

**doggerel and grace:**  
australian poetry in the mid-90s  
by peter boyle

Poetry and Poetics Review

# cordite

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# Doggerel and grace: Australian poetry in the mid-'90s

Review article by Peter Boyle

LES MURRAY *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (Duffy & Snellgrove), JUDITH BEVERIDGE *Accidental Grace* (UQP), JS HARRY *The life on water and the life beneath* (A&R), JAMES TAYLOR *Smoke Proofs* (Paper Bark Press), PHILIP HODGINS *Things happen* (A&R).

“What use are poets in a destitute time?” asked Hölderlin in his poem ‘Bread and Wine’. We might ask instead, “What use are poets in a sunny easy fast-paced high-tech time?” The kind of things poets might do, the value of poetry, and a sense of the possible directions for Australian poetry in the mid-nineties can be gathered from these five books by five very different poets.

Les Murray is a highly prolific poet with an enormous verbal facility. His style owes more to the Australian vernacular of my grandparents’ time than to any obvious American or other influences, and the finest of his poems in *Subhuman Redneck Poems* concern his family and local country people. His writing in general is marked by massive energy, wit, cleverness, but also in the best poems by subtle accuracy and a fully exposed openness to death and life’s other less public tragedies.

*Subhuman Redneck Poems* contains a small group of astonishingly powerful poems in which Murray confronts his own past and his family. ‘It allows a portrait in line scan at fifteen’, ‘Burning want’, ‘The last hellos’, ‘Cotton Flannelette’, ‘Corniche’ and ‘The Head Spider’ are all finely felt, compelling poems standing comfortably among the best of his work. There are also several fine poems focussing on other people, such as ‘An Australian Love Poem’ and ‘Comete’, a quite beautiful and lyrical portrait of a woman:

Uphill in Melbourne on a beautiful day  
a woman was walking ahead of her hair.  
Like teak oiled soft to fracture and sway

## John Mateer

### The Norm

But when I saw her  
‘my first fuck’  
in the supermarket both  
of us doing our weekly chore  
the place polished by fluoro-green  
was not so much a  
maze as a gallery  
of itemized lust. Here’s  
a black pen, draw barcodes on  
my forehead, Quickly, She’s  
passing . . . I’d had visions:  
maternal heritage strobed  
from her fleshy face that night  
her loosened bra revealed indifferent  
if glowing lunar skin. My heart  
was singing like dawnbirds in  
established suburbs.  
She took my virginity into  
her with a tough kitchenhand’s grip,  
gnawed me with muscle.  
I her one-nighter after a band and  
too much beer. She my longing  
randomized. The one guarantee  
here in this supermarket  
in this exchangeable city is  
the face’s inevitable  
sighting me then turning  
the daze normal.

it hung to her heels and seconded her  
as a pencilled retinue, an unscrolling title  
to ploughland, edged with ripe rows of dress,  
a sheathed wing that couldn’t fly her at all,  
only itself, loosely, and her spirits.

A largesse

of life and self, brushed all calm and out,  
its abstracted attempts on her mouth weren’t seen,  
nor its showering, its tenting. Just the detail  
that swam in its flow-lines, glossing about –  
as she paced on, comet-like, face to the sun.

There are also two exquisite short poems: ‘Dream-babwe’ and ‘Deaf Language’. In all these poems Murray is at the height of his power.

The kind of qualities to be found in Murray at his best can be seen from an examination of ‘Burning want’ and ‘The last hellos’. ‘Burning want’ traces the nature of “erocide”, “the destruction of sexual morale”, linking memories of childhood ridicule with society’s destruction of an adopted girl also cursed by “burning want”. At times Murray is direct, casually prosaic, then a line, a phrase will startle us with its compression, its mental leap.

From just on puberty, I lived in funeral:  
mother dead of miscarriage, father trying to be dead,  
we’d boil sweat-brown cloth; cows repossessed the  
garden.

Lovemaking brought death, was the unuttered principle.

The tragic sense of a cursed sexuality is captured in lines that reach out from Murray towards this girl remembered from high school:

Showing off was my one social skill, oddly never with her  
but I dissembled feelings, till mine were unknown  
to me too  
and I couldn’t add my want to her shortfall of wantedness.

The artlessness of the tone is exactly right with its sense of a person speaking with complete openness. The shorthand fusion of “want” and “wantedness” brings alive a bond between these two people that should have been there but wasn’t. The poem conveys a powerful compassion for the victims of schoolyard fascism: a love-hating that is subtly made to extend well beyond this specific story, something finely captured in the last line where Marion, who died at seventeen, “was spared from seeing what my school did to the world”.

‘The last hellos’ is one of the strongest poems I have read in a long time. It recounts the death of Murray’s father with plain and moving eloquence. Simple things are made to carry an enormous weight:

People can’t say goodbye  
any more. They say last hellos.

Going fast, over Christmas.  
he’d still stumble out  
of his room, where his photos  
hang over the other furniture,  
and play host to his mourners.

The courage of his bluster,  
firm big voice of his confusion.  
Two last days in the hospital:  
his long forearms were still  
red mahogany. His hands  
gripped steel frame. I’m dyin.

On the second day:  
You’re bustin to talk  
but I’m too busy dyin.

The ending is an astonishing moment. Murray’s traditional Catholicism needs the power of obscenity to do justice to his need for religion, his need for some love-token to offer this dying man, his father:

Snobs mind us off religion  
nowadays, if they can.  
Fuck them. I wish you God.

Murray taps something very deep within himself in  
*continued next page*

## Dear Les,

I think you ought to write a poem BUSH POET AT DEATH'S DOOR.  
 I wonder what death's door looks like.  
 I've been there, in fact stepped through it – to be precise in an ambulance stopped at the red lights next to Kilbirnie Post Office – but I don't remember.  
 What I am sorry for is my mother heard them say – *she's gone* – or – *we've lost her*.  
 Not nice for a mother to hear.  
 But I was really ready to go.  
 A history assignment on the Weimar Republic – you know how boring the Weimar Republic was and probably still is.  
 For my karma's sake I spent years of my life writing a play about Hitler.  
 Forgive my excess – I am loosed on a tide of red wine and Van Morrison  
 POETIC CHAMPIONS COMPOSE.  
 He is a good guy Van.  
 I can forgive anything except boredom.  
 Boredom kills.  
 Keep meaning to say to you phrase – *everything was burnt up on re-entry* – as if you were a star or a piece of space junk falling back to earth.  
 Not quite *slipped the surly bonds*.  
 Remember what happened when Reagan quoted that?  
 the look on that mother and father's face as they watched their daughter explode in space.  
 I saw a meteorite falling towards Bowral one night.  
 I ducked.  
 Much good that would do me.  
 I am so glad I hope you are as glad as I am that you are in postcode 2429.  
 Van is singing MOTHERLESS CHILD.  
 I didn't bargain with God – I was quite firm about it.  
*Do what you will with him and send him back.*  
 There was no shifting me on that point.  
 I'd rather you came to my funeral than I came to yours.  
 That's what it always comes down to isn't it?  
 Am I going to be holding Matt's hand as he dies or is he going to be holding mine?  
 I'm just going to get another glass of wine.  
 Perhaps this is a poem.  
 I may slap it on the machine and press the save button.  
 POEM OF THANKSGIVING.  
 Now it is all going away because I am thinking of line length.  
*DRINK MORE PISS. TURN UP VAN.*  
*Not people die but worlds die with them.* (Yevtushenko excuse me that just slipped out.)  
 Neil said write a haiku for Les and this poem has only 17 syllables  
 but I don't know which 17 are the ones that make kdang!  
 but you are alive and I don't care if you have lost your net and can't catch those poems any more  
 don't care if you walk on your knees for the rest of your life search in the dust for grains of wheat  
 and those helicopters that you tried to wave away were you in Vietnam or were they giant blowies?  
 were you still at DEATH'S DOOR what I can never be an Australian? no one will ever know why  
 you waved those helicopters away I heard you cough when they threw the phone down on the desk –  
*cough Mr Murray that's right cough.* You tried so hard to cough. You couldn't. You couldn't remember  
 how to cough up those helicopters. Then you remembered. You coughed from a very long way away.  
 And I cheered on the other end of the line  
 – *good on yer Les cough up the feeding tube it's all good pud from now on good pud!*  
 Alive.  
 Miracle.  
 God is good.  
 What we truly want we can have.  
 Then we must let it live in the light of its own nature.  
 Or we kill it all over again.  
 I can't believe how much I am raving on. This is all a letter you write and don't send.  
 Because.  
 I wish everyone could sit in this room of mine and feel what I am feeling.  
 It feels something like bliss.  
 Can I publish this poem Les? Can I? Can I?  
 Sometimes I think the poems we write are only the thin shadows of what we think and feel.  
 The poems are like equations that can't prove the word starved approximations of what we grip onto  
 it's all that thinking about line length everything we hang onto and that hangs onto us is wordless

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these poems; they show us why we need poetry, even in a high-tech age.

*Subhuman Redneck Poems* as a whole, however, is dominated by an altogether different style of poem. Again and again Murray attempts to tackle Australia, the modern world, the city, history and politics in a blustery off-the-cuff style. At their best these poems are unfocussed and disjointed, the poetry serving mainly to obscure whatever it is Murray wants to tell us. As for what these poems are like, I let the reader judge with this extract from 'A Brief History':

Some Australians would die before they said Mate,  
 though hand-rolled Mate is a high-class disguise –  
 but to have just one culture is well out of date:  
 it makes you Exotic, i.e. there to penetrate  
 or to injest, depending on size.

Our one culture paints Dreamings, each a beautiful claim.  
 Far more numerous are the unspeakable Whites,  
 the only cause of all earthly plights,  
 immigrant natives without immigrant rights.  
 Unmixed with these are Ethnics, absolved of all blame.

All of people's Australia, its churches and lore  
 are gang-raped by satire self-righteous as war  
 and, from trawling fresh victims to set on the poor,  
 our mandarins now, in one more evasion  
 of love and themselves, declare us Asian.

Australians are like most who won't read this poem  
 or any, since literature turned on them  
 and bodiless jargons without reverie  
 scorn their loves as illusion and biology,  
 compared with bloody History, the opposite of home.

To me this is an airing of opinions. Full of unanalysed anger flung at the reader, it seems to feed off a culture of resentments. If, to quote the backcover blurb, Murray has undertaken a long journey of discovery "to the wellsprings of modern politics and culture" it all sounds uncomfortably like the profundities of Pauline Hanson. At his best Murray is the equal of Seamus Heaney or Derek Walcott – that is when he writes of the specific, of what is close to him; known people, family, his own life – but when he takes upon himself the mantle of national prophet his writing becomes opinionated, confusing and decidedly inferior. It isn't just that I disagree with his opinions (insofar as I can understand them). It is also that many of the poems in this book are just damn bad poems. Sounding-off prejudices, telling not showing, jumping incoherently, flat endings, clumsiness, lack of focus, doggerel; it's all there.

**T**he poems of Murray's I am objecting to are not satirical or tongue in cheek either – they lack the lightness and the humour required for satire. Nor am I talking about less successful, less inspired poems, the sort of flat but workmanlike, often rather anecdotal or slight poems of which there are examples in Walcott or Heaney, as much as in Murray. Heaney or Walcott never seem imprisoned by resentments or sufficiently charged with hubris to fire off instant salvos in Murray's style. It's as if there were two or maybe three Murrays: a finely sensitive devastatingly strong poet able to grasp the core of feeling, a writer with a great lyric gift (as in 'Comete' or 'Dreambabwe') and an opinionated writer of what is at times doggerel. If this was a matter of only one or two poems there would be no need to comment, but of the 72 poems in this collection 14 are brilliant, a large number – the majority – are fair to mediocre, and 18 are more-or-less bad. The poems I refer to include 'A Brief History', 'Green Rose Tan', 'Memories of the Height to Weight', 'The Suspension of Knock', 'On the present slaughter of feral animals' and 'The Family Farmers' Victory'. One other example of Murray's sad hubris is 'The Beneficiaries', an embarrassingly inept response to the holocaust.

Murray's is a curious case of genius. I have often thought of the similarities and contrasts between Murray and another prolific poet gifted, or cursed, with an enormous facility in the coining of words, Pablo Neruda. Both Neruda and Murray have the ability to take almost any topic, event or object and turn it into a poem. In Neruda's *Elemental Odes* it is an instinct for beauty that guides the images, a sensuous feel for the

continued on page 4

## Inclusiveness, Dunedin

for Ivan Klima

*They tell you: all the seasons in a day*

Mist overnight: in early morning like a silver lid.  
To someone unused to it mist seems to pass  
right through the body, by which I mean  
the mind.

By night I'll stand by the scenic  
lookout and mist will climb up from the ground.  
Now the air is shiny and soon clear,  
across at the point the albatross are circling  
and seals roll in the kelp like workers  
at belts and pulleys under water, the shadows  
shifting, evanescent machines.

The seals are free  
and yet are not, the underwater holds them  
anthropomorphised: I see and so does Klima  
the charm we put there, the sensuous rolling  
but the water closing over . . .

*Samisdat* is  
unforgettable, his books were typed out one  
by one and passed around. Passed on  
in secret makes them intimate, the words  
like shadows, on paper so thin under the finger  
-tips they seem to enter you all that is  
essential.

Klima wants to take  
a photo but the seals have moved off  
the rockface and the light is fading fast  
into the mid-day rain. In ten more minutes  
it is sleet.

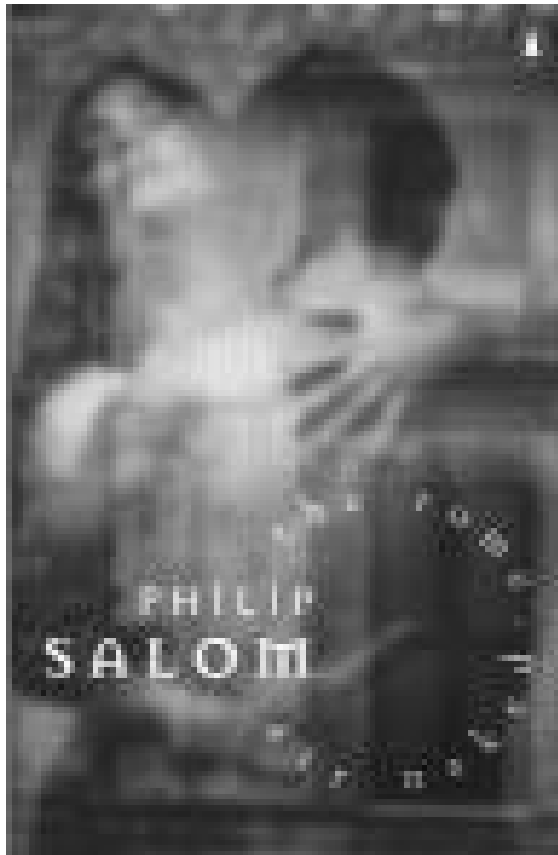
Yes, what they say, is happening.  
In the city I walk alone in sudden warmth  
the streets are grey and piecemeal  
the slopes as dull as England. Two men lean out  
an upper level of an incomplete building  
and hammer away at tin. It's high, dangerous,  
surreal above the shopfronts like a great box  
of lollies wrapped in cellophane.

I am walking past  
the church when the rain is sudden, heavy,  
and I rush in, imagining the gloomy day-pews.  
But an organist is hidden head-down in Bach's  
A Minor fugue, the earth is being thrown about.  
And starts, stops, hesitates in practising what  
Bach knew. The pipes are full, unstopped, the chords

shake me then go silent, the air like dry land,  
all life gone. Then huge, again, unrushed, the  
growling bass and the high keys like everyworld  
at once.

If only Klima were here, but he is  
speaking to another group remembering  
the past, his country's 'counter revolution'  
and passing hand to hand like touching echoes  
his ironic first editions and soon  
everyone asking what he'll write about  
now the communists have gone... and only  
some will see how such presumption  
angers him.

At the scenic lookout  
the stillness moves right in. The bay is losing  
brush-strokes, blue and green: Toss Woolaston/  
loose and rough Cezanne. I stare at the swell,  
wanting it to surge against me like the Bach.  
But it fades. Everything is changing. The mist  
climbs up from the valley, sealing off  
the open ground. The night. The dark.



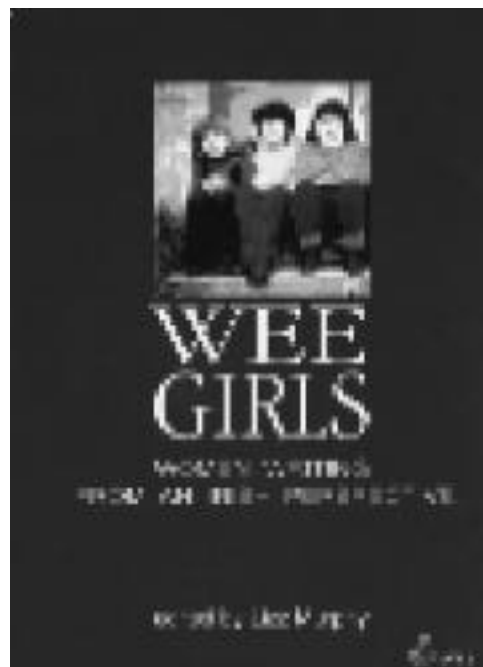
PHILIP SALOM *The Rome Air Naked*

Peter Boyle: Doggerel and grace (cont)

perfection of everything. In Murray it's always  
been an instinct for wit, opposition, energy,  
bluster; the desire to have the last say and to say it  
forcefully, hitting, in the majority of his work,  
towards the truth in an original, anti-sentimental  
way. Neruda seems much less shy of sentiment and  
to that extent the greater, the larger poet. Neruda  
has an enormous openness towards all things, all  
people, while, to me, Murray's work has a limited  
though painfully deep openness. It could further be  
said that Neruda creates out of a profound sense of  
beauty while Murray creates out of cleverness and  
memory.

Of course, a more obvious contrast is between left-  
wing Neruda and vaguely right-wing Murray.  
Does this contrast have any validity in aesthetic or  
poetic terms? Does it affect the quality of their  
poetry as poetry? I think it does. Murray's targets  
are Academics, Intellectuals, trendies, modernism,  
American influences, the city, atheism. When  
Neruda at times had targets in his poetry it was, for  
example, a specific dictator, the United Fruit  
Company or US Imperialism. Neruda's focus,  
though, was with the victims, with ordinary  
people, not with a quest for quick villains to  
blame. For the right wing conservative trying to  
lash out, emotions are centred in the head – they  
remain there as an unfocussed series of small  
angers. Such surface anger contrasts with the  
sentiment of solidarity in Neruda or the  
identification with the outsider as in Blake or  
Vallejo. Quite simply I would argue that the  
politics of a Blake, a Neruda, a Vallejo enabled  
them to tap into a much deeper layer of  
themselves. Conservatism is about holding on to  
what one has already got, about the quest for  
villains and the need to find others to blame for all  
that is wrong. By its nature such an ideology is  
disconnected, based on dividing people. Contrast  
this with the socialism and commitment to  
democracy of Neruda or the passionately spiritual  
Communism of Vallejo in an age when idealistic  
naive Communism was possible.

It is partly a question of where poetry at its best  
comes from – its need to escape the opinionated  
mind we all largely carry with us. Poetry that is  
fully alive comes from somewhere else and carries  
us to the core of things. What Murray is  
attempting in the political poems of *Subhuman  
Redneck Poems* is essentially a gifted illustration of  
opinions and, not surprisingly I would argue, his  
gifts fail him. Poetry that works taps into  
something deeper than what we consciously  
understand. However painful its material, such  
poetry is marked by the complexity of joy not the  
simple answers of bitterness. I think of what Lorca  
wrote in a 1924 letter to Melchor Fernandez  
Almagro – at the time Lorca was writing *Mariana  
Pineda* and starting on the work that would lead to  
*Romancero Gitano* – "Once in a while I am seized  
by a strange happiness I have never felt before. The  
very sad happiness of being a poet! And nothing  
matters to me. Not even death." Lorca is referring,



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alive you're alive and we nearly lost you but we hung on we hung on we hung on  
 I hope you are never sorry for this  
 is Australia just a very little like the Weimar republic? Just a little. Lotta guys doing things.  
 I can't get out of this poem it is writing me I am glad for me I am glad for you  
 I am glad for the crowd at 2429 I am glad for the PRINT CULTURE  
 I'm like just glad all over glad all over me  
 alive alive alive not dead alive there you are the simple mind that lives in the body that lives  
 dear Les why did you frighten us what would I do if I could not find you if you abandoned us  
 MORE WINE  
 poetry does matter they all talk a lot of crap about poetry but it matters more than anything they say  
 POETRY like they hate what lives in the poets the thing that doesn't live in them so they can't know  
 what it is but they can hate it but we mustn't let them oh dear Les I am down to one finger I have  
 lost the caps lock key CAPS LOCK KEY found it okay Les deal give us some more of those pomes  
 milch cow milch cow takes so long to find DEATH'S DOOR can't leave it at that selfish selfish my  
 papa tried to write the poems 30 years tailing out and the nailing machine in THE BOX FACTORY  
 this machine is so much part of me as I type one finger I type words I type message I type meaning  
 two handed now coming in for the big finish and hope that I can get the rope around its wild head  
 when you gave yourself up to poetry you gave yourself up to us you might as well relax and enjoy  
 you have more personae than I have had hot dinners and we can call you a cab in the rain but no  
 one can do it for us like you can do it for us and if we quibble and squabble it's just because just  
 because  
 well you know why  
 I can't finsih I can't finsih  
 misprint misprint  
 there is nothing like the mind of a poet purest manifestation of whatever  
 do it for my father who couldn't write the poem he had to write  
 I do  
 do it because you can do it  
 do it because we're waiting at the bus stop and we're bored  
 tell us about the moment when you gave yourself up  
 didn't belong to yourself any more but belonged to us  
 we'd really like to know about that  
 MORE WINE MORE WINE FINSIHED THE BOTTLE PLENTY MORE WHERE THAT  
 CAME FROM  
 come back to tell us  
 come back to tell us  
**I don't think we can save him**  
 well and we could and we've let plenty go you know we've let them go bright stars  
 so he's gone and he's gone etc.  
 but we dragged you back you owe us joy in the breath joy in the body like space dust that burns  
 in the sky over Bowral falling towards us if we are afraid forgive us live like we are afraid to  
 that's what you promised us wasn't it isn't that what you promised us everything everything every  
 breath  
 let's just forget you are a terrifyingly good poet  
 let's just welcome you back into the tribe  
 find a place for you by the fire (next to my father)  
 there you are where you belong you belong to us  
 we belong to you it's all just one big thing  
 Van Morrison sings *the wine will never run out*  
 fill the glass drink with no fear (next year?)  
 what can they do to us?  
 we who have died already.

#### Peter Boyle: Doggerel and grace

I think, to the sense of liberation felt when writing and something beyond oneself dictates the poem, finds a place in the poem. Looking at literary history, such transfiguration has often happened through political poems – but only where poets have surrendered themselves to compassion, identification with others and the complexity of both their own feelings and social reality. The sad thing in *Subhuman Redneck Poems* is that, whilst Murray often achieves that transformation in writing of his own family, he falls well below standard when writing of history and politics.



JUDITH BEVERIDGE *Accidental Grace*

Judith Beveridge's approach to poetry aims at depth rather than prolific output with some nine years work contained in the 86 pages of her second book. In a way suggestive of what a contemporary Rilke might be, hers is a poetry of spiritual vision marked by a natural affinity for the beautiful rather than the clever. This commitment to the creation of beauty is not in its basis a matter of prettiness or smooth-sounding surfaces but rather a by-product of the quality of attention she gives to things and people. In the best poems in this book, the Indian poems, the Elephant Odes and the Buddha Cycle, observation becomes both a spiritual exercise and a moral challenge. Unlike Murray, Beveridge's poems don't seem to

come out of her personal life or her opinions on things, but remain something separate. In a fairly lonely way in contemporary Australian poetry Beveridge holds up the ideal of the fully-charged poem that needs only itself for justification. Thoughtful, richly textured, tentative, her poems use the process of creation itself to explore in ways quite distinct from personal reminiscence or rational analysis. Her style synthesises a wide range of predominantly American poets – people like Stanley Moss, Charles Wright, Philip Levine, Galway Kinnell, Amy Clampitt, Sharon Olds, Michael Blumenthal – and develops a voice that prizes beauty, pathos, accuracy, formal conciseness, the textures and smells of things. Poetry becomes the task of hard-won vision.

One of the finest poems in the book is 'Man washing on a railway platform outside Delhi'. This poem is a fine demonstration of poetry as enactment; the measured exactness of the man taking the water to his body, the measured exactness of the poet balancing each line, placing the words so that they never be too much or too little, finding an exact course from Mozart to the beggar, from the village ditch to the names of God; seeing this man as wholly other, allowing all political interpretations to have their place, not wanting to preempt him into some creed, but not willing to let go either of the sense of mystery he holds. All this in a page that bears its legacy to Rilke but is confidently in the idiom of today. Another fine poem in the book is 'Tarepati' – a lavish sensual poem that carries a great sadness in its core. Equally compelling is 'Ashok', a description of a man winding a turban onto his head:

But it's the way he winds the cloth back  
 onto his head, not bandaging anything, but  
 turning the air with a gesture of holiness,  
 that tells it most. A woman stirring butter  
 into a pot. A lotus floating on a lake.  
 A scent levitating above the crush of traffic  
 and dust. The moon, the flake of soap, the kite.

It would be hard, I think, for anyone with a genuine taste for poetry not to be moved by the Indian poems ('Punjab', 'Man washing on a railway platform outside Delhi', 'Tarepati', 'The Dung Collector', 'The Tea Vendor' and 'Ashok'), the Elephant Odes and the Buddha Cycle. They have an easily accessible quality, a directness, a power that the best poems have – I think of 'Five Bells' by Slessor, Murray's 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' or some of Robert Gray's poems like 'Flames and Dangling Wire'. They have clarity and focus. Style and content cohere. The beauty of the surface carries depth behind it. They enact, without in any way preaching, intricate matters. There is a probing in them, a layer of uncertainty that operates through language. The individual voice itself seems to resonate quite apart from what is being said.

What then of the other poems in this book? Superficially it might seem at first to some readers that many of these poems suffer from an excessively decorative style, a perfumed extravagance that conceals a lack of real engagement with their topics. That was how some of the poems struck me at first, but after several readings I feel that at most only two or three poems merit such criticism. A more accurate reading reveals gradually that the tone itself, the voice which is the personality of the poet, creates a certain attitude or vision that seeks a fine balance between the instinct for the beautiful and the possible, between longing and acceptance. Poems like 'There is a Haunting Music Round the Bay', 'The Peacock on the Lawn', 'Incense', 'Hawkesbury Egret', 'Pythamides' Last Class', 'Marco Polo's Concubine Speaks Out', 'To the Islands' and 'Looking at a photo of an American Poet before reading his Poems' are much more than exercises in style. In 'There is a haunting music', for example, re-iteration and the sustained slow rhythm create the feeling of an exquisitely beautiful music that rises out of banality, that is sustained by a work-a-day world intrinsically indifferent and hostile to it. 'The Peacock on the Lawn' captures being at its most difficult, the sense of something about to collapse, sustained only with great effort. 'Looking at the photo of an American poet' comfortably sets itself up on the same wave-length as the best present-day American poets. A surety of tone and control guide us through the poem:

You have a raccoon's countenance equipped  
 for the prairie, a wild Kansas between your eyes.

*continued on page 7*



# Create new morphemes!

**JOHN KINSELLA & TRACY RYAN** Interview by Peter Minter

**John Kinsella** has published eight volumes of poetry, most recently *Lightning Tree* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press) and *The Undertow* (ARC/UK). He has won numerous awards, including the WA Premier's and SA John Bray awards for poetry, and was a recipient of a 1996 Young Australian Creative Fellowship. John Kinsella also edits the journal *Salt*.

**Tracy Ryan's** first and second books, *Killing Delilah* (1994) and *Bluebeard in Drag* (1996) are both published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

At the time of the interview both John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan were working at the Varuna Writers' Centre on three week writing fellowships. Having just published their work together in a double issue of the Varuna New Poetry broadsheet, I began by discussing with them the processes involved in collaborative writing.

**pm** In her book *Magnifying Mirrors* Renee Hubert comments that most of the partnerships that helped sustain the Surrealist movement were bound by the

"impossibility of a direct dialogue, of an unimpeded give and take, of a linear progression", that collaboration is not parallelism. Do you feel that common exposures or common responses result in parallel works?

**tr** I think, for myself, that our responses to things are actually very different. While they do have some common ground, we never intended in the first place to do any collaborating. It arose naturally because of common material, partly because of similar age and background in Western Australia, and partly because of living together and coming across the same subject matter and dealing with it differently.

**jk** Absolutely. The question of encroachment and appropriation is a common one and a popular one in our house. "Who owns the rights to what idea?" As Tracy said, we come from similar backgrounds and we're similar ages, one year difference, so things like the 1974 eclipse, were big things to us as children in Western Australia. It was a total eclipse. It profoundly affected not only ourselves but our families in various ways, and in all the time that we've known each other it was a topic of conversation. So I said, "I've written a few eclipse poems here and there, and it's a common image in my work", and Tracy said the same. It's an image in her novel as well, so we said mutually it would be nice to do something with that. This kind of evolved when you mentioned the idea of doing the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheet with the two of us, and the eclipse seemed the most appropriate thing to appropriate.

**tr** Likewise, with the *Intensities of Blue* pamphlet, we basically thought of giving a gift to family and friends that would be something from us both they couldn't get elsewhere. We looked for some common concerns, but didn't set an agenda and say "I'm writing this and you're writing that". Some of that actually arose out of Varuna too – the bowerbird imagery.

**jk** If Tracy and I were the same kind of poet I don't think this would work. If our work paralleled each other literally it would be a failure. It's because we're so different in the way we perceive things. We have similar attitudes, we have a similar moral stance but the way we see is completely different, and what we choose to see within an environment, within the landscape, is completely different. So that I think gives a kind of counterpoint to the work we do together, the same ideas in some senses, but different ways of looking at them entirely, and I think that's what makes for interesting collaboration.

**tr** There's a kind of cross-fertilisation, in a sense that, like any people who live together, if we read something we tend to discuss it or pass it on. If I see something that would interest John, or vice versa, we let each other know. So you've got a broader field to work from in that way, but that doesn't mean that we necessarily have the same interests.

**pm** Perhaps the cross-fertilisation that occurs, the networks of associations during the process of collaboration, would then go on to reinvigorate your independent work.

**tr** I think so. Certainly for me it has.

**jk** It does for me as well. I've collaborated with a few people over the years, including artists, and I've found that not only do you benefit at the time of collaboration, but it resonates right throughout your work in all sorts of ways you don't actually realise at the time. You incorporate a little bit of the other person, and that can only be good. You don't take that, it happens naturally. It broadens your way of seeing and that can only be good.

**pm** The idea of incorporation brings me to the poetry itself. I've always felt that what we call "landscape", and the experience of landscape, is a crucial element in both your poetry, in terms of exploring landscape and in the sense of the ways in which we occupy landscapes. Is this a comment you would agree with, or something that you engage with consciously in your work?

**jk** First of all I'd say that Tracy's approach to the concept of landscape and my approach to it are quite different, though we share common interests. On my part, I'm interested in landscape as something man-made, or human-made, and when I explore the scaping of the land I look at it in terms of how humans have exploited it, how they've adapted and how they reconcile or fail to reconcile themselves with that place. It's very much a visual thing, very much a thing about occupation and spaces being consumed or not consumed, and it's a very spatial thing. I think Tracy approaches it in a different way.

**tr** Yes. I'm interested in this question particularly because I am always told that I don't deal with landscape, and that my poems are only personal. I think that's a ready-made category that a lot of women's poetry in particular, though other poetries too, gets slotted into. People have tended for instance to tell me that they read *Killing Delilah* as just a book about relationships, whereas there are actually many different landscapes, including overseas landscapes, briefly touched on in terms of how the human being and human perception interact there. That really for me is what landscape is. Like John was saying, something that human beings make. People tend to use the term as if it means an unproblematic nature out there that we live in without having created ourselves.

For instance, there's a poem in *Killing Delilah* called 'Basel Zoo', which is about the experience of travelling to Switzerland and having somebody show me animals in a zoo, which are actually common-place animals you

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## Kirsten Tranter

### train

#### a thread

his olive suit shows a thread come loose, buttons sewn cheaply. his lapels curl with a double-breasted edge. my gaze feels vicious. his grey suit sits flat with a woollen look. her thin-soled shoes are crumpling towards the point. her mascara hangs heavy, she could be sleeping. I begin to understand the huge shelf of magazines at the station, the irritation of over the shoulder reading.

#### air

when I step on the carriage the air is thick with more than the usual smell of dark tunnels. there is a coiling around the air. sit and wait for it to spring. then it begins. she starts to sing, loudly with no joy. I have caught myself humming to my walkman at times and suppressed my ticking fingers. but she is singing, just call me angel of the morning. the stare of the passenger continues from every face, a blank. the air stiffens with the noise of her rough tone in the shake of the train.

#### the window

the water shows in a glimpse through rose bay's greenery and then the gallery's elegance. I want to find domesticity in the close windows of the nearby houses in this short passage through open air. the grey house is promising. today the curtains are different. there is no seeing through the freshly painted walls, a humming icy fridge, a white bed billowing with muslin, a metal sculpture. someone stands, and writes, and goes to the fridge and considers, and sits to face away from the rail line close to the window. back into the tunnel with a rattle.

#### a short distance

water pours down the glass door at the end of the carriage. the small space of light before the next dark enclosure shines with the wet colour of rainbreak, and heavy green plants are climbing the tunnel's shoulder. this is a sight to contemplate but the rushing archway makes it a glimpse. through and out again, the park is damp grass and a mist has covered all the taller buildings. my ankles know the cold I will feel when I step out into it, the street's puddles shining in the hardened early light. the greyness stretches across the close sky, no sight past the next block. the sky is a wide cloud of fog as low as the ground in the short distance.

**Peter Boyle: Doggerel and grace (cont)**

And those lines near your smile tell me  
you've been overgoverned by the weather,

underserved by the inconsequential.  
You've looked into skies that couldn't care less . . .

There is no wastage here, no slackness, just the same insistence you get in the best American poetry on making every image fresh, making every line count. By the poem's end we move beyond the fanciful creation of an imaginary poet to a sense of great poignancy:

But perhaps I should put your photo away  
face down on the desk and open your book  
to prove such reverie. Perhaps you'll tell me

it is never hot in Oregon: that men with  
jawlines cut and edged by hooves will never

swear allegiance to poetry. Whatever, I'll  
summon rivers and moons, even a prairie dog's

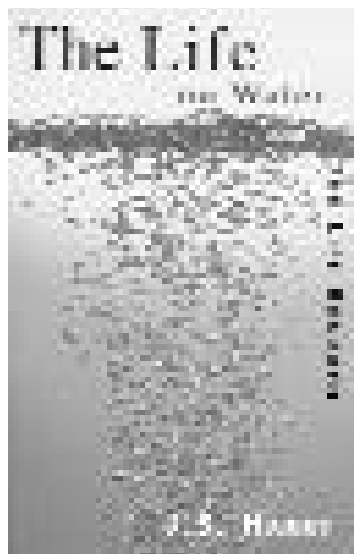
injured paw and deer moving in purple shadows  
far from the eyes of cougar and coyote.

It's fun sometimes inventing without justice  
or honesty. Holding up the photo of a man –

and expecting a nation to bear testimony.

One of the main achievements of Beveridge in this book is the trans-formation of her material – whether it be elephants or a household cook, domesticity or the mistress of a leg-endarly traveller. 'The Fisherman', for example, explores the nature of open-ness, of attention – "the way they stand / at the shore..." and in the end "only the moon / now offer-ing them sight over the waves / as they too lift their arms into the sky." *Accidental Grace* is an outstanding collection.

**O**f the five poets discussed here JS Harry is perhaps the most intellectually complex. Especially in the title poem 'The life on water and the life beneath', and in the Peter Henry Lepus poems, Harry reveals an extraordinary ability to work across many layers. Harry can hold together in a single vision



JS HARRY *The Life on the water...*

philosophy, ecology, memory, rural Australia, the theory of modern music, and Debussy, so that the interplay between these elements mirrors the depths contained within every person. And all this in a vernacular language that never seems pretentious. Playful and witty but equally poignant and disturbing, Harry writes in a style that is quirky, unexpected, both earthily Australian and comfortably cosmopolitan. Above all her poems have the cluttered knotty feeling of someone unwilling to give up any part of the truth for the sake of a smooth or beautiful line.

*The life on the water and the life beneath* opens with a prose-like extract on madness that reads like a psychology manual or a simplified guide to criminal law, only to be interrupted by a colloquial non-sequitur. Then, as in a musical composition, comes the announcement of the main theme, the drowning of a valley, a man rowing over his childhood – "he thought of the houses as bodies / of habitation. He wondered / how they were rotting." Then slice again to Debussy's music and a radio announcer's voice. At this point Harry poses this question in the style of post-modernist disorientation:

How to create a music ( like it )  
( as original as it was ) ever?

Disjunction and discontinuity in this poem always have a purpose – they never become mechanical devices. Section 2 of the poem exemplifies the exactitude of Harry's writing – its tenacious veracity. We are made to feel how in the process of loss "a vagueness / grew in people's minds", a vagueness that undercuts loss itself. The section has a complexity that makes it rewarding reading in the way that good philosophy is. The knottiness of her diction, its delightful toughness is captured in these lines of extravagant simile:

And, grey in winter, green in summer,  
tippling constantly,  
no convenient line of drinker-willows  
knelt, stumbled, leaned,  
stood, or fell,  
against their bar  
that was the river.

This elaborate metaphor to describe a line of trees that never in fact existed – in its context the point being that the mind's constructs are reality. And just when you think you have Harry's style in your grasp, there is this passage of sheer lyric beauty:

Where is the music for the spread  
of water's silence  
over landscape. What is the sound  
that will silk over your ears' skin  
like the silence of water?

The shifts in style and the shifts in the mind are part of this poem's delight. Harry will suddenly leap from the drowning of people's houses to the drowning of ants – as if each phrase, each reality was a bubble leading to another bubble. But, to me, it is never arbitrary, never just a game. Through all the poem's shifts you step deeper and deeper into its fundamental ideas: the uncountableness of the real, the vagueness, the uncertainty of every emotion, every event, the human task: "how to make / the unbearable / sound".

Why write a long poem about a rabbit? Why should anyone read a sequence of poems about some imaginary relative of the classic Children's Book character, Peter Rabbit? Isn't it all a bit whimsical, a bit silly? The truth is that the journey we make through identifying with any other being, the sheer act of becoming any other being – an ant or a rabbit – opens us up to perception. Just as any cultural product looked at curiously enough can lead us down into terrifying insight. It is rather like what Blake is about in *The Songs of Innocence*. Consider this passage:

But the rabbit is too busy –  
it is going down a long dark tunnel inside itself

**Mark Reid****Ode to Sth Beach**

The remains of the pier  
stick in your miserly west coast wash.  
The factory burns in corrugations  
amidst the rabbit scrub, its cyclone  
fencing rusts on the noxious perimeter.  
I have strayed from the primary  
colours of your playground,  
from the preened lawns & pines.  
I am walking the dog beach, old Manners  
arse up/snout down on the trail  
of some vermin or sea-creature long spent.  
I am giddy with aroma, with brine,  
with the stench of pickled things tossed  
from the ocean's passing window.  
I am watching the low profile of Rottnest,  
falling again for dusk over water,  
the port's orange bloom  
mirrored at Rockingham.  
I am mourning the Indian Ocean's  
tatty border, my lines snagging on the hem.  
I am clinging to my sense of you  
& your fishermen who  
hang in there.

**Hugh Tolhurst****Epithalamion**

As the century snarls towards a full stop,  
living together is frightening:  
the young don't marry because they're scared.  
I wouldn't do it this late  
but some kids still go the whole shebang,  
a couple I love did it on New Year's Day  
in a clearing in the Dandenongs  
as hungover as the worst of their guests,  
so romantic they refused a gift,  
requested a wedding poem, sweet fucking idiots.

to a ground  
where it has never been before. The eyes  
it looks at the world with are losing interest.  
It does not answer Peter. Its whiskers quiver.  
Peter leans closer to hear. *How beautiful  
grass is . . .* it breathes, almost with no air.  
Then it gives a long slow exhalation  
as its lungs say goodbye to the world.

The perception of the world and of twentieth century philosophy's attempts to systematize it through the eyes and senses of a rabbit is an extraordinary leap of imagination. In 'An art historian with a church for a burrow' Harry filters Nazism and the Second World War through Peter's rabbit consciousness. What is light, what is serious blur, become confused. If Peter Henry Lepus is a rabbit, he is also a kind of condensation of an upper-class English dream of childhood before Disney, before TV, before the two world wars. His fables startle us as they shift the ground underneath us so unpredictably.

The difficulty for Harry is that when a book starts with two such long and extraordinary sequences what follows is liable to fall flat. There are certainly some very strong poems in the following sections – notably 'Slugs could ski', 'Mother with Broom' and 'From HIV to Full Blown' – but it's hard not to feel a sense of diminished intensity, of work that is good but not remarkable in the way the opening two poems are remarkable. At times poems seem too whimsical like 'Best Lies' or 'Chorus and Protagonists', at times too strident – as when writing a political poem like 'The National Glue' or 'for all . . . (1987)'. One of the best poems in the later sections is 'Woman as Jug/ Blue Lady Poem' which achieves a very difficult task: describing self-destruction, an outcast alcoholic given to violence, without condescension or sentimentality, but equally without the post-modernist avoidance of feeling or responsibility.

All in all, J.S. Harry's *The life on the water and the life beneath* is a remarkable book of imagination, humour and insight.

**J**ames Taylor's *Smoke Proofs* begins with a similar kind of opening out to the modern eye as that in Keats' classic romantic poem, 'Ode to a nightingale'; that heady synthesis of love, death and poetry. Taylor is able to make the words split before us, challenging our assumptions about life and art. This is certainly a challenging volume – and though it contains some half-dozen very fine poems, I found there was much of it I didn't really like.

'Tasmania' unites early colonial history with food. Its brevity, its conciseness focusses strangeness. Consider its first two stanzas:

Grasses sprouted  
from the straw  
mattresses of  
shipwrecked sailors.

Natural moulds  
fermenting into  
double brie  
triple cream  
blues and cheddars.

'Foxground' and 'Rime field near Titania' convey a powerful sense of earthiness, of migration between the human and the animal. Many of Taylor's poems have

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## Interview: Ryan &amp; Kinsella (cont)

wouldn't see in a zoo here because they run wild, and she was very excited about this, saying "look at these creatures!" For me it was quite funny to realise that there were these two different landscapes going on, that what she thought was artifice was natural for me, the way the two collided. I think there's actually a lot of that in the book but it rarely gets picked up on. It's a different kind of emphasis from John's. John's is far more analytical and descriptive of what's out there, while mine's incidental.

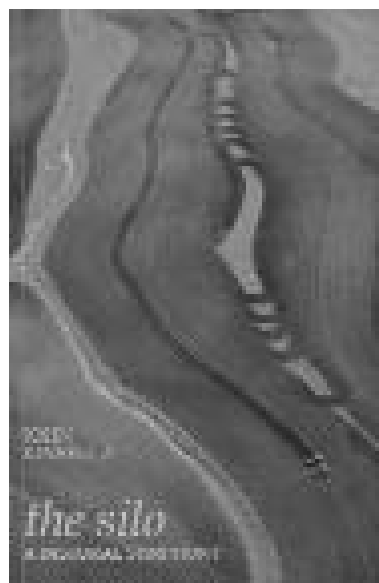
**jk** Also my animals in the landscape are people. Those funny creatures running around are people. I find humans in the "landscape", a thing of their own creation, quite hard to reconcile. Mine's a constant quest to work out how humans can rest in a landscape. It's a constant battle.

**pm** In poetry landscape rests in language, and I'm interested in how you actually approach writing your poetry in terms of craft. Do you think about the materiality of the language as a landscape, the way in which the landscape that is observed by the senses occupies language, or occupies the poet in language?

**tr** I'll just say something briefly because I think that will be more closely tied to what John does than to me. This becomes more evident to me in poems that are about landscapes other than the one I come from. For instance, in that poem about Basel, and another poem about Bern, the other language involved does something to pin down what it is that's foreign about the landscape for me. So the child using Swiss language which resembles English is an inherent feature of that. In 'Bern', the place name means 'bears' and the poem is about bears and how the city was founded on the killing of bears. In a way the language, on the level of just appropriating little phrases and tags, encapsulates what the poem's trying to do. I tend to write poetry which appears to be an invisible language, less linguistically upfront. But that's an illusion.

**jk** My language usage is entirely about mapping, and surveying the so-called landscape. Language for me becomes a landscape. I explore the valleys and the mountains of speech, the pitch scale and so on. Language exists as a thing in itself. In examining this

thing in itself you realise that the writing of poetry is like a palimpsest. There's an undercurrent of meaning in everything no matter how much you try and separate it off as a thing in itself. With me language becomes a decoding device, a means by which I can examine something visual or conceptual and actually illuminate it, so I can show

JOHN KINSELLA *The Silo*

you this picture of this place I've seen by using language. It's literally a process of translation and decoding.

**pm** So the processes of translation and decoding would mean, in terms of the materiality of the language itself, that what can be known of the physical and emotional landscapes is in some way limited by the choices we can make within the language we're using?

**jk** Well, the answer to that is to invent new words, invent new phraseologies, create new morphemes.

**tr** Which is what you're always doing anyway as a poet.

**jk** Exactly. You are. That is the call of the poet. The confines of language are constantly to be changed and stretched, and I think that in a work like *Syzygy*, one of my experimental works which is very influenced by the American Language poets, I try to take the boundary of

statement, observation and recounting that observation into the implication, so you're crossing between what-is into the what-might-be constantly. I don't see any boundaries. But you don't have to be an experimental poet linguistically, as I am sometimes, to do that. I think any good poem actually does that by inference.

**tr** I actually find that anything veering toward what I would call experimental in what I write I tend to keep for myself. I'm not quite sure why that is. It might be partly a

lack of confidence at working in that mode. I am concerned with how language is used to construct realities. One of the things that interests me is the way language is used in institutions like psychiatry to "create" a certain kind of person. For example, if you write in a report "affect flat distant," you're on your way to defining somebody as schizophrenic, and that could be used to describe someone who may not even be that. So I've experimented a bit with writing poems using that kind of language because that for me is a realm where I can do the exploring for myself, before I set out to make a different structure, and I would defy anyone to say that

that structure wasn't equally material and as much artifice as a linguistically emphatic poem. It is the same sort of thing, just doing a different thing with it.

**pm** Poetry is a place in which new ways of seeing the landscape and new ways of defining subjectivity can be developed.

**tr** Sure. I really believe that of poetry, and I think that's a large part of why I do it. I actually believe that of all art, too.

**jk** I don't think that through poetry or through any form of art you can actually expand a landscape. I mean the landscape is as expanded as it can ever be. It's just a matter of seeing things a little more clearly, or actually seeing things you don't notice at first. You go into a room that's completely empty and you say "this room is empty." Now on close observation you'll find dust, you'll find dustmites, you'll find many things there. There are many things you don't see. Of course this is why an environment can be damaged so recklessly without regard to anything else. People don't see things. They simply don't. They see a dirty great bloody tree and they think "that's in the way" and they knock it over. The implications of knocking that tree down, apart from the thing itself being removed, can be horrendous and usually are. So I think what the artist must do, the responsibility of the artist, is to illuminate the unseen. That's not a Romantic notion. It's a highly practical notion.

**tr** It's almost like a Russian Formalist notion of the *thingyness* of things, making the stone *stonier*.

**jk** Well, the Russian Formalists were great.

**tr** In the same way that you can make a person look like a schizophrenic by saying their affect is flat and distant, you can make a landscape look like something to be destroyed by saying it's got no churches in it, or there's no culture there, as was done in this country. The language in that sense is almost, not this simplistically, but almost controlling what's being done. You can't separate the two.

**pm** And at the present time there appears to be a renewed scepticism toward the potential for landscape or experience to be adequately described by lyrical poetry...

**jk** Yes, and there's a couple of things I'd say here, linking up with what was said earlier. There's the genuine "strangeness" aspect of language, and there's the idea of the word itself – that in a single word one can have infinite meaning, and so on. I think the limitations of expressing the landscape in any specific form, in particular the lyric, have been well attested and accounted for. A solution that postmodernism has thrown up is hybridising and running between genres – picking out the eyes of the best of the best and creating some sort of new form that apparently shows us something new. That's interesting, and I actually do that. Hybridising is a big thing for me, but, in a sense, you can do no more than utter a truth, and a lyrical poem can quite adequately convey genuine strangeness (and/or

## audition

cheap crisp and pocket size  
recorded sounds of nature on  
compact disc or tape mountain  
stream waterfall river desert  
snowfall rainforest swamp; birdcall  
crocodile stallion snake and – the  
eternal crystal spring: slip them  
into your ears quicker than you can zip  
up those jeans hey here's a new one  
tropical sunsets shit how must  
a sunset sound the brochure's  
advertising krakatoa meets  
mururoa love songs, with kakadu  
mining melodies to be released in the fall;  
meditational inspirational recreational  
invocational soon sons of jimi hendrix  
start recording acid rain through  
one auditory canal and out the other ears  
sprout coral cactus thin little needles  
of pine the head's awash  
with sand and tumbleweed birds that  
swim underneath reefs fish riding horses  
through mountains crocodiles eating  
snow

the word itself). All the mysteries can be entailed in one word, in one utterance. The idea of "Babel" confusing the one language and making it many other languages, getting those many languages together and getting everything said, gets you no further forward than would the use of one language. These are just different processes that come into being according mainly to the cultural environment at a particular time, not so much because we've discovered new ways of seeing things.

**tr** There is a weird conception about, especially among university students, rather than teachers, that there's one form or one genre or one tendency to be preferred over another, as if it were purer or 'the thing to do', usually because it's seen as the avant-garde at that moment. This is something that John and I often talk about, that it's very strange that people think they have to be restricted to one particular school of thought, that it isn't all there for the taking. I'm very wary, I suppose from having studied literary theory, of how every decade thinks it's got the answer and laughs at the previous one, that there's only one way of doing things.

TRACY RYAN *Bluebeard in Drag*

**pm** What you're both expressing here appears also to inform your activities as editor and producer of the literary journal *Salt* and the small press *Folio*, both based in Fremantle. The idea of all genres being, potentially, equally accessible or equally valid, seems to contradict an editorial statement

made in the introduction to a popular 1980's anthology of Australian poetry, that the purpose of any anthology is to give a "reasonable flavour of somebody's work, so you can then perhaps read more widely." To me this assumes a fairly pedagogical, predictable approach to anthologising – that an editor can educate a readership in what's best within a single genre, within a single text. Considering your approach to editing the *Salt* anthologies, which in a more open sense appears to

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**Peter Boyle: Doggerel and grace (cont)**

great energy and wit. His poems challenge us to view poetry as we would view modern art – accepting that we can grasp it as energy-centre, as line, shape, interplay of colour, inviting us to feel it as worked object. One oddity for me is that whilst Taylor's poems belong in a larger school of American post-modernist poetics – along with Charles Olson and Michael Palmer – at his best instead of the abstractionism that irritates me in post-modernism there is a strong earthy quality.

Perhaps the best three poems in the book are 'Blind Persian fish', 'Receipt for the Oyster Eater' and 'Throwing Objects in Annandale'. This last poem seems to me to say something about the need to make special, to celebrate lovemaking, eating, the fullness of life – to savour it as something charged with individuality and passion. The only way to convey the sudden leaps and strange beauty of this poem is to quote it in full:

JAMES TAYLOR *Smoke Proofs*

Do you ever run your fingers over the wove stock to feel the bite?

My daughter does. She found the tactile permanence and evidence in printed words that letterpress evinces.

Do you ever wish the plate from which you eat was other than the mass-produced thing bereft of love and left wanting as it falls out the oven's mouth? Makes its dull unthanked thud on the sill next the table.

When you eat off the silk slice of glazed clay with the frond pattern the fingerprinted crust in the ochre gloss do you say "delicious" as you inspect the tiny orb beneath the crest of the potter's mark.

The emboss made by her nipple when she worked in the heat in her bib and brace overalls in that suburb of this metropolis where she'd rather not be as she ached to finish each design in her sgraffito series.

There are two main problems for me in Taylor's book. In places, notably in the 'Geryon' section and in the 'CMYK Wedding', I felt there was too much unassimilated influence from other poets. In poems like 'This thing I'd like to offer up to you' or 'On an earlier Palestinian invasion' Pound and the Olson of the Maximus poems were to me too obtrusively present. If you compare Taylor with JS Harry the point becomes clearer. Harry's post-modernism lies in the overall drift of poems rather than in any specific traits. You can't, as you can at times with Taylor, look at a specific poem and say 'Pound and Olson' or 'Michael Palmer'. JS Harry's voice and style seem more consistently her own.

Secondly there were several poems where I could not follow what was happening. 'Australis dibus XIII', for example. What is this saying? Is this a poem about how some unidentified gay should try women again? Why use the word "sluts"? Is this meant to be about Australia's misogynistic past? I felt equally confused when trying to grasp the sense of poems like 'Besoms', 'Bridge of sighs', 'O Citizen', 'The new materia poetica' and 'Fruit of the blathr tree'. 'At Tiffauges' seems to me to convey that bizarre credo that acts of sadism, cruelty, rape, molestation of children open up art, knowledge, poetry. To me there is no parallel and no connection. If the poem doesn't mean this, what does it mean?

However, *Smoke Proofs* contains many exquisite and moving poems and my criticisms may simply stem from my lack of sympathy with post-modernism. The book closes with a very fine group of love poems that seem to relate as much to the Elizabethans as to the Americans. 'Dance on the tempered coulters', 'After the Sankore MS', 'Houghmagandy' and 'A hint of juice' are celebrations of physicality in the long tradition of

amorous poetry that is as much a part of feminist poetry (think of Sappho, think of Dorothy Porter) as it is of male poets. At its best James Taylor's *Smoke Proofs* offers us a strong distinctive voice highly attuned to the sensuality of things.

Philip Hodgins' deservedly acclaimed final book *Things happen* consists of three groups of poems: straight rural anecdotal poems, a small but important group of disturbing landscape poems that fuse the external and the internal, and a long sequence of poems of extraordinary power that give voice to Hodgins' dialogue with his own fate – death by leukaemia. In the first section of the book, "Rural", many of the poems are in rhyme and describe small incidents of country life. Mostly these poems remain at the level of description yet

they have an enormous freshness, a rich engagement with their subject matter. The first poem, 'A Jillaroo', for example, closes as follows:

A few miles down the road she notices the big expensive light-show of a tractor and rig

pulling far out on the horizon like a ship. It turns towards her then disappears into a dip.

She looks back in time to dodge a kangaroo looming fast like a drunk at a woolshed do.

In 'The Meaning' Hodgins uses the rough old-fashioned ballad form but brings considerable freshness to it through observations like:

a pair of eyes  
over near the chook shed,  
low down, close together  
and like Mars, faintly red.

In most of the poems in the first section the poet remains within the world of communal myth just as the style of these poems is mostly rhyme with its overtones of the bush ballad or country and western song. At times there was, for my taste, too little transformation of the material and too much reliance on the willingness of the reader to share a collective nostalgia for the bush. 'An image of the Murray', for example, is a well written yarn. What you see is what you get: a yarn about false teeth dropped in the Murray. 'The Drinkers' describes an assortment of animals at a drinking hole. It's well done, well captured: Hattie the dog "drinking as she goes with a slurpy clogging sound", yet it all remains at the level of description. 'The Land itself', to me, was limited by its anecdotal form.

So often poets have to steer their way between excess generality or intensity on the one hand and flat banality, mere description on the other. Hodgins' rural poems bring us up against one of those difficult areas of subjective judgement. Where one reader will be fully satisfied by the vividness of writing in Hodgins' rural poems, another might be put off by the flat tone, its anecdotal nature and its limited objective: description.

Certainly, though, Hodgins in these rural poems is too original, too gifted, takes too much obvious delight in his material to be dismissed as prosaic. Just as the way he uses rhyme, his control of it, is far too subtle to be, in any sense, dismissed as doggerel. All in all, these are for the most part beautifully written poems that succeed admirably in their own terms.

**Narrative**

Long-hauled in the hot zone  
a road train tugs on the rightist strings  
and precedent is damned like tokenism,  
an outmoded supply strategy  
that has them talking of extracting  
organs from prisoners and sustaining life  
to promote suffering, suspicion  
the family value, a mystery prize  
NO LONGER on the wheel of fortune, childcare  
keeping the nuclear family mushrooming  
like a bad joke in an ideal economy,  
plays pleasantly unfolding to capacity  
audiences who think they're watching  
a bloodsport, confirming  
their eruption from malaise.  
David Malouf says Australia  
is an amazingly successful social  
phenomenon, while that "weepy warbler"  
Mariah Carey says when I watch TV  
and see all those starving children  
all over the world, it just makes  
me want to cry. I mean, I'd like to be  
as thin as that, but not with all those  
flies and death and stuff and an  
Aboriginal family is forced  
into the baggage compartment  
of the Indian Pacific at the request  
of the "cleaner" passengers  
and Manning Clark was seen to wear  
the red ribbon of the Order of Lenin  
and as such is posthumously elevated  
to the ranks of Russian Spy. They  
call this cutting the deficit,  
cutting the fat from government.  
It's a jungle out there!  
The twenty-dollar dame's claim  
to utopia as the regional declines  
into nomadic wanderings. Now  
we don't need visas to tour  
the nation of our becoming,  
wheat subsidies and open markets  
colluding on a test zone called Woomera  
or Uruguay, war brides on the catwalk  
and an increase in the military budget,  
portraits of the Queen sneaking  
into the national pie like additive codes.  
Let us marvel at the national Panopticon,  
let us consider the narrow coastal strip  
turning like a pinwheel around The Rock,  
Uluru, the tower of rapid eye movement  
in the new parlance – explorer  
stock laying claims to its spoils,  
*Ayers Rock* the subtitle  
of a new White Paper on immigration.  
The kangaroos in the South West  
are struck down by blindness:  
crashing into wandoo and jarrah,  
caught up in wire fences, mowed down  
by tractors, drowning in dams. A turning point.  
*Seen it time and time again*  
old timers allegorically maintain. Speculation  
inhabiting the virus-laden air  
of Kangaroo Island, a semantic

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## The Lunar Lake

The moon's riddled Earth day  
carried above black trees  
puzzles birds into trilling,  
makes beetles fly their cars.

The lake on the dark side  
of that world is airless steel;  
its dry plate never records  
our brushstrokes of re-entry

but it's patent to the mind  
in its floodlit drink-quarries,  
a crater-cast golden with dirt,  
a Hubble lens of white settlers.

### Interview: Ryan & Kinsella (cont)

value the publication of a multiplicity of different genres, do you think the era of "The Great Australian Poetry Anthology" is over, or have the rules just changed?

**jk** I've edited *Salt* since 1990, over eight issues, and two of them have been rather large and substantial anthologies. In terms of our working together, Tracy has been involved in the production of the last two issues, including the *Salt Reader*, and although I make all the editorial decisions and have a vision of what the magazine is, the production side of it actually *is* an editorial role, because in the process of setting poems, even though they've already been chosen, there's a lot of discussion that goes on about the way things are...

**tr** It's intertwined...

**jk** It's intertwined! This is about collaboration. Who's to say one is more responsible than the other? Sure, I choose the things, I make the decisions in that way, but Tracy makes all the production decisions and I see that as every bit as important. Now this says a lot about my attitude to anthologising. I don't write editorials. I write voluminous amounts for other journals and so on, but not editorials for the journal I edit. I believe the pieces I include speak for themselves, and I believe in total eclecticism – the best of what I can get in any field. I'll publish a Language poet next to a purely lyrical poet. Definitions of anthologies are best provided by the way the works sit in a volume together. Editing is about juxtaposition. And the interesting thing about the *Salt Reader*, and I've had a lot of feedback from overseas about this, is that people say that it's incredibly revolutionary, because without being polemical, without

*"This is similar to my comment earlier about literary theory, that in the sixties they thought that what they did in the fifties was bit funny."*

–TR

making didactic statements of what should be, it has actually created an entirely new atmosphere by allowing the poetry to be itself. This is opposed to your quote from the other anthology, which theoretically wants people to read the same sort of poetry, or what that person sees as good poetry. This is something I am totally against. Poetry creates itself through the aspect or the medium of the artist, but is something which is constantly changing and defining according to, as I said before, the cultural environment it's being created in. The idea of *Salt* is that it allows the reader to investigate. I offer the best I can get and the reader then makes the editorial decision, and I really think that's the way it should be.

**tr** The other thing that's interesting to me about highly polemical anthologies, which I'm not saying I don't enjoy reading, is that they are very quickly extremely dated, so they are useful in some ways as documents of what people believed. This is similar to my comment earlier about literary theory, that in the sixties they thought that what they did in the fifties was bit funny. Likewise, if you look at some of the anthologies that came out twenty or thirty years ago, all but one or two things have completely died. Things may be argued for as "genius", then you never see them any more. All these things do in retrospect is chart the particular schools of thought that we're at and sometimes actually throw up some really interesting material that should have perhaps persisted. But that's a different project from something like *Salt*.

**jk** Well of course what *Salt* does is chart all those schools of interest and ideology and potential all in the one volume. This doesn't mean that *Salt* publishes randomly. *Salt* is highly selective and hard to get into because I try to choose the best in each field. That means as an editor I have to be aware of everything that's going on. People ask how can I decide a good Language poet from a bad Language poet. Well, a good Language poet is going to be someone who has a grasp of theory, and if I can't see an awareness of those things in the verse then that isn't as effective as other examples in the same genre. With a lyrical poem, written say in four line stanzas and iambic pentameter, it's usually obvious what's good and bad. So it's not a matter of randomness, it's highly selective, but it allows all types to exist. I'm a pragmatist by nature.

**pm** This breaks down the assumption, which seems to be characteristic of earlier anthologists, of the existence of a particular generation of poets who hold a common or related set of ideas and beliefs which can be thus anthologised. Do you think the idea of a generational position or a generational poetic, and I'm referring obviously to that Generation of '68 thing, is basically irrelevant with regard to the important work that's being done now?

**tr** From my point of view it may have been more relevant to previous generations, but as the situation changes, the influences that go into your work are not just the ideas of your own age group, which may be the postmodern situation – you're drawing on everything at once. So it's irrelevant to me.

**jk** But in a sense it's perhaps more relevant to Tracy than it is to me because, as a feminist, Tracy is working very contextually within the boundaries of "progress" against the patriarchy, which is something measured by time. I'm a sympathiser and an empathiser with this. So a feminist poetics works, in a sense, to a kind of timetable of progress against patriarchal things whereas, in my case, it's slightly different in that, even though I am part of it of course, I try and see myself as being outside the patriarchy and a bit removed from time generally!

**tr** Sure, but I think it's important to consider that feminism has been around for a long time, and it's not the primary impetus for what I write, as is also the case for a lot of women writers. In saying that, I'm not distancing myself from what a lot of people are afraid of as 'the label'. I've noticed that there's a great tendency among women poets and women writers generally to be afraid of having that label attached to them, and I'd like to say that I'm *not* afraid of it. I think that people should, if that's what they are, say yes, that's what I am, but that's not all I am. So in one sense there's a definite discourse with which I identify, but it's very diverse and there's a multiplicity of feminisms. For example I draw as much on Simone de Beauvoir, or Adrienne Rich – one of whom is far older than I am and the other of whom died ten years ago – as I do on people my own age.

**pm** And the desire for anthologising, as it has appeared in the past as opposed to the *Salt* anthologies, has been characterised by a very linear, patriarchal sense of progression – this is poetry now and the future will develop from this point. *Salt* does appear to challenge this.

**jk** In a nutshell! With the *Salt Reader*, I wanted and actually tried to solicit a lot more material by women writers. As an editor I won't publish anything by any particular group if it's not good enough. It's not a matter of filling space with 50% men and 50% women.

## Me, Myself, No Other

It's me, myself, no other who's lying  
on this filthy mattress in this hospital  
corridor, cloudsick, humiliated  
by their procedures, by the samples  
that they've taken.

&, yes,

it's me, myself, no other who has  
but one intention: to make it perfectly clear  
that my most ardent wish is to leave as I came –  
on my hands and knees, crawling.

&, yes,

it's yours truly, this humble petitioner  
that you see before you who will crawl,  
naked, to each in turn, to each  
of the mothers, to submit  
to their wrath.

& myself, no

other who will present you, made  
with my own hands, of my hair, of dirt  
from under my nails, an effigy of myself  
to do with as you will.

& myself, no

other, who's stripped to the waist  
in this dim hole, who for twelve hours each night  
shovels coal into a boiler – steam  
for an engine that must be, can only be  
an engine of war.

&, yes, it's

me, no other, who, entering a room  
that I thought was empty, finds it full  
of steamer trunks & in each, as I lift  
its lid, the evidence of a failed migration –  
a blue snake, hibernating, oblivious  
to the intoxication of my flute.

& me,

alone, hugging myself, who's crooning  
a lullaby as the ox is dismissed, as it sinks  
into mist – the ox painted blue  
that brought me here cradled  
in its horns.

& myself, no

other who, coming amongst strangers,  
can understand their language as if  
it was my own, their discourse  
of dead horses, of empire, of excrement  
& tedium.

& myself, yours

truly, no other, who, at the end  
of a long journey, was given a tent  
in this camp of cowards, who tonight  
around a fire as we warm ourselves, in  
gratitude, in terror, will place on the lips  
of each of my comrades a kiss  
of betrayal.

**tr** It's not tokenism

**jk** No, it's not tokenism. As it happens, the breakdown would be between about 30/35% women and the rest men. That's simply a reflection of what I'm sent, and I have found over the years that I get a lot more men trying a second time, after being rejected, than women. I don't know why this is, but usually a lot of women poets who have tried, and whom I have rejected because I haven't found their work suitable, have not sent again,

## Peter Boyle: Doggerel and grace (cont)

It's strange that rhyme is making a comeback at the moment among many Australian poets. Robert Gray, Les Murray and Geoff Page – as well as Philip Hodgins – have all taken to using rhyme in recent work. It may seem risky to make this claim but to me, on the whole rhyme, and English don't really go together very well. It's no accident that Shakespeare in his major plays mostly didn't rhyme, just as Milton and Wordsworth avoided rhyme in their greatest poems. It's partly that grammatically uninflected English doesn't rhyme easily. It's partly a question of the stressed nature of English that makes it all too easy for rhyme to quickly turn into a monotonous jogtrot. Contrast this with French where the stress value given to each syllable is much more evenly distributed so that the sound quality has more levels to play off against. In English the stresses in words are both fixed and strong. I suspect it's no accident that, almost uniquely of the European literatures I know, so many of the major classics of English poetry are in unrhymed blank verse or that, after the modernist shake-up of Victorian cosy, rhymed poetry has tended to move into the background. Rhyme came naturally to Chaucer in the days when our language was half French – a Norman *franglais* that differed from modern English in intonation even more than in vocabulary or grammar. With Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley and others, rhyme often worked largely because they avoided the clip-clop effect by using elaborate rhyme schemes borrowed from other cultures, like the sonnets of Shakespeare or the Odes of Keats. Whilst Blake did write great serious poetry in rhyme ('The Songs of Innocence and Experience'), for his books of prophecy and most of his work he instinctively moved into a form of prose poetry roughly 100 years before Rimbaud. Our greatest rhyming poets, Pope and Byron, were satirists who used rhyme for lighter more humorous purposes. Vikram Seth's 'The Golden Gate' successfully continues that tradition. Unlike the situation in French, Spanish or Italian, rhyming seems neither comfortable or natural for contemporary English in its more serious, more reflective, more inward moods. Yeats and Auden could still produce great rhymed poetry in the thirties, but as the century has progressed rhyme seems less and less viable. There are numerous exceptions, of course, but as a general rule to rhyme in English is to trivialize. Of recent Australians who attempt rhyme, Murray falls on the whole into doggerel while Hodgins, using rhyme for more limited descriptive poems succeeds in the achieving artistry and balance. Of Robert Gray's rhymed poetry, it's clearly not doggerel, but – as with much good poetry – I would want more time to read and reflect before passing comment. Great poetry can, naturally, break all the rules – and I would be happy to have my misgivings about rhyme dispelled.



PHILIP HODGINS

To return to Hodgins' book, there are four poems in the first section which strike quite a different note compared to the other rural poems. 'A House in the Country', 'A Decaying Form', 'A bird of Prey' and, above all, 'Midday Horizon' break away from the chirpiness of bucolic and, mostly, from the slightly sing-song edge of rhyme to present something menacing and complex. The poet becomes exposed, no longer shielded by any type of rural nostalgia. 'Midday Horizon' is an especially moving evocation of a disturbing environment. A man is walking slowly behind sheep in a distant paddock:

From where you are  
his shape is continually being modified  
as if he were walking through different dimensions.  
Sometimes he seems to slip into separate pieces,  
then pull back together, temporarily.  
The same thing is happening to the tree.  
The man stops  
and a low piece of him draws right away this time.  
It must be a dog.  
You notice the silence, how near it is.  
There's no threat that you can see  
and yet the thin exposed horizon trembles.

Whilst there are many fine poems in Section One, for me the quality of *Things happen* rises dramatically in second half – 'Urban'. Here, for 24 pages, there is not one poem that isn't extraordinary, powerful, challenging, disturbing. Even a rhymed poem 'Blood Connexions' is a masterpiece.

It's natural to believe that the greatness of these poems is essentially a reflection of the finality of Hodgins' situation. In a sense that's true. But no tragedy by itself writes a book. Not everyone facing death or loss or life's other appalling "things that happen" can write them in a way that would deeply move others as well as opening things out in their full exposure. It's not even a matter of being a very fine writer facing an appalling situation. Poetry isn't journalism – even supremely gifted journalism. The imagination, the unconscious, the instinctive need to be opened up. The unexpected has to speak through the writer. Rhythm, sound, musicality need to be there. And in this last book of Hodgins' all these forces are there at their most powerful.

There are moments when Hodgins reaches out – to Northern Ireland, to the victims of Italian fascism, to all beyond himself. There is a grappling with the untranslatability of pain – of the complete otherness of all he is experiencing compared to any healthy person reading his work. Proust wrote – thinking of his mother's and his grandmother's death – "Each of us is indeed alone." Hodgins last work both confirms and refutes that.

PB■

sibilance as high winds strafe the gaping spaces and those skies of deep blue open hard though systematically over the red sands while the market watches with a hopeful eye – doctors in Zaire report a breakout on the Ebola River – a georgic sucked dry of RNA. Lobbying freedom the seven proteins unbraid their complex plait, back in the kitchen, neither dead nor alive, a filovirus that takes a massacre to show its presence. Frank Fenner, hating small pox and rabbits, fires a warning shot – ruptured ecosystems release their viruses; a survey line in the jarrah forests moves a hundred metres when no-one's looking, a farmer covets a dozen drums of DDT, threatening to use them 'cause fifteen years ago he paid good money, new viroids sprouting from the paddock's surface, memory prompted by shifting fences. A comparative analysis of candidate strategies, the imposition of tariffs, contours snaking through the Venn diagram of shared usage, the eco-tourists and land share liabilities glossed-up in time for the election. Who says for merriment this planet is not well equipped? He needs to know *he* exists. She knows already but her voice is disguised electronically. A shift in preferences results in the syndic's authority being strengthened; a facsimile on curling paper brings excitement to the editor's office: integration ends all racism! A tightening of the English language literacy standards for would-be immigrants. A considerable body of militia are hiding their weapons. Quiddity is the word. The roaded catchments heaped rolled and compacted ensure maximum run-off with little precipitation, this national psyche has been drought-proofed and well promoted.

## The POETRY BOOK CLUB of AUSTRALIA

The Poetry Book Club of Australia was established in January 1995 by a group of poets, poetry publishers and poetry organisations. It is based on a similar organisation, The Poetry Book Society, which was started in England by TS Eliot and others in 1953. It has been established in Australia to:

- inform readers what poetry has been published in Australia
- give members access to the best in contemporary poetry
- assist poets by giving them access to a larger readership
- assist publishers with the distribution of poetry.

The Poetry Book Club aims to

address the twin difficulties of the low profile and limited distribution of poetry. It will also directly assist poets by providing a guaranteed boost to the exposure of their work, and the printrun of their book. In order to achieve these aims, the Book Club brings you a quarterly selection from the incredibly rich and diverse field of contemporary Australian poetry. A respected or well-known critic, reader or poet selects a title from among the many that are published in Australia each quarter. The selected title is then sent to the members of the Poetry Book Club of Australia, often before it appears in the bookshops that stock contemporary poetry.

The price for annual membership is \$60. You receive four selections

over the year of your membership, in addition to a newsletter and the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheet.

The Poetry Book Club is incorporated, which means once you join, you can have a say in how it is run. The Club is non-profit. If you have any ideas on the way the Club could be developed, send them to the address below.

### Management committee

Andrew Wilkins PRES, David Kelly SEC, Coral Hull, Martin Langford, Ron Pretty and Adrian Wiggins.

If you would like to join, send a your details and a cheque for \$60 payable to the Poetry Book Club of Australia to PO Box U34, Wollongong University, Wollongong 2500.

**Mark O'Flynn****Postcards from the Bottom of the Well**

6

No water here where dust is thick  
and even patented. Her lepidopterist's  
eyes quivering behind brambles of jewelry  
like an aphrodisiac for the terminally  
numb. She listens to the whimpers  
of broken-necked birds and thinks  
of Latin names pinned to specimen boards.  
A horripilation of moths drink  
the dried saliva from her lips;  
her face the pallor of the drowned.  
No pencilled message and no subtext.  
Too stingy even to buy a stamp. Here  
we have an accurate depiction  
of weariness, the solid memory of cushions.

7

You hang on those salted beachside walls,  
fading in all seasons' weather, hovering  
over the mute phone at the top of the stairs.  
Your crossed eyes the only thing  
retaining any colour, other than a bruised  
suggestion at your throat. The pursed lips  
like the diagonal strike of a pawn  
within the circumference of your face.  
But it is the eyes which bind,  
always at the pinnacle, beyond  
the reach of water, whom everybody hated  
that lived there, their red intensity lost.  
On my blind side, unnoticed, they have blended  
chameleon-like into subsequent walls.

8

At last the surface of water  
is manifest, though it could be the sky.  
Unseen mosquito larvae frenetic  
in the shade of a bridge. Punctured  
membranes of publicised dreams  
litter the stillness and eventual peace.  
A floating spider poised on the lake's  
meniscus. Reflections of willows  
conjure quiet violence, mud settling  
on the bottom, a school-bag filled  
with stones, the ripples dissipating  
after a swamp-hen has shrieked across  
the dinner plates of water lillies  
clattering into the reeds.



JUNO GEMES *Eric Mitchell, model maker, with model of his father's steamship Erringhi – Memorial Hall Brooklyn 1995*

**Anthony Lawrence****Chapman River**

At dusk, on a narrow path by the Chapman River, trying to locate myself,

I peel the skin from a honey-locust thorn, and watch black ants  
move along a branch. The ants have made a dark stain on the bark  
from countless single-file journeyings. When I cut a line through them  
with the thorn, they back up, spreading into each other like grey water.

Kneeling in mud beside the river, counting the three-forked  
prints of waterbirds, a sandfly with vertical stripes on its abdomen  
lands on my arm. I imagine a pair of herons high-stepping  
through a cloud of midges to investigate a soft splash near a willow snag.

I see a sand fly bloating itself on my blood, and stab myself  
absent-mindedly with the thorn. Concentrating on the sting  
its poison makes, I watch the ants until it's too dark to see  
their feelers waving, place my ear above the bark, and listen to them  
collide, pause, move on. I locate myself. I give myself names:  
waterbird, black ant, footprint, peeled thorn.



JUNO GEMES *Big Foot Spills His Guts – Mouth of Moony Creek, Autumn 1987*

**Robert Adamson**

## The Speaking Page

from *The Clean Dark*

When the tide moves again  
 comes up over  
 the point here  
 and spills  
 into Parsley Bay,  
 goes over  
 the river's torn entrails –  
 your breath becomes  
 tidal  
 atmosphere,  
 it heals deeply  
 thoroughly  
 then you  
 begin to understand  
 that the river  
 is like a blank page  
 you enter it  
 differently: shape  
 it as you would  
 a new thought  
 first vaguely  
 with phrases  
 then sentences  
 until finally  
 its language  
 starts talking –  
 when the river  
 covers a bay  
 you know its weight  
 soothes  
 healing the savaged earth  
 and the tide  
 begins to make music  
 as it covers oysters  
 as it climbs  
 over the rocks  
 its song fills the valley:  
 a baroque  
 tinkling tune  
 its lyrics  
 in a language  
 easy to comprehend  
 of course  
 it's imagination  
 weaving  
 the river-song, your mind's  
 invention  
 is playing you  
 as the tide begins  
 to ebb  
 and you see smooth mud  
 cuts healing  
 and there is windsong  
 to dance now  
 with your voice.



JUNO GEMES *Adamson's Catch – 6 Lizards, Summer 1987*

### ***The Language of Oysters***

explores the life and mythography of the Hawkesbury River. New and selected poems by Robert Adamson, together with photographs by Juno Gemes, are described by John Kinsella as "a major artistic initiative that sees different artistic mediums interact with each other". To be published by Craftsman House and launched by David Malouf in January 1997.



## Still Life Suite

### 1. Magician

She is marked as magician:  
sticks, flame, shadow and rope.  
She is restless, there is talk of prostitution  
behind the floured hands of the kitchens  
the manicured administrations.

There is the tilted town,  
lives operating in a  
perpetual potato winter  
faces still sharp around the kitchen table,  
only now with a digital accuracy.

The photocopier, the phone, the chair  
just so.

### 2. Butcher

The butcher is perfect in the window  
her head bent to the task  
her hands blurred  
over solid machines.  
Linearity imposed  
on squat meats,  
baroque with a marbled complexity.

Everyday her immaculate apron  
a canvas of hunger.  
She has lost a finger  
and expects more than this,  
as her TV glows  
with a tubular procession  
explosions, diamonds, and a meaningful glance.  
Her head bends to the task  
her hands moving in her lap.

### 3. Wormer

Her hands are the only tool she has,  
they are full of the type of debris  
embedded in the mangroves:  
broken bottle, jagged cans  
and condoms.

All around her there are plants  
breathing. On a quiet day  
she can hear them.  
As they cast bars of shadow across  
her back she bends,  
worming.  
Mangroves mock her in their successful living:  
Reproducing, transpiring, synthesizing  
and succulent,  
while she is as dry and transparent as  
the stocking in her hand.

She is seen on the shores,  
estuarine creatures moving about her.  
They are strung up in her hut  
both talisman and food.  
She is tolerated there  
for one day  
she too shall become prey.

### 4. Gardener

The flowers, the plants  
are there as expected  
complex  
she remembers  
in cross section  
under the microscope all those years  
ago at school.  
Their construction  
an orchestra of desire  
cornets of moist petals  
great swabs of pollen.

With her pencils and calipers,  
how could she have known  
that the house would come,  
a deceptively simple family  
living on inside.

### Interview: Ryan & Kinsella (cont)

whereas the men always inevitably do, and often bombard you with work. This says a lot about "confidence", which is created by the patriarchy.

**tr** I also think that still, and it's a terrible indictment to have to say this because things *have* improved, but it also reflects the material conditions women live under.

**jk** And an anthology, in a sense, if it's not going to be didactic or polemical, has to genuinely reflect what is happening in society. *Salt* tries to do that, so I hope that my ideal of 50% men and 50% women will happen before too long.

**tr** And a necessary condition for that to occur is that people feel there's an openness, because of most

young feminists, and probably quite a few older ones who are involved in writing, have been through the thing of looking through the anthologies and seeing one woman poet and forty male poets, and have always assumed that it has been programmatic, that there's "a

*"...language-wise  
Les Murray  
is incredibly  
interesting, and  
underrated as an  
experimentalist in  
language..."*

—JK

conspiracy". When you get on the other side of it, and are trying to rectify that, you realise that there are other factors involved. You can have the best of intentions and not necessarily pull it off. But you have to be open.

**jk** The poets I find most interesting these days, apart from those I've liked for a long time – there are certain Australian male poets for example whom I've been following for fifteen or twenty years and whom I hold in incredibly high esteem – but of the new material I'm seeing it's almost inevitably the women

poets who impress me. This is because they are inventing a new kind of poetry. The old poetry is a reflection of the patriarchy. For example, something very exciting overseas is the work of the American poet Lyn Hejinian, who has been writing since the sixties. She's redefined whole territories and helped give many young American women Language poets the confidence to get their work out there. The component of the Language movement that is female is enormous, probably larger than the male! I think that's really fascinating, because it's all about liberating language and breaking confines, making new language, which is something to be excited about.

**pm** Stepping aside from issues of gender, you mentioned before, John, that you make editorial choices in terms of what you consider to be "a good poem". How would you describe "a good poem"?

**jk** You have to look at a poem within its context. If it's a lyrical poem, working with a set metre and so on, then if the metre is flawed it's obviously not a good poem. If it's flawed intentionally a good poem will tell you so, because it's all about codes and if you're an experienced reader you know how to read codes as opposed to mistakes. The poem might have a sense of irony playing against the metrics. But if a poet sets out to write a sestina, for example, which has a set pattern, and fails, then that's very obviously a poor traditional poem. On the other hand if it's trying to be ironic and does it cleverly, that can be a good parody or play against the form. In terms of theoretical poetry, I look for vitality primarily, for things happening. There's a whole set of criteria that one observes but primarily it comes from extensive reading and being familiar with the ways things can be done with language. If you see something incredible you know it straight away, because it's not like anything you've read before. It defines itself as something new.

**tr** I think what's also crucial to the process, as I've observed as an editor, is a sense of self-examination. This doesn't exist in a lot of editing, whereby people judge a Good Poem from a Bad Poem without questioning what their preconceptions of a Good Poem are. With *Salt*, I think what John always tries to do is judge a poem within its own context, to say that a good poem is one which is succeeding on its own terms. This means you have to constantly be asking yourself "am I being narrow here, is there something going on in this poem which is outside my experience?" I think a lot of editors fail to do this, and say a poem is rubbish because they don't recognise what a poem might be trying to do on its own terms. And magazines get a name for doing that sort of thing, for being anti-this or anti-that.

**jk** The most common failing I come across is that you get people who write competent poems. They evoke images quite superbly and they give you a feel of something. Let's face it, the image is at the core of the poem and if you can evoke a visual image or sense of sound then you're doing really well. But they don't seem to realise that there is a very complex thing and that a poem must be more than just a statement about love or death. Otherwise we might as well read engagement notices or obituaries. On the other hand, you want the particulars. John

Forbes, for example, can look at an incredibly complex poem and know that it's about love, or is ostensibly an elegy or an ode of celebration. He can take the most complex poem, start at the most basic principle behind it and then elaborate. I often find though, with less successful poets, you don't get a basic point. You might get lots of elaborations but they're not ultimately given any drive. You could write a hundred page Language poem which deconstructs language to the nth degree, but if it doesn't give you a feeling of something in particular then you're at a loss. You need a tone.

**pm** I wonder also whether this consciousness of the limits or boundaries in making editorial choices, of the self-reflexive way in which one reads a poem, also informs each of your own writing processes. Is it important to be self-reflexively aware, when writing your own poetry, of the boundaries of the language you have used in the past, as well as of the conceptual and emotional boundaries of the self at the point of writing?

continued on page 16

## from *Poèmes Saisonniers*

translated by Tracy Ryan

frost  
death brooding over eggs  
it isn't sad

\*

frost leads on to colour  
precisely the yolk of an egg  
whose shell-crack frost also possesses  
yellow precisely  
because divided and  
infertile  
you think of the frozen lustre of a young girl forever prepubescent

\*

by what stretch of the imagination has frost anything in common with the hen  
(but that it gives me gooseflesh) if not the fact that it makes the ground cackle  
and the grass cluck frozen cackle  
stopped in the throat but given the field no less a touch of the domestic  
making a farmyard of the forest

\*

frost gives the earth a taste of water but  
the way you rub an icecube on the lips of the sick

\*

boxtree the scent  
of boxtree felt as brief and  
insistent (like the o and ee of its name)  
right in the cheek the mouth even the palate  
scent quickly lost  
the memory of boxtree has no smell

\*

a poem about  
the scent of boxtree the potent and flexible scent of boxtree  
a poem exasperated at conveying nothing  
boxtree boxtree boxtree

\*

is not elation simply  
exasperation that finds a  
crack a means of leaking something  
that gives

it seems you've barely had time to sneeze or  
to ruffle your hair to  
close your eyes one two  
thr  
the plum tree's in bloom

\*

sour aroma of plum in bloom  
under the tree as if under a fragile  
white corbel  
strewing its white innocence unstinting on the four winds

\*

plum tree in bloom burning  
like a certain bush  
as if no-one had ever seen a tree flowering  
ardent and lightweight  
as the dress of a woman in love

yet isn't it also that  
unimaginable lightness  
that for no reason at all would strip the plum tree  
of its dress leaving it nothing but an anxious innocence

\*

in a car quick what a  
strain all this noisiness of things you haven't the time  
to call by their names no time to recognise  
all these tiny things too numerous for you to stitch a poem for each

in the car quick just a word to stave off thirst a word for  
the trees spilling their blossom over walls gesturing slumped to the lark  
singing itself silly to escape from the field of rapeseed and always  
sinking back into that mute gold a word for the light beneath grey sky and  
in its turn darkness

\*

a tilled field like  
a written page  
thus lines of course furrows but mostly the identical feel-  
ing (I'd like to use another word)  
of stillness (one second) at the bottom of the tilled  
field just as  
at the bottom of the written page  
field and page equally filled  
equally sated

## Lauren Williams

## And Out

It's like developing a photograph  
in reverse  
First the detail is sharp  
then the chemicals begin  
their deconstruction  
Soon all that's left of a person  
are bits and pieces –  
the blue of an iris,  
the fierce dot of a pupil,  
crooked, real teeth  
in a hard, soft mouth,  
the way the neck meets the shoulders,  
a ring on an elegant hand...  
The effort of holding these pieces  
together becomes ludicrous  
Time eats the image blank  
till there's just a sheet of paper  
with an ache on it  
and even that will go.

## Interview: Ryan &amp; Kinsella (cont)

**tr** Yes, that is very much the case for me personally. I find it extremely frustrating, but I do think it's a good sign, because if you had a comfortable feeling of no limits, or of not being constantly challenged by seeing something in poems which may be totally outside the way in which you write, and wanting to learn from that, I think you would be very static as a writer. One of the things I find very beneficial about being with John is that he writes a totally different kind of poetry and reads very different things, and I've discovered things I wouldn't have otherwise. You're always aware you're only doing one kind of thing, but just pushing a little against that and trying to do something else is important.

**jk** My general attitude to life is that everything, no matter how seemingly uninteresting, is interesting. I'll read anything. Sitting on my desk at the moment is *120*

*Days of Sodom* by de Sade, Descartes' *Discourses*, *HQ* magazine and there's a Beckett novel and there's *Moby Dick*. A complete array of books. One of my other obsessions at the moment is Deleuze and Guattari. The point I'm making ultimately is that I read everything and anything. And I try to do lots of things. In one day I'll go bushwalking, listen to a classical concert and then a punk band...

**tr** And that pushes the boundaries...

**jk** ...yes, pushes the boundaries and shows that everything is possible. In one day I might write a lyric and a very experimental visual piece, and as long as you keep an open mind and allow things to actually flow into you rather than going around and just appropriating things, so that things actually appropriate you a bit as well, it makes for a more interesting process.

**pm** You are both about to enjoy a long stay at Cambridge in the UK. How did this come about and what do you plan on doing there?

**jk** I've had connections with Cambridge for a few years now, through friends who teach in various colleges there, and I've had quite a bit to do with the Cambridge poets, who are the theoretical avant-garde of English poetry according to the London-school/Cambridge-school dynamic. Some call them the Cambridge Leisure Centre, and they're basically a group of aesthetes who 'get together' and explore the boundaries, or lack of, of language, and their orientation is experimental but also extremely based within the tradition of the English canon, which they play against constantly. It's very informed poetry, kind of the English Language poetry, although they'd despise that terminology. Many of them consider Jeremy Prynne and Veronica Forrest-Thomson as the great poets of the postmodern era. Philip Larkin doesn't get mentioned in Cambridge, although they all admit he can write a good line. They're a very interesting and highly aesthetic bunch, and I've been communicating with them and publishing them in *Salt* for quite a few years. Last year I was invited to the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, CCCP (very appropriate considering the history of Cambridge!) which was an incredible collection of avant-garde poets from America, Canada, France and the first from Australia. I've now got a *New and Selected* poems being published by Arc in the UK (*The Undertow* 1996), and another book from Equipage, through Jesus College Cambridge, called *The Radnoti Poems* (1996), a very experimental book to be published during the

## Les Murray

## The Harleys

Blats booted to blatant  
dubbin the avenue dire  
with rubbings of Sveinn Forkbeard  
leading a black squall of Harleys  
with Moe Snow-Whitebeard and

Possam Brushbeard and their ladies  
and, sphincter-lipped, gunning,  
massed leather muscle on a run,  
on a roll, Santas from Hell  
like a whole shoal leaning

wide-wristed, their tautness stable  
in fluency, fast streetscape dwindling,  
all rifting astride, on the outside  
of sleek grunt vehicles, woman-clung,  
forty years on from Marlon.

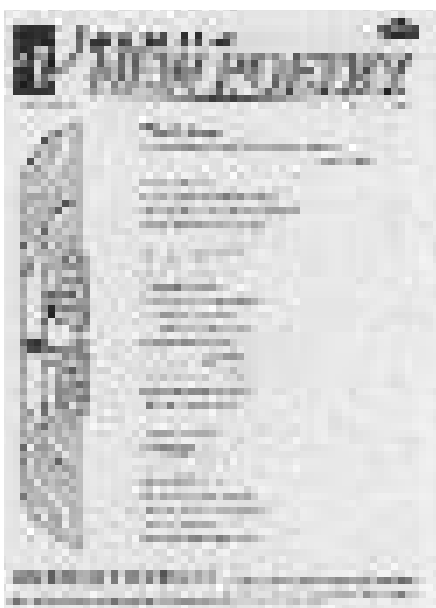
conference. I'll also be on a panel about magazine editing with a group of avant-garde editors. A very interesting thing about this conference is that their guest this year is Les Murray, who in Australia is seen as very conservative, and politically he is of course, but language-wise he is incredibly interesting and underrated as an experimentalist in language. The Cambridge poets are fascinated by his language and have invited him over to read. They're welcoming him as an experimentalist, so that will be very interesting. While politically things may be different this is another example of the "neutral" world of poetry! We'll also be spending some time at Cambridge on a residency.

**tr** We're also going to spend some time briefly in Berlin. John's been collaborating with a Swiss sociologist/artist/writer Urs Jaeggi. We'll also be spending two weeks in Paris at the Franco-Australian Cultural Association, and both of us are undergoing the process of having some of our poems translated into French.

Kirsten Tranter Peter Boyle Dorothy Hewett John Kinsella Tracy Ryan Susan Bower Robert Adamson Zan Ross

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# reviews

**Judith Beveridge**

DIANE FAHEY *The Body in Time* Spinifex Press  
\$16.95 pb isbn 1 875559 37 x.

Diane Fahey's poetry in this collection is remarkably assured, a surety that comes of a hard-won self-awareness. While Fahey writes about her life with an unstinting honesty, she is never self pitying or accusatory. The poem 'Nine/Eleven/Five' which deals with the sexual interference of a child at various ages, and the subsequent inability in adulthood to recall the trauma – "Year after year / I went there for holidays. / Why don't I remember?" – achieves enormous ironical and psychological force as it concludes with the five-year-old affirming: "And I walked up the yard, through the sunlight, / with an immense dignity, / knowing I would not speak of it, / knowing." The tensions in this poem, as in many others, are remarkably executed.

Fahey manages her subject matter with such skill and matter-of-factness that it would be easy to overlook her intensity. Indeed, it is this pragmatic approach to difficult material that makes her work so compelling. The poems which deal with her father's illness and death ('In Memory') contain moments of exquisite tenderness, as when the father, approaching death, lifts his hand "to flick an edge of sheet" across the daughter's legs. As she explains in 'Stories': "It's forty years since we have / sat on the same bed, engaged / in the reading of stories."

The message from Fahey's poetry is that suffering, difficulty, pain and loneliness are instructive. In 'Eighteen' she watches a wedding under trees she walked amongst decades ago "with a sword stuck through my heart", and asks:

Is this the learning life asks of me:  
to turn sword into ploughshare,  
forge long furrows of words?

The clever anagram of swords and words is not amiss here. Fahey's poetry strikes with a great deal of intimate precision into the heart of many experiences. The poems from the section 'In Love and Hate' are acerbic recollections of a love affair doomed by "incompatible life-damage" ('Sleep'). Fahey is far too self-aware and honest to let herself off the hook: "at pains to be responsible for this / one life, try to get it right."

Fahey's focus is sharp and penetrating, her language so adroitly chosen, so deftly executed and constructed as to

appear almost artless – but the effects can be astonishing and resonant. Her poem 'In the Half-light' seems to speak whole pages about a relationship in just fourteen lines.

If some readers may perceive her language as bland, this is because Fahey's poems do not need to be impelled by the struggle for understanding. Instead the poems often begin from hard-won wisdom. A simple unassuming surface can reveal a rich depth, as in 'Time's Light, Time's Darkness':

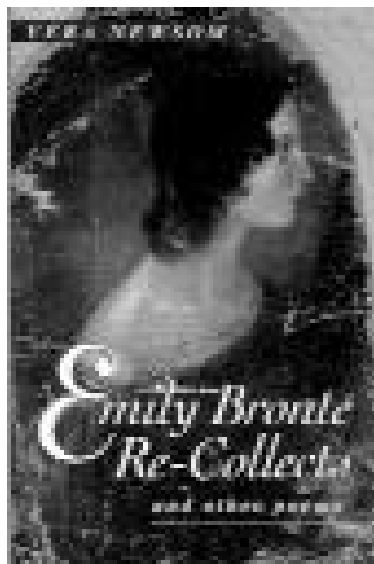
Love is not so blind  
as to regret  
its monumental blindness,  
the shadow side  
of what it touched  
and knew;  
in a half-lit room,  
white spaces in the memory  
contracting  
inside time's darkness.

Though the focus of *The Body in Time* is primarily autobiographical, there is also an impressive section ('Sites') which deals with place. As in other sections, the voice here is engaged, yet not entangled. Fahey has a remarkable ability to let an incident or image draw out psychological implications. In 'Visitation', the sighting of a bird elicits this: "we are mysteries behind glass / to each other, trying to break through / transparency, discover new spaces / wherein to fly, to nest, to sing."

Fahey writes with a confident maturity that understates rather than flaunts itself. Her work in *The Body in Time* has an impressive, uncompromising integrity. It is so free of egotistical schedules and so quietly accomplished that it shows us that Diane Fahey is a poet who has a great amount to teach.

JB■

VERA NEWSOM *Emily Bronte Re-Collects and Other Poems A&R* \$16.95 isbn 0 207 187878.



With this latest volume Newsom continues with her hallmark themes: aging, and the contemplation of illness and death. Her poetry is characterised by a spare lyrical elegance and deft tonal and formal control. Like Fahey, Newsom's starting point is often at the wisdom end of experience. The poem 'Cardiac Arrest' encapsulates many of the book's concerns: "Pain tells me that I am alive / And were I deaf or blind, surely some other sense would speak".

Newsom has a startling ability to handle intensely personal moments of perception and interaction. In 'Leaving the Party' she sets up subtle changes amongst the elements of the poem; images of fire and light are played off

**Evangelia A Papadopoulos**

## Jimmy Dean Jimmy Dean

It is hard and true my father smokes/drinks/works so hard and we've seen his kidneys in the rich light of his bloody body seen his skin peeled and pinned have said goodbye once have passed him the pills that keep him together keeps him with us sweet white liquid mixed in milk I used to splice his pornos so they'd get stuck in the video come home later than me as confused about what is good what is high conduct appropriate feminine masculine man father husband keeping the whore the virgin separate I am Athena head-born to you don't die dad don't die you've not seen what I can do this is the last minute the last choice chooses to burn down come Jimmy Dean Jimmy Dean laughs  
he laughs at things still gets giddy and awed I am a different joy sober contentment home family sits beside his wife watching sit com sit com oddity sit still straight where I can see you old man old old bald sick terminal man your grave is dug sit so we can measure and commiserate wouldn't hurt you to exercise If my dad could talk really really talk as well as he taught his girl he'd say fuck that fuck you the heart will beat till he unplugs it with his own trembling hand trembles with cold fear thin thin blood and laughter.

## Wrapping the Hay

The hay has just been stacked  
in neat yellow bricks like some complex  
puzzle that needs to be solved.

The shed's full, it sits alone out there  
in the stark yellow paddock – pathetic edifice  
waiting to be torched or blown away.

But it's got Escher written all over it  
so there's a sense of the infinite.  
Though early summer storms

can be pretty savage around here.  
Lightning-struck trees along the roadsides  
are testament to this. Dad reckons

we'd better get straight to it. Covering  
the stack with blue plastic sheeting  
and staking it deep in the ground.

But school's just finished and next  
year it'll be university in the city.  
Art history. But none of this landscape

stuff – give me Jeff Koons fucking  
Cicciolina, those fleshy cybernauts  
without a field or ear of wheat

in sight. So it's hard to get motivated  
and Dad tells me I'm not too big  
for a clip under the ear. I wonder

if he's joking but get out there  
with my brothers and get stuck into it.  
I tell them about *Far from*

*The Maddening Crowd* and work up a sweat  
thinking about Cicciolina. And how stylish  
it would be to have a film version

with Koons instead of Alan Bates.  
But keeping Julie Christie as  
Bathsheba Everdene. Gross!

The blue plastic flaps viciously  
as the wind lifts. It cracks in our faces.  
It catches my youngest brother

and slices his cheek. The blood  
spray-paints the hay. He keeps  
at it, swearing at the top of his voice.

Lightning highlights the installation  
and for a dreadful moment  
we seem to be furiously adrift

in the vast ocean of the paddock.  
Over the Hills where the storm's dark eye  
dilates. The rain drives hard

and I forget about everything. Finally  
the hay is wrapped. Christo appears  
in my head and I keep him there.

## the cuan

My grandfather's father was born on the Cuan  
My mother tells me as we drive

On the road from Merriwa to Scone  
On the road thirty-five years ago

She rode to see my father  
She rode a motorcycle then, an NSU

Down the dry creek beds and into his anger  
Down the road from Scone to Merriwa

I imagine her at sixteen in the bush  
I see from the car window

Following behind her older brother and his gun  
Following the idea of rabbits behind every tree

And by eighteen she still had never shot one  
And by five in the evening neither of them had

So Brian said "You'll have to hit one with the car  
So we've got something to take home for Tinny

For dinner"  
For goodness sake she thought as she steered

Into the small streaking form, blinking  
Into the late afternoon light burying itself

In many places  
In the trees, the paddocks, the soft range

The animal thudded but wasn't dead, shot into  
The paddock with the boy in hot pursuit

While she sat in the car  
While her hands sweated on the wheel she heard

Screaming filling its purple noise into the countryside  
Screaming? No it stretched higher than that

It was her sitting in time made remarkable, she realised  
It was the hare squealing

Somewhere she couldn't see  
Somewhere

An insane, imitating and forceless sound  
An old sound, but bright and clear refusing

To turn  
To live . . . or die

He came back to the car with it  
He said "Took a fair whacking"

And she saw blood on his chin  
And on the butt of the gun, with hair, she saw

Bits of hare on his chest and  
Bits on the back of his hand

They drove and  
They drove without talking

Past the Chinaman's farm  
Past Colonel Bath's house where she'd gone one

Day for work experience, but she can't to this  
Day remember what she'd done there because

The boys had teased and teased her  
The whole week before she'd had to go

Colonel Bath, they said, will give you orders  
Colonel Bath will order you to give him a bath, she has

No idea, she says, shaking her head, and I have  
No idea, really, what the Cuan is even

When I see a sign that says "Cuan"  
When my mother sees it she points

"Pop's father was born on the Cuan and  
Pop's father's father, when he was sick

With cancer, went back to the bush and shot himself"  
(With the quick thinking of ninety-two years . . .)

My mother is in the back seat with  
My baby who has laughed herself to sleep

In the motel room, in the pub  
In the church and in the Chinese Restaurant

And on this weekend away for a memorial service for her mother  
And father, my mother talks to the old people and

At fifty-six looks beautiful and  
At the church wears a beautiful blue-green dress

And on this weekend away my mother cries  
And pays for everything



# reviews

each other to dramatic effect. This poem achieves its electrifying force because all the elements are so skilfully integrated and the emotion so subtly controlled that by the end the reader feels an intimacy that is as palpable as "the stars" that seem "very close and bright".

The pinnacle of this collection, however, is the long title poem 'Emily Bronte Re-Collects', a sequence of ten poems written in the voice of Emily Bronte during the time she is nearing her death. Rich and authentic, the sequence travels through the domestic, the mystical and into creativity, loss and obsession. Here, one can only admire the use of drama, contemplation and characterisation over a long distance, and though the poem primarily reflects Newsom's own concerns, the reader does not feel that the character of Emily Bronte has been used simply to serve the poet's own ends. Newsom has brought her imaginative and empathetic skills to this work to make it a highly engaging piece, an ambitious crescendo to the book's ongoing themes. In the eighth poem 'Baking Bread', Newsom has Bronte ask "is one life on earth enough?" which recollects Newsom's own thoughts in 'Cardiac Arrest' as she contemplates her near-death experience:

I heard the monitor's click  
and felt my cells disintegrate, billions of atoms  
on the blank edge of nothing, or the universe.  
Then slept; but waking, on an instant, thought  
"Two lives are not enough!"

As is evidenced by her previous volumes, Newsom works in a careful, linear way. Hers is a poetry of restraint and control. She rarely breaks out of a simple syntactical structure, but this enables her to be very clear and direct and to pay meticulous attention to rhythm and music. Perhaps a drawback of this linear approach is that the imagery often suffers from over-simplification, or becomes too rationally constrained. Rarely do Newsom's similes sound an astonishing chord, instead, at times, they tend towards the commonplace, as in 'The Dune', where "a pale moon rises, / hangs on the horizon like a ball".

A poem such as 'Endurance', however, does show Newsom striking out for new ground in the way her associations develop a more

ambidextrous logic as she moves from thoughts about back pain, to school, to cricket. Through this series of witty associations and connections – "Cricket's / a game of wits, and skill; and joy in running / through the circumambient air. / Can it be the pain's receding?" – the poem achieves emotional and imaginative release. By implication the game of cricket symbolises the playful, imaginative mind breaking its usual boundaries.

*Emily Bronte Re-Collects* enhances Newsom's reputation as a passionate and graceful purveyor of the tensions between life and death, a poet who can manage broad themes in a language that is sparse, elegant, beautifully orchestrated, carefully selected. She brings clarity and discernment to her subjects so astutely and modestly, yet with an intensity and sincerity that surely mark her work a cut above most.

JB■

## Karen Attard

TRACY RYAN *Bluebeard in Drag* Fremantle Arts Centre Press 75pp isbn 9 781863 681346

*Do you wear . . .  
Stitches to show something's missing?*

—Sylvia Plath

*Bluebeard in Drag* has a more concentrated focus than Ryan's first collection, *Killing Delilah*, but the structure of each is similar. There are no pauses in either book, no breaking down of the material into smaller divisions. The pace isn't headlong but inexorable. Ryan invokes Sylvia Plath in several places throughout the collection and the emotional complexity of her work is reminiscent of Plath. Even more strongly it recalls the poetry of American writer Sharon Olds, not because of a similarity of style, but of subject matter.

Ryan explores structures within the family: power and athenia, authority and submission, inheritance and dispossession. She concentrates in particular on the child. This is similar territory to that explored by Olds, but while Olds' poems are more extended, Ryan's poems are lean, with short urgent lines like telegrams from the unconscious.

I'll elaborate briefly on the contrast between these two writers. In her poem 'What if God', Olds uses images of a child being pried open, laid bare. God is a squirrel "reaching down through the / hole she broke in my shell, . . . with His / arm in the yolk of

my soul up to the elbow / stirring the gold" (The Gold Cell, Knopf 1994). Olds tears open experience in a



## Vlado Perlemuter playing Ravel

The elegant sadness of this music is just the first layer.

Beneath enter again

the corsetry of a remote childhood,  
the bindings between the shoulder the neck  
the puffed belly.

Find the white lonely fingers  
poised above a lake in midwinter

and all that dies in small rooms,

the earth realigning itself,

small beginnings of order.

Breathe in the mathematician's crust,

the carefully measured sticks that prop up  
mysterious buildings where

the hearts of reptiles are frozen.

Stand for the smallest part of a second

in the doorway where the rain

gathers fragrance from the herb garden,

where the longing for another world

strips you bare.

While the after-tremor of this music

ripples, eddying around you,

only sit firmly as you play

and glance with the lightest nod of recognition

at all the wedding photographs,

the funeral notices.

Sitting upright concentrate

on the earth's movement,

the invisible passage of light into dark

so that the exact measure of elegance be transmitted -

just enough for this moment

to outdistance pain.

Let the pause between notes

be brief yet long enough

to break however lightly

the gravity of falling through soundless space.

**The Varuna Writers' Centre**, Katoomba, is one of Australia's premier literary establishments. Situated 2 hours from the Sydney CBD in the beautiful Blue Mountains, Varuna offers exceptional poetry readings, workshops, open days and celebrity events.

Special events for 1997 include: \*Sydney Writers' Festival and Sydney Fringe Writers' Festival readings, launches and lunches

\* Varuna's famous Friday nights – one of the liveliest forums for the presentation of writing and writers in Australia \* Varuna New Poetry quarterly readings \* The Varuna Residential Fellowships –

available to 25 writers from all over Australia each year

\* New Writers' Fellowships – available to writers advanced on a project but who have not yet received significant publication.

\* Varuna's renowned writing courses will this year be given by **Patti Miller – Life Stories**, **Deb Westbury – For Women Who Want To Write** and **Sue Woolfe – Writing Dangerously**

**Varuna Membership** is \$30/year (\$20 concession) Members receive a regular newsletter detailing the many exciting literary events and courses. Fellowship applications close 30th May and 30th November each year. For membership and fellowship details, send an SAE to:

**Varuna** 141 Cascade St T 047 825 674  
Katoomba NSW 2780. F 047 826 220

# reviews

series of gaping visceral images. In contrast, the child in Ryan's poem 'Leeches' can't bear to look at the creature her brother turns inside out, although she imagines it, "plush as a frayed nerve / my own veins cut up." Elsewhere, Ryan contemplates a splitting open in 'Wolf'; a wolf, his stomach distended by "a woman and a red-hooded girl", is baffled by his appetites. He desires the axe: "I crave release / that first slice gaping / red satin". This is unusual in Ryan's poetry. Even when the body's wholeness is broached, as it is in 'Cyst' – "they pulled ten litres from like / tapping a cask" – or in 'Leeches' – "the creature – batted on sealed / like baby lips to nipple / unshiftable" – the small breaches are encased; they're closed systems.

Wounds may not gape but the scars are evident, the seams of a father/creator who stitches his female creature together like Frankenstein's monster. Ryan writes in 'Uniform':

my own scar  
horizontal braille for  
lovers otherwise  
sealed  
like lips...

Silence and testimony are embodied. Ryan quotes Alice Miller: "The victimisation of children is nowhere forbidden. What is forbidden is to write about it". This is central to Ryan's project; she has written and not written.

The daughter in 'Monster' pursues her Frankenstein across the "glacier / that is my body, the white / waste spaces of the page." A reviewer of Ryan's first collection found fault with what she termed the "acres of white" surrounding the poems, but this fails to recognise the importance of that mute space. It's a



## Tom Clark

### Heet

Az ii wondurd  
– loenliy not uloen –  
daon paadhz uv liit  
dhe sun on mii bak  
and ii - dhen despuret  
fur sum luv - feeling hot  
and flushd - mii neediy fraon  
must huv werkt its wundurz  
fur dhai smiild at mee  
– loenliy, long, lost  
on kongkreet korudauz –  
waumd tou mee  
in dhiy upresiv sumur heet  
and toald plezent tailz  
uv udvencurz on dhe hii weekend:  
'Wer you dhaer?  
Wen it hapend, wer you dhaer?'  
'Oah...  
yaer.'  
Good frendz, dhoe  
puhabs wun oevulooks et  
in dhe sunshiin uv  
– pair luvurz kworul  
on dhe blisturing streets,  
lumenting butraiylul  
and aij-haadend duseets –  
bencez and shaid dhat giv uv  
dhe kwiiyet beerz uv soludaretiy.

silence particularly suited to these poems; the silence of "hand over / mouth," of a whole winter she can't remember", of "truths gone underground". A silence as eloquent, in its way, as Olds' series of stunning images.

KA■

VENIE HOLMGREN *Peasant in January* dialogue press 104pp; ANNE EDGEWORTH *The Road to Leongatha* Kardoorair Poets Series 72pp.

Peasant in January consists mainly of performance pieces and conversational meditations on the rural landscape. Holmgren's collection is summed up by the quote which prefaces it: "To put it in a nutshell, literature, either spoken or written, is humanity thinking aloud – communicating its experience of all that is, holding a great continuous discussion through out the ages and across the world" (Dorothy Green).

Like Holmgren, Anne Edgeworth's poetry has a meditative tone and she too is interested in performance. The first and last sections of *The Road to Leongatha* are both entitled 'Ends and Beginnings' but endings seem to predominate in this collection. It has an elegiac quality – distinct from her elegies to Hope and McCauley – an overall air of farewell.

KA■

## Kathielyn Job

GRAEME WEBSTER *Skinning Time* Wakefield Press 1996

In *Skinning Time* Graeme Webster has written poems suffused with violence, showing articulately how blood flows, how the persona is repeatedly "skinned by...loss" ('Sheila, and Kevin – and me').

In some poems he achieves this atmosphere of violence in full-bodied action: "and with a slight exaggeration, I paused, / then fed the blade across the throat, bore down, / brought panic to the head, the heart, and I / released life and blood in spurts" ('In the killing pen'). In others, such as 'Down Bulmer Lane' violence is immanent: "I watch the shadows, and if they move, / I sigh, and brace meself for the storm".

The well-modulated tone and perspective, delivered in carefully disengaged voices, makes this collection unrelenting, and at the same time restrained from excess. The strength of these poems is in their unequivocal and resolute vision.

KJ■

GRANT CALDWELL *you know what I mean* Hale and Iremonger 1996

*You know what I mean* is rhythmically flat and unemotive. Caldwell's intention is apparently to keep the reader as viewer. Gradually however, these poems draw you to ground-level beside Caldwell to see as he sees: "... my mother said / she would see me / sitting on the ground / in the back yard / staring down / for hours / until she finally / had to come out / and see what I was looking at. / Ants, she said. / I was watching a line of ants / carrying things back and forth". ('The most placid bullants')

Caldwell writes of the "back and forth" of bus drivers changing shift, drunks in parks, garbage collectors in "Santa Claus hats", an acquaintance drowning: "When the ambulance drove away / we sat around / on the bluff / saying nothing / watching the sea". ('Tidal River') The closing poem, 'I am the centre of my universe', concentrates the theme. Moving "back and forth" between "I love" and "I hate" from a fulcrum of "I am", the significance of the individual is equally dissipated and concentrated "in this small universe of money".

Precise language and unerring rhythm maintain the bland tone of empty living. This is accentuated in movement – walking, riding buses or trams – which implies no possibility of progress: "... I got on / and it carried me off / to wherever it was / I was going." ('Walking though Carlton Gardens in autumn')

These are poems of statement, rather than emotional understatement. There are few images, usually

unrelated to human life: "birds fly like sparks across the sky" ('Rented house trilogy') and trees are "huge symphonies of limbs and branches" ('Old trees, old houses and kookaburra sound poems').

From the passenger point of view, Caldwell is

successful in showing life as repetitive and pointless. Reading this collection leaves one hungry for more images that suggest and imply, images that can absorb and take the reader's imagination closer to the poet's creation.

KJ■

## Peter Minter

SUSAN BOWER *Factory Joker* Five Islands Press 1996 \$7.50; MARK O'FLYNN *The too bright sun* Five Islands Press 1996 \$7.50.

Two new publications from the most recent New Poets' series confirm the growing reputation of Five Islands Press, and excite as collections which demonstrate stimulating approaches to language. *Factory Joker* is indeed a performance by a highly skilled and energetic poet. Bower's use of language is technically assured and characterised by concentrated irony. She excels at warping the vernacular into hyperreal narratives of lives lost somewhere between culture and nature. The poetry is always honest, and Bower delights in turning the halogen on 'the everyday' so it can be viewed from the inside:

I'll wear my best dress  
and impress you  
with my hairstyle.  
Just don't oversleep  
because I'll get suspicious  
and call the cops.

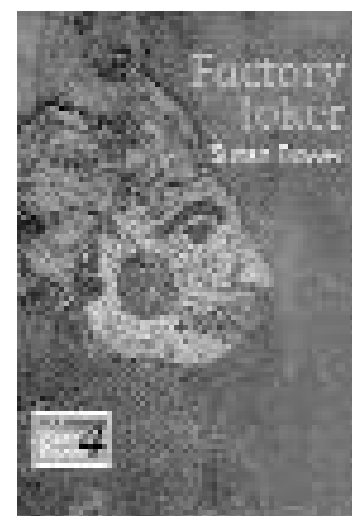
'Marilyn/Triptych'

Bower is also politically engaging. Her poems caustically attack complacencies in poetic content and language, revealing undercurrents of violence and repression in the most common turns of phrase. Susan Bower's first book positions her solidly as an important younger Sydney poet. Mark O'Flynn's *The too bright sun* engages with the vernacular in a more reflective, sympathetic and often vaudevillian manner: "She rolled her first snail/around her gums..." ('Her First Snail'). Engaging on both humorous and significantly serious levels, O'Flynn always balances comedy with pathos, his tight control over material giving him space to engage with both surface observation and its deeper extensions:

Climbing afterwards the guard at the exit  
took me aside, asked in polite  
French and body language  
"What sir is in le backpack?"  
You think a skull? You think  
I took a human skull from down there?

'The Balance of Bone'

One of the best poems in the book, 'Fox', demonstrates O'Flynn's capacity for emotionally acute



**cordite** wants your poetry news! Short submissions from all states on readings, publications, festivals and happenings are welcome. Future issues will also include a calendar of national poetry events, publications and global internet sites of interest.

## West Australia

The reading and publishing scene in WA appears to be undergoing a renaissance, focused by the activities of Fremantle Arts Centre Press, which continues to publish both new (see John Mateer, p.2 & review p.22) and award-winning poets in high-quality volumes, and by readings such as Disk, Web and openmouth...

The **DISK** readings, originally established by Philip Salom, have been held for over ten years and provide a facility for all writers to meet and present their work in Perth. The coordinator, **Ashley Higgs**, writes that the emphasis of this program is on the live performance of the written word by contemporary writers of poetry, fiction, performance and other texts. "**DISK** readings contribute to the professional development of writers in the areas of presentation, performance and marketing of their written work and of themselves as creative artists." The readings take place at **Bar**, situated on Lake St in

Northbridge. Every reading is scheduled for the third Monday of each month, and they commence at 7:30pm. Invited readers are likely to include published writers, students, new "finds" and overseas writers. **WEB** readings run on the 2nd Monday of each month, at Aberdeen Hotel in Northbridge and actively promote women's writing in Perth. Ashley Higgs can be contacted on 09 336 3064

**Allan Boyd** is coordinator of the **openmouth** readings and editor/publisher of **Woodwork**, the **openmouth** journal. **openmouth** began at the PICA bar and cafe in Northbridge – Perth's cultural centre – in February 1996. "**openmouth** features fresh, abrupt poets and local independent bands on the first Thursday of every month, attracting up to 100 poetry enthusiasts through the doors." Following the success of the readings, Allan Boyd has published an anthology of **openmouth** writers, **Woodwork '96**, a well-produced 36 page chapbook, the feel and aroma of which recalls the days of the Gestetner. Boyd has shown his mettle by publishing, amongst the well-meaning and no doubt enthusiastic, work by poets who are worth watching: Zan Ross, Evangelia Papadopoulou, Kathryn Tenger, Kevin Gillam and Sophia Dale. **Woodwork.hot97** is expected early this year, and can be accessed via

# news

[www.iinet.net.au/~chm/catalyst](http://www.iinet.net.au/~chm/catalyst), or from Allan Boyd on 09 307 9273

## South Australia

**Nutz & Boltz** is Adelaide's open mike "anarchistic" performance poetry evening held at Boltz Cafe in Adelaide. Since its initiation over three years ago the founders have proceeded, in their own words, "with abandon and without caution upon a series of experimental poetry and spoken-word evenings". From a beginning crowd of 30, Nutz and Boltz now regularly packs in around 100 patrons.

Prose readers and poets, musicians, acrobats, comedians (serious poets) and other spoken-wordsmiths will be found ablaze in their full five minutes of glory upstairs at Boltz Cafe, 286 Rundle St, downtown Adelaide on the last Wednesday of each month. There are no guest readers. Entry: \$2.

Contact Glenn Murdoch at the South Australian Writer's Centre on 08 8223 7662.

## New South Wales

The poetry scene, particularly in **inner Sydney**, has over the past couple of years experienced its long awaited revival. Focused by the enthusiasm of a new wave of poetry activists, editors and writers in a wide range of genres, the number of poetry readings and events attracting poets of substance and stature continues to grow. Some of the better readings and events include:

- **The Walls Have Ears** – the place for invigorating performance poetry in Sydney. Organised by Clare McGregor (02 9387 4029) and held at the Tap Gallery in Darlinghurst every 2nd Tuesday night, this event has established a vibrant, eclectic and welcoming scene of its own. See and hear performers such as Peter Hines, Tug Dunbley Wednesday Kennedy, Angus Strachan and others.
- **Live Poets**, organised by Sue Hicks (02 9908 4527) continues to draw large crowds to readings on the North Shore by Sydney's new and established poets and performers.
- **Dipped in Ink** focuses the activities of poets in Parramatta and Sydney's western suburbs. Founded by Lainie Cameron (02 9893 8828) in 1994 with the support of the younger poets in western Sydney, **Dipped in Ink** has been held regularly and successfully at the Itsurreal Cafe.

Readings and launches are also organised by the Poets' Union and held at eminent bookstores such as Gleebooks, Glebe and Ariel, Darlinghurst.

Outside the Sydney metropolitan region, readings and poetry events continue to be held at

- the **Varuna Writers' Centre**, which publishes the Varuna New Poetry broadsheet. Quarterly readings held on the last Saturdays of February, May, August and November, and Friday night readings by poets working at Varuna on fellowships, draw sometimes cosy, sometimes large, always enthusiastic and informed audiences (see ads earlier in this issue).
- at the **Northern Star** hotel in Newcastle, the long-running Newcastle Poets in the Pub continues to draw large crowds to experience the work of local and visiting poets. This hotel has long been one of the best in Hamilton, a vibrant inner city suburb of Newcastle. Call Alex Stavropolous (049 675 922) or Bill Iden (049 675 972) for directions.
- the Far South Coast Regional Poets, who are preparing to host the **1997 Regional Poets Festival** in Bega. **Venie Holmgren** reports that John Foulcher, Martin Harrison and Kathielyn Job will be running workshops and readings. Cold weather permitting, Venie will provide more details in the next issue of **cordite**.

# The Poets Union Inc

The Poets Union Inc is an organisation for Australian poets and lovers of poetry.

The Union is a membership-based national poetry society. Only two and a half years ago membership was about 150 and centred mainly around Sydney. Today the Union has more than 300 members in New South Wales and another 100 or so in the other States. It is our nature to be expansive and outreaching and we intend to grow even stronger. As the Union grows it will provide an increasingly national service to an increasingly national membership.

## Union Activities

The Poets Union has organised the highly successful twin Poets on Wheels tours to the northern and southern regional areas of New South Wales in 1996. The Union is also involved in the following:

- Readings and book-launches at Gleebooks and The Gallery Cafe in Annandale
- Monthly poetry workshops at the State Library
- Work with Varuna Writers' Centre at Katoomba to stage the Blue Mountains Poetry Festival
- The Sydney Writers' Festival and the NSW Writers' Centre's annual Spring Writing Festival

We even do T-shirts!

The Union produces a monthly magazine, *FIVE BELLS*, with articles and reviews and news and views about the Oz poetry scene. Meg Dunn says: "*FIVE BELLS* is a lifeline to regional or isolated poets, keeping people in touch with each other and the major developments in Australian poetry".

## Joining the Union

So who are these members and who can join? Members have one thing in common – they love poetry. Anyone can join. Established poets are welcome; those who've never been published are welcome. All you have to do to be a member is read, write or simply enjoy poetry.

Membership is \$30 for full fee, \$18 for concession or \$50 for institutional membership.

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# reviews

observation, particularly when articulating the generational tensions and attentions between father and daughter. There are poems here which are also lyrically confident ('The Camber of the Road'), confirming O'Flynn's reputation as a poet with extensive range.

PM■

## MARCELLA POLAIN *Dumbstruck* Five Islands Press 1996

That the publication of this West Australian writer's first book was undertaken by an east coast press is indicative of the growing attention paid Australia-wide to poets working in Perth and Fremantle. Marcella Pollain's collection positions her as a competent poet concerned most with the articulation and definition of subjectivity in terms of emotional and familial spaces. Her best poems engage with the personal and interpersonal such that localised relationships and personalities are given broader significance:

in this suburb women say  
babies are born with blue eyes

light swarms those summer days for you  
convexed against yours shock & black  
two planets shifting endless in your head.

'when bees see blue'

The seriousness of Polain's explorations of personality, language and desire is often balanced by a sharp, sardonic wit. In 'open-mouthed and soundless' the poem's persona stalks "the streets the libraries / serial mother trigger happy / belly fully loaded accomplice crying in the pram." Polain's weaker work fails however to extend beyond the particular or commonplace, wants to speak deeply for the universal or the collective but relies perhaps too much on reflexive, familiar tropes. Polain is overall a poet to watch, particularly when she focuses her work's conceptual framework and language together with her sensitive descriptive eye.

PM■

## JOHN MATEER *Anachronism* Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1997 \$16.95

John Mateer's second book will surely establish his reputation as one of the stronger talents among the younger Australian poets. *Anachronism* is a powerful, uncompromising collection. Mateer demonstrates advanced technical skill and he appears to have absorbed the most influential trends in contemporary Australian poetry. Postmodernism, romanticism, surrealism, whatever, it's all there. One of the stronger poems in the book, 'This (phenomenal) Journey', has Mateer presenting and ironising the presentation of experiential data:

I saw dead roos, rabbits and twenty eights  
on the road to you

...

I am typing this  
on a borrowed typewriter, wearing borrowed clothes.

They've left. There's to be a sheaf of roses on your made-up bed. I'm awaiting you as one awaits those irreplaceable events of Death, birth, and phenomenal love.

At times Mateer sounds a little too like Dransfield or early Adamson, however he succeeds in blurring the voices of Forbes, Adamson and Kinsella into a strange but appealing hybrid, at times eminently cynical and at others, or at once, revealing a complexity of feeling which moves beyond the prosaic. Mateer is a young poet, and his weakest poems can address sexuality and relationships in immature and at times misogynist terms. It is difficult, in short lyrics such as 'A Reply' or 'Her White Dress' to identify the ironic distance that makes, for example, 'And a Portrait of A Petrol Head,' work. This distance is made more apparent, and the work more deeply felt, in poems such as 'The Brewery Site'. The really satisfying thing about this volume though is the range of voices in which Mateer is proficient. This poet can write! Buy the book!

PM■

## contributors

**ROBERT ADAMSON** has successfully combined careers as poet, editor and publisher over the past 25 years. He is currently a director and editor of *Paper Bark Press*, and poetry co-editor of *Ulitarra*. He has published nine volumes of poetry and won numerous national awards and prizes, including the Christopher Brennan Award in 1996 for *Waving to Hart Crane*.

**KAREN ATTARD**'s first book, *whisper dark*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series.

**JUDITH BEVERIDGE** is a Sydney poet whose first collection, *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, won the Mary Gilmore Award and both the NSW and Victorian Premiers' Prizes in 1988. Her second volume, *Accidental Grace*, was recently published by UQP

**SUSAN BOWER** is a Sydney poet. Her first book, *Factory Joker*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series. She is currently enrolled in a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.

**PETER BOYLE** won the 1995 NSW Premier's Poetry Prize for his first collection, *Coming Home from the World*. He lives in Sydney and is currently co-editing an anthology of Australian poets to be translated into Spanish and published in Columbia in 1997.

**JOANNE BURNS** is a Sydney poet whose most recent book, *penelope's knees*, was published by University of Queensland Press in 1996.

**TOM CLARK** is a postgraduate student studying Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry at the University of Sydney. He has previously been published in *Hermes* and *Avernus*.

**JENNIFER COMPTON** is a poet and playwright. Her poem *Blue Leaves* won the 1995 Ulitarra/Robert Harris Poetry Prize. She was also awarded a NSW Writers Fellowship in 1995, and will have a new play produced in Sydney this year.

**MTC CRONIN** is a writer living in Sydney. Her first collection *zeotrope* was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series.

**MARYLINE DESBIOLLES** is author of over ten books, including collections of poems, short stories and novels. She was born in 1959 and is presently living in south France. Tracy Ryan's translations are of poems appearing in *Poèmes Saisonniers* (Telo Martins 1992, Toulon)

**JUNO GEMES** is an artist with an outstanding national and international career as a photographer. She has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities, and in 1994 was awarded an Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Fellowship to document her comprehensive photographic archive '*In Our Time - Photographs and Texts from the Movement 1969-1995*'.

**PHILIP HAMMIAL** lives in the Blue Mountains. He is a poet, editor and publisher, having published eleven volumes of poetry, most recently *Just Desserts*.

**KATHIELYN JOB** grew up sixteen miles from Dubbo in the Central West of NSW, in Sydney and in Pennsylvania. In addition to writing poetry she works as an editor and part-time teacher. Her first collection *Now, the Melaleuca* was written while living in Dubbo.

**JOHN KINSELLA** is an award winning West Australian poet, currently writer-in-residence at Cambridge University, UK. His most recent book *Lightning Tree* was published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and *The Undertow, New and Selected Poems* was published last year by Arc in the UK.

**ANTHONY LAWRENCE** has published five volumes of poetry, most recently *The Viewfinder* by University of Queensland Press. He was winner of the inaugural 1996 Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize.

**JOHN MATEER** is a West Australian poet. His first book, *Burning Swans*, was published in 1995 and his second collection, *Anachronism*, is to be released in January 1997 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

**PETER MINTER**, a Sydney poet, editor and writer, edits *cordite* and the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheet. His first collection of poems, *Rhythm in a Dorsal Fin*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series and shortlisted for the 1996 NSW Premier's Poetry Prize.

**LES MURRAY** is one of Australia's renowned poets and editors. He has published numerous collections of poetry during a career spanning over thirty years. He was recently awarded the TS Eliot Prize for Poetry.

**MARK O'FLYNN** is a poet, playwright and reviewer. His first collection of poems, *The too bright sun*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1996 New Poets Series.

**EVANGELIA ARTEMIS PAPADAPoulos** is a West Australian poet studying toward her honours degree in psychology and writing at Curtin University, Perth.

**MARK REID** is a poet and editor living in Fremantle. His first collection, *Bitter Suite*, was published by Five Islands Press in the 1995 New Poets Series.

**PHILIP SALOM** has published several volumes of poetry, a novel, two chapbooks and a play. He has won numerous national and international awards, twice winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and three times the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry. He was recently awarded the 1996 Newcastle Poetry Prize.

**HUGH TOLHURST** is a Melbourne poet. *Filth and Other Poems* will be published by Black Pepper in September 1997.

**KIRSTEN TRANTER** is a poet and editor living in Sydney. She has previously published work in *Hermes*, *Avernus* and the *Varuna New Poetry* broadsheet.

**ADRIAN WIGGINS** currently works in the Engineering department with Optus Vision. His first book *The Beggar's Codex* was published by Five Islands Press in 1994.

**LAUREN WILLIAMS** lives in Melbourne and is studying toward her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish at La Trobe University. Her most recent book *The Sad Anthropologist* was published by Five Islands Press.

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**editorial**

Cordite, Australia's first national poetry and poetics tabloid, is committed to the publication of the best poetry, written in any genre, and the best ideas, commentaries and discussion of what it means to write, read or think about poetry.

Ginsberg once said "all decades flower toward the end". Cordite comes into being at a time when the recurring and redundant question "who reads poetry anyway?" works to obscure the fact that good poetry needs only to be advocated and published, and it will be read. At a time when mediocrity is mistaken for substance; when skill, intelligence and craft are ignored by publishers wanting to employ "flair" or "readability" as gestures to "the market"; when many poetry reviews, particularly in the national press, are appallingly uninformed and myopic in scope; when a publicly-funded supplement such as *The Australian's Review of Books*, which has pretensions of being a quality literary review publishes *only one poem per issue* (do they have a poetry editor at all?) and only one poetry review in three issues; when the passionate and imaginative risk-takers are confined to the periphery of national culture – this is the time to back-burn, to spark up and clear out the undergrowth.

By publishing in tabloid format, Cordite has been able to reduce production costs, thereby addressing some of the material restraints that have effected the publication of poetry over the past ten years. A literary journal with a cover price as high as \$10 to \$20 effectively inhibits the breadth of its readership. With a cover price of only \$5 an issue, and a four-issue subscription at \$20, Cordite will conceivably bankrupt neither "the penniless poet" nor the salary-man and -woman. Cordite hopes this decision will help increase the readership for poetry and reviews.

Equally, the tabloid format allows room for longer, more developed articles, reviews and interviews to work together with poems and graphics. While not quite invoking Barthes' "hedonistic aesthetic", Cordite hopes that without separation each text will be all the more pleurably consumed. A certain jouissance is to be had there.

Cordite appears, therefore, with both defiance and humour. It aims to provoke discussion, to promote debate, to give poets and readers of poetry space to again persuade one another that poetry is, essentially, a common sense.



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