

westerly

in writing from the West

Volume 56 Number 1, 2011

Articles

Poems

Stories

Tribute to
Dennis Haskell

Review Essays



ies. Transgressions, acrylic and
mamel on canvas, 107 x 76cm
Courtesy Linton & Kay Fine Art

For Dennis, after re-reading *Attuned to Alien Moonlight*

You have given me back my poetry.
As the BBC's *Time Team* puts together
Roman mosaics lost under some English field,
so, with your trowel, pick and shovel,
and (most of all) careful final brushwork,
You bring me again (as I read) those possibilities
I had forgotten... Thank you for returning to me, as well,
their history and context, both of which I,
(being an ahistorical Iron Age survivor)
had no idea still slept there under the green grass.

—Bruce Dawe

To a Notable Literary Archaeologist

ISBN 978-09804371-8-8

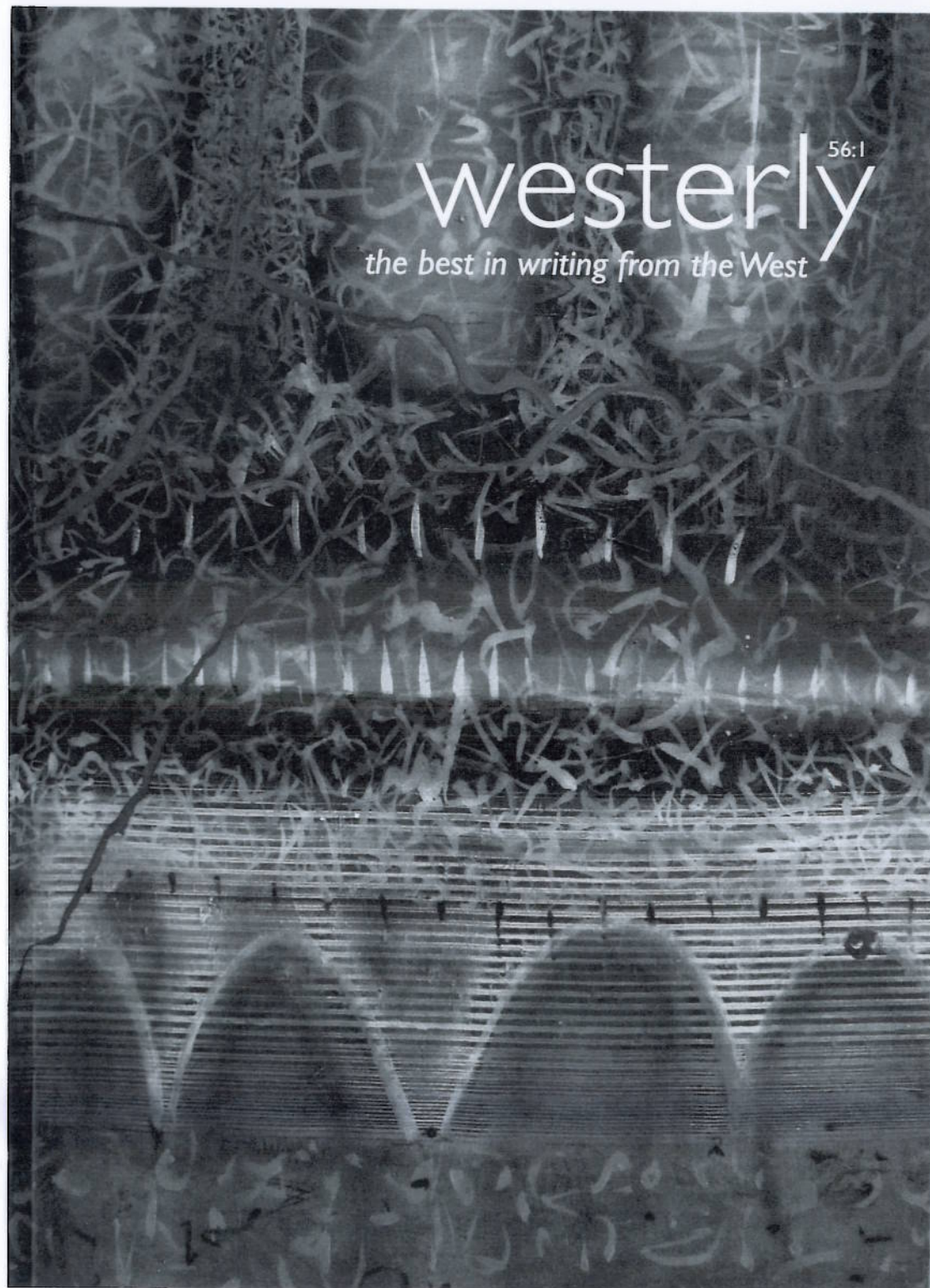


Single copies of *Westerly* (including postage)
Aust \$29.95, NZ \$37, US \$26, UK £15, Eur €17.50

westerly

56:1
2011

westerly^{56:1}
the best in writing from the West



westerly

Volume 56:1 | July 2011

ISBN 978-0-9804371-8-8

Publisher

Westerly Centre, The University of Western Australia,
Australia

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Design: Robyn Mundy Design

Typesetting: Lasertype

Printer: Picton Press, West Perth, WA

Cover artwork: Kerry Stokes, 'Transgressions', Acrylic and spray
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CONTENTS

Editorial	6
POEMS	
Kit Kelen	67
Adrian Caesar	68
Rob Wallis	70
Diane Fahey	72
Jonathan Hadwen	94
Matthew Hall	95
Annamaria Weldon	96
Janet Jackson	107
Caitlin Maling	108
Anthony Lynch	110
Susan Hawthorne	114
Aidan Coleman	115
Graham Kershaw	135
Helen Gildfind	136
Ross Donlon	137
Roland Leach	138
Christopher Konrad	151
Jo Mills	152
Yann Toussaint	154
Bob Morrow	165
David Buchanan	166
Peter Bibby	189

Sacha

David Buchanan

This is no reprieve
it is a field
a bed
a boat lying on sea grass
looking up to a diffuse sun
a squint against rain
a lip gently bitten after *that* kiss
a neck arced to heaven.
If it is a no-man's-land
then I have given up
like the man on September 16, 1916
who walked out amid the shells the bullets
the concussion of detonation
to move against the terror
and name the unspoken
slouched across a shoulder
unreached yet loved
as a cross.

The Year's Work in Fiction

David Whish-Wilson

The headline in the January 2010 Fairfax papers suggested that 2010 would be 'The Year of Reading Dangerously', describing the literary offerings for the period as representing nothing less than 'an outbreak in crime.' It is certainly worth noting that 2010 was the year that, for the first time, a crime writer won the Miles Franklin Award. Some of Australia's best loved writers have written crime—I'm thinking of Brenda Walker, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Randolph Stowe, Andrew McGahan and others—but Peter Temple was the first nominal crime writer to have received the award, on this occasion for his 2009 title *Truth*, having been shortlisted a couple of years previously for his bestselling *The Broken Shore*.

However, while the Fairfax article intended to suggest that 2010 was a year when a larger than normal number of crime titles was to be released, as far as I can tell this proved not to be the case. In other words, far from it being a matter of crime fiction working its way into more literary terrain, replacing a previously literary readership, Australian fiction in 2010 by and large moved in quite the opposite direction—that is, a large number of ostensibly literary titles published in 2010 used crime fiction conventions to enhance a more literary

mode of storytelling. A quick glance at the Miles Franklin longlist for 2010 publications reveals the success of this particular strategy. Of the nine titles longlisted, only Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran* and Melina Marchetta's *The Piper's Son* do not use either a particular crime or a central mystery as its framing device, its means of framing a deeper exploration of place, or of culture, or of the psychology of a particular character (the other six titles being Chris Womersley's *Bereft*, Jon Bauer's *Rocks in the Belly*, Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy*, Honey Brown's *The Good Daughter*, Patrick Holland's *The Mary Smokes Boys* and Stephen Orr's *Time's Long Ruin*.)

Of the novels mentioned above, the standout work of fiction published in 2010 for me was Kim Scott's fourth title, *That Deadman Dance*, which has already garnered a swag of prizes and glowing reviews. In Scott's *Benang—From the Heart*, which made him the first Indigenous writer to win the Miles Franklin in 2000, he signalled a willingness to use the historical record as a means by which to interrogate both government policy and its effects upon his own family history. *That Deadman Dance* is also a work thoroughly grounded in historical research, but one that is yet transformed and enriched by means of a binary optic that suggests, on the one hand, the reading of Country as a living, nurturing presence, and on the other as a site of struggle, exile and gradual adaptation. *That Deadman Dance* is a great example of the blending of fact and fiction for a particular purpose, and is something more artful and poignant as a result. Set in the earliest moments of contact between whites and Noongars around what has become contemporary Albany, the tragedy of what ultimately became of traditional culture in that area is used as a device that gently frames (the unsaid speaks throughout) the exploration of the human side of what has become known as the 'friendly frontier.' The novel is structured so as to essentially provide a voice to each of the participants, on both sides of what was to become a great cultural divide, although what Scott makes clear is that initially this divide wasn't (and therefore isn't) unbridgeable. The pleasure of reading Scott's beautiful prose, the richness of his characterisation and

effortless flowing between voices and dialects and ways of reading the country are only some of the pleasures of this novel.

One of the other tangible results of the publication of *That Deadman Dance* is the fact that, as far as this reader is concerned, history is the richer as a result (perhaps because I'm a Western Australian, as I was reading this novel I was continually thinking that *this* was the book that I have been longing to read about *this place* for most of my life.) *That Deadman Dance*, and particularly its central character Bobby Wabalanginy give voice to not only what was, but also to what might have been—serving not only as a reminder that history is always a matter of individual people, and the choices they make, but also the hard truth that the very openness and generosity of the original inhabitants of the area, something that enabled at one point a genuine possibility for intercultural understanding, particularly as it relates to the nature of understanding Country, was lost (although not irrevocably) precisely because to a large extent the learning and resulting cultural adaption only went one way. As Scott has indicated in recent interviews and at the Guwanyi Aboriginal Writer's Festival in NSW in March, the novel deliberately aims to suggest a counter-narrative to 'the dominant yarn of the story of defeat', thereby holding out the possibility of hope, principally because the 'story' is not over, as it's 'a long yarn.' This is a generous perspective, and one that not only reflects the survival of the kind of openness and generosity that can only come from a position of strength, but also responds directly, or serves as a challenge to the non-Indigenous perspective described by Mary Gilmore that suggests that we, who 'had not wit to read'¹ might, even at this late stage, begin to see more clearly.

Chris Womersley's first novel *The Low Road* (Scribe 2008) won best first crime novel in the Ned Kelly awards for that year, and the generic markers of moody atmospherics and structural unity can be equally felt in his award winning second novel, *Bereft* (but also in his fine short story included in Black Inc's *Best Australian Stories 2010* collection). The novel is the first of many published in 2010 that are set in a marginal rural space, despoiled and purgatorial that

yet positions its characters on the margins of the marginal, from where the narrow social life of the towns might be seen in a clearer light. This contrasting of the natural world with civic corruption is of course commonly a trope of Romanticism, and yet the contemporary Australian vision appears devastatingly anti-romantic, complicated by a metaphorical blindness and consequent distance from the land whose potential spiritual or psychological nourishment is only ever apprehended in glimpses that suggest, but never deliver the yearned for deeper apprehension (much like Wordsworth's plaintive cry of 'will no one tell me what she sings?' in his ballad *The Solitary Reaper*). Indeed, *Bereft* uses the device of a young female character 'gone native' as a means of drawing the badly damaged central character out of his psychological isolation, and Patrick Holland's *The Mary Smokes Boys* contains the character of young mother Irene Finnain, an Irish speaker who has the most unmediated connection to the land (the device of a younger female companion who serves to draw the older protagonist towards a greater understanding of himself/herself is also reprised in Natasha Lester's well-received *What is Left Over, After*, and Jeremy Chambers' *The Vintage and the Gleaning*.)

Bereft begins with a prologue where sixteen-year-old Quinn Walker's beloved sister goes missing during a memorably fierce storm. Soon after, Quinn is discovered by his father and uncle in a disused shed by the town weir, bloody knife in his hand, his sister raped and dead before them. Quinn flees his father's wrath, and the bewilderment and anger of the townsfolk of Flint, where is referred to thereafter as 'the murderer'. Some few years later he is a newly demobbed soldier returning from the Western Front. Quinn has been gassed, his lungs have been ruined and his hearing is damaged. His scarred face resembles 'a slur of porridge.' Quinn hides out in the hills above his parent's farm, observing his father's comings and goings before he decides it is safe to visit his mother. He desires to convince her of his innocence, but it is some time before he can convince her, in her influenza delirium, that he is real. His visits to his dying mother and his retreats to the hillside to escape the still

murderous vengeance of his father describe both the structure of the novel from then on, and the push and pull of his desire to be absolved by the only one who loves him, and his competing need for solitude, for anonymity, merely one of millions of men on the post-war roads, searching for a place to belong. Both Quinn's needs are coloured by concealment and ambivalence. He cannot tell his mother the whole truth, for fear that in her weakened state it will destroy her, and he cannot find solace in the 'dun-coloured and exhausted' landscape. So profound is Quinn's damage that he even comes to envy the blind and deaf soldiers he has encountered for their utter isolation. The mechanised nature of modern warfare is absolute. In the meeting of metal and flesh, it is flesh that is defaced, humanness that is banished. This truth metaphorically inflects his vision of men disfigured by injuries so horrific that their faces are replaced by 'masks of tin on which were moulded and painted those features which had been blasted off', and his vision of country, where a 'glimpse of dirt road lay like a fuse through the elms.' At one point Quinn lays his ear to the earth, and listens: 'beneath him the dense meat of the turning earth...he imagined fires down there, the screech of metal, those goblins and devils with their peculiar industry.'

The vision is gothic, a human and physical landscape characterised by the recent desertion of God, of a grasping at intangibles, understandings just out of reach, but present in the landscape. Quinn believes he has been charged with protecting the spirit of his murdered sister. He camps in the bush, and observes, and listens, but the natural world is not immediately inviting, rather reflecting his own sense of dislocation, recalling the 'weird melancholy' of Marcus Clarke. 'Even the native trees looked to have grown not from this country but, rather, to have been thrust—unwilling, straining skyward—into the soil from which they now attempted to writhe free...And overhead, always, that sheer, blade-sharp sky.' Womersley's prose is gently formal, reflecting the language of the period, peppered with descriptions such as that of hawks circling overhead 'like dark, watchful stars disentangled from their orbits', and the domestic image of Quinn's sister playing

knucklebones, 'a sound through the house like rodents' (Womersley consistently deploys aural images to great effect). His microscopic sensitivity enables Quinn to listen so intently, in his wariness, that '[a]t night, when the house and surrounding bush were still, he heard the whiskers growing through his cheeks with the sound of countless nails being prised from wood.'

It is only when Quinn meets Sadie Fox, a runaway from the town that he becomes emboldened enough to seek revenge upon his sister's murderer. Sadie Fox, 'the angel of death', becomes to Quinn's vulnerable mind the sister that he has returned to protect, although it is she who does the protecting. She steals food from the town to sustain them, but she also shows Quinn another way of entering the mystery of Country. She takes him to the 'cave of hands', where she divines their future in the entrails of a lamb, she makes small propitiations in the form of delicate locks of hair, tinsel and nails, through ornaments 'beautiful and pathetic, a tiny thing made sacred by a girl.' A magical tone, a wonderment begins to pervade the sensibility, such that by the end of the novel, despite the openness of the conclusion, we suspect that Quinn too, like Marcus Clarke before him, has become somewhat more accustomed to his inevitable fate, that 'beauty of loneliness' that explains both his disappearance from the story, but also his continued status as legend, as a ghost who stalks the outskirts of the town, the subject of nursery rhymes and warnings to children, a man outside the ken of ordinary folk.

Angela Meyer, in her ever-popular blog *Literary Minded* has suggested reading Womersley's *Bereft* and Patrick Holland's *The Mary Smokes Boys* in complement, and while I didn't have this opportunity it is something I'd recommend. Patrick Holland's second novel *The Mary Smokes Boys* (his first was the award winning *The Long Road of the Junkmailer* [UQP 2006]) begins with its main character, ten-year-old Grey North watching fireworks flame into the night sky, the sights of children his own age enjoying rides at an exhibition fairground seen from his position behind a hospital window, having just found out that his mother has died giving birth to his new sister, Irene.

This opposition between the carnival festivity on the other side of the window and Grey's sombre mood is deliberate, and metaphorically suggests the social position that he and his family occupy in the town of Mary Smokes—just an hour away from the lights of Brisbane but another world entirely, 'a town surrounded by blowing fields...a broad corridor of flatland before the Great Dividing Range before immense inland plains...The wide and empty country in which the world was uninterested.'

Grey's father William is a manual labourer, and a drinker. When they retire to their home in Mary Smokes it is upon Grey's shoulders that the task of raising his sister primarily falls. While Grey's mother was alive, he had remained close by her, the object of his adoration and love. His mother had married badly, the result of a teenage pregnancy of which Grey is the fruit. Just like the young female character in Womersley's *Bereft*, Grey's mother Irene Finnain is linked closely to the land, whose spirit or essential nature she seems to perceive because of her Catholic piety and the Irish language that she speaks, but which Grey never bothers to learn (indeed, Grey's best friend Eccleston, a 'half-caste' Aborigine is similarly bereft due to the loss of his mother's language, as it relates to the mystic connection to country that he senses, but does not entirely apprehend in the way that his ancestors did). After Grey's mother's death, however, Grey becomes one of the town's Lost Boys, taking to the night with his friends to walk, and drink, and observe. Although the novel is set just outside of sub-tropical Brisbane, because much of it takes place at night, the atmosphere is by turns haunting and menacing, the style at once spare but lyrical, especially when describing the Lost Boys and their muted conversations over a campfire at night, with the land a powerful presence. Much time is spent simply sitting and watching the changes that come over the land, a reminder of the static nature of their lives as they recapitulate the mistakes of their forebears, carrying within them the unspoken burden of a grief and guilt for things they have not done. The boys and Grey's sister Irene in particular are beautifully drawn, with humour and great pathos. In the absence of

adult models the Lost Boys and Irene draw their strength and lore from the land that they traverse, and the waters that pass through. The bonds between the youthful characters are intense and loyal to a vision of friendship that endures despite the passing of years and the mobile nature of the limited employment available to them. But even as they leave and return, and age and love and gradually lose hope, always there is the Mary Smokes Creek, in flood or broken into pools, and their reprising of the rituals of their lost childhood, the sense that their simply observed rituals of watching beside the creek at night confers upon them a sense of identity, and belonging:

At Mary Smokes Creek...The water's violence had grown quiet, stored like the violence of a candle flame...Slabs of granite and basalt were settled in the bed and the water purred around them, though in time of heavy flood you heard the rocks grinding, the water turning them over...And all this, that they barely comprehended themselves, was the boys' secret at this hour of the night. No-one else in the universe was watching these waters. The boys and god were alone. Grey imagined they were the water's keepers.

The Mary Smokes Boys works patiently towards its dramatic and violent conclusion, the result of a crime that Grey and his friend Eccleston have committed, albeit with the best of intentions.

This patience is something that is also characterised by Jeremy Chambers' very promising first novel, *The Vintage and the Gleaning*. The novel's narrator, Smithy, has given up a lifetime of drinking as a result of his ruined guts (we suspect it might be terminal.) Once a 'gun shearer', a bloke who's worked and played hard all his life, noted for his strength and work ethic, Smithy now labours in a vineyard somewhere in North-East Victoria.

The novel is structured as a kind of diary, relating in its early stages Smithy's day-by-day labours down the rows of vines, then the sessions in the pub afterwards. It is significant that the shortest

chapter in the book falls on a Saturday, a day of rest. Without his job, it seems, Smithy ceases to exist. The men that he works alongside consist of different generations, but what binds them is drinking. It is also what has ruined Smithy's life, has made it pass without his noticing, leaving him with plenty of regrets.

The first half of the novel builds quietly to establish the character of both the man and the town that he inhabits, in particular what lies beneath the sun-bitten streets. The language of the men is stilted, inarticulate, drawing out every moment of communication, helping to pass the time, although the novel doesn't suffer for it. Chalmers, like his characters, weighs each phrase and action with a significance that threatens not to hold, but then does. Even the silence is loaded, and the cadences of the men's voices are authentic in this regard. Like Womersley's *Bereft*, cycles of repeated action are refracted through subtle accretions of detail, minor changes in key—a funeral, a dream, Smithy's walks to the pub down the train track behind his house, the odd jobs he does for 'Boss's wife.'

Smithy is a great character, but in the early parts of the novel he is barely a man of words. It is in the pub that Smithy's sobriety properly reflects his new perspective on things. The tone is *Wake in Fright*, but Smithy's eye is in—he is not an outsider:

The smell of beer is everywhere and it brings memories to me, shapeless, formless memories, all soaked in the smell and the smoke and the noise around me and they are the forgotten memories of a lifetime...and there are men who talk and there are men who are silent and those who talk do not know what they are saying and those who are silent do not listen, but drink for the very silence, for the silence of their souls. And I was such a man.

Half-way through the novel Charlotte appears on Smithy's doorstep, not knowing who else to turn to. Her abusive husband Brett is due to be released from prison the next day. Smithy takes responsibility for her, a daughter of the landed gentry who's chosen badly, and been

disowned as a result. Charlotte's arrival into his life, and the resulting violent infantilism wrought upon the town by Brett and his friends ultimately draws out the best in Smithy. Brett has murdered before, and gotten away with it. In the small town, everybody knows this, but nobody wants to talk about it, except Charlotte, and then only to Smithy. Charlotte is self-pitying and defensive, but in her voice and ultimately in her actions, Smithy sees a parallel with his own wasted life, its beauty and sadness, its tragedies defined by its inevitabilities.

But it is Smithy's memories that really set him free. In one of the finest passages of writing I've come across in an Australian debut novel, Smithy casts his mind back to his time as an orphan in an Aboriginal Mission settlement in long elegiac sentences of rare power, drawing out the strange beauty and mystery and terrible sadness of the images of his childhood, even as Charlotte embarks upon a long self-serving monologue designed to justify her love for an abusive husband. By the novel's end Smithy has returned to his job on the rows, the cycle of actions are repeated, but his time the repetition is made significant, poignant in light of recent events.

Another very successful debut novel is Stephen Daisley's award-winning *Traitor*. The main character, and the Traitor in question, is a naive young man from rural New Zealand serving in the trenches of Gallipoli. His first experience of life outside the theatre of war, where he achieves some distinction, is when he meets a Turkish doctor, who is treating an Australian soldier on a Gallipoli ridge, during a battle. David isn't sure what to do. Shoot the Turk? Help him? A naval shell makes the decision for him, and the explosion sends them both to the same military hospital.

Mahmoud is a worldly man, a doctor who has trained in London. He is also a Sufi. He befriends David, and there begins a relationship characterised by gentle teasing, and encouragement. David has never met anyone like Mahmoud, and in his war-brutalised condition he is vulnerable to the kind of sensitivity that makes of Mahmoud's epigrams and gentle coaxing and inextinguishable humour a kind of rational alternative to the crude obviousness that otherwise defines

his military life. With Mahmoud, nothing is as it seems, and so begins a fragile balancing act—a friendship characterised by David's love, essentially a desire for the kind of grace that Mahmoud embodies.

David's crime is that he helps Mahmoud to escape, although the two don't get very far. They are shortly after separated, never to meet again. David is sent to the Western Front to act as a stretcher-bearer, as punishment, where again his bravery and compassion amidst the stupid carnage distinguishes him from his peers. Back in New Zealand, David receives a final letter from Mahmoud's wife, telling him that Mahmoud has been sacrificed at the altar of Kemal Ataturk's desire to secularise and democratise his new republic. The novel jumps forward to where David, now the 'old man', forty odd years having passed, still carries the haunting beauty of Mahmoud's ambiguous teachings inside him, and in his rural isolation, discovers that his words begin to make perfect sense (although he must work to make them understandable—he looks for clues, answers in the natural world around him.) There is a numinous quality to much of the prose that describes his life here as a shepherd, the visceral realities of life on the land aside, he is marked as an outcast, a recluse, and yet is strangely at peace with the physical and emotional landscape that he traverses, the reverential words of Mahmoud colouring his perceptions of the life that remains to him, the barest sense that it is an illusion, a trial, and a blessing.

Michael Meehan's *Below the Styx* is a psychological exploration of a murder committed by the central character, Martin Frobisher. At the novel's inception Frobisher is being held in a Melbourne remand centre, looking at a life sentence. Having been called 'a louse' by his wife, who had been going through his private writings stuffed in a black garbage bag, he belts her over the head with an epergne, 'a large, unwieldy object designed to suspend delicacies—usually fruit—above the table.' Martin is as surprised as anybody that he has committed his crime, and the moment of the criminal act is returned to time and again, as befits the meditations of a man in prison for murder, and is used as a structural device by which he is able (from

the arc, of the swing) to spin out a whole series of threads upon which unspools the main core of the narrative.

Frobisher is an editor at a publishing house, a 'courteous and self-effacing man' who because of his crime has been largely abandoned by his friends and colleagues. With nothing much to do in prison he is drawn to the writings of Marcus Clarke, and with the help of a research assistant, Petra, he begins to trawl through Clarke's entire oeuvre, looking for clues as to the man's essential nature, beneath the mythmaking and logorrhoea that has created for Clarke a viable public persona, while leaving few clues as to what he was really like (even in his letters he was, it seems, he was always 'in character.')

The book is as much about language, and storytelling, as anything else. Frobisher is reluctant to talk about himself, especially to others, and what he gives us instead are stories from his childhood, stories from his life as a younger man, and stories about his married life. Frobisher's stories, as Clarke's stories before him, serve to characterise, of course, but also very cleverly lead the reader towards an examination of the ways in which language frames identity, or in Frobisher and Clarke's case, can be used as a strategy to conceal an essential hollowness at the heart of character, a kind of vacant selfhood, chameleon in nature and eternally elusive. Frobisher is 'utterly superficial', an actor in his own play, a character in his own novel, that has taken a tragic turn (although the tone of *Below the Styx* is wonderfully absurd), to the extent that he realises that without the permanent record which his story will become, that he has essentially never existed in any authentic fashion, an authenticity that is itself called into question. Ultimately, it is in Frobisher's textual analyses of Clarke's stories and letters that he comes to understand, and appreciate Clarke's struggle for recognition, ultimately forgiving him his evasions and cynical accommodations with the hack-writing made necessary for him to survive. In effect, Clarke has succeeded where Frobisher has failed—Clarke has survived in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the fickle memory of our culture. It is only Frobisher's enduring prison

sentence that paradoxically frees him to recognise that (sentenced, to spend time within himself), double place where he is both 'more in touch here, without phone, diary, or appointments, than I have ever been', representing both a place of absence and yet of creating, a place where out of the essential absence of himself he is yet free to tell the story of himself, truthful or otherwise, to whoever will listen.

Different again in tone, but nonetheless absorbing, Stephen Orr's *Time's Long Ruin* examines the improbable and troubling disappearance of three young children from a crowded Adelaide beach, in 1960 (linked very closely the disappearance of the three Beaumont children in Adelaide, in 1966). The tagline on the front cover reads '*what happens when children disappear?*' and in every sense, Orr's novel is a fictional exploration that seeks an answer to this question, rather than an answer for who committed the crime. The novel is narrated by Henry Page, who still lives in the same suburban house that he grew up in, some fifty years after the three Riley children's disappearance (Janice, Anna and Gavin were his next door neighbours and best friends). Henry's father is a detective, and even before the children disappear, Orr goes to great lengths to detail the way such mysteries serve to enthrall a city's inhabitants, when Henry's father and Bill Riley discuss obsessively the earlier mystery surrounding the identity of a man found dead on another suburban beach.

The slow pace of the novel's first half, prior to the Riley children's disappearance allows the reader to spend a great deal of time getting to know them, which is important in a novel that is never going to achieve any real resolution, where the purpose is rather to look at the previously idyllic Croyden through new eyes. Henry is an awkward character who reveres his father, even when he's beaten by him, and yet is chary of his mother, an unsympathetic and resentful woman who abandons them at one point, and who he discovers has written on the back of a picture of the three of them—*Holy Trinity, 1948. The father, the wife and the crippled son* (his mother's fears that she'd give birth to a 'cripple' having been realised). Henry's father, however, is lovingly portrayed, both as the long-suffering husband

of an inexplicably withdrawn wife, and the figure of neighbourhood respect that comes with his office as detective. There are other colourful characters who live on the Croyden streets, representative of the times, certainly, the New Australians amidst the slightly wary Anglo-Australians, but it is never clear whether or not Henry now looks back at this earlier life as a period of innocence, or of general denial, given that at one time he is molested by the local doctor, and the fact that the Riley children disappear so easily from such a public place. The children are never found, in fiction as in real life, and it is Henry who is left behind at the novel's end, the last survivor of the old community since irrevocably changed, haunted and alone and still bearing witness to the damage done to a life, to a family and a neighbourhood.

Jon Bauer's debut novel *Rocks in the Belly* has been widely acclaimed, and endorsed by the likes of J. M. Coetzee, David Malouf and M. J. Hyland. The story is narrated by a character that is never named, in a city that is never named (you might say that the real setting is childhood). The narrator is an eight-year-old child made jealous by the arrival in his family of an older foster child, Robert, who is charismatic in a way that the narrator is not. Robert comes from more difficult circumstances but he is not the selfish and ungenerous child that the narrator has become, nor does he display the sociopathic tendencies that the narrator carries into adulthood, when he returns home from a career as a prison guard in Canada to care for his dying mother. The power of this novel lies in the alternating voices of the eight-year-old boy and the man that he has become, in the lack of distance (it's all scene and no summary, which lends the narrative an immediacy and focus) and the deft juxtaposition of humour and a sometimes startling inappropriateness, as the narrator's manipulations and self-deceptions begin to retreat before the obviousness of the grief he has caused his mother. As his mother fades towards death and loses her physical and psychological dominion over him, he is able to be tender towards her, recognising that while the emotional distance he has always felt from others is now, with the loss of the

only person who might love him, absolute—he is ultimately able to take responsibility for his life, and, in the final flux of past, present and future—his actions—both the feelings that engendered them and the deeper feelings that lie concealed.

The other standout novel of 2010 for me was Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink*, indeed one of my favourite novels of recent years (Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy* having been discussed in last year's review essay). The novel largely shifts its focus between Mosman and Surry Hills, reflecting the orbit of the novel's central character, Marie King, who is a woman in her late fifties becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a life spent catering to the needs of others. One of the real achievements of this novel is that McGregor is able to invest initially unsympathetic characters with a deal of empathy. From the first chapter with its omniscient view of Marie and her three children; Hugh, Leon and Blanche, we are drawn into a world of wealth and privilege complicated by dissatisfaction and anxiety that yet never feels churlish—McGregor never judges her characters. Marie's North Shore home is a haven of sorts, but in the larger picture and framed by her increasing peregrinations Marie comes to recognise 'the cellular structure of society, like a hive, cheek by jowl the wealthy lawyer, the tattoo artist, the housing commission Aborigine.' Marie is becoming increasingly unwell, and the plan is to sell her beloved house, which to Marie and her children means severing themselves from a sanctuary more emotional than material, particularly for her son Hugh, for whom 'Mum is the house...Everything he had first learnt about the world, his primary sensations and obstacle courses were in that house and to lose it was to lose the very foundations of his life.' *Indelible Ink* is an intensely contemporary novel, exploring to great effect the current urban anxieties and feelings of helplessness associated with environmental decline and climate change in particular (indeed, in my opinion the novel is vastly superior to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* which explores similar terrain).

It is mid-summer, and the city is in drought. The hardness that we associate with the drought-stricken interior has entered the heart

of the city, but the city's inhabitants do not draw from it any sense of character, rather blame others in their helplessness. 'Forty-six degrees. Each day hotter than the day before, the heat moving stealthily into every corner of the house.' Trees are dying. The economy is suffering. Water has become a precious resource. But what power the characters of *Indelible Ink* have over this sense of terminal decline can only be expressed through minor adaptations and acts of consumer choice, although this of course does not satisfy their anxieties. When Marie remarks upon the beauty of her best friend Susan's new car, a 'fawn Peugeot convertible', she is met with the following response—'It runs on biofuels. Or it's supposed to. That's why we got it. And two months later we find out that we're responsible for food riots in Bangladesh or wherever. Fabulous, isn't it.' Marie has always been an avid consumer too, but she is able to articulate this consumption as a response to satisfying a deeper sense of guilt, the sense that her wealth, particularly as it relates to her ownership of a prime piece of real estate, is not 'rightful', such that 'the sadness of losing it also contained relief.'

The real momentum of the novel consists in Marie's gradual sloughing off of her attachments to the material, and the subsequent movement towards an interiority defined by her increasing distance from the disapproval of her wealthy peers and her children. The defining moment occurs when a drunken Marie enters a tattoo parlour on a whim, and marks herself with indelible ink. The transformation is immediate, although the reasons for her increasing attachment to the tattoos that subsequently adorn her body are made apparent only later in the novel. Initially, the experience is painful, but strangely pleasant, pathetic in its desperation, perhaps, but immediately empowering. By undergoing the rituals of marking her body Marie feels she has finally 'planted a flag in her own country.' Physically unwell, anticipating the grief she will feel when her house is sold from beneath her, Marie returns time and again to the company of Rhys, her tattooist, who understands Marie's need. 'The heat brought the tattoos up like braille. The dips and swirls disappeared then

rose up again, fresh enough to scale slightly, ancient enough that they seemed to have always been there. This language of welts was strangely familiar, as though the needles hadn't so much inserted ink as stripped the veneer from an underlying design.' Marie's tattoos become increasingly elaborate, drawing her towards understandings lost in the passage of her life, wedded to a successful advertising man and a milieu characterised by boredom and avoidance of unpleasant truth. When Marie recalls witnessing the slaughter of animals as a child, the significance of her tattoos and the intimations of her physical decline become apparent: '[i]t wasn't how a little girl was supposed to feel. Animals were being murdered, but their pain to Marie was subservient to a bigger force, beyond Win and herself: it was the force of human appetite stretching back through infinity.' With the diagnosis of a terminal illness the novel changes key and the voices of the children come to predominate. They gather round Marie and their Mosman home, having 'not seen each other this often since they were children.' Their mother's dying cuts through their self-absorption but the tone is unsentimental, calling forth the larger themes of regret and loss and love in a manner that characterises Marie's final act as one of betrayal, certainly, but also as an act of clarity, of inevitable and courageous honesty.

Gail Jones' *Five Bells* is also a brilliant evocation of contemporary Sydney, although the tone is vastly different, more akin to Slessor's elegy to his lost friend (the poem from which the novel, of course, draws its name). Jones' language too is poetic and beguiling, and the structure is ambitious for such a short novel. Four characters converge on Circular Quay at roughly the same time. The day is luminous and the Quay is crowded (in the words of one of the characters, James, the effect is 'cinematic'), although the atmosphere is festive. Jones uses the aesthetic reading of the regular landmarks to both characterise and distinguish her characters. Ellie, for example, a young woman from rural Western Australia, sees the Sydney Opera house for the first time up close: 'It was moon-white and seemed to hold within it a great, serious stillness. The fan of its chambers leant together,

inclining to the water. An unfolding thing, shutters, a sequence of sorts...she was filled with corny delight and ordinary elation.' James, a depressed young man from the same country town as Ellie, sees the Opera House rather as 'White teeth...Its maws opened to the sky in a perpetual devouring.' Pei Xing, a Chinese émigré and survivor of the Cultural Revolution, inflects the Opera House (as with many things, always beautifully) with her own cultural perspective: 'There it was, jade white, lifting above the water. She never tired of seeing this form...The shapes rested, like porcelain bowls, stacked one upon the other, fragile, tipped, in an unexpected harmony.' And finally, Catherine, a young Irish woman also seeing the Opera House for the first time describes it thus: '...nestling before her, its folded forms stretching upwards, its petal life extending. The peaked shapes might have derived from a bowl of white roses, from the moment when they're tired and leaning, just about to subside. *Blown*, that strange term, *a bowl of blown roses*.' It is Catherine's reading of the Opera House that leads to the first play of what becomes Jones central method—images suggesting emotions which in turn suggest memories, as each of her characters draw upon the contrast between the vividness of the scene before them and the trauma that has brought them to Sydney. The 'fifth' bell of the novel is a young child gone missing from the Quay whilst amongst them, and whose absence serves ultimately to bring them together. While this device deliberately calls attention to the larger themes explored in the novel, those of loss and the exigencies of fate in particular (I'm not sure that I would call the effect of this technical employment slight, as much as convenient, or circumstantial) the effect of the rising emotional tempo yet works much like a musical score, and indeed captures, as presumably intended, the powerful emotional resonance of the culmination of Slessor's own poem.

The following are novels that are hard to categorise, except to say that they have what Les Murray calls Sprawl: Gregory Day's *The Grand Hotel*, Wayne Ashton's *Equator*, David Musgrave's *Glissando* and Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran*. A particular kind of Sprawl,

it might be said, in the face of another of Les Murray's assertions that 'failure was the first rhyme for Australia.'² Gregory Day's third novel, *The Grand Hotel* explores in some detail the turning of a coastal property into a locals' pub, the eponymously named Grand. The characters are all lovable rogues and the hotel itself, with its Dadaist speaking toilet and inventive means of clearing out unwanted visitors, is also a significant character. The novel is by turns garrulous and wonderfully absurd, good natured and inventive, even as it describes the construction of a creative space for the locals of Mangowak, free from the creeping encroachment of touristic development.

Wayne Ashton's *Equator* is an altogether odder although equally free-spirited affair. This is a novel utterly without restraint, and is the more pleasurable because of it. Using repetition as a linking device, and a loopy enthusiasm as its means of maintaining velocity, the novel yet has at its core a serious and melancholy heart, and might best be described as an anti-realist experiment in memory and consciousness that addresses climate change from aslant. Humans are called 'inheritors' and are by and large simultaneously self-aware but ignorant of themselves, mere pawns in a Manichean struggle between the 'boxes', the artfully made opposed to those industrially manufactured. The boxes rant and rave, often sounding like characters from an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, anarchic and energetic, by turns moralistic and amoral, chopping syntax and expressing cosmological 'flux', returning time and again to the phrase 'memory is like water', with the whole functioning as a loving elegy to the ocean.

David Musgrave's *Glissando* is something entirely different again, although it too mines a fervent absurdist strain not often associated with rural narratives. Working both with and subverting Patrick White's *Voss* (the thinly disguised writer and his partner even make an appearance towards the end of the novel), the novel is a wickedly clever parody that uses a pastiche of letters, erudite observations of historical events and literary allusions alongside the framing device of the hunt by shadowy figures for a lost promissory note. *Glissando's*

characters are by turns grotesque and humorous, such that the novel has at times the tenor of a satirical fable, with a central character reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*, although it certainly cannot be said of Musgrave's *Australia* that it is the best of all possible worlds (although, while the arts have a currency in the world of *Glissando* lacking in our own, human nature, such as it is, provides both the continuity and generative comedy).

Finally, Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran*, both critically lauded and highly accomplished, reprises a familiar Australian fictional landscape, but in a manner that is both cartographic and 'epic' as it has been described elsewhere. While the author has called *When Colts Ran* a novel 'about the broad stream of life, structured around seventy years in the life of a drunk', it is also an interesting exploration, inflected with nostalgia, of the nature of character through the generations, in the sense that the novel's earliest characters are products of the traditional outback and war school—they have character in the traditional meaning of the word—but are ultimately supplanted by those who essentially lack character (one young thug accidentally shoots a man, out of boredom, for example). A tone of meanness creeps into the town that they inhabit, where the eponymous Colts, now an old man, takes in a young woman, who, like Charlotte in Chalmers' *The Vintage and the Gleaning* is escaping a no-hoper partner, but whom, also like Charlotte, soon returns to that partner. The changes are subtly wrought, but significant enough such that by the end of the novel Colts seems utterly adrift in the modern world, the way of life that defined his generation having disappeared forever. But whereas Musgrave consciously and deliciously inverts the traditional Australian focus upon war and the working of the land as a source of national identity, and replaces it with the warring of artistic 'visionaries', McDonald works deliberately with the exaggerated but familiar. The landscape of the novel traverses the interior from west to east, but is everywhere peopled by stories in abundance. Indeed, 'the Isabel' where the latter part of the novel is set fairly bulges at the seams with stories of characters past and present.

While exactly the kind of unremarkable rural area that a visitor might pass through without a second glance, what McDonald makes visible is the layer upon layer of living history that all such places contain, and for which he clearly has great affection. Even with a couple of pages to go the stories keep coming, the characters continue to sing the song of themselves, albeit with an increasing desperation. Their bodies are old and broken but their spirits are keen, such that when Colts returns to his mother's grave to finally make his peace, we are aware that this ending is merely provisional, sensing that these characters and their superseded lives, much like Martin Frobisher in Meehan's *Below the Styx*, are similarly pleading to survive in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the inscribed memory of our culture, our timeless fictional present.

Notes

- 1 Michael Ackland, 'Poetry from the 1890s-1970s,' in Elizabeth Webby (ed.). 2000. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 85.
- 2 Les Murray, 'The Australian Card,' in Steven Matthews. 2001. *Les Murray*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 107.

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Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.

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*Bauer, Jon. *Rocks in the Belly*. Melbourne: Scribe 2010.

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*Chambers, Jeremy. *The Vintage and the Gleaning*. Melbourne: Text, 2010.

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Money Street

Peter Bibby

It is winter and the leaves have turned
 But not fallen from the tall Plane trees
 For they must wait for something more than cold
 To bring their bronze and golden glory down:
 The gusting winds of Autumn did not come,
 The nests are dry for there has been no rain
 To weight the canopies with sodden freight
 And send them tumbling in a slow cascade
 From weakened stems, a dry year's mortgage deeds
 Discharged for passing feet and tyres to trash.
 Like some assembled crowd in puzzlement
 Behind a barrier, the brown ghost cloud of leaves
 Murmurs over the street of many changes,
 What's the project holdup? Where's the rain?