Long Paddock

73.1 The Political Imagination

Contents

POETRY

STORIES

REVIEWS

PETER BOYLE

Towns in the Great Desert (7)

There are so many steps you must navigate
to reach the quiet core of the earth.
You stand in a room and call out
but no sound comes.
Sleep has grown all around you
like a beautiful plant.
A confused nuggetty man
is fumbling a mug of raw cinders.
He hands you an ancient rare-edition guidebook
for the town you plan to construct
if you could only sleep long enough.
At the core of the earth
he has put on your sweater and you can't understand
why monsters keep peeling off you
like self-generating wallpaper.
All that moss with its green tangle of pseudo-grass
voraciously feeding on sunlessness.

The centre of the earth you travel to each night
is a small inkling of how it is
when life closes over.
Raw puddle
of a lone waterdrop.
In your slowly opening hand
the wired ancestry of stars:

from the accident of all accidents
these breaths
fated and numbered.

Towns in the Great Desert (8)

"Green Ocean Resort Hotel" the sign reads.
Here in the centre of a wide flat plain
a line of deckchairs wait
for the millennial arrival of waves.
Among crumbling skeletons of desert birds,
the wind-blown grit of dust from disused
chalk mines, rotted freeways, oases of styrofoam,
I await the palm trees,
I await the sky lifting summer off the plain.

Here
where no water has been seen for a thousand years
they erect a shark observation deck
and paint directions for balloons to stop
bringing tourists from remote sunken cities
as they draw the character for water,
for its flowing presence,
the shifting abundance of its rippling
under stars,

and I dream the arrival of the great fleet,
lost fishing boats,
the trawlers of the seven skies,
while the earth is an immense open hand
bearing the stamp of the prayer for water
inscribed into the cancer of its bones.

DANIJELA KAMBASKOVIC

De Vita Sedentaria

Petrarch's house, Arquà.

Your chair,
carved out of walnut,
looks uncomfortable,
but photographs really well for its age.

Mine is new,
ergonomic,
streamlined,
with a spectacular padded seat,

but will probably be quite scruffy
in seven hunded years.

Power

Giotto, "The Slaughter of the Innocents", fresco
in Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua (XIV c)

By what administrative process
did Herod execute
his order to slaughter the innocents?

Through what rational channels
did his order filter down
to move the hand around the sabre?

What was the seal,
what fear,
he used to convince his men

that a generation of one-year-olds
threatened his throne,
threatened their lives?

What was the opiate
that could erase the little bodies
and the mother’s three-dimensional tear

from the memory
of his Lieutenants?

π0

Hymie

Fenugreek and echinacea
are herbs; Hymie was an Aboriginal
in Fitzroy, in the 1950s. It was said, he gave
the English "hot curry" during the War.
A comet, like a fireball. He sold non-existing
gold mines, in the Nullabor; and called himself Clive (when
he had to). The human liver weighs 55 ounces.
Deuterium is an isotope of Hydrogen. He had
20 other known aliases, the authorities knew of, and
he'd made love to over a thousand women.
Croup, is a barking cough. Shakespeare was covered
in ink. Everyone (in Fitzroy) reckoned it was all bullshit;
a bullshit artist who got pinched, cross the street. A helicopter
is an egg-beater. He was foolish enough
in his cups, and in all that diarrhoea. A bloke said, he heard
he killed a man once, in South Africa, and that he was
on the run from the Cops. Azaleas like
plenty of water, and good drainage i.e. not
the brightest bulb in the loop (aye?); sharp as a bowling ball,
ha ha ha hee ha! But in the stomach of
an armadillo (believe it or not) they found a toad, and
like all Thieves he sported a tattoo, of a "cat".
Edentata means "without teeth" i.e. zot, zero, nothing, zilch!
Spin detracts, but not diminish the exploit.
He use to drink at the Champion, and his Passport
once said, he was a "Heart Specialist" – he'd doctored
the "M" to a "D" in his Mr., (only) he got *caught*
going thru Customs, when one of the Customs Officers
put it under an ultra-violet light. They had to radio Scotland

Yard for his fingerprints (: the first time in
Australian history, it was done). A laugh is 3 or more birds
in chorus, on a branch. The last time, he got *caught* (for
a snatch and grab / a woman's handbag) he got 5 years.
When the Cops went to his room (in one of
the boarding houses, in Gore) they found a Priest's robe, and
a whole stack of Bibles. He told the Judge "You've
condemned me to Death", and true to his word
he died (in Pentridge) 8 months later, – "No living
next of kin" – After his death the *Courier*
devoted ½ a page to his "known" exploits, and the drinks
at the Champion, were on the house.

ADRIENNE EBERHARD

The Hand

The hand that holds the pen and writes to you
is a wing – or a sheaf of feathers – too,
a carriage that spirits me away,
wheels turning, faster, faster. I pray
your passage is calm and smooth, the winds true.

I hear the shots and blows, I hear them hew
the statues, bit by bit, too few
remain. Louis is in pieces; they make us pay
with our hearts, and with our hopes they play.
My hand

that writes to you, is the remains of a statue,
broken, shattered, if only I knew
how to read the future in the sun's rays
that shine ineffectually each slow day.
The winds are building, fill your sails, I send you
my hand.

Note: During the Revolution, many statues of the royal family were destroyed. In the Musee Carnavalet in Paris, all that remains of a marble statue of Louis XVI is his hand. In this poem, Marie Antoinette writes to Marie Girardin, a French woman from Versailles who dressed as a man and obtained the job of steward on d'Entrecasteaux's ship on his expedition to find La Perouse (Louis XVIhad instigated La Perouse's expedition).

PETER SWEET

Wall Flower

This mini mart's old sidekick's shut down, hung
there like a death mask on a wall. Lights blaze
out through doors swishing open, swishing shut…

another punter staring bleakly: this
street's cash owl, buttoned up in burka, steps
back, closing up fund's fairground for the night.

Her shadowy skin luminescing now
and then like torchlight flashing on a corpse
whose new face is held *in absentia*...

an ally of ours meeching in her niche,
in situ but offline, a last outpost
whose clinks and clunks of cogitation are

like amatory signals to a cash
strapped passerby…

her inactivity, her regimen
of silence like some mad
sect's self inflicted penance in this red
light district's chapter on the city's edge.

jenni nixon

ships of dreams

australian mining billionaire clive palmer
plans to be the next prime minister of australia
is he cloning dinosaurs for a new jurassic-style disneyland?
has ordered instead an army of giant animatronic replicas
165 of them from china 20 feet tall and each weighing a ton
he aims to rebuild the titanic as a cinematic theme park
cruise on the ocean liner costumes supplied
bejewelled ladies in elegant frocks
gentlemen in edwardian evening garb
dancing in the ballroom
code of chivalry lost on those who tweet today said clive
chandeliers sparkle above tuxedoed orchestra
no dead bodies in the bunks below
he's dreaming long into the future of a fleet
titanic three and four built by chinese hands with his ore
return of the ghost ship from the ocean floor
rich folks saved while down in steerage drowned the poor
we'll recreate 'em! a massive business opportunity!
pay a fortune for a first class cabin on titanic two
complete with four funnels grand staircase turkish baths
but with a casino satellite navigation and more lifeboats
one of the benefits of global warming he said *less icebergs!*

BARNABY SMITH

Grazing, at Colo Heights

I am nostalgic for this morning when
lifeless beasts
strolled passed each shoulder, eyes
blinking like shifting plateaus
and on knees to the sun
I can see
the house from the top of the hill.

Also: chimney remnants and leaves lit
in their thousands,
this ground on which we might have built.

Parallel lines of algae grow over the pink houses
to become
turrets –
pillows of damp among copious glades
the front yard flag, defence
against whatever looms

like a gloom over the district
a downturn
or an outbreak in what remains of the corner valley.

Suddenly I have found
the will to escape the forest and the stone
just as a star carries itself away to die in the river,
under a silent sky.

ROSS DONLON

The Manly Boys

They dived for coins where the ferry docked,
slotting loose change beneath their tongues,
stopping us as we arrived for the day,
white faced and fresh from the suburbs.

Lolling in the water, the *Manly Boys*,
eye whites upraised, mouths silent,
watched a tossed bob sparkle and flicker
high, then enter the water with a flash.
But they swam faster than the coin
sashayed and spangled, until fingers slipped silver
quick as a doubloon into a pirate mouth.

From the other side of the sea's glass,
they were a boy I could never be;
they a man-boy, seal-like, sea being,
me a child on leave from a suburb,
longing either to be that boy
or else the coin held tight in his mouth.

JANE DOWNING

Chance Encounters

It was one of those cold mornings when you steam like a boiling kettle every time you open your mouth. Of course anyone (read me) would want to close the door on the cold lino and the bills piling up under the magnet on the fridge. It's always warm and welcoming at the Green Zebra. They know my order, *The Age* covers the table nicely (though the news is never that nice). A skinny cappuccino can last half the morning.

The old man balanced his peaked cap on his head and was standing by the door pulling on his gloves in preparation for leaving when I made the mistake of looking up from the Odd Spot and making eye contact.

"Cold morning," he said, and I had to acknowledge the truth of it.

Then he told me a story.

That was a year ago now. This morning the air has just that brittleness to it. And it's not that I forgot this old man in the intervening year – on the contrary, his story has haunted me. But I didn't know what I could do with it. He'd given it to me freely, in a public place: could I pass the gift on; should I make it into a fiction? It seems sometimes ethics are just questions that are too difficult to nut out.

But now I am sitting at the same table at the Green Zebra and I realize I have to simply tell his story as he told me.

He was not a local. He was in town for his best friend's funeral. They'd fought in the war together, the big one (my maths is not great but I calculate that this justifies me in describing him as *old*).

"He was best man at my wedding, I was best man at his," the old man told me as he fumbled the sole fiddly button at the wrist of his left glove. So best friends for longer than I've lived. I had the picture: this was going to be an old story. The newspaper still tempted me back at this stage, a page crisp between my thumb and index finger.

"We'd embrace every time we met up," he said, and then paused.

"Your best man and your best friend," I offered as I abandoned the thought of bringing my cup to my lips and thus masking my eyes from his as being too obvious and rude.

"Yes," he agreed. "I'll miss him terribly. I miss my wife. Cancer. Both of them."

The traditional minute's silence for remembrances of things past threatened.

"We'd embrace, and when we said goodbye, he'd always say, *And we see the signs of future grand, as we gaze on a rising star*. His wife asked me for a copy of the whole poem, Lawson you know, Henry, so they can read it as they scatter his ashes tomorrow."

"I'm sure it will be a comfort," I said. Why does grief always bring forth platitudes?

I told myself I was being very tolerant through all this, but really I wanted him gone so I could enjoy the warmth and the coffee without further intrusion. I lost concentration, for only a second, maybe two, as a mother pushed between my table and the old man. The old man held the café door open for the overloaded stroller and a chocolate smeared child. Little family out, cold air in. It was the perfect exit moment for my tormentor too. But in that lost second, maybe two, his train of nostalgia had switched to another track. Or so it first seemed.

After the war, the big one, he had a job as a travelling salesman (*The Death of…* sprung to mind). He named towns that described a vague geography of another state, a list that at a distance managed to sound almost romantic.

"I was staying in a hotel, with the bathroom down the hall, shared, three shower stalls in a row. When I got to the bathroom that morning there was already someone in one of the stalls. A man singing under the shower. I called out to let him know I was there. *I'm just having a shower myself*, I said, loudly so he'd hear. So as not to startle him."

He would have been young then, this old man, young but still carrying the bruises of war. When he said he stripped off, I imagined the unbuttoned gloves, the peaked cap, the windproof jacket and thick corduroy trousers gone, and also the signs of ageing. He was smooth skinned, whiter on his back and chest, up to his shirt-line at neck and arms; showing the afterimage of the neat salesman's uniform he'd put on after his shower. I imagined discarded pyjamas neatly folded and placed on a wooden chair.

"The water was lovely. I was soaping up my hair and, before I knew it I'd started singing too. Humming under the water first, then when I recognized a song I joined in. It was about two blokes tramping around London seeing the sights. I'd been in the choir at church and there was always a sing-a-long with the troops. I can remember all the words to the old songs."

A shower stall choir of naked strangers! It was an arresting image and I let my itchy fingers release the thin sheet of the Age. I was genuinely listening to every word as the old man told me about the songs they sang in the distant hotel shower. Some I recognized from the Saturday afternoon movie repeats on the television, some I'd heard my grandmother sing in the kitchen, though most of the names are irretrievable now because I had nothing to remember them by. Of those I recognised, there were nightingales and blackbirds, in Berkley Square and the Lambeth Walk. There was an exhortation not to Dilly-Dally on the way.

“But we did,” said the old man who’d come to my town for his best friend’s funeral. “We did dilly-dally. Every time a song ended, I thought…, but then the man in the next stall would start to sing another. He had a deep baritone. I always felt my voice was slightly scratchy. The water stayed warm.”

Warmth. Of course he stayed.

“We were singing *I’ll be seeing you* when I realized how late it must have got. I had an appointment. So I got out and dried myself, while he kept singing.”

When you dry yourself too quickly your underwear and socks stick to you. Rivulets of water dribble under your collar. I looked at the old man and recognized that he remembered every detail.

“I checked my watch which was on the chair with my clothes. The same one I have now.” He indicated under his glove. “We’d been singing for fifty minutes.”

Fifty minutes under the shower. Face up to the showerhead, gargling between verses. Water falling over his shoulders, skimming his firm belly, making seaweed of his body hair and anemic prunes of his toes. Fifty minutes singing in harmony.

I don’t think I am making up these details: the face, shoulders, belly, hair, toes. I have not had to imagine the small moments as I write this. The words had been there, faint but visible between the lines, as the old man told his story just inside the door to the Green Zebra.

“I was late. *I have to go to work now*, I said. The stranger stopped singing then and from under the water said, *that’s a shame.*”

The last word hung, briefly.

“I looked for him that night in the dining room but I was the only one there. All the shower stalls were empty next morning too.”

The silence between me and the old man stretched, but this time it was alive.

“He had a lovely voice,” the old man said finally.

The old man managed to button up his gloves that were soft and worn into the shape of his hands. He leaned forward slightly and thanked me three times for listening. “Now I must get on. The funeral.” I’d forgotten his best friend during the shower story. “I shall miss him,” the old man sighed.

A businessman in a suit and frivolous tie opened the door to the Green Zebra and this time, the old man took this opportunity to step out.

I watched him walk away, thin and fragile, bent forward as if he was struggling against a headwind.

I was alone in the teeming café with the ghosts.

It was not any scent of nostalgia that he left there with me that morning, nor was it the afterglow of grief that funerals generate as we contemplate the inevitability of our own mortality. It took me a while to label it, this feeling that stayed with me, that stays with me still, because I did not want to look it fully in the face. It is just too hard to confront the lost moments, the missed chances of this world. Of my life.

Regret lingers when everything else is gone.

When I bring my cup to my lips, today as I write, last year as I sat in the unspoken presence of regret, the coffee is cold.

BRONWYN MEHAN

Down and Out in Alice

1. Coq au vin

We walk out of the TAFE canteen. Hot chips with chicken salt. Gav had eaten most of them while I stood there reading the ice cream ads behind his head. *Bubble-O Bill, Cornetto, Golden Gaytime.*

Outside, on the verandah of C Block, we find a spot where we can watch Nathan and the other Hort students unloading bushrock from a box trailer.

"If we three were Streets ice creams," I say, "I'd be a *Heart* and you and Nathan, you'd both be *Paddlepops*. Caramel and Banana."

Gav lights up. "No way, Teneale. Nathan might be an ordinary old *Paddlepop*. But if you're a *Heart*, then I'm definitely *Heaven on a Stick*."

What I was talking about was skin colour. And I was thinking about a pool on a mountain top that was a million miles from here. Gav, he was off on a completely different trip, with falsetto voice and fluttering eyelashes. It didn't matter. At least he was back to his normal self.

Below us, Nathan has his broad-brimmed straw hat off and is using it to fan his face. Gav is older by a year, yet Nathan, who is the same age as me, 16, looks more grown up. For a start, Nathan's been shaving since he was fourteen. He's tall, tanned and fit. Gav prefers to wax. He has fine, ginger hair all over his body and pale freckled skin that burns easily. Me, I don't shave or wax. Anywhere. They both live at home with their mum, Deb and lots of littlies. Deb fosters some of the kids and some are her own. I'm staying there too, until I find somewhere else.

Nathan shakes his head when he sees us. We're sneaking a ciggie below the *No Smoking* sign. Gav holds the ciggie in his cupped hand and turns his face away to blow out the smoke so Millsy, Nathan's teacher won't see. He flips it, filter-end to me. I take it in my cupped hand – dark-chocolate coating on the outside and creamy on the inside with streaks of caramel.

Nathan calls out. "Hey, what's on the menu today?"

Millsy, who was showing the boys where to position the rocks, immediately looks up at us. The rest of the class stops working and looks up at us, too.

"Nathan, you dickhead," says Gav. He takes a long drag then exhales. "*Cock oh Van*. Try getting your lips around that."

There is lots of giggling and loud muttering amongst the gardening squad. Millsy just stands there, looking up at Gav and me. He's got big, beetle-eyed Cancer

Council sunglasses on, so you can't see what he's thinking. But I can read his body English easily enough. He wants to mouth off at us, for smoking and whatever else rules he thinks we've broken. But he doesn't because he knows Gav and me are STARS (Students At Risk). Plus Gav's just come out of hospital and Millsy's a real busybody so he would have grilled Nathan all about that. *Righto, you lot, get on with it*. They get back to the rocks. Gav throws his head back and lets out a crazy whoop like he's won a prize. His mouth is laughing but his eyes aren't. Deb calls it his Dr Jekyll laugh. I tell her that in the movie it's Mr Hyde who is the mad one not Dr Jekyll but she doesn't believe me. Nathan puts his hat back on and pulls the string tight under his chin.

"It's French," I call out to Nat. "The dish we're cooking. Chicken in Wine."

Nathan nods, gets back to work.

2. Golden Gaytimes

Two weeks ago, Gav did win a prize. At the Todd Tavern. There was a drag competition in the back room of the pub put on by the Gay Pride people. Gav did a few turns on the tiny stage, all done up in the gold dress and high heels that Deb had found for him at the Op Shop. *Piss weak prize*, Gav said. All the finalists were given a Golden Gaytime ice cream. He tore off the wrapper and took a vicious bite of it. At 10.30, as Prickly Pair, the Country & Western duo were starting their first set, he became restless. *Those chicks are crap at singing*, he said. They were alright. They'd changed the words to make the songs about gays. I preferred the originals but the singers reminded me of Yvette with their check shirts and moleskins, so I stayed. Gav said he was hungry and would get some chips from the machine. But when the set was over and Gav still hadn't come back, I went to look for him. I had a feeling he might have gone into the front bar where all the hoons and football heads congregated. Sure enough, there he was, surrounded by a mob of blokes on the other side of the room. As I made my way through the crowd, I caught glimpses of Gav's ginger curls and his gold dress. He was being roughed up but I could see he wasn't trying to get away. He was swaying like one of those blow-up figurines with sand in the bottom – the more you push them away, the more they come bouncing back. Then suddenly the door onto the street opened and he was gone.

By the time I reached him he was sitting in the gutter, his face streaked with mascara and lipstick. His dress was split up one side, right up to his shaven armpits. There were wolf whistles and horns beeping from passing cars and somebody threw a beer can that hit him between the shoulders. Gav was bent over and sobbing, but it wasn't because of the beer can.

I raced back into the hotel to look for Nathan. He was with his mates playing pool and as soon as he heard his brother was in trouble he dropped the pool cue and ran out to him.

"Call Mum, for us, T."

"My poor baby", Deb said. "Listen, tell Nathan I'll send a taxi, okay? I can't leave the kids. And give them both a big hug for me, Teneale."

Hearing Deb made me think about the time Mum came to visit me in Juvie. There was no *My poor baby* for me. She spent most of the visit talking about how awful the bus trip had been, what a handful the twins were and about the problems she

had getting the Department to come and fix things around the house. She only came that once.

I told Nathan about the taxi. *You coming home with us?* I looked at the two step-brothers; the straight one had his hand on the queer one's shoulder. *Nah, I'll stay for a bit.* I watched from the pub door as Nathan helped Gav out of the gutter and took him into Macca's to wait. Then I went inside and stood at the door of the back bar. I scanned the room for The Prickly Pair singers. They were sitting near the stage listening to a woman with a pink Mohawk who stood at the mic, reading poetry. Without their hats on, they didn't look like cowgirls anymore. It was all just an act for them.

In the middle bar, I saw some people I knew from Tennant. *Hey Sis,* they said, *where you been?* They were in town for the races. So I ended up spending the rest of the weekend with them – drinking, smoking and getting out of it.

When I finally got a lift back to Deb's it was late on Sunday night. The place was quiet and Rhonda from next-door was sitting alone at the kitchen table.

"Shit, Teneale. Where the fuck have you been? You should've called. Deb's been real worried about you."

"Yeah?"

"They're all over at the hospital now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Gav took an overdose this morning."

"Yeah?"

"He's gonna be okay, but."

I kept shuffling, through the kitchen, into the hallway and towards the room where the children would be asleep and my mattress would be waiting for me on the floor, against the wall. I'd heard what Rhonda had said, but I couldn't feel anything just then. All I could think about was getting my head onto that pillow.

3. Circle of Friends

There is still quarter of an hour before we needed to be back in the kitchen to the check on the *coq au vin* and put the rice on. We've got English homework to talk over but Gav has suddenly gone dark.

"Come on," I say, getting up. We walk to other end of the building where I lean on the verandah rail. I look over at Alice Springs sprawled beneath a clear blue sky and nestled in the rust-coloured mountain range. That big old caterpillar curled itself and settled down there long ago, they reckon. *Here,* it said, *you mob come and live here and I'll look out for you.* It's not bad, Alice. But Deb's place is way over on the other side. Away from the main street and the river bed where all the action is. Still, much better than Tennant Creek. I was a house mother like Deb when I was living in Tennant. Only I wasn't getting paid by the government. I was supposed to be at school, not at home on my own in charge of five kids. Best times were afternoons. The twins would be asleep and I'd take the older ones for a walk up the shops. Icy poles for them. Chocolate Heart for me.

The white college ute with the box trailer crosses the car park and heads towards the main road. Some of the students are in the twin cab with Millsy. Nathan squats in the flatbed amongst the tools. He takes off his gardener's hat and makes a long-armed wave to us. I wave back.

Their navy work gear with the reflector stripes, reminds me of being back in Juvie. And Millsy, he's just like one of those screws I knew. Acts all kind and fatherly, but you wouldn't want to be left in a room alone with him. I've told Nathan to be careful of Millsy, but he just shrugs. Which is fair enough. No sense him getting sour on people like I am. Nathan's happy in his little world. His dreams are small. P-plates and a flat-screen TV and he'd be set.

Gav and me, we are the opposite. Forever dreaming. Forever talking about getting out of here and heading for the city. The latest plan was we'd get a job in a restaurant like the one in Perth our Cooking teacher used to work in. Fancy place where the waiters wear long white aprons and the kitchen hands don't shred, they *chiffonnade*. We'd live in an apartment with a white leather lounge and a balcony with a view of the city.

But that was before the OD. I'm not sure about Gav's dreams right now.

There is squawking and dust is flying over near the gum trees. Two butcher birds are rounding on a blue and yellow parrot.

"Bloody bullies."

"Just fighting over food," says Gav.

"Nah. They like to throw their weight around. Besides, Butchers are meat eaters. Parrots are veg-o."

"Girl, you're a walking Wikipedia, you know that? Speaking of food, feck I'm hungry. What's this dish we're making called again?"

"Gav, you're completely see-thru. I know you just want to hear me say *cock*. Happy now?" He passes me a ciggie and I take a drag. "You're a stupid article, Gavin Sharkey, you know that?"

"How about this fecking essay, T?"

Earlier in the week, we watched *Circle of Friends* in English and now we are supposed to write about it for homework.

"You should have taken the extension from Mrs A, Gav. Why didn't you?"

Gav blows out a stream of blue smoke. "Oh, shut your hole, T."

"We should watch it again. Blockbusters might have it."

"You just want to perv on Bennie, don't you, T?"

"And you just want to perv on Jack."

"Feck, yes," says Gav. "Jack's a real honey. And isn't *feck* a great word?"

Gav pats the cement beside him and we both sit with our backs against warm brick, our trouser legs making hounds-tooth Vs in front of us. He takes a piece of paper from his pocket and smooths it out on his lap. We both stare at the question for ages.

"An essay!" He blows on the end of his fag so the embers glow fiercely. "How the feck would we know what to put in an essay, T?"

"I was just thinking about the ending," I say. "When Jack says to her: *Bernadette, you're solid.* Remember?"

"No."

"Yes you do. And she says. *Oh, great. Solid, like beef cattle.* And you think they're going to kiss, but instead Jack goes quiet. For ages."

"Well, he did sleep with her best friend. He's most probably got the guilts."

"Yeah, maybe."

Me, Jack eventually said to Bernadette*, I feel like I'm hardly there.* I was shocked to hear him say that. Jack Foley, the good-looking guy from the well-off family who's got a girlfriend who loves him, no matter what. I think Gav, underneath the Big, Loud Queen act of his, feels like Jack Foley a lot of the time. Like he is hardly there.

4. *"Friendship, sexual behaviour and growing up are three important themes in Maeve Binchy's* Circle of Friends*. Discuss."*

(Dear Mrs Allison, I tried writing the essay but it didn't work so instead I wrote to my journal about what I want to discuss about the movie. Sorry, Teneale.)

Benny. Bernadette. A.K.A. Minnie Driver. She is hot, yes. But she doesn't come close to Yvette, the Jillaroo. My first girlfriend. The day we went swimming at Edith Falls, that has to be the best day of my life.

I'd tagged along for the day with some jackeroos who I knew from the pub. We travelled in a convoy of three Toyotas, drinking all the way, and it was midday by the time we reached the Falls. Once we finally arrived all I wanted to do was stagger across the lawns and dive into the green waters. But Yvette grabbed my wrist and squeezed it. *Come on, Teneale*, she said, pointing to a steep mountain track. *It's magic up there, trust me.* Yvette was the only female hand on the station and she was Steve's girlfriend, we all knew that. My head was aching and I was hot and tired. I wanted to stay at the bottom waterhole with the esky and the lilos. But I also wanted to be with Yvette. And the hard squeeze she gave my wrist, the way she jerked me towards her and spoke low and urgently, looking over my shoulder to the others ahead of us – all of these things told me she wanted to be with me too.

We trudged up the rocky track into the bright, hot sky, past huge grey boulders as hot as stones in a fire. Yvette was used to spending days out in the heat jackhammering star pickets, stringing up miles and miles of barbed wire fences. She was incredibly fit and she bounded ahead of me in her black Rossi workboots and thick khaki socks. I had on my thongs and mum's good sarong that she'd bought up in Darwin. In Tennant all I used to do was hang around home or walk to the shops along a tarred road. I mostly wore shoes. Climbing up that hill, my legs were soon dusty and my feet sore from the rough ground. I had to stop every so often to shake the pebbles which kept getting caught between the thongs and the soles of my feet. Why hadn't I worn Nikes and jean shorts? *Come on, you slowpoke*. The more Yvette teased, the more I was determined to push myself to keep up. So I tucked the sarong into my undies, ignored my stinging feet, dry mouth, my aching head and pushed on. I

focussed my thoughts on the backs of Yvette's legs; the buttoned-down pockets of her work shorts and her smooth, pale thighs.

Once we reached the top, the air was thick and the shoulder-high yellow grasses sizzled with cicadas. The ground was flatter up there and the path sandy and wide enough for us to walk side by side. Yvette took hold of my hand. My breathing was returning to normal but my heart was knocking out a beat that I could feel all the way down to my tummy. Further.

We heard voices and then saw two khaki hats flopping above the shrubs ahead of us. Yvette squeezed my hand then let it go. *Lovely down there, girls. Well worth the climb.* They carried metal water bottles and small towels the size of a man's handkerchief. We felt the breeze first, next came the sound of rushing water and then, as we reached the ridge, we saw the waterfall itself and the bedspread of foam it sent across the still pool. There was nobody else around as we slipped out of our clothes and slid into the black water. The pool was deep and cold and our bodies juddered at first. We both ducked under and quickly moved off in different directions. Then, turning back, we glided towards each other. We were getting accustomed to the temperature and to the new forms our bodies took in the water. Yvette's was pale and borderless like a vanilla ice cream melting beneath the dark waters. I flung my head back, spread my arms and let my body rise to the surface so it was stretched out and glistening in the sunlight. Yvette placed her hand beneath the small of my back and I let her, and not the water, bear my weight. *Beautiful*, she said. *Like glazed chocolate*.

The jackaroos were either stuck on the station doing repairs or off somewhere with the cattle. They only came into Tennant once a fortnight, for supplies and down time. Yvette promised she'd call me but she never did. She reckoned she was never alone. I found that hard to believe. But she just got pissed at me if I went on about it, so I didn't. *Let's just enjoy what we have,* she used to say. In the end, what we had didn't amount to much. I'd sneak up to the Roadhouse on the weekends that the jackaroos were in town. I'd tell Mum I was going to Maccas. There was one time, when Mum was away visiting in Katherine, that Yvette came to my house. I had this plan that we could lock ourselves in the bathroom while the kids had pizza and watched a DVD. But it never happened. The babies wouldn't settle and anyway we didn't have a lock on the bathroom door so someone was bound to barge in while we were at it.

Mostly, I'd see Yvette at the Roadhouse. There we'd be, sitting around with the locals and the jackaroos, waiting until they got so wrapped up in a pool game or Foxtel that they wouldn't notice Yvette and I had slipped out to the beer garden to sit by ourselves. And if we were in luck, Steve and the others would go off to someone's cabin and smoke a joint. Those nights we'd spend a lot of time in the Ladies. (It's amazing what fun you can have around a handbasin.)

But the fun didn't last. Someone told Steve that I was coming onto Yvette. I reckon it was Andy, the old perv of a barman. He never liked me on account of some business between him and Mum. Or, it could it have been one of jackaroos that told on us. They were dirty about Steve getting with the jillaroo in the first place, so spreading the word that she was a lezzie, well that solved a few problems for them, didn't it. Or, maybe dumb old Steve worked it out all by himself.

I figured we'd get caught out sooner or later. I mean, it was pretty obvious. I'd walk into the pub and the usual calling out would begin. *Get real, Teneale.* Teasing me about being underage and about how I should be home babysitting. Half joking,

half serious. I'd give them the finger, or just ignore them. But when Yvette was there, she'd tell them shut up and leave me alone. You'd have to be blind not to see she was really sweet on me.

So, in the end, Steve catching us out wasn't what came as a surprise. It was how Yvette reacted when he did that rocked me.

It was the night the mob of bikers showed up with some Adelaide Brown. There was this huge guy with the tattoo of a snake on his bald head. He took Steve and the others with him to where they had their tents set up around a huge bonfire. It looked cool. But Yvette and me, we saw it as a chance to sneak off together. There was this spot, between the ablution block and the overnight cabins, and we crawled under there and settled in. We'd been there for maybe fifteen minutes, pashing like mad in the dark. Really got into it. Our tops were open, our jeans were undone. It was beautiful, just like at Edith Falls.

Then we heard the crunch of footsteps on gravel. Followed by voices. It was the jackaroos. All six of them, it sounded like. And they weren't passing by, on their way back into the hotel. They were standing there, so close, we would have touched their legs if we'd have put our arms out. No way were we doing that.

I was really scared. So was Yvette. I could see her eyes, wide in the darkness. She was completely still. Not even allowing herself to breathe. Hoping, like me, they'd get bored and move on. I thought, maybe they had stopped for some reason unconnected with us. I was wrong. *Yvette, you out there?* It was Steve and he was pacing up and down. We could see his tall cowboy boots. Then someone cracked a whip. We both jumped in fright. *Yvette*! Closer this time and louder. Suddenly, a hand covered my mouth. I thought one of the jackaroos must have snuck up behind me. But it was Yvette. She spun me around, hooking her strong forearm around my neck. I couldn't work out what she was doing and then I felt a sharp pain. She'd thrust her knee into my back and the kick sent me flying. It was like I was a poddy calf and she was shoving me down a shute.

I scrabbled in the dark on all fours along the crawl space underneath the row of cabins. I kept moving until I reached the corner where the hornets and spiders lived; where there was only my hot breathing and the pulse in my forehead. *Yvette.* I heard Steve calling. *You're not out here with that little slag, Teneale, are ya?* I stayed there for ages, well after they'd all gone back inside the pub.

Two weeks later, Yvette and the jackaroos were back at the Roadhouse. I waited in the beer garden. The bruise across the middle of my back had just about faded along with my hurt feelings. When Yvette finally came outside to the Ladies, I followed her inside so we could talk. But she freaked out when she saw me. *Piss off, you sicko. Leave me alone*. I thought she was just saying that for the blokes' benefit but she started punching me and pulling my hair. I held my arms in front of my face. *I'll do whatever you say, Yvette. I'll stay away from the pub. I won't even talk to you when the others are around. Promise.* But Yvette just walked off, leaving me on the floor of the toilet, crying.

I cleaned myself up and snuck around the back of the pub, to the hatch where people buy takeaways. I waited until old Andy was busy serving customers inside then I reached in through the bars and grabbed a bottle from a nearest shelf. Southern Comfort. I walked up the road a bit, took a couple of big gulps and zipped the bottle inside my hoodie. Then I started hitching. I was heading for Adelaide. I would have made it too, if it hadn't been for that truckie dobbing me in at Alice Springs.

I might have got off if it was just the Southern Comfort, but I had the truckie's wallet too, so I ended up in Juvie. But even that turned out okay. I met Jaylene in there and life was alright with her to look out for me. But then she was let out. And she dumped me, even though I only had a couple of months left myself. She was going straight back to that prick of a boyfriend. *I gotta think of me kid, Teneale.*

After that, I got really upset about Yvette again and when they found the cuts I was sent to therapy with Dr Lia. She's the one who started me writing a journal. Dr Lia made me do IQ tests which said I was smart. She wanted me to get on with my education. *No way I'm going to school*, I said. *I want to get a job.* I thought if I could earn some money I could get somewhere of my own, a place big enough for all my brothers and sisters. Then Dr Lia told me about the STAR program where I could train for a job (I chose Commercial Cookery) plus study school subjects. So that's what I did. And, if you ask me the best thing I've learnt so far? It's *chiffonnade.*

PS I know I didn't get around to discussing the film, but if you give me an extension, Mrs A, I'll give it another try. T.

THOMAS RYE

An Ordinary Lunar Sea

When I was a kid I had this recurring dream. I was lost in the darkened hallway of our home and searching for the comfort of my mother's room. I'd stop at her bedroom door. I'd open it and she wasn't there. It was my mother but it wasn't quite my mother. Her face had become rounded and white, like the moon. Luna. "See?" She'd say. "I'm your mother but I'm not your mother." She had sharp teeth and no eyes. I had this dream for years.

It was only later that I learned words like SKITZ-oh-FREE-Knee-yah. A spiky word, a harsh word, that always sounded cruel to my ears. The new word is Dee-MEANT-chee-yah. And I've written plenty of them about her. Words of love, and of glorification, for a totem that crumbles despite anything a pen could do.

It is too tempting to romanticize tragedy. It is too easy to muse on the moon from afar and see poetry. But words can make you blind. The moon only looks like a jewel when it's far away. Up close it is craters and dust.

The sun rises and my mother knocks on my door.

"Tom?" She says. "Tom, are you awake?"

I am now. I need to sleep but I need to be awake. I'm here to look after her. My younger brother warned me about this before I came to Adelaide. "You won't get to sleep in," he told me. "She'll be up and wandering around well before you are." So, I am awake.

I haven't been sleeping so well. I sit on the porch with a cigarette dangling in my fingers. Ma asks if I'd like a coffee. She brings it to me in a glass that burns my hand. I go to the kitchen and pour it into a mug. My mother doesn't remember to change her clothes, or have a shower, but her ability to make a round of coffees lives on with electric imprecision. I usually help her make the coffee. Without help she makes them so strong that your eyeballs bleed. This morning I can't be bothered.

The heat rises above forty for the fourth day in a row. The weatherman says this hasn't happened here in sixty years. I take Ma food shopping and the air-conditioning is blessed relief from the sun. Ma pushes the trolley as I get our food for the next week. I drop a box of cat food into the trolley and she mimics me, putting in another box. When she isn't looking I put one of the boxes back on the shelf. We carry the shopping bags home in the heat. After putting the groceries away I take off my shirt

and lay in the backyard to read Chuang Tzu. The dry grass prickles my skin as I burn in the summer sun. You never realize you're being burned until later.

Ma throws open the back door with deep lines creasing her face. She's clutching the papers for her funeral plan.

"These aren't mine," she says. "They don't have my name on them."

I take the papers from her and show her where her name is. I put them back by the side of her bed. Moments later she produces them again.

"You don't need to stress yourself out over this Ma. Everything is fine. You don't need to worry about this."

My voice shakes as I repeat it like a mantra. I open my book again and hear the sound of her tears.

"My babies," she sobs, "where are my babies? I've lost my babies!"

I think she means my brother and I. It takes time to decipher her crumbs of conversation. I realize she's talking about her childhood diaries. She brought them out to show me and left them on the table so they're not where they'd usually be. When I return them to her she smiles again.

I pour a cold drink of water. The water here always tastes horrible. Adelaide water. I mix it with cordial. I find her crying in her sleepout bedroom. The furnace. During the day she paces around her room incessantly. Sometimes I wonder if she deliberately looks for things to get upset over just to irritate me. I give her a hug and it feels as if she's made of fire. Her clothes are damp. I persuade her to change out of her long sleeved shirt and into something cooler.

When the doctors first told me that she needed full time care I thought they were wrong. I don't doubt them anymore, as the moon slowly eclipses her face. But she doesn't want to go to a Home. She says she's too young for that. She says Homes are for Old People. Our mother is divorced, her parents are dead, and the rest of the family has fragmented. So my brother and I have been caring for her. We've been working to find someone to move in - perhaps a retired nurse or a respite worker. Someone with more experience in dealing with these things. Until I find someone to live with her I can't leave.

I wake to a city blanketed with smoke from the bush fires on Kangaroo Island. It's not the shadowy dreams that frighten me anymore. I'm a twenty-six-year-old man now, and I'm frightened by the day.

Ma wakes in a jovial mood. We sit in the lounge room and wait for Meals On Wheels. I call it "Wheels On Meals." She laughs as I describe the young hot-rodding malcontents who come to your house, grab your lunch, and crush it beneath screeching tires before wheeling off into the horizon.

The moments of laughter are precious. I'm no longer a romantic about it all. You can't afford that luxury after a while. A child in you dies when you see that your mother has become like a child. As a kid I believed every delusion that Ma spoke to me. And sometimes even now I'm tempted to believe that she isn't really sick, that she will get better, and my old mother will return. But these moments are no sunlight through clouds of illusion, they are moments of breeze on a scorching day.

Meals on Wheels bring a hot container of food in silver foil, a cold dessert, and soup in a Styrofoam cup. The elderly couple take the meal from their basket and I hold out my hands to collect it, only for them to give an almost imperceptible shake of the head. They gesture towards the identical basket laying empty by Ma's front door. When I pick it up they give a smile of satisfaction, as if the stars are in harmony once again, and only then do they shift the meal from their basket to mine. I smile on the inside at this scene but my lips don't move.

Ma sits and says, "do you want to eat some of this?"

"No that's okay Ma," I say every day. "You eat it up. I'll make myself something in a minute."

I accept her offer of the cup soup that she never eats. It's a small gesture of love but an important one. It reminds me of the mother she was.

We have a string of visitors from various agencies and medical establishments. The bureaucracies meld into a blur. The next knock brings a woman from Pathways Respite. It's her job to arrange respite workers to give Carers a break. I've talked to Ma about arranging for her to see Donna again – a respite worker who she'd gotten along with in the past. Donna used to take Ma out for the day. They'd gone to the beach together and had long conversations about Aboriginal History. I thought it sounded like a great idea to reunite them. But as I make the arrangements Ma doesn't understand what's going on. She sits out the back shaking with fury. She says nothing when I ask her what's wrong.

I smoke a cigarette and try to calm her down. The phone rings. It's Jen from Domiciliary Care – Ma's Case Worker and the one woman in the labyrinth whose words make sense. Jen seems to understand. As we discuss "What To Do With Ma" I hear the front door crash shut. I tell Jen I'll call her back and panic when I can't find Ma on the street or the nearby side streets. I find her at Pat's house with that same grimace on her face.

"He wants to put me away in a Home," she says, not looking at me. "Everyone wants to put me away."

I find solace in the garden. As I wrench out the weeds Ma keeps talking about her thesis. She says she wants to finish her thesis. When I was a child she worked on her Masters thesis for years. She never completed it. The SKITZ-oh-FREE-Knee-yah hit before she could. Now she cradles the thing all day like a stillborn child. She reads it aloud from her lounge chair.

Yesterday I gathered all the paperwork from around the house and put it in the back room so it won't distress her. I can't hide her thesis. At night I sit with her and tell her I love her whether or not she ever finishes the thing. As I know she never will. Ma goes to the bookshelf and brings out maps of the Menindee Lakes where she gathered the data for it. I've drunk some wine, and we kneel on the lounge room carpet poring over the maps and talking of the desert lakes.

I want to ride this rainbow. I want to fire up her unregistered car and drive to Melbourne, pick up my brother Mike, and then swing north towards Menindee. We can pitch a tent and sit by the lakes while the sun sets, as a family. I want to take Mum back to her desert lakes. But I can't.

I'm woken by the sound of a nurse showering her. The nurse has a key to get in. Sometimes I doze through the visit, sometimes I don't.

I get dressed ready for Mara from the Aged Care Assessment Team. My Aunt warned me that the questioning and scrutiny of ACAT can send Ma into her foulest of moods. She gives vague, faded answers to Mara's questions. Mara observes and then scratches notes into her book. After she leaves Ma calls Mara "a fucking bitch." She thinks we're conspiring against her.

Mara leaves her assessment with me. I don't look at it. I put it away in the back room. Hidden, like the paperwork for the Homes, so she won't find them.

I catch a bus to the city to buy a present for my girlfriend. I don't have much time. As I'm walking down Rundle Mall I get a phone call. It's the lady from across the road who says Ma wandered over in tears saying she couldn't find her keys. I ask her to put Ma on the phone.

"If you don't leave the house then you won't need your keys, Ma," I say. "Just calm down and I'll be back in half an hour."

I arrive to find them sitting. The lady says Ma has been over to her place five times since I've been gone. I thank her and sit with Ma. She shows me her key ring with forlorn eyes. The house keys are missing. Fuck. She must have taken them off the key ring. It's too hot to be dealing with this. I plead with her to think where she took them off the key ring, like a fool in my desperation. She can't remember. After an hour of searching I feel demented. I'm not making sense. Ma is calm. I find the keys on top of her chest of drawers.

I pull out my laptop to write and hide from her eyes. Ma potters around in her bedroom only to emerge in fevered tears. The first few times I give her a hug, ask what's wrong, and try to console her. She says that "the woman" has been coming into her home and rearranging her clothes. She holds up articles of new clothing that have been bought for her.

"This doesn't belong to me," she says.

I say that they're all her clothes, that no-one has been in the house. I repeat this. I know that she's just forgotten what she owns and where she's left her clothes. I know that these are signs of her illness. Dee-MEANT-chee-yah. I know all this, and yet when she ends up in tears the fifth time I say, "look Ma, the sleepout is so damned hot it'd stress anyone out. Just sit in the loungeroom where it's cool and don't worry about the fucking clothes."

We go for walk. Anything to distract her. I buy a cask of wine from the bottle-shop. As we wait in line Ma walks up to the counter, opens up her purse and begins pulling out twenty-cent coins. "It's okay Ma," I say, and put the cask on the counter, handing the man ten bucks with my head bowed. I lift my head for a moment and catch his gaze. He's an old Italian bloke with a rough and weathered face. He looks like he's seen a few things. I don't really know what he's thinking. But his eyes seem to speak. He looks at Ma, at the cask of Coolabah on the counter, and then right at me, as if he can see through my skin.

I wait until Ma has gone to bed and then I drink.

The phone rings. It's a bloke named Victor responding to an online ad I'd placed. He's interested in moving in. He's 41, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't go out much, and spends most of his time on the internet. I'd envisaged an older woman to live with Ma, but I invite him around for an interview. We sit out the back and through talking we begin to think that this could work. Ma throws opens the back door and stands there regarding us with a glare.

"This is *my* house," she says, "and no-one can remove me from it."

"She gets like this sometimes," I say, my fingers tracing through ash on the table. I tell Victor I'll make a few calls and get back to him – just like a proper real-estate agent.

"It was nice to meet you," he says to Ma as he's leaving. She remains in silent rage. Says nothing.

I ring my Aunty Gail. She looked after Ma for six months, before having a nervous breakdown.

"That's it Gail," I say. "I've been putting all my fucking faith in the idea of someone moving in so that Mum can stay here. But it won't work. No-one would want to move in. They couldn't handle it even if they did."

I ring my friends who are at a party in Melbourne. The party is being thrown by alien beings on some distant planet. A faint spark in me is envious, as if I want to be there with them. But it is no longer my world. It is somewhere else, from a time when I was someone else, and now all I have is Here. People say to me, "*You're Doing A Good Thing, Tom*," but the words sound strange to me. I don't want to be here but I can't leave – where's the nobility in that? The praise sounds like the words of someone admiring the colours of a bush fire from afar, throwing sparks into the heavens, while some poor bastard is trapped inside it trying to put out the flames.

"I need to go out for a few hours, Ma. Do you mind if I leave you alone for a while?"

"No, of course not. You're a young man. You can't be stuck inside here all the time."

I prepare an early dinner. As the time grows near her anxiety begins to rise. I try to calm her down, explain that I'm not leaving for good, that I'll be back tonight, and I write a note saying the same so she'll remember it.

The cool change comes and it begins to rain.

The night at Gail's is a sloppy mess. Ma rings my mobile. The first words I hear are, "you're never setting foot inside this house again." I can only guess at the vague sources of anger that trouble her mind. As soon as she says it she can't explain what she means.

"I'm sorry Ma, I don't know what I've done... I'm doing my best to try to help you, Ma, but I don't know what to do..." My voice is wild above the rain.

I become aware of a nervous tic in the corner of my left eye matching a steady pulse with my heartbeat. I drink wine like it's water. I've been watching my Aunt smoke bongs all night and I ask if I can roll a joint. I'm not doing it to have a good time. I want to obliterate myself. Gail has no Rollie papers so I end up smoking a bong. I leave the table to kneel outside in the moonlight.

Gail tries persuading me to sit at the table. “You”re getting dirt on your knees,” she says and I feel heavy. So heavy. She takes long draws on a cigarette and says, “it’s probably just the emotional weight of things to do with your Mum.”

I turn to the side and vomit all over the concrete. I fall to my knees again. Gail tells me to come inside. I can hear her but I can’t respond. I begin to cry as I feel the bile cross my lips. Poison. It burns as I vomit up my stomach lining. I wish for my girlfriend in a childlike way. I lay down to sleep on the concrete. At last I can sleep.

When I wake I rise to my feet. Ma is at home alone and I have to get back to make sure she’s okay. I pour myself a drink of water before leaving. My stomach lurches and I stop in the front yard to vomit into the garden. Then I ride off towards Ma’s house on the old mountain bike, wobbling and creaking on its flat front tire.

I arrive home to rustling sounds coming from Ma’s bedroom. As I pause at her door I think of the dreams I had as a child, and feel as if I’m in one of them. I have that same fear, that same doubt. Will I see my mother, or a demon? Will I see the sun or the moon?

When I open the door it is neither. Ma is standing by the doorway with a blank expression on her face. There’s a splashing sound and I look down to see a steady flow of urine puddling onto the floor. Her face crumples with tears.

“I never thought I’d end up like this,” she says.

When you get right down in it, there’s nothing romantic or noble about pain. It just hurts, that’s all. I put her clothes in the washing machine and bring a towel.

ALI JANE SMITH

Corey Wakeling, *Goad Omen*

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On the cover of Corey Wakeling's first collection of poetry, *Goad Omen*, is a reproduction of artist and fellow poet Duncan Hose's, "Geronimo", a black-and-white painting of a buffalo or bison. It must have been this bovine image that had me idly thinking, as I stood at the mailbox removing the book's packaging, that the title was a play on "goat oxen". This slippage was perhaps a good omen: when I opened the book to read the poems, I discovered that I was fortuitously in the ideal state of mind to bring to a first reading of Corey Wakeling's work.

The choice of a buffalo/bison for the cover indicates Wakeling's approach to language and meaning. The shaggy-headed beast we know from screen Westerns is commonly referred to as a buffalo, but a zoologist would likely describe it as a type of bison only distantly related to the buffalo of Africa and Asia. In *Goad Omen*, there is a productive space of play and possibility between names and things – a space like a screwball comedy with confusion, snappy dialogue, serious ideas, charming asides, and jokes based on mistaken identity.

The practice of categorising poems and poets means entering into debates on how poets should be grouped and the relative merits of such groups. While this process can at times be productive, and likely for some is an impetus for analysis, even for the creation, of poetry, I'm intending to cheat and sidestep the issue by using the metaphor of a spectrum as a means of locating Wakeling's book in a broader context. At one end of my poetry rainbow is a coherent poem that, while it may be complex, treats language as a transparent vehicle for writing a poem about something or things. At the other end is a poem that won't sit still to be read, a poem that might be fragmented, or repetitive, that uses incomplete and broken syntax, that can feel like a cipher, that may not refer to external reality at all. Don't ask me which end holds the pot of gold, but I can tell you that Corey Wakeling is well along the destabilised, enigmatic end, alongside Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, Gig Ryan and Michael Farrell, but more delirious than any of these. This is poetry that has a complicated relationship with "aboutness"; poetry that is interested in how language works, but also in vividness, humour, ways of seeing, and a deliberate disruption of the sense of a stable self that experiences, thinks, describes and reveals to the reader.

It is possible to read these poems for meaning. "That Part in Basquiat When David Bowie Playing Andy Warhol Says" arranges Bolsheviks, D.H. Lawrence, Soviet poets and filmmakers, marine images, references to cinema, a night in Little Bourke Street, a hamburger, and lots of questions:

> …Why is it Ivan the Terrible's dark locks
> during the fall start to take on the appearance of the kelp wood…

…How is it
the speech falls like rum from the Soviet sailor or soldier's mouth…

…Why is the Queen a scallop…

But it is the patterning of names and objects, and the rhetorical techniques employed to bring them into relation with one another that I read, rather than the sense and syntax of the lines and sentences. The poem is framed by its title: David Bowie performing the role of Andy Warhol is the perfect pop shazam, an image of the play of surfaces, the "reality" of figures such as Bowie and Warhol being famously, endlessly, masked. The poem also closes with a line in quotation-marks that links to the title, "'I can't even see what's good anymore.'" We understand that David Bowie playing Andy Warhol is talking about losing the ability to judge what is good art, but in this poem, as I read it, the question is larger, to do with moral good, with the good society, with the meaning of good itself.

In Wakeling's poetry, words and phrases are bolted together like Meccano pieces, forming lines that in turn build stanzas. His work requires an approach that is inimical to reading, to the dance of eye and brain that results in letters on the page transforming into the infinite variety of rich experiences we take from the written word. There is no smooth progress toward understanding as we read the poems in *Goad Omen*. We must be prepared for adventure, to trip and leap across unmatched stepping-stones. The process of reading itself is made strange, as in his poem "The Ox":

At Batman Park, a dance of surfactants about
the tobacco smoke and a small bonfire with molten lead,
like old folks at home in Grafton,
a lung test if you've tried anything like Yeats' symbology
and turned out an architect. Nothing doing, no.

How to read this stanza? My usual approach to interpretation would seek out referents: Batman Park is an actual park on the North bank of the Yarra, in Melbourne, named for John Batman. Batman also calls to mind the caped crusader. Surfactants, tobacco smoke and the bonfire of broken lead might be images related to the park, and might even be in some way "like" Grafton's elderly, though Wakeling doesn't take pains to make explicit any connections that might exist between Batman Park, surfactants, smoke, lead, and old folks. On the next line, the lung test echoes the smoke and lead, but we move then to Yeats, and an architect.

I'm getting nowhere with a denotative approach. Instead, I step back, take a breath, stop looking at the brushstrokes and consider the overall effect. These lines are a bricolage of language drawn from a variety of milieux: the language of science in *surfactant,* of an idea of American vernacular in *old folks,* of literary criticism in *Yeats' symbology.* The very short sentence, "Nothing doing, no", is a pair of negatives that simultaneously confirm the text's resistance to interpretation and provide a brief respite from the complex syntax of the previous sentence. I plunge headlong into the next five lines:

The best known name in Newark versus
unbeaten fuselage-like Hoddle Bridge, strangers
we hallucinate a hanging from the Victorian pommel
lanterns that colour syrup on our return
back, the Yarra near black.

Again, a denotative reading has me puzzling over what "the best known name in Newark" might refer to? Perhaps it is associated with an earlier reference to Kazan, presumably the film director Elia Kazan. Batman Park and the Yarra call to mind the title of one of Kazan's most famous films, *On the Waterfront:* and so the stanza becomes a description of crossing the Yarra in fading light, and, now that I am reading associatively, rather than denotatively, I can go on to think about Kazan and *On the Waterfront*, about the themes of loyalty and integrity associated with both the director and the film, about bridges and fuselages, the glories and horrors of these objects and the industries that produce them, about the visual effect of moving water coupled with changing light. All the while, I'm also taking pleasure in the synchronic play, the mix of "language cultures", as Michael Farrell terms them,[1] the boldly tautological "return/back" that balances the within-line rhyme of *back* and *black* around the axis of the Yarra, the treatment of language as a construction material. Reading these poems is unlikely to offer a revelatory meaning, but extends instead the provision of welcome material for connection and association, for that vital bovine pastime, rumination.

[1] Michael Brennan, "Interview with Michael Farrell". Web. http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/ item/20530/Interview-with-Michael-Farrell/en (accessed 12 June 2013).

MICHELLE BORZI

Diane Fahey, *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems*
Puncher & Wattmann, 2012, 248pp pbk
ISBN 9781921450259, RRP $28

Mark Tredinnick, *Fire Diary*
Puncher & Wattmann 2011, 105pp pbk
ISBN 9781921450402, RRP $24

Diane Fahey's *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* is her first broad selection from her eight books of poetry and it offers a timely reassessment of one of Australia's finest contemporary poets. My first encounter with Fahey's poetry was *Metamorphoses* (1988), her second book. I was struck by how skilfully these poems reinterpreted ancient Greek mythological stories, and by the fierce exigencies of the imagery; for this reader, then and now, *Metamorphoses* presents tough and gritty narratives. Over many years, I have watched Fahey's poetry evolve to include richly diverse interests and she effortlessly casts her voice for the poem at hand. Her distinctly narrative stance can be varyingly hard and resolute, compassionate and ironic, or it can delicately hover over its subject.

The many facets in Fahey's poetry range from ecological observation to ekphrastic, to reflections on travel, place and landscape, to meditations on family and relationships, to an engagement with writers and the act of writing, to feminist questionings. Across all these, the language keeps illuminating the particularities of the human and the natural world. The book has six thematic sections and three of these include some new and uncollected poems. Among the best new work are these poems, which have a mythological touch: "Dürer's *The Little Owl*", "The Annunciation", "Angels: a Dossier", "Walpurgisnacht", "Dracula", "Remembering Ophelia" and "Sower".

Fahey is well known for her observations of birds, insects and animals. A circumspective curiosity towards wildlife is clearly complemented by research on her subjects. That habit continues in new poems, such as "Lyrebirds", "Cockatoos at Dawn", "Macaws" and "Pearly Nautilus". In these, and her earlier nature poetry, Fahey's language and imagery continually surprise, and perhaps more so when she writes several poems about creatures in the same species – sea dragons and seahorses; midges, mosquitoes and other insects; wrens and hummingbirds. The behaviour of animals and creatures is sometimes closely associated with that of human beings, but as the poet says, with typical grace, in "Butterflies: a Meditation" (1993), "Metaphor is such a dance of / possibility, a weightless touching". The ineffable weightlessness of Fahey's own language works to catch the energies that are precise to each species of creature. Here are the opening lines to "Weedy Seadragons" (2006):

> With something of a race-horse's
> vigilance of eye,
> taut slenderness,
> they move just faster than

the speed of stagnation –
by drift, out of
sheer necessity –
sip plankton through a straw,
sport manes of kelp
that ripple like tourney flags
as they flow nowhere –
at one with their milieu.

On the page, the uneven indentations and rhythmic free verse, with its deft line-turns, may well be mimicking the shape of the seadragons, or the litheness with which they move through water, or both. There is a lively tranquillity of tone in those lines. This poet observes things intimately and in doing so conveys a delight in making – in seeing a subject and transforming it and, equally, in letting it be.

Fahey has diligently revised all but a small handful of her older poems, for the better. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. Some of the revisions are a matter of slight re-wordings, and minor changes to punctuation and stanza breaks; others involve acute adjustments to line-turns. "Diver", for instance, from Fahey's first book *Voices from the Honeycomb* (1986), is a poem about spring-boarding into a river, and simultaneously about plunging deeply into the self to work through something utterly private. The original version had emotional force, but the changes have brought a new clarity and strength. In "The Gold Honeycomb" section, Fahey has made revisions to all except three of the poems from *Metamorphoses* ("Niobe", "Danaë" and "Underworld"), and to all but one ("Ares") from *Listening to a Far Sea* (1998).

Every poem in "The Sixth Swan" section has been revised, some quite radically. "Rumpelstiltskin", for example, has a new final stanza and a number of lines and phrases have been totally re-written; and "The Handless Maiden" has a new opening stanza, with major re-writings throughout.

Fahey has even made slight, but finely judged revisions to the sonnets in "The World as Poem" section, taken from a very recent book, *Sea Wall and River Light* (2006). These sonnets are quiet meditations on the sea, the natural world and the townspeople of Barwon Heads, a coastal town in Victoria. On first reading, they seemed too low-key, but their refinement has grown on me in subsequent readings. The language catches at the continual shifts and flows of the natural world in time – as the poet says in "Tides", "the tremendous drift of things" – and they respond to nature's landscapes, and the self too, as endlessly changing. "Time" decisively hits this note: "I watch time pass in the dip and bounce / of branches, the spiral dance of my stripling / eucalyptus". But there is also an idea of encountering "time": "Outside, I enter the pressure / and pull of it, my ten thousand footprints / mark sand as the river ruffles to fish-scaled / silver, and waves leave the ocean beach / scalloped with fine piping". This voice reaches through to the ephemeral with a fine precision. In this group of poems, but often elsewhere too, Fahey has "time" in mind. Her question is not so much with what "time" signifies, but with the self in time, and it is the immensity of the temporal world, with its wonder and hardship, that she homes in on and unaffectedly brings to expression.

An early poem, "Assemblage" from *The Body in Time* (1995), is significantly revised. The opening lines have a light-hearted gravity:

I wake, reposition my head carefully
back on my shoulders, revolve the bolt.

Dents in the teapot on my breakfast-tray evoke
the dimples, oily with light, I'll dive into at the pool,
a liquid bowling green draining through shark gills.

I wear a twenties' costume – black wool, knee to neck –
but anyone can see my skin's rough patchwork;
that my joints have metal accessories.
I am what I appear to be – a walking industrial accident.
Thirsty for reassurance, I lope to the spa:

the circle widens with distant looks, its temperature rises.

"Assemblage" was originally published in three-line free verse stanzas with mostly choppy, short lines. Fahey has replaced the original 16 stanzas with five (of five lines) and the revised longer lines bring out the drive of thought and narrative; the complex thought is also steadied by the few word changes. The poem is dignified and sensual as it observes a human body convalescing – this experience may or may not be drawn from the poet's personal story. In an interview from 1996, Fahey talks about the need for a "measure of distance" when "dealing with potentially overwhelming material" (Fahey 77): "First, how to get a handle on that experience. Second, how to avoid imposing on the reader. And third, how to preserve one's private space" (Fahey 78).

A certain detachment from a private space is an imperative part of all Fahey's poetry, and indeed it is fundamental to poetry in many traditions. "Seeing", with Fahey, is not restricted to sight, but can encompass a wider awareness of a physical encounter with things in themselves, bodily and emotionally. The next lines from "Assemblage" nimbly balance seriousness and a warm-hearted humour:

Resolute fingers clamp bubbling thighs, I check my toes.
Back in the change room, I fiddle with scar cremes,
anti-rust spray, busy as a drag queen.

A half-fogged mirror shows two eyes, almost level,
almost equally blue, in this botched, transparent face
that will never tan. I'm an artefact, I know,
yet some kind of human – I can think with halting
fluency, admire sunsets, want love.

The images move with ease between personal and communal spheres – made to look easy, but hard-fought-for – and there is no self-pity. This voice resonantly catches intimate moments in time. "Assemblage" is a remarkable, celebratory poem.

In *The Wing Collection*, the division into six thematic sections inevitably means that some poems will have been chosen because they fit in neatly. The section, "The Gold Honeycomb" includes only fifteen of the sixty-two poems that were originally published in *Metamorphoses*, along with twenty of the sixty-eight other Greek myth poems from *Listening to a Far Sea* – approximately one-third of each original book. These two books, I believe, are signature Fahey. Through a female-centred mythology, *Metamorphoses* is daring and provocative in its concern for the female self and in its anger against oppression and violence. *Listening to a Far Sea* explores broader concerns of the human psyche, particularly in relation to the gender dichotomies that women and men face – socially,

culturally and politically. The poems chosen from each are powerful, but the selection is a lean one in comparison to the number of animal and nature poems in the section, "Small Wonders" – an expansive selection that weighs the book a little towards ecology. From *Metamorphoses*, for instance, I would love to have seen "Medea", "Polyxena", "Oreithyia", "Callisto" and "Semele"; and these from *Listening to a Far Sea*: "Astyanax Remembered", "Medea's Cauldron", "The Sibylline Books", "Calchas", "Medusa", "Marsyas" and "Sphinx". "Cassandra", among those chosen, shows the potency of this poetry:

> She, who knew her own end would be
> rape and murder, told herself this cell
> was a haven. *If only, oh if only* . . .
> A doorway of light shone at the centre
> of the floor; dry leaves shuffled, whispered.

Lightness and dark, and the complex interplay between them, are key motifs across Fahey's oeuvre and so too is her refusal to present female mythological characters as victims. Cassandra is trapped "in that stone cage, surviving, dying", but this bleakness is resisted through the strangeness of "haven" and the turn to light.

The original publication of *The Sixth Swan* (2001) has largesse: 101 pages of poetry inspired by Grimm's Fairy Tales; twenty of its eighty-two poems are chosen for a self-titled section. Formally a re-writing of mythical stories, *The Sixth Swan* is in some ways a coda to *Metamorphoses* and *Listening to a Far Sea*. The tightly ironic "I" of those two books, however, is turned in *The Sixth Swan* to a more laconic narrative mode. Quite independently of the original tale, many of the poems conclude by opening out to mystery or to irresolution (sometimes both) through an open-ended questioning or a playfully disconcerting refusal of stability. For example, in the final lines of "The Robber Bridegroom":

> The wine on the table was the crimson
> of blood and pain. I drank deeply
> then broke my glass, ready to choose
> peace, have done with all this –
> to follow rumours of joy.

There is wryness throughout Fahey's oeuvre. At times, this shifts into something fanciful and out-of-the-blue. Here is the opening stanza of "Walpurgisnacht", one of her new poems:

> After we drove through the peasants with their clogs and alpine teeth
> and eerie whisperings, ("Walpurgisnacht"), the coachman doubled our speed.
> The sound he uttered was voiceless – a ghost sound: *Wal-purg-is-nacht*.
> I savoured the word, quaffed its vertiginous brandy,
> then lapsed back among cushions: I do enjoy my travel.

This two-page narrative about vampires and the strange callings of the writer's craft should be read aloud. It glistens with mirth and agility.

Mark Tredinnick has been described as a poet of observation with an interest in nature and landscape. In fact, in this first book of poetry, *Fire Diary*, these elements form the

backdrop to an exploration of a poet's self and the writing of poetry. "Diary" is right as a title – the poems can be read as a journal account of ordinary daily happenings. *Fire Diary* won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award, and Tredinnick has subsequently won the prestigious Montreal and Cardiff prizes for separate individual poems.

Readers who turn to the work of a prize-winning poet are entitled to expect that the poetry will imaginatively and perceptively engage with the world, and possibly the self, in ways that show anew what poetry can do. However, *Fire Diary* feels to me neither fresh nor immediate on first or repeated reading. I mention the prizes to allow that some readers may feel otherwise. Yet listen to the concluding lines of "Saturday Afternoon at Exeter":

> Raindrops sob
> On the pavement, and above my head soft consonants
> clatter the tin. Thunder in the east is God's bass drum;
> but all his angels are home in their beds, wings dishevelled
> and trumpets asleep on the floor.
> If I sit here long enough, perhaps the rain will stop
> and I will learn who I really am and what
> in hell I'm supposed to do about that.

These lines have some attractiveness of language and imagery, but there is something troubling about this poem. A hint towards the self-referential angst is set up in earlier lines through a solitary figure, "I sit on the balcony and let a cigarette burn in my fingers", and the rain becomes a metaphor for this speaker's "grief", which seems to arise from the oblique reference to a global concern: "the ten thousand sorrows / the world's forgotten the names of". Rather than opening out these allusions, the language slides across the surface of one bright image after another, tapping in to a vaguely defined melancholy. The last three lines above might be imitating James Wright's famous, affecting final line, "I have wasted my life", from "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" – and also that poet's own shadowing of Rilke's, "You must change your life", from "Archaic Torso of Apollo". But in those two dense poems, the pressure of emotion and thought steadily builds up, precipitating their sudden exclamations. Any trace of reflective thought in "Saturday Afternoon at Exeter" is thrown away as the poem comes down to an arbitrary end-note of inertia. Furthermore, the use of onomatopoeia and consonance seem to be simply mood-settings; so too with the religious allusions, which are brief castings not made relevant here or elsewhere in the poem. In short, the craft itself is tidy enough, but depth of engagement with emotion and thought – which seem to be promised by an alert mind, and also gestured at – is wanting.

This habit of relying on atmospheric image-making and self-intrusive references to impel the lines is a defining attribute of the poetry throughout *Fire Diary*. The opportunity missed at every turn is for a meditative layering of thought.

"A Poem with No Beginning", is a poem about writing a poem. This idea should be highly interesting and the language itself presents a series of capable, sensory gestures. Here is an extract:

> A pair of rosellas,
> dawdling home late from a Christmas party,
> takes breakfast on my lawn. I sit at my desk
> bereft. I've left the door open at my back
> for happiness to find me when she wakes,

if she wants to wake. Around ten, the poem
trips, like the morning's lover, on soft feet
naked through the door. Her scent arrives
first, cut grass and gardenia. She slips between
the overplucked strings of Ravel's lyre, spinning
on the CD player, and she finds me.

Ted Hughes's "The Thought Fox" comes to mind, but the lines above are quite unlike the delicate immediacy of Hughes's fox and his emerging poem, as one, entering "the dark hole of the head". Rather, it seems to me that Tredinnick relies on a flurry of imagery and activity, and the reader cannot but notice that the poem is crafted for beauty while ostensibly being crafted for thought. Finally, it leaves us with very little to reflect on, or return to.

Fire Diary includes fourteen narrative-sequence poems. This form can enable a poet to discursively open out images or themes and leisurely or excitedly to build up layer upon layer of meaning through the length of the sequence. But this rarely happens here. For example, take the opening poem of "Wingecarribee Eclogues":

My daughter, not yet one,
crawls to my chair and takes my pens
and tries to steal the book I try to write in. This could be a metaphor,
but who knows? My son, fresh from the bath and naked yet,
steps into my boots. This could be another, but I hope not. I sit in the corner
of the thick of my life, and I think I'll keep on writing till I run out of pens.

On one level, we are given an engaging glimpse into a family scene of an ordinary kind, which might gather strength in a reader's own private memories. But underlying the cuteness of this setting is the presiding image of the poet's own reluctance, a mock exasperation going along with it. The poet is the subject, reinforcing his own helplessness at being beset by the rival demands of writing and the intruding joys of fatherhood. Routinely in this poetry, everyday happenings are directed towards, or rather collapsed into, references to writing as a vocation. The move is both repetitive and lightweight. Where for instance is the line, "This could be a metaphor / but who knows?", meant to take the reader? Continually, attention is drawn to a picture of the hopeful, unsatisfied writer around whom everything else revolves. A self-deprecating stance of this kind is evident in other narrative sequences, among them, "Eclogues", "The Economics of Spring" and "Things I'm trying to Believe". But it is also pervasive in single poems across this book, such as "And You", "Maybe", "Red Tulips" and "Stopped by the Road at the End of the World".

Poem 2 from "Wingecarribee Eclogues" follows with another self-conscious linguistic image, "I write to sound the world / and to try the shallow syntax of myself / within it". And Poem 6 also conveys an unwieldy emphasis on self, and nature, as language:

What I want is the intelligence
incarnate here, or hereabouts.
I'd like to know the mind whose ideas I step out into daily – this stream
of consciousness, which is never the same stream twice. I want
the grammar of the dialect my days are spoken in. Mauve cloud passes west

to east. A spinebill scatters some phrases about. There's some of it.

Here, the poet's move is to dissolve bright imagery of a self and nature into linguistic terminology in order to show language itself as complex. But the subject matter is threadbare: it is not enough to call on intelligence and stream of consciousness writing, willing these two strong abstractions to be relevant when there is little depth of thought. A perplexing irony hangs over the Heraclitean allusion, "never the same stream twice". In fact, the "mind" in these poems is transfixed with repetition – at once yearning for a revitalising of a fluid self, while endlessly confessing reluctance. Is the reader meant to be patient with this?

Other reviewers of *Fire Diary* have referred to the influence of Charles Wright on this poetry, and Tredinnick's "Reading Charles Wright at Thirty Thousand Feet" deliberately expresses an affinity with that poet. The likeness could well run to the use of long lines, varying with short, and personal revelatory narrative: "I sit inside the delicate envelope of the aeroplane, reading / Charles Wright, who's writing all my poems again in his bashful Knoxville / Scrawl". Wright's own thinking on poetry in "Improvisations: The Poem as Journey" is intriguing:

> At the heart of every poem is a journey of discovery. Something is being found out. Often the discovery is merely technical – architectural, metrical, or spatial – though, when lucky, the technical revelation is not just "merely" but is an uncovered new thing. Poetic structures sometimes end up in that fortunate "field". New concepts of lineation often do as well. From time to time the discovery is spiritual, a way of looking at the world that affects the way we lead our lives, or how we think of them. Poems that cause us to say, after having read them, "Oh, that's nice," or "Ummm, not bad," do not participate in this voyage of discovery. No matter how new their paint job is, no matter how smart and crisp their sails, they never get out of the harbour. The journey belongs to others. (Wright 32-33)

Charles Wright picks up on those vital matters of inspiration and imagination, and where any given poem may carry its readers, and "discovery" is nearly always into the unknown. It seems that in Wright's thinking, the "Ummm" and merely bright poems (perhaps also self-satisfying?) are those where the speaker is too utterly in control to allow discovery to take place.

Tredinnick seemingly bears in mind Charles Wright's metaphysical exploration and yearning for a spiritual transcendence. "Sleeping with the Anima" tries nature as revelation. These are the final lines:

> Some of the gods are rain tonight,
> And some of the rain is you,
> and some of it falls on me as I lie without sleep
> in a borrowed bed. I feel it on my face, fine as moonlight, the sediment of divine
> apprehension, filtered through fly-wire. Love trans-substantiated,
> a thing my body didn't know till now
> it craved. If I were god,
> I'd come like this. This is how I'd bounce prayers back to their sender's account.
> This is how I'd remember.
> This is how I'd forget.

This picks up a time-honoured trope in poetry – the infusion of divine mystery or revelation, which remains a valid subject in contemporary poetry. In the first two stanzas, the speaker has wrestled with private feelings of disquiet, which culminate in this moment of spellbound revelation. "Rain" is a ubiquitous image in this book: the consistent pattern is that the speaker attempts to assuage a sense of self-loss or unhappiness by simply attaching emotions to imagery of rain – or alternatively to nature or the spiritual. Renewal of self typically gets taken up through this imagery, and habitually the thought tail off. In the lines above, the wistful turn at "If I were god" is characteristic of the way this poetry keeps slipping back into subjectivity. The imagery and thought might have been pressed further, and particularly so for a self who craves, but the poem is left hanging on the abstract dictum.

"August Sestet, Written under the Influence of Some Anonymous Japanese Sages" is possibly the most cogent poem in the book. Here it is in full:

> Down where the afternoon pools in winter paddocks,
> brown cows shoot the rising southerly breeze,
> and the late sun spraypaints the arms of the elms, those great old gantries,
> and one yellow-tailed black cockatoo, slouching inside his Zegna overcoat,
> splays the same blue phrase across the afternoon
> the same cool and melancholy way
> the sky has been rehearsing it since noon. It's 4:48 on a Friday,
> halfway through my life and this is what
> I come to now—none of it mine; all of it me, all that love has left.
> The unrequited landscape of my soul.

Sitting behind this is an American tradition of sacred landscape writing that can be traced from the nineteenth-century transcendentalists through such poets as Robert Bly, and indeed Charles Wright. The opening landscape imagery lifts off to engage with a world: the painterly image develops and the connected details are supported by a sure rhythm. To my mind, the first seven lines escape the blueprint of relying on separate, bright images, which Tredinnick's book seems to be tasked with. Yet once again the poem turns, signing off with the usual "I".

Important questions are raised when any poet writes determinedly about Australian nature and landscape. It is an ongoing conversation. Is it enough for poetry to present atmospheric and bright imagery, without probing deeply into what might be new or thought provoking about a particular landscape, or about the relationship of the contemporary self within it? Tredinnick's poetry is continually conscious of nature imagery – as in "I claim this / world of dolerite gothic / and blue-brown jagged distance / and shattered former sandstone / and captured lake and peat bog" ("Rules for Walking"). Do readers need more from nature poetry than a repetitive play with bright sun- or glowing moon-drenched imagery, freshened by rain? In *Fire Diary*, nature imagery mostly comes to us through a painterly veil – sometimes specific, though more often generalised – with the turn to self as the predictable point of release and closure.

In an interview from 2005, Charles Wright discusses the idea of the impersonality of the poet:

> halfway through my second book, I realized what I wanted to write about: my life. I wanted to try to figure it out and I've been doing that ever since. So I have to say that my early experiences—or let's say reflections from images of echoes from my earlier

> life—have been a profound influence on my poetry. My poems often come out of the stories from my life.

This account is very close to Diane Fahey's quoted above. Wright's and Fahey's poetics both focus on personal space and personal response, transmuted thoughtfully. Tredinnick's *Fire Diary* chronicles a speaker's diurnal experience and, within this, the dominant concern is with expressing the angst and disquiet of an individual self and this self's relationship with writing. The project is enacted fairly simply and narrowly.

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NICOLETTE STASKO

Michelle De Kretser, *Questions of Travel*

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There are too many waterfalls here…[1]

This review was meant to be a companion piece to the review/essay of Drusilla Modjeska's *The Mountain*[2] but vagaries of time and place, editorial deadlines etc. have prevented this. The comparisons would have been obvious and fruitful: both are long books divided into two sections concerning the past and present; both use epigraphs from Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'Questions of Travel' and both deal with tourism, post colonialism, exile and belonging. However, while Modjeska's book is written from a historical/political perspective, De Kretser is more interested in the contemporary, how the small contingencies and apparently insignificant choices in life shape the individual future.

At the time of this writing I am aware that *Questions of Travel* has recently won the Miles Franklin Award (*The Mountain* perhaps having not enough "Australian" content), which makes my task easier but also more onerous[3]. And how strange that I should be writing from a place of "exile" while the *tiniest green hummingbird*[s] fly around my head as I sit under dark pine trees, having driven through a gorge riven with waterfalls to get here. De Kretser's is a big book. With such a complex novel one is conscious that there are innumerable aspects that could be discussed but as always, given the space, only a few can be addressed. The first might be why this book has been chosen for our highest literary recognition and, from what I understand, has been a popular choice. There are, I think, two main reasons for this: one is that the book provides an extraordinary insight into Australia, Australian culture and global immigration—for it would seem that now many, if not the majority, of Australians have called other places "home". The second is De Kretser's prose. A.S. Byatt comments in the cover blurb that De Kretser "writes quickly and lightly of wonderful and terrible things". "Quickly and lightly" are the operative terms here. Hers is a brilliant and mesmerising dance of words that constantly surprises and delights. Metaphors beguile with their accuracy: "Ravi was a box of birds" (68). It is impossible to give a sense of this style; one could quote for pages and still not succeed. Hopefully the following will provide the reader with some idea of De Kretser's magic.

Questions Of Travel is a parallel narrative structured in "chapters" alternating between the two main characters, Laura, an Australian, and Ravi, a Sri Lankan, beginning with their childhoods in the 1960-70's: "When Laura was two, the twins decided to kill her" (3); "The sea tugged patiently at the land, a child plucking at a

sluggish parent. That was the sound behind all other sounds. Ravi's life ran to the murmur of change" (9). The first section of the novel details Laura's growing-up in Sydney inflected by the early death of her mother and the unusual upbringing by her eccentric "long faced and amber-eyed" aunt Hester who "brought to mind…a benevolent goat"(5). From her Laura learns the charm of travel and story telling. Despite the dysfunctional family and her father's disinterest, she experiences love and companionship with Hester until her father remarries. Laura has a facility for drawing and attempts an artistic career. Failing in this because of her lack of real talent, she flees Australia with money left by her aunt and thus begins a period of travel and cosmopolitan homelessness. "Dreaming of travel, Laura had pictured a swift slideshow of scenes…But no one mentioned the sheer tedium of being a tourist"(45). And although Laura is a "large plain" girl, she finds she has other, more pleasurable talents.

Ravi's life cannot be more different: the beloved only son of loving parents, he is surrounded by an extended family in a small town where he knows everyone. Existence here is lush and comfortable. A clever student, he develops an interest in Geography, influenced by his teacher who proclaims, "History is only a byproduct of geography… Geography is destiny" (20-21). This is perhaps one of the most significant insights in the book, but as Brother Ignatius admits "there is not much future in it" (23). Ravi goes on to eventually discover the brave new world of computer and internet technology.

One of De Kretser's main concerns in the novel is to tease out all the possible definitions and ramifications of being a tourist in the twenty-first century. "Wanderlust on which the *Wayfarer* [magazine] fed, was only lust, after all, lustily excited by penetration and veils" (200). The subtle inference here is to the Imperial designs of the major European powers and their colonial expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the expense of millions of indigenous peoples. Ali Behdad argues that because of the "lateness" (that is, following after what came before) of Western travellers, their discursive practices are split. These are marked by their anxiety over the transformation of the "exoticist referent into the familiar sign of Western hegemony"[4], inscribed both by the colonial economy and by their desire for the disappearing Other. "Time after time, Laura would learn that she had missed the moment; to be a tourist was always to arrive too late. Paradise was lost: prosperity had intervened, or politics" (48). The resulting ambivalence and uncertainty is characteristic of these "belated" travellers who find themselves caught between the Orientalist desire for power and knowledge and the "subtle critique of western superiority and modes of cultural association with the Other that recognizes the latter's subjectivity".[5] This ambiguity has its roots in the travellers' *desire* for the Orient, a condition which affects travellers who go to foreign lands for any reason. Therefore travellers, and by extension, tourists, are implicated in both the economies of desire and power.

> "Have you noticed, the only word you ever hear around this place is 'tourism'? Because tourism's about dollars, no argument. But 'travel' lets you pretend. Travel has an aura. It allows us to believe that publishing guidebooks is, you know, a good thing. We can tell ourselves that we do contribute to global harmony, international understanding, you know the stuff I mean. It's understood without being spelled out". She paused for breath. Robyn blinked (314).

Interestingly James Clifford proposes that the term "theory" be returned to its etymological root, *theorin*; that is, "a practice of travel and observation, a man [sic] sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony".[6] This notion of

discovery and observation may open up theoretical space for the concept of travel itself and informs at least one aspect of De Kretser's project. Tourism has become a fact of life in outback Australia as well as Africa, and part of a new global economy. One (tourism) does not *ipso facto* produce the other (colonial power) although this does not take in the complicated metamorphosis of colonialism to "neo-colonialism"—that is, the power of international conglomerates in non-Western countries.

Because Ravi's town on the west coast is only twenty-three miles from Colombo, he has experienced his fair share of tourists or travellers (as most like to call themselves); those strange people from strange lands with their strange habits and complaints. Feeling mostly contempt for them (they "went about with practically nothing on, and didn"t wash their feet at night before climbing into bed" (37), Ravi is also aware that for them, he and his family are only experiences, the "real thing" touted in the travel guide: "studying the map, [Ravi] saw that what he knew of existence, the reality he experienced as boundless and full of incident, had been reduced to the mapmaker to a trifle. If the island were to slide into a crack in the ocean and be lost forever, the map would scarcely change" (21). Ironically, as De Kretser gleefully shows in the second half of the novel, with improvements in the speed and amount of information on the internet, these travel guides are virtually out of date before they are even printed.

Using whatever money she earns to travel, Laura lives in London and works at odd jobs until she begins to realise that she is getting older and still has no career. She drifts into the area in which she has a great deal of experience and begins writing for a travel magazine. "What was the modern age if not movement, travel, change?" (124). Ravi's father dies and things "totter and plunge". After the typical romances of a young man, he marries and brings his new wife back to the blue house to live with his mother and sisters. In due course a son is born. All is blissful despite the wrangling between mother and daughter-in-law who becomes more and more involved with human rights, refugee and victims' relief, corresponding to the escalation of the political upheavals and civil war that rends the country.[7] Examining this conflict is not De Kretser's main objective although it darkly shadows the latter half of the novel. Except for a brief and horrifying eruption, it remains background to the protagonists' lives. This moment (and the ending of the novel), Byatt's "quickly and lightly of terrible things", reminds one of Shirley Hazzard's subtlety in *Transit of Venus,* where one has to read and reread in order to comprehend the unthinkable, the unimaginable. As a result, Ravi, after a tortuous (literally) process, finds himself an official refugee "[s]omewhere between Singapore and Sydney… [he] woke and sat up straight. The cabin was in darkness. [He] looked out the window: the plane was suspended in an enormous night" (242). Simultaneously on the other side of the world in London, Laura, "watching the footage of the Sydney Olympics", opens her laptop and googles *"london sydney one way"*(234). Thus the first section of the novel concludes: Laura ends her exile and returns "home" to "the blue fern-leaf of that harbour" (94), Ravi leaves home and begins his exile in Australia. The year is 2000.

For both protagonists, their decisions (forced or not) involve predictable consequences. Both must find some kind of work (Laura becomes an editor at a travel guide publishers; Ravi finds employment in a Western suburb nursing home); the prodigal daughter must reengage in the complicated relations called family and "old" friends, the refugee must try to "acclimatise", to find friends, anyone that might somehow understand his loneliness and confusion. Ravi soon experiences the hardest

thing in an immigrant life: the unexpected long-distance phone call late at night, in this case delivering the news of his mother's death.

> But it was Varunika he hated. By the time they had spoken, there had been nothing left to say. Her voice had thickened, then quavered – but she had been there, the discovery had fallen to her. It was a pattern Ravi recognised: the fortunate youngest, shielded and spoiled. Old injustices clawed at him, paramount among them this: *Varunika had got away with refusing to eat tripe* (336).

One of the notions *Questions of Travel* plays with is that of the gaze[8]. Like most newcomers and tourists Ravi takes photographs but there is no film in the camera. As a Sri Lankan refugee without resident status, is he unable to appropriate Westerners' images and this cosmopolitan city? Or is it a metaphor for his homesickness, his inability to accept and settle? Like the camera lens, we see Sydney through Ravi's eyes: "He marvelled at the ease with which Sydney shrugged off drudgery, slinging a towel over its shoulder, heading for the waves" (350); "[s]ometimes it seemed to Ravi the city and all its inhabitants sought only the untrammelled blue terminus – the Australian mind slid towards it on shining rails" (398).

> Ravi might have been at Hungry Jack's at Central. In the west, too, people came from everywhere to consume, snatch a bargain, sink into dreams. They pushed strollers before them, trundling their vigorous, greedy Australian children into the future.

Laura, too, provides another view on Australia both as an insider and a foreigner. "The second flight of stairs was little more than a ladder. She opened the door at the top and went out onto the roof. The bridge, the boats, the boisterous light, the whole glam, prancing knockout show" (297).

> Through half-closed eyes, Laura was watching the tingle of light on the water. And fearing she might be slipping, slipping into the Great Australian Smugness produced by the blandishments of climate and scenery, not to mention world-class varietals you could pick up in any bottle shop these days. With the special fervency of the unbeliever, she prayed, Keep me from *It's great for a while but* (305).

By now it should be fairly obvious that De Kretser has been moving these characters on a collision course with the skill of a master chess player. Without giving the game away, however, let me say that readers who think they can predict the outcome had rather not try. Ravi does eventually find work in IT, through a strange set of happenstance, at Laura's guidebook publishers. And yes they do meet in this *strangest of theatres.*

The second section of the novel mainly deals with Ravi's exploration of Sydney and Laura's life there – which includes her workplace.[9] De Kretser's depiction of Ravi's home town in Sri Lanka in the first section is brilliant, her descriptions of Ramsay are equally so: both hilarious and an accurate critique of the travel business as a microcosm of Sydney itself. With the savagery of our best satirists and the humanity of a poet, De Kretser details the office routine, the endless meetings and boring e-mails, the casual affairs, downloading porn, the typical and quirky colleagues like Crystal in her bronze stiletto sandals and kneesocks who reminds Ravi of his favourite supermarket desert: "Bronte. If you're more than five minutes from the beach, you might as well live in Melbourne…It's a lifestyle thing" (401). Then there's the earnest do-gooder, the pot-smoking CEO and the owner with a Croatian-

underwear-model-wife half his age. Ramsay is in the business of up to the minute information and depends largely on the facility of the internet to collect it.

Thus, if it were possible to pick one motif that runs through all of *Questions of Travel*, it would be the birth and acceleration of the digital revolution and its effect on society. As with the concepts of tourist/observer (Laura) and tourist destination/observed (Ravi), De Kretser's employment of two main characters from very different backgrounds allows her to examine this phenomenon from both sides. Early on in the novel, Ravi quickly realises the potential of the internet which, when fully developed, will take him anywhere he wants to go in the world: "[s]oon everyone will be a tourist" (138). He is "haunted by the sense that he was witnessing the birth of a new world. …He used a word that had become fashionable: *global*" (101). Laura, of course is no stranger to the web:

> She remembered only four or five years earlier, 'the information superhighway' had been a fashionable term. *Information* encouraged thoughts of newsrooms and statisticians, of gravity and weight. But Laura's experience of the internet was of invisibility, exoticism, discontinuity: a lightness. She moved from site to site in an exhilarating patternless dance. One step led to another, performance and choreography the same (340).

If, as it has often been said, information is power, then it is not surprising that people like Ravi living in a "third world" country, considered to be impoverished and backward (but a good tourist destination!) and those much less scrupulous, would desire such technology. Up until this point in our history Western powers have been able to decide who gets it (information) and who doesn't. Colonial empires have been built by collecting data on the target "inferior" country and its population. (Think of *Description de l'Égypte* – which helped to obfuscate Napoleon's Imperial aims – published between 1809 and 1821 in twenty-three volumes.) Now however, in at least the last fifty years, this control has been made less possible by the net, much to the disgruntlement of the main players.

The debate over cyberspace and virtual reality also concerns the issue of whether we as human beings are becoming more isolated – hunched over our computer screens or IPods – or becoming more engaged with, and knowledgeable about our world and our Others. Does intimacy lead to contempt? It is difficult to fathom Ravi's compulsion to watch "cyber" Aimee, whom he "meets" in a chat room on-line, or her need to expose her life and body to strangers. As Ravi's wife, Malini, comments with chilling perception in the first half of the novel, "daliness normalises everything, even slaughter" (101). But "[t]here was so much on the web that beguiled and blinked" (285). Ravi discovers RSS feeds, weblogs, "everything it seemed was for sale online…the web was like a city of strangers and connections….It thrilled with potential magic, risk" (284).

In the final pages of the book Laura and Ravi's paths are on a fatal trajectory. Laura is in Sri Lanka ("coconut palms at her window"); Ravi has returned home a week earlier. Laura (and the reader?) comes to a major realisation:

> It was the unforseen that returned tourism to travel. [but]…it was the soul that bled and composed accusations. It had learned that it was tourist – not an explorer, vagabond, nomad or adventurer…What …wouldn't stun with busyness, lull with routine, infect with compromise like a slow, fatal blight?

The year is 2004.

I leave Elizabeth Bishop to express the final conundrum:

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places…

Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?...

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty…

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[1] All quotations in italics are from Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel" (1955), *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York: 1983, unless otherwise stated.
[2] "Every Contact Leaves a Trace", *Southerly*, "Islands and Archipelagos", Vol. 72, No 3, 2012, pp187-196.
[3] All the writers on the short and long list are to be congratulated. Australian Literature, a "poor cousin" no longer, has much to celebrate this year.
[4] Ali, Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1994, p10.
[5] Ibid.
[6] James Clifford, "Notes on Theory and Travel", *Inscriptions*, 5, 1989, p. 177.
[7] This conflict began in 1983 and ostensibly ended in 2009 when the Sri Lankan government defeated the insurgents, known as the Tamil Tigers. Accusations of horrific human rights violations have been made against both sides.
[8] See for example Jacques Lacan's "mirror phase"; *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1975); "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey (1975); *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972); "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity", Griselda Pollock (1988).
[9] The epigraph which opens the second section of the novel from "The Tourist and the Town" by Adrienne Rich should read: "To walk and suffer is to be at home./All else is scenery…/To work and suffer is to come to know/ the angles of a room, light in a square", *The Diamond Cutters* (1955).

GRETCHEN SHIRM

Richard Flanagan, *And what do you do Mr Gable?*

Vintage, 2011, 290 pp pbk
ISBN: 9781742752723, RRP $19.95

It is appropriate that Richard Flanagan's collection of non-fiction *And what do you do Mr Gable?* begins and ends with bread. Bread is an apt metaphor for the collection, because behind it is the idea of sustenance. In his essay on bread, Flanagan observes that "Bread, thankfully, isn't politics. It's what people share while suffering politics and what people dream of when politics takes everything from them."

This book consists of essays and short pieces of non-fiction that seem to have been written by Flanagan as a digression from his fiction writing, perhaps incidental to his major work, but nonetheless enjoyable and nourishing. You can't help but think, as you read this book, that this writing, these shorter, simpler pieces were what sustained him over the marathon discipline involved in writing his novels.

In the first, electric essay of the book, "Out of a Wild Sea", Flanagan recounts a trip he took at aged twenty with a friend on a kayak across Bass Straight. The attempt, not surprisingly, ended in disaster and the two were rescued after being tossed from their vessel and separated. This is an exhilarating account of an event that might easily have claimed Flanagan's life and there is something about the way this incident is recounted that suggests it was something more than youthful misadventure; it seems to have been one of the defining moments in Flanagan's life.

From the safety of his adult life, Flanagan recalls the ill-fated expedition and his gift for storytelling is on display here, his sense of what to hold back, to not lurch forward too quickly, but to allow the full catastrophe of his situation to reveal itself slowly. He observes, casually, "At some point, I noticed jets roaring overhead" and only later does he reveal that these were an RAAF squadron of Orions deployed in search of them. Towards the end of the essay, Flanagan observes,

> For though we are an age obsessed with telling all, it has to be admitted that most of us understand so little that any attempt at telling all is doomed from the outset.

It is an interesting disclaimer at the start of a book that is full of telling; for unlike fiction, all non-fiction can do is to tell. Perhaps what Flanagan is hinting at with this observation is a novelist's dual impulse to reveal themself, but to hide behind the veil of their craft. It is the first insight, of many in this book, into Richard Flanagan the novelist.

This is a diverse collection of essays, ranging from personal essays on subjects such as the Port Arthur Massacre, to an essay on Tasmanian wilderness photographer Peter Dombrovskis, and the title essay, which recounts Flanagan's experience in directing the film of his own novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. There are also essays on reading and writing and, notably, two essays on Jorge Luis Borges, who has clearly had a profound influence on Flanagan. Perhaps surprising are the number of essays in the

collection, clustered towards the back of the book, that might be described as "political" in subject. It is fair to say Flanagan wears his heart on his sleeve insofar as his political convictions are concerned, but you never get the sense that Flanagan is a man who fails to interrogate his own beliefs. While the piece on Bob Brown, "Metamorphoses", could only be described as complimentary, there is an article on Mark Latham, "Poor Fellow, My Suburb", written during the 2004 election campaign, in which Flanagan is plainly unsettled by the man parachuted into his position as the leader of the Federal Labour Party, describing him being "like an instrument never quite in tune". In fact, Flanagan's novelistic characterisations are on display in this piece, in which he also describes Laurie Oakes as a "sleek and assured Tongan King waiting to pass judgement".

There is an ease with which Flanagan's writes in these essays, as though he is freed of the shackles of writing fiction, of carefully choosing every word, labouring over sentences and the ongoing battle that comes with creating something out of nothing. There is a lightness to this writing that fiction often lacks. At one point, Flanagan quotes Walter Benjamin, noting the storyteller "is the man who would let the flame of his story consume the wick of his life" and perhaps it is the fact that these are not stories accounts for their readability.

Nonetheless, there are clear indicators in the writing that Flanagan is no journalist, that what he is interested in is not fact, but meaning. In his essay on Peter Dombrovskis, "It's Peter Dom", Flanagan writes:

> The idea that great art is made out of love and can only be comprehended through love recurs through history in defiance of schools, traditions, aesthetics and ideologies.

This is plainly a preoccupation of a man whose life's work is given over to imagination and art.

For a book composed of non-fiction pieces published in an array of publications as diverse as *The Monthly* to *The Age* to *Art & Australia*, this is a remarkably coherent collection. Much of this has to do with the way the pieces have been curated: thought has been given to the order in which the pieces have been placed next to each other. One subject flows effortlessly to the next: an article on the Anzac legacy in "Lest We Forget" transitions to a comment about the "new conformity at the heart of Australian life" in "The Lost Larrikin", published in the final edition of *The Bulletin*.

There is also an overarching theme to this collection that helps pull the pieces together. One of Flanagan's key preoccupations is the imagination; why must humans create? Why do we need love? It is a theme Flanagan returns to, even in pieces that are apparently remote from that idea, such as his article on his trip to the town ravaged by fire "The Road to Kinglake" where he seizes on the capacity of the devastated people he encounters to give to others in spite of their own losses.

Something that comes across clearly is that Flanagan is a man who does not take his own occupation for granted. In "Self-massaging Ugg Boots", he writes "Art is, of course, a guarantee of nothing. Nor is love. But for similar reasons we have not yet discovered a way of living without it." Many of these themes were also explored by Flanagan in his last novel, *Wanting*, which examines the uneasy relationship between reason and desire.

There is something in this preoccupation of Flanagan's that reminds me of the essays of Jonathan Franzen. In Franzen's essay in *How to be Alone* titled "Why bother?" we're

struck by a man who is struggling with a deep-seated concern about what function fiction serves. Equally striking is the way they have both championed the cause of under-appreciated writers: for Franzen it was Christina Stead, for Flanagan it is American novelist Nelson Algren. Their disaffection with the political apathy in their respective countries is also a common theme. Ironic then, is Flanagan's appraisal of Franzen's widely lauded book *The Corrections,* in his essay on the state of fiction writing, "Sheep Management":

> Overall, it is reasonably written, passably edited, and has several things to say about the USA that have been said before. It is intolerable in being presented as a great book, which it is not.

It is striking that the non-fiction of these two accomplished novelists cover very similar terrain; also striking is how emphatic both are in their view of the world.

In the longest essay in the collection "Gunns: the tragedy of Tasmania", Flanagan exposes the some of the economic peculiarities in the business of chipping old growth rainforest in Tasmania. Flanagan's disdain for corruption and the misuse of power is evident, his criticism of the industry's cronyism seething:

> There is in all this a constant thread: the Lennon government's and Gunns' real mates are not workers but millionaires … great areas of Australia's remnant wild lands are being reduced to a landscape of battlefields, in order to make a handful of very rich people even richer.

What drives Flanagan's writing is passion; in the absence of a very strong reaction to what he sees, one senses, he wouldn't write a word.

Behind *And What do you do Mr Gable* stands a man, perhaps rare for a novelist, who is deeply engaged with the world. This is a book of fine observations by a man, given to looking inwards, training his gaze outwards.

KATE LIVETT

Ali Cobby-Eckermann, *Too Afraid to Cry*
Elsternwick, Ilura Press, 2012, 218pp pbk
ISBN 9781921325243, RRP $28.95

Bron Nicholls, *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*
North Fitzroy, Black Pepper, 2013, 164pp pbk
ISBN 9781876044770, RRP $24.95

In *Too Afraid to Cry*, the award-winning poet Ali Cobby-Eckermann tells of her life as an Aboriginal woman stolen from her mother at birth and raised in a white family. Her childhood was spent initially aware that there was some slight difference between herself and other children. Later, Cobby-Eckermann depicts a period, as a teenager and into her twenties, of denial about her aboriginality, of painful curiosity and ongoing feeling of alienation from white culture, but an ashamed inability to identify herself as Aboriginal to other Aboriginal people. The sense of alienation and feeling of aloneness is palpable in Cobby-Eckermann's writing, as is the joy of finally finding a community and family in which she feels she belongs.

Bron Nicholls' title, *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, indicates the ambiguous nature of her biological mother, Phyllis, a mother who did not seem entirely real, a mother whose presence was also absence, and who never seems to have been able to 'mother' her daughter. Indeed, Nicholls seems at times in this memoir to be the 'imaginary mother' to her own mother, a spirit-like presence herself, the shadow of her own mother's intense self-focus and narcissistic prioritization of herself over her children.

Both writers depict the negative effects of their self-fracturing relationships to their mothers, one mother is absent and the other is far too present. In terms of writerly decisions, Cobby-Eckermann chooses to show these destructive effects, while Nicholls chooses to tell them. The latter narrative method is often regarded as very risky, but here Nicholls uses it brilliantly, explaining very briefly and with subtle force, the negative legacy that her mother's passive-aggressive psychological tyranny has left on Nicholls' adult relationships. Both methods are perfectly suited to the respective styles of the writers, and testify to the writerly nature of these memoirs.

Genre is, as ever, a significant consideration when reading these works. The genre of Autobiography within the Western writing tradition is one that revolves around the tension between fact and fiction; the desire for the certainty of fact and the yearning for the liberating pleasures of narrative and fiction. For Aboriginal people, the genre of Aboriginal lifewriting is one with an urgent need for the expression of the truth of Aboriginal history, testimonies of what really happened to Aboriginal people, and how individuals really felt and continue to feel as victims of genocide and colonial oppression. Aboriginal lifewriting has become a source of regrowth for Aboriginal identities. Writers such as Sally Morgan, Jackie Huggins, Rosalie Fraser,

Doris Pilkington and Donna Meehan, have had the courage to tell their painful stories for reasons including public testimony, personal acceptance and healing. Cobby-Eckermann includes new poems in her lifewriting, as part of its memoir weave. Commenting directly on the relationship between lifewriting and personal identity, Cobby-Eckermann writes: "The impact of learning family stories is powerful. Each night I write in my journal, trying to capture my new family history. Poems appear at midnight, and I hasten to scribble them down. My mind seems to evolve from past confusions and doubts, and I feel a sense of healing by writing the words on the page" (173).

Each of these autobiographies differs profoundly from the conventional auto- and biography mode of Western Modernity, in which (usually famous/celebrated) male subjects delineate their autonomous, self-authoring identities. Cobby-Eckermann's and Nicholls' autobiographies demonstrate, from both the Western and Aboriginal perspectives, the intersubjective nature of individual identity: none of us is truly an autonomous 'one', though sometimes the perception of being a lone unit is related to deep unhappiness – Cobby-Eckermann is most 'independent' in that 'free-living-years-of-one's-twenties' way, when she is drifting around, making casual friends and acquaintances, but simultaneously feeling deep sadness from the lack of a true sense of belonging. Conversely, Nicholls' mother, Phyllis, resentfully conscious of her ties to her husband and family, performs duty by submitting to her husband's religious zeal, but maliciously conveys her sense of subjugated suffering to her sensitive children, with a (perhaps unconscious) rebellious refusal to take a genuine interest in them. At all times Phyllis Nicholls' deepest engagement comes across as being with herself, and this egocentrism makes, in her daughter's account, for a profound unhappiness that she never shakes off.

Phyllis' suffering becomes her daughter Bron's burden. On a six-hour bus trip to the hospital carrying a baby with an infected, swollen head, a heavy suitcase falls onto Phyllis' head. Bron, sitting with her mother, is upset:

> "It's alright, I'll be alright," whispered Mum….The baby wasn't crying but Mum had tears of pain in her eyes. On we went, rocking and rocking in the old bus.
>
> […] I realized that somebody had forgotten to look after her mum. Somebody had been having a wild time, cavorting in the land of milk and honey, and not watching out for all the things that could go wrong. My guilt made my face burn hot. I hunched down beside my mother, pressed my head against the padded shoulder of her coat, wanting to let her know that I was there and would not desert her again. I kept looking up at the rack above our heads. There wasn't much else I could do. I was a small and puny child, but I could stay awake, and I could watch. (59-60)

This anxiety about her mother's wellbeing isn't reciprocated. When Bron writes to her mother pleading for money so she can leave her abusive husband, she receives no reply from her, only a "barrage" of letters from her father, "ranting, condemning sermons, as from a nineteenth-century hellfire preacher." Her mother (who had until then been corresponding regularly with Bron) sends her "not a word. And as there was no telephone at my end, her silence was complete, and devastating. It reinforced

the still-ashamed part of me that believed I was to blame for everything – including my husband's cruelty (84)."

In the complexities of the parent-child relationship, however, the knowledge of the spider-entanglements doesn't cancel out the pleasures of shared happy moments:

> In one of your letters…you said: *Always, since childhood, I've had this feeling that nobody believes me. So I am nullified. I disappear.* You 'nullified' me, in the same way. If I said I was feeling happy, you said that I looked sad. If I said I felt well, you told me I look sick, and when I said I was sick, you insisted that I was pretending. […] I never ceased trying to console you, never stopped trying to contradict your version of yourself as useless, unwanted, wicked, 'a bad mother.'
>
> Life as a rescue mission. … We both knew, all the time, that my mission could not succeed, that its failure was built into the system from the outset. (143)

What is made clear in *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, though, is that this is a mental disorder of some kind that hopefully would be recognized as such in contemporary times, but was considered to be one's personality or character until recently (and still is, by those who insist that we are in complete control of our minds and bodies). The damage that such undiagnosed disorders cause on everyone in their vicinity is shown in Nicholls' memoir. Nicholls' generosity of soul means that she has persisted with her mother and come to understand this, allowing her to maintain an affection for her mother despite the pain:

> I still miss you. Think about you whenever a new flower appears in the garden, and when I go out into the muddy yard in my slippers, and when the first autumn rains arrive. (144)

Where *An Imaginary Mother: A Memoir*, depicts the *symptoms* of psychological disorder, and its effects on those subjected to it in others, it touches only in passing on the possible causes of Phyllis Nicholls' condition. In *Too Afraid to Cry,* on the other hand, through her own example Cobby-Eckermann shows how psychological disorder is created in the context of Australian colonialism and its social and cultural oppression of Aboriginal people as an entire group. Cobby-Eckermann portrays her own experience of being identified by others as not 'really' belonging to the white culture in which she was raised, and coming to understand that others identified her as belonging to a racially-inscribed group that has been violently oppressed and abused for two centuries. In this situation your sense of self is built on a profound feeling of inferiority, lack of self-confidence and self-belief, feelings of worthlessness, despair, and disempowerment, that make the temporary relief offered by drugs and alcohol too tempting to refuse, and the addictions that follow easy to understand. Again, it is writing that gives Cobby-Eckermann "a new clarity of mind. … Writing allows me to define my dreams. Writing allows me to discover who I truly am" (154).

Intersubjectivity can be terrible or wonderful. For Ali Cobby-Eckermann, finally finding her birth mother and through that connection being brought into a large network of Aboriginal family with whom she feels an intimately connected sense of self is a profound relief and happiness: "My life is content again" (206). For Bron Nicholls, however, the intense intersubjective relationship with her mother defines her life experiences in a negative way. In a painfully honest section of the book after her mother dies, Nicholls says that the overwhelming feeling is of having attained a

joyous freedom from her mother at last. Her intersubjective entanglement with her mother's unhappy neediness was a burden that disfigured Nicholls' sense of self, rather than the enabling force that Cobby-Eckermann finds in Aboriginal kinship.

Each of these autobiographies is painful and sad, yet never so harrowing that it becomes too hard to read. These books are wise, and poetic in that wisdom. As difficult as they must have been for both women to write, each is a privilege for their readers. I was very grateful to both writers for sharing their stories, and I was personally energized by their faith that there is a reason for Aboriginal people and women and writers to share their stories.