where poetry stands in the 20th Century, the dilemmas it faces as a marginalised art form and the experiments of those poets determined to revitalise debased language and enervated practices of conventional poetics. The focus in this volume is on the period following the Second World War up to the present, and Rothenberg and Joris' introduction establishes that context of chaos, distrust, disillusion and fear which characterised society, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima. That shock to our cultural psyche produced, on the one hand, a retreat to the lyric/domestic/personal/pastoral, albeit with a modern gloss; and, on the other, a profound exploration of the possibilities of rhythm, sound, space and form in the belief that language embodied an oppressive system and had to be transformed by the poet to express radically new perspectives—"Poetry therefore as opposition. Opposition to the dogma and conformity that overlays us, that hardens the tracks behind us, the reason to write poetry."—Nanni Balestrini.¹

The avant garde are periodically accused of being out of touch and self indulgent but this anthology shows how profoundly political, how embedded in the context of this appalling century, such poets are. Against the monoliths of business and government and the hybrid monstrosities of the media, the poet counters with the force of imagination. One is reminded of Blake, of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators". It is, it seems, the duty of poets to be revolutionary or, as William Carlos Williams put it—"Poetry is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas."²

Chris Andrews

Mortal

It's amazing how old some people can get before they even begin to realize they're going to have to die one day too as if no-one had ever made it perfectly clear the stuff about dying wasn't just a threat.

I say that like I'd plied the Styx on a skiff like my death was some sort of exotic fruit ripening deep in the hothouse of my being but how will having gone on about it help when my body is definitively stiff?

It's amazing how long you can go between drinks I mean those moments when it's clear as gin that after all you're not completely dead yet there's a survivor buried in you somewhere I say all this like my life was pure routine.

Adrift

For the first time in my life I didn't feel like an empty hayshed leaning down the wind on top of the last thing you could dignify by calling a spur beyond which peneplain and then just plain for as far as I could see from where I sat near a bale a straggling runt had pulled apart to find it gone grey all through: not absolutely sure of my emptiness as if something in it was working adrift, and almost unaware of falling behind.

The avant garde are also accused of being difficult, as though it's somehow indecent to challenge the reader and yet, some seventy years ago TS Eliot was writing "It appears likely that poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce varied and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language to his meaning."³

Yet the so-called difficulty of many experimental poets is often the result of inappropriate expectations on the part of the reader. Consider these lines by Armand Scwerner—

for you, that I turn for you, that I slowly turn for you, high priestess that you do my body in oil, in glycerin, that you do me, that you slowly do me that you do me slowly almost not at all, that you are my mouth that I am your vulva, feather, feather, and discover for you
—'Tablet XV'

or these from Kamau Brathwaite—

& i was quiet now because i had become that sound

the sun. light morning washed the coral limestone harsh against the soft volcanic ash. i was

& i was slippin past me into water. and i was slippin past me into root. i was

& i was slippin past me into flower. & i was rippin upwards

into shoot. i was

—'Stone'

or from John Taggart,

To breathe and stretch one's arms again to breathe through the mouth to breathe to breathe through the mouth to utter in the most quiet way not to whisper not to whisper to breathe through the mouth in the most quiet way to breathe to sing to breathe to sing to breathe to sing the most quiet way.

—'Slow song for Mark Rothko'

Any of these poets might be described as difficult and yet no reader sensitive to poetry should be indifferent to their power, even more apparent when the whole poem is read. I could just as easily quoted from Paul Celan, Hugh MacDiarmid, Yanni Ritsos, Nicanor Parra, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Pierre Guyotat, Nathaniel Tarn, Robert Kelly, Kenneth Irby, Michael Palmer - the list isn't endless but it's too long for this reviewer. And that is one of the most impressive features of this collection—the sheer number of outstanding poets assembled—and whilst there is a common thread of experimentation, the variety of those experiments is remarkable. Rothenberg and Joris have not restricted their selection to American poetry, nor to European or British verse. *POEMS FOR THE MILLENIUM* ranges from African poets to

Emma Lew

Now, Some Facts

I'm related to Karl Marx
My great great great great grandfather ruled Poland for a month
Anna Freud babysat my mother
My great grandfather never had a hole in his teeth
Stampeding horses tore my grandfather's thumb
My great uncle wrote *SUICIDE* and *ATTEMPTED SUICIDE*
My great grandmother had two sets of twins
My uncle was a bankrupt four times
My great grandfather wrote poems in German
My other great grandfather walked from Russia to Palestine
My aunt and uncle breed llamas in Israel
I'm related to Helena Rubenstein

Nick Reimer

Unrecorded

Cook stands on the shore at Farm Cove: it is the past. Sydney surrounds him. Low green apexes of land slash into the harbour; above blows the open-heavy of the sky, some equilateral clouds. He is not a simple man. Banks carefully traces specimens; others of his crew insert themselves, finding unseen views; outstare blacks, hook strange fish. Cook does not have questions. Haberdashery in Staithe is everything, he sees: he knows that there are no 'new data', that all phenomena are a single kind, a thing of the world can be neither explanans nor explanandum. Really he has not left Yorkshire, has not stopped digging in his garden, is still in church in London, singing. Drink machines lie buried under the sand. Usually he will not accept his own simplicities—Where do words come from? What is the start of action? The harbour is no place of options: it is like thinking into blotting paper; in the natives' language "spider" is the same as "web". Products and history start to fill the land. *The royal banners forward go.* The music is corrugated, a twisted metal framework rusting by a desert sun. Observations are not observations—he skips a stone. Caged in the captain's saloon, the bird of Happen strikes its head against a porthole, forward and back.

Graham Rowlands

The State of the Union

Billed as the State of the Union Address to state the state of Bill's union or preferably the state of Bill's non-union Bill's State of the Union Address prayed closed its eyes & thought of Hillary while looking Saddam Hussein in the lens. So everyone, but everyone wanted to know how far the President would have to go how far the President had already gone. Had Monica Lewinskied Bill Clinton or had Bill Clintoned Monica Lewinski? Instead of going the whole Lewinski perhaps Monica just Monicaed Bill—one & the same as Monicaing Clinton. Bill mightn't have got any more out of it if he'd gone the whole Lewinski but Monica might have got more out of it if she'd gone the whole Clinton Clinton, Clinton, Clinton, Clinton. Depends on whether or not she thought of Monicaing as Lewinskiing with lipstick. Anyway, who cares, who cared? Everyone & no-one once the Navy was on its way the Lewinski aircraft carriers carrying Lewinski bombers carrying Lewinski bombs smart or maybe not-so-smart bombs some dud bombs, dumb bombs, dumbos depending on whether they thought with their Lewinskis or with their Monicas.

the Tammuzi, Cobra, Brazilian concrete poets and the Arechi. One can't help observing Australian poets are conspicuous by their absence—you can draw your own conclusions from that. You also won't find poets like Seamus Heaney, Kenneth White, WS Graham, Charles Simic or Richard Hugo—if that's a limitation, it's a necessary one.

The editors have included transcriptions of a number of oral poets. understandably, these don't work quite so well on the page yet it's fascinating to again encounter such diversity—from Miss Queenie, the Jamaican "priestess, prophet and symbolist" to the Peruvian curandero, Eduardo Calderon, and bluesman, Robert Johnson. In a sense such poets are deeply traditional, seamlessly connected to the life of the tribe and the earth, how easily they speak of the spiritual. What makes their work radical is that here are voices previously excluded from literature, not only because of race but also on the basis of gender and class. And if the voices are different, so are the ways they use language.

I was also impressed by the way the anthology is structured—whilst the general trend is chronological, thus giving a sense of an unfolding, a dance even (progression is not the right word), the editors have also divided the work into discrete sections—these include a number of what are termed "galleries". The galleries introduce the work of seminal poets who are contemporaries but not necessarily part of the same movement.

The variety of poetic movements is amply covered (as I have indicated above). The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the Beat poets, the Misty poets, all are represented. Further, each selection is accompanied by information about the poet, including statements of poetics.

The importance of poetics is a given, and like-minded readers will find particularly interesting the section on manifestos. It's easy to take the detached view and focus on the limitations of any particular brand of poetic theory, of which nothing is surer than that it will eventually degenerate into a style, and yet those poets who are passionate about the possibilities of language, about the necessity for opposing the monsters of ideology and certainty, of proclaiming again and again the paradoxes and confusions of being human, those poets who have not lost faith in the power of poetry to be something other, must not only write poetry but read poetry, think poetry, talk poetry.

A manifesto is not, after all, a school or a set of conventions; it's a flag, a sign—it's not even that hard—as Tristan Tzara, that arch angel of manifestos, wrote: "To launch a manifesto you have to want A B & C, and fulminate against 1, 2 & 3".¹

POEMS FOR THE MILLENIUM is suffused with the passion of wanting and fulminating, it howls, it sings, it even yawps. It is the glittering/sombre testimony of those who have truly experienced this century. Above all, it is an affirmation of faith in poetry, as in 'PYTHAGOREAN SILENCE' by Susan Howe—

age of earth and us all chattering

a sentence or character
suddenly

steps out to seek for truth fails
falls

into a stream of ink Sequence
trails off

must go on

Footnotes

¹ from the Introduction, *POEMS FOR THE MILLENIUM*, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BOOK OF MODERN AND POSTMODERN POETRY. Vol. 2 University of California Press.

² *ibid.*

³ The Metaphysical Poets—an essay by TS Eliot, quoted in V de S Pinto *CRISIS IN ENGLISH POETRY 1880–1940*. Hutchinson University Library.

⁴ Tristan Tzara *SEVEN DADA MANIFESTOS AND LAMPISTERERIES* Calder Publications

Karen Attard

Zan Ross *B-GRADE* Monogene, 1997 63 pp

B-GRADE is Zan Ross's first collection of poetry and the first book published by Monogene. Its cover is reminiscent of a 1950s movie poster: a woman and a man, his face fedora-shadowed, are eclipsed by a cityscape whose glassy towers seem on the verge of engulfing them. It's a telling introduction to the book: gothic has often been regarded as B-Grade material and there's a strong gothic edge to this collection. This is evident in its invocation of certain nineteenth century novels. 'Syphilitic Redemption, 1860' is an inversion of Jane Eyre, while 'Not Quite Gothic' directly addresses Emily Bronte's Catherine (and the reader?): "Should I reach through the broken pane, grab your arm, match wounds, link us for life?"

The pages are possessed not only by ghosts but by vampires, zombies and werewolves: 'When | the full moon came, I slept with the shutters | closed cause I'd read Dracula, I || knew the score: never invite burning-eyed | men into your bed; go to confession, wear | a crucifix at all times. Don't forget the silver | bullet: Werewolves are an increasing possibility.' (Twelve Months Without Moonlight) However, it isn't these overt gestures that truly manifest the gothic in *B-GRADE*—such trappings are often present in the genre but are not central to it. Instead, the gothic is most clearly demonstrated in Ross's relentless examination of confinement and of unstable borders.

Ross's work abounds with diverse images of imprisonment: a madman is locked in an attic, lightning strikes a cage around a woman's shoulders, a daughter stuffs herself into a sheep crate, women are likened to kangaroos trapped on a salt dyke and fish in a barrel. Imprisonment is a central trope of the gothic but it is a particularly vulnerable captivity. The heroine locked in her cell/bedroom/attic is simultaneously enclosed and yet open to intrusion. Gothic walls are strangely permeable boundaries breached by secret passages and spyholes, a device Ross employs in 'Wallflower'—"Up against the wall, the Watcher: | black eyes—holes in plaster". This permeability enables access: "It steps out through the windscreen | in through the showercurtain" ('Wallflower'). Even someone who is "encompassed, all four directions" ('Concatenations') has no place from which they are not accessible. This vulnerability is shown at its most harrowing in 'Movies To Make Walking Quieter' a stark and ironic poem—

Sometimes you are a hostage, gagged
when no one else is. Men laugh, smoke,
kick
you occasionally. You sit in your own filth.
When they finally pull you to your feet, you
can't walk, fall on your face—a small
silence
of bruising spreads on your left cheek. The
men have to support you out into the sun-
light,
complain about your smell. You vomit
behind
the gag, dribble down your shirt, but all you
really care about is the sound of boots on
solid ground when you're thrust in the back
of a black car—you're not certain of rescue.
Someone up front assures you it's safe,
cuts the bonds. You untie the gag in time
for the car to fold into a stone wall, and
then
walk away without your body.

Ross's poetry has been described as transgressive, even excessive. These are both attributes of the gothic but it is at this point that B-Grade diverges most clearly from the genre. Within the gothic, transgression "by

crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits.”¹ (Botting,) ‘Movies to Make Walking Quieter’ demonstrates there is too much irony in *B-GRADE* for such easy reassurances.

Footnotes

¹ Botting, Fred. *GOTHIC* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 7.

John Bennett

John Hawke, ed. *THE NIGHTJAR—THE 1997 NEWCASTLE POETRY PRIZE ANTHOLOGY*. Coal River Press 1997 142pp ISBN 0 9587426 0 x

This anthology has been formed from poems entered for the prestigious Newcastle Poetry prize (I use the word prestigious because I won the prize in 1989 under its Mattara imprimatur, and that’s, I’m pretty sure, the adjective my CV employs). Reviews of anthologies invariably concern who is in and who is out and the orientation of editors in the poetry world but the prize is judged anonymously (though I’d guess that the selection of poets in the anthology are probably not).

The whole project does the service of providing a cross section of what’s being written now-ish by well known and unknown Australian poets (in the category of poets spending \$10 to enter for fame or fortune or as an incentive with deadline). How do judges judge poems? In terms of weight and importance or innovation. . . ? And how does the editor choose the poems? As a pot pourri or some brave stab at being representative of “a year in the life” of Australian poetry. No other publication in this country performs this service (though the Round Table anthologies used to a few years ago, with a changing editorship).

I was surprised that, out of the 31 poets represented, I recognise all but three names. Where are all the new younger or more experimental poets that such a prize would levitate to print? Are they wary of losing their deposit if not selected? One rough guide to experimentation recently has been the use of prose in poetry. Of the 38 poets in Ron Silliman’s ‘Language Poetry’ anthology (twelve years old now), *THE AMERICAN TREE*, 29 write poetic prose (rather than use the term prose poems).

In *THE NIGHTJAR* only three poets (Robert Adamson, Joanne Burns and Anthony Lawrence) write (briefly) in prose.

So let’s get to the poems. Robert Adamson kicks off the selection with his sequence, ‘A Day Book For Eurydice’. He uses a quote from St Augustine, translated thankfully (we are ignorant, Jeffrey Keddie! Classics teacher and poet who nails up three quotes, two in Latin and one in German—none in Greek—above his poem ‘The Return of Orpheus’). It concerns time and Augustine’s Platonist slant - his response to pagans querying Genesis 1, just why did God create the world in that busy week? Now many of us listen to Stephen Hawkins and Paul Davies but Adamson listens to Bob Dylan and the old songs. Adamson mentions neither scientists nor theologians but: ‘Philosophers I swallowed undigested swim in circles.’

Kevin Hart quotes the following exchange:

Rod Steir: Do you want to talk about philosophy?

Charles Simic: That’s a very dangerous thing to be talking about. Ideally, if there’s any kind of intellectual content or thought in my work, I have attempted to digest it and absorb it into the experience the poem is describing. . . . Poetry doesn’t state ideas. At best, it causes them. It’s thought-provoking.

As an evaluative criteria, thought-provoking seems up there with the best.

Roberty Creeley’s *DAY BOOK* is the only “day book” on my shelves, a half prose half poetry continuous account without dates or times (except sandwiched between front and back covers). Creeley at the time was experimenting with immediate, rough, unedited poetry and the book covers gossip, philosophy and odd thoughts. But I find it lacks the immediacy of a journal or diary and particularly their energy. I mention the connection partly because in ‘Raining Italics (4pm)’, Adamson echoes Creeley’s obsession with time escaping us: “Time is fascinating yet vile.”

I’ve timed poems to the moment, trying to pin down a process or the present, though a poet always writes about the past. David Antin times his poems to the minute in his daily improvisations, ‘November Exercises’. Adamson though, suggests a more open scope of modernity, the wild richness of urban experience both banal and extraordinary that conflate in our daily lives: “Simple tasks become operatic.”

In the suite, there is an uneasy energy, the lines don’t kiss you with beauty the way some of his lyric moments can, those moments that seem to dance most in his Hawkesbury poems, glinting with fish. The second part of the sequence, *THE NIGHTJAR* ends in poetic utopia, a world rich enough for the Argument from Design, (with Euridyce for me rare) . His language landing casual domestic irony, a love that’s hooked:

My love, today I’ll catch you a silver dory and tonight, grill it with lemon and a pinch of salt.

And the winner is. . .

The winner is Anthony Lawrence with a handful of poems. He also mentions a nightjar in a poem of an intensity past the lyric, an obsessive mulching of poet and poem in the natural environment, a poet practicing a call, ‘something lyrical, obsessive and pure’ as he ends the poem *When I used to burn*.

The poem *Thanatos* is another poem with the poet freezing into the landscape, but this time much more assured of his poetic voice (I typo vice). When I heard it read by the poet on ABC Radio’s Book Show, its poetic introspection distanced me:

Before you turn away, say your name and count the seconds it takes for the name to be repeated from rockface or the face of another lofty, death-contemplating heart.

I thought of Pessoa’s poem ‘Self Analysis’:

The poet’s good at pretending
Such a master of the art
He even manages to pretend
The pain he really feels is pain.

Not that I doubt the integrity of the poet or poem. I know the poet, he is intense and passionate about his craft. It’s just a danger that all poetry can find itself in, one that greatly concerned WH Auden. On the other hand, *Thanatos* could be an example of what one of the judges, Veronica Brady—quoted in the introduction—calls, “a sense of poetic tradition”?

I was much more impressed by ‘The Extended Narrative of their Lives’, family snap shots of memory embroidered with “a wet scattering | of bees under the bird’s cut crop” or “their shoes on a gravel path and thought | the sound the dead make, crossing over”. And the final section carves a chilling but wonderful trace of the living dead in the New England landscape, surprising and original using well muscled Anglo Saxon language. This poem alone, I



thought was a worthy winner and worth quoting in full.

Ethereal Paris

Adamson’s ‘A Day Book For Eurydice’ was joint runner-up together with Jean Kent’s ‘Working Our Way Up To The Angels’ (shared possibly because of disagreement between the two judges John Scott and Veronica Brady—fair enough, how could you and I agree on a poem’s anything?).

Jean Kent’s poem begins with a notion of equilibrium:

For every black hole in space, there is an equal white one.
Remember this, as you are sucked underground—

Different in quality to the natural equilibrium that half of a healthy wood is dead or dying, more ethereal and Platonic. It is a beginning that sucks me in as if to the dark wood where Virgil may appear.

Instead we find ourselves in the Metro among bodies packed in “tight/as blanched asparagus spears”. A Dickensian underworld is waiting for you above ground:

glimpses of police guns and stains
in an ancient doorway from a sans domi-
cile fixe,
a homeless person, burned to death (acci-
dentally)
last night. Our minds smudge
with black truths.

Does the parenthesis suggest a black lie or black truth, with the neat enjambment after accidentally, smudged (and how come we know?) Sometimes my tongue loses the lines. Rhythm tends to draw out in long lines such as, “When someone else is falling into the deep vacuum of his eyes” or, “The signature of a disappearing jet sizzles silver | in air reluctant to put out its light.” Such lines slowed my journey and made me impatient for the end, reasonable in a detective novel but unhealthy for a poem.

Debbie Robson

The Lighthouse

The image of a lighthouse keeps recurring, toylike with diamond patterns down its walls. A harlequin in black and white that flashes on and off and on and off: highlighting a thin peninsular. Below it wooden houses with verandahs overlooking sand and more sand, inside living rooms not confined by walls and lives not defined by clocks, just the beam at night that blinks awake calm and blinks again on the illumination of this—one second hung in the night. An instant stripped clean, pure in the sweep of light. Invisible in the day.

Kevin Murray

Story

Under the umbrellas of Lygon Street
doing our Renoir ‘Boating Party’ scene
a voice (mine) is saying –

*Once in Suva a lovely Fiji girl wrote a message
on the flyleaf of my Lonely Planet guide
to her grandfather, a village chief in Ovalau
that ancient island and in due course I walked
down a track under the volcano cone into
a green clearing, was led to meet Joeli,
sat to a meal with the elders in a long hut
and was asked to bowl the first ball
in the Sunday kirikit match. Which I did.
Then lay drowsing in the palm-fingered shade.*

This tale curdles among the coffee cups.
“You made that up.” Indeed I did.
The iron laws of narrative make fictions of us all.

Zhu Wen

translated by Simon Patton

bend over eat grass

eat, eat grass
 bend over eat grass
 sun dancing on the tips
 of the blades of grass, the rhyme-feet of light
 a riotous profusion of
 golden dancing shoes. today
 it seems there's nobody
 more fortunate than me
 eat, eat grass
 bend over eat grass.
 I lie on my stomach, lie
 on the grass, on my left
 a cow, on my right another cow.
 the one on my left is bigger
 but the one on my right is more beautiful
 as for me, I seem
 to be entirely without redeeming features, but
 boy am I hungry.
 eat, eat
 eat grass, eat grass.
 that person in the field
 over there, look!
 that's my cute little
 brother, he leads me
 to the grass, but then
 hugs the girls over there
 don't laugh at him, don't laugh
 we were once like that
 ourselves, and love
 a grassy patch in the same way
 but how could we be like that now?
 eat, eat grass
 bend over eat grass
 you love that patch of grass?
 then eat it up.
 keep eating, and then
 you'll understand that patch of grass.
 only, only
 see my brother work himself up into a sweat
 just like that, he's so conscientious.
 eat, eat,
 eat grass, eat grass.
 we're pretty keen too
 not stopping
 the whole afternoon.
 eat your fill
 while nobody's looking.
 eat up this patch,
 eat up that patch, and
 eat up the sunlight too,
 the final dance.
 then eat up every last bit of
 the scenery of their today
 and turn every last bit of it into cow shit
 eat, eat grass
 bend over eat grass.

The poem attempts to mediate between the art and light and squalor and misery and achieves much but tries to force a celebratory ending:

a brief elation of light as just-over-the-horizon angels
 spill champagne toasts to us from their celestial gallery.

My sense of angelic bliss accords more closely with Stephen Berkoff: "The best moments of my life have been spent in cafes, writing. I like to write down an observation on the world every day. Sitting in a French café, off the Rue Montparnasse, working for one or two hours is bliss".²

Kent's crowds become congregations and car horns and sirens, a choir. Crowds in Paris speak to me of modernity not winged beings "just-over-the-horizon". "Crowd without name. Chaos! Of voices, of eyes, of footsteps. Those that one has never seen, those one doesn't know. All the living!" wrote Victor Hugo.³ I must admit my that my experience of Paris is closer to Apollinaire's Zone or Jaques Reda's wanderings.

I'm running out of space so just to mention one more poet, encountered first as I dipped, as one does, into an anthology. Or perhaps I came across the name. I wanted to read the poems like I try to view paintings in an art gallery, without seeing the maker's identity, (the names are too prominent for this—in both senses).

From a Kris Hemensley's untitled poem:

The increasing hum of their wheels like the thrum
 of wings in my ears when
 pigeons flocked upon a flagrant's distribution
 of bread crumbs.

A tasty morsel with words working like thrum and flagrant (flying from flagrant, vagrant or typos) and with an easy rhythm though the piece starts off with an awkwardness that narrative sticks onto this language of ours:

This is the image; suddenly a road full of bicycles
 in that time when there were more bicycles than motor-cars.

The first line could be from a film script but the formal prosaic does take me back to a time when men wore hats (or rode bicycles) unlike the following lines which I find hard to read:

spangle and raucous signal however muffled
 by public-house doors & curtains or even the eight of patrons' numbers.

A kettle of fish, strange and salty. But without diversity and some syntactic or referential strain and formal play, poetry would lose its power and become bland as the sweetmeats of greeting cards.

Many others deserve a mention but without the room I'll leave you with a quiz-match the line/s with the poets.

And the night / is nudging us with gross familiarity

you felt your skin prickle with fear, despite the alcohol, despite the anonymity of the sea

Today a yellow neon/ has been travelling at my elbow

– will the last person to leave the twentieth century please turn off the lamps

All morning, fear batters, trees rot so that strangler figs can feed

The poet's gun as clean as the soldier's poem

where does none find a word for such a blue

. . . and I see / that mountain useless with its / crop of snow

The poets are Adam Aitken, Judith Beveridge, joanne burns, Charlotte

Clutterbuck, Lisa Jacobson, John Kinsella, Peter Kirkpatrick, Nicolette Stasko. For the answers buy the book. There's plenty of interesting poems in a collection that provides a valuable annual record of what's being written by Australian poets. It is also a handsome production in the tradition of Paul Kavanagh and Christopher Pollnitz, the previous editors of the Mattara anthologies.

Footnotes

1. This exchange is quoted by Kevin Hart in 'Writing Things: Literary Property in Heidegger and Simic', *NEW LITERARY HISTORY*, Vol 21. No1.

2. Stephen Berkoff, Style, *SUNDAY TIMES*, London, 4. 3.1997.

3. Hugo's, 'La Pente de la Reverie'. Quoted by Walter Benjamin, in 'Charles Baudelaire, a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism.' (1973) Trans H Zohn, p63. *VERSO*, 1983.

Sue Bower

FRIENDLY STREET NEW POETS N°4.

Wakefield Press, 1998.

Junice Direen THE RIGHT SIDE OF MY FACE

Jules Leigh Koch A STRIP OF NEGATIVES

Jason Sweeney BOY STUNNER

I enjoyed this collection. I think one of its strengths is the fact that it is a mixed bag. Whenever I have heard the term "Friendly Street Poets" I must admit I have envisaged a closely knit group of poets writing the poetry of suburban concerns. There are, however, three very different poets here. They are too different to be said to be forming a "school" and none of them are writing in an identifiably South Australian vector. These poems could be set anywhere. While a lot of them are very much of a certain time and place, it's often hard to tell exactly what time or place. (with, perhaps, the exception of Koch's work, as he locates a number of his poems in identifiable places). I was already familiar with the work of Jules Leigh Koch and Jason Sweeney. The work of Junice Direen was new and as is (hopefully) the case with any new poet, there were a few surprises in there.

Direen at her best is a risk taker. She is not afraid to be vulnerable to be lonely especially. And she does it well. The sense of emotional states seems to saturate the text. Not that there isn't some humour in there as well:

singles cough quietly
 borrow maximum books
 prowls markets with string bags

– 'SINGLE'

There is a lot of light in these poems and it takes all sorts of forms and functions; a lozenge, a frenzy. It bounces off the facets of the text and it is easy to let your eye be seduced, but it is what goes on in the shadows of Direen's poems that is the meat of the matter:

A frenzy of lights
 the sky shimmers low
 never lifts

whilst in another part of town:

cranes scour wounds
 in raw dark earth
 plant concrete pylons

she receives no mail
 the answerphone is mute
 admission of an orphan.

– 'Cityscape'

There are many places in Direen's text that are apparently usual until something very odd happens that compels you to go back to the beginning of the poem and start all over again. Just when you think you are sitting pretty there will be a line that makes you stop and think "huh?" This is good. The vignette is given an edge, the strange made feasible:

the wet buries you alive
rugby is cancelled

six Saturdays in a row
and dogs drown.

—'Auckland'

I have been a fan of Jules Leigh Koch's poetry since reading his poem 'Garden Snails' in a magazine. The surreal nature of this poem impressed without seeming at all forced or unnatural to the poet. There are a number of similar poems at the beginning of Koch's section, in the way of a sequence and they are all surprising, turning environments on their head. Floors become "landscapes of ninety degree angles" for mice, garden snails' house interiors are all different and a crow's afternoon becomes a strip of negatives. This kind of imagination is depressingly scarce.

Koch explains at the beginning of his section that he is more concerned with imagery than sound, story or language, and it certainly is this aspect of his poetry that stands out. Many of the poems in the sequence deal with seemingly small episodes, but he manages to imbue these with a sense of magnitude and space. The structure of the poem seems to work out from the perspective of a microscope to that of a telescope. That is, the poem will examine the minutiae of something and then move out in scope until something is observed from a great distance. This shift serves to heighten our sense of things as they are perceived. Look to the poems Earthworms, Glenelg, View of Harbour from Churchyard for instances of this phenomenon. One aside that I will make here (others may feel differently), is that I feel Koch uses the word "like" too often in his poems and often more than once in a poem. It seems a shame to me when this simple and overused device is employed to resolve an interesting dynamic within a poem. When a poet is on to a good thing, as Koch so often is, I think it pays to wrestle with it more.

Finally, I found that the poetry of place has a strong presence in Koch's work. He is skilled in putting essence on the page, stuff you find yourself nodding the nod of recognition to. Take 'Glenelg' for instance, a place I went to as a child. In my mind it will always be the ferris wheel that "creaks ever so slightly, like an abandoned vehicle, after a joy ride.", sometimes you just need someone else to tell you.

I came to the poetry of Sweeney from much the same place as I had with Koch's work. I was only familiar with one poem of Sweeney's, and that was 'Technopoem', a poem that I had liked and selected for *HERMES* while I was an editor.

There is a lot of pressure in Sweeney's poetry. It feels to me like external pressure, expectations, glances, comments, that have compressed these poems to the point where the text liquefies. These poems are bursting at the seams with an obsessive attention to detail and nuance that I suspect might be the product of some introspection:

Proseflesh/interstitial replacements: I do
not want to leave
gaps gaps in your teeth teeth bitten rose
rows of your teeth.
A techno poem. 2 footmarks an entrance
point. I place myself
grip teeth on plastic tab a small dental
reflective an outline
for my jaw and lips don't suck. Take han-
dle of direction
straps careful you are in a safe chamber
keep still I fashion
blue leaden jacket velcro slips this fits per-
fectly.

—'Technopoem'

Probably not good poetry for the claustrophobic! The language is more experimental than the other two poets, but not gratu-



Yu Xinjiao

translated by Simon Patton

Benediction

I shall walk on lightning
I am not human there is no grave in this world for me

I will see the gold-mines of heaven and the bamboo poles of labourers
see your smiling face wet with shining tears
that hand, in hand with another, running to another hand
that forest, surging towards the edge of the sky after another forest

I will follow this forest and surge to the edge of the sky
thinking of dance halls on earth of school yards and vegetable markets
government troops and actors wearing various expressions
there at the top of streets, the bottom of lanes, lined up on either side of the gates
aside from this heart
I can no longer show them any other identity papers

when I am in heaven this heart will be of use to no one but you
in the twilight on this bench which exists only in name
you hold me tightly
don't let this heart tremble uncontrollably
hold me closely
let me wet your sleeves with my tears
you've known it all along no, I am not human

there is no grave in this world for me

but still I wish to bless the earth
today I leave behind these poems
and you—the forests I have planted—will stay
for it is my wish that not everything of beauty follow me when I go
stay and grow in this city
and do not refuse anyone's dependence
bring forth your red flowers and your leaves
and when you bend in the storm
I ask the city buildings
not to shake in the wind

itously so. Sweeney builds and builds with his words. The magnitude of the fear he feels as a "poofter he's wearing BLACK" is palpable. The imagery reflects the physicality of this anxiety, much of it sited in the mouth with its "sucking", and "small dental reflectives". To say it is only erotic would be to undersell this work. There are elements of eroticism, but it is more about penetration, who gets to fuck who. Who has the power, who is desired.

Even though Sweeney has dispensed with many classic devices of the poet and his poetry looks like prose on the page, it could never be mistaken for such. It is far too intense. And that is the best thing about poetry.

Bev Braune

Neil Paech *THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR*
Wakefield Press 103pp 1998

Stephen Lawrence *BEASTS LABIAL*
Friendly Street Poets Inc in asso-
ciation with Wakefield Press
72pp 1998

In contemplating the relationship between the "Eye and Mind" in painting, Merleau-Ponty noted what we often take for granted when we are not thinking about it—that "the enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look

at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking". It is "this strange system of exchanges" that Neil Paech challenges in *The skinscape voyeur*. This is a collection of poems that is "bare"—bare of desire to appear to be anything other than simple statements of what might emerge from beneath thin skin. Paech seems fascinated by how we read each other in different places and under circumstances that, however varied, come down to one one thing:

i start at my bowels
and move up through my stomach to my
head
which i suck out like an oyster in bone
until all that's left is my mouth.

As in his earlier collections *THE BITUMEN RHINO* and *K IS FOR KEEPER AS IS FOR-TV*, he is concerned with the determination / definition of the significance of surfaces, the relationships between "i" and "the world", where his fingers are "skinscape voyeurs": "the space between us | is a dictionary of collusions"

she cuts her hair and a city collapses
i am a flat interminable horizon
when she isn't present
i am a flat road leading up to a horizon
i can't contact....

This collection plays with the eros of impressions—the voyeur as "an architect of fantastic abstractions". Paech's experimentation with form makes much of deconstruc-

joanne burns

truce:
the humid handshake

thunder in the border lounge
the carpet runs for cover
the apricot armrest wears
its amputation like an official
decoration, say the order of
australia, the bathroom
of the failed statistic steams
like a fragrant wonton
where are the rusks, here's
the superglue to give
the toffee apple its
orthodontal gloss; the bow
of the world touches its
seven toes trying to find
direction, now that
the haystack monarchs
are sniffing at their
pyrex futures the proof
lies in the oven

tivist concerns with words. He uses small "button points" instead of "full-stops" to indicate a break within a line. And the drawing of the personas by the lines of poetry straddle the "skin" of the page concretise the conceptual foci of the collection: "skin around skin". The body is unexplored territory to be made and re-made in the voyeur's eyes and through the voyeur's body; the distinction between human form and urban form tightly woven so that what he sees is the extent of a cityscape of a many-windowed self.



Divided into two sections 'penny' and 'ann', *THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR* is at once a document of affaires de coeur as much as it is not, for "the lover" we learn about carves the nervous fibres of neither Penny nor Ann but those of their skinscape voyeur. The voyeur achieves a nudity that betrays burdensome transparency: "dissatisfaction has sunk me like cement to my feet". It is about the ironic ordinariness and exclusivity of intimacy, about the need to bare oneself, to find barren ground amidst oases of pulsing flesh. The poems of *THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR* are remarkable for their consistent attention to the taut voice of someone with mirages in his eyes—the voyeur arriving at mouths of ribbon-rivers where feasts of waterfalls are expected.

This is not the complex *mise-en-scene* of the "in-body" that I find in Stephen Lawrence's *BEASTS LABIAL*. Lawrence's is a menagerie of intellectual intrigue. His three-sectioned volume comprising 'Beasts Labial', 'Beasts Theomorphic' and 'Beasts Rampant' focus on or address recognisable characters and places from Classical literature, a wide range of contemporary figures (from Pauline Kael to Luis Borges) and methods of communication (from computers, fonts and letters to arteries and sea-journeys): "nerve ends stung at the sharp frontiers". Lawrence's skill lies in his ability to bring everything alive from the past and leave it there so that it remains imbued with mystery:



Thoughts without words
Fix unaware in blind meditation
Upon the sign before, as one might contemplate,
Passively,
A mandala, or crucifix,
Waiting for object and meaning to unite
And this thick reverie to leap into purpose.
....
Meditation is lost but its ghost remains.

—'Sign'

BEASTS LABIAL is reverential, divine-seeking -

Two gardeners to tend and admire
The beauty of the world's former crystalline complexity
To view with God's eyes
The ballet of physics and the jigsaw growth of ice-mountains

—'Eden'

—but even here, the beasts of mundanity contrive to interrupt the reverie of his voices.

As studied narratives on the nature of perception of drawing pictures of the "beast" in us *THE SKINSCAPE VOYEUR* invites readers into the text by pretending to keep us out, while *BEASTS LABIAL* leaves us definite clues through epigraphs and careful but never overdone explanations of contexts. Both volumes regard the world much like Richard Wollheim trying to rationalise the concept of drawing pic-

tures—though we are convinced that we need our eyes to draw accurate pictures and to "read" them, we suspect that there is more than accurate physical vision that brings a picture alive. Or, as Paech might put it: "her picture clarifies the tongue".

Lauren Williams

Anthony Lawrence *NEW AND SELECTED POEMS* University of Queensland Press 1998, ISBN 0 7022 2980 6

I came to review his *NEW AND SELECTED POEMS* knowing very little about Anthony Lawrence or his work beyond his seeming ubiquitousness at the "high" end of the list of poetry awards, and as the subject of the odd personal anecdote among other poets. Vaguely, I associated him with poems about fishing. It was as a tabula rasa, therefore, that I sat down to the task of reading this substantial 335-page collection. The size alone is impressive, and reassuring. . . in such a large haul of poems the reader is bound to find good fish aplenty.

The selection is taken from Lawrence's five previous books—*DREAMING IN STONE*, *THREE DAYS OUT OF TIDAL TOWN*, *THE DARKWOOD AQUARIUM*, *COLD WIRES OF RAIN*, *THE VIEWFINDER*—and a new collection, *SKINNED BY LIGHT*. The opening poem, 'Quasimodo's Bells', is a risky one with which to start a book. Its quasi-mythic subject matter and genteel tone (" . . . when the last bright notes had paled; | he turned to quieter musings. . .") would lose, I estimate, 90% of casual readers almost immediately. However, Australian poetry for some time has doggedly, by various means, pursued this same end, with the result that its audience is now comprised mainly of poets, so it is no surprise that many of Lawrence's poems seem addressed

Philip Harvey

Q

Who ate the rest of my portion, where has the new purchase gone,
When are we stopping to have a rest, sentences missing their mark,
Moments passed waiting, no reply. Who wrote your autobiography,
Where is the South China Sea, what were you doing at the toy museum,
Sentences best left for others, post-modernists, those who might actually say.
Why does it rain then stop, how does the grass grow up,
What is the radius of the solar system, sentences that demand an expert,
For which the Italians reply Boh! Is this the centre of the world,
Are we standing in the main street, am I in my right mind,
Sentences eliciting a straight yes or no without any further to go.
We put our heads forward in this chancy world, there is no way
Of knowing, no way that's for sure, sentences children dream upon,
Phrases that together sway like trees. What is the missing letter,
What is this line about, you can't be serious, can you,
Sentences that imply a hidden intent, where something more must be meant.
Why did you say such a despicable thing, do you think the world owes you a living,
How much longer can this go on, sentences you don't want to hear,
Hazards for the unthinking majority. Can we be born again,
Are you the one for me, is this what we came to see,
Sentences begetting others more impossible than those that began.
Is this all there is to a party, why am I the Wilde of staircase wit,
And shall my pilgrimage reach a centre, sentences no one should ask,
Not that this stops them, not that we don't see the contrary instanter.
Who are you, what is this, where is that, when to, how come and why not,
Sentences we have heard too much from, sentences, sentences, sentences, sentences
Walking around in a circle hoping to find the step in or out.

to his peers. Such "poetic" poetry is not usually my cup of tea, but once I adjusted to Lawrence's unabashed Romanticism, and the accompanying verbosity and flourish of much of this collection, the poetry at the heart of the poems could be discerned.

For my money, Lawrence is at his best when most direct and natural in speech, as in 'The Fire Danger Board', which describes the experience of waiting for, then actually seeing a man come to move the red arrow on one of those isolated indicators of bushfire risk that dot country roadsides. Blackberrying amusingly debunks the bucolic myth of that most English of country pastimes with a comparable Australian scene:

The British poets must have had a terrific time blackberrying while I staggered around in a paddock outside Tamworth with an icecream container full and a pin-pricked hand after vomiting blue-black having eaten too many green ones with a bottle of nasty red.

The powerful and moving sequence, 'Blood Oath', uses the voice of a young, inexperienced jackaroo to narrate the true story of two boys' death in the desert. I was blown away by the piece when I heard it years ago, but couldn't remember who wrote it, so I was delighted to rediscover it in this collection. It is one of the all-time great Australian poems. The sequence on the sport of cricket reinforces the fact that Lawrence does Australia very well:

Test cricket's a gas, a blue for the Ashes
a Boy's Own Annual of thrills.
I'll watch every catch on the televised match,
but I'd rather get pissed on The Hill.

Lawrence's musings on various literary figures, including Brautigan, Bukowski, Ginsberg and Gasgoyne, are entertaining. In the sequence Reversals, events such as

rain falling on a tin roof, a burial, a case of food poisoning, a decomposing animal and a hunted kangaroo, are described as though the film is running backwards, a playful and effective device. In 'Genealogy' the poet responds to the personal items left on his dead father's desk. The poem is poignant and works despite the line cold as a thumbnail on the tongue, which had me testing the simile and finding a thumbnail on the tongue isn't all that cold. 'Lone Pine Road', where a gibbous moon in Pluto and a "moon entering Mars" are astrological impossibilities, also had the pedant in me tut-tutting, as did the misspelling of "ceilidh" in Allihies. Minor points, granted. And in 'The Boiling Head', one of the poems that had previously prompted my association of Lawrence with fish, I also rediscovered what I don't like in Lawrence—a kind of over-smart "craft-straining" (to quote Laura Riding), where lines like "a bald statistic in the wash" and "the anemography of wonder and desire" leave me struggling to find meaning in their important-sounding vacuity.

However, the breadth of Lawrence's oeuvre—humour to tragedy, realism to fantasy, landscape to psychescape—and his skill as a poet triumph over his flaws, and I now understand why he wins so many prizes. He's good.

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19th World Banquet 1 – a programme looking at the relationship between love, food, and poetry from around the world

26th World Banquet 2 – further explorations erotic, gastronomic, and poetic.

October

3rd Spring Journey – the final programme in our occasional series on the poetry and music of the seasons.

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For further details contact the producers of PoeticA

Mike Ladd 08 8343 4928

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Spring Poetry Festival

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The five-day program will have something for everyone: from the finest literary poetry to street and pub poetry; from bush ballads to love poetry in other languages; from the voice of children to the voice of protest; workshops, panel discussions and open-mike poets' breakfasts.

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Octavio Paz

translated by Peter Boyle

Basho An

The world
in seventeen syllables:
you in this hut.

Tree trunks and straw:
through chinks
Buddhas and insects creep in.

Made of pure air
between pine trees and rocks
the poem soars and shatters.

Vowels and consonants
weaving, interweaving
the house of the world

Centuries of bones,
griefs turned into stone, into mountains:
here all weightless.

What I am saying
barely makes three lines:
hut of syllables.

Coda

Maybe to love
is learn to walk in this world.
To learn to stay silent
like the oak and the linden in the fairytale.
To learn to see.

Your gaze is a woman sowing seeds.
It has planted a tree.

I am speaking
because you shake the leaves.

Octavio Paz, Nobel Prize Winner, died in Mexico City on the 20th of April this year at the age of 84. The Consulate General of Mexico and the Mexican Cultural Fund have organised and Homage to Octavio Paz that will be held at the Theatre of the Parliament House on Wednesday September 30th at 6:30pm.

The programme for the evening will include readings of Paz's poetic works by distinguished writers and academics, and a television interview granted by Paz last year where he read some of his poems.

The Melbourne, Victorian and the Twentieth Century festival in association with

The Alliance Française de Melbourne,
The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne,

and The Department of French and Italian Studies, University of Melbourne

present the

Mallarmé Writers' Event

Writers from around Australia will be joined by prominent international poets in a two day project of readings, forums and performances marking the occasion of the centenary of Stéphane Mallarmé's death. The event is part of a Melbourne wide festival and will coincide with the Australian *Divagations: Mallarmé and the Twentieth Century* conference at the University of Melbourne.

The Mallarmé Writers' Event will be held at the Alliance Française de Melbourne, 17 Robe Street, St Kilda on October 8-9.

Tickets for individual sessions: \$5/\$10 (Day); \$7/\$12 (Evening)
Two day passes (admission to all sessions): \$25/\$40

For bookings and information please contact

Chris Feik
The Australian Centre, University of Melbourne
131 Bony Street, Carlton VIC 3053
tel: +61 3 9344 7235 fax: +61 3 9347 7731 email: c.feik@arts.unimelb.edu.au

For further information about the conference and the Festival:

Dr Jill Anderson
Department of French and Italian Studies, University of Melbourne
Parkville VIC 3052
tel: +61 3 9344 5183 fax: +61 3 9347 3489



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Jennifer Compton

Safe House

for David Quinlivan and the Wingello Rural Fire Brigade caught in the fire near Johnstones Creek on New Years Day

Turn this house inside out
braced and joisted by a man with a builder's smile
he hummed as he worked and hoisted timber and tile
turn this house upside down
he's dead now and he built it
likewise tree stumps out in the forest
I could tell you which man, which tree, which forest
he built it and he left it in our good hands
red lights hover over the oval
men are working
unloading the injured, lifting the injured, loading the injured
men are loading and unloading in a documentary come to our town
I am decoding red lights that hover
the poet whispers in my good ear
Are you waiting for a UFO?
That's a helicopter, man!
this is my helicopter come to meet me
this is my town, this is my safe house
the trees in my garden step in close to nuzzle me
stupid member of their unnumbered, numberless cabal
they put me down on the ground, give me their breath
using me using them
the back door bangs
they lift their heads
I need you so bad!
they've melted into background
become scenery with a whisper
they've gone but not for good
the creative writing student
puppyfat and fringe
needs to use the outdoor dunny
I was trying to impress you. I'm sorry.
Now you'll never know the end to this story.
I'm sorry. I'm not going to tell you.

Contributors

Adam Aitken lives in Sydney and has published poems in a variety of national and international journals. His most recent volume, *IN ONE HOUSE*, was published by Angus and Robertson in 1996.

Karen Attard's first book, *WHISPER DARK*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series.

Chris Andrews is the translator of Luis Sepulveda's *FULL CIRCLE* (Lonley Planet, 1996).

John Ashbery is an American poet of some renown.

John Bennett's most recent collections, *AUSTRALIA FIELD NOTES* and *ALBION FIELD NOTES* were released by Five Islands Press in September. He has just completed an MA in Creative Writing.

Paola Bilbrough is a Melbourne poet. Her poetry has appeared in journals in England, New Zealand and Canada.

Sue Bower is a poet and former editor of *HERMES*. Her first collection of poetry, *FACTORY JOKER* was published by Five Islands Press in 1997.

Peter Boyle was awarded the 1995 NSW Premier's Prize for Poetry for his first collection. Hale and Remonger published his second collection *THE BLUE CLOUD OF CRYING* which won the NBC Banjo Award for Poetry.

Bev Braune's most recent collection, *CAMOUFLAGE*, was published by Bloodaxe Books earlier this year.

joanne burns is rarely capitalised. Her latest book is *PENELOPE'S KNEES* (UQP, 1996) A new collection of poems, *AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY* is to be published by Five Islands Press.

Jennifer Compton, poet and playwright, lives in rural NSW. Her play *THE BIG PICTURE* premiered at the Griffin Theatre in 1997.

Tricia Dearborn lives in Ashfield.

Dan Disney is a Fitzroy poet.

Keri Glastonbury lives in Coogee.

Kevin Hart's most recent collections of poems are *NEW AND SELECTED POEMS* (Harper Collins) and *DARK ANGEL* (Dedalus)

Philip Harvey lives in Clifton Hill.

Lisa Jacobson lives in Brunswick.

Andy Kissane's first collection of poetry, *FACING THE MOON*, was published by Five Islands Press in 1993.

Jennifer Kremmer is a Sydney writer and an associate editor of *CORDITE*. She recently won the 1998 Australian / Vogel Prize for her novel *PEGASUS IN THE SUBURBS*.

Emma Lew lives in Richmond, Victoria.

Tiara Lowndes lives in Coogee.

John Mateer is a West Australian poet currently studying in Melbourne.

Geraldine McKenzie lives and writes in the Blue Mountains.

Denis Mizzi has exhibited widely in Australia and overseas. Work of his has previously appeared in

HERMES and *HEAT*.

Kevin Murray lives in Balwyn, Victoria.

Simon Patton is a translator. He is currently studying in Hong Kong.

Patricia Prime is a New Zealand poet.

Brian Purcell's first collection *LOVELY INFESTATION* was published in 1995.

Nick Reimer is a postgraduate student in Linguistics at Sydney University. He has work in *ULITARRA*, *SOUTHERLY*, *HOBO* and *OTIS RUSH*.

Debbie Robson is a poet living in Newport.

Graham Rowlands, for many years poetry editor of *OVERLAND*, had his *SELECTED POEMS* published in 1992.

Brendan Ryan lives in Abbotsford, Victoria.

Gig Ryan's new collection *PURE AND APPLIED* will be released by Paper Bark Press later this year.

Michelle Taylor has lived in England and Scotland, and is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

Deb Westbury lives in Mt Pleasant.

Lauren Williams is a poet and student of Spanish language. She lives in Melbourne. Her forthcoming collection is titled *THE GOOD FISH*.

Ouyang Yu's work has appeared in many literary journals in Australia. He lives in Kingsbury, Victoria.

Matthew Zapruder lives in Hadley, Massachusetts.

Letters *continued*

Given the media's hijacking of sex and sexuality, *SUB DEE* champions a nominally science-fiction format because it seems to provide an appropriate vocabulary with which to describe altered psychologies. But apparently this makes *SUB DEE* a magazine for "nerds"!

It pains me to have to spell this out, yet again: the realism vs fantasy debate is a tired hoary game. Jim Buck buys into this counter-productive fetishisation of aesthetics by refusing to accept and critique *SUB DEE* on its own terms. Finally, Buck's belief that *SUB DEE* is a "publication for boys" completely negates the work of the five female writers and artists represented in *SUB DEE* N°3.

Ironically a piece from Kerry Watson also appeared in that issue of *Cordite*, applauding your publication for providing a context for writers. Not since I last checked.

Symon Brando
Editor, *SUB DEE*
Fitzroy

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Simon Patton

Compton's Hammer

What is poetic "truth" if not a concern for the correspondence between words and things, and for getting the match right? In presenting an aspect of the world (that is, a representation), to what extent is the poet accountable to others on the grounds of accuracy? And if a poet—consciously or otherwise—skews in words an aspect of the world of experience for the sake of appearances, what does this mean for the validity of the poem as an aesthetic and instructive object, not to mention the integrity of the writer?

Despite—or perhaps in spite of—the lessons learnt from Marxist criticism regarding the ideological dimension of literature, many critical essays and reviews of Australian writing are written within the assumption that "true" art exists above or beyond questions of power, privilege and specific injustice. However, a recent poem by Jennifer Compton published in the *BULLETIN* serves to remind us just how overtly ideological literature can be:

I was raped by a woman
the knife she held at my throat was sisterhood
no man had ever taken me so disdainfully
when I met her ever after I was deathly polite and
formal¹

The first thing to notice about this poem—after you've recovered from the whack over the head it deals you—is the fact that it is composed in the form of an epigram. The epigram is, ideally, characterized by compression, pointedness, clarity, balance and polish. Pointedness is the interesting term here and a decidedly ambiguous quality given the central metaphor of Compton's text. One of the main purposes performed by the epigram is satire. Often the satirical impulse is inspired by an urge for revenge. Yeat's 'The Scholars'—"All shuffle there; all cough in ink"—is a good example of what Frontline's Mike Moore might call the velvet hammer approach to trial by verse.

You might wonder about the appropriateness of the satirical objective in a poem ostensibly about rape. Alexander Pope could get away with 'The Rape of the Lock' because he wished precisely to highlight the gross incongruity between the name and the act it was applied to (Arabella Fermor's slight loss of hair). However, in these days of heightened sensitivity towards repressive behaviours, the word "rape" is not one we can use frivolously. It has, on the contrary, a terrifying force. So what does Compton mean when she uses it? To answer this one immediately confronts the distinction between literal and figurative language. Does "rape" here mean "the act of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse against her will" or does it have a metaphorical sense?

It is this ambiguity that the poem exploits. At first, we as readers give her the benefit of the doubt—it's her poem after all, and we are obliged to read the poem as literal truth until the text itself persuades us to do otherwise. After some reflection, however, we are forced to abandon the literal view for several reasons. Firstly, to write of a literal rape in a four-line epigram is a disastrous miscalculation; the form—with its satirical overtones—is entirely unsuited to a subject of this magnitude. Secondly, the metaphorical description of "sisterhood" as a knife suggests that the whole cast of the poem is in fact figurative (hence also the pun on "deathly").

Thirdly, the conjunction of certain terms—rape, sisterhood—and the implied comparison between women who "rape" and men who, with relative verbal mildness, merely "take" suggests that Compton's poem is actually a comment on the behaviour of men and women in general. Finally, the title, which uses "human nature" as a euphemism for negative behaviour, makes it clear that the point of the text is to attack the notion

often attributed to vulgar feminism that women are innately "better" than men.

Just how just is all this? A metaphor that equates a cutting instrument with the notion that women are united by the shared experience of masculine oppression proposes a similarity across two very different orders of reality. It is obvious, however, that while it is useless to try and reason with physical aggression, you can (in some parts of the world, at least) safely turn your back on an idea with injuries no worse than wounded pride. Compton's metaphor is unfair because it proposes a

something that you disagree with is to misrepresent it. What I find most dishonest about Compton's poem is that it is literally unable to name its real target. "Raped by a woman" means, figuratively, "feminism", a belief in the equality of men and women but one which the poet apparently finds coercive. However, such honesty would bring the issue out into the open—a clarity that the poem avoids. Instead, it attacks its object by stealth. By projecting the violence she feels for an idea by transforming it metaphorically into an implement of physical assault, by exploiting the emotive force of the word "rape" for the confusion it creates between the literal and the figurative, and by blurring the distinction between "rape" and "take" (Compton misleadingly implies that "to be raped" and "to be taken" are interchangeable terms), Compton would have us believe that "there is a great deal of human nature in women". There is, fortunately, much irony in this pseudo-ironical title.

Lisa Jacobson

Evolutionary Tales N°1: Flight and distant travel

From this distance, I'm small and quiet,
being all curled up in this poem and waiting

inside the woman who lies spread-eagled,
silenced by the temperament of generations.

Her husband cradles a book, whose contents
no one remembers, and as he reads

she listens, not to this, but the sharp unfurling of wings
within our dim-lit cave; her muscular breath.

Slow march of words crawling back through centuries,
letters inked into leather scrolls,

a dark wind lifting the fabric of memory
and my mother labouring me up to the world's fleshy rim

beyond which lie the nameless continents
and my father, who has long since put his book aside.

false equivalence. Undoubtedly, sisterhood—like any other society-transforming idea—has its zealots. It also has its inevitable caricaturists; you can read all about "those ball-breaking, hairy-legged feminists" in John Pasquarelli's new book about Pauline Hanson the Amazon. But is it unfair to expect poetry to rise above bigotry?

In their introduction to *WHO'S AFRAID OF FEMINISM*, Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell make a useful distinction between "dissent" and "reaction":

There is . . . an important difference between dissent and backlash. Dissent is disagreement, but implies respect for the other position, or at least the acknowledgement that the other position exists independently of the opposition to it. Backlash is primarily a reactive position, defending something that is perceived either to have been lost, or to be under threat. A backlash must formulate the case that it is opposing; with respect to feminism, it must characterize feminism in a particular way in order to convince us of its basically misguided, damaging nature.²

In other words, one of the best ways to attack

Fear is the fuel of many hates. What Compton would appear to fear most is the assertive woman, no longer raped and no longer taken. The active woman is the greatest threat to the poet's status quo since it is she who calls into question that primary hierarchy of actors (men) and victims (women). In the poem's final line, when the text's "I" confronts her aggressor, the best she can do is to turn herself to stone, and in this she affirms her identification with the "right class" of people, which tenaciously upholds an attention to form. And be assured that on this matter Marx would have plenty to say.

References

- Jennifer Compton, "There is a Great Deal of Human Nature in Women", the *BULLETIN*, January 20 1998: 69.
- Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell (eds), *WHO'S AFRAID OF FEMINISM?: SEEING THROUGH THE BACKLASH* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998): pp 3-4.

Philip Harvey

Z

In here is occlusive search for peace.
Limbs find the fairest fall,
Stomach is content, back assumes a line,
Head inclines toward presence.
Words lose their grammar, logic disbands,
Features change outline and fade;
Memory's meanings come apart,
Actions their purpose, practice its perfection,
Conditions are put behind
And here trust is given to unempirical evidence.
Fragments form figments, longings gravures,
Loves landscapes. The unknown of the known discloses,
Quits its tethering events, the jury out forever.
Inside here cannot be brought back to light
Yet merges unaccountable calls into colours,
Conversation in languages that never evolved.
Hemmed by the furbished home in your infant suburb
You are closer to its mood than is remembered,
Seeing faces in unfamiliar places.
Womb without casing, not death but a drug
That slows deep and you can know yourself
Dying of tortures unheard of, only then
You disrobe the germane erotic.
The future rears in a torrential typology
That defies the constringent analysis
Of the exegete in the woken street.