

# **Writing the Goddess**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Discipline of English  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Adelaide  
2005**

## **Abstract: Writing the Goddess**

**by S. K. Kelen**

This thesis comprises a creative work, the manuscript of a book of poems, *Goddess of Mercy*, and an exegesis, *A Further Existence*, which explores the creative, aesthetic, philosophical and other ideas and inputs that went into writing the poems. *Goddess* is a collection of idylls of the electronic age, narratives, dramas, fictions and meditations. The poems are various in style and subject matter. The exegesis begins with the author's earliest remembered experiences of poetry, considers a wide range of poetries and goes some way to proposing an open poetic that allows a writer versatility in approach to subject matter and writing style. Poems can transcend their time and place to create a 'further existence' where temporality is irrelevant. A diverse range of poems are examined — from ancient Babylonian to contemporary Australian — to determine the aspects of a poem that take it beyond daily speech. The usefulness and limitations of theory are considered. The art's mystical dimensions are not easy to analyse but are still worth thinking about: the mysterious spark or talent for poetry, how and where a poem occurs, epiphanies, 'being in the zone' and when all the words come rushing at once. The persistence of poetry is noted: poetry still manifests itself in public life through newspapers, sport, pop music, radio commentary, television, and politics, as well as in everyday living. Poetry adapts to new environments like the internet. Conversely, events in the 'real world' influence poetic thought and writing as evidenced by the barrage of poems and publishing in response to the US invasion of Iraq. Some recent Australian poems are explored with regard to establishing contexts and areas of interest for the practice of poetry in the opening years of the twenty-first century, with a view to establishing the contexts in which the poems in *Goddess* exist and the world they address.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed .....

S. K. Kelen

## **Acknowledgements**

My Supervisor, Professor Tom Shapcott, for his patience, encouragement, spot-on advice on the directions this exegesis should pursue and his sharp editorial eye. Dr Phillip Edmonds for his lucid comments and reminding me to remember to enjoy myself in the final stages of writing the exegesis.

I would also like to thank my mother and brother for their encouragement to undertake a doctorate in English and Creative Writing, and my charming companion, Ms Shao Min, for her patience and understanding putting up with me while I wrote the exegesis.

Poetry's 'spirit of solitude' for the days and nights spent composing the poems for *Goddess of Mercy*.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father who passed away in 2003.

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*Goddess of Mercy*

*poems*

*S. K. Kelen*

*Acknowledgement for poems from this collection that have appeared in publications is made to: The Age, Agenda (UK), Antipodes (US), Big Bridge (US), Blackmail Press (NZ), Canberra Times, foam-e, Fulcrum (US), Jacket, Masthead, Meanjin, Open Boat Barbed Wire Sky: Poems for the Refugees, ed Sue Hicks and Danny Gardner (Live Poets' Press, Sydney 2003), poetryX, Prague Literary Review (Czech.), Southerly, Thylazine, Tinfish, Time's Collision With the Tongue, Writing Macao Online.*

**OTHER BOOKS BY S.K.KELEN ~**

*Atomic Ballet*

*Dingo Sky*

*Trans-Sumatran Highway and other poems*

*Shimmerings*



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## *O'Connor Ridge*

Remember back in the early sixties  
The ridge was a scrap metal dump  
Wasteland without a decent tree—  
At the periphery workshops recycled  
Banged and hammered, welded  
Old steel joists and car body parts,  
Household junk, permanently carked-it  
Hot water systems, corrugated roofs  
Pipes, bathtubs from the iron age,  
Washing machines, fridges and  
Vacuums found their way to appliance heaven  
While the insides of ruined Pye  
Television sets were kicked down  
The hillside for sport. Waste wire was  
Restored by a cottage wire industry  
Sparks flew up, out back  
Apprentices scraped rust and gunk  
How metal flowed sweetly, and everyone  
Was handy, the drills and steel-cutters buzzed  
*Junk-a-junk*—there was smash repair  
Domestic nail and bolt manufacture, as  
Far as earnings went it all added up  
To an almost worthwhile enterprise  
But the scrap mountain grew quicker  
Than the workshops could break it down  
There was real estate all around  
So the responsible authority  
Ordered the lot buried under a mountain of earth  
And trees planted on top—  
Forest grew quickly and today,  
After a big rain has shifted the clay

Exposing a snow gum's roots  
There'll be a rusted-out Austin  
Or the roof of a Valiant,  
A web of cyclone fencing  
Relic of glorious metal days  
Rest of the junk compresses under  
Ghost gums, rough grass and walking trails.  
Today fresh air grows from it  
And the odd, unexterminated rabbit  
Flashes out of sight.

## *Magpie Hill*

From sunny Magpie Hill see  
Distant mountains soft and comfortable  
The mountains are the same grey-green  
Glooming the background of Mona Lisa.  
Blue emerging within the green calms thought  
And action though it's much sunnier  
Here than in the painting and the misty bits  
Are the heat haze eucalypts ooze sweating summer's  
Fine air, not trapped behind a metre of bullet-proof  
Glass like poor old Mona Lisa. The children  
Free as they will ever be fly the blue swings, clamber  
A tall climbing fort and the wooden voodoo horses beckon.  
All day and night you might ride a wooden horse  
Wait for earth tremors and watch the moon  
Its movement imperceptible until you see  
The moon floating the other side of the sky  
And think, *yes the moon has moved.*

## *Kambah Pool*

A bend in the river water's clouded by green mud  
Deep, really deep, good for proper swimming.  
These days only children see spirit life  
Work and play— see a world invisible to adults—  
Clear and just, a solar system glows every grain  
Of sand and kids crush evil in one hand,  
Until growing up evil comes again—  
The light dappling the water surface  
Reveals some native spirits' power  
Derives from fireflies— gumnut babies  
Fuss and fight give a lesson how funny  
Is the futility of conflict. Children see  
That crazy old spirit Pan left his shadow  
Hanging from a tree and reflection  
Drinking at the river the old goat's galloped  
Way up mountain, leaps cliff to cliff  
Grazes on blackberries growing in the scrub  
Gazes over his Murrumbidgee domain.  
All glands and rankness, his shaggy coat  
Putrid with the smell of ewes, wallabies,  
Kangaroos, is still a monster—he'll take  
A bird bath later—dirty musk fills the air  
Like a native allergy—tea trees blossom  
As he passes—kangaroos lift their heads  
Breathe deep his scent and there are dogs, too.  
When the kids see Pan they go gulp  
If dads could see him they'd beat him to pulp.  
You might not see but the musk stench  
Wafts on the breeze. Currawongs squawk  
The inside-out salute, warble a tone of pity  
For the brute. The immigrant god moves inland—  
Raucous the cockatoo never shuts up.

## *Prelude*

Back in Never Never Land. . .  
Some winter nights  
Hear just wind roar  
On the Brindabellas and the hills.  
Black Mountain Tower hums and rings  
Like a syringe singing to the city.  
Houses vibrate  
Thoughts telecommunicate.  
Abandon to the mountains'  
Spiral breath, trees of many green  
Back in Never Never Land. . .  
Again there's the Brindabella wind  
& the bastard tower sings.

## *Street Cafe*

*Segafredo zanetti* umbrellas

Drip rain on the seats

Where elegance takes a coffee break

And caffeine injects ambition

(over the road, a bicycle hangs in a tree)

Puddles that form on hard plastic tables

Steel seats and the wet street are a oneness

The clouds multiply in puddles

Everything's washed clean by the rain

The cars and trees, the filthy street—

Hard rain sounds better than anything

A cooling breeze rustles leaves in émigré trees

(poplar and maple) the coffee takes ages,

Whetting the thirst of high-powered conferees

Meeting at the wet tables — mobile phones

Go off like elevator songs or frogs who croak

Time's passing in puddles — curbside—

A few left-over fun people—the local activists

Scribble letters to the editor. Car doors open

Millionaires step out on the wet pavement

There's a UFO preacher frothing a sermon

Loudspeakers revive the air with a voice gravelled

Too much drinking and smoking—

A torch singer backed by a swinging orchestra

Sings 1940s blues her lover took care of the yard

Up and left her, how sad it got when the coffee took ages

She shared a dying cigarette with Cleopatra.

## *The Pathetic Spectre of Extremism*

Lunatics of responsibility  
fanatics of a quiet life  
peace lovers, collectors,  
hobbyists, insomniacs  
to model planes  
sport and games  
and of course gardeners  
the poets of the land  
chatter like galahs  
on a wire. Say  
excellence through excess.  
Sneaking in, sneaking out.  
Oiling the side gate.  
Quietly, now.  
Then back to the shining path.  
A bowl of grapes  
sets an attaché case on fire.



## *Down Time*

Who steers the thunderbolt?  
Events conspire: there's the one  
Growling like a tigress, calls you 'mate'.  
Choose life. Love's duty will not wait.  
Answer with your being and art,  
Learn how to care. Late at night  
Armpits that are carburettors  
Heat the air, and heart  
Programmed to ache, stay young  
Until the beautiful one says  
*Ulla ulla ulla* and I am  
The most comfortable chair.  
A sunbeam enters the palace.

## *Neon Halo*

Each of us lived alone in a room in Dragon Wing,  
Lone Wolf Lodge, next door to each other  
meditating the heart and lotus sutras, gladly ate  
the sacrificial fruit the chief bonze gave us  
and went to work in the mornings. We demons  
at one with the firmament learned quiet  
from radiation and the circumstances given us.  
And Buddha always watched over might  
have smiled, we never knew at the time.  
Since then the lodge has grown  
into a village and I have become a good monk.  
Out in the concrete world a glowing Buddha  
stands a statue forever like all mortals  
who transcend and signify like a god  
become image of life continuing to whom  
the living pay respect, wish blessing.  
Yet a week ago, the statue  
was Lady Kwan Yin, her right hand  
pointing skyward held eucalyptus leaves  
water fell from a jar in her left hand  
into the lily pond. Cupid-eyed celestial  
naughty boy entrained her robes  
and ribbons of the goddess's thought  
wrapped his head. But the stars  
shifted on their axes and statues fly  
across the constellations—  
Lord Buddha is here now in Kwan Yin's place.

At night the neon halo switches on electricity  
come from the heart sparks love.  
The Buddha's concrete robes flow meteor  
& comet trails he touches down on Earth  
at once great speed and stillness — neon  
halo is prayer that illuminates heart  
spanning galaxies, each star  
a lamp lighting the path or revealing  
a world that is a dancing girl in bas relief  
who can dance five thousand eons  
one way and five thousand the other.  
Buddha's right hand points skyward  
holds gum leaves, water falls to Earth  
from a jar in his left hand.  
A statue that has flown.  
People flow as water flows in rivers.  
On blood moon night Buddha  
flashes out of the neon halo  
pure heart, right hand pointing skyward  
holds eucalyptus leaves, his left hand's  
a fountain splashing water on the Earth.  
Cosmic joke. O! it is really Lady Kwan Yin  
and the celestial naughty boy has played  
tricks on our eyes, again.

## *Numerology*

All the numbers on the houses  
Are meant to drive you nuts  
The telephone is an instrument of torture  
All talking is a colony weird but okay  
Planning to let go again quietly's the best way  
Opening a cage door and there  
Are sunrise and breakfast cereal.

## *Back Home*

They say Canberra's a boring town  
But opening the front door  
The fuse lights on *Mission Impossible*.  
Sheriff over the road lobs an empty  
A mist billows over a land where  
Gardens bring tranquillity. The road is  
Deepest bitumen and trees, immigrated  
And assimilated, wave from the nature strip.  
Things slow down a bit these days  
With more citizens made redundant  
To the economy's needs.  
Kids still go to school — poor bastards —  
Work comes and goes and that's about it.  
Those epic journeys to *Centrelink*. . .  
In winter with all the chimneys smoking  
The block resembles an ocean liner,  
New round-about and crossing  
A shame about the extra traffic.  
No backyard swimming pools, only trees.  
Walking the dog is the way, see holy  
Wattle and banksia glow.  
To be an oak or a cherry tree.  
Silver birch, golden ash.  
Yard dogs sulk  
Cranky at the mighty sleep.

## *Weekend Magazine*

The cars' hearts hummed in the plush garage  
the remote controlled rollerdoor opened  
on to the superb driveway—  
it was a time for separate weekends  
in the Laser and the Cherokee and  
hopefully it would turn out vaguely happily  
like in that relatively obscure Audrey  
Hepburn movie, "Two for the Road", where she  
and Albert Finney spent half their lives  
driving around Europe in their own sports cars  
always kind of fallen out of love and kind of not  
driving away with strangers to take quick honeymoons.  
There was a Tuscan villa waiting with Cupid  
bathing in a fountain at the centre of a beautiful  
circular driveway. Ah conservatism's sweet  
like living in gossamer. This time next week Italy—  
coffee in a real Italian cafe. Italian cars, Tuscan  
driveways, the piazzas' grand intensity.

## *Falling Rain*

Clouds bring the news from where they've been  
the rain birds feel and warble the rain song  
and the rain song hung in the air like skywriting  
the smell of rain and the cloud's soft taste  
the serious duty to make rain welcome  
at least to watch the drops fall onto a page  
of a book about clouds and falling rain—  
see the trees are happy the first time in months  
far thunder laughs (chariot) a few rain drops  
lightning wind when the sky floods us  
there's only the song of the rain and the lawn  
is a green hymn to water falling from the sky.

## *Fuel Injection*

Admiring the silver trees  
I feel so proud I planted these.  
A white owl perched on the branch  
of an elm tree, a person  
like an owl can fly or stay  
what dreams make possible for some  
a finely tuned car does for others.  
There's the toll we pay for running  
engines filthying the atmosphere  
the carnage is an undeclared war  
all worthwhile when you hear  
a steel heart's multi-valve purr.

Petrol head meets petrol head  
and many permutations thereof  
equals one kind of modern love  
their heat and carbon emissions  
are real life. Drive off to fight  
for clean air, for road safety  
and plant a forest on the roadside.  
Like all my contemporaries I've  
fallen for technology (fleeting magic)  
know fuel injection is a beautiful thing.  
Admiring the chariots  
parked beneath the silver trees  
I feel so proud I planted these.



## *Wood*

Fern dells & flannel  
flower man's lapels  
crumple under the bulldozer's  
honest tread clearing space  
for humans and their waste—  
wild animal souls  
depart for the cloud world  
(where else is there for them to go?)  
forest spirits flee to town  
and absorbed by houses  
their mischief goes all wrong  
cellar spooks, things that  
drip between the walls  
and weird house slime  
twist in twisted minds

## *The Electric Church*

At dusk step out on a raw veranda  
Overlooking the vermouth sea  
And while the ants carry the picnic away  
Watch the distant lights glimmer  
In the entertainment universe.  
Merry Christmas Mrs Oceans!  
That's what it's like when you join  
The congregation of the electric church  
Meet the other worshippers and share the cool  
Of expired dreams, lost loves and tender hopes  
Hearts together, reverently listen to the roar in the pit  
There'll be lawn bowls soon enough and time  
To exercise the spirit. Life rewards a barbarian's luck  
Makes space in the garden of earthly delights &  
That fragrance only a fool could resist but never does—  
Find a happy jugular and wonder about ambition  
Then a once-young hand took the binoculars  
Zoomed an ocean view that lulled the lotus eaters  
The veranda was an apparition in a caravan park  
And there, poor but happy, Aspiration sat watching.  
Out on dangerous sea a boat battled waves.  
Life is cruel the way waves move on  
And on—listen to an old sailor's advice  
Balancing this and that. Who wants that strife?  
Join a club, love what you can of life and receive  
The club's fortnightly newsletter.

## *Venice*

Bugsa Bunny you're the sanest man  
in all Italia last hope for risorgimento  
singing *Santa Lucia* in the barber shop  
glorious ears twitching your gondola  
the only golden one in Venice  
carving new canals infuriating  
a city of inflated shopkeepers.  
Sylvester, leaving paw prints on tourist  
maps living a chase without travellers cheques  
perhaps Europe's last sportsman then one last  
swing further than Tarzan across Canal Grande  
220,000 tourist eyes blinded by your tail

And Bugs, Sylvester never heroes  
of a World Cup victory no pizza or basilica  
ever dedicated to you saints of my sanity  
for years and years you were art  
and life's all about more real  
than any fresco

Alive, when the city of art, *the world's heart*  
ancient Disneyland contracted out  
to pros and cons, its own bankruptcy  
totally unanimated cartoon. Sylvester if only you  
had written I'd have sent you the can opener.

## *Buffy*

All the evil sins in a book  
Learned at Obedience School  
A flag in people's hearts—  
And people everywhere are born chained  
The real bloodsucker death  
Steps out of the television  
When the runways extend from Hell.  
Better to think of the angels above  
Heaven busy with electricity.  
Those departed hoons rise undead  
To catch new episodes of trash tv.  
Buried in a grave they crave war, sex  
And machines smoothed on a screen.

In most celestial ballet Buffy kicks ass—  
Thus contemplate the path made light  
By Buffy meditation—athletics is a soul's power  
Breaking out, unflinching and she would  
Never let down a friend—you might ask Buffy  
For a smidgeon of grace, be smart and quick  
Kick *mucho* evil butt with finely scripted wit  
Kick decay from our hearts Give the self  
to purity ideal and your dreams  
will be 'wicked accurate'.

Buffy does it so it's okay to party  
All night and 'go through stuff' growing up and  
If Buffy gets a hard time at school those vampires  
Are so killed. Mumble the words of an occult prayer  
*So it should be with you. . . This world you do not—cannot—  
Angel of the world gone to hell—déjà vu Buffy*

Stake evil's heart thank her for the bliss she gives

A blood-stained shower curtain kind of love  
The kind of love an angel craves.

Children take up armour, swords, crosses &  
Garlic necklaces. Learn by heart the snappy

One-liners six seasons of Buffy episodes

Brought us they are powerful charms.

Late nights, warmed by the television

We shall listen to those Californian voices—

A cold wind blows from outer space.

Any ghost will tell you: Love is forever.

Light the incense now and call the spirit.

Good will triumph in her light.

Kick those demons. Kick 'em high

Buffy bless and sanctify.

## *Reality Check*

I

Zeus handed Troy's smoking altars to the Greeks

A burnt offering to human passion and cruelty.

Believe the stuff about Helen's beauty

Launching a thousand ships. Those kids

Were doing it for kicks and the money.

II

The wind plays upon Apollo's lyre: drunk

Satyr strutting under the Milky Way

Strums an air guitar, has a great day.

## *Helicopter*

Finger stuck in the light socket  
& electricity flowed like honey  
— words flew up like birds  
on fire  
sparks and thumping the air  
helicopters' rotors

surveillance to a

it evil, one  
bad hotel in

a billion  
maniac a—  
be—

a helicopter  
and the heart goes  
ke-thump ke-thump

Gone to hell—

back home's kind of snafu  
the usual goings-on  
never say never  
driving out for  
the  
here, forever  
the — it's

see, be?

speed on —

and grind, grind to a . . .

Welcome to the motel of life!



## *Chinese Movie*

Clouds unveil a fool's moon  
taken from a thousand year old  
languid idyll conceived  
by poets who liked to party  
with courtesans riding perfumed barges.  
Clouds frame a classic scene: the bamboo  
forest's calm shadows start to run.  
Nightingale song pierces night's curtain  
cheeky crickets' screech sparks industry  
their songs will be sung by sunrise.

The makers of this movie  
knew well enough their verse traditions—  
brooding human power  
equals a force of nature  
a cruel river or a snapping tree branch  
cartwheels churn the muddy road  
movement has arrested peace  
pikes are sharpened metal beaten  
war trumpets bark throughout Cathay  
highways fill with young and old men who  
march to town to enlist, some yoked like cattle. . .  
sweet smell of sweat and burning incense.

Forbidden City: indoor scenery  
the plotting is complete and the emperor's  
decision it's time for a war party.  
Robustly decadent mandarins laugh and greet  
(the gaudy retainers provide light relief)  
the emperor waves his hand  
all gaze through palace doors  
out to the great city and its life

endless movement on a  
moon-lit night means power is revealed  
as well as love—

see beyond to the countryside  
the rivers sing to the rocks  
the bamboo forest's calm  
the crickets' song

Wind blows ice across wheat and rice  
The wind says 'Wake, it's time to pack and go.'  
Cities feel the chill, poppies in the fields bow low  
already you can tell that by the end of this movie  
the same fierce wind will be blowing red flags  
while beautifully painted pictograms catch fire  
in time to the sombre twang of a peasant violin  
Things are not so different.

Bamboo beaten down grows strong.  
Soldiers march east and west, north  
and south to lands owing tribute  
soldiers may do bad things  
bad things happen

Thunderclap elms bend  
under air's weight  
wood smoke.

Arriving at the academy a not quite so young Li Po  
and his old school mates, high spirited, recently enlisted  
to join the fighting. Li Po, already a respected poet  
had been authorised to write an official account of the fighting  
a warrior poet he'd breathe and taste death.

The friends wanted to walk around the grounds

hear the college nightingale sing that sweet song  
sought out the school master and found the old man  
white as winter mountain still had words for his pupils.

*Remember Learning's four precious things  
inkpot and ink, brush and paper; in battle  
keep an idea of them close to your heart  
where you'll find four more precious things  
weapon, skill, courage and good luck if you're lucky  
Trivial skills alone will not bring success  
but you are the land, the empire.  
In war an enemy fights the huge mass  
of all our provinces, each one of you  
(and he looked at each man in turn)  
Stay true to your path. . .and in great numbers  
Great numbers is what wins any war for China  
and the 'path' truism sounded tired,  
the old man chuckled to himself, he'd taught  
these boys too well for them to swallow  
any official line. He trusted they saw  
a truth beyond politics and empire beyond  
the people's undying love and courtesans composing  
delicate poems to honour great warriors  
Don't mention the college nightingale*

The friends stepped quickly down a pebbled path  
leading from the school to the village, shaking their heads.  
'You know,' said Li Po, 'I've never heard such shit.  
We're going to get our arses whipped  
by those monkey farmers with their lousy spikes  
and tiger traps. Blood rivers oh! the verses I will write.'  
The friends laughed, marched through carved dragon  
doors of the nearest inn attended by true silk girls  
languid and unveiled by clouds. They choose  
a red silk as their banner.

## *The Story of Obatu*

The Ainu tribesmen gathered to hear my tale:  
Hokugawa was trapped by the monster  
and I passed out when the killer rats arrived.  
Six-thirty—time to turn the bats on.  
But what's this? Obatu's set fire  
to the bat cave & Hiroku cried, 'Let them  
free, Obatu, fight the alien within you!'  
& Obatu let the bats go. I could not  
bear to watch the giant lobster fight  
the jungle turtle, it was too terrible.  
Then there was Obatu about to dive  
into the volcano. 'Don't do it,' we  
implored but intent on saving the world  
Obatu had to. Twenty minutes later  
the rescue freighter *Kobe Maru* arrives  
at the once again idyllic island.  
And Obatu could have taken it easy.

## *Ballad of the Texas Ranger*

Dallas—windswept—concrete cold glass—  
where do they come from vicious criminals  
who live in every city's shadows  
and have no place in Dallas? Somehow they get here  
and they run into Walker Texas Ranger.  
Helicopters, fast cars, surface to air missiles  
in the streets, in the schools, more than a challenge  
it's war so the Dallas rangers are no slackers  
fighting for where charity and virtue live.

When things get tough the comforting voice  
of Walker Texas Ranger whispers  
to young battlers everywhere: everything's fine  
say no and everything's going to be jim dandy.  
There's a wrestler on the ropes, things  
ain't right his wife's in dire danger,  
her Miami boss who she saw murder. . .  
is after her—now only one man can help 'em

That's Walker Texas Ranger. Action, a plot to-boot,  
karate cops, and all the civic virtue you can stomach  
whips the bad dudes every time. Walker's gnarled  
as an old tree, tough guy for the law armed  
and wisely dangerous with a roundhouse kick to die for  
so what if it's a just a tv show etcetera etcetera. . .  
Walker Texas Ranger. Flying feet and fists break jaws  
make life a beautiful ballet and at the end of the day

he picks up, dusts off his hat. That night  
the world's all right again, drinking low octane beer  
in the bar with his girl friend the comely DA  
Miss Alex Kayhill and his ranger buddies.  
But peace is an illusion proven by the cars exploding  
up and down Main Street. Now there's a young boy  
confused his daddy's acting kind of strange drinking  
all the time saying and doing cruel things there's justice

learned the hard way for a kid—his mom's in real  
danger—the boy grows up just and strong  
a ballad on television: Walker Texas Ranger.  
Walker finally marries the beautiful DA  
The band plays middle of the road rockabilly  
the Tennessee Waltz then come the jokes and speeches  
and up up and away a Paris honeymoon. Naturally  
the flight's hijacked and Walker shoots the terrorists

brings the plane home for a three-point landing.  
We're out of danger thanks to Walker Texas Ranger.  
Hand gun always handy, say a prayer for Dallas city's  
solid constabulary. They ensure a happy ending brings charity  
and virtue plenty when the ranger's eyes are upon you  
savour a moral twist delivered in the comfortable voice  
of Walker Texas Ranger.

## *Homer's Dream*

Woo-hoo Homer Simpson is thinking  
designer polish makes shoes softly glow  
especially a pair of *Assassin* cross trainers.  
The day just feels better owning lots of things  
and knowing soon you'll own even more  
so what if the things are mostly useless and stupid  
and it's a life's work paying them off  
the reason for work is things  
like things to eat, the children's things—  
paying bills is what growing up brings.  
Debt is a key that unlocks the world of things  
things that you must master but will be your master.  
Industry might bathe the world in synthetic oestrogen  
but free-range background radiation only serves to make  
us stronger. Who's complaining? TV fiction is where we  
can find solace and fulfilment, the actors show us how to live  
brilliantly, without hope. Cartoon characters can teach  
us even more. The longer the end takes the better.  
*How should we live?* Homer finds out and shows us.  
First we laugh at growing up: look at young  
Bart Simpson writing love letters to his teacher,  
Mrs Krebapple who, opening them reads the thinly  
veiled innuendo and relishes the scrawled  
whisperings—*Ay carumba, a butt that won't quit...*  
She falls for the smutty words written  
in Bart's young hand she imagines spoken  
sexily, a foreign accent, a Mexican  
she's so sucked in by the photo of the football star  
any fool would recognise, she wants a love  
forever, a love that she deserves.  
Whatever. After too many ads it's the bowling episode  
perhaps the most beautiful of all Simpsons episodes

when Homer has to give up *following a lifelong dream*  
his dream part-time job working in a bowling alley  
cleaning and clearing up after the bowlers have finished  
their games, there could be no work happier  
yet to make ends meet Homer must  
return to full-time employment  
at the nuclear power plant Sector 7G  
and as he walks in the door  
the management lackeys chant  
“Don’t forget you’re here forever”.  
Homer hates it that the dream  
left him and he had to leave the dream  
and in his flashbacks gets mad every time  
Marge says she’s having a baby but their children  
are the holy family, a glowing icon pinned to a wall  
in every house with a television. Moments of truth  
and beauty when the reactor melts down, chaos  
storms into the tv hypnosis. Only dumb luck and  
one of Homer’s epiphanies save us—the cartoon  
craziness is Homer expressing love  
for his family. O little baby Maggie her photos  
brighten Sector 7G’s grey walls, sweet enough  
to make nuclear power safe for all.  
The little baby’s what the story’s really about  
in the end what a lot of stories are about  
and that’s how the Simpson family’s  
love redeems America’s savage affluence.  
One day Homer floods Springfield  
to make the streets canals, his town  
a work of art like Venice the city of art.



## *Kitten on the Keys*

By lunch time the nymphs have  
All arrived from their worlds  
With their wit and beauty  
They bring sundry delights  
In sandalwood and camphor boxes  
(And with each of these is a written word)  
The nymphs spread a picnic for the afternoon  
And they ask, 'Can robot lips do this?  
Hold you quiet at the bright centre?'  
Gazing to memory, step  
Into the James Bond Infinities—  
Surf and butterfly wing  
Lightning forks out to sea.  
Cat lands on keyboard:  
Cross-reference "kitten on the keys".

## *Toxin Baby*

Say the words you thought  
the power was in the books  
a prayer to avert bad—  
nuclear leak in this place—  
that place—chemical spill in a river  
reactors glow under the polar ice  
we've sprung a leak  
damn radiation whorl—  
toxin whirling emission

cloud stuff of extinction  
the land coughs smog—  
an end-of-the-world volcano  
any old man monkey can tell you  
not lightning sword and shield  
no cool mist will stop  
the forests crinkling.

## *Coda*

It's cool listening to Miles Davis trumpet  
playing 'Bye, bye Blackbird' on that great  
. . . *Classic Ballads* cd though I know  
outside the world is really suffering  
oozing with all the bad things humans made  
and made work, we as a species sacrificed  
a blue planet and walk through a toxic soup  
— *the System* made Creation invisible—  
demonic thoughts occur a thousand times a day  
a thousand days a year madness is factored into the way  
we live, the way work is the greatest drug  
the way things are is the way things have always been—  
because humans are a kind of bug the traffic spins—  
get out of the car and put your hands up  
come on down, come on down o lucky ones  
consume, be silent, die but Miles plays trumpet so beautifully  
he's an angel now and wow jazz that's cool and hot  
happy and sad draws the world's poison out  
like sucking a snake bite now the earth is sweet again  
a breeze blows the leaves in the mind's blossom trees—  
that's the trick a stereo can play, turn it up loud  
there's no traffic no other sound &  
the death work brings to the day is not invited.

## *Imperial Vampire*

Machines were hungry  
A blood stain spread round the world  
A cruel spirit fed on carnage and murder  
Found many willing to deliver a smorgasbord  
Of tribes, cities, nations, people.  
Islands and islands.  
So different yet so much the same  
Brimming with the gift of life  
Whose names were as beautiful as their lives  
Had been: Shoshone (a breeze), Eora (a star)  
The cruel spirit saw fresh flesh  
A rhapsody of innocence, well near enough  
And the spirit called to the pioneers  
Come massacre and do your deeds—  
Hate-folk come out of the woodwork  
Duty-takers do the dirty work.  
And in return is granted a piece of the earth,  
Commerce. Beach heads. Thirsty tentacles  
Spread, prime the land for civilising.  
Shoot and shoot and shoot until sadness is forgotten.  
War and colonisation kept the vampire fed  
So much blood to shed and so many cultures  
To a vampire they all taste great. Just yesterday  
Yankees offered up sweet rice blood  
Perfected a recipe for *consommé Indochine*  
But it all got a little overdone (napalm)  
Village cooked too long on a turning spit  
When the bombers left the feast was done and  
For dessert *rapture* Cambodia Year One!  
You humans are too kind. Who could fail to  
Appreciate the delicious irony Sub-Sahara  
Cooking and chewing those skinny bones.

Jihad heroes knock on Heaven's door  
They're jumping in a salad bowl.  
And what a lolly shop Europe's always been  
A taste of 'ethnic tensions' keeps the blood  
Running for years like Russia who's always been so  
Selfless with her sufferings. Mass production perfected  
At the Belsen factory now kids scream a Balkan mess  
The cutlery's kept clean by all that ethnic cleanliness.  
Eating's just fine in Palestine and there's still  
A drink to be had in Ireland. Where next to eat?  
There's a road toll. And the rest.

## *At the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum*

Uncle Ho was a cool guy, now he's an ancestor...  
Ancestors say free energy  
clear spirit pure charisma glow  
at peace, relaxed  
doing and saying it all  
for the country.

*All Vietnam*

fought for freedom  
Ho had  
charisma come  
by way of  
gentleness  
& ferocity—  
the two  
sides—in  
villages,  
seaports  
cities  
maze the land's  
resilience—people  
who've spent millennia  
working for the  
rice tough as  
bamboo—  
the  
people  
are  
everyone  
on the planet

a map of Peace  
a shot-down  
fighter  
pilot, soldier, sailor,  
farmer, factory worker  
tinker, official,  
pamphleteer, dreamer  
poet, leader—and the  
famous photo of Ho  
playing pool in Canton  
the aftermath a god  
protecting young children  
—men and women, boys and  
girls will build—they love him, still  
queue for miles feel his glow freedom  
fighter—waiting, great ancestor—  
he is the land—he is everyone

## *Tiger in the Smoke*

'The science of luck equals the pursuit  
of death,' the wise minister told Johnny,  
'our souls are our own'. But Johnny was  
wild with a power he didn't have & things  
came his way. Sure he was nuts but  
his old army mates followed him everywhere  
— still fighting & smuggling —  
they were the scum of the British Army  
& kipped in their uniforms under bridges,  
or in deserted warehouses. Johnny asked,  
'What does priceless mean?' tried to smash  
a porcelain Madonna while the seagulls  
went crazy. The boys saw the finest hour pass  
saw that Britain had been best in black & white  
when George VI and Alistair Sim were king  
ships set sail from Southampton to the world's corners  
and *Waltzing Matilda* was the Empire's song.  
Swing came along & the flag turned jungle green.  
One by one the colonies broke away like forgotten Roman  
provinces & Johnny's boys, sharing tea under a bombed  
out bridge, knew the time for regret was over.



## *Cymru: Motoring in Wales*

Rock tendrils jut cold ocean  
Crumbling cliffs and a monks' beach.  
Dragon head is belly and hand, a castle land, nymphs,  
Giants, green and more green inland, trees have hearts

Speak at night, dragon grown from the Arthuriad  
Chain mail memory: battle axe crash on shield, sword clang  
Knights are always off to battle or a dark wedding cave.  
Today, a twig might crack in the woods, old terror

Is a fairy tale kept alive by the children's colouring book.  
The road map reads like a Druid hymn: *Abigaverry*,  
*Llandaff*, *Llanfhangel*, *Llandrindod*, *Llangollen*, *Llanfair*  
—though these names mostly mean a churchyard—

Are charm to hold the land forever.  
At Tintern Abbey ancient ruined monks  
Ring the tourist shop's bell, mint-breathed rabbits  
and sheep graze, merry as Christmas.

Dragon towns where Peace reigns—  
Vegetarianism is as serious as speaking Welsh.  
All roads lead to a ferocious coast  
Up to Caernarvon and Anglesey

Some never get beyond the Black Lion Hotel at New Quay  
Haunted exclusively by Mr Dylan Thomas himself  
Who smokes a Brecht cigar, the corridor murmurs  
You get the shakes just walking in and out of there

Cold and windy like a coal mine —  
Bottles disappear from the pub now and then.  
Seagulls chew his words: damned typewriter  
Tapping madness on a high stormy night  
But the old poet mostly haunts New York.

Smugglers' cave. A seal's random head bobs in the swell,  
The rocks chalky with broken shells and bird droppings.  
A cacophony of sea birds. Today, the sun blazes bright  
Grey sand on the beach turns white,

Ice cream vendors ring in the Summer.  
Outside the gilt forked Indian Restaurant  
The doorman says, "good morning sahib".  
Cafes trade Welsh Cakes this boat trip day,

Walking tracks round the coast conquer the Atlantic.  
The castles' bloody power —all the ghosts—  
Holiday towns. To the east lies Hay-on-Wye  
Where all the books in Britain go to die.  
The serpent roads hemmed in by hedge

Petrol station, motorway, restaurant, cottage  
Old warrior and poet still haunt the green  
The town witches are cats and  
Cars like angry sheep climb the hills.  
And the hills introduce mountains, cloud  
Wrapping green deeper green and rock.

## *Attitude: Don Juan in the Shopping Mall*

*Let us fly to bounty land. . . Aqua*

### I

Today's Don Juan could be any of a million characters:  
Mohammed Hatim a wayward son of the Mujahadeen  
Doan Huan sporting a Da Nang pedigree, or Mario  
Lanza living out a serious fetish for muscle cars, Jim Giakos  
Many moons from the post office in Kiama and they  
All love soccer—true—choose one or make your own character  
Whatever, his forebears came by boat from somewhere  
Migrants—survivors—refugees—settlers safely

### II

Tucked in bed ashore the island of shopping malls  
Now these families call Fortress Australia home.  
Click an ethnic option. Call him Juan keep it simple  
Who wants to be a millionaire? Our hero had an inkling  
His place on the great wheel of fire—reincarnated  
By a poem, a poem reincarnated! Now wherever migrants  
And natives gather, there'll be Don Juan. Or movies  
or poems like this one with Don Juan hanging around.

### III

Time for the shipwreck—a starfish on bleached coral.  
Big island like Australia has plenty of coastal treachery  
Juan's boat hit a storm before he was even born.  
Back home families and traditions were trampled in dust  
Those who got out brought memories of homelands  
Turned nasty: torture, hunger, every day some  
Bad news, ruins, guns and weeping. The world  
Turns its back. That's the modern shipwreck.

### IV

Juan's parents made it ashore and found an island  
Of peaceful streets and shopping malls, paradise where all  
Comers are welcome and there's nothing between people  
But a bond called mateship and the spirit of the 'fair go'.  
The past could be forgiven beginning with happy endings  
In the brave new lucky country of the mall.  
Thus into slippery times Juan was born a happy mongrel  
Family background tick multicultural

### V

Two centuries after the British boat folks washed ashore.  
With his birth certificate Juan got a bicentennial medal.  
Brought up by MTV in *rap* and *gangsta lore*  
(Read baseball cap) like everyone he relaxed & watched  
Each fresh war start with a bang & a whimper on TV  
Washed it all down with beer and pizza. His accent is dinkum  
Aussie but to many Juan was dark like a foreign country.  
Not every where's a mall, outside there's a world

## VI

Incredibly sad—as seen on tv—huge swathes of continents  
Where children search for shrapnel to sell for scrap  
Where there's no food on the table, where there's no table  
The nearest shopping mall's a thousand miles away  
Here, on the island, the mall is everywhere.  
The earth moves under Parramatta Road and the wind  
Ruffles a bird of paradise's tail feathers.  
Traffic zoom drowns speech—outdoors

## VII

A sin of traffic exhales and the engines' great hum  
Fills every corner and the sky is beautiful toxic grey  
You drive with the heart and drive till you're done  
So right to be a maniac—don't go there—roadside  
Doomed hands reach up from the steering wheel  
— Juan left his chariot parked underground —  
Inside the mall is safe and warm. Atoms vibrate  
Molecules agitate and bring the blessed their reward.

## VIII

Shopping's a way of life except for the bored  
Cashless kids the mall management tries to keep out  
But wants them back to join in and spend they listen up  
Flamenco muzak is ecstasy and like a dragon's  
Spine, the escalators rise, rise  
And glide among the shiniest place of all time.  
Up, up shining the way paradise should shine.  
Fashion is as fashion does post-modern style &

## IX

Bliss grows fresh from the strawberry's heart  
Glowing rockmelon, avocado and smoked salmon  
For the masses, the fragrant mix of simmering meat  
Baking bread, hairdressers' vinyl incense  
Happy roasting coffee beans, chocolate  
And all the world's ice-cream, kebabs and  
Hamburgers' crackling aroma you can eat the air.  
There's gadget apparition digital virtual electronic

## X

Electric, mountains of myrrh, silver appliances  
Raw pearls for faithful lovers. Come buy! come buy!  
Say signs and glowing screens, sports clothes, shoes, mobile  
Phones, cane furniture, over a million cds, and health's accessories  
Are all for love and family. Things. The escalators carry shoppers  
To the dollar's many possibilities. The mall is happy hunting, a  
Gleaming chapel, farm and village magic well,  
Radiant hub and sacred site: two-hundred shops sell

## XI

What people want or can afford and the mall gives  
Warmth and truth: tinsel music, indoor forest  
Pets, banks, books, cameras and food without end  
Oceans away from the rubble and tents  
And the magic goes home with a happy customer.  
All the houses and flats are furnished, decorated  
Supplied by the mall and all the homes add up  
And make a giant house and whether his place or hers

## XII

Everything was warm, gratifying like making love  
In a furniture showroom, at home the mall kept *satisfying*.  
Sometimes Juan sells Ease and Pace in the mall's dark corners.  
He's discreet, part of the mall's culture. Now Juan  
Works the mall searching for a pulse, gazing at blue  
Windows when security stop and ask where he's going  
Where he's been— times like this feel kind of low—he  
Considers the happy fates of serious school mates

## XIII

Good citizens populating new suburbs and interstate.  
Explorers from the Middle East and Indochina.  
They'd borne the souls of family-caring birds or mammals,  
Not like a wolf. 'Hey Juan!' someone calls from a shopfront,  
'Hey Juan—your life sucks.' Hanging round in the mall  
Might suck. Being a nine to five loser really sucked especially  
When you can be Don Juan spinning the wheel of life.  
Bring it on, bring on whatever life brings. A robot moment

## XIV

Calm robots squeeze up and down the escalators  
Juan nods to robot acquaintances —humanoid  
Ravers disguised as normal people. They haunt  
The clubs are where disco perfect grace keeps people  
In touch with their feelings. In a healthy society  
People think about sex once every five seconds.  
Juan 's companions came and went —in a world  
Where you grow up mainly so you can pay the bills

XV

Juan was fine to spend time with, occasionally.  
Pillow talk means you're not dead yet and sometimes  
It is good to be desperate. As with melancholy  
You don't need hunger to do desperate. In fact  
A bit of cash means you can do desperate with style  
Like Byron the romantic saint was wealthy *yet* melancholy,  
*And* desperate to live life. He knew he'd be gone  
Before completing his epic about Don Juan, a youth who

XVI

Loved to charm houses full of women whose names like  
Aurora, Julia, Haidée, and Adeline were the many names of roses.  
And on a hot night, Juan was cool as. Some push  
Their luck the young punk Juan caught on shaky video  
Sipping eagerly at love's chalice. Angels shout delight —  
Dance the bulimic babes' dance then the Botticellis'  
O veiled breasts o comet eyes, honey hush  
There are souls and eyes and lush places to go.

XVII

Cabramatta Headline (shrapnel demons)

*Race relations success*  
*these three Vietnamese boys*  
*shoot up with skinheads*

Apparatchiks might mention theory, 'isms' or morality  
At this juncture 'specially politics or the sacred cow of law  
As Juan's dad told him 'always vote for the least worst fascist'  
A hand of friendship—your government let refugees drown in the sea.



## XVIII

It's way better at Aurora's flat her underwear is simply magic  
Signals the body and spirit are harmonious. Juan swoons, melts  
Swears undying love. Who cares? A good time fully zonked  
An eight-day romp is a journey like any journey a *trip*  
Upon which a youth might embark at the third  
Flush of hormones. Writing a poem can be free or be  
A kind of whipping, sweet torture of rhyme! The  
Original *Don Juan* was composed in *ottava rima*,

## XIX

A stanza of eight lines of heroic verse, rhyming  
Abababcc, used here as a kind of primer to paint words on.  
'As useful as painting coral reefs,' history growls in its cage.  
Desist from the gentle reader stuff. Forget the paint and primer  
Time to log on Playstation® game *Shopping Mall Don Juan 2010*  
The opening level sees Juan racing through a maze  
Of streets talking behind hands, smiling like a butcher or  
A therapist waiting while sirens wail around him.

## XX

You've got to figure out what he's doing to proceed  
To the next level. Passing through a twirling screen  
Icon earns extra life and strength to fight on  
And save the kungfu princess bride.  
But first the car park, get in the car, turn the key  
The noble steed *Impreza* gallops up the ramp  
Beats the traffic six thumping speakers  
In the doors & under the dash a 24 valve injected

## XXI

Powers alloy wheels, the engine's grunt  
Floats like a discotheque above curvy freeway.  
Finds a place at the bar, spinning stars punctuate  
Sees eyes and sees the soul smiling in the eyes.  
Every time Juan steps on the pavement  
He steps into a new car (dream option) a power girl  
Hands him an *orgasm* in a tall glass. Now Juan has to interact  
With his city's myths—urban cowboy, tribes and gangs,

## XXII

Witty lawyers, the town and country mouse, aliens (imagine)..  
Best of all the Sincere Young Miss Who Brings Humanity  
To a Man's Monster Soul. Together, powers combined  
They confront life's disasters. Live happily ever after.  
But Juan craved love the way a poem might dream many  
Readers or a parched traveller chase desert mirages  
And Juan found oases real enough, felt oneness  
With his calling to see loveliness like a bird set free

## XXIII

By touch and kiss and share his wicked happiness.  
Juan took care of himself and stayed alive worked out  
Seriously at the fitness centre adjacent to the mezzanine.  
As tensile as a loaded spring a nunchaku on a fling  
. . . and he felt good, mind and body without fear  
Every five seconds he thought about sex and  
Juan's mind made love with the atmosphere.  
His goddesses are fine with most of this. Karen a sunny

XXIV

Blonde florist brought breathless roses and camellias.  
Kandy baked at the bakery. Kelly the indoor pet specialist  
Say no more. Wendy had a room out the back at Toys-R-Us.  
Cherry was *Cafe Cognoscenti's* creamy gal. Lisa brought rustic  
Charm from the hardware store checkout. Fan just hung around.  
Svelte Lee Lin from the emporium undressed behind a paper screen  
Kathleen a sandy haired beautician was a dream outdoors in the rain  
Poppies and tulips grew wild in Juan's garden and kept life sane.

XXV

Like lions men should lead their natural lazy lives —  
What happens when you reach the use-by date?  
When Juan was out of it he might philosophise —  
Everything lives and dies, souls go on or end  
You find out soon enough, and Juan had bodies to attend.  
To wake at noon's beautiful daze and hear high heels  
Clatter down the hallway and not know who it is  
Until she walks in the door is a happy state of being.

XXVI

And remembers ah Lee Lin lovely, brilliant. The escalators call.  
Driving to the mall Juan sees the troika of hairdressers  
Who made New Year's Eve such a treat—a shocker —  
A hard body works harder with chemicals driving.  
Superficial? It beats being Hitler or Martin Bryant or  
A political jerk who profits from poor children crying.  
Everyone here's happy polluting the world  
With garbage and dreams and with Nature dying

## XXVII

Juan knew it was too late to save the Earth.  
You might as well enjoy the technology and the girls.  
If you're honest in life there's no need for sincerity.  
Romance, however, is always necessary.  
Flowers chocolates and conversation (sigh). Juan  
Learned early from TV that puddles multiply the moon  
And the white moon trapped by quiet lily pond  
Distracts lovers them moaning full deep.

## XXVIII

But when you swallow a karaoke machine—as Juan had —  
Sparks fly, smoke billows, the microphone attacks  
And tears your shirt off. A weekend of wrong choices  
Read their eyes and hear their voices. Who want something.  
This afternoon in the coffee shop Juan watches  
Angels fall through the atrium's glass roof their buckets  
And brooms fell from heaven on his head. Graffiti  
Swirled like a prayer, *the rippling of her lovely hair.*

## XXIX

Regarding the matter of Liên's brothers. Five  
Big Brothers—old fable when billy goats gruff  
Meet Aladdin. He met the guys at the club.  
Juan's life choices made for him: a fine son-in-law  
Or painful ending—there's nothing like a shotgun  
Wedding to focus and give closure. Juan saw the future  
Wearing a white linen suit and liked the look. He settled  
Down with Lee Lin and worked for her family's emporium.

XXX

Three years in accounts then Juan & Lee Lin flew out.  
Lee Lin would run the family's Jakarta warehousing wing  
There'd been disputes and Juan's doubtless charms  
Could prove persuasive, pivotal. And Juan stepped  
Up to the next level: a Jakarta mall pushing a stroller  
Down a shiny escalator. Outside is hot & raining so many lives  
Beginnings and endings, Juan's and Lee Lin's hearts entwined  
The world rose and fell around them, breathing.

## *The Cafe Bear*

Out back of the cafe a square iron cage  
made hard corners for a honey bear  
the boys saved from a bulldozer.  
Crouched like a dog, the cage  
wasn't tall enough to let her stand,  
the bear's broad-necked head swayed  
misery to misery. What to do with  
the poor bear so unhappy in the cage?  
Bear waved with her front right paw  
You could see sad bear eyes saw  
Nothing good living life chained, crave  
Her aching bellow roared  
To the cave where her cubs should be.  
She'd harmed nothing in life.  
She nuzzled the bars, a children's bear  
never hurt a butterfly and like fetching  
honey held out her front right paw—  
beautiful claws. You could see in her eyes  
and see everything sad bear eyes saw.  
Would she be all right in the house?  
But dogs might get it. Think about it.  
The bear could use some fattening up.

## *Understand*

wild animals become divinely rare  
*their habitats* wild homes are soft earth & tree  
cannot flee before the bulldozer concrete  
flame and smoke desert where only wheat  
cows and crows grow where wild animals  
and forests once— the garden remains  
and domestic wildlife love that life especially  
whatever shares the human cage—  
the cat is all that's left of the leopard  
the snails who sip spiders' milk  
eat flowers they live as frogs once did—  
when it rains and just after— currawong's flight  
rained on— ooze & wattle's blood— rainy sagacity  
gracious eucalyptus casts its own light

## *Scenes*

Feel wonderful the spirit thing  
where animals come up and follow him,  
the park Jesus—occasionally people do  
the same but he talks better with the animals  
the birds are happy to nest in his hair  
sometimes he'll have to fight a dog.  
That time lying down in the road next to the lake  
and stopping the traffic for blocks  
like a glory day. He doesn't say much.  
All that's left of the old world is a mobile phone  
and the calls start, one after another  
until the voices are a web  
of sticky meetings he must attend—  
“Demand the purity of Heaven  
a celestial outcome,”  
And the party comes to the rescue.



## *Crab Nebula*

In 1054 AD Chinese astronomers  
noted the appearance of a star  
in the Taurus system, the Crab Nebula's  
blue claws appeared in our sky.

*The Catalogue of Nebulous Objects*  
rates the Crab highly: "One of the few  
astronomical objects where radiation over  
the entire measurable spectrum  
has been detected—"

Old suns die as they spin into the Milky Way's  
spirals that hang down from its core  
like spider legs light years long; the galaxy  
takes fifty-million years to do a complete revolution  
and younger solar systems going through  
the spirals receive supernova radiation—  
our mid-life sun with its brood of worlds  
passed through fifty-million years ago

And the old stars, lives spent in this universe  
pass on to the next, and the next, and the next  
space while here during our brief stay we can intuit  
or theorise, guess and wonder, hope or blame  
we can see crab's claws floating in space.

## *Interrupt this Program (Liberty Lotus)*

Of badly behaved humans and pallid dust—  
Split screen shows tall buildings in New York  
Make good targets for aeroplanes  
And the Pentagon burns like any other place.  
Screen cuts to FBI files, witnesses, the flimsy  
Evidence (a flight manual in Arabic)  
And the President informed seems stunned  
Though eerily unsurprised. The two gleaming  
Towers collapse again in slow motion.  
“The first time an event of such magnitude has  
Been broadcast using entirely digital technology”  
A savvy CNN anchor comments &  
Afghanistan’s back on the US radar.  
Special effects have improved since the Gulf War  
Events can be more easily edited and enhanced  
eg an instant retrospective beautifully  
Counterpoints Osama’s calculated obsessiveness  
With a New York fireman’s utter decency.  
Terror moves fleshing out its agenda.  
A talking head asked ‘How do we process our anger?’  
Now’s not the time to ask who armed and trained the zealots  
And why there always has to be an enemy?  
Who helped destroy Afghanistan—  
Why in some places peace can only mean sleep or death.  
When do land mines come home to roost?  
To whom do we address our regrets?  
Or remember Hiroshima set the standard  
For breaking glass and Nagasaki was signed  
Off to test another kind of atom bomb  
Well, one nuke would have been enough  
How terror burned for years in Vietnam

To satisfy unquenchable domestic thirst for fire. Evil  
Pure and simple rained on the Vietnamese people.  
The Vietnamese might forgive yet cannot forget  
Quite as easily as we can. They say no more war  
Plant forests where the napalm burned.

## *Dads are Cool*

Happiness to tend  
the garden that is children.  
Kids race and wrestle  
you down to them you  
are a trampoline,  
that manages to speak  
tired wisdom at times  
put food on the table  
until you need feeding yourself  
from day one you're  
feeling gladly obsolete  
so stand up, open your  
heart to middle age spread  
and the fresh strength  
serious parenting brings,  
the wonder finding  
in your heart a watchful bear  
—implacable—growing up—  
always growing out of things.

## *One Year Sentence*

Dog tired deep into the morning  
awake first thing after a restless night  
when snatches of dreams where there were words  
that might have been right for the sentence  
there's no getting past it—that one sentence  
the sentence that's been driving you mad for the last  
year or so when you get up every morning  
and go down to the basement study  
switch on the computer  
and see how the sentence is going—  
it'll be a great sentence  
and will lead to somewhere  
more interesting that's if the sentence  
ever gets finished, it's at a new drafting stage—  
there was the time the computer crashed  
and the file with the sentence disappeared  
all day, all night re-writing the sentence  
(sometimes sitting in the backyard at dusk jotting notes  
or a trip to the coast where the ocean can give  
something of its energy), the sentence returned  
to be worked on then down to the basement study  
cleaning up, making the work place  
just right to get cracking on the sentence  
the headache from worrying about the sentence  
should help you concentrate on writing—  
once that one sentence is right the rest of  
the book will almost write itself  
and the opening sentence will illuminate  
like a door opening in the morning;  
there's no getting past it—that one sentence  
never seems nearer to being finished—

in the morning you get up after a restless night  
wrestling with a verb  
and go down to the basement study  
switch on the computer  
and see how the sentence is going—  
it'll be a great sentence when it's done  
and will lead to somewhere  
more interesting that is, if the sentence  
ever gets finished, it's at another drafting stage  
the trees will know what happens next  
how later the day will grow more  
solemn and serene.

## *Real Time Turtle*

Ready to go cleaning up  
Ferocity time—buff the place  
Vim cleanse—purify  
Like a hygienic snail in its shell—  
Loving tentacles reach between  
Skirting board and carpet weave—  
Call upon disinfectant—furniture oil

Get down—brush and scrub  
Shine the table and chair's grain  
Till they glow &  
Polish inside the shell—  
Stroke the cat's fur backwards  
O carpet, the house can shriek!  
Take the broom sweep a grain  
Of thought in the turtle's mind.

## *The People Who Live Inside the Comet*

'Don't go to Xha'Doom, ' she said. You went  
anyway, dived into the world's heart.  
O boat, o lantern, sweet electricity.  
Never forget her pallid hand  
falling to the lake's grey water. Stuck here  
on this two-bit planet, its endless cycles  
entail so much tragic repetition—  
humans blur on the landscape  
and they need kindness.  
Through a satellite's eye  
watch the jungle's final stand  
turn into cattle country

South of reality's days we are scorched  
and frazzled. Senōr El Nino's laughter  
shakes the core and the silver ships  
take centuries to arrive.



## *Modern Problems*

Coffee and the south sea bubble—  
precious metals, information  
tea and spices  
'invite' powerful 'interests'—  
*give me land, lots of land*  
*and the starry sky above*  
that song lingers  
a stupid faith in destiny  
empires turn to dust  
galaxies rush— the Sun's  
light is given us when hydrogen  
fuses into helium —  
why go to all that trouble?  
of the reason for galaxies  
there are many ideas—  
how worlds are born  
why anything happens  
who steers the thunder bolt?  
strike and illuminate  
earth and sky  
bless star dust's  
hard light incarnations.

## ADDENDA

### WRITING THE GODDESS

S. K. KELEN

#### GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

The exegesis, *A Further Existence*, will explore the genesis and development of a poet's craft, and in particular to place this in relation to a specific manuscript – in this case, *Goddess of Mercy*. The essay gives a broad consideration of the origins of my own poetic awareness and sensibility, the growth and development of ideas which have informed the content and style of my poetic oeuvre, and the wider world of what poetry and poetics might be considered to include today – ranging from recent movements in prosody to the broader area of language and communication in a multi-media/digital age.

It is useful in this context, to 'place' a modern poet's output into the context of his/her immediate cultural and social environment, not so much to determine 'influences' as to identify the impulses from many sources that inform, and ultimately contextualise, a book of poems. What is in the ether of ideas and readings, thoughts, current affairs and background noises at the time and place of the writing of a book of poems can provide insight into the book's genesis and perhaps establish the poems' relationship with those elements.

Rather than undertake a conventional *explication de texte* I would hope the reader look at the poems themselves with an awareness of the mental and cultural world in which they were conceived and developed.

I do, however, offer a concluding chapter in this brief exegesis, in which is explicated how the specific selection and development of poems in this book contributed to its final shape, as well as offering some practical examples of the effects and value of rigorous drafting and editing.

The chapters:

#### EARLY CONTACT:

The first influences on the young poet.

#### ILLUMINATIONS:

Poetry in time, poetry outside of time.

#### PHILOSOPHY:

The development of thought, as well as of feeling. Recent attempts (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, for example) at expressing intellectual ideas and shaping the possibilities within poetry.

#### MYSTERIES:

'Perhaps poetry's final and most sacred duty is to language and speech...'

A poem must use language in new and exciting ways, but it might also 'urge its receiver's mind to see the world with foresight and aftersight.'

#### POLITICS:

Language IS politics. Some notable precursors among poets, and the impact of larger ideas.

#### POETRY IN PUBLIC:

The position of the modern poet and the need to be aware of the contemporary environment. Poetry in life, sport and television.

#### THE GREAT GAME OF GETTING PUBLISHED:

An important part of a poem's progress is to be published: what every poet must become aware of in the context of getting his/her writing disseminated. The world wide web is currently a growing and interesting space for poetic communication.

#### CONTEMPORARIES:

Placing the poems in *Goddess of Mercy* in the context of Australian poetic developments over recent years. 'I like to know what my contemporaries are up to.'

#### WRITING THE GODDESS:

Writing the Goddess. Drafting and selection of poems for a volume of poems to be published.

NOTE: On page 165 could readers, if they wish, please substitute 'blatant falsehoods' for 'bullshit'. The latter term, though intemperate, does, however imply a level of exasperation and disbelief that might be ameliorated or blunted by the more 'acceptable' terms.

# A Further Existence

being an exegesis of the volume of poems,

*Goddess of Mercy*

by

S. K. Kelen

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## *Chapter 1*

### EARLY CONTACT

Like most people my first contact with poetry was with childhood nursery rhymes, then at school with poetry appreciation and some creative writing in English. What first attracted me to poetry was the way words could be made to tell a story, paint a picture, make music and leave a lasting impression, sweet and lingering.

I recognised resonance was what a poem strives to achieve. I still remember my mother's recitals of Christina Rossetti's 'Who Has Seen The Wind'.

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you.  
But when the leaves hang trembling,  
The wind is passing through.  
Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I.  
But when the trees bow down their heads,  
The wind is passing by.

1

That quiet poem managed to haunt me and remembering it gave me a comforting focus longer than any story, song or television program. Mum half sang, half whispered that poem like a distant breeze. It was like a song but she said it was a poem. As a child I could appreciate the difference as it said so much and implied even more by saying hardly anything.

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1 Rossetti, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/rossetti/singsong/singsong.html#y>

Dr Seuss' 'Cat in the Hat' imprinted in my subconscious the idea of rhythm extending down a page, for example,

"But I like to be here.  
Oh, I like it a lot!"  
Said the Cat in the Hat  
To the fish in the pot.  
"I will NOT go away.  
I do NOT wish to go!  
And so," said the Cat in the Hat,  
"So  
so  
so..."

2

Don Marquis' *Archy and Mehitabel* was read to me and talked about and poetry seemed like a warm place, where creatures of all sorts could live in peace.

My parents inadvertently introduced me to the larrikin spirit of Australian poetry by giving me a copy of C.J. Dennis' *A Book For Kids*, where the place of the vernacular and the 'real world' in poetry was made clear. Poetry was good fun:

#### **The Baker**

I'd like to be a baker, and come when morning breaks,  
Calling out "Beeay-ko!" (that's the sound he makes)—  
Riding in a rattle-cart the jogs and jolts and shakes,  
Selling all the sweetest things a baker ever bakes;  
Currant-buns and brandy-snaps, pastry all in flakes;  
But I wouldn't be a baker if . . .  
I couldn't eat the cakes.            Would you?<sup>3</sup>

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2 Seuss, Dr. *The Cat in the Hat*, 27.

3 Dennis, C.J.. *A Book for Kids*, 14.

Years later I wrote a poem as a tribute to Dennis' spirit of fun:

**The Mail Sorter**

I'd like to be a mail sorter  
    flicking letters all day  
Be first to bundy off  
    and make good my getaway.

I'd read other people's postcards  
    from Bangkok, Spain and Rome.  
But I wouldn't be a mail sorter  
    if I couldn't go home  
and get stoned. Would you?

In high school I learned to appreciate that the obvious relationship between the last few lines of 'Kubla Khan' and a Jimi Hendrix riff was not logical, but an intuited satisfaction given by unity of form and technique, created with dexterity verging on the athletic.

A lot of the poems I learned have stayed central to my understanding of poetry. Coleridge's wicked poems, 'Kubla Khan' (it was about sex as well as everything else!) and 'The Ancient Mariner'; the ghostly precision of Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'; Japanese haiku; Chinese poetry; Australian poetry as represented by AD Hope and Judith Wright; William Blake's visions. T S Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'The Wasteland', and the student anthologies like *Poems of Spirit and Action*.

My third form English teacher had the class writing poems and she advised me to write poetry 'seriously'. Progressive English teachers encouraged us to experiment in different writing forms – essays, short fiction and poetry. I have often heard the complaint (from poets) that poetry isn't taught properly in schools,



that it is taught too much like a school subject and that having to study poems somehow kills the joy and magic of poetry but as Christopher Bantick has commented:

Poetry is one of the threads of national language. A history of Australia is a history of poets. We may, with maudlin respect, say the first line of *The Man from Snowy River*, but in classrooms of this state, there is no longer movement at the station. The reason is clear. English teachers have just about killed off English as a subject. They have, with an eye on VCE results, reduced the study of Australian language to a series of texts. Books are no longer referred to as such. Texts reign supreme. Intertextuality and multitexting are the new English-speak. What is being lost is the richness of heritage and language. What is being lost are the poets.

4

But at least it *is* taught in schools. Poetry is also taught pretty much the same as it was when I went to high school in the 1970s in that theme and form receive the most attention, and levels of meaning, use of metaphor, rhyme or lack thereof, alliteration, use of line are all still studied.

I started writing poetry at a relatively early age and was easily hooked on the exhilaration of composing and completing a poem, then the absolute bliss of having it published. Writing poetry seemed especially fine in a brutish world.

Poetry as therapy? Poetry as spiritual pursuit? Poetry as a way to better understand the world and confront it? Or an outlet for the rigours of growing up? Being able to write well had positive implications for other areas, like study and work. The main thing for me was that writing poems was a very satisfying experience.

My desire to write poetry was boosted considerably by a trip as a teenager in 1972 to Papua New Guinea. The excitement of a new environment and people with

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4 Bantick, Christopher. 'The Muse is standing outside the classroom'. *The Age*. (May 10 2004), 11.

a culture so different from what I was used to, flooded my mind with images and words. Poems just started happening. The goings-on in a local market were so different from anything I had experienced previously so poetry was unavoidable:

Koki market on the beach  
next to the village on stilts  
over the water. Where you can  
buy fruit and vegetables at native prices.  
Red stains of betel nut spat  
everywhere on the ground. Pedlars sit  
behind their goods all laid out  
on small grass mats. Gossiping  
and arguing in Pidjin and Motu.  
Fifty Papuan soldiers march by to the joy  
and pride of a gang of native transvestites.  
Naked children play while a red-brown man  
with no legs, held up by crutches, looks sadly over  
a universe of waves to heaven. A youth  
with Afro hair and a shirt with a picture of Che  
screams revolution at the seagulls. . .

5

Though I had not heard of it, the idea of *negative capability* was in my mind: letting the world speak for itself in a poem. Poetry was word, image and sound, a sweet mixture thereof, as far as I could see. To bring these elements together to make moments of vision and sound was magic.

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5 Kelen, S.K.. *Atomic Ballet*, 34.

## ILLUMINATIONS

The more I read of poetry, the more I came to see that the time and place of a poem's creation was unimportant. A good poem still *worked* as a poem a hundred, five hundred or two-thousand years after its author's death.

Not everyone is reading Ovid's love poems these days, but enough people do so to keep these poems constantly in print. Sexy and funny, a lively translation of the *Amores* is still enjoyable to read a couple of millennia after their original composition. The eternal triangle that has been the source of many complications in fiction and life is explained with good humour:

No man can love two girls at once, you told me  
Graecinus—I remember it was you.  
It's all your fault I'm tricked and caught defenceless;  
You see me shamed—in love at once with two.

They're both good lookers, elegant and *soignée*  
Which more accomplished, difficult to say.  
This one's more beautiful, and so's the other,  
Each more attractive in her own sweet way.

I waver like a yacht when winds are warring;  
This love, that love, they keep me torn in two.  
Why, Venus, make my endless troubles double?  
Could one girl not give me enough to do?  
Why give the forest leaves, the ocean water,  
Why give the crowded sky more stars to strew?

Yet this is not so bad as lying loveless.  
God grant my enemies high moral tone;  
God grant my enemies a bed that's empty,

To sprawl there in the middle all alone.  
I want wild love, to shatter sluggard slumber,  
Mine not the only weight the blankets bear.

Then clear the decks and let my girl undo me,  
If one can do it; if not, I'll take a pair.  
I'm up to it; I'm slender but I'm wiry;  
I may lack weight but not virility;  
And fun's the food that fortifies performance—  
No girl has ever been let down by me.

I've often spent a night in dissipation,  
And still been fit and strong when morning came.  
Happy's the man who dies amid love's duels;  
Heaven grant the cause of my death be the same!

Let soldiers get their chests stuck full of arrows,  
And buy eternal glory with their gore;  
Let traders in their greed criss-cross the ocean,  
And swill it, with their swindles, far from shore.

May my death find me fainting in love's ferment,  
And in mid-act may I expire in bed;  
And may some mourner weeping at my funeral  
Comment 'Your death well matched the life you led'.

6

Poems that are thousands of years old have survived. Ancient Babylonian love poems are still read, but not by everybody (and not everyone drives their car through a tunnel carved in the base of an ancient redwood tree, meditates, or water-skis) but ancient poems like the ancient trees remain with us.

When a poem lives well beyond its time, it can be translated or written anew. Perhaps *undead* better describes the existence of a two thousand year old poem, finding its succour in the imaginations of succeeding generations.

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6 Ovid. *Love Poems*, 42-44.

Sometimes the oldest vampires are the sexiest. A translation from the Sumerian 'Cycle of Inanna' written in Akkadian on clay tablets about 2000 BC demonstrates that poetry has been infused with the power of Eros for a very long time.

The text functions as a guide to the marriage rite undertaken by Sumerian, and then Assyrian kings, who during the ceremony adopted the identity of the god and by consummating the marriage with a priestess incarnating the goddess, magically fertilize and fecundate all of nature for the year, ensuring rich pastures, herds and healthy children for the following year. Inanna is the goddess and Dumuzi the god:

Inanna spoke:

I bathed for the wild bull,  
I bathed for the shepherd Dumuzi,  
I perfumed my sides with ointment,  
I coated my mouth with sweet-smelling amber,  
I painted my eyes with kohl.  
He shaped my loins with his fair hands,  
The shepherd Dumuzi filled my lap with cream and milk,  
He stroked my pubic hair,  
He watered my womb.  
He laid his hands on my holy vulva,  
He smoothed my black boat with cream,

He quickened my narrow boat with milk,  
He caressed me on the bed.  
Now I will caress my high priest on the bed,  
I will caress the faithful shepherd Dumuzi,  
I will caress his loins, the shepherdship of the land,  
I will decree a sweet fate for him.

A servant, privy to the sacred proceedings recites the following prayer. If the ritual is performed according to the poem's guidance and all goes well, the land is fecund, idyllic.

In the marshland may the fish and birds chatter,  
In the canebrake may the young and old reeds grow high,  
In the steppe may the *mashgur*-trees grow high,  
In the forests may the deer and wild goats multiply,  
In the orchards may there be honey and wine,  
In the gardens may the lettuce and cress grow high,  
In the palace may there be long life.  
May there be floodwater in the Tigris and Euphrates,  
May the plants grow high on their banks and fill the meadows,  
May the Lady of Vegetation pile the grain in heaps and mounds.

O my Queen of Heaven and Earth,  
Queen of all the universe,  
May he enjoy long days in the sweetness of your holy loins.

7

Implicit is the power of poetry to address the gods and influence the course of the universe (as in ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ where God is almost commanded to ‘Give us this day, our daily bread’). Poetry was the language of magic and religion. In this 5,000 year old poem the important elements of poetry are in use. ‘Inanna and Dumuzi’ is rich in metaphor and description. The text’s compression allows the whole country to be involved in a single ritual act of love-making.

Many civilisations’ core texts have been written wholly or partly in poetry. Verse can be found in much of the Bible, all of the Mahabharata, Upanishads and other Hindu texts. That so many key concepts and constructs of so many societies are preserved and communicated through verses says much for the original place and power of poetry – and its staying power. For example, every Sunday ancient and not so ancient hymns are sung in churches. Aboriginal wisdom passed down through creation myth and other poems helped ensure the continuation of one of the

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7 ‘The Cycle of Inanna: The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi’. Anonymous. Trans. Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. *World Poetry*, 8-9.

longest surviving cultures in the world.

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All art is a performance of some kind and every art form has its audience. But the nature of the audience and each art form's engagement with its audience vary greatly. The television news' audience is large, popular and immediate. The evening bulletin takes half an hour to watch and most of its contents are forgotten by the following afternoon. A novel will have a wide readership, but nothing like the reach of television or the popular press. Poetry is different again, having an audience that is more diffuse, longer lasting. A great poem is like a cultural organism whose use and arrangement of words might have changed the way we use words, or whose visions or stories have influenced people's way of seeing themselves and their world.

I can be thrilled by Emily Dickinson's 1860s vision of the western world powered by electricity for evermore, and I confess to not remembering last week's headline or holding too many episodes of *The Simpsons* close to my heart as I do the poems that have found a reverberation in that place in the psyche where poetic sensibility resides.

There are worse role models to whom an aspiring poet might look than Emily Dickinson. Reclusive, meditative, an intuitive master (or mistress) of rhythm, she bent the language in a way that mystically turned plain talk into elevated speech. Declining the vocational possibilities of writing Dickinson was free to be a mystic and seer. She could hold an oriole in her hands and turn it into a poem, every bit as beautiful as the oriole itself. From her Amherst retreat, she could almost hear the future:

The farthest Thunder that I heard  
Was nearer than the Sky

And rumbles still, though torrid Noons  
Have lain their missiles by –  
The lightning that preceded it  
Struck no one but myself –  
But I would not exchange the Bolt  
For all the rest of Life –  
Indebtedness to Oxygen  
The Happy may repay,  
But not the obligation  
To Electricity –  
It founds the homes and decks the Days  
And every clamour bright  
Is but the gleam concomitant  
Of that waylaying Light –  
The thought is quiet as a Flake –  
A Crash without a Sound,  
How life's reverberation  
Its Explanation found –

8

There are episodes of *The Simpsons* that do touch or move a viewer the way a poem might. In fact it is possible for a television program, or a movie to be a poem. My own take on *The Simpsons* was a response to the 'poetry' that is in the series. Homer and his family live out the late 20th/ early 21st century American dream. It is a cartoon and therefore the surreal and absurd are more easily achieved than in other forms of television or cinema.

Because of the series' longevity, characterisation has gone beyond the two-dimensional which is the animated cartoon's natural domain. Bugs Bunny played a different character in each cartoon – more a typecast actor – while Homer is a fully-fledged character, a complex of human weaknesses and strengths. *The Simpsons* is also highly allusive, referring often to characters in well known poems,

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8 Dickinson, Emily. p. 154. *Poems*.



novels, plays and movies.

Homer Simpson's responses to the world are often mundane and lackadaisical. At other times he is heroic and invariably absurd. That our hero is named Homer indicates the epic task the cartoon series has taken on: an Iliad and Odyssey for our time. An overarching cultural icon, Homer Simpson is a very flawed Everyman, a warrior of suburban ordinariness rather than a demigod. How better to celebrate a popular hero than by an ode? And the program contains moments of deep thought and morality and provide what many poems give us, moments of truth and beauty:

. . .the holy family, a glowing icon pinned to a wall  
in every house with a television. Moments of truth  
and beauty when the reactor melts down, chaos  
storms into the tv hypnosis. Only dumb luck and  
one of Homer's epiphanies save us—the cartoon  
craziness is Homer expressing love  
for his family. O little baby Maggie her photos  
brighten Sector 7G's grey walls, sweet enough  
to make nuclear power safe for all.  
The little baby's what the story's really about  
in the end what a lot of stories are about  
and that's how the Simpson family's  
love redeems America's savage affluence.  
One day Homer floods Springfield  
to make the streets canals, his town  
a work of art like Venice the city of art.

In this sense my poem is more a slow release medium than television, movies or popular fiction. It also works to distil the essences of the cartoon series. 'Homer's Dream' hopes to work its way into the public consciousness in quieter,

subtler ways. It is garnering readers slowly and surely at the poetryX website<sup>9</sup> and was published more conventionally in the pages of the US journal, *Fulcrum*. But 'Homer's Dream' is also about how we recollect, reflect and understand the values of television.

'Homer's Dream' tries to capture the essence of the series by juxtaposing storylines from different episodes and making them cohere with one voice to see 'what the story's really about'. To achieve the compression necessary to render the underlying (or over-riding) poem that is *The Simpsons* into a single poem, the language used is intended to be at once minimalist and expansive. The poem presents itself as natural speech, but is artficed with internal rhymes, assonance and alliteration, metaphor, flashbacks. Even 'conversational poetry' works in a different register to conversation, as Joseph Brodsky points out:

In the works of the better poets you get the sensation that they're not talking to people any more, or to some seraphical creature. What they're doing is simply talking back to the language itself—as beauty, sensuality, wisdom, irony—those aspects of language of which the poet is a clear mirror.

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Poets sometimes write differently from what has come before. Pound's 'In a Station in the Metro' written in 1911 is a case in point. After the grand poetry of the nineteenth century, Tennyson, Swinburne et al, Pound's two liner might seem hardly a poem at all, yet it is.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

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9 <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/1888>. The poem had attracted 900 'hits' by late 2003 and links to it have appeared on several *Simpsons* fan websites, such as *Cartoons and Comics*, <http://comicscartoons.fanfictionforums.com/>

10 Brodsky, Joseph. Interview in *Writers at Work* (Eighth Series)

Here two apparently disparate images fuse and 'Metro' resonates as a poem should. Incredible compression of sound, and visual imagery render a full poetic experience in just two lines.

While 'Metro' did not conform to the conventional narrative expectations of its time, it does deliver as a poem. Having experienced poetry before, readers expect to deal with an artifice that has 'poetic' qualities but 'Metro' bears little obvious resemblance to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* yet in just two lines there are rhyme, rhythm, alliteration.

From a twenty-first century reader's perspective it is clear 'Metro' fulfils the expectations of a poem and one might wonder why it was ever considered difficult. More explicit linkages between the first and second line could be reasonably expected. Are the 'petals...' a metaphor for the faces in the crowd – or vice versa? Perhaps there are no tropes, and the two lines are separate pictures.

The first line is an immediate impression of a scene: the 'faces in the crowd'. The second line (sensual in its visualisation) focusses on specifics. But these specifics are far away from the people in the Metro and the connection between the two lines which is usually provided by the author is left to be made by the reader. To me this poem stands as a testament to the possibilities of the adage, 'less is more'. I have always admired this poem for its zen-like simplicity and the way it brings a moment to life and puts it on the page.

We might not wish for every poem to be a two line marvel but 'Metro' demonstrates the value of clarity and compression in writing. The imagination is given two pictures that are distinct yet blur, opening many possibilities. The use of

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11 Pound, Ezra. *Selected Poems*, 113.

the semi-colon might indicate this poem is from a list – of apparitions? – or the sentence is complete.

Pound's own comment on the poem's genesis gives an insight into the way one practitioner receives the grace of creativity.

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying, and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little spots of colour. It was just that -- a "pattern," or hardly a pattern, if by "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour.

12

Here, Pound is describing what it like to be 'in the Zone'; a space and time when the poem begins and takes over a poet's being which becomes an instrument (like a lightning rod?) of composition. Being in the zone feels very good, ecstatic. I find it often occurs as a physical experience – breathing quickens or slows right down, the body is seized by a poem – sometimes it is a silence but it is invariably a moment of elation. As for vocabulary, like Wordsworth I like to compose from the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'.<sup>13</sup> It is best to write with words that come naturally. What counts is how these words are put together.

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12 Pound, Ezra. "Vorticism," *The Fortnightly Review* (Sept. 1, 1914), 465-67  
*Representative Poetry Online* <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem1657.html>  
13 Wordsworth, William. Preface. *Lyrical Ballads*. 1800. *Bartleby Classics*.  
<http://www.bartleby.com/>.

### Chapter 3

## PHILOSOPHY

My own work benefited from studying Philosophy. The world of Philosophy I found was a big place with infinite ways of perceiving and explaining the world and its workings.

Phenomenology, in particular, was important in my own intellectual development in that the focus on perception and letting the world speak for itself is a tenet of my writing. Its ultimate appeal is that of all the philosophical movements in the West it relies most on intuitive verification and goes beyond the simply empirical, though empiricism plays a part in it. Like many philosophies it aspires to provide a 'unified theory of the world', a meta-science that offers a key to how humans exist in the world and ultimately to all the arts and sciences. Often it makes use of poetry as a metaphor for how the mind perceives the world and synthesises that information.

Phenomenology also offered a contemplative way to transcendence, that did not impose a deity or overarching ideology.

Apart from helping me to understand the world better (or at least, more interestingly) Phenomenology and its close crisis-bound cousin, Existentialism, offered no programmatic way to change the world and remedy the world's problems. Ethics based on perceiving the world and transcendental understanding have difficulty providing a basis or agenda for action. But an inclusive, open view of the world can help one better understand it.

*Zu den Sachen selbst* (*To the things themselves*) was the catch-cry of the phenomenologist. The world is as we perceive it and full of things which include

ideas, historical events, scientific theories, love, space and relationships. Understanding things in the world means you can go beyond things and see the world as it really is. Merleau-Ponty suggests:

The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man,' or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.

14

To achieve annihilation of the 'inner man' and to transcend the ego it might be best to adopt Keats' *negative capability*, which he defined as 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...'<sup>15</sup> Adopting such a view of the transcendental ego might provide a framework for opening the mind and one's poetry to a large and inclusive vision, allowing the world its own voice or voices. Solipsism is a level of consciousness beyond which poetry should always venture – towards being and life and toward what Merleau-Ponty termed the 'further existence' that a poem inhabits.

While I don't write a poem with *The Phenomenology of Perception*, *Nausea* or even *Ode to a Nightingale* at the back of my mind, I have always had a fond regard for Phenomenology's approach to understanding. As D. J. Huppatz commented in a survey of my earlier work, 'Kelen offers an alternative vision of the world, a poetry affected by the world that in turn affects the world, allowing the noise and silence of the cosmos to reverberate through the reader.'<sup>16</sup> So something of my studies must have sunk in!

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14 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Preface, xi.

15 Keats, John. 'Letter to his brothers, George and Thomas' (21 Dec. 1817). <http://www.mrbauld.com/negcap.html>

16 Huppatz, D. J.. 'Being in the World: the poetry of S.K. Kelen' *Southerly* (Winter 1999), 204.

T.S. Eliot prescribes a remarkably Zen approach so that the poet might attain a workable state of *negative capability*: ‘The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’.<sup>17</sup> Of course some of the greatest poems, including many by Keats, are written from the first person singular yet the poems that ‘succeed’ go beyond the brute requirements of *cogito ergo sum*. Of course a person is still there – a poem must be human, delivered by a human voice – but more as a vehicle for the poem rather than its subject.

A music of the ego and id is possible. The best confessional poems of Lowell, Plath and Berryman inhabit a further world than the self-centredness of first person poems that ‘don’t quite make it’. Husserl’s *transcendental intersubjectivity* allows for generosity of spirit – *transcendental intersubjectivity*: the world is constructed by many minds, not one. The self, like any other place, can be a scene of exaltation. Thoughts themselves can provide enough detail and the *I* or *me* can be an unobtrusive presence in a poem, along with other subjects, as in John Forbes’s ‘Love Poem’:

Spent tracer flecks Baghdad’s  
bright video game sky

as I curl up with the war  
in lieu of you, whose letter

lets me know my poems show  
how unhappy I can be. Perhaps.

But what they don’t show; until  
now, is how at ease I can be

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17 Eliot, T.S.. The Sacred Wood, <http://www.bartleby.com/200/>

with military technology: e.g.  
matching their feu d'esprit I classify

the sounds of the Iraqi AA — the  
thump of the 85 mil, the throaty

chatter of the quad ZSU 23.  
Our precision guided weapons

make the horizon flash & glow  
but nothing I can do makes you

want me. Instead I watch the west  
do what the west does best —

& know, obscurely, as I go to bed  
all this is being staged for me.

18

As in Keats' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', the 'I' is only one of the poem's elements. The persona functions more as a conduit for the working of the poem than its subject. *Only in the world does he know himself*. The initial diversion into the *boys' own* fascination with the technology works to evade the passionate response elicited by lost love: 'whose letter// lets me know my poems show/ how unhappy I can be. Perhaps.' The jilted lover seeks solace from his misery by watching television. Melancholia is intensified by the artillery pyrotechnics in the Gulf War watched on the television. The poet's self-concern is rendered pathetic by the unhappiness implicitly delivered by 'our precision guided weapons'. The incinerated lives and homes of people we have come to know as collateral damage are what 'make the horizon flash & glow'.

The final couplet is an absurd proposition presented as personal knowledge.

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18 Forbes, John. *Collected Poems*, 158.



This knowledge has been acquired ‘obscurely’ through the development of the poem. But it is *the things themselves* that constitute our perceptual experience and it is these ‘things’ that give poems their tactility. As a result, events, people, objects and their place in the world determine their place in consciousness and ultimately in poetry.

Though Husserl’s theory largely eschews theories, it still aims to construct something like a model for the workings of consciousness. The primacy of *phenomenon* allows the world a say in how it is perceived and how it should be imagined.

As Forbes’ ‘Love Poem’ demonstrates, the devil is in the detail. William Carlos Williams would agree. There are, at least as far as the writing of poems is concerned, ‘no ideas but in things’. Generally, poets go beyond the self, though often via a persona.

That things are important components of poems is a practical line to adopt in that it encourages specificity in writing. Tangible objects are imaginatively synthesised to make new worlds or moments of ‘reality’.

Heidegger takes this one step further. Though every real object or creature has the characteristic of *thingness*, in other words a solid, tangible reality about it, we don’t consider a human being, an animal, or even a plant a ‘thing’, but as something much more complex – a being.<sup>19</sup> As important as the objective reality of people, animals and plants are the myriad relationships formed between them. A work of art should be more complex than a mere thing, it must contain relationships – within itself, with its audience and with its subject matter – to attain ‘being’.

Letting the world speak for itself in poetry goes back to the Aristotelian idea of mimesis. The best art is that which most believably recreates life or, better still,

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19 Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter, 21-25.

creates a life of its own. Poems like Eliot's 'Wasteland' and the works of many American poets from Whitman onward make poetry from plain speaking.

A phenomenological view allows for many voices, subjects and objects to assume a place in poetry. The poet's voice might be one of many (or not even there at all) in a poem. Going beyond the self, letting the *ego* dissolve or be annihilated, as much Buddhist teaching recommends, allows a transcendence that gives the world a chance to speak for itself. This engagement with the world can lead to other things occurring within a poem, ethical positions, judgements, meditations, emotions, passions, moments of elation or despair, political engagement, awareness of the sacred or profane etc. Nothing need be precluded from Poetry's view.

All the inputs, the things and beings of the world, are set to the music of speech, and this synthesis creates a dimension of poetry that among other things, steps out from a conventional flow of time. Merleau-Ponty describes this dimension as a poem's 'further existence':

It is well known that a poem, though it has a superficial meaning translatable into prose, leads, in the reader's mind, a further existence which makes it a poem. Just as the spoken word is significant not only through the medium of individual words, but also through that of accent, intonation, gesture and facial expression, and as these additional meanings no longer reveal the speaker's thoughts but the source of his thoughts and his fundamental manner of being, so poetry, which is perhaps accidentally narrative and in that way informative, is essentially a variety of existence. It is distinguishable from the cry, because the cry makes use of the body as nature gave it to us: poor in expressive means; whereas the poem uses language and even a particular language, in such a way that the existential modulation, instead of being dissipated at the very instant of its expression, finds in poetic art a means of making itself eternal...<sup>20</sup>

Here the philosopher is trying to understand the 'further existence' a poem

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<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 150–151.

inhabits which, in many ways, is resistant to analysis: the extra something that may be conveyed to the reader beyond what is suggested literally by the words. The way technique, form, imagery and subject come together can make the difference between a poem that has lasting power and one *dissipated at the very instant of its expression*.

Adopting a single ideology can limit poetry much as it can limit a person's outlook. Such a course runs counter to the openness of Phenomenology which, in addition to insisting on viewing a subject from every point of view (and these can be infinite), allows perception of the world an *intentionality*.

Philosophies, so often used as an excuse for narrow-mindedness, should open the mind to better understanding the world as shown in Les Murray's 'Dog Fox Field' where he suggests where dogmatism can lead, that the duty of poetry is to transcend ideology and to take a stand when human decency demands it. If an ethical response is required, a poet should rely on the resources of his or her humanness.

Taking a stand does not require preaching or editorialising but the world's horrors need to be spoken of with eloquence. Murray does not have to tell us what he thinks or how he feels, the simple but evocative descriptions say it all:

. . .Anna who rocked her head, and Paul  
who grew big and yet giggled small,

Irma who looked Chinese, and Hans  
who knew his world as a fox knows a field.

Hunted with needles, exposed, unfed,  
this time in their thousands they bore sad cuts

for having gazed, and shuffled, and failed  
to field the lore of prey and hound

they then had to thump and cry in the vans  
that ran while stopped in Dog Fox Field. . .

21

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Over the last twenty years or so, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poetry has introduced new and firm theoretical underpinnings to the practice of poetry. One of its principles is that the words in a poem are no more than words, refer only to themselves and have no correlations in the real world beyond words. While it is useful to be reminded that poems ultimately consist of language, the theory ultimately denies the value of imagery and the musical effects of poetry.

Though 'deep truth' might be 'imageless', much of poetry's power depends on its imagery's effectiveness in evoking a picture, sound, smell or taste from the real world. Removing imagery from poetry is to remove its resonance and a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem is often little more than an exercise in syntax, or in truly extreme cases, exercises in punctuation. This is fine if we want poems to take a journey through grammar. This poem by American Clark Coolidge illustrates the point:

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21 Murray, Les. 'Dog Fox Field'. *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, 226-7

I see... "Who wants to see himself"

the noun states accent in air

so much that an "on" or "hard" takes on  
solidity of noun at line-end

the prepositional phrases: a thought he's  
using only one unit, over & over again  
(Cezanne?)

every line hit to a conclusion; the prepositional phrase  
pushed up against its noun-wall; the single noun,  
preposition, whichever, its own wall; each wall  
a cut in space "a wall was thick  
air was a wall"

a nounal/prepositional universe. verb slides...

an invisible & steadying "is" behind everything  
"my own hands are distractions"

all particles in the pile soon to reach  
nounal state

22

This early example of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry takes an enjoyable look at grammar, a journey into the mechanics of syntax. Poetry, like life, is broad enough to accommodate poems about 'a nounal/prepositional universe' but perhaps not too many of them. Such poems, so concerned with the 'process' of writing can end up being evocative only of themselves in my view: the poem as narcissist. But the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E theoreticians and practitioners promote this as something of a virtue:

[I]n the view of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing, the time is always the present. Nevertheless, past and future are permanent concerns of these writers, whose work would be travestied if it were represented as the imperialism of the here and now, or immediate self. The textual activism that is promoted in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing places the writer inside the writing process. The writer manipulates and deploys his or her texts, but in so doing the writer is also, necessarily, made subject

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22 Coolidge, Clark. 'Einger Notes  
<http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse/projects/LANGUAGEN1/html/>

Further we find:

'Frost, Yeats, Auden, and Stevens are the 'precursors' of the poets of accommodation, Pound, Stein, and Zukofsky stand behind the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Oppositional politics are a paramount concern, and the work stands in the sharpest relief, stylistically, to the poetry of accommodation.

24

Dismissing the first four very different writers as 'poets of accommodation' ignores the complexities of Yeats' and Auden's political/poetic activisms and Stevens' experimentation, while appropriating the latter poets seriously discounts Pound's translations of classic and traditional poetry. Still, whatever suits... L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's insistence on the political nature of writing, that poetry should in part work as an oppositionist text to the injustices, cant and general nastinesses of society might come as a timely reminder to poets not to neglect their duties.

The cleverness of 'Larry Einger Notes' lies more in its novelty, though this sort of novelty seems to turn up every now and then – the Futurists and Surrealists loved playing with words and textual surfaces, too – and wears off rather quickly. But the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E program insists on a flatter surface than employed by those other rebels.

Yet often, a poetry breaks free of the boundaries established by its theoretical spokespeople. Poems by Coolidge, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, the Australian John Kinsella and other adherents to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E write

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23 McGann, Jerome, 'Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes' <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/mcgann.html>

24 McGann, Ibid.

poems that are 'good' as poems in that they meet the requirements that are constant to poetry of any style or persuasion.

In fact we find poets sensibly having a bob both ways. Adhering to an ideology or theoretical persuasion can be limiting. John Kinsella, has been a major contributor to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E corpus of poems and to its theory-building. His chapbook, *Syzygy*, includes some extravagant play with parentheses and other keyboard items, but Kinsella also writes poems whose narrative flow and lyricism are well within the range of poems predicted by the work of those 'precursors of accommodation', Yeats, Frost, Auden and Stevens. The following poem from *Syzygy* might be an example of being a bit too fancy for its own good, or of getting carried away playing with a keyboard, yet it catches the reader's eye:

**30: re (con) structure ing / damage  
control**

(a) Ponge c/- or a la Fahnestock

ah  
'In this undergrowth, half shade half-sun  
Who thrusts these sticks between our spokes?'

river white burnt & scullcraft taunting drift downtide, down in the mouth & down towards the centrifugal drag, & towed & motored the sherry stained ramps, I cry & laugh and palpitate
---

& can

not right & moralise  
& catastrophise & lies  
out & about before sequestering  
downs the spout & closes  
the ment (al) gap: lash  
out

25

Perhaps we can think of this poem as an insight into the drafting process. Was this the way the poet wrote in his notebook? Is the stanza enclosed by the lines cut in from another draft? Considered as part of Kinsella's whole body of work, poems like this form a minor tract of his writing, and we find a firm lyric spirit breaking through in many other Kinsella poems, unencumbered by fancy tricks:

### **The Silo**

Visitors, as if they knew, never remarked  
on the old silo with its rammed earth walls  
and high thatched roof, incongruous amongst  
the new machinery and silver field bins.  
Nor the workers brought in at harvest time,  
trucks rolling past the ghostly whimperings,  
snarls and sharp howls cutting the thick silo's  
baffling. Nor when a bumper harvest filled  
every bin and the farmer was hungry  
for space – no one ever mentioned bringing  
the old silo back into service. This  
had been the way for as far back as could  
be remembered. Thin sprays of baby's breath  
grew around its foundations, while wedding  
bouquet sprouted bizarrely from the grey  
mat of thatching. The sun had bleached the walls  
bone-white while the path to the heavily  
bolted door was of red earth, a long thin  
stream of unhealthy blood. Before those storms  
which brew thickly on summer evenings  
red-tailed black cockatoos settled in waves,  
sparking the straw like a volcano, dark  
fire erupting from the heart of the white  
silo, trembling with energy deeper  
than any anchorage earth could offer.  
And lightning dragging a moon's bleak halo  
to dampen the eruption, with thunder  
echoing out over the bare paddocks



towards the farmhouse where an old farmer  
consoled his bitter wife on the fly-proof  
verandah, cursing the cockatoos, hands  
describing a prison from which neither  
could hope for parole, petition, release.

26

Here we find an erstwhile L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet in full flight as a poet in the lyrical narrative mode. Making use of the much wider array of techniques that the long tradition of poetry provides, there is not the haltering self-reference we find in much L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. ‘The Silo’ achieves a real resonance because it has regard to all of poetry and does not seek to limit itself within any theoretical prescription.

Wherever there is a practice there will be a theory trying to explain how things work. Exploring theory can be valuable to a young poet – and probably to old ones. Experiencing different modes of thought that use language logically and/or imaginatively (though not always economically) can stimulate the language gland. There is poetry in philosophy (and a lot of pseudo-poetry as demonstrated by Husserl).

Pound’s Imagism kept it new in 1911, but his best work – some of the Pisan Cantos, Cathay and other translations and transliterations from many poetries – was absorbed into the corpus of poetry. The same could be said of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. They have done much to revive interest and debate in poetry. But their poems will stand or fall in the poetry’s open field that is thousands of years long and millions of miles wide.

This author occasionally likes to have a bet both ways too, and for *Goddess I* wrote a poem about the process of writing, or more correctly, not writing:

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26 Kinsella, John. *the silo: a pastoral symphony*, 58.

## One Year Sentence

Dog tired deep into the morning  
awake first thing after a restless night  
when snatches of dreams where there were words  
that might have been right for the sentence  
there's no getting past it—that one sentence  
the sentence that's been driving you mad for the last  
year or so when you get up every morning  
and go down to the basement study  
switch on the computer  
and see how the sentence is going—  
it'll be a great sentence  
and will lead to somewhere  
more interesting that's if the sentence  
ever gets finished, it's at a new drafting stage—  
there was the time the computer crashed  
and the file with the sentence disappeared  
all day, all night re-writing the sentence  
(sometimes sitting in the backyard at dusk jotting notes  
or a trip to the coast where the ocean can give  
something of its energy), the sentence returned  
to be worked on then down to the basement study  
cleaning up, making the work place  
just right to get cracking on the sentence  
the headache from worrying about the sentence  
should help you concentrate on writing—  
once that one sentence is right the rest of  
the book will almost write itself  
and the opening sentence will illuminate  
like a door opening in the morning;  
there's no getting past it—that one sentence  
never seems nearer to being finished—  
in the morning you get up after a restless night  
wrestling with a verb...

'Wrestling with a verb' or switching on a computer to 'see how the sentence is going' at first glance might seem to be absurdities but they make sense within the absurd proposition made by the poem. This gives the poem its humour and momentum. Even my 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem' breaks out of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's prescribed two-dimensional constraints – it still makes reference to the real world. 'One Year Sentence' is about writing (or not. . .) but it is also about obsession, the desire and struggle to create.

## Chapter 4

### MYSTERIES

The main argument of Colin Wilson's *Poetry and Mysticism*, is that literature and poetry in particular should seek to comprehend the universe and offer transcendental moments that go beyond the day-to-day. Reading poetry therefore should offer deep insights of the universe.

In her *Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver defines a poem as 'both a mystical document and a written document'.<sup>27</sup> We can teach and learn the technical skills for the written part but attaining the mystical in poetry has always been difficult.

Poems, like epiphanies, can just happen. Pound's description of his heightened awareness in the Paris Metro shows that poems often are epiphanies. In this way students of poetry will get straight to the point when they ask: 'Where does it come from?', 'How do you start writing?', 'What gets you going?', 'Do the words or ideas come first for a poem?' When I am asked those questions I get cagey. More than a matter of revealing technical or trade secrets, it's revealing one's relationship to the creative mysteries.

There is an old Chinese saying that goes something like 'who reads a hundred poems writes like a hundred poets, who reads a thousand poems writes like herself'.<sup>28</sup> Such wisdom fits in with an eclectic approach to writing poems. Arguments between different schools of poetry can miss the big picture as Mary Oliver observed: 'Poetry is a river; many voices swim in it; poem after poem move

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<sup>27</sup> Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Anselm Hollo sources this quote from an 'Ancient Chinese poet (?) via Jerry Gilbert via Joel Oppenheimer, in J.O.'s *Poetry the Ecology of the Soul.* *The Poet's Notebook*, 100.

along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves'.<sup>29</sup> Shelley in his essay, *Defence of Poetry*, stated that all poems are really 'episodes to that great poem, which all poets like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind have built up since the beginning of the world'.<sup>30</sup> And every poet wishes their poems to be episodes to that great poem.

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I have found that 'getting it right' in a poem, attaining the poem's 'further existence' is a balancing of many elements. Choice of words for meaning and sound, and how they look on the page; the subject chosen; and how the poem's voice speaks to its subject and to the reader. A great poem sweetly combines these elements but there's always something extra, a resonance that indicates the poem's 'further existence' that might make a poem mystical and lasting.

We can scan and analyse a poem down to its very syllables, examine the punctuation, consider historical inputs and implications, but cannot fully explain how a poem can send a shiver down the spine. In *Poetry and Mysticism*, Colin Wilson goes some way to defining the state of transcendental intersubjectivity. At least telling us how it feels: 'the moments when one has that sense of immense significance, when consciousness seems full of vibrations of meaning'.<sup>31</sup> This is possibly the most succinct and accurate definition of 'being in the zone' I have come across.

False consciousness or bad faith (as the existentialists term it) is seen by Wilson as a lack of awareness of the beauty and complexity of all life and the universe. What we do automatically – eat, sleep, tie up our shoes, drive a car, do our jobs day in and day out – are aspects of what Wilson terms 'the robot', the sum

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29 Oliver, 9.

30 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry*. poetryX at <http://articles.poetryx.com/1/>

31 Wilson, Colin. *Poetry & Mysticism*, 61.

of activities and abilities that enable us to survive. Survival would be almost impossible without instinctual and learned automatic behaviours.

Yet when consciousness is restricted to doing everyday things, when it does not go anywhere beyond the reflex needs of survival, 'the robot' takes over. The world is necessarily reduced and its horizons severely limited. Transcendental states can be achieved through many ways – meditation, religious experience, Zen etc. Poetry, however, switches off the robot by creating a transcendent state in writing, and lets us leave behind the boredom and pessimism that characterise much of life. Thus 'the Poet is a man [or woman] whose vision sometimes expands beyond the usual human limit and is startled by how enormous and beautiful the universe is. It is the one thing that all poets have in common, even the pessimistic ones...'<sup>32</sup>

We can experience the world afresh through the eyes and words of another, and sometimes receive a glimpse of the infinite. Wilson's example from the Bhagavad-Gita, when Krishna allows the warrior Arjuna to see briefly the totality of God, is worth quoting here:

Universal forms, I see you without limit,  
Infinite of arms, eyes, mouths and bellies  
See and find no end, midst or beginning.

33

Without the strictures of meditation or religion, the trauma of taking mind-expanding drugs, poetry can take us straight to the desired state of being, perhaps a bird's or god's eye view of the world or a feeling of repose in the universe. Poetry

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Faith Library: prayers & reflection [http://www.hindugateway.com/library/prayer/articles/lib\\_prayer\\_home\\_bhagavad\\_gita.html](http://www.hindugateway.com/library/prayer/articles/lib_prayer_home_bhagavad_gita.html)

works here as a kind of 'affirmation consciousness'. Good poems about just about anything – the landscape, animals, love, death, families, travel – can give us a 'bird's-eye' or even a 'god's eye' view of existence and refresh our enthusiasm for life. As Colin Wilson would have it, poetry 'is a formula for inducing 'holiday consciousness without the need for a holiday.'<sup>34</sup>

Shelley's sonnet, 'The Poet's Dream' can be seen to attain *holiday consciousness* or a transcendental intersubjectivity that allows the natural world a voice in dreams, and in poetry. At the same time dream and imagination are accorded places in the world of real things. The poem, until line 11, might be just another idyll to wistfulness or perhaps an occult guide to achieve transcendental intersubjectivity – or the sublime. But what we get is a harmony of reality, perception and imagination:

On a Poet's lips I slept,  
Dreaming like a love-adept  
In the sound his breathing kept;  
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,  
But feeds on the aerial kisses  
Of shapes that haunt  
Thought's wildernesses.  
He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,  
Nor heed nor see what things they be—  
But from these create he can  
Forms more real than living man,  
Nurslings of Immortality!

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34 Wilson, 24.

35 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Selected Poems*, 136.

The last three lines of 'The Poet's Dream' occur as a further transcendence. What could appear at first sight as a rather abstract piece, contains enough solid referents in the real world to give the poem a tangibility that pure conceptualising could not. It is the juxtaposition of these real things and actions –'lips' 'breathing', 'lake reflected sun', 'yellow bees', 'ivy'– with very abstract conceptions such as 'thought's wildernesses' that give 'The Poet's Dream' tension, while the combination of 'aerial' and 'kisses' is a fusing of the conceptual with the very tangible.

A 'nursling' is usually someone else's child, the implication here is that poems belong to someone else besides the author. Poems are only yours while you are writing them, perhaps not even then. Like all children, poems grow up to lead their own lives – in publication.

'The Poet's Dream' could easily have degenerated into romantic slush by being more abstract. In another context, which did not include real-world referents, 'mortal blisses', 'thought's wildernesses' and those 'nurslings of immortality' would be abstract to the point of meaninglessness.

Here Shelley finely balances the precisely real, the almost real and the abstract, which in the poem's context (after all it is a dream) synthesise to create poems – 'Forms more real than living man'. Note that the poem begins with what might be considered the weaker of the major tropes, a simile '...like a love-adept' but progresses to the metaphor and 'imageless' physical description and thought. The reader is carried to a place, perhaps where metaphor has fallen away and experiences an inkling that the 'deep truth is imageless'.<sup>36</sup>

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36 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Prometheus Unbound* (Act II Scene IV): 'If the abysm/Could vomit forth its secrets--but a voice/Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;/For what would it avail to bid thee gaze/ On the revolving world? What to bid speak/Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these/ All things are subject but eternal Love...'



And it is as much what is not said as what is that can give a poem its power. Silence at the poem's structural level (a caesura) can turn the meaning of a poem inward or outward or, as in 'The Poet's Dream', what is not explicit is left to the reader's imagination. We are not informed how a 'love-adept' might dream, in fact we are not even told what a love-adept actually is. But it is not so hard to imagine, especially in the context of the poem. A poem must be of the world (so it can be perceived) in order for it to create its own world. Philosophy, science and other disciplines attempt to explain everything in a logical sequence of ideas, description, and analysis. Poetry relies on other things besides explanation.

'Poet's Dream' might suggest a humbling of the self because from the point of view of the poem, the poet is just part of the process of artistic creation, no more than the instrument of a poem's delivery. The finished poem itself emerges as the object of transcendence, a form 'more real than living man' implying perhaps the Platonic world of ideals or a further reality where the 'nurslings of immortality' have to grow up to be long lasting poems.

Certainly a poem has a greater chance of attaining immortality than its creator, but how humble can the progenitor of 'nurslings of immortality' really be? The poet's role is to nurture poems as ultimately they are someone else's children.

A poem attains 'further existence' when its total effect is greater than the sum of its parts (words). A poem can be 'haunting', meditative, exciting, erotic, confronting, funny, sad, uplifting and then evoke any of a number of feelings or intellectual responses in a reader or listener.

According to Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, the first human utterings, the first naming of things, was our primal poetry; the development of human speech was an act of poetic creation and meaning, but of course language grew way beyond the bounds of any poem:

In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of Poetry.

37

Many poets look back on golden ages, different times in different societies where poets in general held more power and prestige than they do in contemporary society. The Irish filid, British bards, Chinese sages, the seers, the Arabs' sha'ir, and the shamans of the world made a living from composing, reciting and inhabiting an albeit magical 'further existence', that was parallel to the reality they served with chants, spells, charms and poems.

The significance of poetry as a social force is stronger in European culture the further back in time we look. In societies that did not rely on writing, poetry holds an almost central place to communication and culture. As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* tells us of Native American poetry:

The Indians made poems...for many reasons: to praise their gods and ask their help in life; to speak to the gods through dramatic performances at seasonal celebrations or initiations or other rites; to work magical cures or enlist supernatural aid in hunting, plant-growing, or horse breeding; to hymn the praises of the gods; to chronicle tribal history; to explain the origins of the world; to teach right conduct; to mourn the dead; to arouse warlike feelings; to compel love; to awaken laughter; to ridicule a rival or bewitch an enemy; to praise famous men; to communicate the poet's private experience; to mark the beauties of nature; to boast of one's personal greatness; to record a vision scene; to characterise the actors in a folk tale; to

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37 Shelley. *A Defence of Poetry*.

quieten children; to lighten the burden of work; to brighten up tribal games; and, sometimes, to express simple joy and a spirit of fun. 38

Poetry still can and does do these things, though not in any real official sense, because other ways have evolved that serve many of the functions that poetry previously undertook. For example, prose for writing history, horticulture and botany for growing plants, veterinary science for horse breeding, propaganda to arouse warlike feelings, love songs, pornography and romantic comedies to compel love, newspapers to praise famous men, Panadol to quieten children (though nursery rhymes are still used to put them to sleep).

The supernatural powers attributed to sha'ir and shamans have sadly diminished. Poetry can still do all sorts of magic for a reader or listener, but today poems must be appreciated for being good poems.

Unburdened of its many 'official' duties, poetry is free to be poetry. Perhaps poetry's final and most sacred duty is to language and speech, or as Eliot in 'Little Gidding' noted: 'Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us/ To purify the dialect of the tribe/ And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight. . .'.<sup>39</sup> Keeping the language pure means keeping it refreshed. A poem must use language in new and exciting ways, but it might also urge its receiver's mind to see the world with foresight and aftersight. There is 'poetry' in the world but poems must have 'that something extra'.

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38 'American Indian Poetry', *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 19-23.

39 Eliot, T.S.. *Collected Poems*, 218.

## Chapter 5

### POLITICS

When Shelley described poets as being the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’, he was not making some absurd grab for power or, on the other hand, a plaintive cry for more attention to the art. He was merely placing the profession at its position in the hierarchy of human consciousness.

Most poets in Shelley’s day had the means to just be a poet and thus had the time to see the world clearly. As leading members of their society, poets’ works were read widely and their ideas and visions taken seriously.

But Shelley is also referring to the poet’s responsibility to say what is really right and wrong in the world. And this does not require any ideological adherence or theoretical standpoint to make a poem do that. In fact the most effective political poems are those whose language and imagery are distant from ideology.

Shelley’s own ‘Masque of Anarchy’, preferred to dress up its villains – Britain’s ruling politicians – as characters from a Punch and Judy show or perhaps a pantomime. Murder is being played by Castlereagh (the foreign secretary whose suppression of the Irish Rebellion was noted for its brutality), Fraud is played by Eldon (the Lord Chancellor who as attorney general was largely responsible for the measures that the ministry of William Pitt the Younger took to suppress political meetings and literature considered seditious.)

And many more Destructions played  
In this ghastly masquerade,

All disguised, even to the eyes,

We need not know who were Castlereagh, Eldon or the other people identified in the poem, only that they were politicians acting out the roles of Murder, Fraud and Hypocrisy and they are harbingers of chaos and finally there is 'Anarchy' who gets to play himself, but masquerades as '...GOD, AND KING, AND LAW'. Knowing what we know of politicians and the results of their actions in the world, the poem then remains accessible to modern readers.

Having said that, those who bemoan that, for all its passion and power, poetry doesn't seem to be able to really change the world (let alone save it) are asking too much. No one reasonably expects any other art form or even a common human trait like *decency* to somehow remedy the bad, truly indecent things that happen in the world. Perhaps this frustrated expectation of the power of poetry is a relic from poetry's ancient use in magic and religion. That a poem might conjure images or scenes, or a better understanding in a reader or listener's mind, should be enough.

Unacknowledged legislators compose their tracts within the harmonies and disharmonies of the world. Poets can challenge and accuse, examine, praise and condemn, but the practical application of vision is down to political and practical action. It is the poet's job to see, taste, smell, touch and hear the world for what it is, and what it was, or might have been. But a good political poem can take us to another dimension of understanding, to the 'further existence' a good poem inhabits. Robert Adamson's 'The Goldfinches of Baghdad', for example, demonstrates the power of imagination and how poetry's heart can ache:

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40 Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 'The Mask of Anarchy'. *The Oxford Library of English Poetry* (vol. 2), 423.

These finches are kept in  
 gold-plated cages and fruit boxes  
 covered with wire mesh, they  
 are used by the falcon trainers as lures  
 and as living ornaments singing to rich patriarchs  
 in their death beds. Their song is utterly pure and melodious.  
 A goldfinch with a slashed throat  
 was the subject of masterpiece painted by an artist  
 in the sixteenth century on the back  
 of highly polished mother-of-pearl shell:  
 it burns along with the living caged birds  
 in Saddam's palace tonight. Feathers and flesh,  
 hands and wings burn; and as the sirens wail  
 the tongues of poets and the beaks of goldfinches burn.  
 The ones who cannot speak burn  
 along with the articulate; the creatures  
 who are oblivious of prayer, burn along with the ones  
 who lament to their God. Falcons on their silver chains,  
 and the children of the falcon trainer smother  
 in the smoke of burning feathers and human flesh.  
 We must sing or die. Singing death as our songs feed the flame.

41

A remote world and experience is brought into existence – but how? The poet was not in Iraq at the time of the bombing. In all likelihood he has never been to Baghdad, yet with what he does know of Iraq and its current military situation from television and newspaper reports – and perhaps from dreams – he can create a poem whose immediacy and sadness are lasting. So poetry's further existence is not always a happy place. That beauty can be born of horror is one of the perversities of poetry and art in general. As Shelley commented: '[t]he pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself'.<sup>42</sup> The aesthetic 'pleasure' obtained from the beautiful writing here does not make anyone happy or

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41 Adamson, Robert. 'The Goldfinches of Baghdad'. *Best Australian Poems 2003*, 67.

42 Shelley. *A Defence of Poetry*.

glad – but it can make people more aware of what is not right.

Similarly, the most dire of situations can inspire humour. A ditty, the last of a sequence, ‘Australian Transcripts’ by a long-forgotten colonial poet, William Simpson, demonstrates ‘black humour’ at its most incisive:

**Justice (uncivilised and civilised)**

That night Ah Sin was somewhat shot –  
By accident! For he had got  
From Earth a little gold — black sin  
For thee though not for us. Ah Sin!

43

It would be hard to attribute a specific ideological or theoretical position as actually informing this poem. Perhaps the poem’s brevity and its grim humour makes it resistant to analysis of a serious kind or perhaps it obscurely contains the seeds of a ‘post-colonial’ approach to the world where the point of view of the *other*, in this case, non-European migrant, is taken by the author. This seemingly simple poem depends on its readers knowing what it is about but its grim humour speaks volumes about the human condition. Poor Ah Sin might be an illegal immigrant today making a futile claim for a share of majority Australia’s fabulous standard of living and quality of life.

Language itself is the ultimate poem run riot. There so many voices, too many words and too much to do with the words to even have time to jot down a poem, and most of what’s spoken and written just vanishes. The great poem of the world began with the first word uttered and will last as long as people are speaking.

So much of what is said in public is so absolutely appalling. Hopefully

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43. Simpson, William. ‘Justice (uncivilised and civilised)’. p. 184. *Australian Ballads and Rhymes: poems inspired by life and scenery in Australia and New Zealand*, 184.

unaware of the term's resonance, the Government names its policy for dealing with refugees 'the South Pacific solution'. The irony of calling the refugees' leaking boats siev(e)<sup>44</sup> seemed to evade notice. When the Prime Minister says that a group of refugees are 'the kind of people we wouldn't want in Australia' his vague language allows different people to insert their own reasons for not wanting to allow these 'kind of people' to enter the country.

Conversely, poems like 'The Gold Finches of Baghdad' go some way toward redeeming language and use words to see beyond lies and ignorance, to evoke and inspire rather than deceive and suppress. Yet sometimes the news itself reads like a poem. This juxtaposition of news stories was delivered in almost the same breath by the newsreader on recent a late evening edition of the ABC News:

Afghan refugees in Jakarta refused entry to Australia have sewn their lips together protesting their treatment by Australian authorities. Indonesian officials have said they can remain in Indonesia. The Commonwealth Bank announced a record annual profit of \$2.6 billion. . .

45

So many political usages of language are anathema to those who believe language should enlighten, delight and liberate. These are hard days, these early years of the twenty-first century, a time perhaps when poetry might matter more than ever.

Language has been used by governments, corporations and other organisations to propagandise, lie and justify the unjustifiable. But poetry continues

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44 "SIEVX is the acronym for 'Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X' (the X stands for 'unknown'). It is the name by which we have come to know the dilapidated, criminally overloaded Indonesian fishing boat that sank en route to Australia's Christmas Island in October 2001 with the loss of more than 350 lives, most of them women and children." *SIEVX: Unanswered Questions* at <http://sievx.com/>.

45 *ABC Television News: evening bulletin*. 12 August 2004



to keep language fresh and to use words as an instrument of imagination and as a way to express truth. This is true not just of poems per se but the poetry that is found in other places as in journalism, sport or TV.

POETRY IN PUBLIC

Everyone has been touched by poetry, even if only in childhood, by nursery rhymes, by the cat in the hat, by remembered popular song lyrics, by the youthful writing of love poems, the recitation of schoolyard rhymes and ditties, and keeping a journal usually involves writing some poems. Everyone has an opinion about poetry. Just ask anybody what they think of poetry and they will tell you they either love, hate it or couldn't care less. But the detractors of poetry know it well enough to have firm ideas about the art. Not everything is for everyone, not everyone loves cool jazz or skydiving. Why should everyone be expected to love poetry?

Those who do love poetry often complain about its lack of worldly rewards.

An editorial for the Poets Union journal, *Five Bells* opined:

It's lucky we don't write for money or fame...We shrug our shoulders. Laugh. It was ever thus. Only a few giants break through. But still it niggles. Why isn't poetry more popular? Why don't the general public read it for pleasure? Do we blame the major publishers (never the heroic smaller presses!)? The magazine editors who choose to print the wrong poems (who are doing a similar thankless job)? The poets who write the wrong poems? The academics who don't write about poetry in the right way? The bookshops who don't stock it? The distributors who don't distribute it? The teachers who don't teach it properly? The public who don't read it? Haven't we been here before?

46

Yes, some of us have been here before and the answer is that these questions are largely irrelevant. Fame and fortune do not necessarily come to the composers of great poems. Posterity hopes to be the main beneficiary of poetic production.

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46 NSW Poets Union. 'Editorial' *Five Bells* (summer 2002), 3.

And posterity rarely pays. Doomsayers like the Poets Union and Christopher Bantick who fear the dreadful consequences of the decline of poetry seem to ignore the large part that poetry still plays in Australian culture and culture in general. Perhaps there is enough poetry in most people's lives they do not feel the need to read or purchase volumes of verse.

Writing poems is a national pastime that is taken for granted. The literary sections of the newspapers, the various cultural and literary journals, the national broadcaster and, of course, the poetry magazines are deluged with literally thousands and thousands of poems by thousands of Australians every year. There would be tens of thousands more writing who can't be bothered mailing them off and playing the great game of getting published.

At the 2001 Queensland Poetry Festival (18 – 21 October 2001), poet and publisher Rob Riel estimated that about 86,000 poems were submitted annually to Australian literary and cultural journals. When Rodney Hall was Poetry Editor for *The Australian* he estimated that his section of the newspaper had more contributions than the 'Letters to the Editor' columns. My own experience as poetry editor for the weekend edition of the *Canberra Times* confirms these estimates. I received about 300 poems per month, and could publish three at the most. Larger papers like *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* get many more.

I found that the published (professional? established? practising? or experienced?) poets tended to write the better poems, the ones most suitable for publication. Their poems generally had something new to say and used language in a way that in itself was worth reading, and through their verve and originality were worth publishing. The poems that didn't make it were still worthy expressions of the writers' views, but they all used borrowed cadences and expressions that could only be described as clichéd. There were also submissions that with a bit of work

might be publishable. This is where an editor can help a writer along, make a few suggestions to, say, tighten up the poem, get the line lengths right, or rework or remove the clichéd third line and encourage them to keep writing and, perhaps, read more poetry.

The desire to create poetry is not the sole preserve of the fanatic poets. Steve Waugh when captain of the Australian cricket team conducted poetry workshops for his team on the train from South Africa to Zimbabwe to play in the 2003 Cricket World Cup. Waugh claims to have started a craze for composing poetry among the Australian cricketers when he asked the team's fitness adviser, David Misson, to come up with an inspirational quote. Instead Misson wrote an original poem which when read to the team had an inspirational effect. Waugh then requested his players and other team support staff to come up with their own poems. Manager, Steve Bernard, delivered the following lines about the captain before a match against the English in 2002:

If he loves one thing, it is the fight,  
When the game is poised and the bowling tight,  
And the bowling attack is sensing blood,  
If they get his wicket, there'll be a flood. ('The Skipper')

47

But others credit the team manager, John Buchanan, for 'proposing new-fangled ideas such as creative visualisation and group poetry readings', techniques he had used successfully when managing the Queensland side. Whatever its origins, poetry emerged as an important tool for our international cricketers, and as one fan commented, 'If reading poetry wins us games, then bring it on'.<sup>48</sup>

We should not expect great literary works from our sportsmen and women—

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47 *Steve Waugh Australian of the Year*, <http://www.freewebs.com/stevewaugh/>

48 *CRICINFO* [http://www.cricket.org/link\\_to\\_database/](http://www.cricket.org/link_to_database/)

they can't be expected to do everything at championship level. They can be expected to write a form of applied poetry to assist their sports and perhaps lifestyles with the benefits of increased creativity and perceptiveness. Poetry can bring a more imaginative approach to the game and enliven sportspeople's memoirs. As well as holding poetry workshops and readings, Waugh included his own verse in his bestselling annual *Captain's Diary*.<sup>49</sup> Waugh was updating the traditional gentleman all-rounder's accomplishments which included a familiarity with verse and a propensity to write it occasionally to supplement the journal or commonplace book.

So the poetic impulse is strong in society. For example, adroit and innovative use of words and vivid imagery have a place in satire and reportage.

When Rampaging Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson (Roy and H.G.) turn on their endless commentary cum banter they present a unique and extreme vision of Australia, *when too much sport is barely enough*. They mine the fitful vernacular and dry-as-the-desert humour with the wicked exuberance of a C.J. Dennis. There is something of the spiv in just about everything they say. Watching the grand final on the TV with the volume turned down and the radio on listening to Roy and H.G.'s alternative commentary on Triple-J was one of the great civilised activities of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Australia. Roy and H.G. fulfil the poet's tasks of reviving and refreshing the language, and between them create a voice (not always a pretty one) that speaks to many Australians. But Roy and H.G. have also taken on the shaman's role, protecting and proselytising our great icons, bringing to the public the mysteries of sport.

Sport then functions as metaphor and paradigm for Australian society at large. Every word used works as a double entendre, often smutty. They mercilessly

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<sup>49</sup> Waugh, Stephen. *Captain's Diary* 2002.

lampoon sporting and other public figures with much verbal ingenuity. At the Olympics we find fencing champions are ‘dazzle merchants’, while the Graeco-Roman wrestling is presented as a fat man’s enactment of the *karma sutra* that begins in the ‘dog position’ and gets smuttier as the match progresses, the poor wrestlers’ ‘cruets’ cop a pounding along the way, as do the ‘battered savs’.

The Olympic Gymnastics Artistic Men’s Floor Routine is transformed to a riotous sequence of metaphor and synecdoche relating to various movements and parts of the body, and viewers find themselves treated to a hapless bronze medallist:

he’s opened the back door bringing up  
the crazy legs the crazy legs  
and there it is—the crazy date!  
and a hello boys  
landing—a flat bag  
he’s up again—crazy date, crazy date  
what’s this—a half hello boys?  
he’s gone into a full Harry  
the back door’s open  
a battered sav launching  
into a chiko roll  
ah yes, the chip shop’s open  
another battered sav and he’s serving  
it up with fries—it’s a four dollar fifty routine  
and he fried that mars bar beautifully. . .<sup>50</sup>

In one episode I recall of their short-lived Channel 7 sports variety series, *The Monday Dump*, viewers were asked to campaign to popularise the word ‘arseclown’ as a term of abuse. But for all their crass talk of ‘trouser flutes’, ‘Dutch winks’ and ‘kicks up the date’ Roy and H.G. are making us look anew at familiar things, how we speak but their banter often sexualises its subjects in discourse (yet

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<sup>50</sup> Roy & HG. *The Dream in Athens*, 28 August 2004, Prime Television.

remains eerily unerotic). Some true poetry emerges, for example, H.G.'s calling of the final stages of the 2002 State of Origin opener was a cross between a race call and the hot panting bits of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. (I was driving at the time and could not transcribe this.)

During the second State of Origin match in 2003, when H.G. praised one of the New South Wales Players, 'He's the carburettor and the six plugs'<sup>51</sup> it brought to mind the automotive 'Fuel Injection' I wrote in 2001 for *Goddess of Mercy*:

Admiring the silver trees  
I feel so proud I planted these.  
A white owl perched on the branch  
of an elm tree, a person  
like an owl can fly or stay  
what dreams make possible for some  
a finely tuned car does for others.  
There's the toll we pay for running  
engines filthying the atmosphere  
the carnage is an undeclared war  
all worthwhile when you hear  
a steel heart's multi-valve purr.

Petrol head meets petrol head  
and many permutations thereof  
equals one kind of modern love  
their heat and carbon emissions  
are real life. Drive off to fight  
for clean air, for road safety  
and plant a forest on the roadside.  
Like all my contemporaries I've  
fallen for technology (fleeting magic)  
know fuel injection is a beautiful thing.

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<sup>51</sup> Roy and HG. Rugby League, *State of Origin*, second match. Commentary 25 June 2003. Triple J FM.

Admiring the chariots  
parked beneath the silver trees  
I feel so proud I planted these.

The nexus of machine and human implied in H.G.'s metaphor is made explicit in 'Personality', the slippery ambiguities such as driving a polluting car 'to fight for clean air' are subsumed and made slipperier by the love a car can bring. Michael Brennan wrote of this poem in a review of *Goddess of Mercy*:

Gesturing towards the pastoral in the speaker's admiration for the 'silver trees' he has just planted, Kelen develops a suburban idyll in celebration of a 'modern love'... He unravels the contradictions of one of the key loves of suburban experience, a young man for his V8, fully cognisant of the 'undeclared war'... With the relative, not wholly redemptive, worth of the modern love in question, the poem sees the line between turpitude and morality blurred with well-meaning, if self-deluding ethics. The import of this unabashed paean lies in the recognition that the ambiguous, almost ambivalent, ethical position is the stuff of 'real life'.

52

Roy and H.G. also recognise 'that the ambiguous, almost ambivalent, ethical position' is the stuff of 'real life'. They are, among other things, tapping in to a culture's reflex for poetry as does much comedy. (The structure of a joke will often resemble the rondeau, returning to a refrain which has taken on a different and funny meaning because of the joke's carefully structured telling).

It is the poetic reflex that makes language so rich with metaphor and the need to create new metaphor. When you are working hard you are likely to be 'flat out like a lizard drinking'.

The TV program *Kath & Kim* is rich with Australian metaphor. The two foxy ladies can happily describe themselves as 'hornbags', recommend 'lean cuisine

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52 Brennan, Michael. 'Unplugged Sensibilities' *Australian Book Review* (March 2003), 58.



and nicotine' as the best way to lose weight. When Kim's husband, Brett, has to fly to the Gold Coast he catches 'an 11 o'clock virgin'.<sup>53</sup>

Some episodes of *Kath and Kim* are poems too, tales of everyday consumer extremism where a simple plot, for example, a makeover to make Sharon a true hornbag like Kim or buying a plasma TV, takes on epic proportions. The dialogue at times is a machine-gun sputter of malapropisms, misheard homily, triple-entendred puns and many neologisms – a formula for wicked humour.

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A geek who wishes to write a computer virus, worm or trojan (malicious programs for disrupting computer operating systems or hard drives usually spread via the internet) might approach his work with the thrill a poet gets putting pen to paper. And they like to 'keep it new', refreshing the design of malicious computer code the way a poet might wish to write a contemporary sonnet:

For the sheer intellectual challenge, PhileOast3r replied, the fun of producing something 'really cool'. For the top worm writers, the goal is to make something that's brand new, never seen before. Replicating an existing virus is 'lame', the worst of all possible insults. A truly innovative worm PhileOast3r said, 'is like art'. To allow his malware to travel swiftly online, the virus writer must keep its code short and efficient, like a poet elegantly packing as much creativity as possible into the tight format of a sonnet. . .

54

The W32/Bagle-W worm was one of many that propagated through email, but rather than wipe a hard drive or cause programs to crash, this worm simply delivered a little piece of 'New Age' doggerel as an attachment. The verse is less infectious than the worm: 'Unique people make unique things/That things stay

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53 Riley, Gina and Turner, Jane. *Kath & Kim*. Series 1 and 2. Melbourne. ABC DVD (2004)

54 Thompson, Clive. 'Dangerous Minds'. *Sydney Morning Herald: Good Weekend* (April 3 2004), 23

beyond the normal life and common understanding/The problem is that people don't understand such wild things./Like a man did never understand the wild life.'<sup>55</sup>

Sydney Morning Herald columnist, John Casimir discovered a source of found poetry in perhaps the most obnoxious phenomenon of the digital age, unsolicited email, or Spam, 'piecing together odd little narratives from the subject lines of the junk email that pumps into my Inbox like digital effluent'.<sup>56</sup> And the 'spoems' that appeared in succeeding issues of *Icon* had a definite jauntiness about them. Some even pushed the poetry buttons, albeit briefly, as in John Casimir's 'Four O'clock Dreaming':

Breaking News: Your Job Sucks  
the solution is finally here  
Get what you need  
Termination Notice  
It's now or never  
Feel co-worker envy  
No Boss! No Suit! No Commute!

57

But depending on what comes in your email inbox limits the likelihood of good poems as much to luck as to good composition, thus much spoetry will, like its inputs, be destined for the deletion box.

The following was emailed me by an old friend in the public service. It demonstrates that speech is a wonderful resource for found poetry, even when it is the speech of somebody grappling with words, making up words when they don't

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55 Keizer, Gregg. 'The Poetic Side of Worms', TechWeb News

<http://informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=19202014>

56 Casimir, John. 'Dr Spamlove' *Sydney Morning Herald: Icon* (May 1-2, 2004), 6-7

57 *Sydney Morning Herald: Icon* (May 22-23 2004), 3.

58 A fascinating analysis of the popularity of this poem on the Internet and an explanation of its origins and purposes is available at the *Urban Legends Reference Pages*, <http://www.snopes.com/politics/bush/piehigher.asp>

know the real ones, perhaps like a primal poet inventing a language. . .

#### GEORGE BUSH, ZEN POET

This is a short poem made up entirely of actual quotations from George W. Bush. These have been arranged, only for aesthetic purposes, by Washington Post writer, Richard Thompson. A poem like this is too good not to share.

#### MAKE THE PIE HIGHER

I think we all agree, the past is over.  
This is still a dangerous world.  
It's a world of madmen and uncertainty And potential mental losses.  
Rarely is the question asked  
Is our children learning?  
Will the highways of the Internet  
Become more few?

How many hands have I shaken?  
They underestimate me.  
I am a pitbull on the pantleg of opportunity.

I know that the human being  
And the fish can coexist.  
Families is where our nation finds hope, Where our wings take dream.  
Put food on your family!  
Knock down the tollbooth!  
Vulcanize society!  
Make the pie higher!  
Make the pie higher!<sup>58</sup>

Poetry can be found anywhere. The 'found poem' has a distinguished lineage that includes Dadaist, Futurist and Post-modernist practitioners. The corollary of poets finding poems almost written for them is poets leaving poems in places to be found by members of the public. In some cities like Sydney and London, poems have been exhibited on public transport.<sup>59</sup> Australian artist/poet, Richard Tipping, makes visual poems that gently confront the public:

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<sup>59</sup> *Artransit* was a program placing poems on Sydney buses, see <http://leswicks.tripod.com/art.htm>



60

The clever choice of words for a headline and the neat lines of the newspaper columns constitute an endless prose poem. Perhaps Pound was right when he described literature as 'news that lasts'. Or is it that news is literature that doesn't last? In the newspapers (the weekend editions at least) a traditional practical use for poetry – satire – is still employed.

Satire is *applied poetry* and perhaps one of poetry's few remaining public duties. Political cartoonist, Alan Moir caricatured the Australian political scene through weekly episodes of his mock-epic cartoon 'Little Caesar' in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Written in heroic couplets, or thereabouts, the verse engages directly with public life:

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60 Tipping, Richard, Kelly. *Signed*. <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/school/design-comm-info/staff/tipping/public/signed/oneday.html>

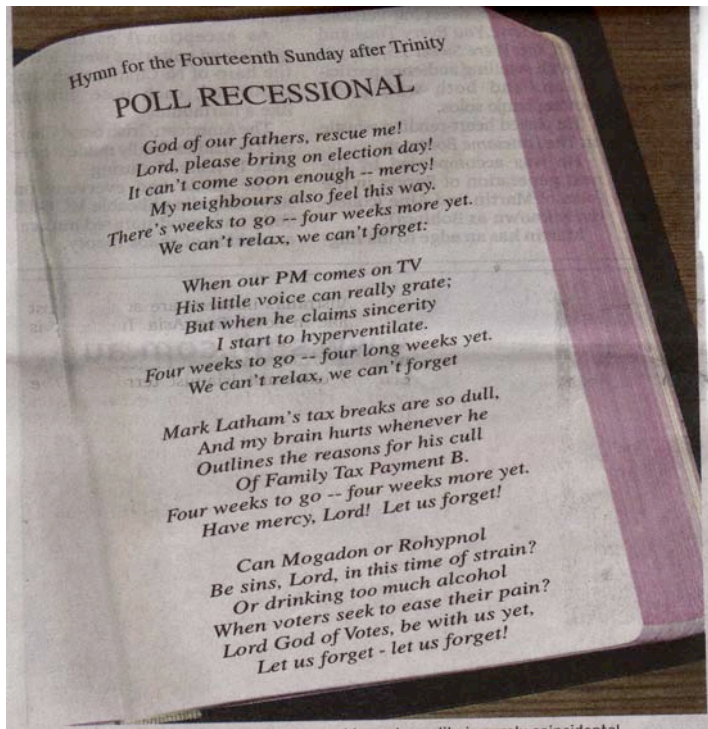


61

Chris Henning is another satirist who occasionally draws on the deep wells of the Australian popular feeling for poetry:

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61 Moir, Alan. 'Little Caesar'. *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 12-13), 2002.



And of course, the ABC radio cricket commentary is our epic eclogue – a collection of gentle and often animated voices describing a pastoral activity that, for all its tensions and changes of play, is as timeless as fielding. The word pictures broadcast evoke a vision of Australia that is harmonious, which sees the world as an ordered place, or places an order upon it – the rules, customs and language of cricket – where values of decency and sportsmanship are paramount and if that sounds old-fashioned, perhaps the past doesn't have much more to offer us by way of values. ABC radio cricket commentary serves a function similar to that served by Edmund Spenser's 'Faery Queen', providing a spiritual focus as well as an absorbing diversion .

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62 Henning, Chris. 'True Fictions' *Sydney Morning Herald* (11-12 September 2004), 28.

## THE GREAT GAME OF GETTING PUBLISHED

I started writing poetry fairly young with the idea of publishing my work and got lucky. When my first poems appeared in *Poetry Australia* in 1973 I felt a sense of satisfaction that came in waves. I knew then poems are written to be published. And the ‘quality’ journals made the space to do it. Here, it seemed to me, were the incubating grounds of Australia’s finest poems.



<sup>63</sup> Journals like *Southerly*, *Meanjin*, , *Quadrant*, *Westerly* are perhaps the sentinel literary publications, long-lasting with a multitude of editors and many hundreds of authors appearing in their pages. With coverage of cultural, social and artistic pursuits these journals reach a wider audience than magazines devoted entirely to poetry, like the excellent but sadly

defunct *New Poetry* and *Poetry Australia*.

Over the years, many of my ‘nurslings of immortality’ have found happy homes in journals like *Poetry Australia*, *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Heat*, *Scripts*, the literary page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and especially *Southerly*.

Of course it is not *that* easy getting published. By age 19, I had wallpapered

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63 Henning. ‘True Fictions’. *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 18-19 2003), 26.

the garage wall with rejection notices from magazines and newspapers. Ultimately reject slips proved to be a good thing – they teach you to only send out your poems when they are good enough. Even when they are good enough, poems still get knocked back because space is limited in the journals.

Journals and anthologies let poems interact with other poems and find new contexts and sometimes common ground, particularly when the editor has chosen works to address a specific theme. But while writing the poems for *Goddess of Mercy* I forgot all about publishing and just appreciated being in the zone, too busy working on poems to worry about stamps and envelopes.

\* \* \*

Another of poetry's duties is the 'poetry reading'. Audiences may not be in the rock stadium league but they are generally well versed and discerning which makes readings a good testing ground for poems. Poems are audio documents as well as 'mystical' and 'written' and should be able to sustain oral performance. A clanger read out loud can really clang. Some actors and radio 'voices' can make anything sound good. I read poems at a few readings and festivals in 2001 and 2002 and the poems I was writing for *Goddess* went over well, no clangers or at least not serious clangers. I knew the poems 'sounded' okay but any lines or words that did not come fluently off the tongue would be reviewed.

There is a new place for publishing poems. Poetry-lovers might bemoan the loss of print outlets, including space in newspapers, lack of interest by major publishers, and the frequent demise of literary journals but the space for poetry has increased exponentially with the advent of the world wide web. The volume of poetry-devoted resources on the internet is immense, with thousand of ezines (online journals) flourishing, poetry databases; online communities that discuss poetry and related matters on chat sites and on email lists such as Poetryetc,



Performance Poetry, British Poetry, Poetry Espresso, poneme.

A Google search for the terms 'poem' or 'poet' will deliver links to tens of millions of websites. As well as being able to read new poems it is possible to download complete volumes of poetry, sound files of readings, access sites with new forms of digital poems. The Australian poet, Komninos Zervos, has an interesting site of cyberpoems, interactive texts that are part concrete poem, part computer game. Impossible to reproduce on paper, it is better to experience the cyberpoems at Komninos' Cyberpoetry site at [http://www.griffith.edu.au/ppages/k\\_zervos/](http://www.griffith.edu.au/ppages/k_zervos/). There is a plethora of websites devoted to poetry and poems offering endless resources, discussion, e-book publishing, video clips of poets performing their work, reviews, critiques, essays, statements of poetics, online journals, the ability to download the complete works of the 'great' poets. It has been said that Poetry comes a not too distant second to 'sex' in the number of sites on the World Wide Web.

Nurslings of immortality have overrun the information superhighway. The great traditions of poetry are there as well as the new and experimental, and really awful poetry is there, too. The many discussion lists show that poetry still plays a big part in a lot of people's lives.

The speed with which poetry sites can be accessed and the many digressions made possible by links to different sites has created a new arena – the screen – where many different kinds of poetics co-exist. Conventional print poems are far easier to read on a screen than, say, a novel. In fact they can look quite beautiful, illuminated by cathode ray or liquid crystal light.

As Angela Gardner wrote in introduction to the first issue of the poetry *e*zine, *foam:e*:

The web has brought new opportunities for poetry to again be a visible force within society. The nature of this global communication medium, its immediacy and openness, has meant that a sense of community can be enjoyed by people in disparate places, societies and time zones.

64

In the online age if a billion flowers wish to blossom, they can do so. In many ezines and other poetry sites there is little mention of 'schools' or 'movements'. In cyberspace there is enough room for everybody. Some sites, of course, are dedicated to specific kinds of poetry. For example, *Jacket* (created and edited by the doyen of the Australian '68ers, John Tranter) has a definite preference for American modernist and post-modernist poetry, though many other poetries – French, Australian, English – are in there, too.

There is already a quality 'press' out there. Online journals like *Eclectica*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Jacket*, *Cordite* and *Thylazine* are among the early twenty-first century's cutting edge journals. Alongside the established print periodicals they provide the public arena for new writing. To an author a published book is still worth more than a million web pages, but if *digital* (or something evolving from it) is the future of publishing, then it is probably wise to have a few poems published and archived in cyberspace. Some poems from *Goddess...* would end up in ezines.

But one has to be careful. Poetry has its share of confidence tricksters, especially on the world wide web. In 2002 I read an ad online for a free poetry competition with big prizes so I entered a well-published poem, 'Dads Are Cool'. The competition was held by an organisation called POETRY.COM, whose homepage<sup>65</sup> 'features over 5.1 million poets!' and offers '\$85,000 in prizes'. As if in a Reader's Digest lucky-dip 'Dads Are Cool' made it to the last round before winning \$1,000 and being entered in the big draw to win \$10,000. . .but when

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64 Gardner, Angela. 'Editorial'. *foam:e*. (March 2004). <http://poetryespresso.org/foame/>  
65 <http://www.poetry.com/>

'Dads Are Cool' didn't make the final, POETRY.COM offered the opportunity 'to publish your volume of poems in a very limited edition at a very premium price. POETRY.COM's book publishing wing, Watermark Press, will publish fifty copies of your 80 page manuscript for \$966.00.'<sup>66</sup> The above figures are in US dollars.

POETRY.COM, 'a subsidiary of the International Society of Poets', also offered the opportunity 'to attend a convention, receive a guaranteed silver bowl trophy, the chance to win a \$20,000 award and a Caribbean cruise for two. There are also seminars and readings over the weekend, and 'Florence Henderson...legendary star of *The Brady Bunch* will entertain and inspire us all weekend'.<sup>67</sup> Who said poetry has too few rewards?

Because legitimate publication is not easy for poets to attain, especially those of limited talent or originality, vanity publishing can be hard to resist, especially when it comes with bells and whistles and silver cups. The following testimonial demonstrates not only the length to which some people will go to separate you from your money, but the seriousness and hope that aspiring poets put into their creative effort. New players take note that even in the airy world of Poetry, it is easy to get your fingers burned:

**Silver Bowls** by Mary Zayas

The open mike rooms were not organized. No sign-in sheets, no time limit. You had to wrestle the mike away from someone. Poets had pages and pages of poetry in some instances. Then the banquet. Chicken, rice, buns, water, iced tea, coffee and dessert. No offer of a soft drink or wine – and my registration fee alone was more than \$500! After listening to W.D. Snodgrass you need wine. The Marvelettes were great...the induction ceremony was not. They put glow-in-the-dark circles from Disneyworld on the table, had us twirl them in the air and we were now members!

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<sup>66</sup> International Society of Poets. *Poet's Corner* newsletter: vol. 17, number 2 (2004)

<sup>67</sup> *Poet's Corner* *ibid.*

Hooray. The rest of the convention was more of the same. Tables had been set up for poets to display work. Selling things mostly. The day of the competition, there was one poem I thought had merit. "The Cree Cree Train". The winner of the 20K was about a thick, gooey dessert filled with pecans, caramel and chocolate. No depth or relevance as far as I could tell. Everyone went out the door angry. . . They draw you in by making you think your poetry is special, then use people like Bob Eubanks and Dr. Len Roberts and Mr. Snodgrass to make it seem legitimate. I don't know where these people are when the convention is really going on...did Len Roberts judge that winning poem? I hope not! All in all I spent well over \$1,200 and felt cheated. Disney management asked me why, if it was a legitimate contest, so many people were walking around with silver cups? 68

It is one thing to publish your poems without payment. No one writes poetry for the money. Many quality journals, particularly university-based journals in the USA, do not pay authors or don't pay much. But it is still an honour to appear in their highly selective pages. Better to submit your work to a journal or a book publisher whose editorial tastes you respect, where you'd like to see to your poems appear and wait until you have enough good poems to persuade a real publisher. Many people writing poems wish to see their work in print – some are desperate – and nothing is more desirable than to have a book of poems published and *out there*. Never be tempted by a vanity publisher.

But as for POETRY.COM, I let them have two well-published poems which appeared on their web site along with the work of 5.1 million other poets. One of them, made it into the leather-bound edition – without charge.

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68 *WinningWriters.com*. <http://www.winningwriters.com/wergleflomp/silverbowls.htm>

## CONTEMPORARIES

It can be instructive to place one's own poems next to favourite poems from the past to see if they work well enough to fit into the 'episodes to that great poem, which all poets like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind have built up since the beginning of the world'<sup>69</sup>, to see if the poems I am writing hold up their end of the conversation and if what I am writing says what it is trying to say, using the best words and arrangements of words.

As well as great and abiding poems from the past, there is the work of one's contemporaries to consider. I prefer to see my poems published in journals alongside poems of quality – well-written, evocative and with that resonance which gives a poem 'further existence'. The current crop of Australian poets is numerous and diverse. Diverse in styles of writing and subject matter. Many 'isms' have been evoked to categorise contemporary Australian poetries, including post-colonialism, multiculturalism, modernism, post-modernism, deconstructionalism. My own poems have had many labels applied to them – post-modernist, cavalier, larrikin, 'domestic surrealism', punk, compassionate, and even 'quasi-Wordsworthian'.

But poems do not work within the strictures of theory. Rather, poems are used by theorists to demonstrate their world view, which is as it should be. Arguably, Australia is a post-colonial society (though in many respects it still

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<sup>69</sup> Shelley. *A Defence of Poetry*.

behaves like a colony), and we do live in post-modern times. Thus anything written now can be seen as a demonstration of, or response to, the events and social mores of the time.

As Christopher Bantick wrote in his lament for the decline of poetry teaching standards in Victorian schools: 'Poetry is one of the threads of national language. A history of Australia is a history of poets.'<sup>70</sup>

The same way the values and ideals of colonial Australia were reflected upon by Harpur, Kendall, Gordon, Lawson and Paterson, today's poetry responds to our world. Age-old themes such as death, love, war, the weather, and life's continuity remain the mainstay of poetry.

Today's post-modernism can be tomorrow's classicism or archaism. Everything changes: the world, language and poetry.

From the 1970s a positive awareness of the multicultural nature of Australia came to the fore of our the national consciousness. The old policies and ideas of assimilation where people were expected to give up their cultural heritages gave way to valuing differences and allowing them to enrich society as a whole. Similarly our writing, particularly poetry, came to reflect these changes.

Poets like Peter Skrzynecki, and Antigone Kefala wrote of the 'otherness' or 'outsideness' of newcomers. The titles of their first books respectively, *Immigrant Chronicle*, and *The Alien*, are indicative of the way they initially related to their new environments. Skrzynecki's 'Crossing the Red Sea' gives an insight into a specific migrant experience through detailed description and scraps of conversation:

Many slept on deck  
Because of the day's heat

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70 Bantick, Christopher. Ibid.

Or to watch a sunset  
They would never see again –  
Stretched out on blankets and pillows  
Against cabins and rails:  
Shirtless, in shorts, barefooted,  
Themselves a landscape  
Of milk-white flesh  
On a scoured and polished deck.  
Voices left their caves  
And silence fell from its shackles,  
Memories strayed  
From behind sunken eyes  
To look for shorelines. . .

71

Kefala's 'The Wanderer' takes a more universal approach to migration and travel – the dread of otherness that can occur in travel of all kinds: yearning for home and the familiar, and highlighted by the alien nature of the new world which in the final stanza blossoms into nausea of the pure, European existential kind:

*The Wanderer*

The river  
moved further away  
in the heat of the road  
shimmers of water  
towards the horizon.  
The salt  
which they gave him at home  
he would place on his tongue  
  
to taste his own roots  
and draw comfort.  
The world  
made of a matter that never

Steve Kelen 1/5/02 3:59 PM  
Formatted

forgets, a symmetry so exact,  
fatality at the heart  
of each thing.

72

At the same time, the vision of Australian poetry sought sustenance farther afield than the local pub or the Bush. Some found it in the writings of non-British poets and in the tumultuous changes of the 1960s and 70s. For example the important influences on Australian poetry cited by John Tranter in the introduction to the anthology *The New Australian Poetry* included 'rock music, new copying and printing technology that enhanced the ease of publication, consciousness-altering drugs, but 'the strongest direct influence was from America, in the form of the new poetry that emerged there in the early 1960s...'<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps writing about Australian rural life and history needed a break – many poets headed overseas for inspiration. Not as expatriates but more as cosmopolitans. Some travel poems tended to look at different places from an Australian perspective. Our poets and novelists had made forays into South East Asian countries ahead of Australia's government making overtures with regard to trade and politics as Jacobs and Hosking have suggested:

Changing social relations within the geopolitical region incurred by political changes at home and abroad, dynamic economic shifts and increased migration, as well as increased cultural exchanges between 'Asia' and Australia through education, the arts, media and new global communications, have all been modifying or shaping factors in recent literary reconsiderations of Australia's place in the region. The work of writers like Christopher Koch, Adam Aitken, S.K. Kelen and Brian Castro offer consistent foci. The restoration of previously marginalised voices within Australian culture (like the writings of Chinese-Australians or Australians of South East 'Asian' descent) has further enlivened the range and

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72 Kefala, Antigone. *European Notebook*, 44.

73 *The New Australian Poetry*, ed. John Tranter. Introduction, xvi.



Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu's poetry belies any pre-conceptions any one might have about all Chinese poets writing gentle poems about flowing rivers. This comes as no surprise when we consider the author's best known work in Chinese is a volume banned in his native China mostly because of its tasty (nasty?) title, *Cunt Sequence*.

In *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet* borders are broken down. The Chinese immigrant poet has no difficulty slipping into the rough vernacular of his Australian neighbours throwing in a dash of good old Australian anti-intellectualism for good measure:

broken lines written all over scrap paper

such as this:

the male prostitute's soliloquy

or this:

i play with my despair

or this:

review of his own works

unpublished

once more

i dumped into the spittoon

a platoon

of poetry

rejected through

the arseholes of lit. mags

(i mean littered maggots)

in the next century or so

let's kill all the editors

and publish from headtop

now you want minimalism

you dickhead

that's what you can minimize yourself into

75

It might not be necessary to 'annihilate the self' (or even to beat oneself up) but a poet should listen, look and have an open mind to learn of other worlds, and these worlds can become poems. The sound of other languages suggest new rhythms and patterns for poems as living differently can extend the range of vision. Sometimes a newcomer can see things afresh, discover something fascinating that the locals take for granted. Applying negative capability and letting go of preconceptions and letting the local world wash over lets us dream and think differently.

A poem composed by an Australian poet living or travelling in Malaysia, Vietnam or Paris is as much an Australian poem as one of David Campbell's poems that breathes the Monaro air and meets the wheat like a lover.

A good travel poem is usually about a lot of other things as well as travel. An extract from Adam Aitken's 'Village Ways' demonstrates the ability to imagine a world apart from one's own. The trick is to be able to write about what at first sight might seem exotic and make the world of the poem tangible. The experience of village life becomes the experience of the poem:

. . . so he left his eyes in the village  
went travelling down the dead-end lanes

to the spirit house and left his offerings  
to the phantom of perfect fruit

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75 Ouyang Yu. *Songs of the Last Chinese Poet*, 83-84.

who played a cracked guitar  
singing the old village ways. . .

76

Still, there is a lot of Australia that needs poetic mapping. The nation's life and its poeticising occurs mostly in suburbs in the cities and regional centres: it is where most of the people live, work, play, dream and love.

Yet the 'Bush' remains a rich source of inspiration. Les Murray is the most obvious exemplar, but other poets like Coral Hull, John Kinsella (see 'The Silo'), Robert Adamson, the late Philip Hodgins and Dorothy Hewett, and Robert Gray locate much of their dreaming in rural Australia. Apart from the many 'bush poets' who write mainly in the style of Adam Lindsay Gordon and Banjo Paterson, not many poets write exclusively of country life. With a television installed in every Australian home and pub offering instant world-wide communication, it would be a brave or stubborn writer who would shut out this world completely from his or her poems.

The nineteenth century ideal of the 'Bush' as a place of purification, either through character-building hard work or meditation, and the city as a place of corruption (see Henry Lawson's *Joe Wilson* stories) retains a presence in Australian's collective consciousness. M.T.C. Cronin's 'God's Silence' is based on this dichotomy and though the city might not quite be evil, the horizon that should be expansive is 'expensive' can imply a multitude of corruptions. The 'Bush' of course remains a place of purification by either its natural beauties or the hard life and realities it can inflict.

The fog in these mountains  
is a reminder  
of how far up our feet are

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76 Aitken, Adam. *In One House*, 19.

when they are on the ground.  
As the baby has aged  
she has taken up wrestling  
with my breast.  
As if the milk had bones.  
The gorge is like owning something  
frightening, merging with the self  
what won't sustain life.  
The stars' odour.  
The man who felt so keenly  
that all around him hearts broke  
like the tears of a young girl  
for an animal.  
Occasionally you hear the gunshot  
and yellow-headed birds  
with the fan of their wings  
spin fear into beauty.  
The children don't remember the city.  
Its expensive horizon.  
Here, they listen to a history  
of sing-song in the rain.  
Here, where God never says anything.

77

'God's Silence' works at one level within a perceptual dimension, the specificity of 'mountains', 'fog', 'gunshot', 'yellow-headed birds', gives us a sense of the place, but not too much. The mountains, city and even the baby are not named, allowing an easy step to universality — though giving the baby a name might have been an improvement. Abstract worlds of thought and vision, memory are rendered real. While time passes ('the baby has aged') it could be in any time. In a poem thoughts and dreams must be real as any object, though '[t]he stars' odour' mysteriously makes sense.

A similar balance of the tangible and abstract is found in 'The Poet's

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77 *Poetry International*. <http://australia.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/22796>

Dream' and in Adamson's 'Goldfinches. . .' . The latter, though far more explicit in its time and place, achieves universality as well as immediacy. Tactility can give a poem lasting presence.

By the 1990s multiculturalism was just one of poetry's many byways of interest. Like all the 'isms' – modernism, post-modernism, Marxism, social realism – it had become subsumed in a poetry that transcended theory and borders. Cultural and national differences and even the arguments that turned into full blown 'poetry wars' are subsumed by the great ocean of poetry.

\* \* \*

If 'scene' is the collective noun for poets then the Australian scene at the opening of the twenty-first century is as vital and productive as ever. Perhaps more so because poetry's parameters continue to expand; more and more people are attracted to the art – even if they don't buy books of contemporary poets. The scene includes a multitude of practitioners. Adamson, Murray, Tranter, Dawe, Peter Porter, Jennifer Maiden, Geoff Page, PiO, Laurie Duggan, Joanne Burns, Kevin Hart, Alan Gould, Rosemary Dobson and Robert Gray – innovators in the 1960s and 70s (in Dobson's case the 1950s) – who are, by virtue of their age, experience and publishing records, among the senior poets of the early twenty-first century. Confident in their art, they have established voices.

Somewhat younger, perhaps mid-career poets (generally aged between 35 and 55) at the moment include M.T.C. Cronin, John Kinsella, Luke Davies, Coral Hull, Peter Minter, Adam Aitken, Bronwyn Lea, Emma Lew, Alison Croggan, Michael Farrell, Ken Bolton, Judith Beveridge, Jill Jones, Christopher Kelen, John Foulcher, Gig Ryan, Jordie Albiston...

There are always poets emerging who wish to continue to contribute their own 'episodes to that great poem'. Bronwyn Lea, Samuel Wagon Watson, Liam

Ferney and Miriam Wei Wei Lo are just a few of many young Australians intent on composing *further episodes*.

This is merely a survey of some recent poems that immediately come to mind. They are the tip of the tip of the iceberg of the diverse range and depth of contemporary Australian poetry but demonstrate the diversity and quality of poems being written at the moment. Contemporary poetry deserves far more exploration than I have space to undertake here as indeed a study devoted to post-1980 Australian poetry is well overdue.

\* \* \*

There have always been and will always be people passionate about writing and reading poetry. There will always be new generations of poets. As the poems quoted throughout this dissertation demonstrate, poetry is an open field. One of Ovid's *Amores* should be read side-by-side with a poem by Pablo Neruda, Ted Hughes, Li Po with any of the modern and very diverse Australians. Ultimately, it should not matter when a poem is written.

It is clear that so-called free verse is established as a valid and successful form of poetry. Not that poetry is ever free of conventions. Maybe non-rhyming is a better term, or the old 'blank verse'? For poets who forgo end-rhymes must compensate for that most obvious of devices with closer attention to other facets of style and tone. New ways of using language are needed when conventional usages are not employed.

For example, Gig Ryan's 'The Last Spring' takes apart speech and thought and puts them back together in surreal and surprising way. Some times hard words are the best:

The last Spring scents Chekhov's verandah where we yarn  
But you were sad before

Another moon's come and gone  
unloved cartel of lines and bones  
Drugs dissuade her as she hovers the streets  
in broken day's enforced idleness

that music snipped like wings  
and her mauve assistant  
You sympathetically die

as the sky's navy river tips  
over the car-light stars. . .

78

The most surprising aspect of this poem is that it makes absolute sense. Despite its lack of coherence, the images are tangible enough to resonate and say what really happens in the world. Narrative collapses, but the words remain. Ryan's poems have been always various in approach and the poet can turn her hand to more classical forms and ideas. You have to know the rules to be able to break them and old myths remain to be refreshed, as in the breathless 'Actaeon':

I took them racing in the lime fast air  
to hunt and run and kill  
their prey, the lesser forms of old despair  
in thrall to nature's spill  
A copse of shade to catch my breath  
a fish packed pool  
parting in a ring  
when gold flesh  
rises and withdraws  
then eyes catch out and echo wrath  
my career, my dogs who tear  
my limbs, a stolen flute  
falls in the seeping grass <sup>79</sup>

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78 Ryan, Gig. 'The Last Spring'. *Best Australian Poems 2003*, 115-6.

79 Ryan. *Heroic Money*, 57.

A poet should always be doing new things with words, looking for beautiful combinations. But new ways of poetry can mean going back to older ways. In the early years of the twenty-first century rhyme has returned as a mode of serious poetry, as opposed to just being used in light verse. Geoff Page's earlier works were mostly long-lined narratives and pastorals written in free verse. These days he writes his poems in rhymed iambic pentameter lines or in a briefer, and to this ear more abrupt, trochaic tetrameter. The danger with rhyme is that it can tend toward the excessive, as in Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'.

Not only rhyme but insistent rhythm is coming back into usage. Here the risk is that the poem falls into sing-song. Page, a deft and experienced hand at free and rhymed verse, is not averse to dancing into the miasma of light verse as witness a few lines from 'The Table Dancers', inspired by an article in the *Canberra Times* regarding the legality of nude table dancing in the national capital. Page's poems at times dance close to the edge of sing-song:

The music's turned up loud  
For the Government has told us that  
Nude dancing is allowed  
But only on the tables  
And after kids are fed  
Policemen call around at dawn  
To check us into bed.

80

The insistent trochaic line works without regular end-rhymes, as in 'The Heroin Anecdotes' –

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80 Page, Geoff. *Darker and Lighter*, 68.



The coppers call the ambos in  
down a midnight alley.

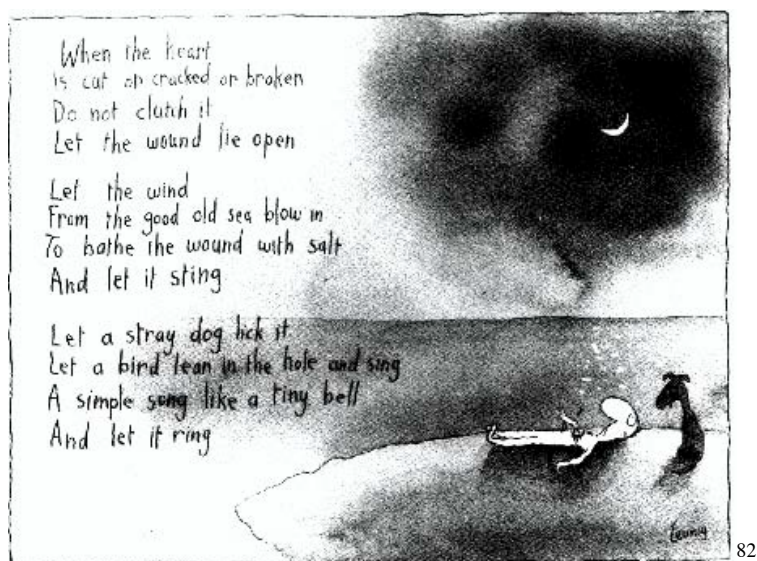
The fit is on the pavement.

The bend is in the spoon.  
There's still a sign of breathing but  
the lips are turning blue.

81

– and is used most effectively in his verse-novel, *The Scarring*, a gritty and disturbing story set in Sydney and rural New South Wales just after World War II.

Rhyme is naturally suited to humour of all kinds, particularly satire and social commentary. Michael Leunig's poems and cartoons appear in the Saturday editions of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* in Melbourne. The poems stand up on their own, without need of illustration, but like Blake's poems, Leunig's should be viewed in their illuminated form. His popular poems might rhyme, half-rhyme or not rhyme at all.



82

Leunig's cartoons and poems provide a gentle balance to a not-so-gentle world and gives weekend readers the chance to repose in a quiet poem.

But rhyme isn't always gentle and can lend itself to a more *Punk* sensibility where life is met head-on, as in Alan Gould's carefully measured 'Carpark Scene':

'Soup now! they chant. 'Gimme soup and now!'  
And for one wild instant, noting their wildness,  
I think that 'soup' refers to me somehow.  
Their shorts and t-shirts flap, their nostrils gleam  
with gold rings. The orange hair of one  
is filthy as a doormat; the other's skull is bone  
but for a snake tattoo across its dome.

83

Luke Davies has found rhyme is the natural format for love poetry. Part 2 of his recent volume, *Totem*, is a sequence of twelve-line lyrics, some beautiful and sensuous, and always fanciful:

(Breathe)

Across your back  
Those freckles strewn  
Are every constellation  
I have known—

All galaxy and godhead too—  
An astronaut would weep  
At such a view: as if,  
After dreams, in the deep

Heart of dawn, he'd wake

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82 Leunig, <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~paulma/leunig.htm>  
83 Gould, Alan. p. 48. *Dalliance and Scorn*.

To that expanse, and breathe it in.  
Home! O Milky Way!  
O milk-white skin!

84

The first half of *Totem* is the title poem, an epic (525 lines) of love and redemption. Written in free verse, its length allows the development of imagery (and image-driven storylines) and a deeper view of how love affects people than the lighter second section. Love is the focus which attracts a world of metaphor and contemplations, yet at its heart one might detect an autobiography:

Things came and went—the years and all the airports.  
I was a shade scattering my shade seed  
liberally to the winds and weathervanes.  
There was not enough absence to go round.  
I heard voices, *stabat mater*, in the whine of jets. . .

85

The verse is well-wrought, readable and the cumulative effect of layer upon layer of imagery is almost intoxicating. Metaphors come thick and fast, imagery is all. Love is the further existence sought and eloquently achieved. At times ‘*Totem*’ works like a vortex breathing in images then breathing them out. Whimsy is elevated, perhaps at the expense of meaning, to pyrotechnic heights and the danger of waxing too lyrical: ‘...how/on the path were strewn bright bones and lions gluttoned with poetry.’<sup>86</sup>

Sadly, poetry cannot be concerned with romantic love all the time. Though it should be for at least some of the time. The love of poetry must shine on all the universe. While Davies’ ‘*Totem*’ is like a flood of images, Les Murray’s ‘*Leaf Brims*’ approaches the world differently, ideas are only in things and the deep truth

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84 Davies, Luke. p. 58. *Totem*.

85 Davies., 13.

86 Davies., 21.

here appears to be imageless: the world speaks for itself in four unrhymed quatrains, containing simple scenes with people in them arriving at the same truth – but not quite. What is not said is as important as what is. In the space of sixteen lines four mysteries unfold and whether or not they matter is also a mystery. But the scenes themselves are crystal clear, adding to a sense of plausibility. The poem is constructed not of images but of moments:

A clerk looks again at a photo,  
decides, puts it into a filebox  
which he then ties shut with string  
*and the truth is years away.*

A Naval longboat is worked upstream  
where jellied mirrors fracture light  
all over sandstone river walls  
*and the truth is years away.*

87

Moments can be interpreted in all sorts of ways, they can consist of thoughts or speech. Emma Lew's 'Sugared Path' resembles some of Gig Ryan's poems by its disconnectivity, an apparent lack of cohesion breaking down the distinctions between narrative, description and direct speech:

Thanks for coming by so late in such a beautiful  
state of mind. The stars dream this way. We  
  
can't keep running from the past. The stones  
on the road: like I said it's just a hunch. . .

88

Another age called it 'stream of consciousness' and elegance never hurt

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87 Murray, Les. 'Leaf Brims'. .26. *The Best Australian Poems 2003*.

88 Lew, Emma. 'Sugared Path'. p 38. *The Best Australian Poems 2003*.

freedom of expression, but some poetry just needs to be inelegant. Without authorial ordering, the incoherent sometimes remains just that. But Lew is smarter than to leave it all to chance and poems like ‘The Tree Dark Town’, ‘Honour Bound’ and ‘Red’ in her recent *Anything the landlord touches* are compellingly surreal poems.

Poets like Les Murray and Bruce Dawe can take events and speech from everyday life – plain talk is always welcome in poetry – and, like Wordsworth, distil them into elevated poetry.

Rather than distil the vernacular, Alan Wearne composes huge chunks of speech and sets them to the musics of many kinds of poetry. Wearne writes a truly epic vision of the Australian suburbs. The language of the two volume, 750 page, *The Love Makers* is distinctly Australian – it could not have been written anywhere else – and Wearne has possibly the best ear for the Australian language and its humour since C J Dennis (and Roy and H.G.). *The Love Makers* is one poem constructed of various sections packed with all different kinds of poetry, from ballad to soliloquy to verse drama. Even the limerick is utilized:

When some hyperheads moved in and stayed,

And giggled for weeks, I was made.

No umms and no errs

From these dope connoisseurs

With the best words I’d get in the trade:

‘For a drug that can turn on the svelte.

This sure gives the neurones a belt.’

But temper all rumours,

I’d advise my consumers,

Sure I’ve sold, but I wouldn’t say dealt.

A return to interest in rhyme has not displaced non-rhyming poems, rather rhyme is returning as one of many possible forms, but not as the dominant mode that it was in English language poetry up to the early twentieth century. One of the great popular misconceptions is that in the past poems always had regular end-rhymes. Anglo-Saxon verse rarely rhymed and poetry in Latin mostly did so by accident. And while rhyme might make for an easier music, sometimes a word can be used for their sound, at the expense of precision of meaning.

These days, so called free verse is every bit as structured and rhymed as rhyming verse. Judith Beveridge is perhaps one of the country's most disciplined practitioners. Every word is turned and polished for exact clarity, for its rhythmic and syntactic qualities within the line and poem as a whole.

See, all dice are cut on the teeth of thugs,  
liars and raconteurs. I've conducted calls  
those dealing in risk and perfidy, bluff or  
perjury, would envy. But I've never stolen  
or coveted dice fashioned from agate  
or amber, slate or jasper, or from  
the perfumed peach stones of distant shores.

90

While the consistent music of rhyming verse lets us forgive the occasional imprecision, free verse cannot afford any slack with regard to choosing the correct word for meaning as well as effect. Whether it is painting a scene, telling a story capturing a feeling or a moment in time and space, we want to see the scene vividly and require an equal musicality of words and fluency in using imagery.

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89 Wearne, Alan. p. 229. *The Lovemakers: book one.*

90 Beveridge, Judith. p.18. *Wolf Notes.*

Anthony Lawrence's poems are highly descriptive and make a use of visual imagery that bolsters the description and gives a sense of feeling to the scene he is creating. It is the specifics that give the poem its reality. Again, it is tactility that makes a poem work for its readers over distance and space. Though I am reading Lawrence's 'Woodbridge' in land-locked Canberra, the sea and the human activity upon it are palpable. This moment of the ocean has been successfully delivered to an inland destination:

With a trimmed outboard, and his son  
like a crippled figurehead holding a Dolphin  
flashlight, he is rowing into Woodbridge.  
In the shadow of a capstan, teasing squid  
with a prawn-imitation barbed with twin  
crowns of needles. I have been watching them  
come from a distant point past shell-  
blistered atolls the run-out tide has exposed.

91

The rhyming pattern is nowhere near as regular as in a 'conventional' rhymed poem. Judicious use of half-rhymes and internal rhymes give 'Woodbridge' a rhythm that is less obvious and resembles natural speech more than more obviously artficed rhyming pieces. But contemporary Australian poetry – all poetry – is a broad church and can accommodate many approaches, areas of concern and techniques.

Pam Brown in "A howling in favour of failures..." eschews the role of unacknowledged legislator and prophet, preferring to write closer to home. The conventional notion of line (that usually approximates to the tetrameter and pentameter) is discarded in favour of a more Skeltonic approach where words fall

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91 Lawrence, Anthony. 55. *The Sleep of a Learning Man*.

down the page, and as they fall they build a new rhythm, more of thought and direct perception than of speech:

It's time to lay my  
zip drive on the table –  
here is where we all  
washed up –  
the caffeine failed,  
the water pipes  
hammering,  
pink batts  
making it difficult  
to eavesdrop,  
April Fool's Day . . .

92

I like to know what my contemporaries are up to and see how my work stands up in relation to other poems. Gladly, there are many fine poems being written at the moment – my 'nurslings' are in good company. I also see that the voice and vision conveyed through my poems are individual – unique – and I intend to keep it that way.



## WRITING THE GODDESS

Does one ever set out to write a book of poems? One might have ideas where the poems should go. But the poems themselves might have other ideas. And when there are about forty or fifty poems you start to think about putting them together to make a book. Poems sometimes suggest their own order. Some will group together and others will serve as changes in a book's direction. I had an idea where to start: with the very familiar, the locality, and work my way to other places where the poems could take off into different realms. The poems would be ordered to suggest transcendence.

Of course the actual poems had yet to happen. The idea of writing 'Don Juan' into a shopping mall had not occurred. Still, at least there was a general template of directions for the book to follow. And if the poems did not stick exactly to the script, fine. All that needed to be done was write the poems.

Each poem would be a wholly new creation but at the same time reach for the timbre that distinguishes fine poetry – of any age – and to do what poetry does best: make visions of words and words of visions. The poems for *Goddess* came mostly of their own accord. The words just started happening. Who can explain that? The poems were all about myths and magic places emerging from the local area, merging into imagined worlds of words. On the nearby reserve, O'Connor Ridge, rabbits that had survived the recent outbreak of Rabbit Calicivirus began popping in and out of sight. A neighbour who'd grown up in my suburb told me

about how O'Connor Ridge actually covered a scrap metal dump and that there had been light industry in the vicinity. And it was a peaceful place to walk the dog and think about it, so the resulting poem, 'O'Connor Ridge', was a natural opener for the collection.

After a swim in the Murrumbidgee at Kambah Pool and walking up the steps to the car park, I thought I spotted Pan's shadow breathing heavily under a tree on the opposite banks of the river.

Having spent several years enjoying the excitement of poetic creation in Asia, Europe and North America, I found it once again in my favourite dreaming places: the house, backyard and the neighbourhood.

Backyards and neighbourhoods grow in interest and significance when you write about them. So too, indoors: every house includes a conduit to the wider world, the television. Thus an exploration of a house's interior will, if the television is switched on include many and various scenes from news reports and the imagined worlds of movies and television series. The few TV poems in *Goddess of Mercy*, particularly 'Buffy' and 'Homer's Dream' seek the essences of the programs they engage and distil a single poem from their many episodes.

A couple of poems I wrote for Goddess were in an apocalyptic mode – but visionary – and afterwards I thought they would sit well with 'Yeats' Second Coming'. For example, 'Interrupt this Program (Liberty Lotus)', was apocalyptic in its vision but hopeful in the finale:

Of badly behaved humans and pallid dust—  
Split screen shows tall buildings in New York  
Make good targets for aeroplanes  
And the Pentagon burns like any other place.  
Screen cuts to FBI files, witnesses, the flimsy  
Evidence (a flight manual in Arabic)  
And the President informed seems stunned

Though eerily unsurprised. The two gleaming  
Towers collapse again in slow motion.  
“The first time an event of such magnitude has  
Been broadcast using entirely digital technology”  
A savvy CNN anchor comments &  
Afghanistan’s back on the US radar.  
Special effects have improved since the Gulf War  
Events can be more easily edited and enhanced  
eg an instant retrospective beautifully  
Counterpoints Osama’s calculated obsessiveness  
With a New York fireman’s utter decency.  
Terror moves fleshing out its agenda.  
A talking head asked ‘How do we process our anger?’  
Now’s not the time to ask who armed and trained the zealots  
And why there always has to be an enemy?  
Who helped destroy Afghanistan —  
Why in some places peace can only mean sleep or death.  
When do land mines come home to roost?  
To whom do we address our regrets?  
Or remember Hiroshima set the standard  
For breaking glass and Nagasaki was signed  
Off to test another kind of atom bomb  
Well, one nuke would have been enough  
How terror burned for years in Vietnam  
To satisfy unquenchable domestic thirst for fire. Evil  
Pure and simple rained on the Vietnamese people.  
The Vietnamese might forgive yet cannot forget  
Quite as easily as we can. They say no more war  
Plant forests where the napalm burned.

‘Interrupt this Program’ started out a bit of a found piece – the title at least  
which describes how the poem began. It was while watching *When We Were Kings*  
on ABC television, the wonderful documentary about Muhammad Ali and George  
Foreman’s rumble in the jungle. About half an hour into the movie, the screen  
suddenly switched to a tall gleaming building in the process of collapsing. There

was frantic commentary, the sound of shouting and people crying and then a plane appeared on the screen and crashed into another building and it collapsed, quite gracefully, as flames and smoke billowed. The rest of course is history, and ideas, suspicion, regrets, and this poem like so many responded to the madnesses signified by the al-Qaeda attack on New York in September 11, 2001 and the ensuing madness. 'Interrupt this Program (Liberty Lotus)' is the final version of the poem as it would appear in 'Goddess of Mercy' but here is the original, before I got to editing it:

All cities are beautiful in their own way,  
New York City especially so where people  
of all races live in harmony  
(a chaotic harmony) and the confidence  
of success gleams in the skyscrapers' blue  
windows and even in the city's hard  
places where times are usually tough people  
pull together, there is cheer in a city  
that still says howdy in a yankee drawl  
and bums look prosperous in cast off  
Armani and Pierre Cardin suits.  
The cab driver jokes are good-natured  
if a little racy good to get the blood racing  
as New York's heart beats in the morning  
the great hustle and bustle the world's great  
city swings into the working day!

Because people are driven to hatred  
and hate is a product traded  
freely because innocent people live  
in a world where no one is innocent  
& prosperity needs poverty to thrive

Because there isn't enough land  
to share fairly and "folks"

are driven from their homes-  
in some places peace is just  
a word for death or sleep.

Tall buildings make good  
targets for aeroplanes  
there is a death circus  
to manufacture and export  
add a dash of evil  
(cruel economy & race hate)  
to the world of current events  
governments kill people  
organisations kill people  
people kill each other  
everyone kills the Earth  
and religions open dark dark spaces -  
what happened to the truth and the light?  
Because the world is full of arseholes  
oozing hate and the Peace Corps never  
saved the world with American  
generosity and know-how?

Just wait for the latest conspiracy  
theory and a new bete noir, patience  
and sick karma-hatred exported  
returns in a blaze of hateful fire  
aboard suicide airlines- the split screen  
shows buildings in New York and Washington  
implode & children dancing in Palestine  
all captured on digital video -  
"the first time an event of such magnitude  
has been broadcast using entirely  
digital technology", the sharp commentator  
comments and the special effects have improved  
since the Gulf War... Making history, it's not  
a healthy world when children cheer murder  
but American bullets mines and bombs  
and missiles - the brilliant technology -  
razed hell around the world.

Now's not the time to remember  
how the standard for breaking glass  
was set in Hiroshima, Nagasaki  
how terror burned for years in Vietnam  
to satisfy an unquenchable thirst for fire  
yet the Vietnamese have forgiven  
but cannot forget as easily as we can,  
they say no more war and plant  
forests where the napalm burned.  
A talking head on CNN asked:  
How do we process our anger?  
There's the blood and limbs the networks  
decide not to show us  
and a thousand photo opportunities  
for the once-mocked leaders  
What the world needs now  
is love sweet love. . . Yeah, right.  
Hands reach out from under the rubble.

They are two very different poems. This first and unworked draft was published a fortnight after the September 11 attacks in a special issue of the online journal, *Masthead*: 'American Terror: writings in the immediate aftermath'.<sup>93</sup>

But, later, looking at the draft it seemed somehow too diffuse – too many ideas – and, at the same time I thought, too obvious – opening with a pastoral only to smash it to pieces. So I removed the pastoral. I also took out the preachy rhetoric, particularly:

governments kill people  
organisations kill people  
people kill each other  
everyone kills the Earth  
and religions open dark dark spaces -

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93 [http://au.geocities.com/masthead\\_2/us/index.html](http://au.geocities.com/masthead_2/us/index.html)

what happened to the truth and the light?  
Because the world is full of arseholes  
oozing hate

I decided to let the event itself raise questions and lead to the contemplation of other events. The final poem is more focussed and if there is any anger in the poem it is unstated.

Though it has yet to appear in an anthology with 'The Second Coming', 'Interrupt this Program' found a home in an online anthology, *Poems About War*<sup>94</sup>, one of a plethora of print and online collections of poems that were published in response to the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. Poets do rally to the role of unacknowledged legislators when a serious issue or event rouse their passions. The weight of thought and poetry mobilised by so many won't change the world, but the many thousands of websites, books, magazines, petitions and readings must have at least opened a few minds regarding their views of the war and war in general.

The outpourings by poets before and during the Iraq War were voluminous and continue to be so. They were protesting the killing and carnage before it began. While journalists ummed and ahed about the official reasons for starting the war, poets (without the journalist's editorial constrictions) could say what they really thought and felt. Adamson's 'Goldfinches of Baghdad' says more about the conflict than a hundred Fox news reports. Clearly, poets do not swallow nearly as much bullshit as journalists.

No one can say poetry is not a democratic art form. Against the tsunami of poems directed against the Iraq War one lone verse bastion – *Poets for the War* – stood up against the near concordance of voices expressing horror and disgust at

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<sup>94</sup> *Poems About War*. <http://www.poetsunion.com/PoemsAboutWar.html>

the suffering and destruction of what is, in my view, another murderous war being fought for spurious reasons. The site includes poems such as J. Cormack's 'Ode to War' which speaks volumes on how some people might approach grave issues of politics, society and the world:

I know that Saddam is a bad, bad man.  
He stabs dogs in the street.  
He has evil feet.

I know that America is really, really great.  
We have more planes.  
We will cause pain (to Saddam).

Saddam's best friend is Osama Bin Laden.  
They have the same tailor,  
and play golf together.

But they also do bad things,  
Like they are Communists.  
We showed those Vietnamese that was dumb already.

So watch out Saddam.  
America will stop your political beliefs,  
Cos we're great and you're not.<sup>95</sup>

I was on a bit of a roll all through 2001 and the poems were flowing easily to fill the pages of the manuscript. Of course the flow of words required much drafting and re-drafting: getting the lines right so the rhythms are apparent without being too obvious, the same with rhymes and half-rhymes, making sure every word counts. A few days at one with the Muse usually results in lots of work, drafting and composing.

At the same time I developed an idea for a longish poem, perhaps one that would serve as a centrepiece or focus for the volume. I had been teaching Romantic

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<sup>95</sup> *Poets for the War*. <http://www.poetsforthewar.org/war/>



Poetry at the University of Canberra and the idea of an epic based around a modern Don Juan became more insistent. After all, the Don had had many incarnations over the last four hundred years.

The long form would allow plenty of time for some satiric commentary, for though he might be damned, Don Juan is invariably honest. But where to place him? The poems in progress had found imagined worlds in the suburbs as it was only a skip and a jump to the shopping mall and the mall is the focus of much of consumerist Australia's dreaming. The perfect microcosm for exploring various versions of modern Australia – everyone goes to the mall.

After a few scribbled notes then the poem arrived as a torrent of words. I sat up and took notice, breathing fast and deeply, and wrote them down as they came but even in the unworked, rough form there was a momentum building, and rhythm. Some of the words were already seeking a stanza form, some lines seemed more random, related but going other places. These would form the seeds of other directions for the poem. It all came in a rush:

The earth moved under Parramatta Road and  
The wind ruffled a bird of paradise's tail feathers—  
Angels' wings shaded toxic sky— a sin of traffic  
Exhaled gas and hummed white noise the auto  
The car had arrived at its godhead climax  
The force for life dominance there is no choice  
Listen to car engines all night, breathe poison  
All day long—cars up and down—stop and start  
Steel demons—obnoxious motors screech and blur  
Gorge the atmosphere, their fumes perfume love forever—  
The endless traffic zoom drowns speech—roadside even  
A dead dog can be sexy—it's so right to be a maniac—  
—at night the cars keep coming and going—  
The traffic grew logical— history—doomed hands  
Reach up from the steering wheel—

Juan left his chariot parked underground—  
Inside the mall it's safe and warm. Atoms vibrate  
Molecules agitate. 'The mall has it all',  
Brings bounty to those blessed by the glitter gods  
(Slavery's reward). Shopping's all there is to do,  
Except for some of the young people the mall  
Management would like to exclude—they hang  
Round and grow up and try to keep out of trouble.

While Byron modelled his Don Juan in part on a popular pantomime character – 'We all have seen him, in the pantomime,/Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time',<sup>96</sup> – today's Don Juan would be more like a character in a movie or a computer game. Juan would be an Everyman of our time and, of course, a hero of 'an uncommon want'.

As to his identity the reader would be allowed to make up their own character as you do in a computer game. Having said that, the challenge was to create a world with characters that are believable.

Writing itself is considered throughout 'Don Juan in the Shopping Mall', a didactic sub-text is woven into the narrative, and originally the piece was envisaged to have more of an essay dimension to it. The following drafting tracts did not make it into the final of 'Attitude: Don Juan in the Shopping Mall' as it would appear in *Goddess of Mercy*.

The mini-epic approaches the lyric in brevity  
leaves time for work and physical activity.  
Today's best loved poems are the ones that can be  
enjoyed during the ads on TV, playing air guitar  
or downloading. Thus Don Juan Y2K leaves  
much to the imagination—what is given  
is some discussion and sudden bursts of story

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96 Lord Byron, George Gordon. 'Don Juan: Canto the First'. *Byron*, 223-224.

and imagery—the big conceptual leaps  
are indicated by the blank spaces and as far  
as plot and meaning go, like the original Don Juan  
DJ-Y2K is an open field. I'll drop the dot points  
and proceed with the shipwreck—  
The trouble with Byron's Don Juan diary  
for 21st century readers is the verse  
smoulders but it's hardly fiery  
for an audience accustomed to love arts  
rendered graphic, too artificial  
for an age that dispensed with silken sighs  
and eyes like dreamy comet tails, witty beau  
jstes that actually got you into her pants  
*those were the days*—though sometimes wit  
still works and the media kept the art  
of bodice ripping alive—the pillow  
talk industry flourished, see magazines  
at the checkout are a soft core poetry  
the models shimmer vinyl bras and jeans unzipping  
reveal panties delicate beyond believing  
but you believe because it's easy to  
and gossip is where undead Chivalry  
came to rest—soap opera rules east, west—

wherever—romance is the last adventure  
in a world where adults grow up to be teenagers  
and this poem too, must only hint at the flame  
the smoke conceals in a room of words, and mirrors

There was a risk the essay would take over the poem. If Byron were explored too thoroughly, then other scholastic pursuits regarding the Don Juan myth might demand inclusion in the poem. Would Mozart's *Don Giovanni* be playing over the mall's piped music speakers? A reference to the third act of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, 'Don Juan in Hell', would be better considered in an essay or lecture.

Byron and his Juan would be shady reference points and not the main players. I decided to limit the ‘process’ aspect of Don Juan to be a diversion from the main story, allowing the reader a break from the action and to reflect on the writing of this poem and poems in general. Rather than send Don Juan to hell quite yet, Juan could have a happy ending more in common with Jose Zorrilla’s verse play, *Don Juan Tenorio* where ‘love has saved Don Juan/ before he could descend’,<sup>97</sup> than with the myth’s usual demise.

The form this ‘mini-epic’ would take came naturally enough, as the poem progressed it would approach the stanza, line and perfect rhyme used by Byron – ‘A stanza of eight lines of heroic verse, rhyming/Abababcc, used here as a kind of primer to paint words on’ and come teasingly close to *ottava rima*.

A similar rhythm could be achieved using internal rhymes and half-rhymes – more my style – though where appropriate, perfect rhyme would be used. Byron could only offer ‘new one’ and ‘true one’ to rhyme with the anglicised pronunciation of ‘Juan’. A six-hundred page poem has more time and space for modulation and a few groans can give a sense of continuity whereas a ten-page epic has not enough space to allow for forced rhymes. Any groans at all could kill it.

Using internal rhymes allows for using a lot of enjambment which permits frequent ‘turning’ of directions in the poem. The use of end rhymes with internal rhymes tends to speed things up. In this context it also represents reaching a crux in the poem, but it can also be funny:

Like lions men should lead their natural lazy lives —  
What happens when you reach the use-by date?  
When Juan was out of it he might philosophise —

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<sup>97</sup> Zorrilla, José. *Don Juan Tenorio*. Trans. N. K. Mayberry & A. S. Kline  
<http://www.tonykline.btinternet.co.uk/>

Everything lives and dies, souls go on or end  
You find out soon enough, and Juan had bodies to attend.

A longer piece allows room to do different things. It is possible to philosophise and to take on society's good and ills. The political and militaristic machinations of the time come in for some satire. The 'paradise' that is a shopping mall is counterbalanced by other realities:

Incredibly sad—as seen on tv—huge swathes of continents  
Where children search for shrapnel to sell for scrap  
Where there's no food on the table, where there's no table  
The nearest shopping mall's a thousand miles away

Throughout the poem are references to shipwrecks, literal and metaphorical. The SIEVX drownings occurred during the composing of 'Attitude...' and this event is cited as an example of official hypocrisy: 'A hand of friendship—your government let refugees drown in the sea'.

Thus humour is balanced by sadness about the way western prosperity and peace is in cruel equilibrium with Third World poverty and warfare around the world. The juxtaposition of the mall's relatively opulent consumerism with a world of 'rubble and tents' is not commented upon. I trust the reader or listener can make their own connections. The volume had its centrepiece poem which marked new directions in my writing. 'Don Juan' was more overtly classical than my previous poems and perhaps more sustained.

As the volume's centrepiece, 'Don Juan' held echoes of the other poems in *Goddess of Mercy* and gave the book a solid sense of unity.

The poem is also a continuation of a life time project – or maybe adventure is a better word – writing one long poem consisting of many poems.

The rest of the poems in *Goddess of Mercy* came of their own volition as is the way of the lyric impulse. After torrents of words came the editing, turning over words to make sure they were the right ones for the job. Removing the poems that had not made it to the level of 'further existence' or did not suit the spirit of the book, my nurslings of immortality were ready to move on.

After the completion of *Goddess...* and its acceptance for publication came a lull in writing activity, perhaps the quiet after the storm or when inspiration goes on holidays. No poems happened for a while. Then the feeling for poetry returns. The world delights and horrifies the imagination. Words are back, cadenced and forming themselves into lines, stanzas, and poems. And after a year spent largely 'in the zone', that is, receiving and writing poems, a new manuscript begins to take shape and I play with various titles for the collection but settle for *Earthly Delights*. The poems in it are different to those in *Goddess...* perhaps more intense and incendiary in places – though the aim, as ever, is peace.

I was hoping to spend the future writing poems from a tranquil garden in a world where hope and good sense blossom. But the beat goes on and, for the time being, so does the war in Iraq. Of course it is about as likely to bring Peace and Understanding as beating your head against a brick wall but there is nothing one can do but write. Sometimes it is appropriate to write poems ferociously:

### **One Afternoon Over Baghdad**

Just about to knock off after a mission  
the co-pilot tapped on the pilot's shoulder.  
'I have targeted 15 civilians walking on the street.'  
'Copy that. I see them.' It was like when  
you're a kid playing *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*  
and machine-gunning the hundred topless  
strippers who run out of the club screaming.

This was real—it's a lot quicker and less sexy killing towelheads. 'Should I?' the pilot asks, 'I can blow them away but the window of...' 'Do it', Ground Control agrees. The pilot squeezes the joystick: 'I have impact.' Just a puff of smoke on the screen. Ground Control responds, 'Dude!' he says, 'dude.'

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