FOREWORD

(Foreword to Peter Robinson's third volume on the working lives of gay men.

'Work! Consume! Die!' remains salutary about the nullities to which life can be reduced in the absence of fulfilling relationships across its every sphere and at each stage. We become what we do, as individuals and as a species. If we do nothing, we become nothing. The fate of Sebastian in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) is a metaphor for idleness relieved by preying on the poor, who eat him.

Peter Robinson's third installment from his study of gay males takes us beyond reported experiences of work and retirement into his reflections and onto those of his interview subjects. As ever, we are left questioning how to make sense of a universe indifferent to our existence yet amenable to our needs and hopes through the social effort we too narrowly call 'paid work'.

Most of us, much of the time, remake ourselves in such jobs where estrangement and alienation can turn work to a near-life experience.

Allowing for the fact that earning a quid has always been compulsory for the ninety-nine percent, the prime attraction in going to work used to be to socialise. The fragmentation of the application of labour since the 1980s has stripped away much of that enrichment. Finding enough paid work each week to survive is not going to get any easier in competition with robotic automation. Moreover, precarious employment all but excludes the promise of paid work that enriches our individuality through the quality of our relationships.

Higher rates of joblessness and the fractured future for such work as will be on offer are not specific to any strata of the workforce. However, in a buyer's market for labour, the petty prejudices that would otherwise be inoperative add to the chances of gays being passed over, a discrimination doubled if the application is both gay and not quite white.

Gay liberation had hardly got underway when the long trough in unemployment ended in the mid-1970s. The 1980s saw two more whacks with the restructuring of work and HIV-AIDS. In a world where a majority of otherwise sensible people fail to distinguish a cold from the flu, it is hardly surprising that the facts about the limited means for transmitting the AIDS virus has still not eradicated the panic about breathing the same air let alone sharing a toilet seat, as the experiences of the New Zealand teacher testify.

The discrimination against a HIV+ lawyer depicted in *Philadelphia* (1993) was nasty yet Hollywood's portrayal of his final days was more glamorous than the fate of the tens of thousands of his fellow U.S. citizens who died impoverished in a polity where a halfway decent health service remains an impossible dream.

'Unemployed at last!' exalts 'Tom Collins', the narrator of Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) in one of the most arresting opening lines in literature. Tom is looking forward to writing up his diaries. Good luck to him. For most of us, to be out of paid work even for a week or two means a financial crisis. Long-term unemployment causes relationships to

sunder and results in homelessness. Once again, those outcomes are not extremes. In recent years, millions have been denied their entitlements because of corporate and state bankruptcies. The unraveling is far from over, and may even have not begun if the Bank for International Settlements is right in alleging that the measures taken by governments since 2008 have done no more than postpone the day of reckoning while making its impact worse. Nest-eggs might hatch vulture funds.

To retire early on a package is not the same as getting the sack before ending up on a disability pension in one's fifties. In any society which thrives on structured inequalities, Sophie Tucker knew of what she spoke: 'Ah's been rich an' ah's been poor, and believes me, rich is best.' In societies like Australia, the age pension guarantees frugal comfort - if one is out of the commercial rental market, does not need to drip-feed Big Pharma and has no calls for big-ticket outlays, say, for home repairs. People are now being made to wait till they turn sixty-seven, and encouraged to keep working beyond those years while being told that you are too old at forty.

The economic imperatives that exacerbated the insecurities inherent in working life during the 1980s are reaching into retirement, indeed, are in pursuit of the money we cannot take with us. The secular stagnation that persists from the implosion of capital expansion late in 2008 impels its agents of capital to seek fresh sectors from which to garner profits by colonising hitherto sheltered realms, notably education, health and aged care. Just as the Mad Men of marketeering learnt to chase the Pink Dollar, their equivalents in the corporatised service sector are now buying up retirement homes, a take-over in which the churches are complicit, selling-out their caritas to the likes of Lend Lease and Stocklands. Is this on-coming wave of elder abuse designed to meet the compensation payouts for decades of institutionalised child abuse? We all now have as much to fear from corporates, which are profit-blinded to sexual orientation, as from religious Fundamentalists who see little else.

The business plans vary according to the targeted facility. For one very expensive ex-Anglican property, the aim is capital gain from renovating the unit after its current owner's departure. At an ex-Roman one intended for welfare tenants, the scheme is to replace its blocks of motel-type rooms with spaces reminiscent of Japanese capsule hotels, while dispensing with the trained staff who dispense the medications. The luxurious and the slack will be promoted as providing flexibility and freedom of choice, two of the Big Lies behind which corporates retain their sovereignty over us as consumers.

An alternative of modest guesthouses is hinted at by the interviewee who plans to take in a couple of boarders to make his own ends meet. Why not a B&B element to vitalise the talk at the shared breakfast table? Single men used to wash up in inner-city boarding houses until gentrifiers knocked down those cheap and cheerless refuges. Today's bad used to be a lot worse, and still is across most of the world, and will not improve anywhere without campaigns to match those around securing decent responses to HIV-AIDS.

In keeping with the American way of death, U.S. firms bought up municipal cemeteries around the world, pushed up the price of burial sites and cold-called families to shame them into spending thousands on graves in need of 'renovation'. We can escape

their clutches by bequeathing our cadavers to anatomy schools. Being old does not make all our bits obsolete and so it is worth bequeathing any still functioning parts for transplant.

Several decades ago, Dennis Altman surprised an academic seminar that he had come to understand more about himself from novels than from the social sciences. Since no one was interviewing gay men about their lives, other than Hirshfeld and the Kinseys into sexual practices, creative writings, and responses to them, call for sensitive re-readings, not grubbing for data but seeking what Raymond Williams calls 'structures of feeling', for a start, to appreciate which kinds of work were deemed appropriate for homosexual men.

Vautrin is Balzac's master criminal and anything but the fop, although his mastery of disguise could doubtless have extended to full drag had a crime demanded it. Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* (1975) portrays its protagonist as a jackeroo in the Snowy Mountains. His character was inspired by the oil portrait of Herbert Dyce-Murphy, a trannie espionage agent, one of the kinds of work that earned queers a bad name as traitors.

Fiction can take us into tabooed territories, though their frontiers are as permeable as presumptions about what queers should do for a living. Stereotypical occupations of hairdressing and ballet-dancers provided a cover for gay soldiers and scaffolders, one which the coming out of footballers and Olympic Gold Medalists has removed so that anyone can now be 'sus', but none more so than men of any persuasion who work with young children. In the backwash from the exposure of the institutional cover-ups of abuse in schools and orphanages, students are aware of their power to accuse. These interflows between reform and fresh forms of repression remind us that there are few gains without some loses.

Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour* (1931), and the 2012 *The Hunt* traverse the disasters from children falsely accusing teachers of deviance or molestation. Steve J. Spears's internationally renowned play, *The Elocution of Benjamin* Franklin (1975), about a sexually aware pubescent boy and his besotted speech instructor, went where few would now dare to tread, even though nothing happens. Far more circumspect is Kenneth Mackenzie's *The Young Desire It* (1937) about the friendship between a repressed teacher and a straight fifteen-year-old student.

George Turner's career as Commonwealth Employment Officer in the large Victorian city of Wangaratta in the 1950s provided the materials for his close observation of blokey behaviour. His *Waste of Shame* (1965) explores the alcohol-fueled violence between the homosocial and the homophobic in a rural sawmill. Alcoholism just one of the addictions not touched on by the interviewees as a means to cope with workplace stress or the loss of structure in retirement.

To conclude with a scatter of responses to some of what's not obvious from the interviews.

Since we seem never to find the time to do in retirement half the things that we imagined we would, it is superfluous to think up what else gay men might do. The frequent references to volunteering around AIDS suggest opportunities to extend a gay Meals on Wheels beyond to those with HIV-AIDs. There is a gay LifeLine, so why not a service to draw up living wills?

No one talks about being part of a 'Men's shed'.

There is only one very passing suggestion about voluntary euthanasia despite overwhelming public support for its legalisation in some form. More is involved here than release for physical torments. A decision to go while the going is good is not a disease in need of medication and therapy.

To knowing what music the interview subjects would chose for their memorial services does more than 'round out' our assessment of their other answers. There is no mention of an afterlife – or reincarnation - and none of cryogenics, that ultimate vanity of vanities. Those silences should not lead us to assume that all the respondents are atheists for it seems as likely that those who do retain a shy hope of a life everlasting have been secularised in how they speak about the lives they lead on earth. Perhaps that loss explains the emotional roller-coaster of how we do nowadays react to the deaths of those closest to us, as portrayed in Tony Ayres's 2002 feature, *Walking on Water*.

The moment of death is not mentioned. Fear of dying has displaced the fear of no longer existing. An acquaintance who bought a unit facing Moreton Bay dealt with his being woken early by an enlarged prostate by slipping across the street to sit on a park bench and enjoy the sunrise. Regular joggers exchanged greetings with him until one morning he could no longer respond. That exit might not be perfection but it was much, much better than most of us can expect. Sherwin Nuland's *How We Die* (1993) dispelled most of my fears about how the end would overtake me by spelling out that few of us will die of this or that disease, since dying, not unlike living, is a process but one in which each afflicted body part disrupts others until the system shuts down. Nuland is not a cheery read but a reassuring one in ways that total ignorance cannot maintain when our time comes.

The loss of heavenly rewards has not abolished the fear of hell on earth, manifest in the concern at ending up a prisoner in a homophobic institution. Those who want a quiet life might revert to passing as straight. Why does none of the activists embrace the chance to carry the message of liberation to a new audience? The fear that the 'Out' hairdresser as stereotype would be in for a rough time from the fellow occupants has to be set against how elderly women will have had long relationships with their own gay hairdressers, and how much they will welcome the proximity of someone to provide the tactile pleasure of a warm mauve rinse for a lot less than the going rate down the road.

As I key in these words in my own unit at the top of sixty-four steps, I can still afford to sound fussy about where I might end up. Without allocating each fear to a circle of hell, the first that comes is mind is where the pinnacle of intellectual activity is bingo night and the communal television is fixed to a shopping channel. The thought of an all-gay retirement village is not without its own terrors. Being at the mercies of bossy queans jostles the despair at being condemned to the company of people who think Puccini the world's greatest composer.

After an eighty-eight year-old woman friend haunted an exhibition of Yves Klein's blue canvases she said: 'The older I get, the more I value silence.' At the same time, she sought

out new or rare operas: ‘I don’t have time left for what I already know.’ Between serenity and impatience seems as good a spot as any to close these remarks and to end one’s days.

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