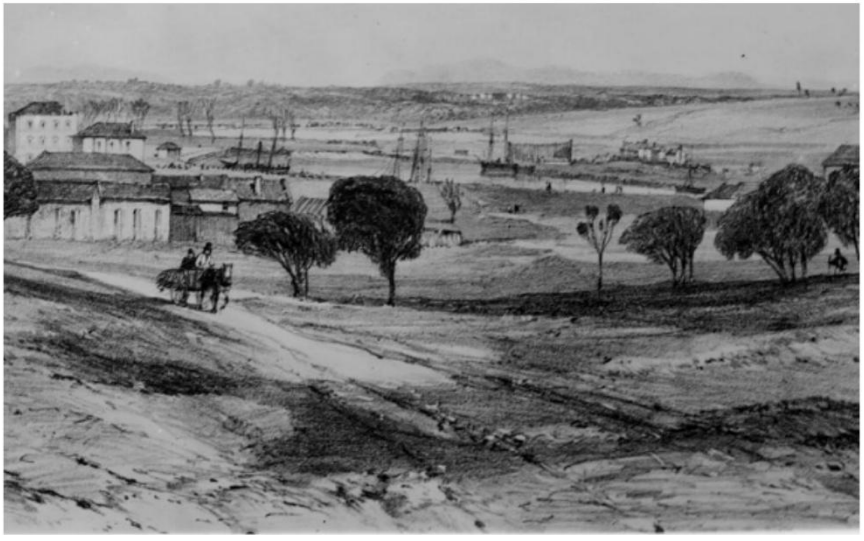
THE BOROUGH

2026: ISSUE III

"TRADITION"



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Editor's Introduction

With renewed support from the English-Speaking Union (Victoria Branch), The Borough's relaunch marks its reconceptualisation as, in part, vehicle for the publication of winning and shortlisted poems from the ESU's annual Formal Poetry Prize. Accordingly, where permission has been granted by the authors, these poems have been included and their previous publication on the ESU website acknowledged in the contributor notes.

Another innovation is that the present issue is themed. I chose the theme 'tradition' in complement to the ESU's 2025 contest theme of "Australian identity." Since I wanted to publish overseas contributors as well as local, it seemed necessary to propose a complementary alternative to that of the ESU's competition. Much could be said about how our theme plays out in the pieces here. Contributors have reflected on religious and secular traditions, personal and collective connections to the past, and have translated and responded to works known and lesser known. In short, each has attempted to write a part of the unwritten constitution of the heart.

Also, this will be the first time The Borough has published prose. In addition to poetry (including translations), there are sections for essay, review and fiction. Whilst our primary commitment remains to publishing formal verse, especially that written by Australians, we are glad to expand our purview to include other genres of writing—and, indeed, styles of verse, though catholicity on this point is nothing new for us.

One reason for this expansion is that the need for a journal like ours has never been greater. What do I mean by "like ours"? Australian literary culture continues to narrow ideologically and stylistically. The established, university-affiliated and publicly funded journals are increasingly inaccessible to formal verse and to literature written from outside those allegedly marginalised perspectives from and about which we hear so constantly.

Our mission remains the revitalisation of Australian literature by publishing works that demand to be read in

perpetuity; that demonstrate what our contributor Konstantin Kanelleas terms “the pioneering spirit.” To this end we publish the best contemporary Australian writing alongside the best international writing.

–-Clarence Caddell, Editor
October 2026

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POETRY

Glenn McPherson

More Light

You're just like your father,
the fireplace in the dimmest part
of the lounge room being the lifeblood
of your first home. Youth's incinerators
burn and spit and smoke
like the sole doctor in town no-one spoke
to about cancer as long as he was capable
of performing minor surgery.

A month's wage to install it on stone –
it made a pinging sound, a tinny
pop like car tyres on the dirt road
across Crown Land to our fishing
spot, not far north of the abattoir
that closed years earlier.
Worth every cent, though the Western-Suburb
Council in the dark'll never know.

Mid-winter, without lights, AFL
abandoned at half-time unlike Candide,
who went on about the garden. You felt a bit
like one of the patriarchs, ready to pack
it in, but half-suspecting (as true believers do)
a late revival.

When the prospective owner knocked ten
grand from the house price, holding up
a light beam to his eyes
so you could witness the termite damage
it seemed like the right price.

Thomas McKendry

The Philosopher

A stiff wind blew me through a small town called Giru,
Where the pub is the best in the nation.
I was looking for work, so the post office clerk
Recommended I ask at the station.
“All the workshops are shut, and the mill is full, but
The Philosopher's out on the muster.
Though he don’t drink or smoke (he's a church going bloke),
He’s a tough one and braver than Custer.”

So I made my way down past the cattle-yard rounds
Where I’d heard I was certain to find him.
Sure enough, by the wood the Philosopher stood
With two stock horses saddled behind him.
He was wiry and short with a smile that was caught
Behind eyes of mysterious forces.
As he held out a hand that was leathered and tanned
He said “Young man, I hope you ride horses.

Whether four-stroke or two, I’ll be cold-dead and blue
Before any bike musters my cattle.
It'd scare them to death, so while yet I draw breath,
All you'll hear is the ring and the rattle
Of the stirrup and bridle while tanned leather hide’ll
Hold tight to the whither and flank.
Check your straps ere we go; first we’ll just take it slow,
Then we'll run ‘em all down past the bank.”

We took off in the fog of the morning; the dogs
Ran around us and snapped at the tails
Of the Brahmans that ran in a cluster of tan
Through the paddocks, past fences and rails.
And I looked on amazed as he galloped, unfazed,
By the tempest of hoof beats resounding.
With grace equal to none, man and stock-horse were one
In the fray, in the leaping and bounding.

As we rounded the bend the dance came to an end,
And we closed the gate firmly behind them.
Bathed in sweat and in foam we all headed for home:
The mares didn't need us to remind them.
As the morning fog lifted, the dawning sun gifted
The flower and feather its flame,
And we slowed to a walk, and he started to talk—
And I knew why they gave him his name.

In terms simply profound he began to expound,
Without hubris nor with hesitation,
On what one man could hear if he lived in the clear
Silent sound of the land's revelation.
Though I took it all in I could never begin
To do justice to all that was given;
Every hard lesson learned, every battle scar earned,
All that comes from a life's worth of livin'.

But one thing he said stuck, and if I've any luck
I've remembered it here to a word:
"When the first pair of eyes saw our bright southern skies,
Something deep in the deep places stirred.
We don't sing of our cities. No banks or committees
Inspired a poem or a song.
It's the bush has the voice that makes poets rejoice:
It's out here where our artists belong."

By the edge of the Bruce, where the old mills produce
A king's ransom of golden molasses,
You'll find something more sweet running under bare feet
Through the cane fields and shoulder-high grasses.
Something greater than gold, something ageless and old
That's the cure for all things that ail ya—
It's the fire in our heart, it's the source of our art,
It's the soil of our blessed Australia.

Lucas Smith

Sasquatch

Well, it is evidence,
each sighting and story,
not definitive, yes,
nor *a fortiori*.

A conspiracy vast
as the moon, evergreen
as mid-tarsal breaks cast
in cryptic Plasteen.

They solemnise burials
gait silent and vanish
behind striplings and owls,
mind-forge their own English

to communicate fears
of what we plucked men did.
Listen—Esau's all ears,
argue *ad hominid*.

The Ageing Star

The sun as it goes down was called the ageing star.

When I was twenty… say the women who stand
behind him in the queue for wine
gawping up at his shoulders, leonine,
at least two heads above them.
He is a real sauvignon bloke, shirt a white linen,
brown pants that cut above his well-turned ankles,
the belt a deep wattle, the blazer baby blue.
But now, the women say, *better to go lesbian.*
Captain of a losing Grand Final side
a decade or so ago and record holder
for single-season marks, but here, after the ceremony
at a younger cousin's modest wedding
passing the other sauvignon to his wife,
as the MC points out the sunset behind the crowd,
plum and orange still life in the sky,
and, telling them all to *charge your drinks*,
he turns, un-noticed, pondering
what the groom's father said, and purposefully
strides, as if sneaking up to take a screamer,
to stand at the balcony, back to the stage,
to watch the purple-orange panorama
melt over the Yarra Valley vineyard
in the Restricted Agricultural Zone,
(the rich man's Tuscany)
as it shades the natural pyramid opposite
in deepest royal purple hashed
with the vine's Capuchin brown.
Unusually alone, for now,
before his wife or child feels his absence,
feeling for his phone, to take a picture
or check the pre-season stats of the top draft picks,
that new ruck-rover out of Leongatha,
what was his name, Latarullo?
he decides against it; normally he'd be boundary-side,
Channel Seven mic in hand this time on a Saturday night,

crossing to the studio, questioning coaches
at quarter time and humourously non-plussed kids,
and unbidden, as the best thoughts are,
a memory comes from out of the sun-soaked
valley to his private mezzanine—the dream:
That night after the lost Grand Final
he felt a weight on both feet.
he'd read that in the original sport the goalposts were trees,
the ball was first a head
and if you lost yours might become one too
and every man and boy ran headlong
and there were no rules or referees.
And that weight upon his feet
was a head, a wild head, with tongue awry,
long matted hair, black as the open eyes.
And it's always his set shot to split the trees,
win the game, release his team,
but he cannot, cannot, cannot
remove the ball from off his feet.
A stab at his calf; an errant ankle-biter
has careened like a fullback into his reverie,
followed closely by her mother,
four heads shorter, not the usual two,
and he can tell by her casual manner,
and foreign look, perhaps alone of all the guests,
who he is she has no clue.
Harvey, say sorry! You didn't spill your wine?
No worries, he says, and after an older sister
has escorted the child happily away,
It's so beautiful here, hey?
Have to enjoy it while it's here.
Was a beautiful service, she replies, *and you are?*
Cousin of the bride. And you?
Groom's sister-in-law.
Here the conversation stalls and in a flash
the words the groom's father spoke,
minutes before, a concession to the older folk,
while the civil celebrant stood back bemused,
hands clasped behind her, appear:
You're both here because of love,

because of your parents' love, and your own,
and that's God. God is love.
His body, his legs would never work
as well as now, his stabs never be as flat,
his torps as long. *In the end, we're competing*
with ourselves, he remembers from a coach,
then, half to himself, *I thought it was good*
that his father mentioned love and God, and all of that.
Well sure, what else is there to say? She answers.
The sun dips behind the hill,
he drains his wine, says goodbye, finds
his wife at the mutilated canapes.

Casey Dwyer

When you were under the fig tree

I saw you, sitting there
turning the late leaves in your fingers
like Isaac, chewing the cud.

I saw you
Israel's son, never-liar
who dreams of Israel's ladder.

I saw you
your thoughts a kind of mirror
Praying? As thought is prayer.

Your mind is the audience of angels
all now climbing down
on my back.

Mother is a kind of river

I once lived close to the water
The old river kept keeping pace
until it was canyoned into concrete
Sad river, river carrying our death.

They said the trees are barked-water
I used to lay beneath their waves
Their twined canopies knocking in the wind
Old wind, wind that blows now the empty air.

Water cuts furrows in the dirt
Searching ever for the other
To puddle, to pool, to find, feed the lake
Relic lake, lake fed by ancient pressure.

These fused bodies are pooled water
Laughing water, longing water
Our mother is a kind of river
Sad river, river dried away by death.

Leon Trainor

Beach

after Ken Done, January 1, 1998

A beachscape, squiggly brush-strokes, dots:
perhaps a T-shirt or a hat
with someone in them, mark the spot
they chose to understand – or not –
what's around them, where they're at.
An ocean loiters out of sight,
where every wave's an afterthought
hissing over another's tracks
with white noise, washing, wiping out
what is to come before it breaks;
so anyone who contemplates
must come back to a golden beach
where countless blissful bodies bake,
believing they are on the edge
of truth, in a predestined space
where every one of them and we
(transfixed before an utter fake)
confirm the impenetrable
expression of artistic will
that promised more than we can see.

Christina Pickard

Amid ancient gums

valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground
remembered by descendants on a sunlit shore
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

evacuated at night, far from the vermin they found,
navigating trenches; crimson rivers of mud and gore
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground

over sixty-thousand souls never homeward bound
a farmer's sickle lies abandoned; his legacy lost to war
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

that mirror a scarred Lone Pine slanted on a mound
to shade a generation's youth devoured by war
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground

collapsed tunnels sleep under moss-covered ground
where ghosts of charging men with slouch hats roar
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

honoured in November when red poppies are found
and in April's dawn; we recall those who came before
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound.

Matthew Perry

Pandora

After the "Pandora" painting by Odilon Redon, and a poem titled "Peace" by Rupert Brooke.

Her curves and shadows frame the wooden box.
Few even notice that small block of wood,
for flowers sprouting from their hidden stalks.
Behind, a tree trunk rises winter-hued

above her, like a diadem of frost.
Her lower hand grips the box like a claw,
as though she keeps it closed at any cost
and yet her role is to unleash its law.

Pandora's box would open with a shove,
and life would soon be suffering in extremis
and young men turn from the emptiness of love
like swimmers leaping naked into cleanness.

The stalks and trees and flowers charred to black;
and so many young men did not swim back.

Contretemps

After Chopin's Les Syphidies

The supple sylph came, each step or jump a pent-
up burst of pure aplomb, her legs were bent

into a diamond under arms whose furls
foreshadowed fleeting turns and tilts and twirls,

until her lines of dance were mirrored quiet
in darker lines, across his wistful sonnet.

He marveled, not a choreographer.
His Cuban cigar hung in the ether.

Later some pewter smoke rose up in small
curved corkscrews, their ascent a wilted crawl

of winding spirals, and so the long loose trail
of breath rose, drifting slowly with each exhale.

The dancers leaped up calmly. Hushed, the crowd
watched. The troupe of pirouetting and proud

sylphs, were sleek in sea-shell white tutus. With
a leap or stretch, the women raised their lithe

pale hands prayer-like to reach, cellingward,
and point at smoke, or remnants of smoke stirred

to curling silver. Rising, he's a man
burning with his silent longing. Like Chopin,

the dancers burned in the corners of his mind,
until a poem became desire refined.

Joshua Patch

Horsemanship

At daybreak to the ridge decamp the herds.
A cowboy hoods his lamp and mockingbirds
devolve the night to lovers born at dawn.
We fight at all hours when the kids are gone.
Today you put your flannel on and stole
the trail guide's easy mare. You're on patrol
right now somewhere along the fire road,
decoding me, relaying me in code.

Back in the cabin, network channels shine
and fade like fresco panels in decline.
The Hindu Kush, its peaks in scholar's white,
sparse brush below in valleys recondite—
A warlord fled there in the night. He chose
his mount, a lean Qatgani, slept and rose,
gazed out at dawn from one ridge to the next,
a texture more arcane than holy text.

Alex McKeown (tr.)

from Alfonsina Storni

Could it be that all I've ever felt in verse
was nothing more than what could never be?
Was nothing more than ever unquenched thirst
passed down by women through my family?

In my ancestral lands the people say
whatever must be done must be done
in moderation, and maybe that's the way…
In my mother's home a woman holds her tongue.

Sometimes I'd see her eyes light on a whim
of liberation, then, very slowly, dim
and sink into a bitter wave of tears.

But all the gnawing, beaten, mutilated
things locked within her soul, in all my years
of verse I feel I've almost liberated.

Pudiera ser que todo lo que en verso he sentido
no fuera más que aquello que nunca pudo ser,
no fuera más que algo vedado y reprimido
de familia en familia, de mujer en mujer.

Dicen que en los solares de mi gente, medido
estaba todo aquello que se debía hacer…
Dicen que silenciosas las mujeres han sido
de mi casa materna… Ah, bien pudiera ser…

A veces en mi madre apuntaron antojos
de liberarse, pero, se le subió a los ojos
una honda amargura, y en la sombra lloró.

Y todo esto mordiente, vencido, mutilado,
todo esto que se hallaba en su alma encerrado,
pienso que sin quererlo lo he libertado yo.

Lee Harlin Bahan

140/August 23: *Wyatt, Surrey, Benatar*

Love, who occupies and rules my intellect,
and made his chief seat in my heart, at times
troops into my forehead where he erects
his tent and colors, forming battle lines.

The one who teaches us to love and bear
all things wants reason, shame, and reverence
to halt our great desire, the hopes which flare,
and seethes inside at our impertinence.

Upon which, Love, struck by anxiety,
abandons his every aim to cower
fast in my heart, tearful and quivery.

What can I do if the fear of my Lord compels
me to stand by him until the final hour?
For he makes a fair end who dies loving well.

Petrarch: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta 140

Amor, che nel penser mio vive et regna
e 'l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene,
talor armato ne la fronte vene;
ivi si loca et ivi pon sua insegna.
Quella ch' amare e sofferir ne 'nsegna
e vol che 'l gran desio, l'accesa spene
ragion, vergogna, et reverenza affrene,
di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna.
Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core,
lasciando ogni sua impresa, et piange et trema;
ivi s'asconde et non appar più fore.
Che poss' io far, temendo il mio signore,
se non star seco infin a l'ora estrema?
ché bel fin fa chi ben amando more.

D.A. Cooper

To Silence

Sometimes I hear your voice, conveyed, it seems,
on wafting wind or on a gurgling stream,
out in the woods, far from the buzzing towns.
Come back to me before I drown.
Why did you go? I long for your embrace.
Without your touch my life is packed
with raucous noise, the stillness cracked.
I miss your gentle touch, your calming grace.

They say, in the beginning was the word,
but then, before a single sound was heard,
you were—the cold womb of the world from which
all hurtled forth at fever pitch.
O sweet progenitor, come back to me!
I've searched for you—you know I've tried.
I beg you, tell me where you hide.
Like Orpheus, I make grand plans to see

if reunited we in life can be.
But, like the lyrist, my deficiency
is my impatient, overeager mind.
I seek you out, but ever find
that when I say your name, you disappear—
back to that lifeless land where Hades
rules over all the quiet shades—
once here, now footsteps fading in my ear.

Kevin Klein

Tumut

Wiradjuri for "a quiet resting place by the river"

Call it Ithaca, Hobbiton or Tatooine,
the face framed by a doorway in the opening scene
squints through sunset past the shoreline, hedge or dunes
that block the glint of arms and strains of martial tunes
because there's nothing folks here fight against or for
except themselves. And when the film's rhapsodic score
fades to a single lonely note, another face
appears, equally troubled, scanning the same place,
but oh, how disparate their visions! Our hero's eyes
meet our other hero's, and we recognize
their quests: one doesn't want to go but cannot stay;
the other will not move but must change anyway.

So, kids and chastened man in tow, the woman leaves
her mum, who bears her own abandonment, who grieves
each loss as a betrayal. This firstborn daughter weeps
with her sisters and their kids, hugs her brother, keeps
rehearsing to herself why she's left them behind.
And if still in the desert, prophetesses find
the hero's road to death that promises rebirth,
they'll cross red hills and rivers toward the sands of Perth
in a van with no aircon, where her own daughter in turn
discovers who she is and isn't. Loves to learn,
the very first of anyone on either side
to finish uni. Snagged a good teaching job, so why'd
she keep studying? Who does she think she has to be?
And why the bloody hell a graduate degree
in America? See what happens? The family sufferings
fester: she's gone for three full years, and then she brings
home a Seppo husband. Well, he could be worse.
Respectful to a fault and doesn't seem averse
to moving here. Gives it a go in family games

of footy and cricket. Delighted by the ticklish names
of country towns, particularly this palindrome:
Tumut, with Nanna in the musty family home
for a week one May. First night, after a drive past trees
in autumn red and gold, she takes them to Chinese,
reciting, course by course, with consummate belief
the sacred tales in her mythology of grief:
of when her husband breathed his last, and how he left
a dog that when she's lonely snores like him; the theft
of grandsons' pushbikes by the bugger-all police
because the boys forget their helmets; then her niece
losing to cancer that the doctor should have caught.
The granddaughter worries that her husband's scared. He's
not
just needs Nanna to pause. She isn't looking up.
So, painfully polite, says "Sorry to interrupt,
but I've got to go and find the loo. If that's okay."
Unfazed, she waves him off and answers, "Fire away."

Truth is, you can't step into the same river twice,
a fact so tragic some offer the sacrifice
of never stepping in a river again, and some
of never stepping out. One day, when we become
rivers ourselves, with no desire to stay or go
because we all connect, and everything is flow,
we'll understand those visions and each other's faces:
to find, become, and offer ourselves as quiet places.

Marybeth Rua-Larsen

Belief: A Sestina

No one here / believes in green deeply enough.
—Les Murray, from "The Hanging Gardens"

Belief is everything, and if it's green
it's new— a eucalyptus will never cross
its arms in no. It lets the owls rise
and glide. Its long and tender limbs believe
they'll grow beyond their forest home, like fish
contract, expand their nascent gills and live

the many sharp-toothed days they're meant to live,
to swim among the corals of the green-
black sea and know their purpose: a needlefish
that leaps from predators to safely cross
into whatever's next. There's no belief
we can't control and make our own. We rise

as if we have already risen. We rise
and tell the stories we are meant to live
in this life or the next, where mere belief
in the purpose of our lives turns us green
then gold, and every time we run we cross
the bouldered beach and cup our hands and fish

like children, minnows slipping through, those fish
a silver shower of smallness, and yet they rise,
jump back into the depths they came from, cross
the vastness where we're lost then found. We live
like luck will follow, where we're among the green-
eyed dragonflies who soar with our belief,

belief that all we see is half, belief
that we can swim among the needlefish,
among our daughters and our sons, still green
from all we've left undone, and though we rise

from our sea beds and laugh at how our lives
repeat, repeat, repeat, yet still we cross

into the world we hope to see, and cross
into the storied realm where we believe
our differences spark light, not shadow. We live
for more imagination, more schools of fish,
more skies where stars and moons and suns all rise,
where both the bush and sea bleed evergreen.

We live without an anchor, and we cross
whatever's green, whatever's gold. Belief
is the fish that leaps ahead, that seeks to rise.

Writing in Les Murray's Room at Hawthornden

I've written a new body that only needs a reader's touch.
—Les Murray, from "The Head-Spider"

We don't have much in common. Perhaps our girth,
however much it pains me, and being here.
I climb the fifty stairs to reach our berth
and like an unexpected guest, a killdeer
blown off course, I lurch and squawk, consumed
by coughing fits and high-pitched whines.
How did you field these steps? this tiny room?
The view, I bet—the magpies, thistle, pines.
I've watched the fog roll in and out all day—
Did you? A wall of flailing ghosts, they move in
tandem through the glen, then storm the gateway
to what's next, the River Esk or ruin.
And then they're gone. They will not be coerced,
nor will this pen, these throbbing knees, this thirst.

Michael Yost

Appendix to "The Fall of Rome"

(After W.H. Auden)

In the amphitheater's cheapest row,
A nice young family cranes to see
The crucifixion. (Kids are free.)
The half-time act's a little slow.

Nero inspects, on Air Force One,
His fleet of smooth hermaphrodites.
The vestals fumble at their rites,
As smoke of wildfire tints the sun.

The Christians froth in separate gyms.
Somebody fells the oldest tree,
While to another deity
The psychopaths disgorge their hymns.

The deserts grow: libraries shrink.
All the food goes fast and faster.
All are slaves, no man is master.
Toilets are robots; so are the sinks.

Again the Goth's and Vandal's wars
Embarrass senators who see
The globe as their democracy.
Both popes absolve their favorite whores.

The rural districts dull their pain
With hookers, opioids, and gin.
Plastic surgery is in
Among the rich. It does not rain.

Tenured philosophers debate
The existence of the human race.
The algorithm knows your face.
Death plays the Knight to check and mate.

All anybody owns is debt
To one Phoenician creditor.
The guard arrests an editor
Whose prejudices posed a threat.

A chicken scuttles on six legs.
The maze is full of milk-white rats.
They're eating the dogs. They're eating the cats.
Deep in the subway, a madman begs.

Within the Mariana Trench,
Leviathan sleeps. He has no eyes.
He slowly turns and starts to rise.
A candle gutters. The wick is quenched.

The Teacher

Look: it is he who stands against the tide,
The watermark of the unknowing sea
Of things forgotten, broken, decomposed;
Now stare into the pearls that were his eyes,
Beautiful irritations of the mind,
Reflecting in their convex ivory,
The mathematic arcs of all the stars.
See how upon the altar of the book,
He goes with fierce attention to his work,
The Reason's priestcraft. See him summoning
The speech memorial of all the dead,
As he obscures the truths he would refine
Even as he becomes their medium.

Veronika Winkels

Settler

Wattle shadows daubed her brow,
And brawny brown strength of arm
Are her trademarks now;
A new shade of beauty to barter
That echoes back to wives of Sparta.

She shed a tear to see the place,
After so long on the unforgiving track,
With a spirit like the rein gone slack,
But for him, she mustered every grace.

His strength is fierce, moved by terror,
(Deadlier here is failure),
With the asp-menace and screeching flame,
Implacable swathes of dust to tame,
While the world scoffs at the southern game.

Two centuries and two decades on,
Did we prove them wrong?
Seasons behind, we made ourselves new,
Fresh-cut timber, as gold-green as the land is brown
Cities gilded from the central downs.

Our folly: to scorn greatness when it reigns,
(It's what damned us to these southern plains),
To prove it costs too dear,
And what beauty a common life contains.
Which gifts were nurtured, which decayed?

Pride persists, drinks from a shallow dish,
Like brow-sweat and foamed flanks,
It cares none what the old world thinks.
So we begin, in the middle, feeling our way,
Soul-worn with a grin—a life to prove to save.

Bethel McGrew

Now Is the Hour

"Now is the hour when we must say goodbye,"
We sing, when there is nothing left to say.
You said that you were glad we made you cry
And made this present darkness melt away.

You hang on every note that we replay.
We resurrect the sparkle in your eye,
Although it cannot last. We cannot stay.
Now is the hour when we must say goodbye.

You know us, though you can't remember why
We've come, sometimes. Your halting words convey
The questions we will always satisfy.
We sing when there is nothing left to say.

We saw you through a darkened glass one May
To spare your health (at least, so went the lie).
We shared that Christmas under skies of gray.
You said that you were glad we made you cry.

The shades of Christmas past could testify
How it was you who made men's yuletide gay,
So young, so shy, but brave enough to try
To make this present darkness melt away.

Now your tomorrow is a yesterday.
Now pain is gone. Now all your tears are dry.
"Come quickly, even so," we pray.
We hear the sound of glory drawing nigh.
Now is the hour.

Mark O'Flynn

Lady Betty

In Roscommon prison the murderess
nicknamed Lady Betty numbered her days.
Sentenced to be hung by a rope by the neck
until, by chance, the hangman himself dropped dead.
Who to do the deed? Lady Betty volunteered,
becoming Roscommon's first and only hangwoman.
For as long as her fingers secured the noose
her neck would survive, her dear breath blow.
No one knows how many folk she hoisted
on the scaffold, how many whiskered cheeks
she last laid fingers on. Nor do records tell
what happened when she became too frail
to pull the latch, no longer invisible
beneath her hangwoman's hood.
It is said she hung her own son.

Eric Colburn

Make It Old

I want it all to stay the way it is,
the way it was, the way it's been. By "it"
I mean, of course, every little bit
of you–your voice, your face, your eyes, their lids,
the crease behind your knee, the stuff I miss
when you're away, the way our bodies fit
together—yes, but also all the shit
I wouldn't miss—or would I?. All of this.
Change is natural, they say…
        Fuck that!
Perhaps each part of what we've had will glow,
a steady constant beacon of delight,
forever–but I don't want to learn, or grow…
I mean, that's not quite true, of course I do—
But only if I grow even closer to you.

Fergus Cullen

Ephrata

On a quickly-
cobbled bed
in a fodder-
perfumed shed
by the bad road
out of town,
under star-
swollen sky
and an old ewe's
knowing eye,
lies a Gali-
lean maiden,
her unready
body laden
with an absent
father's son.

Rorate

A belly swells. Its freckles spread and widen.
A mud-brown puffball blown beneath a hedgerow
for some weeks nudged by passing sticks and dogs'
inquiring noses ruptures on the quiet.

Press cheek to hill or belly. Feel legs kick
greave-fit, arms barge as if shield-bearing.
Press eye to sagging sky. Its waters brink
on breaking, drop to tap an upturned nose.

Wide eyes reflected in a bulging drop
reflect the drop that bulges on the thorn.
Drop down! Unzip the hill along the hedgerow
to pull out sleeping soldiers by the handful!

Katie Hartsock

The Giant's Grandmother

after "Three Golden Hairs," a fairy tale

He laid his head down on my lap
to fall asleep that night,
as he often did, the huge adult
of him—the leather bracelets,

the tasseled fillets, so much brass.
I listened for his snores
then plucked three golden hairs from his head,
as I promised the miller's son.

Him I'd turned into an ant
to hide in my apron pocket,
so the giant wouldn't smell his supper
in that human scent.

I can't resist a young man with a quest
that needs me, and he did,
as I knew he would, my grandson no harm.
Just three hairs and some kingdom

went to him, princess and all.
Timmy still lays his head
in my lap. He'll marry someday, he says,
and as long as I live my home

is with him. We're in the city now.
At Kroger yesterday
he left me in the car, keys in
the ignition to keep the heat on,

but he looked worried: as if I were
his child, not to be
left alone with the engine running,
or a goose whose eggs gave gold.

He said he'd lock the doors, *in case*
some wacko comes around,
and I said, "My dear, I do not think
I'm that lucky anymore."

Postlapsarian

A forest feels a fence
as rank, and waits
for summer storm-shoved tube man trunks
to turn it into gates.

Come in, climb over, disregard!:
the fallen chain-link sings
hale songs it wanted all along,
so full of openings.

Ashley Mangtani

Emergency Credit

Three in the morning is the honest hour.
The meter in the hall counts down our worth.
I feed it pound coins I had meant for bread.
Emergency credit. Five pounds' grace, then dark.

The meter in the hall counts down our worth.
The kids sleep warm. I've turned my side to off.
Emergency credit. Five pounds' grace, then dark.
And grace runs out before the gas runs out.

The kids sleep warm. I've turned my side to off.
I check my balance like I'd check a pulse.
And grace runs out before the gas runs out.
A brown envelope waits three days unread.

I check my balance like I'd check a pulse.
The radiators tick their way to cold.
A brown envelope waits three days unread.
I price the week in fifty-pence mistakes.

The radiators tick their way to cold.
I add the week up wrong to make it right.
I price the week in fifty-pence mistakes.
Whatever we owe is climbing up the stairs.

I add the week up wrong to make it right.
Tomorrow I will smile and say I'm fine.
Whatever we owe is climbing up the stairs.
My mother did this, sitting where I sit.

Tomorrow I will smile and say I'm fine.
His trainers have a fortnight in them, tops.
My mother did this, sitting where I sit.
Next door have gone to bed behind their wall.

His trainers have a fortnight in them, tops.
The fridge holds one long note it can't resolve.
Next door have gone to bed behind their wall.
The dark is free. I sit in it a while.

The fridge holds one long note it can't resolve.
I wring a second cup from one used bag.
The dark is free. I sit in it a while.
Nobody sees the sums I do for love.

I wring a second cup from one used bag.
I feed it pound coins I had meant for bread.
Nobody sees the sums I do for love.
Three in the morning is the honest hour.

Rikki Santer

Stir of Their Skirts

We were born for your nougat center with
refusal to pay any gravity bills, leaping planets
as if they were stepping stones. We whirl
into the diorama of your dreams, orbs our diet
for dervish theater. Remember you, too,
can be destined for worlds built on clouds
so we spin, our harlequin garden of
of witty mischief with catbirds purring
at our toes, ribbons of sunlight lacing
our fingers. Visit us often, our language
of light and wonder for we are your faithful
calculus of once upon a time and ever after.

Joe Dolce

Infection in St Osyth

"The Cage" in St Osyth, Essex, was the initial holding cell for those accused of witchcraft during the 1582 witch trials.

Burn me or hang me, your justice dispense,
the appointed time set, my heart is full,
the Lord above knows of my innocence.

I made no contract for Satan's defense,
I employed no one, I scorned the Mogul,
burn me or hang me, your justice dispense.

Falsely accused, arrested, my offence? -
Molestations from the Invisible.
The Lord above knows of my innocence.

By the devil's legerdemains, so fenced…
Untrue! No demon infected my soul,
burn me or hang me, your justice dispense.

The government requires penitence,
my execution will appease people,
the Lord above knows of my innocence.

A Gospel woman is my recompense,
in this final hour, a silent lull,
burn me or hang me, your justice dispense,
the Lord above knows of my innocence.

Ron Vernon

The Storm 1896

Eighteen ninety-seven saw the launching of a prize:
The Wynne's a landscape accolade for which each painter tries.
Impressionistic painting was the fashion of the day,
And Walter Withers won it with his masterpiece in grey.

To see it in the Gallery, dull grey, in formal frame,
Can make a viewer wonder how it justifies its fame,
But come a little closer till you merge into the scene,
And suddenly it grips you in a way you'd not foreseen.

You find yourself, rain beaten, in a wild unruly battle,
On muddy track with struggling folk and sodden, forlorn cattle;
The storm swirls all around you in a gloomy rough and tumble,
With stinging rain, a gusting wind and angry thunder's grumble.

The whistling, shrieking wind's distorting scrawny, groaning trees
And shredding all the tree tops, snapping branches off with ease;
It flings away the debris in abandoned misdirection,
And buffets birds that vainly strive to fly for some protection.

The sky is blotched with angry clouds, horizon dark and louring,
The wind roars like a dynamo, destructive, overpowering;
The summer storm's explosion is a sudden fierce intrusion,
And little stabs of sunlight try to pierce the mad confusion.

Conveying these impressions in a single work of art
Requires a skill with brush in hand and passion in the heart;
I venerate this painting and the artist's deft perception;
I often stand before it, lost in pleasant introspection.

Jakob Ziguras

Abyss

I
Bronze surfers, gleaming with the light of Hellas,
stride past as on a frieze. A gaze arrests
the flux of foam. Offshore a swimmer breasts
a wave. The girls beside their taut umbrellas
embrace the sun. While cafe patrons pore
over the news, unroll an endless scroll—
distracted doom, mimetic rigmarole.
The tide, receding, leaves a wilting score
of sea-weed, driftwood, coins of polished glass.
Aeolian ripples lace the shifting dunes.
Upon the venous distance heaven swoons.
The bone-caressing wind makes one more pass
and shivers in the green and goldenrod
of palm fronds—some to dryness droop,
and fold in brittle strands. The sea gulls swoop.
Across a vast abyss, God praises God.

II
What can be said about the whistling bones
and the desolated advent calendars
of bombed-out buildings under falling stars,
as the destroying angel's epigones
fade beneath a constant veil of ash.
Emerging from dank basements, other shades—
their vision wounded by the spring's first blades—
see the aurora open like a gash.
The mouths of infants burst—a bloom of wails.
By grief each soul is to its body pinned
as by a falling wall. A wanton wind
bestows its ghostly burdens on blank sails.
High atop the tree, the orphaned Dream
awakes at last in darkness without source.
A death march parallels the watercourse.
The desert still has echoes to redeem.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

April Fools' Sonnet

What fools these mortals be!—
Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream

And he is right, though it's not clear why.
Because we fall in love and think
All Will Be Well. Because we lie,
swear we're made of truth, and wink.
Because we laugh & talk too much.
Because we love to eat & drink.
Because we lack the magic touch
to heal the harm we do to others.
Because we become fathers & mothers
and clutch our children desperately.
Because we're too short-sighted to see
that all will end in disaster,
that life & death can't be mastered.
Because heaven isn't true.
Because we're mortal, me & you.

Saint's Body

First it must be kept
in parts or wholly,
the heart high-prized in the marketplace,
nail clippings, the blue finger
still wearing its knuckle ring.

Then set it out for adoration
encased in ice or frozen stone,
like soft Snow White laid out by seven lovers
awaiting the imprint
of the Prince's kiss.

Approach on ragged knees
along the gritty ground.
Blood will flow in sympathy with blood,
new wounds paying
homage to the old.

Touch your hot forehead
against the cool tomb,
lips pressed to the Christ-iron cross,
rosary binding your hands, you stand,
St. Joan amid the blazing branches.

O Eye of every martyr,
bared breast of St. Sebastian,
sleek skin of Bartholomew who did not scream,
how our bodies love your holy bodies,
how we punish them with joy that is not ours.

Jack Duknowski

naturally

countless chemical events at a glance
reactions spontaneous evenly measured

inherently bound and intrinsically tethered
to nature triumphant in its slow dance

hopefully somewhere within the millions of billions
there still sits something like memories or feelings

because billions of years evolving to this
yet how we forget how we came to this

daily and deadly, resorting to this
out of the ocean and all into this:

> now walk like this and out of the ragged crawl
> no, these plants aren't sunbathing, that isn't it, that isn't it at all

it's a deep and desperate pleading, needing,
this reaching out to heaven for a daily feed and

it's either sudden and silent or clumsy or violent
but it does come, yes, it does come to visit us all

as things come to being and then they do not,
keeping the beat to the one ancient song

with repeats and refrains, and the hook and the chorus
then the crescendo, we come back for more, so:

take a step back and on second glance
I suppose it is one big slow dance

both brutal and precious,
persistent and present

and then some selection and
designed to perfection, naturally

Liam Guilar

The Murder of Evesham

('For battle it was none'. August 1265)

Banners on the skyline.
'Banners of our friends!'
Cheering in the town.
No longer harried,
cut off and alone,

Banners, and armoured riders,
flicking the early sunlight,
and the man in the watch tower
bellowing, 'We are betrayed
I see royal banners.
This is not your son.'

The ridge above Evesham
a steel gate slammed shut

on the town in its loop of river,
with only a narrow bridge
behind them on a road to nowhere.

De Montfort, who never made a mistake
or admitted fault, smiled
taking credit for his own destruction:
'They learnt that from me.'

Secure in the simplicity of 'honour',
to preserve the lustre of their names,
they disdained the bridge and flight,
and rode uphill as the ridge above

fragmented, cascading downwards,
became horses, banners, shining riders
and the slaughter that was not a battle
began above the town of Evesham.

Tony Lintermans

Swimming Westernport Bay

Swim for the father in oceans of memory, gone into smoke.
Here in the bay where his ashes sank, my constant stroke
brings the reef closer where he stood chest deep
in a frayed straw hat readied for leatheries, unlipped
from his fishing rod before the swim to shore. Holding
our dinner in his hat, the tide cajoled him in.

Swim for the rancorous waves that smack, and straighten
my line
between beach and grassy sea floor, where stingrays align
their wide wings to tremors of swell — a gliding flow
to hunt and haunt under splashy human rococo.
The yachties' marker buoys glimpsed further out
alarm the lifting eye, a dorsal fin of doubt.

Swim for the arm reaching forward, dragging mind away
from cogitation, stretching the spine to Hideaway Bay
and towns up north where siestas make more sense.
As the other arm pulls, feel the muscles tense
like a day-drowsing dog twitching its skin,
dreaming the rabbit, waking a rhythm within.

Swim for the winter joy and jump of it, breath snatched
from indoor lungs stung by ice but given back
slowly, in crawling distance as heart rate grows.
Swim towards pleasure, the light within snow.
A mother's ashes too, wind-cast, so long flown.
Her voice a missing whisper with a wetsuit on.

In the slick of immersion to vanish from self, to find
what world is, why sea hankers and chafes, the blind
dice throwing us a life — swim for the call
and haul of it, particular, unequivocal
when the only air to breathe is gratitude
at making the reef, where pied cormorants collude.

ESSAY

Konstantin Kanelleas

Youthful Australia and the Pioneer Spirit

The heart's wave would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit, if the ancient, mute rock, Fate, did not stand opposed to it. - Hölderlin, Hyperion

The Pioneer

The pioneer is exceptional; the spirit that guides him is particular in its choice of vessel. The greatest aid in identifying such individuals is therefore a discerning eye. To find these leaders, we must possess insight acute enough to spot specks of gold in plains of dust. We must search for the searchers. Australia was found and founded by searchers, men who knew how to look. There is an inborn agitation by which we may recognise this type. It is a ceaseless restlessness born not of frivolity, but of a will to action. A pioneer is one who is never satisfied with mere consumption of knowledge; there is always an urge to say and to do. An intellectual and a scholar may be a searcher, but the pioneer is that searcher who must always exceed himself, who longs always to distinguish himself amongst his peers. A desire for progress and the uplifting of the world around him motivates the pioneer. Mere negation of established and inherited norms is not his motivation—he longs for something greater. In fact, it is greatness itself which the pioneer covets. He understands that he cannot summit new heights by toying with what already exists, he is compelled to invent. What exactly an individual possessed by the pioneer spirit will invent is a product of his unique nature and proclivities.

Australia itself is the invention of pioneers. So great is the power of that spirit that it can birth entire nations. Every great historical achievement is a manifest invention of the pioneer spirit. A historical survey of human triumph reveals this plainly. A compilation of historical genius—whether it be intellectual, political, military, or artistic —could justifiably be entitled The History of the Pioneer Spirit. From the

Palaeolithic to the age of extraterrestrial exploration, every innovation humanity has enjoyed has been a gift of the pioneer. Without the urging of that spirit, we would have remained subjects of the animal kingdom. The pioneer *par excellence* is a self-possessed genius of thought and action.

Tall Poppies

The perpetual problem facing the pioneer becomes self-evident as we characterise him: he is surrounded by those who do not share his uncommon spirit. He is suffocated and stifled in an inevitable milieu of non-searchers and non-pioneers. They cannot recognise him. Not only this, but any display of his spirit is mocked out of ignorance, and often malice. Fear and insecurity dictate the lives of many, and there are few things more frightening than forceful action in new domains. Any noble values which may have originally motivated our renowned "tall poppy syndrome" have been lost. That syndrome has become a subliminal social contagion. Perhaps in its origin it represented a desire to dissuade the vulgarity of unwarranted pride, but this is observably no longer the case. A desire to humiliate sneeringly our most ambitious peers is a hyper-egalitarian mockery of excellence, born of resentment. A full-blown flower outstretching its petals to the sky is an eternal symbol of beauty. It is unwise for us to define ourselves by an eagerness to sever the heads of these blossoms. We should instead aspire to share in their delight and rise amongst them ourselves. The common social mode has become as crabs in a bucket—dragging down any potential escapees to ensure shared suffocation and darkness—rather than a field of upright poppies in the sun. James Cook was no "tall poppy" in need of cutting down. We can only wonder how many potential James Cooks have been lost in the miasma of the last half-century.

A general stagnation has become inescapable. The generations now established —in their careers, in their beliefs, and in their society—have, for the most part, been drowned in this stagnant ocean of convention. Their thinking has calcified and has become resistant to novel suggestion,

especially when it threatens either their self-estimation or their comfort. Youth, however, skips across the surface of that ocean, still unsure as to how so many have been pulled below. This nimble youthfulness is not exclusively possessed by the young in body, but any older individual who has retained it has likely done so through its careful and attentive protection. Only those who cherish the gifts of youth live their entire lives without succumbing to infirmity. An individual can be eighty years of age and still undrowned. Our land is indeed girt by sea, an ever-present reminder of our independence and will to establish ourselves regardless of whatever isolation we may face in charting new frontiers. It is therefore our responsibility to remain young and free, always vital, and liberated from decrepitude in all its forms. Hope is eternally renewed in that characteristically youthful Australian spirit.

A Gerontocratic Age

Our age is spiritually gerontocratic, marked by a refusal to entertain the youthful energy necessary for the action of the pioneer. The status quo and safety are prioritised to the detriment of any higher values—and this leads necessarily to mediocrity. Anyone who proposes movement forwards or the conditions that would allow it is shouted down as dangerous. It may be safer to remain still, but one cannot advance without uncertainty. The boat must be rocked if someone is to grab hold of the oars.

In recent history, the social and intellectual health of the youth has been sacrificed to placate the anxieties and preferences of the older population. This solipsism is a symptom of decadence; an older population with no view of the future or respect for the importance of a robust youth cannot sustain itself. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the majority would refuse the implications of this proposition even if its value were explained to them. In pursuit of any end, sacrifices are made: this is a pragmatic reality of life. What exactly a culture decides to sacrifice is determined by what it

values. Conversely, what a culture truly values can be determined by reasoning backwards from what it observably sacrifices. It is axiomatic that the future cannot exist without a next generation. And yet, the success of our next generations is being sacrificed. It is therefore unfortunately clear that Australia does not currently value the pioneering spirit that built it. Otherwise, the circumstances for its flourishing would not be sacrificed daily on the altar of other, lesser gods. These gods are those of uniformity, timidity, and passivity. That is, the future is being sacrificed for the present. This suicidal formulation can lead only to the death of a nation. The present has its inevitable twilight before the future's dawn—the dead, however, will not see that sunrise. This fact is no morbid platitude, and only in an age so ensconced in superficial comforts could such a truth be deemed unutterable. In just over a century, every person now living will be dead. Before that time comes, our duty is to leave our nation in better condition for the next of us. It is to be wondered how much of our myopia is attributable to an intentional refusal to confront our own mortality. We have blocked our ears and covered our eyes to the reality of our impending deaths, and have chosen to live in a hedonistic fantasy of silently hoped-for immortality. We believe there is no need to recognise and nurture the pioneering spirit, to encourage those who possess it, because we want to believe that we will live forever. "An inheritance should be squandered in fleeting pleasures and comforts, not preserved for posterity"—so whimpers the myopic man of greed. In truth, the proper place of our elders is to take their accumulated knowledge and prepare the way so that the successive generation may reap the same enjoyments in life.

All of this is not to say that a totally uncritical loosing of the youth from the reins of older authority is an appropriate course of action. Youthful enthusiasm is most rationally tempered by aged wisdom. There is a place in society for a venerable *gerousia*. What is necessary, however, is an elder population that retains its vision for the future, and employs its body of wisdom to that end. A nation only concerned with the present moment will degenerate with every successive generation. No inheritance is being passed between

generations, only the tattered remains of whatever is left over as an afterthought. It is no wonder that the would-be pioneers cannot collect and expend their energies towards meaningful ends, when they are instead preoccupied with ensuring their bare survival in an increasingly hostile landscape.

The pioneering spirit that built Australia is not lost; in every corner of our society there exist individuals who are torchbearers of that spirit. Our weakness is that they have been intentionally neglected in pursuit of lesser ideals. It is therefore our duty to cultivate and nurture a culture of intellectual vitalism of a uniquely Australian character. Too many serpents have been sent into the cots of our youth, who do not possess the Heraclean strength to strangle them alone.

Where the Pioneer Is to Be Found

The pioneer is found where courage is displayed. Though, even in an ideal environment in which searching and action are fostered, the true pioneer may not appear; so uncommon is that type. The pioneer is he who seizes the moment and takes a decisive step forward. "Action" is used here not only in the sense of some courageous physical activity, but in any arena in which some form of valour brings victory. The pioneer is a practitioner of *parrhesia* by nature—that fearless speech being a sure sign of an individual in whom there burns a noble spirit. When an individual prioritises the proclamation of truth without regard to the mockery he may face, that is where the pioneering spirit is to be found. The will to stand up and speak the truth for its own sake, and to act according to that truth, is the power possessed by the pioneer. In a culture of timid passivity, this power is either ignored or maliciously stifled by those in whom it is absent. Those of us, however, who retain a reverence for the spirit which built Australia must rebut the prejudices of those who do not. We cannot champion such a cause amongst ourselves only, as a mere intellectual exercise. We too must practice *parrhesia*. The company in which one finds oneself must not deter a commitment to fine speech and action. When an individual demonstrates that spirit, it falls to us to reassure him that he is not wrong in his feeling, no matter the

assailment or neglect he may endure. It is lamentable to envision the flames that have been snuffed out as soon as they began to glow. But this lament amounts to nothing if we do not commit ourselves to fanning those flames wherever we see their light.

Our current situation is not meritocratic. Individuals and their contributions are not assessed on the basis of their virtue, but according to whatever arbitrary standard is presently fashionable. This, however, does not blind us to demonstrations of merit. We may identify those in whom the spirit resides not only through their fearless speech, but also in their meritorious actions. Again, where that merit is unrewarded by society at large, it falls to us to reward it through whatever means are available to us. Fortunately, the true pioneer does not wait for bureaucratic authorisation before presenting his unique contribution to the world. The pioneer stakes his claim in terra nullius and declares his sincerely-held convictions, acts according to them, and demands for them to be judged only on their demonstrable merits rather than weakly-justified conventions. In a culture rewarding primarily obedience and conformity to arbitrary rules, the pioneer is made to feel ashamed of the very spirit through which this nation came into existence.

The Future of the Spirit

Our lamentations over the rarity and suppression of the pioneer spirit must not consume us. Reality must be confronted, without reliance on either blind hope or despair. In all things we must take the attitude of tragedians, presenting honestly the unpleasant truths of the world so that we may face them uprightly. Only with such honesty and resilience can unfortunate circumstances be rectified. That there continues to be contemplation of these matters is proof in itself that the spirit survives – complete desolation would imply that not a single person lives who could even conceptualise what we are missing, this is not the case. Outnumbered though we may be, we who recognise our spiritual deficiencies endure. Surrender to hopelessness would be an unnecessary capitulation. Every age mourns

what it has lost from the previous, we are in no unique situation. What will define the circumstances passed to our heirs is our ability to elevate what has been unjustly discarded. The pioneer spirit is one such jewel that has been pulled from the crown of our nation and impudently tossed aside.

Every one of us has encountered manifestations of the spirit in our lives, knowingly or otherwise. We may all think back to moments in our lives in which either ourselves or an individual before us demonstrated an unusual animation, spurred by a stirring of the soul for which we had no name. These moments of fearless speech, inspired innovation, and courageous action were no mere coincidences of circumstance – they were the embodiment of an ideal from which we have strayed. Perhaps, when we hear the words of our national anthem sung, we are often deaf to the beauty of their lofty sentiments. No matter, they are sung until there are those with the ears to hear them. If, however, we do hear those foundational meanings, we are obliged to take them to heart, and to allow them to stir within 4 us the spirit from which they were born. By doing so, we allow ourselves to be guided by those same principles valorised when that song was written, one-and-a-half centuries ago. We must be honest that the true pioneer is a rarity, but that does not mean we cannot aspire to the same spiritual vitality with which the pioneer overflows. Let us be ever vigilant for instances and manifestations of that spirit, it is what lifts us all to heights of which we ordinarily cannot conceive. Let us resist the forces surrounding us that encourage the apathetic dilapidation of our nation and our people – we are more alive, and therefore stronger. The spirit of the Australian pioneer lives on, and we owe it our diligent service. Even in such unfortunate cultural circumstances as our own, glimmers of that golden spirit glint in the corners of one's eye. One must not blink and miss them.

Joe Dolce

Saint Huck: The Faux-Americana of Nick Cave

Let me warn you in advance that I have never been much a fan of Nick Cave. But I have gained a better appreciation for his musical contribution from writing this essay. Cave is unique amongst pop singer-songwriters in the way he wields language as a kind of sonic musical instrument.

Initially, I was only impressed by the engineering effects Cave got on his early records, especially the first album of his band The Birthday Party, and the way the musicians endeavored to make their instruments sound like tormented animals. Other pop musical influences, The Beatles, Jeff Beck and Jimi Hendrix were also into reinventing the sound of the electric guitar.

But as a songwriter, singer and, more importantly, as regards the moral backbone of Cave's music, there is nothing there I wish to learn from.

Don't pay any heed to my opinion if you are a fan of Nick Cave. Stop here, do not read further and go and roll a joint or get another tattoo or something. I do not listen to music as a fan—I listen to music as an apprentice looking for inspiration from masters for my own development in the craft.

The litmus test for me is this: am I compelled to actually learn this artist's material myself to see how it ticks and to play it for my own enjoyment? The answer for Nick Cave and his music is, and has always been: No.

Obviously, thousands of people disagree with me. But, if you are a thinking person, you might as well have a good devil's advocate on your shoulder.

There are nine songs I took a close look at—first as stand-alone lyric writing—and then I examined as much of the music as I felt necessary to get a grasp on what Cave was doing.

I looked at the duet he sings with Kylie Minogue and also the ballad, "Black Hair," both of which my partner Lin likes. She and I disagreed on the writing quality of Wild Roses but agreed on "Black Hair."

The songs I have chosen to look at are “Mutiny in Heaven,” “Wild World,” “Deep in the Woods,” “Big Jesus Trashcan,” “Saint Huck,” “From Her To Eternity,” “Red Right Hand,” “Where The Wild Roses Grow,” and “Black Hair.”

Cave’s early Birthday Party songs are performance pieces created to be pretty much screamed and shouted in performance by testosterone-charged teenagers or recited over music (similar to the new wave of emo-gothic rock that is now very popular with young teens.

These are not constructed poems but barely coherent song-lyrics. Probably, thanks to Cave’s influence and others from the Sex Pistols era forward, there is now a position created in these kinds of new emo-goth bands: as well as a regular singer, who oftentimes sings actual melodies, bands now have one or two “screamos.” These types of singers use the human voice as an instrument or sound effect. It’s quite powerful and original.

Cave’s early cathartic rock was meant to shepherd the audience through a psychological catharsis specific to that group’s needs. The words don't really matter— it's the delivery, the chemistry and intent that makes these songs work.

I went through this very same process in my own teenage years, as did many of you, first with The Rolling Stones and then with The Doors and many other bands. The lead singer could be shouting out the phone book in reverse and it would have the same effect. The testosterone and delinquency of the group and singer, anarchistic volume of the music, and shared cult values, drive this stuff.

“Red Right Hand,” “Where The Wild Roses Grow” and “Black Hair” have lyrics which are clearly written in a much different way than Cave’s early material, most likely due to a growing interest in extended prose writing which probably required him to create from a point of stillness rather than looking at words as a quick, cathartic performance fix.

Cave has a few modes as a writer, but the most irritating to me is what I will call faux Americana. As a bona fide American for half of my life, with a deep understanding of the South, educated as a child in racist mixed-races schools and having written my own 100 page, 35 song

Leadbelly Ballad Novel on the life and times of Huddie Ledbetter (in similar vernacular to some of Cave's characters), it is obvious to me that he is endeavoring to sing-speak from the personae of Black Americans from the 40s and 50s as he imagines them. But these characters have no basis in reality. He channels his own kind of white-bread, jumbled Mark Twain mythology. Certainly not from the South and blues roots background I am familiar with. "Mutiny in Heaven," "St Huck," and Cave's novel And the Ass Saw the Angel are examples of this faux Americana.

If his earlier material could be said to resemble Screaming Jay Hawkins in its delivery, then I would say his later stuff is Jim Morrison-meets-David Byrne, with "Where the Wild Roses Grow" and "Black Hair" later bringing in strong Leonard Cohen influences. But I would judge all these songs, except "Black Hair," as C-grade poor photocopies of his primary source influences: Jim Morrison and Leonard Cohen.

In "Mutiny in Heaven" we are taken on a bad drug trip. The paranoia reminds me a little of Philip K. Dick, and we get an exaggerated, white version of the old American Negro-speak, like Porgy and Bess, but less authentic: faux Americana. The singer takes the point of view of some kind of fallen angel or something equally wacky:

> Ah tied off! fucken wings burst out mah back
> (like ah was cuttin' teeth!!)
> Ah took off!!!
> (rats in Paradise! rats in Paradise!)
> There's a mutiny in Heaven!

This song is basically a blabbering rave over a steady groove, heavy on style, light on content, *à la* Screaming Jay Hawkins. The hookline, or repeated mantra of the song, 'if this is heaven ah'm bailing out,' is clever and funny, but kind of whingy.

In "Wild World," a Jim Morrison-styled love song, we have another mindless repetition of the key image: wild world, as hook or mantra.

> It's a wild world hey! it's a wild world it's a wild world
> It's a wild world and she's a wild girl hey! hey! uh! uh!

It's a wild girl uh! huh! ah! it's a wild world uh! huh!
uh!
And she's a wild girl don't push me uh! don't push me
uh!
Don't push me uh! in a wild world hah! uh! huh!

"Wild World" is a dead, overused image and cliché, and does not survive repetition. This same image is much more powerful in the Cat Stevens pop song of the same name.

In "Deep in the Woods," once again, we find Cave leaning on another tepid cliché for his repeated hookline.

Yeah I recognize that girl
I took her from rags right through to stitches (pray for
Me now)
Oh baby, tonight we sleep in separate ditches.
Deep in the woods
Deep in the woods yeah
Deep in the woods a funeral is swinging.

The only lyrical hooks that can stand repetition over and over again are phrases that have intrinsic depth, mini-poems or almost haiku-phrases. Examples of hooklines that have self-sustained content and survive over-and-over repetition: *all you need is love, give peace a chance, we shall overcome, I shall be released,* etc. These phrases as mantras keep their strength. Often gaining strength. They are true mantras, not losing power with mindless hammering.

Cave does this again with the line, "the sidewalks are full of love's lonely children," which is not a bad line in itself—once. But drone-like repetition drives it into the ground so that it loses all effect—then he throws in the nutty "the sidewalk regrets that we had to kill them" which is just plain lazy writing.

The cacophonic anthem from the first Birthday Party album, "Big Jesus Trashcan," is a song I have always liked. This is also my earliest experience of Nick Cave's music.

Big-Jesus soul-mates Trash-Can
Fucking rotten business this

Both feet in the Bad-Boot
Stiff in the crypt, babay, like a rock
Rock-rock-rock
Big-Jesus soul-mates Trash-Can

I remember when he recorded it at Richmond Recorders in the late 70s with wunderkind Tony Cohen engineering. Cohen placed contact microphones on sheets of roofing tin in front of the amplifiers to get that grunt sound. The sound and arrangement is very Jimi Hendrix (but without Hendrix's masterful guitar soloing ability), and hearing it in retrospect reminds of Hendrix's If a Six Was a Nine.

But "Big Jesus Trashcan" is also faux Americana. Plot: rich fat cat US Texan sleaze bag Christian despoiling all he touches.

Big-Jesus-Oil-King down in Texas
Drives great holy tanks of Gold
Screams from heaven's Graveyard
American heads will roll in Texas

Cave isn't American—but he sure is fixated on the Southern gutter of Americana culture.

In "Saint Huck" we find faux Americana and catharsis again in guttural and primal screams, presaging today's screamo-music. The words don't really matter too much here. One image could just as easily be replaced by another, and in any order. Cave just slams pictures together here, cut-n-paste. Shock tactics. High volume.

And a bad-blind nigger at the piano
Buts a sinister blooo lilt into that sing-a-long
Huck senses something's wrong!
Sirens wail in the city,
and lil-Ulysses turn to putty
and Ol Man River's got a bone to pick!

I remember being in a supermarket once in California and this black guy suddenly screamed 'HEY!!! at the top of his

voice. Everybody froze and looked at him and he laughed: 'You don't like it when black people talk LOUD do you?'

But ya traded in the Mighty ol' man River
for the Dirty ol' Man Latrine!
The brothel shift
The hustle'n'the bustle and the green-backs rustle

A great lesson in performance dynamics.

"Saint Huck," like many of Cave's blood-and-nail Christian-themed songs, is all held together by the frayed thread of Judeo-Christian mumbo jumble suggesting much but saying very little. Style over content again.

"From Her To Eternity." I've always liked the title. It's much better than the unrealised lyric that accompanies it. Probably, Cave came up with the title first (in collaboration with someone else, I understand) thought it was sexy and romantic, and then decided to write a song around the title.

Ah read her diary on her sheets
Scrutinizin' ev'ry li'l piece of dirt.
Tore out a page 'n' stufft it inside my shirt.

Unfortunately, he must have forgotten why he liked the image in the first place, because there is neither romance nor sex in the lyric.

This is a common writing error. Many writers come up with a great title for their song but lose it when they attempt to develop the theme in the lyrics, e.g., "They Aint't Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore" by Kinky Friedman, which is a great self-sufficient idea in itself but the actual song lyrics fail to fulfil the promise. Whatever it is these songwriters intended stays in their heads and doesn't make it onto the page.

Fled outta the window
And shinning it down the vine
Outta her nightmare and back into mine.
Mine! O mine!
From her to eternity

The title, “From Her To Eternity,” sets the song up to be a tender lovesong with overtones of the imagery from the book and film of the same name, but the lyric turns out to be a shallow, poorly written comment about a pretty skanky girl. In one version, Cave adds the verse:

> This desire to possess her is a wound
> and its naggin’ at me like a shrew
> but ah know that to possess her
> is therefore not to desire her.

Errrr… a weak piece of confused logic (desire to possess as a wound nagging like a shrew? Yikes!) but shows unusually clearly, for a change, that women/girls to Cave are just projections of his own ego, not real people.

In “Red Right Hand” we suddenly discover very even verses and steady rhymes. No wasted repetition of lines, which is refreshing. It is clear Cave was writing prose during this time as this lyric is written from a place of contemplation (as one would have to do, writing long sustained prose) and not a place of throw-away imagery with cathartic performance as its main function. I would venture he wrote this lyric intact first and then set it to music.

> He's a ghost, he's a god,
> he's a man, he's a guru
> You're one microscopic cog
> in his catastrophic plan
> Designed and directed by
> his red right hand

A good song, but not sung well by him as he slaughters the threadbare melody line. Johnny Cash found the real singable, almost narrative song in this and brought it out quite resonantly.

“Where The Wild Roses Grow” is a duet sung with Kylie Minogue. Our squeaky-clean Pop Princess must have wanted to try a bite of the poisoned apple, it seems, as these two singers are an odd combo of contradictory styles, to say the least. This Cave song is another interesting study in style over

content. I can be more specific about what I mean here, as I can do this kind of structure in my sleep:

> He would be my first man, and with a careful hand
> He wiped at the tears that ran down my face

Cave calls this a "murder ballad," but the great murder ballads all have motive—and moral instruction. This song has neither. It is sung in his Leonard Cohen style and is a sick little puppydog of a lyric dressed up in pretty clothes:

> And the last thing I heard was a muttered word
> As he knelt (stood smiling) above me with a rock in his fist

The guy savages and beats an innocent girl to death for no reason. Not a murder ballad but a mindless-murder-of-a-virgin ballad. Celebrating this kind of romanticized violence with soft, seductive breathy voices and sex appeal is, to me, fucked up. No wonder Cave asked someone as Americana-naive as Kylie to do it with him, rather than a serious down-from-the-mountain gal like Emmy Lou Harris, Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss or any of those real old-timey singers who understand this genre. They would probably have had no part of a song with such a disgusting message. I don't see any of these singers covering this song in the distant future. (German "aggrotech and industrial" band, Fusspils 11, did a German translation on their album *Elektro-Polizei: Alarm Für Fusspils 11*! Haha. That'd be about right.) Pure faux Americana again. The chorus is also too weak to withstand repetition four times. It is a badly written B-grade attempt at producing something classic like "Long Black Veil" or that kind of old ballad. Let's have a look at the chorus, with comments following:

> They call me The Wild Rose *(nothing wrong with this – quite good.)*
> But my name was Elisa Day *(this is ok too – he's still on the right track.)*
> Why they call me it I do not know *(Neither do I. Nick*

Starts to lose it here.)

For my name is Elisa Day.

What is this girl? Brain dead? She already said this—no reason to say it again. There needs to be a solid closing line here to wind this idea up. Something more like: "I never chose that sorrowful way," or something conclusive worth hearing three more times as a chorus. A summation.

"Black Hair." I have only come to this song recently. It may be the best Cave song of all I have heard. Again in the style of Leonard Cohen:

> Full of all my whispered words, her black hair
> And wet with tears and good-byes, her hair of deepest black
> All my tears cried against her milk-white throat
> Hidden behind the curtain of her beautiful black hair

Kind of a tone poem on the colour black, but then Cave goes and messes it up with the throwaway dead mantric final chorus line, "Today she took a train to the West" which is weak, unnecessary and wrecks the hypnotic mood he has previously set up with the seductive and effective repetition of the black imagery.

> As deep as ink and black, black as the deepest sea
> The smell of her black hair upon my pillow
> Where her head and all its black hair did rest
> Today she took a train to the West
> Today she took a train to the West
> Today she took a train to the West

I would have simply omitted this last line and voila: a masterpiece. If I was recording this song myself, I would simply leave it out. Also, he starts to sing here, leaving his breathy Cohen-like low recitative register and going into a shaky tenor area he is unsteady in. Cave really is not a singer, but a reciter who sometimes sings but mostly shouts.

I feel that Nick Cave works hard to conceal his real thinking and his own personal experiences in his writing, and instead settles for rather easy, lurid, throw-together collages, leaning heavily on the clichéd Judeo-Christian war-chest of sacrilegious shock-and-awe to keep his stoned-out fans from passing out.

Cave wields language more like a musical instrument than any traditional vehicle of actual poetic understanding and insight; hence the imagery in most cases is interchangeable within each song and even from one song to another. In other words, I could take ten of Cave's songs, slice them all up and reassemble the lyrics in just about any order and the effect would be the same.

In that sense he is unique, of all other artists, using language-as-sound effect, and in some strange way, actually more of a William Burroughs-style slice 'n' dice poet than either Bob Dylan or David Bowie.

Alex McKeown

P.L. Travers: Australia's First Free Verse Poet

Australian poets didn't take to free verse until the 1960s, with brief experiments in the late 1930s and early 1940s having been killed off by the Ern Malley Hoax. So the conventional story goes. If you ask someone in the know they might mention the popular contests held in the 1910s by outlets such as The Bulletin, which sadly only received Whitmanian parodies by rank amateurs. Or they might mention the two isolated experiments which very belatedly became part of the standard Australian canon in the 1980s: "Grotesque" by Lesbia Harford and "Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope" by Christopher Brennan. It's clear enough, if only from the titles, what these two accomplished poets thought of free-verse as a form: absurd, ugly and good only for parody. For sustained and serious output we might look to Frederick Manning, a friend of Ezra Pound, who wrote imagist free verse in the 1910s. But Fred hadn't set foot in Australia for at least a decade when he began his free verse practice, so while he may technically win the title of Australia's first free verse poet, I'm not sure if we have any real right to claim his achievements as our own.

So, did free verse pass us by? Was there really no Australian free-verse poet who wrote and published in Australia for Australians until the Jindyworobak movement in the 1930s? In fact, there was, but her existence has not yet been noted in the annals of our literary history. Her poems have never even been released in book form. And yet you've certainly heard of her: I speak of Pamela (P.L.) Travers (1899-1996), most notably the author of Mary Poppins. For a year prior to her leaving for London to become an international literary success, Travers published a deluge of poems, stories and anecdotes in Australian magazines, and received significant recognition for her efforts.

Travers's writing career begins with some rhyming poems in three issues of The Bulletin in March and April of 1923.

April

Soon she'll come dancing
In her yellow gown
Autumn leaves upon her head
In a chaplet brown.
Leap high, young Laughter,
Play your merry part,
April comes a-swinging, singing to my heart!

Eyes like a sunset
Creeping to the west
And, for lover's pillowing,
A round kissing breast.
Pipe low, O wonder,
Shadows come unfurled,
For the dusk of April drenches all the world!

Bend down, I'll whisper
(No one else must know),
He comes in April,
Love-laden, and so
Farewell to Sorrow,
Joy shall stain the years,
And the lips of April quench my foolish tears!

Travers was an accomplished formalist and continued to publish such poems alongside her free verse, including sonnets, heroic couplets, ballads, triolets and rondels, showing clear influence from Ernest Dowson and the decadent movement.

From May 1923 onwards, Frank Morton gave her free-rein in her own monthly column, "A Woman Hits Back", for his journal The Triad, a surprisingly heavy responsibility and honour for a 24 year old who had only just received her first

publication. It is in this column that we see her first foray into free verse:

From *"What My Family Thinks I Think"*

I am made of sawdust.
Of course, I have blood in my veins,
But I avoid thinking about it
As much as possible…
It is not nice.
My mother found me under a pansy petal
One day
When she was picking flowers
In the front garden,
And that is how I came to be born.
We do not talk much about the event…
It is not nice.
I must not dance
More than twice in succession
With the same man.
And even then I must keep my partner
At a full arm's length,
Even if we are dancing the Woop-Woop Jazz.
I must never kiss a man
Unless I am about to become engaged to him,
Because nice girls don't do that.
I shall marry some day, I suppose,
But I don't think much about it…
It is not a nice subject
For a young girl.
…

The speaker goes on to describe the supposed happy ending of the loveless and passionless marriage eventually to be her fate. She knows the absurd innocence and self-denial expected of a young woman and exposes it with a nice ironic detachment. This subject matter is typical of the column, later described in the journal as "that pageful of candid feminism which each month set so many of us blinking."

The form of this free verse is curiously casual and unrhythmic for a poem of 1923, more reminiscent of the form-phobic second-wave of free verse which would come to dominate the poetry airwaves of the 1960s than the quasi-metrical, rhyming, high-style of innovators such as Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot that defined free verse at this time. Such poets, each in their own way, used free verse to experiment with what was possible with meter. Free verse for them was not a freedom from form but a new and exciting form to play with, moving in and out of different meters and rhyming patterns. A large percentage, sometimes a vast majority, of lines from such poets could be easily extracted into a metrical cento. Traver's poem is more akin to the verse stylings of William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, who would become major influences on the free-verse revival of the 50s and 60s, and whose lines and sentences resist metrical readings.

If a proudly British-Australian poet of the 1920s was influenced by such American Americans as Moore and Williams this would be quite interesting to say the least (keep in mind that even in the 1960s, it was a struggle to obtain American books in Australia). Imagism was vaguely known of in Australia, and much derided, but Travers's doesn't follow imagist tenets. I'd love to see some future research into exactly which free verse poetry Travers was aware of.

She also worked occasionally with the longer line to good effect:

Loss

Gentle little cat, why do you go stealing swiftly past
my hands stretched for your caressing?
Once you crept adoring to my arms, and music
slumbered in your mouth as you slept content.
Is it that you guess that he, in the darkness, woke my
mouth from dreaming to a yearning hunger?
Are my hands no longer worthy your caressing? Must
I weep forever, tender little cat!

A higher more rhythmic style can be seen in the following neo-paganesque poem of death's acceptance:

Pan's Answer

It is I, Pan, behold me, brother!
Blind, foolish mortal, beloved,
Have I not held you in my hand's deep palm
Since first you sought me
As a trembling boy
Within the garden of your first love's eyes?

When you have wept in pain,
And flung your hands
Groping for light,
My arms have borne you through a sea of doubt
And kept you faithful.

I have laughed to hear you
In the quiet night
Crooning of love,
White Psyche in your arms,
Sobbing with ecstasy,
You who have been love's lover down the years:

I have loved you in happy, quiet places,
On the high hills I piped my melodies
Goldenly
That you might catch some strain
And weave it into beauty for the world.

Proudly
I stood beside you while you cried
Against the hypocrites and barren fools
Who knew me not—
Then, too, I loved you!
And now you stand
Upon the edge of Life
Which you call Death...
Are you afraid, brave soul,

Who have lived fearlessly,
To pass the gate and come to me at last?

Ah, no! Hold fast, hold fast now to my hand,
Your brother Pan shall guide you through the darkness!

But she's superior in her low-style, exploring everyday life and human-to-human connection, as in the following deeply Australian poem, which I think is her best:

On a Verandah

We skim
Light-footed over the fragile surface
Of emotion,
Talk of the weather, countless books,
New friends
And old, old jokes.

While underneath it all
Our sobbing hearts cry hungrily
The searing words, which, cowards that we are,
We dare not speak!

In February 1924, after seven columns of "A Woman Hits Back," containing around five poems each, and more than 30 poems published outside of the column in The Bulletin and The Triad, Travers left for London to seek fame and fortune. In The Triad's announcement of her departure, we are told that by the time she reaches London, her book of verse, "Bitter-Sweet," will have been released by Kirtley Press, run by John Kirtley and Jack Lindsay. Such a book never seems to have existed, however; there is no record of it in any library that I can find. A clue to this comes ten years later in 1934 when Nettie Palmer, one of Australia's top literary critics, writes the following:

It must be ten years since Pamela Travers went to London. In her youth here she was versatile and

skilful, and the overshrewd suggested that she was just another pen-name for Frank Morton. Steadily, through the last ten years, Pamela Travers has been proving that she is nobody's pen-name.

Apart from the breezy journalism on which she lives — her "Letters from Russia" will soon appear in book form—Pamela Travers has been uttering her own vision of life, using original verse-forms of increasing subtlety and power. In recent decades, many poets writing in English have taken Verlaine's broad hint that rhyme should be suggested, not emphasised. The reader should be made aware of a flickering, rhymed pattern, not jarred by hammer-strokes.

…

Directed towards a new bondage, a new freedom, these devices and a score of others are all used today by poets capable of the most exacting Spenserian stanzas or intricate Gilbertian pattern. Among them is Pamela Travers. Gently daring, not in the matter of rhyme only but in the wayward metre, she writes a girl's "Prayer in a Field," with stanzas like these, the first and last:

> Saint Anthony, my little cow
> with the sedate and comely air,
> you remember? Her horns were round
> and bent like thorn boughs, and there were
> dun shadows patched upon her grey,
> that when she moved
> along the bushy dappled ways
> you could not tell her from the wood;
>
> ….Have you no girl, Saint Anthony,
> to bend back into Heaven's lawn
> and kiss until your mouth is dry
> for a bowl of milk or spring water?
> If you'd been under a girl's cloak,
> Saint Anthony, now

you'd know the thirst in Michael's throat
and bring me back my little cow.

> This was one of four poems by Pamela Travers in Alida Monro's striking new collection, Recent Poetry. To possess more of her work you need to have been an assiduous clipper of reviews, such as the short-lived, masterly "Irish Statesman" and the current "New English Weekly." Long ago, her published verse will have amounted to a bookful, but it seems she is her own severest publisher's reader, rejecting and postponing. The first book of her selected poems will be important.

Ah, so one of those poets who rejects and postpones their own publication. It's interesting to see these new lines of poetry from 1934, showing us something of how Travers's practice developed in London; notably she has abandoned the line-initial capital letters of her Australian years. Given she already had a bookful of poems when she left our shores, how much more must she have published after a further decade of writing? And after 1934, and the success of Mary Poppins, how much longer did she continue writing poetry until her death in 1996? Palmer was surely right that the first book of Travers's selected poems would be important, except of course that it still hasn't appeared nine decades later! Somebody needs to gather up these poems from The Bulletin, The Triad, The Irish Statesman and the New English Weekly, and put them into book form. Presumably as the author of an important series of novels her papers have been carefully preserved, so there will also surely be the opportunity for discovering unpublished work. I look forward to the first book of her collected poems, which will be important.

REVIEW

Maryann Corbett

Mixing It Up, Feelings-Wise: New Prize-Winning Books by Anna Lena Phillips Bell and Ash Bowen

Definitions of poetry are numerous, but some of them have rhetorical forms that fix them in memory. Auden's, for instance: "Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings." Auden's sentence feels true of individual poems (think of his own "If I could tell you"). It feels even more true across the arc of a poet's works (think of the darks and lights of Hopkins). Within most books, this mixing happens, sometimes with a shift of dark to light or vice versa. Naming the particular hue of a book overall is one way of comparing collections, of pointing out the uniqueness of each book, even in a pair of contemporaneous prize winners. The differently shaded books I review here are by poets whose work I've been aware of for at least a dozen years, each with a new book this year.

Might Could. Anna Lena Phillips Bell. Waywiser Books, 2026
Winner of the 20th Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize

Might Could's title is an homage to its native place and language. The usage, says my search, is local to the American South and South Midlands, and the book's notes get more specific about the home of the poems, "in what's now called New Hanover County, North Carolina." In the dialects of those places, "might could" is a double modal maybe-I-can expression, open to hope.

The book's largest, most hopeful focus is the longing for a child. While its several impulses are distributed among its four sections, this theme gets pride of place in each. In the

opening section, a long poem explores the physical, female concerns of trying for pregnancy. It opens with the title "Your body is"—

> working. Your body is doing what
> it's supposed to to do, everything we would expect
> for a body your body's age. Your body is
> the age it is, and that fact cannot be escaped.

and proceeds in the alternating tones of the clinician and the self-assessing woman with a full life being weighed against this large longing.

Another principal subject is the beloved geography, botany, and zoology of the poet's North Carolina, always carefully named to acknowledge its Indigenous inhabitants. Sometimes immediate subjects and themes mix: "Wish for Continuance" is addressed to an abundance of marigolds, but about living through the night of a surprise hurricane, and "Might Could" is about pollination but also hints at needing help to conceive. Fondness for plants wild and domestic, and for gardening, is evident throughout.

Sometimes this fondness is joyous (see especially "Paean," about peonies); sometimes it's tinged with a fear of environmental damage wrought by powerful local industries. While I'm glad to have the extensive notes that give the full story of the chemical contamination behind these fears, I also wish I didn't need them. End notes always arrive a bit late for full appreciation of a poem.

Still, the notes do make clear that pollution is a subtext to certain of the poems, and talking about it is an aspect of the book's love of place. Other environmental harm is less directly human-made. The grievous damage wrought by two slow-moving hurricanes, in 2018 and 2020, is the focus of several more poems. "River Now Called Cape Fear" is frank about the destruction:

> Twenty steps from our front steps to where

the ground turned gray. Over felled trees and up
the bluff to find, on the forest floor, shrimp,
washed miles inland, cooking there in the swelter…

The feel of the book overall, though, is not dark or fearful. Most of its poems are sonically interesting, near-surreal, sometimes with surprising syntax or inventive diction that reminds one of Berryman or Dickinson. They're hard to excerpt: long and skinny, with strung-out sentences and riffs in repeating, short-lined meters that emphasize bounce, as in "Vase," which she describes as

enveloping,
at present, air,
the premise that
outside the house
something will bloom…

That bounce is a kind of signature. Rhythms are this poet's principal tools in her books so far, and she deploys them in wide variety over all this book's subjects. The book's most charming aspect is its use of such meters in a sprinkling of small, lighthearted lyrics that celebrate the unimportant, like "Against Stoicism":

An itch, untouched,
will twitch and wail

till an answering scratch
unhitches hell.

A tempered squeal
can conjure oil.

Squeak, wheel.
You may as well.

Poems like this are scattered among the several sections in varying sizes, sonics, and meters—about place cards, dental floss, a menstrual cup, scissors, spoons, pencils, the stuff of

dailiness. They provide the book's general sense of lightness, leavening the whole so that its darker concerns don't weigh it down. Anna Lena Phillips Bell is telling us: celebrate it all, the hope, the danger, the flowers.

Other Edens. Ash Bowen. University of North Texas Press, 2026
Winner of the 2025 Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry

Celebration, hope, and uplift can make a poet's work popular—witness the best-selling status of Mary Oliver—but they're not every poet's way of moving the reader. The dominant mode of Ash Bowen's Other Edens is elegy, even lament. Call it the dark side of celebration.

The Edens of this book, one for each of its four sections, are not places of sinless perfection. Each is a locale in a bleak and unloveable Midwestern state, where a man and a woman struggle and fail in various ways. Before each section begins to present its particular couple, it prefaces the story with an Eden poem, a riff on the Genesis story of original failure.

In order, the book's sections narrate—or sing, or bewail, or hint obliquely at—stories from four marriages: first, the narrator's family of origin, marred by divorce and strained finances; then his first marriage, with its end in suicide; then his second, another fractured relationship; and finally his third, still intact with its pleasures and sorrows.

"To speke of wo that is in mariage"—to put it Chaucer's way—is an old theme, and Bowen surveys an assortment of woes in an assortment of approaches. The poverty and brokenness that grind at the narrator's childhood are explored in the very plainspoken "The Bills" and "Guest Bed," while the suicide always in the background of the book's second section is treated in an extended sexual metaphor in "My Wife and Suicide Go Way Back" and in a mix of real and surreal in "When My Wife Took the Raft." The gradual emotional death of the narrator's second marriage gets the page-scattered dimeter lines of "My Cinderella" and the blank-verse sonnet

form of “Weather Indicators.” The happy marriage finally arrived at gets a variety of relaxed meters, until it veers into a series of equally varied poems about illness and death, never clearly telling us whose.

The book’s most usual mode is a pentameter or tetrameter, sometimes exact, sometimes unconcerned about metrical precision. When it’s clear-cut, and joined to rhyme in a veiled scheme, it works to heighten the menace and sexual tension in poems like “Heat”—

> I do not make these stories up. What pales
> to Gramma’s father being one of her uncles?
> Beside my father stripping my sister’s panties
> below her ankles before he broke her in
> to welts with leather?

The range, though, of approaches to rhythm is wide, stretching from sonnet through loose iambics to ghost-of-meter page-scatter sans punctuation, in “Fetish”:

> The fire grew closer and so did her lover
> They fucked for hours in the licking
> light
>
> until tractors came with fire brigades and blazes
> slowed to a smolder

That a book about marriages includes poems about sex is not a surprise, though again the book has wide-ranging takes on it. “Fetish” illustrates the surreal approach, while “Honeymooners,” with its seemingly straightforward narrative about an evening at home with dinner and children, swerves to convey the weariness of a relationship going wrong.

The pure joy of lovemaking doesn’t arrive until the book’s final section, in poems like “Lovers’ Reunion at the University of Arkansas” and “Halfabecedarian Love Letter.” Then in the middle of this final section of the book, the joy skids to a stop. Illness and death take over, at first no one’s in particular

("Oncology Bees Detect Cancer"), then sometimes the deaths of the famous ("The Last Love Letter of Marie Curie"), and at last the death of a "you" who may be the same person as the lover just rejoiced in, or may be the narrator, or may be someone else. Perhaps it's wrong of me to want a clearer narrative. Clear enough is the tone of lament.

Also clear is a current running underneath these marriage stories: the narrator's relationship with his father. As portrayed in the book's first section, it's tense, brittle with money troubles and fractured by divorce. It's the sort of relationship that might die, but holds on in a wounded state amid the woes of the first, doomed marriage, disappears for a while during the confusions of the second, but gropes for understanding (after the father's death?) in the book's final poem, "Epilogue":

> [T]onight, I've crept back here to Arkansas
> and cut the shop's lock off. The penlight chatters
> between my teeth, the fog that forms my breath.
> My finger follows a frozen hieroglyph
> across the bottom of the photograph,
> someone's black cursive that spells my father's name.

So there you are: two award-winning books that make use of the pleasures of rhythm and form yet are nearly as different in emotional balance as they can be. There are reasons to have both on your shelves.

FICTION

Jack Norman

Moonlight Upon Our Given Fates

"—*insofar as I can tell*," Dale's favourite phrase since he had taken up reading. In his middle age, no less. Yes. Reading—he told her—could be very meditative—especially when paired with one's carefully selected "playlist." That was how he kept their rumpus these days. She did what she could to unwind in his company. It *was* a nice place to spend time. "Or more than likely she's off yet, stuck well into the piss, somewhere out in the long grass, and probably with a handful of other drunks we're unlikely to hear about."

"People do go missing, you know?"

"So they do."

"Then please stop making fun of it. The thought of her out there frightens me so much. I refuse to cast judgement. During someone's hour of need. You'll invite something karmic into our lives."

Oh yes. She should have guessed it would "sound funny," that is, as Dale put it. Laughing in his new manner. Enjoyed rolling his eyes at her. "Because you're funny! I love the way you engage with things. Don't you know it takes belief to be superstitious like that? I only wish I had more of that in me."

"No," she said. "**—!**" Saving her breath. Because he'd only learned recently about the power of "not caring," whether from somewhere on the internet, or accidentally in the course of things. She was now forced to drop the rope on matters she'd still rather contest. Cornered on the wrong side of the table. Thinking of how—once upon a time—she might have sighed—exasperated—or rolled *her* eyes—and he'd paw after her and beg "Sorry!" But now he welcomed the silence. Permanent sort of checkmate. The only way to revert their course seemed cruel. To point things out to him. Challenge his limited intellect. Ah, *husband*! They were part of the world order. And it was considered flippant and irresponsible to "take the nuclear option" over a little belligerence. But God

and Christ! ("Take them all in vain!") How did she ever figure of ceding all her gains and territory under the foreign onus of *restraint*?

The name Roslyn Cobbo was general over every headline that September. She was the nation's latest, routinely beloved MISSING PERSON for whom men, women, and children were to prove their dedication. Yes. Every private fishing spot had been yielded to volunteers and authorities. Children scoured the back ways under fig groves and salt creeks for a corpse or a rusted kind of cage they had dreamt up… *"Ro-os-lyn!"* … Over paddocks, salt pans, low tides, cliffs, quarries, farms, private property, dirt roads, back ways, "parts" of town… Indeed, there was a sense of familiarity with this procedure. Members of the Parent-Teacher Association assembled in grid search formations without the need for any instruction. The usual descriptions of *her* (Roslyn's, and many of those others) light, life, joy, and smile evinced her desperate need to be found. But it was sometimes funny the way everyone seemed to understand that—for perhaps the first time—the media's lost darling was Black—Indigenous—Aboriginal—"The full-blooded kind"—Knobbly in pictures—Deep-set about the eyes—Likely on file with services: Centrelink, Dept. of Child Safety, Dept. of Justice—The kind that caused trouble—"Local" in the worst way you could mean it—who maybe, (for nasty reasons people speculated), "Deserved it"—(Or, charitably)—"Couldn't have been helped even if you wanted to."

"—and yet there's something about her name," Dale reckoned.

"Roslyn?"

"Yes. It sounds very girlish. Makes you want to come to her rescue. Didn't we have it on one of our lists once?"

"*Rosalee*, but—."

"—handful of four or five of them, more than likely. I've always said it. Gone off somewhere on walkabout, meanwhile the whole town's—… and I appreciate it's nice the girl's family are worried. But as far as hardly did they ever care before? How did she go missing in the first place? —is, of course, the question no one's really asking. Even if they put it in those words. But it's taken over by the cameras and the news who'll

breathe life into any… "corpse" so long as you'll watch and which I doubt the family ever realised that's what they were inviting. And then what? Weeks now is it? Doesn't it all begin to feel futile when you consider that the statistics suggest—."

You see, for the average woman, getting older required an increased awareness of your personal hygiene… or perhaps it was better to say: a wholistic understanding of your health. And that a healthy person—by that measure—came together in the form of "presentability." One's appearance was evidence of one's health. And indicative of the time they'd spent caring for it… "*insofar as*" it was your responsibility… "*insofar as*" your body was less regenerative… more "stinky," to put it simply, if it was left to your lifelong devices. This did not present in Dale as an area of interest. Nor did it present that way in many men. Even though it should have. Because his beard stank like an old man's now. And his habit of passing gas beneath his clothing—layered, and baggy, the older he got—clung to him the same as his favourite hat he'd worn for years. (If she was being honest, it completed an aspect of her father which she'd forgotten). But what it meant was she was now quite agonised by the perils of small vices such as consuming her regular brand of grenache. Because that was also one of her favourite things to do. Which now seemed concentrated on the density of her breath. Swimming stupidly in her front of mind. Or stuck to her in a dozen other ways both inside and out. Everywhere she looked, young women were growing sexier; clothes that slid those alien forms they'd developed, and yet it sophisticated them? She feared becoming "pathetic" to a modern point of view. Hm. When her sister—smart girl, a mother—laid all over the laps of that set of boys one evening, "only doing it for a lark," calling herself a "cougar!" … it was nearly too much to bear.

"What I often remember," she said, "was that some time around the early 2000s it became very *cool* for women to go with Indigenous men. Fijians and South Sea Islanders. Those—what would you call them?—"nearby" blacks you'd go to school with. (And I don't like putting it that way). But you can see the legitimacy it conferred upon them. Don't you think? Their children are everywhere. Speaking in the same

terms you or I would use. Basically part of the conventional population."

"Hm?" — privately: "**… !**"

"Only it's for the best women don't go for that anymore. I don't believe it was ever very safe. Men tend to *other* women who are not of their own kind. Fetishise. Abuse. And so on. I believe we were led astray by a cultural fever… —er. That's as a whole. Men and women. Don't you remember when "club music" was kind of the thing? "Channel V" and all of that. It trickled down through everything."

"Can you believe this band? Listen a minute. How the music draws out slowly. At times it's nearly like static. Did you know if it wasn't for YouTube they'd probably be lost to time?"

"White boys in their garage."

"What are you upset with me? you're trying to—."

"No." Ah! Relief. (Stupid idiot of my own). "It's art. You're right." She drank some more.

Some years before he died, Dale's father encouraged them to purchase their home on the southern shore of the Ross Creek. Kind of a dirty arm of the Ross River that ran behind Flinders Street and out to sea. The edge of centre of things as far as traffic flowed. "Global warming will freshen the smell as it begins to swell," he said. "There are shipping lanes in the Arctic the Russians are aiming to use by the decade." He was close with all his sons. The kind of father-in-law who kissed you on the mouth. "You've got to be on the edge of change." But over twenty years, the creek did not rise. And whether was there a structural diagnosis? she could not say—but she felt as though the house had depressed under the brackish elements. It was only now, as things grew dire across the country, they could finally sell for a profit. But then who'd buy? Lonely against the mangroves. Which god and how they'd advanced upon the yard! Long grass up the sides of the house the council never saw to. Yes—and—well—Dale got out there now and again on the ride-on, but… *they* were often sleeping under the weeds, weren't they? "Grog sick." Irate at being woken. The native call to the land which surmounted all solutions the city had ever devised for them. And say he was out there, as she said to him once, and "say

you don't see them and you run someone over?" Roslyn, just as easily, (anything was possible), or a family member, asleep, hand mangled under an obtuse rotary blade… —The funny thing's that he was only a bricklayer—Dale's father—but because he was a sole trader—local all his life around the "boy's club"—he was used to people listening to his ideas. She certainly did. (Her own father died very young). When he told her to marry Dale. "For me, most of all, sweetheart." Funny. "But for yourself! Who'll need someone in the long-term." By which he could not have meant anything. Ham-fisted phrase about… "—risk of yourself getting lost… —going wherever that long nose of yours leads you…" Old men dramatised by television like the rest of us. Thinking in those stupid, bulbous terms. When the truth was much plainer. Her and Dale had once shared a sexual attraction. It was enough to sustain them over a period of years. He was only three years older than her, but he was working whereas she was studying, and he had what she thought of as "a lot of money." Their lifestyles seemed very compatible, and so did their friends, so much that they came to feel they "shared" them. Much as you shared a life. Or money, or a dog. It became inevitable they should marry. And this was not something she regretted. Or dreamt much other than. No. You could not call your life a tragedy because it panned out with a little boredom towards the end.

"Listen now. Here—*here*. My favourite part's when he sings: *It's the way! …. Home should be! … The way the windows frame the trees!* … Oh, wow. You almost want to say his voice sounds terrible. Even accounting for the fact it's a live show. O-o-h… but then it's "slowcore," remember, basically an instrumental project. So you don't demand he can sing. It'd be missing the point. But you come to feel that it's part of what makes this version so special."

"Hm," she said. "Art's flawed."

"Exactly!"

"I've heard you say that."

"Oh, really? Well. I shouldn't take credit for it. Truth is I read it somewhere. I can't remember now. I need to read more non-fiction, actually. I've been saying that. "Art-analysis-type-work." Or maybe art history."

When Roslyn Cobbo's family approached the police to report their suspicions about her absence, they confessed to feeling that the officers would not take their complaint seriously. This is because the subject, and reality, of Aboriginal itinerancy was now taught throughout state institutions of all kinds, especially police departments. Professionals including medical staff, educators, and tax accountants now required formal certifications before serving their community in any capacity, or evidence of personally attended *modules*—(it was often enough, for example, for an Indigenous client to list their formal address as: "Dean Street Park," or literally: "long grass," where it met a bureaucracy's need for a fixed address; and in order to recognise—nominally—the nomadic forms of urban living which occurred under and far beyond the oversight of our systems)—which, sadly, had the unintended effect of producing a professional culture of fatalism amongst sworn officers that left many to their own, hopeless fates… But, in Roslyn's case, it seemed the young officer who met with her grandmother and sister was readily concerned by what he heard; or, at least, the facts as they were reported aligned with the "key criteria" for lodging a missing person report—(therefore, if he *was* prejudiced in any way, as Roslyn's sister once, non-committaly speculated, his more scrupulous attitude won out in favour of the ordinary process).

"Which now and that I find the most frustrating. Because they commenced the investigation!" Dale said. (Who would be quite astute for the next hour and a half, off the back of his fourth glass of wine, but was likely to deteriorate from there). (There was one occasion she called him a "sloppy drunk"—not actually meaning much by it—and it caused a long, now infamous argument about the subtle ways she attempted to undermine his credibility). "Which is only to say: the arm of the system responded perfectly once someone engaged it. Regardless of her race. So the family was mistaken to assume it wouldn't. But and yet they keep making this point over and over like it's somehow the fault of you or I they ever had the impression in the first place. Now it's got to be some *other* kind of barrier that's the problem, cultural instead of institutional, and of course this one's even more nebulous!

It's like. No. You're wrong. If there are matters going unreported because of some misguided notion you've picked up, then stop thinking that and go and report them right now!"

"Hm," she was required to admit. Roslyn's fate had seemed rather convenient for various types. The permanent marquee station which was first established in the middle of Flinders Street mall as a sort of "operational hub" for the grassroots/volunteer "Roslyn Cobbo Activist Mission" had slowly grown districts at its flanks, additional tents and stations, so that it became something like an all-inclusive women's shelter, night market, protest camp, and political/artistic podium dedicated to an assortment of "progressive" causes. Several of these outspoken latecomers eventually came to represent the entity in a highly public fashion (though, Roslyn's family retained final and official authority on all things specific to *her*). One way or another, they said, Roslyn Cobbo's fate was emblematic of, and attributable to, an oppressive/unjust/indifferent/ignorant/inefficient system which failed its most vulnerable constituents every day in similar and different ways. "Despite the full force of the law," (Dale was now yelling without noticing), "out there searching tirelessly for her." And which by all accounts they were. Searching every hedge and surveillance system they could access. Retreading old interviews, suspecting family, kind of desperately, clearing everyone they spoke to of any wrongdoing… —The strongest piece of evidence was submitted during the first week of the search by a man named Harrison Midgley whose doorbell security camera captured footage of Roslyn wandering across his yard on McAlister Street, near the Oonoonba Community Centre. She presented in a seemingly ordinary mood—whether you factored that the time was 11:06 PM on a Wednesday night was any factor at all—she appeared barefoot, which mattered very little to anyone—and, on the closest zoom possible, it was remarked—because there was so little to remark upon—that she may have been "muttering to herself." This piece of information became the subject of an impotent, online controversy after several people began to conclude she had been "raving mad"

about something. “On the drink,” as every know-better knew better. Or causing problems for herself and everyone else—the neighbours—the police—the taxpayer—her four children—and those well-meaning volunteers out wasting their time and searching week after week—by gallivanting like a fool, late at night, in a dangerous part of town.

“See this is the kind of functional thinking people like *you* weaponise to distort the “true nature” of victims. That because they are not perfect—or even moral—they do deserve to suffer—or don’t deserve our concern—or mercy, for god’s sake! Don’t you understand the investigative work that has gone into this woman’s private life? Whole staff departments set—and probably it’s deliberate the way they seem to alternate each week—on proving and disproving her legitimacy as a victim by a revealing every facet of her life. Interviews and tell-alls. There’s nothing about her we won’t learn anymore. So what she was once admitted to the drug and alcohol service? How sterile! It came as no surprise to me, because I don’t think of people as anything more than themselves. I expect that her private moments would humiliate her. And put her beyond all redemption. Like yours would. Like mine. And don’t say—.”

“Children in the care of the state—.”

“Maybe so!”

“And that’s just fine according to all—.”

“Right and so we should just do nothing? Out there either freezing or dying of thirst. Wishing maybe someone’ll find her? Maybe injured? And your problem’s with the credibility of this whole movement she’s had nothing to do with. Thinking maybe she should die out there, while we’ve hands ready to search, volunteers, day and night, because more important’s the integrity of a few activists, or the principle that she should have thought twice before having a drink that evening, or whatever it is according to your list of rules that makes you eligible for public rescue.”

“No,” laughing. On his side of the table again. “I’m actually not. That’s your silly idea of it. Woman’s way of thinking. Because my feelings, and this conversation, are confined entirely to this house. They go no further than that door. That is the prerogative that we enjoy as husband and

wife. I get to say what I want when I'm here. Right, wrong, or rude. In my public life I don't declare a thing. It would ruin me for one thing. But do you know what? I actually donated to the family the other day. The *official* fundraiser that goes directly to the family. The office set up a payment for us. And no one forced me to. I figured it was "the thing to do." So do you know I'm actually tangibly in favour of the whole thing—and her! Does anyone count that or is *that* not the point… is the point more about what's in my head and heart?… because why?… why is that the point? … —is *my* point."

When they attended parties, people sometimes asked Dale: "So what do you do for work?" And he deflected the question as well as he could. Or asserted a moral maturity: "Do you know in Aboriginal cultures, they ask "Where are you from?" or "Tell me about your family?" instead." —"Oh, yes!" (They must say). Yes, yes, yes… —"Nobody *really* wants to talk about work, do they?" … Only, a lot of the time, people did want to. They liked what they did for a living. Especially when they had a profession. And that, she knew, was the real problem. Picture: "I'm a lawyer." Oh? "I'm an electrician by trade, but—." Wow! … —Dale had to put his work to people in the form of a phrase. One that was always changing, edited over many years. And still nobody made it easy. "Sorry now what does that mean?" Why couldn't they just pretend? Move the conversation along. Or try and glean something in the telling. Sadly, once they got down to it, the real answer was unimpressive.

"Well it's mostly administrative. I won't bore you with the details."

"Oh so you're not on that project, then?"

"Dale's actually been reading—."

"Don't, please, darling."

"Oh? There we go. What've you been—."

"… —but if you don't know the author, it's hard to make much sense of it. "

"I'll tell you, I saw the film."

"Yes I was surprised it turned out so well."

If only she'd understood sooner how much of his disposition had to do with her. And how she saw him relative to other men (whether these were strictly individuals borne in

mind). Even when his mood appeared thoroughly apathetic. Or beyond any sexual appetite. (He was remarkably skilled at reading her mind. Which communicated itself through her elbows on the table and willingness to interrupt him). Actually, he had come right out and said it on a few occasions, "I need you to adjust your opinion of me," but she struggled to observe the needs of the male ego for longer than a day. The *zero-sum* nature of a woman's attraction seemed to confer a man's status upon him. One wife was the better. Did she seem light-hearted? flirtatious? or overly opinionated? Two wives indicated the pursuit of something. Men made calculations about each other based on all this. But she thought it must be some pornographised anxiety of the era. Because when she was a girl her mother had license to call her father whatever she wanted: "Damned fool"—"Buffoon!"—"Fat"—"Old man"—"Drunken bastard." And, as far as she remembered, it all rolled off his back, laughing *with* him, and out into the street. The same as all the rest of them. They'd come over, even, to spend the night if they needed, or perhaps a moment's peace and a plate of tea if the time was right. But it was the culture now to go rushing to the window when you heard a woman arguing, to find the man out on his arse, spurred like a working ass, left and right looking fool—no one's heart could take it! … "—and so that's necessary to define a man? … —long days, no I don't doubt it, solving problems, only natural they'd talk a bit of shop or bring their work home with them." And even though they were sitting next to each other in the car, he only made eye contact with her across the rear vision mirror. Asking, basically, "do you find that attractive?" The overly forward attitude of a man with an idea of himself? "Or do you prefer me?" How to say… (she wondered)… that in life you can ask yourself the question: "Do I love my dog?" And, despite how you answer, you might find it hard to isolate the feeling. "My friends?" Or what about: "My own mother?" Of course!—only… Does it cling to your fingers? The supposed *thing* of love… or is it more about a set of terms we have arbitrarily designated—… She said: "We have the word family for a reason. You are my *family*. That's the beautiful thing about marriage. It binds us together for reasons that go beyond the simple whims of

attraction." Wow—Oh—Yes. He nearly drove them off the road.

… —going way too fast—which, to be fair, was his usual habit—and peeling off the road onto their long driveway, tyres spinning out for a bit on the dirt, righting with a kind of *yank* when they found purchase, and going up the way home through tunnels of tussock grass that—though the headlights revealed nothing at the moment, splitting branch ways apart, light the way it spilled in all directions of darkness, glimpses of dirty or barren paddock each second they passed—certainly housed a dozen or so of the "locals." Yes. Right as the garage door opened and they pulled the car inside, Dale said something like: "at the centre of this biome," because it was on both their minds every time they had to drive through it in the dark. By the time Dale's father came to regret it for them, he made every attempt to secure the property against intruders and loiterers. He installed blinding floodlights on the eastern side of the house which were so sensitive they often illuminated if you moved hastily inside—or when the one cat came by, as it did every night, as they were laying down for bed. But they had never been directly threatened like that. By any force or misbehaviour. "[People] don't shit where they eat," Dale said, reluctant to accept more favours. "Although it's funny I do get nervous taking the bins out."

Out of any window, distant as she felt, they were alone on either side, and she could pull the grassland across the curvature of the earth. You might as well say they lived "On acreage," and they did where they could get away with it. "Oh?" Plains, sure. In the heart of the city. Wasn't it strange how harmlessly groups of Aboriginal people yelled at each other? Put as words in some ordinary document. And over the same things for as long as she'd noticed. Or the regular songs of birds. That they could be territorial and yet so inclined to share? The difference was navigated by a convoluted system of manners. Land, dwelling space, or a person's "favourite spot," came easily and went, and that was common by their nature; but grog was hard and bartered for and fairly won by a lot of luck which they were obligated to share; and each other's men and women were most the source of violence and

jealousy. Which either explained or complicated the reasons they were always pursuing each other across every line of friendship, kin, and tribal law. The women came to blows more often than the men. They fought over the younger men, who were surprisingly demure over the attention, slender by their aspect and the shape of their shoulders. And it was the men who seemed the most stricken with grief when their woman went wandering. They turned themselves inside out for the world to hear them. Wailing over many nights. She could hear it in bed even with the windows closed. And no matter how many times he was put out of bounds by the mob, he always seemed to come back, to find her from the dark, clubbing her with something, and dragging her away by the hair before they routed him again, while she resumed her place in the circle, dizzy and blowing dirt out of her nose.

"Three kids out of California and there's barely anything written about them," Dale said. Gulps of wine getting away from him. "You know this is before the internet. I often wonder how did people innovate before the internet? It's difficult for me to challenge an idea until I come across something in my algorithm. Imagine seriously you're a kid out of California—maybe 19 years old—if that—and deciding to record some special kind of *prog* album—out of a scene where you don't even know if… —Like maybe have I played you *Spiderland* before?"

"… —but it's fair to speculate," she said. "And I'm not blaming her. But why was she wandering around on her own? The articles said this morning the police have not interviewed her boyfriend, because there's no confirming their relationship—*or his location*! But, of course, there's no telling what that means. Because perhaps he's missing, as well? Only there's no family in his case to worry. Some of those pictures from the *Bulletin* look like she's from around South Townsville. I wouldn't be surprised if perhaps we've heard her one of these nights."

"Could you imagine? Say we went out there right now and just called her name. Figuring we'll give it a crack. She calls back: "Ye-a-ah?" as regular as ever. And we just solve it like that? Whole town out looking for her and she's been asleep under our fence."

"Ha!… —except I've seen volunteers over there in the mornings. They do outreach there now. The women from the tents in town have been visiting all the usual spots to confirm she hasn't shown up. And the police, too. Of course, the sad thing's that I think there's a culture against "speaking to the police" for whatever they maybe can't trust."

"Again with—?"

"I'm saying it's a bad thing. That someone probably does know more than they're saying."

"There's nothing we can do."

"That's not true. Their biggest search yet is scheduled for this weekend. It's going to cover the whole of Cleveland—and the bay—and even the water where they think the current might have taken her. Anyone can register to volunteer. Police are going to be leading teams through the bush. It's just—… I find that idea of "manpower" to be so obtuse. Like when you lose your keys and you end up turning out cupboards you know you haven't opened in years. It would feel like a waste of time to me."

"Yes. That I agree. The answer's right under our nose. In some way I'm not sure how. If only more people had the courage to say what we're thinking."

"… —fuck's sake this music goes on and on! Can't we turn it off?"

"That's precisely the point! It's common to feel that way. With prog—or lo-fi—you have to wait until it clicks."

It wasn't easy to forget that early days in the area were characterised by a kinetic, summery sort of optimism. The weather was not so abrasive. Warm and rigorous that even carried the rain off with a nice lick along the back of your leg. Memory, more than anything, retained its colour over the years. And it was of aqua, white, and black. The style of the property developer who cleared a hundred lots along the eastern bend of the Ross Creek as part of its vision for an "integrated living and business district" around the Little Fletcher bridge. Well and even so. The fact that it never came to fruition didn't stop her from thinking of it fondly. Because the land about them was so clear and level at that time. And all those paths and access ways emerged out of the forest canopy, "goat tracks," "pig tracks," that'd have to have been

fairly thrashed in their making, mudded and rutted, appeared sweet like garden lanes once shown by the light of day and kicked along with boots. Long time ago. Promised about the civilising effect men could have on a space. And how once envisioned, and given over to a marked "potential," a thing could never seem to uncouple from its given promise. They often walked their dogs between the civil machinery and across the shape of residential plans. Began friendships, or the seeds of, with prospective neighbours who visited in their cars. (Scrappy trees grew out of the gravel now, never quite the same way as they were). When people seemed active and open… out of the house—"for the fuck of it"—on a healthy whim… "up" for more things like that… —But it was always difficult to achieve certain outcomes in a sweltering town such as theirs; and around the time people started accessing the internet on their phones, they also lost their nerve for *grandeur*.

Dale's father found it difficult to visit them in the later years. "A fine home," he consoled at times. Hm. "Sure, yes." Although: "stank through with the elements of mud," as he spat a hunk of phlegm that'd troubled him all day… — Intrepid fishers drove through the mud of the creek in the afternoons. Directly behind their yard. They waved as a point of etiquette when they saw her watching from the terrace. Casting nets in the shallows that drew hundreds of tiny flitting fish. And, although she'd never caught them, those fishers, or whoever it was, almost certainly had to trespass through the back corner of their yard to drop crab pots in the mangroves by their bend of the shore. Their house—their *home*—"a common obstacle, or landmark, securing time and space," Dale said. Thinking whether it could be funny, say, if running late some evening, or really any afternoon, a person might find themselves calling home to say they were: "—by that old house on the edge of the water…"

But!—and how to put it the right way? … who had the heart or the soul to take her meaning? … (when, if she was being honest, Dale probably *did*, more than anyone, who was sweeter by his nature than she gave him credit for)—for however "rundown" the old place maybe seemed—because the creek was shallow and muddy when she remembered it

used to flow—and the banks were often cold under the shade of Little Fletcher street—(and more the taller it grew)—and litter and sea corpses gathered under the footbridge—or how the grass grew interminably under the star pickets and fence lines spotted about their yard and surrounds—well… there were occasions—late arves, especially, early eves—when she saw it differently: how when, especially during summer, the sun fell low behind the tree line, but still found its way over the earth's floor, through the skeletal frame of the country bank stadium… **Or!** … (and not to split hairs)… but seeming more to recede through them… the more she thought of it, yes, because, after all, the sun was mighty, wasn't it? Relentless the way it came on. Over, and thorough, and bearing down upon every inch of concrete as though it had weight… —so that it must necessarily release! Day's end seemed to gasp. The weight of its work. *A-h-h*! The orange sludge of the sun, perhaps nauseous, fatigue by its bowels—(same as how before eating the apple, Eve's cunt—and so, necessarily, her arsehole—whether wide as she spread it—for purposes of prayer or that frolic—and the same for modes of waste—(phlegm which could not trouble her)—was yet pure, still "of Eden," and kindly to look upon)—ran through the river, long ways with the water, glimmering like a fish, out to sea via the mouth of the Ross. Sun birds. Gulls, crows, ibis, bent in oblong shapes across the earth, only cooler shadows in the length of their necks, never shade, river run, sun fal'n, so that each evening—"from a certain point of view"—was drawn up from out of the sea.

"It's so funny because it doesn't matter what the weather's looking like: if you stand out on that terrace, the wind is blowing. But if you went directly downstairs, it might seem like the whole night was still. Shows you what you don't always know. Right in front of you with no semblance of an answer."

"Yes I think that's—."

"Hm?"

"… —something scientific. There's a reason for it."

"Hm."

On Triple M's popular *Pricey for Breakfast* program, a celebrity outdoorsman described the freezing nature of the

wilderness that could threaten a person's (Roslyn Cobbo's) chances of survival—even under tropical conditions. It seemed obvious they were under the direction not to speculate directly about Roslyn's health, circumstances, or likelihood of survival. To the disappointment of many, he spent a lot of time talking about trees. Indeed. "You see I like to think of trees as "*nature's engineers*" who are always working to develop our landscapes. They provide a defence system that stabilises the ground and regulates water and creates a self-sustaining ecosystem that we all benefit from." Erm. Yes… "and in a survival situation, where a person may be totally exposed to the elements, trees provide an immediate form of natural cover… so that they can "burrow" against the base of the tree, and, if it's large enough, rotate around the trunk as required so they're always sheltered from the wind…" Yes, well… that seemed quite obvious. The police conducted interviews and regular press conferences that reminded everyone they were "doing everything they could," and that if anyone had any knowledge of Roslyn, they should "report it to [their] local police station immediately." Yes, yes! Of course—. The Townsville Women's Centre, who were rather ceaseless in their support for Roslyn, very noble, and doing the real digging tasks, getting out on the ground and far across country in search, but knowing a "cause" when they saw one, said: "violence against women is never okay."

… —just as they'd gotten over it, Roslyn of tremendous charisma had the habit of inserting herself. Because she couldn't get over the idea of her, and Dale loved the sound of his own voice. "Now the thing's that to their point. And I seriously doubt she was "raving mad" at all, at least not in the way they keep putting it. But you have to admit, whether drunk, angry, unwell, or… even a victim of harassment, where someone might have been following her, which like you said is actually likely… well but then anyone who goes missing under those circumstances could be said to be, in some way, "out of their mind," or "away from their senses."

Because the result of ordinary conduct was an ordinary life. The true nature of a tragedy was revealed when some strange and horrific force shattered that impression… —such as some time ago, there was a young couple out

walking their baby behind the stroller, and a stolen car drove through them on the side of the road… children, or "youth offenders," behind the wheel… when most people had called for the death penalty and the police had to explain the merits of restorative justice in community halls… —Many years ago, when they were still renting at the top of Walker Street, one of the neighbours delivered Dale to their door drunk and utterly out of his mind on an evening he'd stayed late at work. No one ever learned why he had been wandering up and down the road, yelling to himself, obscenities, and cursing someone in particular who must have upset him. It was the drunkest she would ever see him. Stinking of rum when he had always despised the taste. "It was just the sound of him out there that was beginning to worry us," said Marc Hansen. Certainly, they were young, or else why did she find it so funny? Dale hung his head over the toilet bowl for the whole night… eventually retching bile… and, for some reason, she allowed enough time to pass without properly asking: "How?" … so that, after two or three days, he could plausibly say, (and was perhaps telling the truth), that he was too drunk to remember, couldn't say, "…—nothing was the matter," "must have got carried away…"

Dale slid his feet across the soft carpet. He disguised food and wine stains by drawing the shading in the right direction. "It does start to seem," she sighed, "that no matter how you swear you'll pay attention, or grab onto the reins, time always has that habit of getting away from you…"

"O-o! yes," he said. "I like you like this. Hey. Perhaps you should read some non-fiction."

"When are we going to sell this place?"

" —Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* could be the best place to start. If you can seriously believe that! … although I've never read it… —but I'd like to."

"*Sell*."

"I forgot to tell you. I met with the real estate at lunch. They say they're "confident," but I don't know… Fees are high, obviously. Don't know if they'll go for your… "Tennessee River" analogy, though. "Godly aspect to be found in the muck" or how it was you put it? To be perfectly honest I did not even bring that part up to them. Now, obviously—."

"That's okay. The more I think about it, the less I want to do with it. I just want to close my eyes and wake up somewhere normal. With a small yard. Stupid people on either side of us."

"… —this fucking ice tray, man! Have to jam the cunt every time. Got to fucking—."

Slowly installing every comfort of life upstairs. Now he waged war against that kitchenette. (Which she did not use because he was particular about where things went). But that was the worst thing about getting half of life's luck out of life's "luck of the draw"—you had half more than a lot of other people, and so *they* said you had no right to complain. Or even fight over an instinct for more. Not without a guilty conscience, anyway. ("There's your problem"). "I see a lot of myself in Roslyn," she said more lately as she found the opportunity. Her girlfriends observed her politely, favourite restaurant; grown women carefully *vaping* behind their menus so the staff would not see them. "But don't you think so?" Roslyn Cobbo was a mother to four children. Her boys were athletic specimens. Destined for representative football. But her girl, tiny thing, they always held her during interviews, had lived with her grandmother most her life. It must be an accomplishment to keep your children under one roof. Her own were beginning to stray in all sorts of directions. And she—… knew what that could be like… before public rhetoric began to deal seriously with "domestic violence" in broader, academic terms… which, even now, did not seem rightly applicable to a high school "relationship." The name "Dwayne" was a part of her mother's general rhetoric on "Fijian men as romantic partners." Far as why they were not to be trusted. Forgetting how often she evicted her from the family home, yelling at her from the front door, while she retreated as far as she could out of the porch light. "And where else did you expect me to go?" Once, when they were at the beach, he became irate when he cut his foot on a piece of glass, and he shoved her over the rocks for screaming at the sight of his blood. And it was not that he made it so clear, or presented any such bargain to her, but his temper was short, and he was openly selfish, and unless she "gave it up" per evening in exchange, she did not believe she would have

had anywhere to go. His mother laid out clothes for her, though. Fresh towels. She did not have any daughters of her own. The same way as all women understand each other. In the gynaecologist's office when she took up that picture book and flicked through the images of different women, explorers, photographers, sitting arm in arm with native women in some jungle, tits outs, khakis, enjoying the immutable spirit of sisterhood. "We're all mothers." Kept apart from each other's business by different lifestyles… —Dale began shouting at the children downstairs, leaning dangerously over the banister, about keeping their music down, because it was getting over the top of his. Hm. Yes. At a certain point, you needed to learn how to live the life you were living, instead of hypothesising over "taste," recounting the errors of failed ambitions, and what you think you know better. Dale had even said that to her. Which hurt her feelings. **About a month ago**. Because he was capable of condensing the truth into a blunt object. When she could least stand to hear it.

"—and besides you drink more than I do. More hazardously that's for sure. I actually enjoy it as a pastime. You just tank yourself. But anyway I'm not judging you. Only that you see our life through the eyes of the girl you were twenty years ago. Conceited little brat. Wishing things were different. Why do you let her determine everything we're supposed to be?"

Perhaps it would not be so catastrophic if he did not spare her his "character assessments" for so long. Half the problem seemed to be that he bided so much of his time over them, as if maturely, that it felt too strategic during the moment he lost his patience. It really drove her wild. Beyond control. Because it revealed the fact he was watching and cataloguing her. The truth as he saw it was dull and concerned only with facts… "—which speak for themselves, if you're paying attention." And it only ever put her back against the cage. Yes. "Are you fight or—." "Fight, definitely." It was difficult to admit at the parent teacher association's awareness council, that she was one of many women who: "… if you examined incidents such as *slapping* or *shoving* by the same criteria… were often as aggressive (or more) as men." It seemed quite normal. And wasn't it? She remembered the

night at the bowls club when her friend had gotten so drunk that she started hitting her boyfriend in front of everyone… and because so many of the women already thought he was a pig, they started hitting him, as well, and throwing drinks at him, presumably in the hope of "driving him off" for good. A woman's arm was so graceless when it was slung like that. Cudgel. Some old man called them *harpies* who saw everything from a man's point of view. Then but the funny thing was he was back a week later, doe eyed, love eyed, making apologies across the table but occasionally stirring the pot… —victims or not didn't men just love the attention? … —Dale, though… to his credit… only preferred seclusion once it was all said and done. He retreated quick as he could after he'd caught her wrists and wrestled with her and tired her out. She collapsed on the day bed when he took a step back, and she realised she was leaning on him for balance. Humiliating as ever. He didn't even care if she was sorry or not. That was not something he exacted from her. "These things" happened, as far as he was concerned, and the only things he demanded were Silence and Privacy which she paid to him as a formal mode of indulgence…

That night. One month ago. By the time he'd left her, she was "empty" throughout her body, the out-of-breath sensation of adrenaline's passing, which, in a strictly mechanical sense—i.e. undramatic—left her shaky on her legs as she occupied their terrace over the creek. She restored herself with water and wine, the alternating glow of her smart phone, and the light of the full moon. Our empty city. Feels that way, doesn't it? and as with anything, she found herself again slowly. The creek bed was luminous that evening because the canvas of the mud—pale where the water clung to the surface, and black for as many stratas below—so readily reflected the night sky. Towards the eastern figs, small fires were obscured in the grasslands, tended by miniscule shapes of the land, and cries of habit and pain. They weren't to be drowned away. Diluted by the mysteries of—… When suddenly there *he* was. Emerging out of the mangrove's sharpest point on the bend, where you couldn't get to unless at desperate gasps of the tide. He was perfectly visible under the moonlight. Very tall. And although he was thin, he seemed

quite healthy, it was in his posture. Funny that his clothes seemed rather "fashionable" for who she could only describe as "a vagrant Indigenous man." Meaning they hung off him in that manner photographers preferred. Disturbingly, he crept across the wet surface of the mud without any difficulty, knowing the way where it was compact, and mindful of a measured *chalance*. He had nearly made his way over the creek until he noticed her staring from the height of her house; and he stopped in his tracks, she thought, accidentally… —and despite the fact that there was something like eighty metres between them, they established eye-contact as ordinarily as if they'd passed in the street. "Where's he coming from?" she wondered. Out of the mangroves like that. She wanted to call: "Dale!" just for his company. Because she was alarmed. The man's demeanour indicated something horrible. And, worst of all, she could see that he remained frozen in place, entirely against his will, in the striking cone of *her* gaze, like a "deer in the headlights," or "caught red-handed," but at what? … (or so she asked then) … (because it now seemed obvious)… —so that she thought he might confront her in some way: call out to her, or race across the creek, climb into her yard, scale the drainpipe directly by her, and—… but he must have been "thinking" on his feet for that time being, because when he suddenly began to run, (causing her to gasp), he moved as though upon a calculated trajectory that took him north across the creek bed, falling through the surface of the mud, but stopping at nothing to drive through it, scurrying up the bank's sheer edge, pulling on the sturdy hearts of young trees, and disappearing over the edge and into the city between chasms of shadow and night.

That night. One month ago. She did not say to Dale: "I just saw the strangest thing," because they were not talking to each other. She had tried to take his eyes out only minutes beforehand. And so he had resolved to sleep downstairs that night. God she barely slept. And the next morning when she saw the scratches on the side of his face, she kissed them apologetically, and cried (very loudly) out of shame.

"Shh," he said. Telling the children she was unwell. Possibly menopausal or something. Making nothing out of the

whole thing, in hopes that they would go back to their lives. "Everything's okay now."

"How many times have I promised not to hurt you? It takes over me before I know it. And every time I feel like such a failure!"

"It's not you. Every time you get back on the horse. It's a state of mind. You'll always be safe with me. To try again."

… —and nor did she say: "I think Roslyn Cobbo was killed—or at least disposed of—in the mangroves behind our house," because by the time the thought properly occurred to her, strange as all the facts were, it had been weeks; and she had become, (rather selfishly), obsessed with the idea that if Roslyn *had* survived the night, then it was *her* complacency/poor behaviour/all-round desire to see things back to normal which had prevented her from "putting two-and-two together" sooner. (There always came a moment in the days after a fight like that when he or she suggested eating chocolate together and watching a film. When things felt back at "ground level." Smaller the better. One smelly patch of dirt to call their own, and a little room upstairs). During afternoons she watched as the tide came and went from under the banks and the groves climbed along the shore. And by the month it came time again for the tide to get so low as it had. Whether parts of her had gone to sea already or, perhaps, (she wished the radio would have said), a body is preserved under those conditions. "If *anyone* has *any* knowledge of Roslyn's whereabouts, we ask that you *immediately* come forth and report it to your local police." But, like the man in the creek, she was suspended by the spell of some curious gaze: *hers*!—and why?—what good on earth did it do her, or right did she have, to flounder over such a simple thing?—as when you suspect you might be pregnant, but refuse to take a test of any kind—repeating mirror of herself upon herself, god how violent it was to actually *feel* that, like a spider in one's brain, methamphetamine, "tweaking" even when she was out to stroll, seeing herself as she saw him, behind the right side above her shoulder, "out of body experience," her, and him, going, and going—screaming: "why don't you do something!"

"… —but especially with investors and all of that," Dale slotted ice into his wine. It was something he saw a woman

do on television. “Even if we go lower than we’d like. We can be out by the end of the year. The photographer is free next week, so long as we pull the trigger?”

“Don’t you think we deserve it?”

“Sure, we… pay our taxes, don’t we? … —don’t know about *deserve*, but… the kids want to be nearer to their friends. I know that’s for sure. They want to catch a bus from five minutes down the road instead of making it across country every time they’ve got to go somewhere.”

“Oh it’s so overwhelming! I wish I could just close my eyes and wake up somewhere else,” she said. Her character was sometimes determined, or predicted, by the clothes she wore. “Dressing up” or “dressing down” as they called it. But particularly when she wore that set of pyjamas from the bargain store, she became very stupid and small. “Don’t you hate looking ahead like this? You remember what it’s like to move. The fact that I’m so excited by the idea, but the truth’s that it’ll take a year or maybe more before all’s said and done. I can’t bear to look at us through that ordeal. At least not now. I feel cornered for some reason. Can’t I click my fingers and just be there? … —suppose that time does that for you. Like I said. Doesn’t matter what way you commit to it. This time when I was a girl and it occurred to me that one day I would be a mother, just a thought like the one a kid has, not more than a moment in a time, and I said “I’ll remember I thought this, once I’m there, and I’ll remember this moment, the one in which I’m thinking about it,” and sure enough was that I did! Carried that little idea with me for years, then one day while I was nursing Casper, it just came to me. And you think how, on the one hand, life’s sustained quite like a rope, you’re pulling on it every day… but there’s a reason they say “blink and you’ll miss it,” because you find yourself places, don’t you? Can’t keep track of everything… I want to close my eyes and be somewhere else… —*Being and Time*? Is that what you said? Well maybe you’re right. Maybe I should see more behind the curtain. Tell you what, I’ll make you a deal: I’ll sit down and read whatever you pick out for me, so long as you handle all the business and get us out of here. Can you believe this is where we live? I want something new. Something built last year with white walls and tiles in every

room. Don't even want to look at pictures, you pick it out for us. I guess I'm getting to an age now where a decision's too much for me to manage. I'm under a weight. Can't control myself. I don't know what's right anymore. Why's the conversation always about morals and ethics? How did we convince ourselves of that? When maybe once you'd talk sport and I'd talk *Australian Idol*. On the eve that I couldn't sleep because of it. Thinking I'd dial the number again and cast my vote because I was so invested in the outcome. I want to go back to that. —*Guy Sebastian*…"

"Milky little faggot he was."

"Dale!" She couldn't hold back her laughter. "You have to push the envelope don't you?"

"Only when you let me."

"Maybe I should."

"Sure. But don't beat yourself up. Things matter to you. It's a good thing."

Loudly, enough to frighten them both, an advertisement for organic grade dog food began playing through Dale's speakers. The music was over. When he scrambled over his sofa to reach for the computer desk, he kicked the side table over, and the red contents of his glass spilled onto the carpet. "*—no!—you bastard*!" In his commotion, the floodlights came on outside and illuminated the eastern side of the house. Bent backs of that tussock field, mastered by the wind, sheltered hundreds of coves, caves, like tents, like *homes*, all empty of souls, except for the nearest of them that reached directly over their fence. Where there, beneath the grass, was an elderly man who seemed unconscious against the rusted chain links by the earth. His face was pressed through each square. His lips were pursed through it. She could tell he was struggling to breathe. "This is too much," Dale said. "How many times are we going to do this? Floor's nearly ruined." It seemed that when he complained like that he was begging for something else to go wrong. He dabbed at the carpet with a wet, wine stained rag that lived over the doorknob. Sprayed it with the cleaner foam. Swearing under his breath. She realised the man outside was urinating himself. It was leaking out of his pants and over the driveway in a long puddle that eventually met

the bottom side of their garage. “—what’s the point of having nice things when we can’t ever seem to manage them?” Out on the terrace. Over the distance of night, she spotted the red and blue lights of a police car smouldering, made silent, for the purpose of diplomacy. She hadn’t heard anything, but perhaps it was getting out of hand over there. Wound up cars in a safe formation. They parked at the proper distance. Trained in the arts of *outreach*. She could make them out as they supplied water to anyone willing and detected the friendly tones they deployed. Thinking of the man on the ground, she began to scream as loud as she could, to bring them over to her, but when she opened her mouth she called: “**She’s here!**” Desperately crying louder. “She’s over here!” while the old man began to throw up in his sleep, voiding himself of the night; and a little back inside, scrubbing on his knees, (rather preoccupied), Dale looked at her upside down between his legs, and asked: “… who’s *she*?”

Contributor Notes

Lee Harlin Bahan has translated 205 of the 317 sonnets in Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, sixty-nine of which are collected in A Year of Mourning and To Wrestle with the Angel. Her work will appear in Traces Journal, Nimrod, and Able Muse. She lives in the rural midwestern United States.

Eric Colburn has been published in THINK Journal, New Verse Review, Nimrod and many other places. He has taught high school for the past couple of decades but is happily taking a sabbatical this year.

D.A. Cooper is a poet from Texas. His original poetry and translations have also recently appeared in Autumn Sky Poetry Daily, Forgotten Ground Regained, Modern Age, and New Verse Review.

Maryann Corbett is the author of six full-length collections of poetry, most recently The O in the Air (Franciscan U. Press). A seventh book, Notifications from the Unseen, is forthcoming from Slant Books.

Fergus Cullen is an apprentice historian and occasional writer of prose and verse. He lives south of the river.

Joe Dolce's most recent publication is Crooked Timber, a compilation of articles about film and music. He is a writer and musician of many and varied accomplishments.

Casey Dwyer is a poet living in Wisconsin. His work has been published in print and online, and focuses on the intersection of memory, faith, and nature.

Jack Duknowski is a writer/artist based between Barcelona and Brisbane. He ran an independent arts magazine in Melbourne until it went kaput; led a seven-piece rock band in South America into a studio and off a cliff; shot and

edited experimental films in empty warehouses, and now just quietly writes.

Liam Guilar has published several collections of verse, most recently How Culhwch Won Olwen, a verse translation of the oldest Arthurian Tale. He is poetry editor at The Brazen Head.

Katie Hartsock's poetry collections include Wolf Trees (Able Muse), recipient of the Philip H. McMath Poetry Prize and one of Kirkus Review's Best Indie Poetry Books of 2023, and Love-Gifts to Be Delivered Via Subterranean Rivers (Aureole Press, 2026). She is an associate professor of English and Creative Writing at Oakland University in Michigan, USA.

Kevin Klein is an American teacher and writer. He has published two picture books and, most recently, a poetry collection titled Loved Ones. He is the winner of the 2025 English Speaking Union (Victoria Branch)'s Formal Poetry Prize.

Tony Lintermans is the author of many poetry collections and has been a winner or shortlistee for several awards, including The Peter Porter Poetry Prize. The poem republished here was awarded Best Victorian Entry in the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.

Ashley Mangtani is, besides a poet, an author of speculative and slipstream fiction. Grounded in clinical psychological tension, his stories and poems examine the mechanics of alienation, transformation, and the limits of survival.

Bethel McGrew is a widely published freelance journalist based in Michigan. Her prose and poetry have appeared in outlets such as First Things, The Lamp, The Spectator, New Verse Review and Joie de Vivre.

Thomas McKendry is an Australian poet and musician, currently studying philosophy in Rome. He has been published by The Clayjar Review, Ekstasis, and Poems for

Persons of Interest and publishes frequently on his Substack, Rhyme n' Metre. He won the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize People's Choice Award. The winning poem is republished here.

Alex McKeown is a Tasmanian poet and translator. His work has appeared in Meanjin, Island, Australian Poetry Journal, Cordite and The Canberra Times. He is the author of We Leave Gaps (Walleah Press, 2025) and translator of Love in the Fields (Penteract Press, 2022).

Glenn McPherson is an Australian writer whose poetry has been published nationally and internationally in leading journals and anthologies. He has been writing poetry most of his life, considering it to be a part of his daily bread.

Jack Norman lives in Hobart, Tasmania. He is the author of Sleep Capricorn (Bonfire Books, 2025), a collection of short fiction.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell is a professor and poet at Fordham University in New York City and the author of 12 poetry collections, most recently The View from Childhood: New & Selected Poems (Paraclete 2026).

Mark O'Flynn has published seven collections of poetry, most recently Einstein's Brain (Puncher & Wattmann) and Undercoat (Liquid Amber Press). His poems have won the John Shaw Neilsen Poetry Prize, the Banjo Paterson open poetry award, the Australian Icons prose poetry competition among others. He lives in the Blue Mountains.

Konstantin Kanelleas is author of a book of poetry, Hyponeirisms (2022). The essay republished here won the 2025 ESU Youth Writing Award.

Joshua Patch is a teacher living in Michigan. His poetry has appeared in Solum Journal, Reformed Journal, and elsewhere. He was longlisted for the inaugural Lemonlight Poetry Prize.

Matthew Perry is a poet from Prescott, Arizona. He studied at Embry-Riddle University, and Benedictine University. His poetry has previously been published at Dirt Freckles, and his IG is: @MatthewPerrypoems.

Christina Pickard's poems have appeared in various publications. The poem republished here was a finalist for the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.

Marybeth Rua-Larsen lives on the South Coast of Massachusetts. She won the Luso-American Fellowship for the DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon and was a Hawthornden Fellow in Scotland. Her chapbook Nothing In-Between is available from Barefoot Muse Press.

Rikki Santer's (https://rikkisanter.com) poems have appeared in various publications and received many honors including a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her collection Resurrection Letter was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and her collection Shepherd's Hour, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books.

Lucas Smith is the author of Spare Us Yet and Other Stories (Wiseblood, 2025) and the co-founder of Bonfire Books (bonfirebooks.org).

Leon Trainor lives on a farm in south-east NSW. He attempted a simple exercise in ekphrasis but found the poem insisted he say exactly what he thought of the painting. The poem republished here won runner-up in the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.

Ron Vernon's poetry has appeared in Quadrant Magazine. The poem republished here was shortlisted for the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.

Veronika Winkels is a founding editor of Mathilde, a magazine "reclaiming a lost ethic of femininity" (Catholic

Weekly). Her poetry has appeared in Quadrant Magazine, and the poem republished here was shortlisted for the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.

Michael Yost is a poet and essayist living in rural New Hampshire with his wife and children. He is managing editor of The Colosseum. His first book of poetry, A Charm Against Eros, is available for purchase from Wipf and Stock.

Jakob Ziguras is a poet, translator and lapsed philosopher. He has published three poetry collections as well as translations of Polish poetry and prose. The poem republished here won President's Choice Award in the 2025 ESU Formal Poetry Prize.