Southerly

Long Paddock

72.3 Islands and archipelagos

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Rebecca Law

KALORAMA PARK

I.

mist,
when you leave be atomic
else not wake again;

if I were you
I would pursue,

raindrops closest to my own
for a chain-reaction-exit

like little kisses,

away with the winds,

mist.

II.

wide road
how often I say Wordsworth
when I see you

like a conception.

III.

cumulus
i can see blue skies
vast and wide

fill spaces
between
each of you

so weather
is incongruous

but generally
your stormy effects

dominate

and my shivering
is more reverance
than dislike, say-

Stuart Barnes

conversation

a cento for Silvia Schivella, after the Emma Jones poem of the same name

‘how did we make it up 2 yr @tic’ —
(what am i doing w/ a lung ƒull o’ dust & a tongue o’ wood,

knee-deep in the cold & swamped by ƒlowers? how shall
i tell anything @ all 2 this inƒant still in a birth-drowse?

what do u know about *th@*, my ph@ pork, my m→y
sweet♥, ƒace-2-the-wall? what keyhole have we slipped

thru, what door has shut? – the moon’s? is she sorry 4 what
will happen? have u seen something awƒul? when will it

b, the second when Ti’m breaks & eternity engulƒs
it, & i drown utterly? who is he, this blu, ƒurious

boy, shiny & strange, as iƒ he had hurtled ƒrom a ∗?
what did my ƒingers do b4 they held him? what bloo, moony

ray ices their dreams? how long can my h&s b a b&age
2 his hurt, & my words bryt birds in the sky, consoling,

consoling? r u not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
who has dismembered us? is there no way out o’ the mind?

what r these words, these words? o God, how shall
i ever clean the ƒone? is He here, Lil’ Poppies, Lil’

Hell Flames? do u do no harm? where r yr opiates,
yr nauseous capsules? what do they know th@ i don’t? –

i am bitter, i’m averse, a tiger this year @ the door, a Christus,
the awƒul God-bit dying 2 ƒly? O mother o’ leaves & sweetness

who r these pietàs th@ whisper ‘howz this, howz this?’
will it go on once 1 has seen God, once 1 has been used in

the sun’s conƒlagrations, the stains?) — ‘what is the remedy?’

Sources: Sylvia Plath’s ‘Leaving Early’, ‘Candles’, ‘Zoo Keeper’s Wife’, ‘The Babysitters’, ‘Three Women’, ‘Crossing the Water’, ‘Event’, ‘Apprehensions’, ‘Words heard, by accident, over the phone’, ‘Poppies in July’, ‘Burning the Letters’, ‘The Tour’, ‘Years’, ‘Winter Trees’, ‘Totem’, ‘Paralytic’, ‘Mystic’

Stephen Oliver

RENDEZVOUS

for Warren Dibble

You gave me back my words. A reminder.
Your voice I knew immediately. My words gave me
pause, half recalled, how could it be otherwise?

                    I heard them in a different register,
as if for the first time, remade. They had all gathered,
those words, in spontaneous,

mass demonstration, shoulder-to-shoulder,
to make a rendezvous. Whether this was expectation or
conclusion, greeting, or decisive farewell,

in a town square, down highway, for one moment,
I could not tell, those words, disowned, independent.

Given back to me within the single minded
character of your voice, tremulous, through the cable
beneath the Tasman Sea.

The phone call reversed its charge and two poems
informed me newly. Then you hung up.
                    Nothing more needed saying. A gift.

September 27, 2010

NOCTURNE

All night, the footpads of these ghosts
amongst the walls, harried as waiters between the
mortal, and some unseen command centre.

Orders taken and given,
the silent traffic of night coming and going …

As though one half of me had not emerged
from the marble block, the live side, perfectly formed,
held there by that dead weight.

The dream, and the waking.

The mind a sinkhole. Jumbled cinematic frames
forming and reforming. Taut silences.
Nocturne for the soul’s restive tossing.

And the breath that in dead earnest
wakes the body in those early hours of the false dawn.

That form lowering to my bedside
whose thought caused the body to kick wide awake.

There is nothing but grainy silence.
A hissing sound, and the darkened objects of the room
surrounding me.

The ghostly thought evaporated.

Petrina Barson

Cacique Dos

for Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who explored the Rio Paraguay in 1543-4

Remembering all this I have the feeling, the sense
of Paraguay: the sudden delapidation
as we left Argentina and its sleek stores behind;
canvas stalls sprouting from muddy roads -
weighed down by their crop of oddments:
onions toothpicks radios some beaming plastic toys.
On the bus to Asunción, worlds scoot past
our steamed-up windows: men sitting on rainy porches,
a pink donkey tethered to a tree, a rooster running,
washing spread out on a hedge.

What would you have made of this tatty place:
the legacy of Irala and his long line of swindlers -
or of all the gold that wasn't there?
I think you'd feel at home here - *Guaraní* faces
eyeing you from beneath basket-loads of *Chipá*.
I can see you stepping carefully along the disastrous
pavement, between the daily pot-holes of corruption.
I looked for you in Asunción, found only Irala
embracing a *Guaraní* on the cathedral wall -
no sign of the knife in his other hand.

Approaching the port along a street lined with oranges
we stuck out like watermelons: too big, too groomed,
too rich, too much luggage. We walked the plank
onto the Cacique Dos and felt already launched - well before
the horn sounded and the tide of hawkers fell away.
You left Asunción with twenty brigantines,
one hundred canoes, and an army of *Guaraní* -
metal plates on their foreheads bouncing the sunlight
between them. We had lightning, and herons fishing -
their white wings stirring the pink air.

For a few hours we managed our awkwardness with sleep
then surfaced to face the gleaming river and the challenge
of passing time in Spanish. Made ourselves busy with our books -
made ourselves an oddity amongst these still-rooted people
who let the hours pass like the *Camalote* plant
that drifts by the boat in little islands. Eventually
curiosity brought us Alicia - sixteen and just married
and wanting to be girly with me about hair and husbands;
and Martin - who nursed our Spanish through comparisons
of wages and genocides and the price of bread.

At night we sat on the prow with Martin, drank *mate*
talked philosophy, crawled across the language bridge
until exhaustion had us watching the stars in silence.
Sat entranced as the boat became a catalyst for flashes
of river life: as swinging lamps hailed us, or the search-light
teased out a man and his row-boat from the darkened banks.
Watched as a sweet-faced woman climbed aboard his little ferry,
held out her arms as a baby bundle was passed down to her,
then sat still beyond silence as he rowed her to the shore.
Wondered about her life amongst the waiting chickens
and about all the lives we are abandoned to.

You were the second chief of that unruly tribe
of Spaniards who wanted riches and the services of women
more than the brotherhood of man. You were on Garcia's trail
and I on yours - both looking for a kind of gold
both chasing someone whose traces are unreliable stories
in unreliable mouths. Garcia led you to near-starvation
at Los Reyes, and while the Arianicosies shot arrows
at your misery, last hopes dissolved in the deadly glares
of your men. You led me into the wide arms of the river
and a plunge without ripples into quiet and distant eyes.

Kate Middleton

A Reckoning

A
Reckoning

The
Exploration
of
the
Colorado
River
and
its
Canyons

John
Wesley
Powell

First
Expedition

Two lose their oars
Quite broken in two   Quite broken
And men also thrown into the river

Water catch ’em   H–e–a–p catch ’em

Of course the cargo of rations
instruments and clothing
is gone   is gone   thrown into river

The only things saved   barometers
package of thermometers   a three-
gallon keg of whiskey   At least

we find two or three oars   three sacks
of flours lodged in the rocks
And “Maid of the Canyon” is lost   So it seems

But she drifts some distance
swings   into an eddy   regained
Then a conflagration   Clothing burned   Hair

singed   Away go our cooking utensils
Our plates are gone   Our spoons are
gone   Our knives and forks   gone   gone

Water catch ’em   H–e–a–p catch ’em

and Goodman concludes not to go on
We go on   We run a rapid
Break an oar   Lose another

I   thrown some distance into the water
Dunn   loses his hold   goes under
and Bradley   knocked over the side

Guns and barometer lost   over the side
“Emma Dean” swamped   and we
thrown into the river   thrown   Three oars lost

And “Emma Dean” caught in a whirlpool
we get out if it
only the loss of an oar   only the loss

Water catch ’em   H–e–a–p catch ’em

—And at last we also lose our way   So it seems

The sugar melted gone
on its way down the river Bacon

so badly injured we throw it away
down the river Saleratus lost
overboard down the river (How precious

that little flour has become)
The little canvas rotten and useless
rubber ponchos all lost

Still it rains It rains

Howland his brother William Dunn all three
to go no further

Water catch 'em H–e–a–p catch 'em

And the loss of hands Still it rains

'Til at last I leave my “Emma Dean”

Not a moment of daylight lost

ankles

mine jigs
as he unravels the week

on my arm a wound
worried by nail

we'd spent the day
running

he said, 'lay down sally
was a national shame'

mostly i'm running
the heat fills my sides

when i'm under time
the day rises

like wheat
in the window sill

(
once i ran over
the hill's crest

and dipped into the stream
in my sister's knickers

the cool trickle carried
pubescent seed
)

his eye cocks
like a finish line

'you're a good sport',
but i've lost my shoes

he's all soccer mom so
lends me his

i gasp for air
at the cool pine trees

a stitch in my side
opens up like howe sound

now he's talking game
and strategy,

'there are two ways to shepherd sheep:

tender them grazing
from hill top
killing off wolves

or tend them close
with a crook
to hook stray ankles'

Demelza Hall

The Isle of Refuse in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*: Reconstituting Heterotopic Space

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"And I'm holding that long turtle spear, and I feel I'm close now to where it must be"
Neil Murray, "My Island Home"[i]

In her series of digitally manipulated photographs "Sulu Stories" (2005), Sabahan artist Yee I-Lann explores cultural intersections and issues pertaining to identity within the "watery" and contested borders of the Filipino archipelago.[ii] For I-Lann, the archipelago signifies the zone of the "not quite" where identity endlessly re-forms against a backdrop of shifting ideologies, myth and the sea. Islands are rendered spaces of cultural memory in I-Lann's work, where dynamics of difference are played out against an uncertain horizon. Like "Sulu Stories" – to which Alexis Wright refers in her essay "On Writing *Carpentaria*" – *Carpentaria* manipulates archipelagic sites to explore "what becomes of the islands we have created, of communities, our places and ourselves."[iii] Wright claims that when she looks at *Carpentaria* "it is like seeing a myriad of ideas that have created the same thing: islands."[iv] This analogy, which extends beyond the geography of the narrative to the "self-sufficiency" of the characters themselves, culminates in the subversive vision of "the floating island of rubbish."

The conflicting ancestral and social forces that Wright links to the dawn of "Armageddon"[v] in the opening pages of *Carpentaria* brew throughout the narrative – disrupting every day dwelling processes as well as national agendas – until, finally, cyclonic forces obliterate/instigate a "new reality" in the form of a peripatetic island of junk (491). Crowning the end of Wright's text, the floating island of rubbish is an interstitial space that is literally "born" from the nation's post-apocalyptic waste. Unanchored and drifting around Queensland's Gulf – much like its sole inhabitant, the perennially exiled Will Phantom – the island functions as an uncertain bridging space in the text; a site where the past, present and future jostle alongside each other. The spatial and temporal multiplicity of the floating island of rubbish aligns it with the "category of social spaces" Michel Foucault calls "heterotopias." Outlined by Foucault in his unpublished essay on architecture, "Of Other Spaces," heterotopias are spaces which function as "counter-sites" to more normative spaces in society.[vi] Heterotopias are "threshold" spaces which, by revealing hidden ideologies and intricate alignments, can "inspire a new way of ordering" society.[vii] By simultaneously conflating and destabilising domestic, national and spiritual ways of being, Wright's floating isle of refuse motivates processes of "reconnection"[viii] and reflection; processes which, in turn, prompt a reconsideration of the various ways in that we (both the characters and readers of the text) make ourselves 'at home' in the world. In light of the pervasive sense of un-belonging touted to be undermining national identity in Australia, the importance of developing a space from which to reimagine not only the parameters of nation but also the more intimate topography of home cannot be understated.

A a hybrid zone that refuses neat categorisation, the floating island of rubbish that forms in the wake of the novel's final and most devastating cyclone is a space which is simultaneously intrinsic to, and separate from, many of the other spaces and stories explored throughout the narrative. For instance, the architecture of the floating island of rubbish recalls the supposedly haunted "moving islands" of "the world's jetsam" Will Phantom saw "roaming" the Gulf as a young child on a fishing trip (386). Like these detrital and seemingly foreign "flotillas" which troubled the people of the Gulf years before, the floating island of rubbish is a space that collapses the boundaries between world and region. Representing a union between town and country, indigenous and non-indigenous architectures and infrastructures, and both modern and ancient ways of being, the floating island of rubbish is an intensely ambivalent space which fractures dreams of home and nation. In light of the island's ability not only to echo but also unsettle normative conceptions of space, this essay suggests that the isle of refuse benefits from being read as a form of heterotopic space.

Whilst the floating island of rubbish has not been widely read as a heterotopia, a number of other critics have acknowledged its potential to function as an emblem of social transformation. Laura Joseph claims, for example, that *Carpentaria* “contests the continence of ‘one Australia’ on the level of spatiality through a shift from the singularity and coherence of the continent form towards the multiplicity and dispersal of islands.”[ix] Although Wright’s floating island of rubbish is only one of many literary examples Joseph explores in “Dreaming of Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond Nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*,” its chaotic presence is palpable throughout her essay because it is a space that distinctly “refuses the terms of nation.”[x] In keeping with Gaston Bachelard’s idea that “the imagination must take too much for thought to have enough,”[xi] Joseph argues that the “imaginative excess” of *Carpentaria* – which the outlandish archipelagic space of the floating island epitomises – allows for the nation’s future to be “realised” beyond the confines of its “violent” history.[xii] Joseph’s comments resonate with what Wright herself says about the text. Wright claims that whilst *Carpentaria* is a “contemporary continuation of the Dreaming story,” it is also a text which – in response to the ongoing trauma of colonisation – attempts to “understand how to re-imagine a larger space than the ones we [in Australia] have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us.”[xiii] The journey Will takes on the floating island of rubbish is a journey of self-awareness; towards reconnecting with community but *also* re-imagining the parameters of home, nation and identity.

Frances Devlin-Glass also explores the floating island of rubbish in her review of *Carpentaria*, describing the space as “an island of Western debris” that “challenges European hubris and ecological ignorance.”[xiv] Whilst the island can, on the one hand, be said to symbolise a moral, as well as ecological, comeuppance – the island’s strange architecture brings to mind, for example, the tangled mass of sea life and rubbish caught in the enormous “ghost nets” left behind by fishermen in the Gulf of Carpentaria[xv] – it is also important to recognise that it is a space which intersects with ideas pertaining to the concept of home. “Waste,” as Brook Collins-Gearing notes in her analysis of Warwick Thornton’s 2009 film *Sampson and Delilah*, “is a subjective notion.”[xvi] During his island sojourn, Will is cocooned within the detrital trappings of his former family dwelling; a space which, prior to the cyclone, sat squarely within the realm of "wasteland." Unlike Robinson Crusoe, the seminal Western figure of the castaway, Will Phantom remains within the fold of his tribal country (which embodies both land and sea)[xvii] whilst marooned on the flotsam of Desperance, his "home" town. Coming after two years of effective exile – spent following traditional songlines in a car-convoy pilgrimage – Will's arrival on the floating island is treated as an almost utopic homecoming in the text; a reclaiming of home/wasteland which upsets the dynamics of displacement typically associated with 'being elsewhere', and reconstitutes the ways in which heterotopic spaces tend to be conceived.

As a profoundly complex and multi-layered space, the floating island of rubbish resonates with a number of the six heterotopic "principles" Foucault outlines in "Of Other Spaces." The island can be read, for example, as a "heterotopia of crisis;" a space where Will's "coming of age" occurs beyond the prying confines of society. Foucault states that "crisis heterotopias" are "privileged or sacred or forbidden spaces" that are "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis," spaces such as the "honeymoon suite," or hotel.[xviii] The floating island of rubbish both physically and imaginatively evokes the social/spatial dynamics of the hotel. For example, its foundational "bulwark" is formed from the "monstrous" debris of the "Fishman Hotel," a space where Will takes refuge during the cyclone (492). As Yvette Blackwood recognises, hotel spaces "point towards the idea of individual monads, individual worlds that sit together, and are sometimes forced to connect, like guests dwelling in hotel rooms."[xix] The isle of refuse, like the Fishman Hotel, is represented as a parallel space in the text – a world apart – where Will becomes acutely aware of the haunting presence/absence of other beings, such as family, the folk of Desperance, and his "old people."

The island, however, is not only a "hotelized" space.[xx] Wright's floating island of rubbish is an *über* heterotopia, inspiring a plethora of spatial readings. For example, due to the island's imprisoning dynamics, and Will's belief that he is "doomed to a hermit's life" (500), it is possible for the "life raft" to be read as a "heterotopia of deviation" – a zone set aside for "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" – the kind of space Foucault saw to be "replacing" the heterotopia of crisis. Furthermore, the "malingering" presence of other beings on the island also flags it as a site of burial and, therefore, aligns it with the shifting space Foucault uses to demonstrate his second principle of heterotopia, that of the cemetery. In keeping with Foucault's third principle, the island "juxtaposes" spaces that are usually "incompatible."[xxi] Like the space of the "Oriental Garden," [xxii] which Foucault offers as an example of the third principle, the floating island nurtures "many species" of vegetation (496) and it also brings together, in one space, the usually segregated elements of the Aboriginal fringe with the more "socially acceptable" architecture of the town. One of the key heterotopic interpolations the floating island of rubbish makes, however, is its ability to inspire "a break with traditional time," an attribute Foucault associates with his fourth principle which deals with "heterochronies."[xxiii] On the island, Will's sense of time fluctuates. For example, although he claims to be "able to recall each day [...] from the time he began living on the island" (496), he seems to be unable to conceive the passing of time elsewhere. It is only with the realisation that, on this strange vessel, the passage of time does not actually *lead* anywhere that Will returns to what Foucault calls "traditional time" and begins to re-evaluate his situation and his role in society (497). Like the "temporal heterotopia" of the fairground," a space that Foucault claims "is not oriented toward the eternal" [xxiv] the island also becomes, for Will, a temporary – or outskirt – space, surrounded by a perverse and frightening "travelling sideshow" (501). Additionally, with his fifth principle, Foucault states that "heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable;"[xxv] a system which can also be inferred on the floating island through Will's futile obsession with guarding the vessel's entry points (498).

The time Will spends on the floating island of rubbish is underscored by his acute sense of ambivalence; his inability to reconcile his desire to remain isolated with his wish to be rescued or liberated. The argument put forward here – in light of the ambivalence the space inspires – is that the floating island of rubbish specifically benefits from being read in line with

Foucault's sixth and final principle; as a heterotopia of "illusion" and "compensation." According to Foucault, these forms of heterotopia are sites which have, by "trait," a "function in relation to all other space that remains" in that their role is to either "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space […] as still more illusionary," or, conversely, "create a space that is other, another real space that is as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled," the heterotopia of "compensation."[xxvi] The floating island of rubbish echoes both of these enigmatic heterotopias. Initially, it appears to be a space of compensation, where Will is able to build a simulacrum of home out of the debris of his former life. However, as an innately fluid space, the island – like the world – will not sustain one settled mode of being; as soon as Will becomes comfortable with his new form of existence it is exposed as illusionary. Foucault provides two quite different example of these "extreme" types of heterotopias – suggesting, for example, "those famous brothels" can be seen to function in the role of heterotopia of illusion, whilst colonies such as the "Puritan societies the English had founded in America" during the seventeenth century could function as heterotopia of compensation – but, in the end, he links these apparently "polar" heterotopias via the "connecting" space of the boat, or ship.[xxvii] Foucault claims that the boat is "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea."[xxviii] Like Foucault's boat, Will's floating island is a heterotopic space that is insular, contained and separate to the world; a seemingly private sanctuary. Yet, at the same time the island is also a detached vessel; essentially governed by the "will of the sea" and, thereby, open to boundless interactions and other ways of being and subsequently linked to the notions of "return" and "home."

The floating island of rubbish reconstitutes the purpose of heterotopic space by revealing the connections such sites may have to spaces of home and "processes" of dwelling.[xxix] Foucault is generally considered to have deemed heterotopias to be unlike "ordinary" home spaces, disassociating them with acts of dwelling.[xxx] Wright's re-imagining of heterotopic space, however, subverts these distinctions on a number of levels. For example, as the ensuing analysis reveals, the floating island of rubbish is *both* a heterotopia "par excellence"[xxxi] (a boat) and an integral manifestation of "country," unsettling the ideal of displacement upon which heterotopic habitation is usually premised. Whilst the floating island is, on the one hand, an alien terrain – adrift on the world's seas – it is also, for Will, a space constructed from elements that are familiar to him, the detrital topography of his childhood home, and can therefore be read as a space which celebrates fringe dwelling. Rather than just juxtaposing multiple spaces, the floating island embodies them; inspiring a "new dreaming"[xxxii] where the Aboriginal sacred and home making practices combine with elements of Western culture to force a 'coming of age' and contemplation of the world beyond the nation's shores. During the cyclone, "the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world" is broken down by the wind, rain and tidal floodwaters and "crushed into a rolling mountainous wall" of debris (491). Forming the foundation of the floating island, this wall of rubbish is an amalgamation of old and new worlds; a realm enigmatically belonging to "the ancient spirits of the creation period" as well as Will Phantom's "thoughts of the future" (492). By reimagining nation from the perspective of the Indigenous fringe, Will's island sojourn initiates a new system of dwelling; a system which reflects an emerging world vision and recognises the need for ongoing and specified reconnections with community and country.

Like all of the spaces and places Wright conjures in *Carpentaria*, the isle of refuse is framed by the creational story of the rainbow serpent. An ancestral being common to numerous Aboriginal tribes (including the Waanyi people to whom Wright herself belongs), the rainbow serpent's movements create and influence the ever-changing topography of the land and conditions of the sea in Queensland's Gulf country:

> Picture the creative serpent, scouring deep into- scouring down through – the slippery underground mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The sea water following in the serpent's wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed colour from ocean blue to the yellow of mud [...] When it had finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no

> apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin (1-2).

The frenzied tidal-conditions which create the monstrous island are an incarnation of the ancient creative forces used to describe the Gulf County early in the narrative. Will claims, for example, that "the macabre construction resemble[s] a long-held dream of the water world below ground where the ancient spirits of the creation period rested, while Aboriginal man was supposed to care for the land" (492). Evoking the manifold links between ancient and modern worlds, the floating island represents not only the power of the "Great Earth Mother" – or "female Rainbow Serpent" – to continually destroy, rescue and renew, but also functions as a contemporary unearthing of "deep knowledge."[xxxiii] According to Wright, "deep knowledge" is way of describing the wealth of Aboriginal stories, or "ancient treasures," buried in this continent and intrinsic to its proper care.[xxxiv] The Rainbow Serpent not only "permeates," but embodies, the new hybrid space of the floating island, forcing a primary recognition of the Aboriginal sacred.

An innately revelatory space, the floating island forces all manner of cultural and personal excavations. For Will, the island's sole inhabitant – with whom its "destiny" is "intertwined" (494) – the space rouses a moving "return of the repressed."[xxxv] Arriving on the "serpentine flotation" during the early stages development – as "its parts rubbed, grated and clanked together" until they became tightly enmeshed into a solid mass" (493) – Will briefly feels like an "intruder [...] clinging to a foetus inside the birth canal, listening to it, witnessing the journey of creation in the throes of a watery birth" (494). His initial feelings of being-out-of-place, however, are mixed with an uncanny sense of the "familiarity" as he realises that the "embryonic structure's strange whines" are in fact familiar to him (494). The oscillation between feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity, or strangeness, may also be understood as heterotopic effects. As Danielle Manning notes, for example, heterotopias are inked to Freud's concept of "the uncanny" because they "reflect a curious slippage between the familiar and unfamiliar."[xxxvi] "Heterotopic sites," she claims, "seem familiar, as they are subsumed within a society's conventional ordering system that links them to other sites, yet they are unfamiliar in that they simultaneously contradict the premises by which the relationships are sustained."[xxxvii]Due to its unusual architecture, the unanchored island simultaneously distances Will from the spaces and people he has left behind whilst constantly echoing them in endless and uncanny ways.

The floating island of rubbish – or "birthing wreck" (497) – is intimately associated with Will's mother, Angel Day; and by extension his family's home, the "Number One House." As Carole Ferrier recognises, "the huge pile of floating rubbish" that is born from the cyclone can, in fact, be read as a "strange displacement of the material of which Angel's [and Will's] home was made."[xxxviii] Will grew up in a "a rattling corrugated-iron shanty fortress," built by his mother "from sprinklings of holy water, charms, spirits, lures [...] and discarded materials pinched from the rubbish dump across the road" on the town's fringe (12). Like the floating island, the Number One House is an embodiment of the rainbow serpent; a space that is disturbed by "haunting spirits residing in the smelly residue" from whence the structure came, the "slime-dripping serpentine caverns of the dump" (16). It is also an "excessive" space which, like the island, is prone to intrusion and filled with overflowing and often conflicting energies (41).

The process of dwelling Will enacts whilst marooned on the floating island of rubbish is largely informed by the homemaking practices he learns from both his parents whilst growing up in the Number One House. Like his mother fossicking at the dump and seemingly using "magic to erect the house from scraps" (14), Will creatively salvages what he can from the wreckage "tunnelling down into the depths of the pontoon island itself" to find "boxes of precious hooks [and] nails" to build himself home and shelter (496). Like his father, whose process of dwelling incorporates tending to country. Will is also instinctively aware of how the floating island of detritus is a part of the serpent dreaming and linked with the ancestral spirits of the sea. To survive in this new world, Will quickly realises that he needs to reconnect with his sea country and the seafaring lessons he was taught as a child; a challenge he welcomes:

> Come hither fish, come sea spirits, demons, marine monsters. He would have to learn all about them if he were to survive. He would have to chart nautical routes in his mind. He would have to start remembering the journey of the heavens, all of the stars, breezes, just like his father, Norm Phantom. (494).

By self-consciously modelling Norm's distinctive dwelling practice, Will's "life raft" is rendered an environ of home. Michele Grossman claims that it is the "oceanic space where key characters" of *Carpentaria* "are most truly at home, deeply themselves and meaningfully linked with their world."[xxxix] Out of the flotsam, Will creates what he thinks to be a predictable and intensely ordered, miniature world; becoming "a practical man in a practical man's paradise" (496). However, the floating island of rubbish motivates a concentric process of (re)connection that progresses outwards, from the private and familiar to the public and unfamiliar. And the orderly realm of compensation Will creates is revealed to be unsustainable, and essentially based upon fantasy.

As a veritable heterotopia of illusion, the floating island of rubbish appears, at first, to fulfil Will's every wish. For example, "if he went looking for driftwood, his hand only had to reach down into the shallow water and as though a magical spell had been cast, the treasure would be his to hold" (497). However, what Will refuses to acknowledge during the early months of his castaway – the island's "golden days" – is that on the island it is not just wishes that are granted as "any fear had a reality too" (497). Having immersed himself in the innate escapism of his survivor narrative, Will struggles to face up to the fears he has supressed since being washed up on the island's strange shore: the possibility that no-one is steering the island and he is "caught in a sphere of oscillating winds and currents" on a sinking ship of ghosts (497). Once Will realises that his fantastical "island home" is not actually going anywhere, "other places" quickly begin to grow "more fabulous" in his mind (499), revealing the ways in which heterotopic space can highlight the "illusionary" perceptions governing imaginative constructions of even the most normative environments.

In her essay "A Question of Fear," Wright claims that "one of the great lessons" she has learned from "important Aboriginal thinkers" is that "fear comes with our dreams, and if you learn how to conquer your fear, you will learn how to become a fearless dreamer and an instrument of possibility."[xl] However, despite his growing awareness Will refrains from taking self-determined action. Rather than working through his fears and taking charge of his own destiny with the courage he has shown throughout the narrative, Will begins to while away his time on the island first ignoring, and then – after killing the turtle – indulging, his fears and suspicions. The death of the turtle functions as an important nexus in the novel. [xli] As the song lines from "My Island Home" evoked in this essay's epithet suggest, turtle hunting is a ceremonial activity integral to Indigenous practices of being-in-country. By killing the "huge green turtle" as it pulls "its heavy body onto his island" (498), Will is demonstrating his connection with the traditional ways of the saltwater people to whom he belongs.[xlii] However, as soon as Will eats from the turtle's flesh, the illusion of his wish-fuelled, pre-colonial utopia collapses. Whilst Will's island continues to shine "brightly with happiness" he starts to feel "stranded and claustrophobic [...] like a prisoner grown old with incarceration" (498) whose nightmares become all encompassing. Although Will has the skills and perseverance to survive on the island, he lacks the motivation (or self-determination) to actively take control of his destiny and, therefore, remains trapped in a viscous cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The killing of the turtle is Will's "albatross" and symbolises the burden of *authentic* being-in-the-world.[xliii] Authentic being-in-the-world – being based upon and/or inspiring a sense of belonging – stems from processes of self-actualisation.[xliv] Although Will's knowing performance of being a castaway is one of genuine reconnection with country and traditional ways of being, his illusion of returning to a time of pre-settlement is not sustainable. According to Grossman, one of the results of reading *Carpentaria* is that the "doppelganger effect of indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing is fully, furiously, sustained as tandem stories and lives variously intersect and diverge, yet remain haunted by the shadows of the others' truths and lies."[xlv]

Like his mother – who on the fateful day she found the statue of the Virgin Mary at the town dump, is startled when other peoples begins to emerge from their "ensconced positions […] under cardboard boxes, pieces of corrugated iron, inside forty-four gallon tar barrels" (23) – Will becomes precipitously aware of the other bodies, both the entangled mass of familiar and unfamiliar beings whose rotting core fertilise his island heterotopia and the tortured faces of the nameless masses who, like him are "jettisoned" offshore and cast adrift (501). As Will begins to increasingly rely "on the idea of being saved," he shifts from his position of insularity and moves his gaze outwards, to the uncertain horizon (501). From his virtual vantage point, however, Will struggles to make any kind of connection with either the inner or the outer world and feels "asphyxiated," as though "there was not enough air in the atmosphere for them all to share" (501).

The journey Will takes on the isle of refuse is a journey of self-awareness. "Surrounded by the mirrors of a travelling sideshow" (501), the "floating island of junk" (502) is a heterotopic space designed for meditation and reflection upon the collective plight of humanity as well as self. McMahon claims that island spaces represent "a condensation of the tension between land and water, centre and margin, and, relative to national perspective, between reflective insularity and an externalising globalisation."[xlvi] Through its ability to embody other spaces and oscillate between different locations, the floating island of rubbish allows Will to not only reconnect with his ancestral heritage, knowledge and skills but also to bear witness to the plight of other displaced people in the world seeking shelter on Australia's shores and, thereby, enhance his capacity to make global, as well as regional, connections. Throughout *Carpentaria*, Will Phantom is represented as a man who is not afraid to act, regardless of the consequences. Yet whilst he is repeatedly shown to possess the skills required to be a hero, or leader, wisdom is not a quality that is attributed to him (494).

Unlike his father Normal Phantom, who, as Devlin-Glass recognises, eventually "reclaim[s] his family and cultural heritage,"[xlvii] Will seems to spend little time considering the plight of his wife Hope and son Bala (who are on a parallel journey in the same oceanic space) and the narrative leaves him fastidiously scanning the horizon; apathetically waiting to be rescued. Yet whilst this parting vision seems to be one of "hopelessness," perhaps what Will is seeking cannot be *actively* found. Hetherington claims that the horizon, as the ultimate heterotopia, is "a boundless space of connections [...] into which social relations are extended beyond their own limits."[xlviii] Although he recognises that the horizon is "impossible" to ever actually locate, Hetherington also suggests that it is an "obligatory point of passage."[xlix] Whilst Will's life raft is indeed a space which exemplifies John Donne's famous claim that "no man is an island," [l] in the end it only gestures towards the need for a "collective" approach to being-in-the world via the unreachable space of the horizon, and Will's desire to hear the sound of a "stranger's voice" (502).

In the introduction to "Of Other Spaces," Foucault suggests that the human "experience of the world" has shifted from the linear perspective of "a long life developing through time" to a distinctly spatial comprehension; "a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22). Like Foucault, Wright shifts the ways in which we think about being-in-the-world. By successfully re-imagining the debilitating borders – or "broken line"[li] – of colonisation, *Carpentaria* reveals some of the ways in which "ancient beliefs sit in the modern world" and exposes "the fragility of the boundaries of Indigenous home places of the mind" (places that Wright claims are "often forced into becoming schizoid illusions of our originality)."[lii] The floating island of rubbish, therefore, like I-Lann's archipelagos, never quite conforms to either a utopian or dystopian model but instead functions as a "cathartic"[liii] in-between space where ideas about home, nation and identity can be boundlessly reconstituted.

Notes

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[i] Neil Murray, "My Island Home" song lyrics, from the Warumpi Band album *Go Bush* (1987)

[ii] Gina Fairly interview with I-Lann, "Not Drowning … Waving: Intersections in the Sulu Sea" *Nafas Art Magazine* (2006). http://universes-in-universe.org/content/view/print/6386

[iii] Alexis Wright "On Writing *Carpentaria*," *Heat* 13 (2007), 94

[iv] Wright (2007), 93

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[v] Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*. Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing Company (2006) 1 (hereafter parenthetically in main text)

[vi] Foucault "Of Other Spaces" *Diacritics*, 16.1 (Spring 1986), 24

[vii] Kevin Hetherington *Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*. Routledge, London (1997), 42, 40

[viii] Kim Scott, in his analysis of representations of indigeneity in Australia's national narratives, suggests that alongside stories which focus on "disconnection from country, language, and family" exist narratives of "reconnection" that "tell of the struggle to reconnect individuals and small groups of people to one another, and to a sense of history and heritage derived from a specific place."[viii] Whilst "reconnection" is primarily concerned with strengthening traditional bonds and recovering language within Aboriginal cultures, Scott claims that the concept "can mend some of the damage done by colonisation and restore relationships within a [wider] community," and suggests that it "is one way a relatively young nation state […] can be rooted in its continent and prior societies" (122). "Covered Up With Sand" *Meanjin* 66.2 (2007)

[ix] Laura Joseph, "Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*" *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Special Issue: Australian Literature in a Global World* (2009), 7

[x] Joseph (2009) 1

[xi] Gaston Bachelard *Water and Dreams- an Essay on the Imagination of Matter* 1942. Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation (1999), 253

[xii] Joseph (2009), 9

[xiii] Wright (2007), 82

[xiv] Frances Devlin-Glass "Review of *Carpentaria*" *Antipodes* 21.1 (2007), 83

[xv] "AM" on ABC Radio National AM - Tuesday, 18 May, 2004 08:20:00 **(**Reporter: Ian Townsend**)**. http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2004/s1110367.htm

[xvi] Brooke Collins-Gearing "Reclaiming the Wasteland: *Samson and Delilah* and the Historical perception and Construction of Indigenous Knowledges in Australian Cinema" *M/C Journal* 13.4 (2010). http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/252

[xvii] According to the 2004 Government consultation report "Living on Saltwater Country: Southern Gulf of Carpentaria Sea Country Management, Needs and Issues" prepared by Paul Memmott and Graeme Channells in association with the "Aboriginal Environments research centre" at the University of Queensland, "sea country extends inland to the furthest limit of saltwater influence – includes beaches, salt pans, mud flats, beach ridges (which become islands in very high tides, additional wet season effects) etc. land and sea is inseparably connected" (8). http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mbp/publications/north/pubs/losc-capentaria.pdf

[xviii] Foucault (1986), 24

[xix] Yvette Blackwood, "Parallel Hotel Worlds" *Moving Pictures Stopping Places: Hotels and Motels on Film*. Eds. David B Clarke, Valerie Crawford Pfannhauser and Marcus A Doel (2009) 279

[xx] Blackwood (2009), 280

[xxi] *Ibid*

[xxii] *Ibid*

[xxiii] Foucault (1986), 24

[xxiv] Foucault (1986), 26

[xxv] *Ibid*

[xxvi] Foucault (1986), 27

[xxvii] *Ibid*

[xxviii] *Ibid*

[xxix] According to Hetherington, "Heterotopia have an ambivalence within them that allows us to focus on the idea of process rather than structure" and consider alternative and ever-vacillating modes of "social ordering" (139).

[xxx] Marietta Rossetto, "Heterotopia and its role in the lived experiences of resettlement" *International Education Journal* 7.4 (2006), 446

[xxxi] Foucault (1986), 27

[xxxii] Wright, "Deep Weather" *Meanjin* (2010) http://meanjin.com.au/articles/post/deep-weather/

[xxxiii] *Ibid*

[xxxiv] *Ibid*

[xxxv] The "return of the repressed" is an influential psychoanalytic theory – introduced by Sigmund Freud in his early essay "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" in 1896 – which refers to the process by which memories of seemingly forgotten events or incidents psychologically manifest, or return.

[xxxvi] Danielle Manning, "(Re)Visioning Heterotopia: The Function of Mirrors and Reflection in Seventeenth-Century Painting" *Shift: Queen's Journal of Visual and Material Culture*, 1 (2008), 1

[xxxvii] *Ibid*

[xxxviii] Carole Ferrier, "'Disappearing Memory' and the Colonial Present in Recent Indigenous Women's Writing", *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (Special Issue 2008), 49.

[xxxix] Michele Grossman, "Risk, Roguery and Revelation". [Review of *Carpentaria*.] *Australian Literary Review* (4 Oct. 2006), 10

[xl] Alexis Wright, "A Question of Fear" in *Tolerance, Prejudice and Fear: Sydney Pen Voices* Sydney: Allen and Unwin (2008), 149

[xli] In her essay "Rethinking emplacement, displacement and indigeneity: *Radiance*, *Auntie Rita* and *don't take your love to town*," Ceridwen Spark suggests that the space of the island in Rachel Perkin's film *Radiance* is treated as a "contested rather than an ideal of authentic place" and can be read as "heterotopic" because it "connote[s] an Aboriginal past as well as a more brutal postcolonial history" (99). *Journal of Australian Studies* 26.7 (2002)

[xlii] Note that Spark also claims that Nona's inability to kill the turtle in *Radiance* demonstrates that "disconnection [as well as reconnection] comprises Aboriginal people's relationship to past rituals and ways of being-in-the-world" (98).

[xliii] See Coleridge poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798)

[xliv] Linn Miller, in her article "Belonging to Country — A Philosophical Anthropology," explores self-actualised approaches to being-in-the world, suggesting that "authentic" belonging is only possible when people know every aspect of themselves (220). *Journal of Australian Studies: Voicing Dissent*. Ed. Kelly McWilliam, Peta Stephenson and Graeme Thompson. St Lucia API Network and University of Queensland Press, 2003.

[xlv] Grossman (2006) 10

[xlvi] Elizabeth McMahon, "Encapsulated Space: The Paradise-Prison of Australia's Island Imagery" *Southerly* 65.1 (2005), 21

[xlvii] Devlin-Glass (2007), 84

[xlviii] Hetherington (1997) ,140

[xlix] *Ibid*

[l] John Donne "No man is an Island/ Entire of itself./Each is a piece of the continent,/A part of the main." From *Meditation XVII* (1623)

[li] Wright cited by Ferrier (2008), 44

[lii] Wright (2007), 81-82

[liii] Rossetto describes heterotopic space as potentially "cathartic" (2006), 447

Luke Beesley

First Light by Kate Fagan

Giramondo Publishing, 2012, 102 pp pb,
ISBN: 9781920882808, RRP $24

First Light, by former Sydney, now Blue Mountains-based, poet and folk musician, Kate Fagan, is a book in six or seven chapters, depending on whether you include the notes which are substantial at five pages and revealing in terms of influences e.g. seminal rock/pop musicians , L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E.-centred modernist and postmodern poets, local contemporaries, and writers such as W.G. Sebald who are difficult to categorise.

Visual artists are important to Fagan, too, including Nick Keys, a Sydney-based installation-and-collage artist and poet in his own right, who has made an artwork work specifically for the cover of *First Light*. Keys's blue, cream and white collage of cut-up words immediately brings to mind a similar, collage piece of Rosalie Gascoigne's, "Hung Fire", on the cover of Fagan's last full-length collection, *The Long Moment* (2002).

I found risk in this reiteration – this tilt to displaced lettering, surface, signs and collage – particularly given the 2nd chapter of *First Light* contains ten centos. Is collage too obvious a technique to describe Fagan's poetics? She does so much more than simply *collage* the poems.

But what becomes a possibility, upon repeated reads, is a desire to remind the reader of the book's *book-ness* and its presence within the act of reading; to encourage the reader to return to Keys's work as it's deepened by the poems and by an intimacy with the book-as-object.

A second, perhaps less superficial, hesitation came at the discovery of this flock of centos 15 pages in. After developing a seductive trust, using a direct and even tone, Fagan boldly confronts us with a potential flight from the author, and from this atmosphere of steady assurance.

I'll sketch this effect to demonstrate one of *First Light*'s real strengths:

The first chapter, 'Observations on Time, Cargo', contains a sequence of nine short, lyric poems, the first being about testing the air and, like many of the poems of *The Long Moment*, the tone is philosophical and intimate. Ten years on from her first collection, Fagan contemplates new beginnings and poetics – What to take and leave behind? – “cargo”:

> All I can see are weather and its imitators.
>
> I decide upon four themes:
> tragedy, character, temporality, locus.
>
> Things and appearances are moving,
> positive freight lines up
> in letters.

The poems of this section use enjambment to swing the reader through, with glimmers of metaphor, using Fagan’s signature ability to make the vocabulary of science sensual. Linguistically, this section contains some of the book’s lushest moments:

> Afterimages sway,
> flocks of apostrophes
> skirt the ‘bright obvious’ still-house of speech.
>
> There are peaches
> tied in the richest windows.

This gorgeous piece recalls the juicy, meta-lyricism of the poem, ‘In Pursuit of Blue’, in *The Long Moment*: “a smooth chunk / of ocean in our hands. // surprising and licked / as the word *turquoise*.” The final moments of *First Light*’s first section ends: “Voices cut the street like old super-eights. // On the count of three: / one, two. Three.” The reader then pauses – is reminded of an earlier line – “the maroon resolve / folding to a page” – and sees the new section heading: FIRST LIGHT. The shift from “weather and its imitators” in the first line of the book, to “one, two” – beat – “three” – beat – turn the page, FIRST LIGHT, is exquisite and characteristic of Fagan’s sense of music and its need for movements.

The possibility of abandoning this careful atmosphere for centos – a collage of other people’s lines – is a little nerve wracking.

There’s great pressure on these centos to not only contain strong lines that feel part of the same poem, but to continue in Fagan’s even voice. We find relief, though, immediately, even as the voice scats and croons:

> This time I'm going to talk about
> red light. Bandit trees altering
> ways of relating with clouds
> hum hum hum aum hum hum.

This poem, like the book, the section title and the artwork on the cover, is called ‘First Light’, and is made up of lines from neo-Dadaist, Fluxus-friendly poet, Jackson Mac Low. He’s clearly a touchstone for Fagan’s leap into poetic chance, here, and perhaps even a precursor to Fagan’s cover designs (many of Mac Low’s covers contain a rectangular-shaped artwork divided into parts). Fagan seems in control. And the centos – although containing a jagged sort of lightness to them – are quintessentially hers: playful, sonorous, quizzical. If there is awkwardness in any of the language: “alcohol lamp between / thick things”, Fagan anticipates our concerns in the next phrase: “between much railing and mouthing”. Her control and intelligence is also evident when allowing for a more personal note, in a poem dedicated to her daughter called ‘A Little Song’ which, with its softness and light musical touches, and using phrases gleaned from Gertrude Stein, cleverly links Fagan’s daughter’s early utterances to Stein’s reduction of language to pure sounds and essences.

In chapter three, ‘The Correspondence’, we encounter metaphors for birth and references to pregnancy and the sensitivity of the body, but the “letters” are abstract and more complex than a simple note or lyric to new life. They’re portraits of emotion and memory, and their recipients are indistinct. The line breaks are cunning and the mood brings to mind the densely emotional imagery in Terrance Malick’s more recent films:

> The boats decay on their painters
> and no one lives to sail them.
> Later I saw a woman walking
> past us with a lamp, illuminating

And, a little later in ‘Letter IX’:

> A kite against the setting hill.
> Eventually my songs will pass for history,
> brighter than time.
>   I will walk
> across the city as another
> beside others.

Following the letters of section three is ‘Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers’, containing 15 prose poems. Then in the book’s fifth section, ‘Authentic Nature’, we find nine of the book’s most conventional poems, in that each has their own title; their own conceptual and sonic space to occupy. It’s as if, after trying out new instruments and session musicians, the singer turns her skills and experience, ten years on from her last album, to the standard – landscapes. Curiously, there was a section in *The Long Moment* called ‘anti-landscape’. Fagan enters ‘Authentic Nature’, now a mid-career poet, with her eyes open. The maturity of her writing is evidenced in poems like ‘Workman Honeyeater’ where she uses the philosophical enquiry and playful sense of fragmentation in *First Light*’s first four sections, but brings them to a more recognisable form or circumstance. That she can successfully (originally and without sentimentality) write with unabashed lyricism here attests to this:

> A thousand leaves like arrows,
> close to the truck than I could hazard.
> It’s helmet of sleek feathers shook
> in the long, fluid rain. These eaves

First Light’s final section, ‘Thought’s Kilometre’, like section one, has a sense of its place in the collection – *denouement*. And yet the book throughout seems to refer to the audio of its motion in the reader’s hands: to beginnings and farewells and “moveable chapters”.

Returning with this idea to the prose poems of ‘Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers’, the first letter of each poem is enlarged in the manner of a novel’s new chapter/new paragraph – first light. There is restraint in these block-shaped poems, too, and surrealism, but they’re lean and aural. The poems reference Keys and Gascoigne in shape, but there is an accumulated logic to them that allows a line like: “I raised my hand to steady the stars. Where we might and would. Could you have seen would you have desired saw and seeing became that is to say electrified”, to enter the reader freely and with meaning.

Again the reader is brought to Stein’s musical gestures, here, and ‘Book of Hours for Narrative Lovers’ ends in a wound-down tone of formal austerity – aesthetically Japanese and considerate: “I move quietly now as if picking up shoes or setting papers in order. Fold and renew the hours.” Looking back at Nick Keys’s collage, I realise that at least half of the artwork is blank. Although the centos and the busy prose poems offer a carnival-like static and texture to the book, *First Light* still comes across gently, or austerely. Perhaps this is because there is a deliberately equal amount of blank white space throughout the book, in and around the well-spaced poems. Or perhaps it is more to do with a trust gained, and Fagan’s empathy for patient readers and re-readings. In this sense, the overall pleasure (and power) of the book – its whole – washes over the reader. The “syllables” of *The Long Moment* were “a vector, an atomic spacial practice”, but in *First Light*, in a resonant and beautiful way, Fagan finds that they’re purely “hollow”.

Andy Carruthers

Mez Breeze, Human Readable Messages (Mezangelle 2003-2011)

Traumawien, 2012, 327 pp pb,
ISBN 9783950291094, RRP $30.25

> I think in the artistic field the immanent infinity is finally something like the infinity of the form itself. And what is infinity of the form itself? It's the possibility that the new form—the new possibility of the form—is in relation, in direct relation with the chaotic sensibility. And a new form is always a new access, a new manner, a new entry, a new access in the chaotic of sensibility. And so we can say that in the artistic field the creation of forms is really the movement of immanent infinity, is really an access of the infinity of the world as such.
>
> Alain Badiou, *The Subject of Art,* 2005

Poetry Must Return to the Infinite!

In "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice," Kenneth Goldsmith writes, "if John Cage theoretically claimed that any sound can be music, then we logically must conclude that, properly framed, any language can be poetry."[i] Foreseeing the eminent destruction of writing itself, the *logical end* of the work of Cage (begun in poetry by Jackson Mac Low), is to turn everything into possible language material for poetry, "properly framed" (what is "proper" anyway?) One aspect of procedural and conceptual poetry is their tendency to subsume other available forms. We could call a conceptual poem which is a lead block or a video piece a poem, as long as it was considered language properly framed. Poetry named as such will continue to be called poetry, just like the economy in capitalism — with its infinite adaptability — will remain the economy. For instance, when the "fiscal cliff" as it became known loomed over the American people in late 2012, good economists knew, of course, that everything would be ok, that if anything the resilient growth-economy would not only withstand but perhaps even benefit from the post-cliff "tweaks" in taxation law and program cuts.

As it is with general capitalism (depressing as this may sound) so it is with poetry: even when it seems it can't go on, it keeps going on, and on. It is not enough to accept that poetry cannot die or to attempt that impossible task of trying to destroy it. Readers and writers of poetry must make it more than alive and remake it anew. Charles Bernstein, in "Attack of the Difficult Poems" (2011), argues that difficulty is no excuse. In January 2009, the US federal National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) reported startling finds: while more and more adult humans are reading, *less and less are reading poetry*. Why is this the case, especially now when more poets are writing poetry than at any time in history? Perhaps poetry is *not* so eternal. Perhaps poetry, like religion, is a transitional aspect of humanity that is to be slowly phased out as it acquires language. This would be my spontaneous, three-pronged counterattack: 1) poetry has lost its passion for the Real, 2) poetry is not committed to creating eternity in time, and 3) it is no longer committed to the infinite. In an age where it seems like there are almost as many poems as there are people, poetry must be forcibly remade from within itself in ways that profoundly unsettle us, and in ways that do not limit poetry to sophistical language-games.

For experiment's sake, let's rally around this affirmative cry: poetry must return to the infinite! In new and interesting ways, m[ez]ang.elle, Australian poet Mez (Mary-Anne) Breeze's code language, thinks through new ways of working with the infinite of language to make poetry, and to change the ontological ground of poetry itself (as Brian McHale might say). Even if the title claims otherwise, *Human Readable Messages* may not yet be appreciated by all human readers. In any case, many listeners did not consider many great ruptures in the history of music.[ii] For these *precise* reasons, work like this requires our attention. Its potential participation in the making of new artistic truths may (or may not) anticipate a future in which such work will be read by all. We may read signs sent back from the future of poetry.

> processes > conditions > potentials

"Content curation isn't art", Mez Breeze writes.[iii] *HRM* is composed in Breeze's own created language m[ez]ang.elle (or "Mezangelle"). Published by Traumawein, an online publisher of "Digital Conceptualism/Poetry. Hybridbooks," it is minimally curated. Written and organized chronologically, from June 2003 to May 2011, the duration of *HRM,* certainly a "long poem," spans eight years, a good part of the last decade. We can count labour time, even artistic labour, by the working day (the day being a basic temporal unit distended in modernist novels like Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance). Long poems can partake in even longer rhythms, and compress and distend time accordingly. Very long long poems like Goldsmith's *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003) seem to confirm that difficulty is alive and well (and you thought modernist poetry was difficult!). If Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Drafts* showcases (post-Pound) the *evidence* of curation (elisions, strikethroughs etc.), *HRM* either hides it or does not partake in curation at all.

Readable as the logical end of proceduralism, Mezangelle is codewurk, and codewurk, as scholar Rita Raley puts it, "makes exterior the inner workings of the computer."[iv] It brings into appearance the language which lies underneath language. This is not the Real as such, since code does not resist signification, but you could say it sits closer to the edge of the Real. If "Content curation isn't art," content-presentation or content remixing *is*.[v] Un-curated, pure, we might even say the language of code is something like the undoing of form and content to bring forth change in the laws of appearance. Put in the language of Badiou, the creation of Mezangelle is something like an access of the infinity of the world, the immanent infinity of the world in the creation of new forms and a new superstructure of language through those forms. Codewurk is at once new, contradictory, pure, and dialectical:

> The impact of her unique codewurks [constructed via her pioneering net.language "mezangelle"] has been equated with the work of Shakespeare, James Joyce, Emily Dickinson, and Larry Wall.
>
> \>
> ■Thus, when I
> ■think about 'digital writing' I have to do with a doubled or better: a
> ■self-referential notion.
> \>
> \> self rif.f[lings+ego=arrowings]>construction ripplings
> \>
> ■Aesthetically, digital writing - for me - is
> ■concerned with the processes, conditions and potential of writing in its
> ■pure sense.
> \>
> \>
> \>processes
> \>conditions
> \>potentionals

Processes, conditions and potentials form the crucial procedural triplet for an aesthetics of digital writing in its "pure sense." It is pretty much a postructuralist aesthetics. Processes are immanent and potentionals "ex-timate," you might say. All three defer the authority of the text itself to some other force potentially inside or perpetually outside of it. The triad works not to puncture time and create eternity but to work with time as it is. It exposes media to the point of its own finitude. Rosalind Krauss argues that post-medium work still strives for purity but without the support of media *per se*[vi]. According to some "post" theories of media (post-convergence and the post-medium condition) new media subsumes other media, and thus the whole concept of "medium" and "media" itself has to be called into question. Code causes the effects of hybridity: pictures, animation or videos, almost anything digitally speaking, can be reduced (or expanded) to enormous strings of code, transferred from one device to another, downloaded onto your Smartphone, or made to appear again in failed transfers. The postmedium poem results in all media and all forms collapsing into the poem, via code. Yet this hybrid network of lenses, frames, distanciations and deferrals cannot elide the ontological poem, or force the infinity of the poem (which may even be captured in a single word). As Sally Evans has convincingly noted in an article published in *Cordite Poetry Review,* Mezangelle is almost holophrastic, both adjective, noun, and verb all at once, committing a kind of phrastic seizure, a freezing of the chain of signification itself, a collapse of code and message.[vii] An instance of this can be found in the play on *Das Kapital* and majuscule/masculinity:

> Date: Mon, 09 Feb 2004 08:01:22 +1100
> To: arc.hive
> From: "][mez]["
>
> Subject: the poorest tiny MAPS [+MAN] [+meat]
>
> the poorest tiny MAN [rd]
>
> i am pauper MAN.
>
> occular.king + door.feeding.queens
> Das Kapitalisation.via.good.lexi[Def]cons
>
> sickness MAPS rotten me[-ld]at.

Teledildonics

If Breeze is engaged in a resistance against the very idea of the poem by engineering the collapse of code and message, she is also openly and vehemently resistant to any kind of artistic categorization:

> In an effort to keep this manageable [lump me into one of your keeerazzzy glitch/net.art/web-point-infinity/relational & new aesthetically-defined "artistic" categories if you will] here's some [non-random + IMO relevant but not necessarily cohesive] points

There is a sense then that this “resistance” to categorization is equated with novelty and contradiction:

> 40. WHAT INSPIRES YOU? uber-newness. gaps and swells in conversations. contradictions [especially in ppl]. dedication. oddness. talent. passion. focus. fragments.

The "you" is an avatar. The avatarization of the poet is a return to the actuality of the virtual and the immanence of the virtual in the actual itself. The virtual is actual and ontologically (in)existent in the reality whose world it is supposed to represent, but the world it is supposed to represent ceases to exist at the sight of the virtual, and is eclipsed by the virtual itself. The virtual is *not* virtual by virtue of it *not* being actual: the virtual is where the *heterocosm,* the poem's worlds *are,* where they dwell. At this eclipsing of "virtual reality" there arises a kind of "Real-virtuality." The poet's avatarization parallels, interestingly, a return to the body in the guise of more advanced neurological technology. If you can use Teledildonics (dildos controlled by your sexy digital other), it may be possible to recreate the entire sex act through virtual domains. The Real-virtual will conduct the affairs even of things like bodies, but not necessarily emerge from them. Have poets always been avatars? The logical end of the procedural and conceptual project is that avatars and their screen names are just as likely to write poems as living human breathing poets are, and why shouldn't we welcome this?

Mez Breeze's *HRM* presents some epistemological ruptures for the poet and thus opens itself up to all kinds of new ways of reading, knowledge and assessment, perhaps even beyond classically "literary" readings such as these. It enters the infinite of language, not to find eternity in time, but to rupture the laws of appearance. It is preoccupied with its headlong adventure into what lies beneath: the world of the powerfully in-human language of the computer.[viii] The immanent infinities of this other world of code could pose a challenge today to thinkers and literary critics in how they might understand, process or, if need be, *intervene* in the condition of poetry, the language art. Even if we cannot see clearly ahead into the murky windshear of a coming storm, let's blow our ram's horns and storm the palisades! Let's all read electronic postmedium long poems in the twenty-first century!

Notes

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[i] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice". World Wide Web, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html (accessed 14 January 2013)
[ii] Have a flick through Nicolas Slonimsky's *Dictionary of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven's Time* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2000)
[iii] See the url: *http://netwurker.livejournal.com/138975.html*.

[iv] See Rita Raley, “Interferences: [Net.Writing] and the Practice of Codework” (2002) http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/net.writing

[v] For a good technical understanding of Mez Breeze’s procedures, see Rob Myer’s review on furtherfield.org (4/6/2012).

[vi] See Rosalind Krauss *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010)

[vii] Sally Evans, “The Anti-Logos Weapon”: Excesses of Meaning and Subjectivity in Mezangelle Poetry” *Cordite Poetry Review,* (1 Dec, 2011)

[viii] Significantly, the first thing programmers learn how to write is “Hello World.” I thank Amelia Dale for this piece of knowledge.

Petra White

Bonny Cassidy, Certain Fathoms

Puncher & Wattmann, 2012, 64 pp pb,
ISBN 9781921450372, RRP $24

John Watson, Occam's Aftershave [Collected Works Volume 4]

Puncher & Wattmann, 2012, 97 pp pb,
ISBN 9781921450518 RRP $24

Certain Fathoms is Bonny Cassidy's first book, aside from an earlier chapbook. Many of the poems take place in the natural world, but they are not mere nature poems. By which I mean they are not merely descriptive, nor do they project the soul of the speaker into the landscape. That said, they are often encounters with nature, with a sense of the dramatic. What happens typically is an encounter between the human and the natural, in which the natural is changed by being observed, and the human is changed by the encounter.

The first poem, 'Serrata', is a dawn, or pre-dawn encounter with Banksia Serrata through a bathroom window. The serrata is magnified by the light: "Breathe grip, breathing gripping under dark, serrata / shadows the fleshcoloured wall / trunks 200 per cent, leaves the size of nebulae ..." And the end recalls Dickinson in the way the speaker is effaced: "So close I doubt myself / squared in the bathroom window, telling." The poem's gesture might appear to be towards the classical sublime, though it is not exactly so. The speaker of the poem, though self-doubting, is able to speak, to "tell". What is this telling? The telling becomes the poem; the poem opens out into what can be told. The poem moves from description to reaction, or maybe confession: "I doubt myself." She looks at herself, "squared in the bathroom window", already "telling" even as the encounter continues. She is framed by the light as the banksia is. The poem becomes a double observation.

In 'Figure' Cassidy continues her awareness of the presence of the human in the landscape: "Pressed and packed into myself / I followed them / under a field / light as shale, its wild melons striped with fuschia bush." There is a similar awareness of, and interest in, human presence and language in 'En Abyme (Northland)': "Talk is breaking, breaking. In these minutes you / and I seem to be history without lineage. / But something made us / and so it lies in our pit / like a seam turned in."

In another poem, 'Hand to Mouth', Cassidy is concerned with the elusiveness of language – and the need for it – in the face of the overwhelming sea: "I stand here being mumbled, / hearing the bay's mouth from above (water dull as traffic), / sight bigger than tongue. ... My own mouth contracts at the root." Again, the sublime is suggested: being overwhelmed by the natural phenomena and losing one's ability to speak – being mumbled – then recovering, to the extent that her 'grimace' "floods the high tide". But the flood is not a flood of language; it is something abstract, like "simple blocks of space or tonal shifts". And when she says "sight bigger than tongue", it is one sense overwhelming another, rather than the natural world overwhelming all the senses, as the classic encounter with the sublime might have it. There is something interesting, for Cassidy, about the capacity of language to break down and regenerate, for the mouth to "contract at the root" but later find speech, which is the act of the poem. This does not strike me as something Cassidy experiences as a loss – or an instance of the so-called 'failure of language'; it is part of the strength of language that it can be absent, but that it can also be found – and have its absence spoken of. Cassidy does not posit nature as something unsayable; rather as something that opens up possibilities for new forms of speech.

'Range', by contrast, is about the subtlety of nature. This poem has a fascination with the drama and processes of nature that recalls Mark O'Connor:

> But don't listen for walking saplings: it's when their droppling
> becomes a memory not too distant that it's heard,
> and all their scattered picks and knots harden into recognition.

Here the experience of nature fuses naturally with thinking and recognising. The mind is hyper-alert to sounds and shadows, the movements, real and imagined, of the trees, the drama of a bird. There is nothing in this poem about how the poet feels, rather this is about the mind and how it opens to experience and to the strangeness of the real. Which is not to say the mind is passive: there is a creative process involved. The poem opens: "Always begin with a bird, like ruling a line / that stretches into angles", and the self-instruction continues: "But don't listen for walking saplings…" This poem, like many others in this exciting debut, shows a fascinating sensibility, and an acuteness of language:

> And here is where the trees have found themselves.
> Now the trunks lie flat: thin round tracks down a sandbank.
>   They're making water by acting it
>   trying to bring it about
>   but getting closer and closer to being salted rock.
>   Their bark rings off in trickles.

*

Occam's Aftershave is John Watson's fifth book, the fourth volume in what he calls his 'Collected Works' – as if he is trying to avoid the monolith of a Collected in one volume by collecting as he goes. Like his previous volumes, *Occam's Aftershave* is dense, serious and playful, with a great variety of tones and registers, and an acute awareness of the relationship between writer and reader. Indeed the opening poem is called 'To the Faithful Reader' – an ironic title, of course, because surely readers are fickle creatures, easily bored, liable to put down that which doesn't engage them – unless of course they are faithful to an idolised writer, but I don't think that is what Watson has in mind. Watson begins with an improbable scenario and then: "If you believe this / You'll believe anything, and are thereby my ideal reader." The "faith", here, is the ability to believe, or suspend belief. So why does Watson need a faithful reader? It is part of a game, in this poem, inviting the reader to be led beyond her expectations of what poetry might be. Watson writes:

> But for some time now it cannot – surely –
> Have escaped your notice that I am flirting
>
> With the idea that poetry and jokes are alike, both skirting
> The hem of things, the indrawn breath of wonder corresponding
>
> To the hush before the punchline, the device
> Of enjambment being somehow like the nudge nudge
>
> Of double meaning ...

This is in itself a kind of joke, making the poem a joke or the joke a poem. The playfulness is with reductiveness – is the poem merely a joke that is taken too seriously? Can the poem be reduced to these basic elements? If so, why should the reader be interested, let alone faithful? But the whole poem is a tribute to the reader, that person who "resigns herself / To being carried along by events". Such events in poetry include the trickery of tropes, and the beautiful unexpectedness of lines such as "How prodigal the waves in the estuary of the present". To be a faithful reader is to let poetry happen. And Watson, in turn, is the faithful writer who is always alert and open to poetry's possibility and ready to reel in its largesse.

He is not a poet who works much with emotions; he dwells in the play of ideas. When one is unused to him, he can seem annoyingly clever and a little too fecund, but there is nearly always substance and interest. 'Positive Incapability' is a marvellous re-reading of the myth of Sisyphus, relating it to poetry and how far it can be pushed, the stone being the "stone of possible ideas" and the text which "pushes on by artifice / Until at last it has no reader left". Poetry may challenge the reader but it also works the other way – poetry must be able to go beyond the cosy faithfulness of the reader, even if it seems as ridiculous as pushing a stone uphill.

This capacious book – there is much more to say about it than present space allows – also includes tributes to other writers. I am particularly taken with 'Missing Miss Moore', an ode to the twentieth-century poet Marianne Moore, which outlines a poetics that could be Watson's as readily as Moore's. It is difficult to quote from, working as it does in long virtuosic verse paragraphs, but I recommend reading it in full. Similarly beguiling is ‘Ripple on Lines of Paul Muldoon’ with its endless play on proverb and pun. At 97 pages, this is a long book – generally I’m of the view that a poetry book should be around fifty or sixty pages, or shorter. But Watson’s book is a rarety among many books published of late, in that it deserves its length, containing not a single weak poem.

Sarah Holland-Batt

Verse novels in review

Anthony Lawrence, The Welfare of My Enemy

Puncher & Wattmann, 2012, 80 pp pb,
ISBN 9781921450495, RRP $24

Ali Cobby Eckermann, *ruby moonlight*

Magabala Books, 2012, 64 pp pb,
ISBN 9781921248511, RRP $27.95

In the past two decades, the verse novel has enjoyed an international renaissance, bolstered by heavyweight contributions by Derek Walcott, Vikram Seth and Anne Carson, and nowhere has it been more popular than Australia, where Les Murray's, Dorothy Porter's and Alan Wearne's classic contributions to the form are joined by more recent works by Geoff Page, Paul Hetherington, Judy Johnson, and many others. It would be interesting to speculate about what precisely has driven this peculiarly antipodean interest in the form—perhaps it is a remnant of the relatively strong historical tradition of narrative poetry and balladry in this country—but what is clear is that the verse novel's popularity among Australian poets continues unabated.

The most frequent complaint leveled at the verse novel is that it fails to either be wholly satisfying as a novel or as poetry. Its strange and often ill-fitting marriage of lyrical intensity and imagism with characterisation, plot, and the other trappings of fiction offers the poet a difficult balancing act: poems must maintain the narrative interest and momentum of a novel via the compressed and distilled unit of the poetic line. It is a rare verse novel that can keep those two competing demands on an even keel; most often, either the narrative drive or the poetic craft suffers. Curiously, the two works under review here, Anthony Lawrence's *The Welfare of My Enemy* and Ali Cobby Eckermann's *ruby moonlight,* are more successful for *not* trying to attempt all the crisis and catharsis we might expect from a novel: impressionistic, quick-paced and mosaic in approach, these two works sit, one feels, in a genre of their own.

Lawrence's decision to write a verse novel will come as little surprise to readers familiar with his oeuvre. Since the long poem "Blood Oath" in *Three Days Out of Tidal Town*, tracing the death by exposure of two jackaroos, Lawrence has revealed a lasting interest in narrative poems, voice and vernacular; his 2002 novel, *In the Half Light*, was notable for, among other things, its lyrical and forceful narration of its protagonist James's disoriented and fractured psyche ("I crossed over the Bay of Dislocation into the Straits of Disembodiment. My head was scooting around in dusklight on a small island, telling its own story to the resident gulls."). Lawrence's new verse novel, *The Welfare of My Enemy*, dwells in similarly fraught and emotionally-charged territory; its subject is the phenomenon of missing persons. As the book's press release reveals, this phenomenon has a personal dimension for Lawrence, who experienced the unsolved disappearance of two friends in the 1970s, whose disappearances were eventually ruled as death by misadventure.

The Welfare of My Enemy is in many ways an unconventional verse novel. While Lawrence employs rhyming and half-rhyming couplets in rough pentameter throughout, giving the poems a coherent feel, he eschews many other familiar tropes of the genre. Rather than relying on recurring or identifiable characters, or using titles to give a shorthand insight into the speaker's identity or emotional state, Lawrence divides his poems by asterisks, making no other attempt to identify the poems' speakers. Making sense of each new poem is an act of deduction for the reader, who must ascertain who is speaking the poem, and to whom. The poems are spoken variously by all the entities involved in missing persons cases, from police investigators, family and friends left behind and the missing themselves, to cadaver dogs and the perpetrators of crimes against the missing. Consequently, the poems maintain a kind of anonymity: few details are included, and rather than following a contained crime narrative with killers, victims, and tidy solutions at the close, Lawrence instead chooses to focus on the more general experience of those grappling with disappearances.

Individual poems are marked, as one might expect from Lawrence, by their superb naturalistic detail and their finely drawn images: in one, clouds are "like the scales of reef fish"; in another, yellow police tape is "strung like old sunlight around the trees." Yet unlike Lawrence's work in recent books, where an almost rhapsodic convergence of human apprehension and the natural world has predominated, the poems in *The Welfare of My Enemy* are more interested in a largely human drama, where the psychic states of human actors preside. The poems often adopt a clipped, and even didactic, tone that resembles police reports, as in the abecedarian "A man is not listed as missing":

> A man is not listed as missing, though he's been gone
> By all accounts, for twenty years. It's been so long
>
> Children don't say his name or try to find him.
> Dad is not a word they use. His absence is a thin
>
> Erratic line through the years. At five, his own
> Father left, and never returned. Call it a pattern.

Some of strongest and most disturbing poems in the book deal with the psyche of the murderer, where Lawrence's rhyme scheme and rough pentameter contribute to the brutally closed logic of the couplets:

> I've heard them calling for mother and Christ.
> One thought he was a fucking ressurectionist
>
> Said, "come on then, do it, I'm ready, and I'll return
> and you'll be sorry." These people never learn.
>
> I did what he wanted. He kneeled. I put him down.
> That was what? Ten years ago? Clown.

Among these anonymous voices, however, small details of a repeating missing persons narrative is exposed, wherein "two people, a lime-green van, on their way / from one how to another" disappear and are never seen again. One suspects from the context given by the book's press release that these may be the real-life friends who prompted Lawrence's personal interest in the phenomenon, but like all the other characters who surface in *The Welfare of My Enemy*, no particular solutions or conclusions arrive for the couple, and the poems shy away from imagining or inventing possible endings. As soon as the poet is tempted to speculate, as in "A North Shore suburb", about what may have happened after

> ...they vanished, as if the earth itself has inter-
> vened to seal them away. Death by misadventure
>
> or abduction, deprivation, murder? Who did they encounter
> where streetlights and house lights no longer
>
> mark the way?

he almost immediately turns to considering *who* may be responsible, rather than the details of the crime itself:

> At the time they went missing, a now-convicted serial killer
>
> was active in the area. A council worker
> on the roads, he would have known where
>
> tracks begin and end, and whether
> they were being used. Despite being marked Never
>
> To Be Released, he's not confessed...

This turn is characteristic of the poems in *The Welfare of My Enemy,* which veer from voice to anonymous voice, never coming to rest or forming full conclusions. While this approach may withhold some of the more familiar pleasures of the traditional crime narrative, it gives a more haunted, incomplete and possibly more accurate sense of the unsettling world of missing persons, where, as one poem tells us, left “alone, we endure a private madness.”

Ali Cobby Eckermann’s *ruby moonlight* is, like Lawrence’s verse novel, unorthodox in some of its strategies and likewise stronger for it. *ruby moonlight* charts the massacre, circa 1880, of a Ngadjuri Aboriginal family as negotiated by sole survivor Ruby, a young woman who strikes up a pragmatic but ultimately fraught relationship with a European pelt-trapper, Jack, who is in competition with an old dancer for Ruby’s affections. Told in revolving third-person perspective, the poems focus on the difficulties of Ruby and Jack’s relationship and the condemnation they receive from both suspicious town-folk and from other Aboriginal tribes. Unlike *The Welfare of My Enemy*, *ruby moonlight* is intended to be read as a chronological narrative with identifiable characters, yet I was pleasantly surprised to discover that so many of the poems in the collection read convincingly (as do Lawrence’s) as stand-alone poems. Eckermann’s verse novel also gestures towards broader ideas about colonialism’s hierarchies and power structures, and its lingering historical impact on the first peoples of this country, on language, and on the very landscape itself. One of the most remarkable things about *ruby moonlight* is the subtlety with which its political implications are handled: Eckermann invites (rather than dictates) political readings of what is, at heart, a simple and highly engaging narrative.

Perhaps the most immediately striking feature of Eckermann’s poems is the impressive condensation of imagery they achieve. An early poem, “Smoke”, describes the moment when Ruby first encounters Jack, the trapper, with haiku-like economy and precision:

> from within the wattle brush hide
> she observes a smoking ash ghost
>
> it is tall like emu
> its face galah pink
>
> seemingly oblivious to the rain
> it emits the strange odour
>
> how can it smoke fire
> breathe smoke from its mouth
>
> maybe it is a fire man
> maybe the rain is putting it out
>
> like water
> on hot coals

Yet, as with the best haiku, this seeming simplicity belies a great sophistication. Eckermann's images are controlled, concise, and convey the shock of two languages and cultures abutting each other with inventive abbreviation. Jack's otherness—his clothes, his pink skin, the smoke from his pipe—are rendered via the animals and objects of Ruby's frame of reference, producing a superb and surreal set of imagery that drives, via balanced couplets, to the lovely last image of water dousing coals. Time and again, the poems display a gift for imagery: in "Loose", Jack drinks in the pub where "froth shampoos his new-grown beard / [and] the beer tastes like liquid gold"; in "Detour", he visits a village to sell pelts, passing "wattle and daub shacks" where "eyes peer from curtains"; and in the superb "Birds", one of the stand-out poems in the book, Ruby walks where "honeyeaters flit the route to sweet grevillea / [and] owls nest in her eyes". The most notable feature of Eckermann's imagery is its supreme control: the poet never overplays the image, but is consistently confident to let short and unelaborated images stand on their own.

While Eckermann clearly revels in the imaginative and transformative powers of language, she is also attuned to its destructive capacities, as in "Merger", where we learn Ruby is "glad Jack is / a man of few words", as "it is forbidden for Europeans / to fornicate with blacks." The Latinate "fornicates" leaps out with its prejudicial tones and its prudery; it is a word that Jack, in his illiteracy, would not use, but its implications for both Jack and Ruby are clear. Later, in "Caution", we learn that "*abo lovers* are despised in these parts", and in "Visitor", Jack is confronted by a passing carriage at his and Ruby's camp, where he is told by men who "touch hats in silent greeting":

> we need ya help mate
> the words hang on reality without suspense
> there's sickness going on cross the river
>
> Jack knows the remainder of the conversation
> before it was spoke ya see any blacks roaming
> best ya kill 'em disease spreading pests

But it is not only outsiders who impose linguistic divisions and hierarchies on Jack and Ruby; they, too, are divided by language, as we learn in "Oasis": "neither know / the other's language // they never speak during the day". At the beginning of their relationship, their slow courtship begins with gestures, not words, as when Ruby leaves a gift of birds' eggs and dead echidna at Jack's campfire, and Jack introduces her to sugar. One of the strengths of Eckermann's novel is the ambiguity and complexity of Jack and Ruby's relationship; it is mutual, clearly, and borne from an admixture of mutual attraction, circumstance and interdependence, but marked from the outset as a difficult union that can only exist in "the oasis of isolation". Once that isolation is broken—by both European and Aboriginal intruders—the result is an equally complicated dissolution brought on by a combination of obligations, racial and linguistic divides and social pressures.

Like Lawrence's *The Welfare of My Enemy*, Eckermann's *ruby moonlight* is more moving and haunting for the conclusions it withholds. Some recent additions to the genre have too fully revealed and dramatised their intentions; it was a pleasure and relief to encounter these two fragmentary works, both comfortable to inhabit ambiguity and to leave the unsaid unsaid.

Contributors

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Stuart Barnes lives in Cooee Bay, where he's working on Blackouts and other poems, a manuscript dedicated to the memory of Gwen Harwood. He's poetry editor for *PASH capsule*, an online journal of contemporary love poetry, & *Tincture Journal*, a literary e-book that publishes poetry, fiction & creative non-fiction from Australia & overseas. Twitter: @StuartABarnes @TinctureJournal

Petrina Barson is a Melbourne poet and medical doctor. When she has time (which is not often) she likes to write long narrative poems about explorers and *conquistadors*.

Andrew Carruthers writes on musical notation and militant politics in 20th Century long poems. He is also interested in the work of Hope Mirrlees, Jocelyn Saidenberg, Maggie O'Sullivan and contemporary conceptual writing.

Demelza Hall is a PhD student at the University of Ballarat, her research is entitled "Re-Negotiating Home Spaces in Contemporary Australian Literature." She also has a Master's degree from the University of Tasmania, which explores the treatment of space in the literature of British novelist Sarah Waters.

Sarah Holland-Batt has lived in Australia, the United States, Italy and Japan. Her first book, *Aria*, won the Thomas Shapcott Prize, the Arts A.C.T. Judith Wright Prize and the F.A.W. Anne Elder Award, and was shortlisted in the 2009 New South Wales and Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. In 2010 she was the W.G. Walker Memorial Fulbright Scholar at New York University, where she earned her M.F.A.

Rebecca Kylie Law is an Australian poet. She has an MA in poetry from the University of Melbourne and is the author of two collections of poetry, *Offset* and *Lilies and Stars* published by Picaro Press. She has undertaken two residencies in Australia and Italy.

Kate Middleton is the author of *Fire Season* (Giramondo, 2009), awarded the Western Australian Premier's Award for Poetry. From September 2011-September 2012 she was the inaugural Sydney City Poet. Her second collection, *Ephemeral Waters*, is forthcoming in 2013.

Stephen Oliver is the author of 17 volumes of poetry. Travelled extensively. Signed on with the radio ship *The Voice of Peace* broadcasting in the Mediterranean out of

Jaffa, Israel. Free-lanced in Australia/New Zealand as production voice, narrator, newsreader, radio producer, columnist, copy and feature writer, etc. Lived in Australia for the last two decades. Currently resides in NZ. His latest volume, *Intercolonial*, a long narrative poem, is to be published by John Denny of Puriri Press, John Denny dennyjhs@xtra.co.nz Auckland NZ (2013) is as much about Australia as it is New Zealand. A*transtasman* creation.

pony lives in the north of melbourne. he works a menial job to support his lifestyle, which consists of reading, writing, hanging out with friends and going to parties. he also has a large debt owed to the government for going to uni here and there.

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