The whole island, you know, was one enormous hotel, complex beyond explaining, and on the other side there were miles of floating hotels, and huge floating stages to which the flying machines came. They called it a Pleasure City. Of course, there was none of that in your time—rather, I should say, is none of that now. Of course. Now!—yes.

H.G. WELLS
A Dream of Armageddon, 1901
Pat Brassington (b. 1942), artist, was born in Hobart and studied at the Tasmanian School of Art. One of Australia’s foremost photo-based artists, she has been exhibited and collected extensively in Australia and overseas and featured in such prestigious events as Australian Perspecta 1989 and the Sydney Biennale 2004.

Brassington’s work references surrealism, feminism and fetishism. Photographic motifs, collaged or digitally manipulated, create disconcertingly ambiguous imagined states which fascinate and disturb. Images evoke uneasy tensions between bizarre, sinister intimations of menace and weirdly beautiful, benign harmonies. Open to multiple interpretations, the titles deflect from the content to redirect and encourage more subjective meanings. Using sexuality to confront, discomfort and intrigue, she layers and collages the actual with the improbable to create a mesmeric and often humorous quality.

From Alison Alexander’s The Companion to Tasmanian History, University of Tasmania, 2005.

The selected images here are from Brassington’s most recent exhibition, Quill, at Bett Gallery, Hobart.

www.bettgallery.com.au
PAT BRASSINGTON
The Permissions #2 2013
pigment print

Left:
Misterioso 2013
pigment print

Continued on page 111
I am a fifth-generation Tasmanian, a descendant of Irish convicts who arrived here in the 1850s. Most of my forebears lived a working class existence. My brother Michael was the first in our immediate family to obtain a university degree, followed by my sister Michelle, and then myself. My father was a ‘swampy’ from Invermay and a tradie painter. My mother raised three children before returning to the workforce as a cleaner. The values my parents gave me – compassion, equality, justice and a passion to work hard to make other people’s lives better (because it’s never enough just to feel sorry for someone, you must always find a way to help) – have guided my path through life. These values led me to work for the trade union movement and then on to representative politics in the Australian Labor Party.

Although both my parents served as elected rank and file union shop stewards to represent their workmates, and my father was awarded life membership of the Hospital Employees Federation, a trajectory into parliamentary politics was never our ‘family business’. Becoming a politician in 2010 therefore was an enormous challenge for me – including adjusting to the machine-like processes common to all political parties in dealing with the contemporary media, which demands messages that can be easily understood and snapped up quickly. My background has led me to talk from my heart. Sometimes that does not work for the political professionals or the bureaucrats (I do not use this term negatively) surrounding me, but authenticity in politics is not just important to me personally, it’s crucial to effective parliamentary representation. I think Tasmanians have an especially astute and powerful ‘bullshit’ radar.

If someone in public life is not being authentic or sounds like they are trying to spin people, then Tasmanians call it for what it is.

Back in my days in the trade union movement, I did not greatly enjoy getting into a suit and running clever arguments in the Industrial Commission. What I loved was visiting cleaners, hospitality workers and all other kinds of workers – in the middle of the night, or whenever they worked – to talk to them about the things that mattered to them. The question I always asked myself was how could I empower them, and help them to fight for a better life. I passionately believe in the activist empowerment model: feed someone a fish and they eat for a day, teach someone how to fish and they eat for a lifetime. Sometimes union officials take power away from people in an effort to gain better working conditions. My imperative was always the opposite – to hand away power, so that the workers I represented were not solely dependent on me (or anyone else) to deliver a result, but were self-reliant with a genuine voice in their workplace and the wider community.

For many years I was sceptical about politics and its ability to make people’s lives better, until I saw first-hand the devastation that could be wrought on people’s lives when politicians made poor policy decisions and implemented appalling legislation. So when I decided to put my hand up to run for politics I had arrived at my ‘put up or shut up’ moment. Or, to paraphrase American activist and songwriter Joe Hill, my ‘don’t mourn, organise’ moment. Giving people a real say in their future is the responsibility of a politician every bit as much as it is the duty of a trade unionist. But too often contemporary politics diminishes this ideal.
When I did put my hand up to enter parliament—politics, I put my my values and skills into action in the way I had learnt over years of lobbying for workers’ rights—through grassroots campaigning. My preferred style of politics is based on building a relationship with people and building understanding about the things they feel strongly about. From the first day of my campaign I involved people in its planning—volunteers regularly joined together, at times in groups of over fifty people, and we would talk together about their issues of concern and how we could make a difference. This was a very different election campaign than any I’d been part of across the previous twenty years. Too many of them were run by a small handful of key people, who essentially had only a transactional relationship with volunteers, and in turn a transactional relationship with the community. This approach is one of diminishing returns. It’s like strip mining—the more you strip, the less of real value there is to harvest. It contributes to the intense cynicism many people express today about politics.

I will never forget visiting a community house in the lead-up to the 2010 election. I sat down and introduced myself to a woman who was attending a community event. She promptly responded that she ‘hated politics’ and ‘hated politicians’. For the next half an hour we spoke about her son’s struggles with the education and health systems, her concerns about public safety, and the inadequate public transport service to her suburb. At the end of our conversation about these things I told her we had been talking ‘politics’ for the last half hour. She initially argued, saying ‘that’s not politics’. I talked her through the role of politicians in government, as I saw it, and decisions were made on the questions that concerned her. All I did was to join the dots for her; she was already passionate about key issues. She lifted her head, and since that one discussion she has become more involved in her community. The concept of ‘politics’ changed for her—because a ‘politician’ had taken the time to listen to her and provide her with a way to get involved. That is how politics should work.

After that 2010 election, I was selected to be a minister before even being sworn into the House of Assembly. That was simultaneously a humbling and exhilarating experience. With good intent, the departments and the communication/media advisers immediately went to work making sure I stuck to the script. The media responded, and still does, by trying to get me and everyone else to go off-script. So the dance has continued, leaving the vast majority of people who listen to the media frequency seems to be more focused on the political ‘gotta’ moment than reporting the deeper story, which makes pushing on big issues or confronting controversial issues difficult. My ministerial responsibility crosses five portfolios—Infrastructure, Workplace Relations, Economic Development, Innovation, Science & Technology, and Police & Emergency Management—which demands addressing some of the most challenging economic circumstances Tasmania has faced for almost a generation. This involves engaging with issues that rarely can be resolved quickly or simply. Nor can they be readily explained within the constraints of a competitive media environment where patience is increasingly a rare quality. The media cycle in recent years has shrunk from around twenty-four hours to between four and six hours. Social media does not necessarily make things easier. I am not blaming journalists or commentators for this state of affairs, as ultimately it involves the responsibility of political leaders to rise above the restrictions of the media culture of the day. But genuine communication with the community has become extremely difficult for politicians.

If someone in being authentic or are trying to spin Tasmanians call public life not is what it is.

After three years inside the belly of this beast, I have found that regardless of the issue, context and circumstance are often lost—and unpacking complexity is usually replaced by the claim that everything that goes wrong is the fault of the state government. I have also found that there are many decent hard-working individuals in the parliament, in the bureaucracy, within industry and in the community. Encouraging and participating in more mature and reasoned debate is difficult, particularly in this environment, and at this time. But we must persevere if we are to restore faith in the political process in the eyes of the people we represent. I like that woman in the community house who so clearly articulated that ‘politics’ angered her—and so many others—we have a choice. We either respond in kind, or we pursue a kind of politics that is more genuinely engaged, and focuses better on the issues we face our change can be confronting. I am a big fan of the view that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”, but I am critical of those who use that chestnut of a saying as an excuse for not progressing, tweaking and improving things. That approach is lazy and unstrategic. I don’t support change for the sake of it, and I don’t believe that we should use the power and privilege associated with public life as a licence to conduct experiments at whim on our community. Circumstances do shift, our thinking and our acceptance of new things evolves, and we must move with all that. But we must also not trash or disrespect established approaches or concepts, simply because they are older or are not ‘ours’. Conversely, if things are broken they need fixing; it is not acceptable to do nothing. Change must be made, and to interact in a finely balanced dance. Politicians must lead, but they also must take people with them on the journey. Politicians should be pragmatic, strategic and truly ambitious in relation to policy formation and aspirations for the community—but we should always act with a view to the longer term, ensuring we not only improve the situation of people today, but also advance change that will stand the test of time.

Governments and their departments must as a first order of priority be competent. This is not as easy or automatic as it sounds. Slow decision-making, and decisions made in detachment from an overall strategic vision, occur more regularly than anyone in any government would acknowledge readily. (This is not dissimilar to many private sector organisations I have dealt with). Massive demands on time and resources, further squeezed by political imperatives and challenges from various stakeholders with diverse needs and aspirations, do not create sound environments for key decisions. On the contrary, this combination of pressures encourages a conservative, risk-averse mindset where the path of least resistance tends to be seen as the easiest and best option. So competence should not be just assumed, it deserves attention, protection and encouragement. The irony of the issue is that, for a few years; I’ve backpacked around South America and Europe, and travelled for work to other countries. Going away for a while has given me a wider perspective and stronger understanding of Tasmania, including its strengths and failings. Tasmanians commonly say that ‘we don’t want our children to leave’. As a father I understand that emotion, but I also want my children to experience the world and find their own way. The desire of the young to leave their homes and explore a wider context is used by some to question Tasmania’s economic and social progress. But a place of Tasmania’s size cannot offer all the opportunities our young people need—and if we pretend that it can, we set ourselves up for failure. Instead we should encourage a sense of collective responsibility to build a thriving, diverse, enriching environment where our children will want to stay if they can, and be able to return to if they wish.
Tasmania is an island state of half a million people, equally dispersed from the top to the bottom, with three distinct sub-regions. This places enormous pressure on the delivery of social services. We are also economically and geographically isolated from our broader region and our markets, and we live in a first-world country with high living standards and associated expectations.

Victor Hugo said that there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. In many respects I feel that way about the Tasmania of today. There has been a powerful convergence of circumstances, providing the time of individual and collective interest in Tasmania that uniquely places our state at a key moment of opportunity. Further, the world is now placing increasing value upon products and experiences that are unique to Tasmania. Our breathtaking natural environment makes Tasmania one of a shrinking handful of places in the world where people feel less overwhelmed or stifled. Our relaxed atmosphere is a wonderful counterpoint to our increasingly sophisticated culture. For many years Tasmania was seen by many as a place of mediocrity, across social and economic indicators. Special things happened elsewhere. But something significant has changed in Tasmania across the past decade; a new and increasingly intoxicating mix of creativity, innovation and self-confidence has emerged. This has been given an extra push by people new to Tasmania (and therefore unencumbered by the baggage of history), and a critical mass of returning members of the Tasmanian diaspora who have travelled and worked around the world. This has helped us to lift our heads, collectively, as a community.

Tasmania enjoys the highest proportion of scientists and researchers of any state in Australia. Hobart is Australia’s gateway to Antarctica, with the highest proportion of Antarctic and Southern Ocean researchers of all of the five international gateway cities. Our science and research sector is world class, featuring institutions such as the CSIRO, the Menzies Research Centre, the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Science, the Australian Antarctic Division, and two international secretariats dedicated to Antarctic and Southern Ocean research – which mean Tasmania enjoys a permanent critical mass of highly educated and engaged academics. A collaboration between the University of Tasmania, the Tasmanian government, CSIRO, NICTA and IBM – a world-leading research initiative that is the first economy-wide initiative of its kind, is an amazing and community-based adaptive water management.

Tasmania also has the highest proportion of artists per capita, nationally. Our attendance at cultural events is higher than the national average, and is, worn with ease. In fact, during the opening of MONA, Hartz and his family visits to QVMAG provided my first emotional connection with the arts; a more conscious, intellectual connection and appreciation came many years later. Can any economist measure and quantify the profound effect those experiences had on me and those from my background?

It is similarly difficult to measure the indirect economic impact of creative industries and initiatives in Tasmania. Consider the effect of the opening of MONA, as the most prominent example. Direct jobs and visitation can be readily quantified, but estimating the overall positive economic net-benefit of MONA is trickier. We do know that the indirect benefits it has already delivered are significant. Over fifty per cent of festival ticket sales for the recent MONA Festival of Music and Art (MOFO) went to non-Tasmanian postcodes, indicating a dramatic upsurge in tourist visitation created by MOFO – but this figure doesn’t even begin measuring the positive effect on our community of the ‘pulse’ and ‘feel’ that Hobart has during these festival celebrations. Which metric registers the fact that the arrival of MONA and its consequent tourist traffic means that we can now have a conversation about the potential for a commuter ferry service on our waterways?

Positive developments in the scientific and creative industries and associated activities are in large part why Tasmania has recently become more confident, and recognised as one of the most liveable places in the world. How do the creative industries contribute to the economy? It’s important we ask this question, and attempt to answer it, as too often data drives a conclusive assessment of a publicly-funded or supported activity. Economists tend only to measure things that are easily quantified, however, and there is a danger that social and cultural benefits – because they are difficult to quantify – may be dismissed as unimportant, or have their value discounted.

But many things cannot be measured while still being clearly important to the fabric of our community. Drawing on my own experiences in Launceston as a student on school holidays, much time was spent at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. My family spent hours walking through the gallery. It did not matter how many times we had already seen an exhibit or a particular piece. Why were we there? I had a mother who encouraged us to explore; and, as importantly, entry was free, which meant that a family with not much money was able to access publically-supported culture as often as we wished. That experience was, and is, shared across generations. How many of us have not ‘just happened’ to enter an exhibit or a particular piece. Why were we there? I had a mother who encouraged us to explore; and, as importantly, entry was free, which meant that a family with not much money was able to access publically-supported culture as often as we wished. That experience was, and is, shared across generations.

Positive developments in the scientific and creative industries and associated activities are in large part why Tasmania has recently become more confident, and recognised as one of the most liveable places in the world. How do the creative industries contribute to the economy? It’s important we ask this question, and attempt to answer it, as too often data drives a conclusive assessment of a publicly-funded or supported activity. Economists tend only to measure things that are easily quantified, however, and there is a danger that social and cultural benefits – because they are difficult to quantify – may be dismissed as unimportant, or have their value discounted.

But many things cannot be measured while still being clearly important to the fabric of our community. Drawing on my own experiences in Launceston as a student on school holidays, much time was spent at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. My family spent hours walking through the gallery. It did not matter how many times we had already seen an exhibit or a particular piece. Why were we there? I had a mother who encouraged us to explore; and, as importantly, entry was free, which meant that a family with not much money was able to access publically-supported culture as often as we wished. That experience was, and is, shared across generations.

Positive developments in the scientific and creative industries and associated activities are in large part why Tasmania has recently become more confident, and recognised as one of the most liveable places in the world. How do the creative industries contribute to the economy? It’s important we ask this question, and attempt to answer it, as too often data drives a conclusive assessment of a publicly-funded or supported activity. Economists tend only to measure things that are easily quantified, however, and there is a danger that social and cultural benefits – because they are difficult to quantify – may be dismissed as unimportant, or have their value discounted.
world. But that stimulus is now gone. The challenge of our economic transition is in full view, and our unemployment rate of over seven per cent is the highest in the country.

However, we have natural advantages due to our climate and our environment, our abundance of water and other natural resources, and our people who are increasingly being recognised as innovative and passionate. We have access across Tasmania to high-speed broadband through the National Broadband Network, a key piece of infrastructure that transforms the tyranny of distance. If you were to start your business in a specific place, why wouldn’t you do it in this place – which consistently rates highly on global liveability measures? While some see our future as dark and bleak, nothing could be further from the truth.

Many individuals and businesses want to relocate, start up or expand their investment here, to take advantage of what Tasmania has to offer. As one example, in late 2011 a new company called Burlington Berries purchased a sheep grazing property in the northern midlands, with a dream of becoming a key player in the soft fruit market. Today, using sophisticated growing techniques learnt from their years of experience growing berries in the European market, they have planted out fifteen hectares of land, produced 350 tonnes of strawberries and raspberries and have plans to expand to at least twenty-five hectares next season. Burlington Berries now has approximately thirty full-time employees and many more during the picking season. Another example is M2 Telecommunications, the fifth largest telco in Australia and one of the lastest growing. Eighteen months ago they employed approximately eighty people in their contact centre in Hobart. Today, by consolidating most of their activities from around Australia and South East Asia, they have over 200 full-time employees, and are looking to expand further. Why Tasmania? Two reasons: first, the quality of the staff. Workers from their Tasmanian offices consistently outperform their other operations interstate; the company attributes this to the Tasmanian ‘give a shit’ attitude. Secondly, their staff turnover is in single digits, compared to upwards of thirty per cent in their other operations. The lesson from M2 is that Tasmanian workers are more loyal and more productive – and this is driving other investments in Tasmania.

Governments must have a strategic framework in which to support the growth of the economy and improved outcomes of the people it represents, rather than relying on ad hoc or kneejerk responses, driven by the headlines. Our framework is the Economic Development Plan, launched in August 2011. The plan provides a comprehensive, whole-of-government framework for economic growth, listing the ten key sectors for a strong economic future: Antarctic research and supply; building and construction; food and agriculture; forestry; ICT; mining; renewable energy; science and research; specialist and marine manufacturing; and tourism.

We have also developed three Regional Economic Development Plans which provide the most detailed analysis yet undertaken of Tasmania’s three regions, linking their respective and diverse strengths to the economic activities that would best transition them into a prosperous future. Crucially, we have worked effectively to counter the ‘silos’ thinking I described above. An Economic Development subcommittee of cabinet has been established, with all the key ministries represented at the table – including the important portfolio of Education – that meets regularly to oversee the implementation of the plan and to identify any key blockages and emerging opportunities.

As a relatively new politician I am optimistic and excited about Tasmania’s future. I am not doing a Pollyanna. I acknowledge we have challenges; we face key challenges in education and health, especially. Our outcomes in these critical areas are nowhere near good enough. We must do better, which is why we have invested in child and family health centres in the areas of greatest need; and centres that provide a range of key services, and key intervention points in breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Our developments in supporting early childhood education, which is already making a difference with the ‘Launching into Learning’ and ‘Bridge the Gap’ programs, are significant. But we must do more. As part of a strategic and whole-of-government approach we recognise that education – intertwined with industry and community economic development – is the key to unlocking Tasmania’s future prosperity. Already we are seeing key industries stepping up their investment in education.

Major new investments in the dairy sector have recently referred ‘the new black’ are interested, has a shelf life.’

The Age newspaper recently referred to Tasmania as ‘the new black’. People offshore are interested, but every fashion has a shelf life. The current Tasmanian government has a clear vision, but the short-term focus of the political cycle could soon undo the work that has been done. Our challenge is to embed sustainable and lasting transformation, and to inspire this community.

It will take community, industry and political leadership working together to deliver this. As a community we need to acknowledge that things won’t just fall in our lap. Regardless of our party-political persuasion, our occupation, our birthplace or regional loyalties, we all owe it to our children and future generations of Tasmanians to work hard, to take responsibility for our future, to lead and to act to make this place better.
W hen The Age journalist James Button answered the call in late 2008 to become then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s speechwriter, it was in response to a private need. He wanted to implant himself ‘in the belly of the beast’, to find out what political life was really like, and to go where his father, John, a Hawke-era minister, had gone before.

Button’s account of that experience in *Speeches: A Year In My Father’s Business* (Melbourne University Press, 2012) is a complex tale. It interweaves the personal – a Melbourne upbringing steeped in Labor values; the newly Canberra-focused Button’s growing regard for public servants, the unsung heroes of Australian democracy – and the social – an open-ended enquiry into ‘the fading pull of politics in people’s lives’. Through all this runs a meditation on the art of the speechwriter, who must put the right words into his master’s mouth.

When Button is parachuted into the job of drafting Rudd’s speeches on the cusp of the Global Financial Crisis – a heady time to be in Canberra, with markets toppling around the world, and Kevin Rudd bent on toppling around the world, and Kevin Rudd bent on positioning himself as Australia’s economic saviour – his first key challenge is to wrestle with the mass of detail in which the Prime Minister clearly revelled. His early briefings are ‘very. He must write about ‘challenges’ (to be overcome), not ‘problems’ (a ‘deficit word’ implying failure). ‘Issue’ is also in use generically among citizens’. Through all this runs a meditation on the art of the speechwriter, who must put the right words into his master’s mouth.

Button works doggedly for Rudd, giving him the benefit of the doubt long after the journalist sustains his first misgivings. Late nights, naps under his desk, lonely dinners in Parliament House (warmed-up packet lasagne). No effort is too great. Close enough to the boiler room to feel the heat of power that fires up politicians, Button does his utmost to support efforts to keep the ship of state on course.

Despite his own inexperience in speechwriting, ministerial dealings and policy-making, Button soon stumbles on to something vital that Rudd – perpetually obsessed with detail – cannot see. For a speech to reach its audience one golden rule must be observed. ‘You have to collect the detail, Point out points, you have to throw it all out, apart from one or two brilliant points that light up the bigger picture... Rudd had to speak less from the head and more from the heart. That was the only way he was going to be able to tell a story.’

Button does his tactful best to convey this to Rudd, but the Prime Minister won’t listen. Instead, a number of painful incidents later, Rudd drops Button. ‘I passed through Canberra darkness’, recalls Button, ‘brilliant stars and the mountain nights turning cold, as beer, coffee, curry and some mingled sense of agitation, failure and pleasure at being alive made my thoughts run. And perhaps I occasionally spoke them aloud, so that a public servant putting out the garbage might have seen a shadow in a blue suit pass his house yelling, “Kevin, USE MY STUFF!”’

After many more late nights, Button winds his way home to Michelle Grattan’s Red Hill flat where, over a cup of tea, the two discuss the fate of journalism in a speeded-up world. Why is it, they repeatedly wonder, that ‘the public space for intelligent debate is shrinking’?

Riveted by Canberra life, Button is yet haunted by things his father never said – what politics meant to him, whether that life was fulfilling. Was it worth the private sacrifices? In the wake of his father’s death, James is left asking the same question of himself.

In his Quarterly Essay ‘Not Dead Yet: Labor’s Post-Left Future’ (Black Inc., 2013) Mark Latham – after admitting he was too young and inexperienced for Labor’s leadership a decade ago – goes straight for the party’s jugular: trade unions. As he sees it, Labor’s future is as a party no longer captive to unions, open to the ‘aspirational class’ and to a ‘civilised capitalism’.

The free exercise of human rights, in tandem with the changing nature of work and communication technologies, has loosed the glue of social capital’, writes Latham. This is ‘the price of modernity: instead of being heavily inculcated in traditional social norms, our obligations to each other have become optional’. Latham’s solution? ‘The challenge for progressive government is to maintain the benefits of pluralism and personal freedom while encouraging solidarity among citizens’.

Is it time to bring Latham in from the wilderness – or, perhaps, into dialogue with Labor scrutineers like Button?}
CHRIS BOND
Jarvis Extract 2012
oil on linen, canvas

CHRIS BOND
Ursula Weiss 2012
oil on linen, canvas

All images courtesy Nellie Castan Gallery Melbourne
Photography by Joanne Moloney
www.chrisbond.com.au
Earlier this year, Black Inc. published an English translation of Simone Weil’s 1943 tract, On the Abolition of All Political Parties. Translated by Simon Leys, this volume also contains an essay by Czeslaw Milosz on Simone Weil, and an essay by Simon Leys on the friendship between Milosz and the Gallimard editor who first published Weil’s books, Albert Camus.

In the Translator’s Foreword, Leys opens with a reflection on the role of the conscience vote in the Australian parliament: ‘A conscience vote – what an extraordinary notion! It should be a pleonasm: don’t we all assume that every vote – by definition – is being made by MPs who listen to their conscience, instead of following some diktat from a political party?’

In his collection of essays, The Hall of Uselessness (2011), Simon Leys prefigures his more recent concern with the tension that resides behind this assumption; a concern which prompted the project of translating Weil’s essay. In an essay on Jean-François Revel (‘Cunning Like a Hedgehog’), Leys describes how Revel’s experience with mainstream politics ‘gave him an invaluable insight into the essential intellectual dishonesty that is unavoidably attached to partisan politicking.’ The story he tells is of the time Revel wrote a speech for François Mitterrand (then leader of the Opposition), which opened with the line: ‘Although I cannot deny some of my opponent’s achievements ...’ At which Mitterrand screamed: ‘No! Never, never! In politics never acknowledge that your opponent has any merit. This is the basic rule of the game.’

An alternative to this view of democratic politics was once offered by Albert Camus, which he considered to be, above all else, an exercise in modesty. In a 1947 article in Combat, Camus wrote that ‘a democrat is a person who admits that his adversary may be right, who therefore allows him to speak, and who agrees to consider his arguments’. He goes on to say that when someone is ‘so convinced by their own arguments’ that they ignore, dismiss, silence, or even resort to violence against their opponents, that ‘democracy no longer exists’.

In his essay on Milosz and Camus, Simon Leys writes: ‘Regarding Camus, one cannot fully understand his intellectual and spiritual development during the last part of his life – from the end of the war till his premature death in 1960 – without taking into account the exceptional importance of the influence on him of Simone Weil’s thought and the example of her life.’ It is an example that can be traced also through the work of Simon Leys. So, when On the Abolition of All Political Parties was recently published, Island co-editor, Matthew Lamb, took this opportunity to put a few questions to Simon Leys. For his part, Leys agreed to respond, with the following caveat: ‘As regards your questions, however, I must first remind you: I am only Simone Weil’s translator – which, in itself, does not qualify me for answering in her stead on these issues, on which I have personally very limited competence or experience (even though my interest and concern are great). The translator of a great philosopher could, in a way, be compared to the secretary of a great doctor: useful to take the calls of patients and fix their appointments, useless as regards diagnosis and treatment of their complaints.’

ML: I’m interested in how you arrived at the point of raising the question of the role of the party system, particularly the ‘for-or-against’ mentality it promotes. Was it through reading Weil’s essay, or did you come to this question in another way, and did that prepare you for what Weil had to say?

SL: Like many citizens, the spectacle of partisan politics in parliament these last few years gave me an acute feeling of dismay. Then I came across this particular essay of Simone Weil (quite perchance – though I long had a strong interest for Weil’s thinking on other issues) and it seemed to me that it might provide a useful starting point for analysing the nature of our problem. Regarding the ‘in favour of, or against’ dichotomy: C.J. Jung thought that this was a characteristic of Western thought, as compared with the Chinese mind, which endeavours ‘to grasp simultaneously the two opposite poles of every reality’... Jung found that ‘the unilateral character of western thought gives it extra energy, but also condemns it to remain barbarian’.
Before reforming the party system one should consider its relation to the democratic ideal: to what extent does this system serve democracy? To what extent does it contradict the very ideal it ought to serve?

ML: The central claim that Weil makes against parties is that they are a machine for generating collective passions; an organisation that exerts collective pressure (internally) on the minds of its members (and, presumably, externally, on the minds of citizens); and, as such, parties are concerned, first and foremost, with their own expansion, without limit. Party thus becomes an end in itself, and no longer a means. For this reason, Weil concludes that parties are totalitarian, ‘potentially, and by aspiration’.

Such rhetoric may have had a place in the context of Europe in the early 1940s, when this essay was written, but do you think such a label as ‘totalitarian’ to describe political parties is at all applicable to parties as they currently exist in Australia, ‘potentially, and by aspiration’?

SL: That partisan politics tend to aspire (unconsciously, by their very nature) to totalitarianism seems to me a shrewd psychological observation. It would be healthy for members of all political parties, and for all politicians, to keep it constantly in mind.

ML: The strength of Weil’s argument is that she asks us to exercise our political imaginations and consider the possibility of a politics operating in the absence of parties, if only to better equip us to understand the effect of their presence. But the weakness of her argument, I think, is how she proposes to abolish political parties — by introducing a ‘complete set of press regulations’, and by making illegal any circle of ideas or debate that should begin crystallising into a more formal group membership — which seems to be a process as undemocratic as what she argues operates under a party system, if not more so. Moreover, her plan requires party politicians to vote their own parties out of existence. Aren’t there more democratic means of removing the influence of party? And what do you think our political culture would look like in the absence of political parties?

SL: Political parties are probably indispensable for a number of organisational and administrative purposes, and it would be inconceivable to do without them. Democracy can be achieved without parties only when it operates on the scale of a small town where the entire population can gather on one central square.

The question, therefore, would be not how to get rid of them, but how to reform their nature. And the answer lies perhaps in Weil’s very first paragraph: she is only dealing with political parties in the Continental meaning of the word — as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon practice (which, at the time of Weil’s writing, was still a living reality). Would it not be feasible and desirable to restore this ‘element of game, of sport’?

ML: So I suppose the real question, therefore, would be, as you say, ‘not how to get rid of them, but how to reform their nature’. Now, there has been much commentary about the need to reform parties internally. But even here, do you think, perhaps, that the main point is still being missed: that what is needed is to reform parties externally, to reform the relationship of parties to parliament, to the media, and to the citizenry?

SL: There should be no ‘party line’ — all votes should be ‘conscience votes’ or secret ballot.

ML: In your introduction to the Weil essay, you attempt to refute in advance a possible objection to the question raised by Weil: the objection that what she suggests is ‘hopelessly utopian, unrealistic and impractical’. You claim that such an objection ‘entirely misses the point’. You then illustrate this by adding a parable by G.K. Chesterton, about a group of people who pull down a lamppost, and then stumble about in the dark.

I fear that those who would miss the point of Weil’s essay — and charge it as being utopian — would also miss the point of Chesterton’s parable. So I was wondering if, to end with, you could supply your interpretation of it for us?

SL: Before pulling down the lamppost, one should first consider what is the purpose of the lamppost, and whether it can fulfil this purpose. Before reforming the party system one should consider its relation to the democratic ideal: to what extent does this system serve democracy? To what extent does it contradict the very ideal it ought to serve?

What would the Australian political landscape look like in the absence of political parties?

Island asked a number of Australia’s more thoughtful commentators to respond, as an act of political imagination, to this very question.

HARRY EVANS: The abolition of political parties in Australia would impose a heavy burden on candidates for political office, the media, interest groups, and the public: the burden of individual responsibility.

Candidates would no longer be able to hide behind the collective will of parties or justify their decisions on the basis of party solidarity. They would have to articulate their own opinions and policy positions and make their own judgments of public opinion. Chanting slogans in unison with others would look foolish. They would be held individually accountable for their decisions and their legislative actions. If repudiated by the electorate they would not have the party to compensate them with other jobs for their loyalty.

The media would have to give up its focus on leadership challenges and party splits, and would have to follow more diligently the views and policies of individual candidates and developments in public opinion. Analyses of policies and measures would have to replace sensations about quarrels and scandals. Leaks and handouts from parties and factions would no longer do.

Interest groups would not be able to target particular leaders on the assumption that once those leaders were recruited their parties would follow. Attempts to buy candidates would be far more difficult because they would have to be influenced one at a time. The public would have to be persuaded by open debate rather than covert expenditure.

The public would have to pay far more attention to the views and policies of individual candidates, and not simply rely on their representatives following a party line. If things went wrong the part played by their own choices of representatives would be clear, and they would not be able to blame other voters, the majority party or particular leaders. Voting on vague impressions or personalities would carry a penalty.

Perhaps all four groups would fail to make these adjustments, and society would collapse in confusion. If the groups did eventually adjust, there would be painful lessons along the way: candidates exposing their lack of ability through unwise statements and policy decisions, interest groups caught out attempting their old secret methods; the media missing significant issues and shifts in opinion and backing causes without public support, the electors making disastrous choices.

Either way, it would be a big change indeed. ▼

Harry Evans was Federal Clerk of the Senate 1988–2009, editor of 7th–13th editions of Odgers’ Australian Senate Practice. He is the author of various items on constitutional and parliamentary matters.
What would the Australian political landscape look like in the absence of political parties?

IAN MARSH: An impasse seemingly afflicts political parties in many developed democracies, not least Australia. Where might this lead? My own, no doubt romantic, view is that it might lead to an enrichment of citizen engagement and instead of citizenship itself, paradoxically through a reworked structure of parties. Here are some reasons. The two-party system was born roughly in 1899 after which date Australian society did progressively come to divide along class or binary lines. But is Australian society divisible, any longer, solely or primarily in class terms?

Recall the way organisational reach was formerly embedded in the institutional fabric of the mass parties – including differentiated platforms, conferences, intense policy debates and elaborated branch structures. In their great days the mass parties enrolled some ten per cent of Australians and between them attracted the primary votes of over ninety per cent of the Australian community. These days are long gone. Moreover, the major parties owed their reach and binding power to their respective ideologies. Where now for ideas?

Rather, our two major parties are like dinosaurs, survivors from another era, now sustained by the inertial power of venerable habit, by our constrained political imagination, by an incentive structure which seemingly continues to serve individual political ambitions and by the many resources which are disproportionately available to incumbents.

Australian politics was reconfigured in 1856, the Labor party is reconfigured in 1900, and 1909. It is at least plausible that we are approaching another turning point. Possibilities that may now seem unimaginable may progressively rework its formal structure. In other words, most now regard minority government as an aberration to be overcome in an Abbott landslide and a later Labor revival. Is it rather the harbinger of a gradual transformation in the two-party structure – a structure that belongs to another social and ideological era and that is now well past its use-by date?

If change is to occur, new political parties, no less than independent candidates with local standing, will be its janissaries. From all this one might hope for the emergence of a new, more plural, more just political order – one that is better fitted to the diverse aspirations of a twenty-first century society.

JAMES DRYBURGH: In the absence of parties, political culture would become a relevant branch of the civil society it is meant to represent, rather than an alternate reality to it. In communication between individuals we appreciate thinkers, we respect a willingness to listen, and we do not impose a prerequisite that conversations begin and end with two sides. Real conversation reflects the complexity of issues – rarely as simple as ‘for or against’.

By contrast, party politics demands of its politicians no independent thoughts at all, requiring only embalmed and internal loyalty. Meanwhile the partisan feeds off blindness and hallucination in equal measure – eyes closed to climate change then open to see a terrorist where a child refugee stands. If freed from the chains of the parties and moulded from the same social norms as non-politicians, political culture would more closely mirror reality. Surely then the political conversation might reconnect to the actuality of policy issues, and thus better serve the people?

Politics would become more forward-thinking, as leaders consider issues and their own personal legacy more than party strategy. Politics would become more agile without being hamstring by the slowness to react to changing circumstances inherent in political ideology. In being able to think and speak for themselves, politicians would become less dependent on lies and spin. Human rights would improve – how many Labor politicians, for example, personally believe in ideology. In being able to think and speak for them- selves, politicians would become more independent in their level of cruelty toward asylum seekers?

A certain honesty and authenticity could appear, allowing people to engage in politics less as though it were a sport, whereby most support either/or – Holden or Ford, Carlton or Collingwood, Labor or Liberal, and so on – and modify their approval of events, performance and policy to suit their chosen team. Ironically, greater sportsmanship within politics would evolve with healthy rivalry becoming contained within society’s accepted rules of behaviour.

Politics would begin to communicate less in the form of a pre-recorded advertising message or a football chant and more akin to a conversation between human beings, which may even make it worth listening to.

NATALIA CICA: I envisage two scenarios. First, one where political parties disappear, but the incumbents remain in office. Here I predict a kind of bumbling chaos in the first instance, given the powerful if undersung role of party whips in Australia’s current political culture – niftily described by Canberra’s Parliamentary Education Office as ‘team managers’.

The chaos would not be anarcho. The undertow of existing factional, interpersonal and even ideological allegiances would linger; the latter already operate across the party system, to an extent. But many parliamentarians would struggle and sometimes stumble in the way they already tend to do when freed from party discipline to exercise a ‘science vote’ on questions of unusual moral gravity.

Left alone, the situation would likely correct itself – to a return of discipline and certainty, by the re-establishment of political parties.

The second scenario is one where political parties disappear, and the field is simultaneously thrown open to entirely fresh candidates, with no track record of party representation or aspiration. Again, we would witness a kind of chaos. A truly, newly open field would likely attract a rich mix of genuine idealists, results-driven pragmatists, duffards, ego-manics and expert manipulators … all professing to act in the public good.

Sound familiar? No, it really would look different and feel exciting, at least for a while, but in time factional, interpersonal and even ideological allegiances would develop. New political parties most likely would be established. Unencumbered by the weight of party history, traditions and figureheads, those parties would look different from those we currently enjoy or endure. But perhaps not as much – nor for as long – as we’d like to imagine.

Australian political culture is a subset of larger (or smaller) Australian culture – we may well decant the sauve blanc into shiny new bottles, but ultimately there is no escaping or hiding from ourselves.

P A U L A M A T T H E W S O N: It’s hard not to agree with Simone Weil’s contention that partisan spirit is the embodiment of evil, and political parties are the diabolical means of generating it. Contemporary political events serve only to reinforce the view. Setting aside the vast difference between contemporary Australian politics and the historical context of Weil’s call for the abolition of political parties, it’s fascinating to consider what Australia’s political landscape would look like without them.

In many respects, the capacity for Australians to participate in democracy has never been so … well, democratic. Digital communication has delivered real-time mass political engagement that have the potential to make parties redundant. Never before have so many individuals been able to directly converse with their elected representatives and participate in governmental decision-making processes.

But this civic optimism presumes all citizens wish for deep political engagement. For good or bad, many don’t have the time, patience or intellectual capacity to do so. Others just don’t care; they want government to get on with business while they get on with their own.

This reality wouldn’t change in a world without political parties. However, our politics would be atomised. We’d have to contend with scores of views on hundreds of issues. Elected representatives would have no easy way to find common purpose with each other; disengaged voters would have little sense of what a politician stands for; and those who report politics would have no basis upon which to track or understand what transpires in and outside of parliament.

In short, the abolition of political parties would disfranchise voters. Thankfully, any such deprivation would be short-lived. People naturally seek and commune with those who share similar views and, in matters politic, this is no different. In the absence of parties we would simply start again, creating new political alliances based on common values or philosophies.

While weeval political parties as vessels of evil, today they have a more honourable role: they’re a way of organising and guiding what would otherwise be political chaos.

What is needed is not the abolishment of political parties but a greater space in which political interests are expressed and a greater level of political engagement. In the absence of political parties the traditional political default position would be the vice-like grip of the dominant political culture that belongs to another social and ideological century society.

JAMES DRYBURGH is co-editor of Tasmanian Times and a writer who has been published in New Internationalist (Ireland). Smith University Press and the International Congress of Rural Sociology in Lisbon, Portugal, on the role of the media in giving greater voice to the world’s poor.

Natasha Cica is Director of the Inglis Clark Centre for Civil Society at the University of Tasmania and an inaugural Sidney Myer Creative Fellow. She co-edited Godfrey’s VIEW 39: Tasmania - The Tipping Point and has worked as an adviser to a range of Australian federal parliamentarians.

Ian Marsh is a Visiting Professor at the Australian Innovation Research Centre, University of Tasmania. His study, Demo- Journal and Democracy: New Organisations in Britain, Australia and New Zealand (with Raymond Milner) was published late last year by Cambridge University Press.

Paula Matthewson is a freelance communications adviser and writer who has been published in New Internationalist (Ireland), Smith University Press and the International Congress of Rural Sociology in Lisbon, Portugal, on the role of the media in giving greater voice to the world’s poor.
It is not unthinkable that Australia could exist without political parties. Up until the late seventeenth century such beasts were not a feature of the English body politic and even today in some places, such as Canada’s North West Territories, parliaments exist without political parties. While Australians seem to be wedded to the idea that politics be organised around political parties the idea that they do not exist must surely be attractive given the atrophic impact of the party system in recent decades.

Political parties are simply machines for the ambitions. They are the enemies of freedom of speech and thought, and they stultify public policy debate through their obsession with compromise, consensus and finding the lowest common denominator.

So without them, what political culture would emerge? One that was more free-wheeling. One in which the legislature could never take a bloc of votes for granted and so thinking and deliberating about public policy would be better informed. Perhaps the most useful dimension of an Australian political culture without parties might be the demise of spin. Spin is a cancer deep within the body politic of this nation. It exists because political parties see themselves as brands or commodities.

Additional, the absence of political parties in Australia would mean that the citizenry are likely to become more engaged with issues. The reluctance to participate through their obsession with compromise, consensus and finding the lowest common denominator.

In fact, the most surprising fact about political parties in Australia is how powerful they remain. Social trends are indeed assailing them: the steady decline of registration, of the consent – is the stuff of politics itself.

It is not possible to imagine a parliament constituted completely of independents, who would vote according to their conscience on each law presented to them. This, roughly, is the sort of assembly John Stuart Mill envisaged in his tract, Representative Government (1861). Even so, Mill ran into trouble. For instance, should representatives be bound by pledges they made during election campaigns? Mill says no: parliamentarians should be free to change their minds. But Mill admits that this risks disillusioning voters, who end up giving their representatives a kind of ‘power of attorney’ to do as they please. And even Mill acknowledged that voters would largely be split between Tories and Liberals, the two main groupings of his day.

In 2015, much more than in 1861, it is almost impossible to imagine a modern democracy without powerful, institutionalised parties. Parties may be internally disunited, as the ALP is today, but they still play muscular roles in the practice of democracy. In a structural sense, parties are important because they are so good at organising things. They play a crucial role in organising political activity: by gathering and distributing resources – especially, of course, campaign funding – by connecting personal ambition with electoral opportunity, and, perhaps most crucially of all, by their institutional knowhow of how to win elections.

In fact, the most surprising fact about political parties in Australia is how powerful they remain. Social trends are indeed assailing them: the steady decline of registration, of the consent – is the stuff of politics itself.

Greg Barns is a barrister and former national president of the Australian Lawyers Alliance. He is the author of What’s Wrong with the Liberal Party? Selling the Australian Government, and co-author of Australian: The Road to Surfdom. He has a PhD in political philosophy and is the co-founder of the political blog, ‘The Road To Surfdom’. He has written for The Drum. His new book, News at the End of the World, will be released in 2013.

Tim Dunlop is the author of two of Australia’s most successful political blogs, ‘The Road To Surfdom’ and ‘Blogocracy’, and also wrote the Crikey music blog, ‘Johnny’s in the Basement’. He has a PhD in political philosophy and is the co-founder of Essential Media Communications (EMC), a public affairs and research company specialising in campaigning for progressive social and political organisations.
My brother and I were watching TV after school. I had a lot of homework to do — to get done — and it was worrying me like it always did, but I did not want to start. Not yet. I just wanted some time to not have to do anything.

My brother turned to me and asked me where Lebanon was. He was in year four and I was in my first year of high school. I told him I didn’t know.

‘A man came to talk to us about Peace,’ he said. ‘He was from Lebanon.’

There were often talks about Peace at our school. All I knew about being a Quaker was that there were minutes of silence when we were meant to think about Peace, and there was grey. Grey uniforms and grey walls.

I got up off the couch and walked over to the small bookcase that was really just a shelf squeezed in between the chimney and the wall. We had a two-volume edition of the World Book Encyclopaedia. The books were brown and black, maybe they were leather, and World Book was written in gold letters down the spine. Mum had won them in a raffle and that was lucky because I often needed to use them for homework.

I took down the L-Z volume and carried it back to the couch. I opened it up to the beginning of L.

LEB.

Lebanon is a small independent republic at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The name of the country comes from the snow-capped Lebanon Mountains. In the Arabic language it is called LUBNAN. Lebanon’s capital and largest city is Beirut.

I read it out loud and my brother nodded like he knew, like he was being reminded of something that had just slipped his mind. There was a map of Lebanon — long and thin and by the sea. There were also a few black and white pictures. One of a giant cypress tree, and one of some ancient ruins with Roman-like columns standing tall without a roof. There was a photo of a smart looking city with lots of cars and people walking in the streets and bright white art deco buildings against the sky. One building had a sign on the rooftop that said RIVOLI in huge curly writing.

The caption read – Place des Canons, Beirut – 1969

On the next page there was another picture of the city, only there were no cars and no people walking and the art deco buildings were gone or so altered that there was nothing there to recognise. Smoke rose from missing rooftops and everything was blackened or grey. Everything different. The city had been smashed to pieces.

The caption read – Beirut 1982: Operation Peace for Galilee

My eyes scrolled down the page then, down all the columns about all the wars in Lebanon. The Civil War and the War with Israel and the War with the PLO. My brother had stopped looking at the pictures, he stopped looking at the book altogether and rested back against the couch.

‘No one wins a war,’ he said, and he breathed in heavily. ‘That’s what the man said he had come to tell us. No one wins a war, we just all lose. He showed us some photos of his family and he passed them around and told us they were all gone.’

I closed the book and sat with it heavy on my lap. The TV was still on but we were not watching it. Eventually I got up and walked over to the bookcase. I stood there in the corner with the World Book in my hands and the room was very still.

‘Is the man going to stay here now?’ I asked, and I meant forever. I meant was the man going to stay here in Hobart forever.

But my brother just shrugged. His eyes were back on the TV and he wasn’t thinking about the man from Lebanon any more.

Only I was.

The story was inside me now. I knew I would remember the man even though I had never even seen him or heard him speak. I didn’t know if he was old or if he was young, but I would think about him, here, living on this island without any of the people he loved or even knew at all. Here, so far away from home, knowing that he could never return to the place he remembered because it was gone.

Favel Parrett is the author of Past the Shallows (2011). She was a recipient of an Australian Society of Authors Mentorship in 2009 and has had a number of short stories published in journals including the Griffith Review, Wet Ink, and Best Australian Stories.
Dave Arnold, 84, retired from teaching and education administration in 1959 when he decided that he wanted to be a gardener. Following his divorce in 1987, he lived with his partner, Pete. They first met in 1984. He was involved with gay law reform in Tasmania from the beginning, present at the very first meeting, ‘when Rodney [Croome] and Nick [Toonen] took the ball and ran with it. Bob Brown was there too. It was a meeting deciding that just something had to be done and that was when the activity started.’ He has three children and seven grandchildren.

Miranda Morris, 60, is a writer, historian and academic, who has also worked on adventure playgrounds and radio scripting. She is currently working full-time writing espionage novels. She is the author of *The Pink Triangle* (1995), the definitive book about the gay law reform and human rights issues which incited Tasmania and the world in the late eighties and early nineties.

Lochsley Wilson, 18, lives in Launceston. He is currently on a ‘gap year’ and is going to the University of Melbourne next year to do a Bachelor of Arts, possibly followed by a Bachelor of Law. He has recently written a story in response to an article in the *Examiner* (a northern Tasmanian newspaper) about gay marriage. The story ‘started a domino effect’ that took him to Canberra for the ABC Regional Writers Summit for Heywire. The story was then recorded and broadcast on Radio National.

Rachel: One thing that is extremely apparent to anyone with an awareness of Tasmania’s recent queer history is that we have ricocheted from extreme to extreme – from a state where male homosexuality was illegal until the early nineties to setting an international standard in human rights, following the United Nations decision in 1994. But as we delve even further back into Tasmania’s queer history, a lot more richness is revealed.

Lochsley: My sister was born in 1994, the year that the UN Human Rights Commission condemned the intolerance of Tasmania at an international forum. I mentioned it in a speech trying to encapsulate family and my experience growing up within the context of gay law reform. That speech was really interesting to write because it made me realise how I really am at a point in history where things have gone from us being the last state to decriminalise homosexuality to the first House of Parliament in Australia to nearly legalise same-sex marriage.

Miranda: I was working for the health department at the time of the parliamentary debates around law reform – it was obviously a pretty hot potato there. They were trying to stop the spread of HIV, but men who had had sex with men were reluctant to be tested because it was a notifiable disease and people who tested positive were put on a register. It was tantamount to turning themselves in, because sex between men was illegal. This was not the area I was working in but I could see the political quid pro quo that were happening.

I always find it a bit difficult to work with the grain, so the opportunity to write a book about something that was going to be quite challenging was absolutely exactly what I like to do. *The Pink Triangle: the gay law reform debate in Tasmania* came about at the time the Preventative Measures Bill, which included the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between men, had just failed to pass for the third time. The book was funded by a grant from the National Council on AIDS, and its aim was to understand the issues underlying the debate. The Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group (TGLRG) wanted attitudes towards homosexuality in the state to be examined in a broader context – to remove the pairing of AIDS and homosexuality. It was tricky because at first I was housed in the AIDS Council, as was the TGLRG, but then the TGLRG became too political for the AIDS Council and had to move – and I had to make the choice about whether to stay in the AIDS Council premises, or move with the TGLRG.

It was an interesting thing to write because I was trying to write it historically, but things were happening every single day – it was always in the news, always being debated in parliament. Phones were ringing, banners were being raised, people were helping out with paints so it was very much full immersion journalism that I was doing.

Lochsley: How did you go about countering bias in your book? What sort of mechanisms did you put...
I was on Google looking at what has happened in Tassie, and it was really shocking for me to find out that I was born in a time when homosexuality was illegal.

Lochsley: One of the many interesting comments in your book, Miranda, was that there were many feminists keen to support the gay law reform movement in Tasmania as they had had experience of organising and of collectivism, but there was also a group of women who said ‘No, we’re not going to help these blokes,’ which led, in part, to, lesbian separatism. This sense of bringing knowledge in – or, conversely, condemning others to repeat mistakes they’d made was an interesting divide.

Miranda: Yeah, that was quite a difficult one, too, because, on the whole, gay men hadn’t been very sympathetic. Lesbian separatism had grown out of the older homosexual law reform movement that wouldn’t include lesbian issues on their agenda. And I mean certainly the issues were very different for men and women – sex between women wasn’t illegal, but women were often losing their children in court because they were lesbians who were much more out as feminists and quite loud in Hobart. The focus for lesbian feminists was to rethink patriarchal structures of all kinds. But most recognised the gay law reform opposition as being the result of homophobia that affected both gay men and lesbians.

Dave: I felt as if they were more accepted because they used to go around together and could hold hands, but men couldn’t.

Lochsley: I don’t know how many women would have felt comfortable about holding hands; I remember we had a, not a march exactly, of women deliberately walking through the mall holding hands. It wasn’t something I felt able to do. Certainly it was likely to cop verbal abuse.

Lochley: Do you think that Tassie will ever have a strong gay and lesbian community?

Miranda: There is one.

Lochley: Well, I suppose I’m in Launceston, I don’t know what it’s like down in Hobart but it seems like there’s a sense of community is with a few Facebook groups where people are trying to find casual sex.

Miranda: I think that having a political focus helped us in the late eighties and early nineties. I don’t know if you feel this, Dave, but it was interesting that a lot of older people didn’t get involved in the political aspect at that point. They had had to be covert for so long, it was a really difficult place to be.
the sanctity of the Tarkine to the sanctity of marriage and saying that if the Greens are so fervent in pushing for the Tarkine, why aren’t they trying to do the same for the institution of marriage? The whole thing was a convoluted metaphor.

Rachel: And we’ve heard that argument before: ‘Are the Greens For Nature or Against It?’ So 1990s!

Dave: Yes, we’ve heard it before!

Lochley: I read the article, and saw everyone on Facebook having this huge anger rant about how terrible the article was and how it completely misrepresented the issue. They were going off and sending her hate mail. I thought these things were completely counter-productive for Claire Van Ryn, that was why I wrote the story for Heywire. When people talk about sanctity they obviously have a biased idea of what nature is. I see sexuality as something that is biological, though clearly the people opposing it see it as a choice and I think that’s why the Tarkine metaphor is really quite powerful: it’s something that everyone can enjoy – marriage is not so. Claire Van Ryn started it for us!

The debate at the moment is still very male-centric. At least in the way it is framed – in the ads you see for gay marriage it is always two guys and the whole gay marriage debate actually forgets that it is about people or against our relationship in their presence, or there are transgender people and a myriad of different demographics trying to fit into this gay marriage debate. It’s so important that we don’t continually focus on gay law or lesbian law but instead try and think of it as part of a wider community.

Miranda: I have a problem with gay marriage as an issue from a feminist point of view. In the seventies and eighties the debate was around abolishing marriage, not trying to make it more inclusive. We seem to have lost the debate around what marriage is.

Lochley: We personally believe that the government should have no intervention in our relationships at all. I support these issues because I want people who want to get married to be able to.

Miranda: It’s still not about the big picture, because marriage privileges couples and certain kinds of couples. Certainly not everyone can get married – I mean some people can’t because they can’t find a partner, others because they don’t want to get married, other people want different relationships to be considered that would not be allowed under marriage. So if your most significant relationship, even if it is not sexual, was with your brother or sister, for example, that would not be allowed under gay marriage, so it seems to me elitist, even if it is broadened.

Dave: We are recognising relationships, though.

Miranda: The Significant Relationships legislation was really progressive. It broadened our frame of reference and encouraged recognition of cultural diversity. I feel as if the next step has been to make that the umbrella legislation, and phase out marriage legislation altogether.

Why does anyone need public recognition for something that is a private relationship?

Lochley: I guess it’s one of those things. Marriage is of huge cultural significance, whether you are religious or not, and I guess it is one of those things a lot of people want to experience. They want to have the big white wedding and they want to have the dress and the cake and the wedding bells and the arch and all these romanticised ideas of love. From a historical perspective we have so much hinged on this idea, and to be told you can’t do it with the person you love is to quite devastating to a lot of people.

Miranda: It seems to me that there is a difference between a party and legislation – I mean legislation is intended to privilege one group and exclude all others.

Rachel: One of the things that crystallised the situation for me was when I went to the wedding of two dear (lesbian) friends. As part of their ceremony the celebrant had to legally say something that meant ‘well, I’m not properly marrying you’. It seemed to be a very intrusive anti-gay marriage move.

Miranda: But that is pretty recent. There had been no requirement for the gender of a couple to be mentioned until the Howard government introduced an amendment in 2004.

Lochley: It is just trying to get to a point where we can reframe those backwords moves and then we can work to find a fuller equality. I’m thinking about what Christine Milne said on the Mama Mia blog recently. It was a response to the quote by Michael Ferguson that she was the ‘mother of teenage sodomy’. Although she is a politician and an environmentalist, she was talking about that experience primarily as a mother. It was an extremely powerful article, to consider that a politician, in this case Ferguson, would even say that – and that my mother could similarly be called the ‘mother of teenage sodomy’ was horrifying.

Rachel: Each of you have come out at a different time, under different laws and levels of acceptance. How different were your experiences?

Dave: Well, I was married and I have three children and seven grandchildren and they accept our situation. All of the grandchildren have been born since Pete and I were together, and so it’s all been great. Pop and Pete. The acceptance by the family, on both our sides, has been fantastic; I think it’s part of the general acceptance that there is in the community these days. We live out in Lenah Valley and we’ve got straight people around us but nobody bothers us and we’re accepted. I’m sure people know – if they don’t listen they should.

Miranda: How was it initially, Dave?

Dave: Well, it was never really different. I remember an occasion when we did a TV interview for Lateline about gay marriage and they wanted a couple of normal looking people to introduce the topic. They took tape after tape and when it went to air, it was only a snippet, two minutes or less. My brother in Queensland phoned me a few weeks later and he said ‘Hey, we saw you on television’ and I thought ‘Oh god, he here we go – he’s six years older than me, and I thought they’d be in bed by 10.30 when Lateline started. Pete and I had stayed with that but we’d never talked to them about anything to do with gays and things. Anyway, he said ‘Gosh they must have paid you some money for that.’ But he didn’t say one thing that I’d say ‘Oh, you’re gay’.

I am amazed about how supportive my kids are – they wouldn’t let anyone say anything against gay people or against our relationship in their presence. I’m sure, they’re just totally supportive.

Rachel: Miranda, what about you – when you arrived here in Tasmania in 1972 were you out?

Miranda: No I wasn’t, I married out here and I have a child. When I was first becoming aware of my sexuality, I was a bit of a late bloomer. I was about 30, and it was from reading Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West and then reading about more and more lesbians in the 1930s, and I began to think ‘Oh gosh! I wish I’d lived then, when there were less horridness.’ The debate following gay law reform involved quite a lot of discussion around gay and lesbian parenting. When I was approached by television and papers about whether I would do an interview about parenting, I had to really think about it. I didn’t want to include my daughter in a political debate; it felt unfair on her. As it was, as soon as they knew I was a single parent, whatever my sexuality, they were completely not interested. They wanted people who were clearly going to have sex with each other!

I was too ordinary. It was quite weird and really most of my life since my marriage I have been living as a single person and it’s quite difficult socially; people make assumptions that you’re not gay and there’s no – kind of – well ‘here’s our partner, meet my partner’ making it clear. I still find that I get to this awkward position, when I’m talking to people or introducing myself, about whether I say anything or not because I know that the assumption’s there that I would be heterosexual, but at the same time it seems completely unnecessary for me to state my sexuality to somehow draw attention to it.

Dave: We don’t feel the need to tell anybody, but if they ask we respond truthfully, in most cases.

Miranda: It’s kind of clear from your living arrangements but I also get to a point, with some people that I’ve known for a long time and not said anything to, where I find myself getting really scared that they’re not going to like me if they find out, and they’re going to cut me off.

Dave: Well, it makes no difference!

Miranda: Well, I wish it wouldn’t. I’m just thinking that it’s still a hangover from before, that kind of self-censorship.

Rachel: Lochley, you mentioned when you were starting to come out that you were Googling. What was the experience of coming out for you?

Lochley: Well, coming out in a time where we were one of the first generations to have internet access readily available meant that there were places to go when I wanted to. It was both a blessing and a curse because while I was reading supportive information about how ‘it’s ok’, I would only need to go a few more pages down Google and I would find the ‘God hates you’ stuff. I think it made it more difficult as well as easier, especially because there were the social networks. I wasn’t at a point where I was able to tell my parents or my friends so it was good to be able to get it off my chest to someone, even if it was only in a chat room.

Dave: We haven’t told our mother we were straight!

Pete: I did come out when I was in primary school, but she said she should wait! So in year seven I wanted to have my friend Olivia stay the night and she said
Lochsley: I know what you’re trying to do, and I was like ‘No Mum, I’m gay’. It was all really quite easy for me, though it isn’t for everyone in my generation, and I would like it to be.

I have a friend last year who told his mother, who went to the minister of her church, who recommended that he be kicked out. This was a month before his eighteenth birthday, at the end of year twelve and during all the things that go on as an eighteen-year-old. You’d want support from your mother at least.

Dave: Very different from when I was growing up! There was no ‘gay’ word – I suppose there was ‘camp’ but, not homosexual –

Lochsley: Why should we come out? And it’s kind of a tricky kind of thing because the more people that come out the better known it is, the more people accept – and the more people that know a gay person, it’s suddenly less foreign, suddenly so much more approachable. But at the same time, it’s still assumed you’re straight until … well, innocent until proven guilty.

I don’t think it should be that way – I shouldn’t have had to ever tell my Mum, but I did – I hope that the more work we do now, the more chance there is that when I have children it’s never assumed, and that they can be who they are without any thought or fear about anyone else knowing.

Rachel: Let’s go back a bit further – to the comparatively ancient history since white settlement in Van Diemen’s Land – and before that.

Lochsley: It is so tricky without a scribbled history – and indigenous culture was passed down the generations through oral language or dance. It is so hard and indigenous culture was passed down the generations without a scribed history –

It is so tricky without a scribed history –

paratively ancient history since white settlement in Tasmania was settled. I think if it had been settled a hundred years earlier then perhaps we wouldn’t have seen quite the same trajectory.

Dave: But the type of settlement must have had something to do with it – because it was mainly male, wasn’t it?

Miranda: It was mainly male, but it was also the beginning of a kind of bureaucratic surveillance – a sense that you could have not just physical control over people but moral control as well and that you could control it from a distance, from England. This meant that moral codes were set in writing.

Lochsley: What discussion of homosexuality was there in the penal colony?

Miranda: Oh! There was masses! There was a big report about it. There were people who desperately wanted transportation to end and one of the best ways of garnering support for this was to show how morally depraved the system was. Sodomy in particular. Actually not just sodomy, it was sexual relationships between women and men that were listed in various reports to try and shore how appalling it was.

We have some very interesting and quite detailed reports of same-sex relationships – sometimes you get something lovely (for an historian) but normally it’s just in police records that we actually hear about any kind of same-sex relationships. It’s also a class thing, so we’ve got records from the working class for that convict period and a few more from the literate upper class sometimes revealing things through letters. Everything we have is so fragmented. The information that has remained is very, very select.

A title of somebody else’s book is Streetswalking on a Ruined Map, and I really love that as an idea of how history works; you know you just have to somehow piece it together, you know you’ve got far more gaps than facts and you know you can’t extrapolate but we tend to because that’s just how we’re made and we want our stories to work.

Dave: We like to have things clear cut, don’t we? Precise.

Rachel: One of the quotes that you mention, Miranda, is Florida of Bass and Pinders fame, quoting in his diary about Bass – there was a time when I was so completely wrapped up in you that no conversation but yours could give me pleasure. Your footsteps on the quarterdeck over my head took me from my book and up on deck to walk with you.’ Which is just beautiful.

Lochsley: And clearly very romantic as well.

Miranda: That’s ever so interesting. It was a Georgian relationship, so before Victorian times. People were much freer in expressing who they were before the nineteenth century. It’s easy to see ourselves as having a kind of progression but there’s an absolute backwards move that corresponded with the rise of the bourgeois family.

Lochsley: It feels like it goes in varying states – I wonder if it will go backwards again. They used to call all homosexuals ‘Florentines’ because in Florence during the Renaissance lots of people were homosexual, and especially with the big art community it seems like it was accepted.

Dave: I suppose it’s just the title of history – Queen Victoria had a lot to answer for!

Miranda: No, no, no, she wasn’t to blame! Dave: She wasn’t to blame?

Lochsley: Do you find there’s a blurred line between historical fact and historical fiction, when we have to fill in the gaps for ourselves and try and figure things out – especially with something like gay law reform?

Miranda: We certainly do, especially if you are politically involved, because you really need to believe on one level that what you do is gapless, and whatever your focus is you have to really believe that it’s true because otherwise you lose the energy to see it through. It’s a fragmented story and we’re in much more danger of creating a fiction if we’re involved in trying to make change than if we’re not. I can’t really stand outside that. The sense of community that existed in the early nineties meant it was necessary that we didn’t show too many cracks.

Rachel: What can you tell us about the niece of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Marie, who was a romance fiction writer, the fifties and sixties and grew up in Tasmania? Marie was an early ‘out’ lesbian, it seems.

Dave: Did Joh know?!

Miranda: Marie Bjelke-Petersen lived with her loved one, Sylvia, and about that, there is no doubt in our minds. She also wrote film scripts and one of them is called Jewelled Nuits. It’s set up on the north-west coast of Tasmania in a mining town and it’s about a young woman who is unhappy in love and goes to the mining town dressed as a miner, a very glamorous miner. This chap falls in love with her and it’s very Shakespearean as there is the issue of her being the ‘wrong’ sex to be in love with. It is slightly coded but it was quite advanced. Louise Lovely, who starred in it, was a Hollywood film star who came back to Tasmania with her husband. They had the Prince of Wales Theatre in Macquarie Street and she also ran screen tests for anyone who wanted them at the Theatre Royal.

In terms of Marie Bjelke-Petersen and Joh knowing about her sexuality, well, Bob Brown decided to propose making the criminal act gender-neutral. It was just around the time when anti-homosexual laws had been introduced in Queensland. As soon as Bob Brown had got it through the lower house, he realised that this meant that to change the language to gender-neutral, sex between women would become criminalised. He was horrified and approached the speaker and asked whether it could be rescinded, but it did go through to the upper house. He then discovered that in Queensland Joh had specifically asked that women be excluded from this political code and asked why, and he didn’t say why, it is quite interesting. It would make some level of sense because Marie and Joh were quite attached to each other as aunt and nephew.

Rachel: Where do you see the movement going and what would be an ideal future, considering the conversation we’ve had today?

Lochsley: I would like to see the marriage equality legislation passed, whether it’s in Tasman or nationally, leading to a nice bed for the next movement – maybe regarding laws for parenting and surrogacy. This is where I see myself campaigning in future.

Dave: For our relationship we need nothing to change, we’re happy and we couldn’t marry if we wanted to – and we’re not interested. I’ve said before if I were going to be in a straight relationship I wouldn’t marry again. However, I support the Bill for those who wish to marry.

Miranda: I would like it to be absolutely OK for children to be growing up with parents in gay relationships and for their peers to think it’s okay for their parents to be gay.

‘I would like it to be absolutely OK for children to be growing up with parents in gay relationships and for their peers to think it’s okay for their parents to be gay.’

When did you tell your mother you were straight?
Johnny Avalanche had been delegated a task.

His legal name, the one recognised and authorised by hospital registry when he was newly-born and encircled by a taciturn and bright-eyed committee of debating and unshaven faces as he first exercised the brassy capacities of his little lungs, was a moniker entirely dissimilar: he was Zeynelabidin Demir at that time, a Turkish title of sobering and robust invention, made spidery and serrated-looking by the tectonic mountain-mass of history and national etymology weighing down on the letters until they warped and bowed to accommodate that weight, but a signifier also too extra-terrestrial in sound and dimension for most pale, slow and unadventurous Western tongues to grapple with.

When he’d come of age, and endured the youthful adolescent brutalities common to foreign kids born to advantaged democratic Western countries they neither comprehend nor question until they start reassessing their place external to it, Zeynelabidin had suffered too many cigarette burns and had been too frequently pelted with rocks prior to being instructed to ‘fuck off home’ (which was only a suburb away in hillcrest St Kilda), that he decided to simplify his identity for the ease of others. He couldn’t satisfactorily encapsulate what was intended by the constant and unflagging frustrations of his fellow schoolmates when they berated Zeynelabidin with their violent remarks and unimaginative recommendations that he return to where he came from—which wasn’t particularly plausible as his mother’s uterus could no longer sustain a body such as his or manifest a shelter that might afford him amnesty from the scorn of the disapproving world – but he learned to retaliate by collapsing the complexity of his personality; by adopting a staggeringly less sophisticated name.

Zeynelabidin Demir became Johnny Avalanche, a two-hundred pound caricature of truncated, internally-contested Turkish masculinity beleaguered by the demands and complexities of twenty-first century living, equipped with a gargantuan appetite, schismatic green eyes that squinted and sweated in rills of iced-tea perspiration, and a conflation of cheeks scored red with butterfly rash, as though he’d only moments prior emerged from the turmoil and bloodsport of a bare-knuckle serenade.

Johnny Avalanche had thus welcomed the consequences of possessing and engineering an alter ego to accompany this new superhero-attribution, and it was only a triviality of months before he stopped referring altogether to ‘Zeynelabidin’ the ungainly and pussywillow-soft wallflower with the scars-of-his-failure-to-confront-his-aggressors dappling his spine: instead exclusively self-identifying as ‘Johnny’ the slow-moving incendiary weapon with the thuggish grin to all those he met and romanced.

And he never – not for the elliptical flash of a solitary instant – felt as if he had compromised the integrity of his person by pursuing this idea of himself as a dark-skinned archetype for tough and imprecisely European, because forsaking a specific national identity helped to get him the attention he’d been starved of by anyone trying to seek assimilation or symbolism in his sea-green gaze as a kid.

Johnny Avalanche was prepared to portray the goombah – if it meant the goombah evoked affection.

Pretty soon, he had attracted the discerning employ of the suburb’s local organised crime faction, had located a coterie of pleasing female company, had been claimed as the legitimate property of an ancient and venerated family who understood the significance of his new role, by furnishing him with pinches to the temples and kisses to the cheeks. The same facial contours whose hue and texture had once provoked the thrown stone of exile.
Johnny Avalanche's task was this: he was duty-bound to conduct a stakeout in the weeping bushes and tide-flats of St Kilda, in the vicinity of the circa-1970s customised Great Red Shark convertible (personalised number plate: GR8TEST KILL), which sounded incontrovertibly slick but actually constituted little else than an oxidation-mottled crimson fang of a car with broken tail-lights and chiropractic head-rests, at the intersection of Barkly and Carlisle Streets.

He would sprawl behind the dash whilst listening to first-edition cassette tapes of Bob Dylan, wriggling his toes against the frayed-out carpet and archeologically-interred Mississippi hop from the forties, inhaling sweet cinnamon cigarettes, and absorbing immodest slices of sun-tanned baklava and icing-dusted Turkish tea-cake, sweating enzymes of gastric decay into the beachside breeze, just waiting for a chance to assail his quarry.

Johnny Avalanche would wait hours if he had to – that most timid and minor of sacrifices was expected – and he would leak and fume, through a wheeze-tweezed visor of smoke and sweetened breath, squinting through his brilliantly squirreled Aegean-marine pupils, until the waiting for a chance to assail his quarry.

At his baklava-berthing hipbone in speedy succession, the car glistened like a crimson apocalypse down the boardwalk, the strutting and dangerous and militantly left-wing and hopelessly partied and deranged and scotched and trampled underfoot, and Zaslavsky prattling not fifteen metres, was depending upon the compass and distance from him to enjoy that privilege.

Some nine-year-old kid clustering behind a biohazard of sun-stippled freckles and the centre bar-berating and salivating and apoplectic and raw and waterlogged, as Johnny Avalanche channelled his most anatomically perfected and unrepeatable freak of nature at him, was the boy whose charge determined to exterminate him.

The car glistened like a television with precarious reception; so that what you could view from the headland was an immobile and immobile and immobile and immobile, and mortal morning.

Johnny squinted, oozing rivulets of sweat, and he chewed with accelerating distraction at the pearl-studded fat of his lover lip. Sometimes the sky resembled a cove, he was thinking, a barbershop where people dwindled into a violent tranquil, but the surface was always scraped clean by morning.

He hoped the same would eventuate with the pending murder of Lazarus Zaslavsky, but there was a beacon-vivid part of him, some vestige of wisdom, that knew with a creeping clarity that once Lazarus was fed to the fishes, all old and forgotten turbulences would return to the family and deflate the geography of the sky for generations unforeseen.

He knew that any war begins with the tinct of bloodshed, because like any good example of sorcery, the rest is contingent upon a mixture of willpower and public faith. Johnny's ineffectual flippers and mortal mornin...
Johnny Avalanche tailed Zaslavsky’s taxi all the way to the Astor, its notorious piano-bar marquee looming from out of the dropping eaves and eavesdropping of the surrounding architecture. Why, he asked himself, had he, Johnny Avalanche, disembarked from the passenger-side of an idling Yellow Cab – hickory cane thrust skyward, like a sentry sounding his bugle on the attack-parapet – before retreating with deliberate and delicious method of limb, using his cane to pull him over the asphalt and into the cool of the theatre-house. The way an amputated crab struggles to scale rocks with a single, phosphorous, satellite-red claw.

Johnny Avalanche found a park in a clearway zone, disengaged the ignition, and dialled down the radio. He unclasped himself from behind the steering wheel and, mustering sweat beneath his brow and pist the likes of a shepherd to a convoy of strays, Johnny rolled his hypnotic gait over the cracked cement girdling the theatre-house; a human curveball dispatched from the gauntlet of Mars, the god of battle.

Johnny Avalanche entered, gun sheathed beneath his jeans and in the cuff of his boot, and sat, to his own surprise, between the two suns of the Astor’s piano-bar – Zaslavsky and his henchman, Demir. Johnny put his cigarette lighter to the girdle of the bar, to release a cloud of smoke and, before it dissipated, to roll and light his cigarette.

Johnny Avalanche tailed Zaslavsky’s taxi all the way to the Astor, its notorious piano-bar marquee looming from out of the dropping eaves and eavesdropping of the surrounding architecture. Why, he asked himself, had he, Johnny Avalanche, disembarked from the passenger-side of an idling Yellow Cab – hickory cane thrust skyward, like a sentry sounding his bugle on the attack-parapet – before retreating with deliberate and delicious method of limb, using his cane to pull him over the asphalt and into the cool of the theatre-house. The way an amputated crab struggles to scale rocks with a single, phosphorous, satellite-red claw.

Johnny Avalanche found a park in a clearway zone, disengaged the ignition, and dialled down the radio. He unclasped himself from behind the steering wheel and, mustering sweat beneath his brow and pist the likes of a shepherd to a convoy of strays, Johnny rolled his hypnotic gait over the cracked cement girdling the theatre-house; a human curveball dispatched from the gauntlet of Mars, the god of battle.

Johnny Avalanche entered, gun sheathed beneath his jeans and in the cuff of his boot, and sat, to his own surprise, between the two suns of the Astor’s piano-bar – Zaslavsky and his henchman, Demir. Johnny put his cigarette lighter to the girdle of the bar, to release a cloud of smoke and, before it dissipated, to roll and light his cigarette.

Johnny Avalanche tailed Zaslavsky’s taxi all the way to the Astor, its notorious piano-bar marquee looming from out of the dropping eaves and eavesdropping of the surrounding architecture. Why, he asked himself, had he, Johnny Avalanche, disembarked from the passenger-side of an idling Yellow Cab – hickory cane thrust skyward, like a sentry sounding his bugle on the attack-parapet – before retreating with deliberate and delicious method of limb, using his cane to pull him over the asphalt and into the cool of the theatre-house. The way an amputated crab struggles to scale rocks with a single, phosphorous, satellite-red claw.

Johnny Avalanche found a park in a clearway zone, disengaged the ignition, and dialled down the radio. He unclasped himself from behind the steering wheel and, mustering sweat beneath his brow and pist the likes of a shepherd to a convoy of strays, Johnny rolled his hypnotic gait over the cracked cement girdling the theatre-house; a human curveball dispatched from the gauntlet of Mars, the god of battle.

Johnny Avalanche entered, gun sheathed beneath his jeans and in the cuff of his boot, and sat, to his own surprise, between the two suns of the Astor’s piano-bar – Zaslavsky and his henchman, Demir. Johnny put his cigarette lighter to the girdle of the bar, to release a cloud of smoke and, before it dissipated, to roll and light his cigarette.
Dennis Haskell is the author of six collections of poetry, the most recent Acts of Defiance: New and Selected Poems (Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK) in December 2010, and thirteen volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. His All the Time in the World won the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry in 2007.

Insistence
by Dennis Haskell

The dead have nothing to do with us. It is only the living who inhabit any dimension we can begin to understand. Why then do the dead determinedly step through our sleep, persistent zombies? Each night I go to bed exhausted, and exhaustion has me tossed for hours in a rolling, tumultuous sea; until blissfully I sail into sleep — then each dark 4am you silently summon me; telling me that I understand nothing. It is you. But it is not you, and never will be.

Out on some broken reef of reality waves rise, bank and crash, each one an image of you, all cancer gone, thick, long hair and vivid smile, your voice voicelessly saying you will not sleep.

I have so many promises to keep and the horizonless sea thrashes on forever, your silent voice insisting: “You will not sink. You will not float. You will not sleep!”

Joan Ross’s latest work, Touching other people’s shopping can be seen at Bett Gallery in Hobart from 7-28 June 2013.

Joan Ross is a Melbourne-based writer and teacher of English Literature and Media (Film & TV Studies) at RMIT University. He has written for more than seventy publications, including Award Winning Australian Writing, Wet Ink, Going Down Swinging, Vastworks, Visible Ink and Mascara Literary Review. He edits Red Leaves, the English language/Japanese bi-lingual literary journal.

Kirk Marshall is a Melbourne-based writer, and teacher of English Literature and Media (Film & TV Studies) at RMIT University. He has written for more than seventy publications, including Award Winning Australian Writing, Wet Ink, Going Down Swinging, Vastworks, Visible Ink and Mascara Literary Review. He edits Red Leaves, the English language/Japanese bi-lingual literary journal.

We’d come to see Roman Holiday, or The Seven Year Itch, or something with Frank Capra or Rita Hayworth in a dishevelled slip performing songs like a ragtime quartet all assembled in a single body, and we’d talk about the possibilities of escape from our circumstances, you understand? That’s what these pictures, the industries for motion cinema, are all about, Demir. Dreams, dreams so that we might forget the shit we’ve done. Not to absolve our sins, Demir, but teach us ways to delude ourselves into less tortured configurations. Horrible shit — you understand this, don’t you, Demir? Stuff I can’t stand about people screaming for their fucking lives. If I can impress upon you one fucking thing, son, it’s the necessity for you to exercise an escape from all this, get out while the tide’s still with you. You don’t want to be caught up in the cascades, in the rip tide. Bad metaphor, but she descended to the ocean floor with this all ensorceling us. ‘Zaslavsky snapped his fingers. He swallowed next, shuddering. Zeynelabidin could see the tears through his ones.

We’d sit in these same shonky-upholstered cheapsheets, or at least in this exact fucking row. I know, I’m not just raving here, because she tripped once and I tripped with her in an attempt to pull her up. We were both sprawled together on the floor hooting with foolish glee, and the letter ‘M’, from the illuminated aisle plaque, was burning behind my eyes the whole time. Six weeks later, and she was dead.’

Zaslavsky turned hotly then, gasping snot and a monsoon of hard-wrung tears, while fixing Zeynelabidin in his wounded and berserk stare. He was like some holy antlered creature, furious at a trap-wound that continues to prevent it from rising.’ Son, I come here, not to forget the cancer that gnawed away at her breasts and polluted her veins, because that would discredit all the pain and adversity of her months of struggle. I don’t come here to forget my debts, or my broken friendships, or my wicked deeds, or my decaying face. I’m coming here to forget my fucking name, long enough to enjoy living the lie.’

Johnny Avalanche didn’t really harbour much hope for what was about to ensue in the fourth act of that delectable soap-opera. He decided, then, to defer the consequences, retire his revolver into the hot elastic of his underwear, and keep walking. Johnny Avalanche administered his shoulder to the wood, and thrust forward, his head raging in the strobe of light projecting Audrey Hepburn’s perfect countenance. ‘I come here to forget my debts, or my cancers at a trap-wound that continues to prevent it from rising. Son, I come here, not to forget the pain and adversity of her months of struggle. I don’t come here to forget my debts, or my broken friendships, or my wicked deeds, or my decaying face. I’m coming here to forget my fucking name, long enough to enjoy living the lie.’

Johnny Avalanche, startled, disengaged from the seat beside Zaslavsky and withdrew a few paces away, his head reeling in the strobe of light projecting Audrey Hepburn’s perfect countenance onto imperfect canvas. He stood and watched Zaslavsky for a minute, diminished and distorted and staggering like a drunkard, but he descended to the ocean floor with this all ensorceling us. ‘Zaslavsky snapped his fingers. He swallowed next, shuddering. Zeynelabidin could see the tears through his ones.

He stood and watched Zaslavsky for a minute, diminished and distorted and staggering like the image of the film on-screen, already portraying a memory of an individual consumed by the losses of the present and reproduced in flesh and bones — but without a heart to dictate their continued gravity — by the technology of the past. Zaslavsky was already a film of the man his death would evoke, bristling in a lonely theatre with the ghost of his heaven-seized sweetheart, muttering to the lustres and vibrancies of a Hollywood vision of a fabled Italy. Johnny would rather be like one of the teenagers coaxing elicit pleasures from each other in the hodding corners of the afternoon. He decided, then, to defer the consequences, retire his revolver into the hot elastic of his underwear, and keep walking. Johnny Avalanche administered his shoulder to the wood, and thrust open the exit door. He wondered how the girl at the box office would react if he were to disclose to her that that there was a fossil man, a revenant — some eccentric old fart who had been dead for years now — currently rasping a Russian elegy in the glow of the movie screen. Might any of this compromise Johnny’s chances at securing a sour debate about film with her, over coffee? Would she even afford him enough time to mention chocolate halva? Johnny Avalanche didn’t really harbour much hope for what was about to ensue in the forthcoming thirty seconds, but it was the vitality of her amused disdain — the idea of her offering him a rejection after considering the possibilities of his proposition — that sent him advancing toward the booth. Because for Johnny there was nothing comparable to this stir of adventure, even if it were thwarted by a declaration to get lost, to propel him into the world of living, one more time.

She smiled, a little longer this time, at his approach.
JOAN ROSS

Changing its spots 2013
hand painted digital mock still, on rag paper

Opposite:
Shopping for Butterfly 2013
hand painted digital mock still, on rag paper
I have been to quite a few major museums in Europe and in the United States, but at the top of the list for me now is MONA.

The day of my arrival, Delia Nicholls, Media Manager and Research Curator of MONA, showed me around. She was very friendly and helpful, as are all the staff there. I had seen photographs of the museum on the web, but I didn’t expect the exhibiting space to be so vast.

I was amazed by the elevator system that actually asks you to go down to tour the place, and not up. You go down and straight away there is a bar. I had never seen that. ‘David believes having a drink puts you in a better condition to comprehend modern art,’ Delia told me. What a brilliant idea.

I remember visiting the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam on a special evening last year, when the museum organised a bar with a DJ playing lounge and electro music. Looking at masterpieces that way was a great feeling. Mixing experiences, making art more friendly. The atmosphere it created made Van Gogh’s work even more tangible, more real, more striking. MONA does something similar.

One thing I like most about MONA is the building itself, because I like museums-as-experiments. I have been to quite a few major museums in Europe and in the United States, but at the top of the list for me now is MONA. It makes, out of the building and its scenography, a work of art in itself.

On Saturday, I started taking pictures. I came very early, around 4am when it was still night time, waiting for the sun to come out. I asked the taxi driver to drop me near the museum and I walked to the other side of the bay. Tasmania is the perfect illustration of unspoiled natural environment and the place where MONA stands is amazing. It seemed to me that the MONA museum was a spaceship that had landed randomly in the middle of nowhere. And, yes, I thought that you must be a lunatic-dreamer to complete the shots, and after asking me if I had what I needed, David Walsh vanished into the vastness of his strange creation.

I wonder what he would think of the comparison, but Richard Branson from Virgin and David Walsh must have the same blood. They have something in common. I spent some time with Branson last year for a magazine and the likeness is stupendous. I wanted to ask Walsh if they knew each other, but I didn’t.

I only spent three days in Hobart, mostly at MONA, so I know nothing really, just a feeling of what I saw. I also heard people talking; I love talking to taxi drivers – some criticising, others proud to have driven David Walsh and his family from the airport. I know nothing, but I’ll always remember that Tasmania is not just an island with amazing landscapes, but it is also a place with a vivid art space thanks to a man called David Walsh.

Now, sorry for this, but there is one bet I want David to lose: his bet with French artist, Christian Boltanski. For the rest, I will keep just good memories.

Nicole Durling: To start, your background was in literature—what was the motivation for you to make your first artwork?

Todd McMillan: I’ve always been a really big reader and, as a kid, I wrote lots of bad poetry and pieces of fiction. When I finished high school and went into university I studied English teaching and literature with a minor in art. My desire was to become a writer, a novelist, to move to Indonesia, teach English and work on my novel like an ex-pat—a Hemingway or Graham Greene-like figure. This was something that I desperately wanted. But at university I discovered conceptual art and the work of Bruce Nauman, John Baldessari and other key artists from the 1970s and 1980s. The open-endedness of their work and their ability to think through ideas made a lot of sense to me. I was also interested in Samuel Beckett. The ideas that appealed to me—about the world and about literature—were those grappling with existence, with what it is to be alive, and the attempt to try and make meaning in the world. Through conceptual art, I found an avenue for those ideas which was really appealing.

Through the work of these artists I discovered that contemporary art was much more than an illustrative practice. I saw that I could make art that was actually thinking through an idea and the work could be the demonstration of that thinking. That’s something I found really quite attractive; I also like the idea of having the body in the work, where a thinking body becomes the subject matter.

ND: Artmaking enabled you to express ideas in a way that you couldn’t through writing?

TM: Yes, very much so. My desire to write that big novel, became—I guess as I matured—quite disin-genuous, evidence of a kind of romanticism. The drive to write was superseded by the idea of wanting to sit down and write. It was the image: the desire to want to write. But writing wasn’t something that came naturally to me; in fact it was something I didn’t and still don’t enjoy doing. Whereas the creation of artworks provided a means of thinking in a more abstract way and then constructing bodies of work that were able to meander a little bit.

ND: Text features heavily in the work of the conceptual artists you mention, but not within yours. Instead it seems you physically perambulate around an idea, although words and text are still very important to you—as much so that you’re selecting a collection of books to include in this exhibition. Can you tell me about your literary influences, because it’s apparent that your ideas are still grounded very much in literature, that it inspires you more than visual art?

TM: Yes, a lot of my work does reference literature and comes from a desire to create a union similar to that between the author and the reader. Literature can have the author thinking and then a reader apprehend that thought and thereby feel less alone. Through literature you’re able to speak about an emptiness and a longing and in sitting down to read we’ve put into a state of mind which is one of quietness and of reverence. For me that is something really important and something that I love. I create my artwork in the hope that the experience of it will mimic that of sitting down and reading a novel. I want someone to be able mentally to wander, to see me and what I’m seeing—in those works where I appear myself—and imagine being in the picture themselves. I stand in for the viewer and that, I think, relates back to literature.

Writers such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and Georges Perec are key influences. Perec’s book *W, or the Memory of Childhood* is broken up into two parts with two narratives running against each other, but a meeting is created through their association—an indirect communication. It’s funny
to think about that coming from literature, being what it is: the written word and its directing of meaning. It’s one word followed by another, which then creates a sentence, and that sentence then creates a mental structure through which we can apprehend and decode a meaning. In my art practice that structure is something that I find really beautiful and yet I also hope to create something a little less tangible, which speaks of an emptiness and the void. It’s this intangibility, this shifting, that Gerald Murnane uses in *A History of Books* — a slippage between what is real and what is made-up. His ideas about the creation of images through words and ‘true fiction’ are fascinating and hugely influential for me.

**ND:** Yes, there is a nice link between you and Murnane. In his writing this apprehension of meaning through words has a certain fluidity, yet the figure is an important mediator. Even within a seemingly empty space the figure allows the reader to create images and meaning. And in both your work and Murnane’s the figure seems to take on a dual role where it also acts as a filter, protecting us from being overwhelmed by vastness of the void. This is also, as you say, an invitation for the viewer to be placed within the work, so the space in between is bridged.

**TM:** Very much so. The use of that figure is based on a German painting convention called the Rückenfigur, which translates from German into ‘back figure’. It was employed most recognizably by Caspar David Friedrich in his paintings such as *Morn* by the Sea (c. 1810), or *Wanderer Above a Sea of Mist* (c. 1818), where the figure is placed in the foreground with their back to the viewer and the experience of the painting is looking at somebody being overwhelmed by the world; the figure disallows the viewer to conceive of that landscape. That is the key for me: when I put myself within the landscape, it is to provide a means by which the viewer can conceive of being overwhelmed when viewing the work. So, for instance, it *By The Sea* (2004) was just a time lapse of dawn-to-dusk, it would have been a pictorial trick and I don’t think any viewer would be able to see everything that is going on. When I put myself within the landscape, it is to provide a means by which the viewer can conceive of being overwhelmed when viewing the work.

**ND:** That is the condition which I’m trying to create. I’m mediating — for example, I choose to shoot what is felt?

**TM:** I am mediating — for example, I choose to shoot when it’s raining. I filmed *After the Deluge* (2010) and *Mountain Study* (2012) there’s an honest and genuine desire to apprehend a feeling of insignificance in relation to nature and the universe, to experience something that is at least the potential to shift things and to change them.

**ND:** A great deal is said about your work as a melancholic ruminaton on failure. This puzzles me as I find your work incredibly reassuring. There is a calm acceptance, particularly in *Albatross*, *Mountain Study* and *After the Deluge*, a calmness and a transpirancy, and even though there is no figure, no filter, there is a sense of fearlessness in these works.

**TM:** I wouldn’t say fearless, more often than not I’m terrified. For example, in *Albatross* I filmed using 16mm film off the southern coast of Tasmania in the Southern Ocean. What’s happening in that work is I’m creating a melancholic environment which the viewer is able to think through. Here upon the tumultuous sea the albatross stands in for the figure; it exists as a symbol, traditionally of the human soul. I want the viewer to be able to see everything that is crucial to the world and crucial to one’s being, the essence of what it is to be, represented in this bird.

And just as the albatross is, in today’s environment, quite literally on the precipice of its own demise, so the question of whether there is anything such as a human soul is endangered as well. What I want is to be so much to direct a meaning, as to place somebody in a context where they’re going to be able to feel sad; and for that sadness then to tend towards to a looking inward. I want people to be looking inside of themselves while looking at my work. I personally think that creating a mood of melancholy aligns perfectly with that sense of reverie and introspection. Because melancholy — it’s not so much a blatant sadness or depression — is bittersweet and that is what I’m really interested in. That feeling of the weight of the world on your shoulders, yet experienced as somehow invigorating and quietly beautiful; and the feeling one has in thinking about one’s own significance and the idea that we will all die.

**ND:** It’s interesting you speak about melancholic environments, as there is really no emotion in nature. It doesn’t know who I am or care that I’m sad …

**TM:** … yes, so the universe is completely indifferent to us.

**ND:** Absolutely. So you’re not necessarily creating these environments or controlling the conditions, you’re not trying to mediate between what is and what is felt?

**TM:** I am mediating — for example, I choose to shoot when it’s raining. I filmed *After the Deluge* (2010) off the cliff at The Gap, a place in Sydney where there are a lot of suicides. There was as much chance of it being a sunny day as a rainy one, but I chose to witness the coming of a storm. This for me determines a mood; the sense of being overwhelmed by nature is deeply coded historically and that’s what I’m drawing on. That meaning we bring to a landscape, I want the viewer to look at the method of display and understand that it is philosophically important. With *After the Deluge* (2010) or *Whisky in the Kitchen* (2011), for example, the sense of a sad vista and a beautiful brutality is projected through a fragile machine that itself is susceptible to age, and that’s in the same process of breakdown as we human beings are. Both the work *Albatross* and the 16 mm film itself speak of loss: the albatross may indeed soon be gone and 16 mm is a method of display where the film is subject to decay as it goes around in the loop and by its very mechanism will eventually destroy itself. So the means of display that I choose becomes philosophically potent and emotionally charged. This machine is shivering and shaking; its demise is imminent and it is also killing the work. The sense of the film going...
ND: That’s where I come back to this fearless acceptance of our demise in your work. I can’t help but find that calmly reassuring.

TM: It’s in apprehending that anxiety and in thinking about it that there is calmness. If anything it stems from a quasi sense of stoicism, of being able to comprehend and deal with the fact that we will go. But that mode of thought for me comes through neuroses and anxiety and the sense that everything’s going to end. So yes, I do calmly display it and it does have, I hope, an assuredness and stillness to it. But within that, I am overcome by doubt and fear, so there’s an oscillation there. I’m really interested in that what is depicted, what we’re looking at, will inevitably create a tremor in the viewer and an anxiety and a fidget and a …

ND: … I was going to ask if you fear death but I realise that’s a ridiculous question—how can we not fear death?

TM: There’s a great Woody Allen quote, that he’s not afraid of death, he just doesn’t want to be there when it happens. I think that’s important for me—the comedy of that beautiful gallows humour—being able to say yes, I can understand that I am going to die. But I do fear it like everybody else and I think we should be fearful. Because that state of fear is also quite exhilarating—and that again is a condition of melancholy. Honestly engaging with anxiety leaves us feeling strange and scared. But it also makes us feel alive. You can be overcome by the sadness of leaving, that sense of missing somebody or of you, yourself, having one day to be gone. But I like to think a lot of my work sits between the sadness of leaving and the fear of return. There is a melancholic loop: we’re forever leaving and we’re always losing something at every point.

ND: This idea of being overcome links to a discussion we had previously about your work *Ague* (2009), where you went out with the intention to swim the English Channel, but what happened?

TM: So *Ague* is a work, a three-channel video that documents my attempt to swim across the English Channel … that you trained for, prepared for, physically, mentally …

ND: … yes, over at least a six-month period while I was based in London. I was constantly training, swimming outside, preparing my body, knowing that I wished to attempt to swim the English Channel. Much has been made of this work and indeed of my work overall in terms of its relationship to failure. But too much has been made of *Ague* being a failed attempt before it ever began. For me, for the work to be honest and to have any integrity whatsoever, I needed genuinely to try to swim the Channel and succeed in this task.

What I attempted to do was, quite literally, too much for me. So it’s not so much that I went out knowing that I would fail. I went out knowing that in all likelihood I might, but the work itself is about somebody attempting to do something that may be too much for them to try—something tried and failed but honestly tried.

ND: So no matter how many times you repeat that and you comprehend that, you can’t help but still ruminate and go back over it?

TM: Very much so. I think we must live honestly with the idea of our own demise there at every point. But that can be apprehended with a sense of beauty and awe, of being overwhelmed by time and its race towards an end. As in *Flare* (2012), it’s very much about that anxious cry that’s never answered, calling out in distress, a howling related to existential angst: that howling, that call, the release of the emergency flare will forever go unanswered.

‘Honestly engaging with anxiety leaves us feeling strange and scared. But it also makes us feel alive.’

Ten years of Tears runs from 19 June – September 16 at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart.

www.mona.net.au

Right: Todd McMillan
*Flare* 2012
16mm film, duration 00:05:30, looped
Cinematographer: Peter Hulme
All works from the collection of the artist unless indicated, by courtesy of Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney
All works © Todd McMillan

ND: That’s where I come back to this fearless acceptance of our demise in your work. I can’t help but find that calmly reassuring.

TM: It’s in apprehending that anxiety and in thinking about it that there is calmness. If anything it stems from a quasi sense of stoicism, of being able to comprehend and deal with the fact that we will go. But that mode of thought for me comes through neuroses and anxiety and the sense that everything’s going to end. So yes, I do calmly display it and it does have, I hope, an assuredness and stillness to it. But within that, I am overcome by doubt and fear, so there’s an oscillation there. I’m really interested in that what is depicted, what we’re looking at, will inevitably create a tremor in the viewer and an anxiety and a fidget and a …

ND: … I was going to ask if you fear death but I realise that’s a ridiculous question—how can we not fear death?

TM: There’s a great Woody Allen quote, that he’s not afraid of death, he just doesn’t want to be there when it happens. I think that’s important for me—the comedy of that beautiful gallows humour—being able to say yes, I can understand that I am going to die. But I do fear it like everybody else and I think we should be fearful. Because that state of fear is also quite exhilarating—and that again is a condition of melancholy. Honestly engaging with anxiety leaves us feeling strange and scared. But it also makes us feel alive. You can be overcome by the sadness of leaving, that sense of missing somebody or of you, yourself, having one day to be gone. But I like to think a lot of my work sits between the sadness of leaving and the fear of return. There is a melancholic loop: we’re forever leaving and we’re always losing something at every point.

ND: This idea of being overcome links to a discussion we had previously about your work *Ague* (2009), where you went out with the intention to swim the English Channel, but what happened?

TM: So *Ague* is a work, a three-channel video that documents my attempt to swim across the English Channel … that you trained for, prepared for, physically, mentally …
Do it again

by SEAN MONRO

The Select is a play based on the Ernest Hemingway novel The Sun Also Rises. Elevator Repair Service (ERS), a New York City–based theatre group, under the guidance of director John Collins, have previously staged two works generated from novels – Gatz, an eight-hour rendition of The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald, and The Sound and the Fury, inspired by the first chapter of the novel by William Faulkner.

The Select recently completed a season at Tasmania’s biennial Ten Days on the Island festival. ‘The Select has been a sell-out at many of the most prestigious arts festivals around the world,’ said Ten Days’ artistic director, Jo Duffy. ‘It is a coup for Hobart to have this company in the state with this particular show.’

Tasmanian critics, however, were confronted and dumbfounded by the possibility of praising a work that was not about Tasmania, was not written or directed by a Tasmanian, nor starred a Tasmanian. One local reviewer thought it necessary to rank the highly polished, two-year-developed, multi-award-winning, internationally acclaimed The Select below Tasmanian-born Tom Holloway’s didactic monologue As We Forgive. To suggest that the two shows are on the same playing field is simply ludicrous.

There were at least two great gifts given to the Tasmanian theatre community by the ERS. The first gift was the show itself: an inspirational work, innovative whilst grand in scope, and a great reminder of where the bar has been set if we wish to consider the work that we create here on this island of artistic excellence as being world class.

The second gift, and perhaps one that may eventually prove more significant than the first, was the extended workshop and residency that ERS led at Tarraleah in the Central Highlands of Tasmania. The residency, part of the new Beyond Ten Days program, is supported by Ten Days, Tasmania Performs and the Theatre Council of Tasmania. Twenty of Tasmanians’ leading theatre makers and multidisciplinary artists were given three days and two nights to build rapport, collaborate with and interrogate the director of ERS, John Collins, and five ensemble members: Lindsay Hockaday, Kate Seela, Susie Sokol, Mike Iveson and Sarah Hughes.

ERS takes months and sometimes years to build their shows. Whilst three days might be ten per cent of a standard theatrical rehearsal time, it is a much shorter period on the ERS evolutionary scale. Consequently, the workshop took the approach of closely familiarising the Tasmanian participants with only one aspect of ERS show-building – choreography – rather than trying to transmit the entire ERS rehearsal methodology.

Choreography gave the participants a chance to engage with ERS on the rehearsal floor. Short pieces were worked up collaboratively, with initial stimulus points provided by ERS and then developed in small groups with one or two ERS guides and six or seven Tasmanians. During this process the ERS crew were thrilled when a unique choreographic element emerged and was added to the toolkit. They delighted in learning our idioms and gestures and treated us with respect and gratitude. It was all about the work – they weren’t precious about their reputations or imposing a hierarchy, only hungry for new stimuli. They take their work very seriously, which isn’t to say there weren’t a lot of laughs as well.

These pieces were then refined and shown, then refined again ... and again ... and again. Those of us who were not trained dancers or movement specialists were being reacquainted with muscles we had presumed lost or which perhaps were actually dead. It was only much later that the text and the choreography were combined. Yet, strangely, the two different languages which had developed in isolation spoke to each other. Resonances were obvious, humour and clarity emerged; the sum of the parts was far more than the whole.

Out of this experience we were privy to the process of how the ERS turns literature — such as a novel by Hemingway — into something that is so theatrically compelling.

By making mistakes and trusting their collective intuition, this is something that can’t be formed or created in a rush. It is one of the rare and irreplaceable strengths of the ensemble. Much of the ERS rehearsal period is about making mistakes, not about reproducing something known but rather finding interesting areas of the unknown: it is about finding connections between tangentially linked gestures and text, snippets of video and silent movie choreography, contemporary absurdist playwriting, YouTube wonders and TV game-show excerpts.

By doing the piece repeatedly, and listening to and observing what happens, the repetition itself begins to throw up ideas. Do it again. Refine it. Lock in one small part and leave that whole area free to develop. Have fun with it. Stop and talk about how it looks. Now, make it better. Do it again. Do it again. Music and sound is there from the start. It is a totally integrated element, like another performer in its own right. Do it again. Let people who have been locked inside the performance the whole time step out and observe. Take on any feedback they might have. Trust the collective intuition of the ensemble. Keep reworking it. Don’t stop, until... it... is... done!

Whilst many theatrical companies are concerned with problem solving, Elevator Repair Service seem keen on problem creating: creating problems that lead to unexpected relationships, utilising found objects and the limitations of the rehearsal space itself to force innovative solutions.

I’m not sure the ERS practice would fit neatly into the parameters of Tasmanian funding bodies, as it is a practice that delights in errors, lack of specific outcomes, trusting intuition, developing growth through repetition, happy accidents and harvested coincidence. The Select will be ‘a game changer’ for Tasmanian theatre.

It was certainly a privilege for all of us who were involved. Friendships and collaborations were started and I am sure will be deepened in the future. Hopefully the gifts that were so generously passed on by ERS inform our practice and our work so that we can give greater gifts to our audiences. And as long as we use Tasmanian artists the critics should love us.

Sean Monro lives in Hobart and is regularly humbled by the beauty that surrounds him. He is a writer.
Women can be terrible

by KELLI LONERGAN

Directors Jennifer Lynch and Penny Vozniak are sitting on stage at the Peacock Theatre in Salisbury. It is the opening night of the Stranger With My Face Horror Film Festival, and we have just finished watching Vozniak’s documentary, Despite the Gods.

The documentary was one of the most terrifying things I have ever seen and it has nothing to do with the fact that it was filmed in India during the making of Hust, Lynch’s Bollywood-horror-romance film about a snake who turns into a woman and then into a human again. The real horror stemmed from seeing the documentary’s various setbacks. Perhaps Terry Gilliam’s (La Mancha’s director) even had it easy, in that he was not a single mum, working in a foreign country where sexism is still a rampant feature of the cultural milieu.

In the Q&A session, and despite what we have just seen on screen (a distinct lack of call sheets, cameras and woodchips), Lynch has been asked if there are any special challenges faced by women working in the horror genre.

‘People are more surprised that I want to [work in horror]. I love pouring blood on things and putting lamb intestines on people … If you’re going to announce your gender, then have a horror film that is a bunch of men die scantily clad.’

Of course it is no secret that filmmaking in general is a male dominated industry. It took the academy eighty-two years to award a female an Oscar for Best Direction. Funnily enough, Katherine Bigelow, who won the award in 2010 for her war drama, The Hurt Locker, started out her career in the horror genre with the 1987 vampire-western, Near Dark. Think gory antithesis to the immensely droll Twilight films, with a deeper analogy for the violence that is so often lurking underneath small American towns. Not to mention it was a female vampire playing the main love interest.

More recently, there has been the Lynne Ramsay debacle, with the director’s no-show on the set of Jan Got a Gun, with many critics pointing fingers at her gender as the real cause for her ‘dramatic’ withdrawal from the film.

Jennifer Lynch has experienced similar personal attacks throughout her career – attacks that ultimately lead back to her being a female filmmaker. After the release of her debut feature, Boxing Helena (1995), Lynch was not only labelled a misogynist, but the National Organization of Women stated that she ‘deserved never to be loved again’.

‘I get a lot of questions about how could you do this? How could you do this as a mother? Why this subject matter?’ Lynch said at the Peacock Theatre.

(But now, I have already started to love her a bit. She is naturally funny and self-deprecating in a charming way. Not to mention she is the daughter of coffee-drinking, meditating film auteur David Lynch.)

It is interesting to note that Vozniak, an Australian documentary filmmaker, has never experienced such problems. She acknowledges that this is most likely due to the fact that the documentary genre promotes ‘exploratory and caring’ virtues which are the more accepted qualities of the female nature.

So why is it then that women are seen as sick or, more strangely, as displaying some kind of unwar- ranted impulse by making horror films, or by even watching them?

The Stranger With My Face Horror Film Festival seeks to address this question, as well as promoting women filmmakers within the horror genre. It is the second time the festival has been run, and it is the first gender-genre-specific festival in Australia.

The festival’s theme is ‘the horror within’, promoting the darker psychology of women and how this may manifest itself into larger issues. For women, these issues may centre around prevalent fears to do with the body, subordination, abuse, identity and sexuality. However, it is also a reference to the ‘other’ psyche, that instable, violent or evil facet that semantically has been fostered not to be part of the gender.

Most importantly, the festival demonstrates the ways female horror filmmakers are exposing a niche in the genre by creating complex, character-driven films, which are led by emotion and suspense, as opposed to just blood and gore.

On this note, one of the scariest Australian horror films I have seen is not, say, Wolf Creek (2005), but a short film by Briony Kipp, filmmaker and director of the SWMF Festival. The Room at the Tip of the Staircase (2010) is a coming-of-age story about a young girl living in her first share house, who, at first haunted by her room’s previous occupant, eventually begins to emulate the enigmatic behaviour of the departed figure. Putting aside the fact that all share house liv- ing is frightening, the film was more horrifying in the normality of the scenario. I was shifting uncomfortably in my seat as I watched the shy and artistic protagonist attempt to forge an identity for herself in a new but hostile environment.

I scared me in the way that Black Swan (2010) did, where ultimately I came out of the cinema saying, ‘That could happen to me!’

I could see parts of myself in these characters, in their motivations and actions, in the fear of insecur- ity and how this susceptibility could lead to violent extremities, or to succumbing to the influence of sinister impulses. And nothing is more unsettling than when we recognise in characters parts of our- selves that we have otherwise tried to repress.

‘Women can be terrible. Have you ever been to high school? Girls have as much love in them as they have viciousness, because they are human beings,’ says Jennifer Lynch. ‘Violence and horror films are not gender specific.’

This is why there is a general desire to see real- istic and authentic portrayals of women in horror films: to take these dark stories and experiences and live them out in the safety of entertainment, as opposed to real life. The Stranger With My Face Horror Film Festival identifies directors like Lynch, who are the driving voices behind these stories, and ensures that audiences, including women, are given the opportunity to see multifaceted horror films.

Call it sick. But I like to think of it as an afford- able form of therapy.
In those days, the trucks came by a dirt road that branched off the expressway. The road was fringed by forest. By the time the trucks arrived at the school, they were covered in dust. On the first day of each new term, we saw men unloading baskets of tomatoes, bunches of unripe plantain, rice in sacks, and bitterleaf. The men, too, were covered in dust. We stood in our freshly-starched uniforms — blue and white check blouses, dark blue pinafores — and gossiped about what we’d done and who we’d seen on vacation, watching them work. The loads of food passed from hand to hand, as did boxes of school supplies: exercise books, ink, blotting paper. The men were dark and thin, and they had bodies made muscular by long manual labor. When they finished working, they clambered into the backs of the trucks, and left us in our clearing in the forest.

The Royal College for Girls was in Omu, and Omu was the real middle of nowhere. Compared to it, other small towns in the Western Region, towns like Ikorodu and Odogbolu, were interesting destinations. Omu — before the school’s establishment there lent it some prestige — consisted of a few small farms, a cluster of mud houses with tin roofs, a creek, a chieftain. The people of Omu were mostly Muslims, which meant they were not a part of the cultural elite. We, the students at Royal College, were by and large Christians. A majority of us were Anglicans, but there was a smattering of Methodists as well. Only two girls in our class were Muslims. One of them, Saudatu, was the daughter of an important politician from Ilene, a one-time advisor to Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Like the rest of our fathers, he had done something in life. And she had been admitted to the school, like the rest of us, on merit. She was also one of the best students, and a genuinely nice girl, so the fact that she was Muslim didn’t really matter. And anyway, she knew all the words to the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed. Mrs Allardyce sometimes called on her to lead the school in prayers at Assembly, which was a remarkable enough privilege for a girl in the tenth standard. If Saudatu was truly Muslim, she didn’t show it much, and acted just as normally as the rest of us.

The other girl, Nuratu, was a different matter. For one thing, she was a reservation student. The towns around Royal College were given a certain small number of slots in each year’s admission. The students had to be good — at least by the standards of their villages and hamlets — but it was often clear that they weren’t the usual Royal College material. Their clothes were scruffier, they sometimes didn’t wear socks, and often, to our astonishment, would do things like climb trees or run around with no shoes on. Nuratu came from Odejebu, which was about ten kilometers away from the school, and even smaller than Omu itself. She wore her hair in spiky tendrils plaited with rubber thread, unlike the cornrows and afros sported by the rest of us. It wasn’t exactly clear to us what it was her father did. It didn’t matter. He was probably a farmer or, at best, a schoolteacher. We did notice that, as one term followed another, Nuratu became a little better at blending in. By the time we were in tenth standard, she was one of the few girls brazen enough to relax her hair, and risk the wrath of Mrs Allardyce. That won her some admiration from us. Still, her English wasn’t very good — she pronounced ‘ch’ as ‘sh’ — and her laughter sometimes sounded like the
squealing of a goat. And then, there was the problem of her breasts. While we mastered lines from Dryden, she sharpened our minds in various ways, her entire being seemed to be physical. She was, to use the word we were most fond of, *juju*. We watched her with some wonder, this curious creature who tore into boiled yams with all the elegance of a market woman; this hayseed who only used her fork and knife when a prefect was patrolling the hall; who, when she laughed, heaved her chest up and down. Around her hovered a constant skein of our knowing glances.

Our was to be a part of that first generation of Nigerian girls who really played a role in the intellectual life of the nation. We were often told of how fortunate we were, and we took it seriously. Our fathers had been the first in their families to go to school. We came from homes that had cars, drivers and domestic servants. The words *Olorun* and *Cantab* were familiar sights on niny eyes hanging from the walls, and we were used to suits, jurists’ wigs, telephones, private libraries and receptions at embassies. Letters came to some of us from brothers studying overseas. Those blue envelopes, bearing news from another part of the planet, festooned with stamps and intriguing postmarks, were a reminder that Omu was a mere detour in our journeys. Many of us were set – in two or three years – on attending University College Badan, or else the British equals of that institution. A few of us had already declared ourselves Awoists, and expressed disdain for the bush politics of the NNDP. We bemoaned the lack of newspapers at the school. These activists amongst us were typically the girls who were interested in law. Others, more talented in *skémba* – physics, chemistry and biology – were on the road to medicine.

The school fostered a feeling of tranquility in us. We were preparing for the world, but the world largely remained at a distance. We went to Gym, to Home Economics, or to Father Duncan’s Latin class, and the war was something that barely rose above the level of hearsay.

In October of that year, when a busload of seventeen-year old boys arrived for a day visit, we hoped they recognised what good luck had brought them to our little dominion. They were from King’s College in Lagos, wore dark blue jackets and carried themselves like lords. The ball, that evening, was our opportunity to show ourselves their equals. We did Mrs Allardyce proud – we were prim but not unfriendly, and just about impossible to impress. We showed them that they had come to Omu but might just as easily have been in London. We dazzled them, and each other, with our perfumed dresses and powdered faces, and our easy mastery of the walls, the footstool and the cha-cha. Those little lords must have been sighing all the way back to Lagos the next day. We sighed too – for a whole week – and fanned ourselves with exercise books. Our minds strayed far from work, and would have continued to do so endlessly had Mrs Allardyce not come one day to interrupt our Geography class.

Is Atinuke Oswoole here? Mrs Allardyce hadn’t been back to Scotland for thirty years, but she was no better at pronouncing Yoruba names than when she’d first arrived in Africa. Tinu raised her hand. She was one of the richest girls in school: her father was a magistrate who had been posted to the North. She often told us that he would be a Senior Advocate of Nigeria one day, and when she said it, it wasn’t anything like a boast. It was a simple fact. Mrs Allardyce spoke from the front of the class. ‘I’m so sorry, Atinuke, but a telegram has just come in. Your brother Alade was killed in action near Benin City. So sorry about it.’ Tinu, as gentle a soul as existed among us, came from the front of the class. ‘I’m so sorry, Atinuke, but a telegram has just come in. Your brother Alade was killed in action near Benin City. So sorry about it.’ Tinu, as gentle a soul as existed among us, was killed in a dance, during a Biafran push. Tinu went home not long afterwards. She didn’t return to Royal College to finish her school certification until late 1970, by which time we were all in final year, and our minds were on other things. Following her run-in with Tina’s head, Mrs Allardyce became more careful around us, more skeptical of our supposed innocence. If and when possible, she would recruit Father Duncan to deal with any issue that might be sensitive. This was how, starting that year, most of us got theoretical details about sex, and the importance of sexual modesty, from an ancient-looking, celibate white man. To his credit, Father Duncan was never flustered by our embarrassed snorts during these sessions.

And it was because of Tinu, too, that Mrs Allardyce would have nothing whatsoever to do with Nuratu’s case. How does a rumor begin? This one suddenly appeared, that’s all that anyone knew, or cared to admit. Christians were with a Christian, you knew where you were, and what you were dealing with. Muslims were a different matter. Many of them retained an affection for traditional religion. They practiced *jaju*, secretly or openly, and they thought nothing of using the unseen powers to get their way in life. Nuratu, this story went, was a full- fledged user of *jaju*. The news of it went like a tremor through our whole class. We’d heard of such things, of course, but to have it so close to us?

For so long, we had kept the forest at bay. We read Livy and Cicero, learned how to set silverware on a formal table, mastered the expansion of polynomials. We were modern girls. Now, the forest had returned with a vengeance. It whispered through us as we whispered to one another. The details of Nuratu’s *jaju* emerged, and deepened with each telling. It all began one day, after Gym class. Someone – impossible to figure out who, but surely there had been someone – had seen Nuratu staying behind, and, it seemed, the years of Christian education had done little to help her. So, for all of the rest of that term, when we saw Nuratu coming, we mewed away. We took another route, gently closed a door or pretended to be asleep. We lived in fear of her, a real fear that was also like a comedy of fear. ‘Oh God, here comes the witch,’ we’d say, and change direction as smoothly as possible. Conversation with her, if we could not avoid it, was kept to a minimum – polite greetings, nothing that would give the girl ideas or make her take interest in any of us or, worse still, make her offended at us. And Nuratu, seeing us – and oblivious as a frog in a pot of water – would cheerfully cry out ‘Hallo, Tolani!’ or ‘Hey, Funmilayo, why don’t I help you with your hair on Saturday?’
And Funmilayo, barely concealing her hysteria, would say, ‘Oh, but thanks! Kemi Omolola has already said she would do it for me,’ and would scramble off to find Kemi to firm the story up, and avoid Nuratu’s roving hands on her scalp. Who’d wish to have her head massaged by a witch?

It went on like this for weeks. Unable to shake off the image of the jùjù sitting in the pencil case – and uncertain about whose pencil case it was that had been so cursed – we all divested ourselves of our pencil cases. We took to carrying our fountain pens to class without the usual paraphernalia – the fifteen-centimetre ruler, the compass, the plastic angle set. And when we mentioned Nuratu’s name amongst ourselves, it was with nervous laughter. It did make a kind of sense that she’d make alliances with devils, we said to each other. Maybe that was how her breasts got so big. This whole issue of reservations ought to be looked into, we said. And, of course, when we used the gym, we never went near the lockers, but instead showered and changed in the dorms.

During the exams at the end of term, another story began to circulate. Nuratu had been seen touching the stack of blotting paper in the storeroom. The blotting paper? Just what was it with this girl and stationery? No one dared ask. All we knew was that blotting paper was henceforth to be avoided. So, there it sat, in its soft, white, innocent-looking reams – but we now knew it bore invisible traces of who-knew-what malevolence. At the end of our Literature exam, when even Nuratu’s simple mind could no longer ignore the accumulated evidence of almost two months, she accosted a group of us in the hallway. Why, she wanted to know, had none of us used blotting paper? Our fingers, stained with blue ink, betrayed us. We had used the unabsorbent paper of exercise books, handkerchiefs, or small pieces of cloth snipped from rags. What was it, what was going on? We were no longer to take her for a fool. Hadn’t we been avoiding her? She would march off to Mrs Allardyce with the full story right now if we didn’t start talking, Allah was her witness.

We shuffled when we heard her invoke Allah. All but begging her not to unleash her powers on us, we recounted, in turns, how we had heard from someone who had heard from someone of the pencil case in the gym. Pencil case in the gym? What pencil case in what gym? We said that we had heard stories, too, about the blotting paper. Naturally, we made no mention of her Islamic faith. The word ‘witch’ remained unsaid. We said only that, whatever she had done, we were certain she had done it for a good reason. And that her adversary, whatever it was, had probably deserved it. Nuratu, as the full implication of our story dawned on her, looked as if she had been stabbed. She slowly sank to the floor, and began to weep and shake her head. And we, ashamed, dispersed. Perhaps she herself took the story to Mrs Allardyce, or perhaps some other party, having heard us tell it and having seen Nuratu’s reaction, did. Either way, Mrs Allardyce immediately passed it on to Father Duncan. Tolani was in the hallway when that conversation happened, and she came back to us with a full report. Mrs Allardyce, she said, had said, ‘We have entirely failed to free these girls of the pagan spirit.’

Hearing this, Bunmi Lijadu – who always had something clever to say, and who, many years later, became Vice Chancellor of the Oggun State University – said, ‘I’ve never heard such nonsense! Everyone knows we’re Christian girls. Right, girls? Pagans indeed, that Allardyce has some nerve.’ We all agreed, even Saudatu, who, in any case, eventually would convert to Christianity, after marriage. And we admired Bunmi for saying ‘Allardyce’ instead of ‘Mrs Allardyce.’

Father Duncan called an assembly of the entire tenth standard that afternoon, and said he had decided to investigate ‘this most troubling report.’ After getting several versions of the story from us, he walked off towards the gym. We followed. Once there, he began to look around the lockers. And there it was, on a little ledge – an abandoned pencil case. Father Duncan was either brave or stupid, because he immediately picked up the pencil case and, with his bare hands, unlatched it. We almost fainted. ‘Come around, girls, and look at this,’ Father Duncan said.

Gingerly, we trooped around him, craning our necks from a safe distance, refusing to breathe, and looked into the pencil case. There was jùjù in it, something truly horrible to look at. One of us – hard to tell now who, but it was probably Abisola – began to cry. ‘This,’ Father Duncan said, ‘is not jùjù. It is merely some orange peel on which a layer of mould has grown.’ He flung the peel through an open window into the grass outside, and placed the empty pencil case down. He looked at us with stern brown eyes, ‘Someone peeled an orange and abandoned its skin here, that we had been a jokey kind of thing and no real damage had been done. Others had had it much worse. Even Tinu, after her brother died and before she left, had calmed down and hadn’t taken herself so seriously. She had even given Mrs Allardyce a farewell present of a souvenir she made herself.

By the following year, when a stream of refugees began to make its way over from the East, and four strange, thin Igbo girls with impeccable manners came to join us in the eleventh standard, we could already look back with some understanding. We’d lived through the whole conflict without shortage of food or supplies. There had been no threat, no danger, and no interruption of our education. Biafra had burned and starved, but we’d been innocent of atrocity and news of atrocity. For us, in our little clearing in the forest, it had been a shadow war, a war amongst faint figures moving on the far side of a screen. How lucky we were, we said, to have remained modern. Looking at it that way Nuratu had no right – it was Bunmi Lijadu who said this – to go around acting all hurt and entitled. It was bad form actually, typical local behaviour. We all agreed.

Teju Cole is a writer and art historian. His is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College. He was born in the US to Nigerian parents and raised in Nigeria. He currently lives in Brooklyn and is the Author of two books, a novella, Every Day is for the Thief (2007), and a novel, Open City (2012), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, and the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. He was shortlisted for the NBCC Award and the Guggenheim Fellowship. He is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College. He was born in the US to Nigerian parents and raised in Nigeria. He currently lives in Brooklyn and is the Author of two books, a novella, Every Day is for the Thief (2007), and a novel, Open City (2012), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, and the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. He was shortlisted for the NBCC Award and the Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Bard College. He was born in the US to Nigerian parents and raised in Nigeria. He currently lives in Brooklyn and is the Author of two books, a novella, Every Day is for the Thief (2007), and a novel, Open City (2012), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, and the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. He was shortlisted for the NBCC Award and the Guggenheim Fellowship. He was born in the US to Nigerian parents and raised in Nigeria. He currently lives in Brooklyn and is the Author of two books, a novella, Every Day is for the Thief (2007), and a novel, Open City (2012), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, and the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. He was shortlisted for the NBCC Award and the Guggenheim Fellowship.
When does a person end and a place begin? In crime fiction, particularly that which hinges on psychology and secrets rather than blood and gore, the scenery is often as potent a character as the cast themselves. This is particularly true of David Owen’s enigmatic Detective Inspector Franz ‘Pufferfish’ Heineken, and the brutally complicated and painfully beautiful Tasmania he inhabits. If you’re a born and bred islander, much of Franz’s story will come as no surprise; if you’re an import to the state, you’ll probably wish you’d read of his experiences sooner; and, if you’re planning to move for a peaceful sea change, let Franz and his complicated Tasmania serve as a welcome and a warning.

The Present is Tense

It would be easy to draw a link between the man and the island. Especially when you hear his mobile phone ring … A simple, unpretentious brr brr. No modern theme tune or quirky abstract sound – just the kind of ring that says the owner of the phone doesn’t really care what others think of him, is someone who has better things to occupy his time than contriving to make good first impressions. Obviously no slave to others, or technology, he doesn’t answer the phone. Instead, he hangs his turd-brown overcoat on the chair behind him, and orders a coffee – black and strong (of course).

Detective Inspector Franz Heineken – otherwise known as Pufferfish – is fifty-ish, devoid of any pretensions and as nondescript as you’d expect a middle-aged plain-clothes policeman to need to be, to swim largely unobserved through the criminal depths of Tasmania. Heineken is, for someone who’s not local-born, strangely similar to the island: both hard to get to know, they are resolutely take-me-or-leave-me, enigmatic, and prickly if you’re yet to prove yourself, or if they feel you’re trying it on. So yes, it would be easy to draw the line between Tasmania and the imported cop who’s driven to clean up its messes. Yet, as with all easy comparisons, it’s too simplistic and does the man and the island a deep disservice.

Who is Pufferfish?
Franz Heineken’s Tasmania

by CARMEN CROMER

Who is Pufferfish?

flows through the state like tannin river water. The serene face of Tasmania is apparently a front for some seriously dirty stuff. Who would’ve thought? And this is Heineken’s milieu. Yet there is so much more to Tasmania – in its small country towns, sophisticated urban spaces, desperately unhappy and trapped people, others blatantly enjoying and exploiting the cream – and, equally, to the Detective Inspector than what is immediately obvious on the surface.

Sharp as a blade, pragmatically intelligent and with a poet’s appreciation and expression for the world around him, what’s perhaps most commendable about Heineken is his ability to treat himself and his actions in the same honest way as he treats those around him. He doesn’t suffer fools, especially when he believes his own actions have been foolish. He’ll say what others have been thinking, but been too afraid to say for fear of backlash in Tasmania’s merry-go-round society. And he’s quietly funny, in a very dry way. Living in Tasmania, this sense of humour comes in handy.

Heineken’s modern Tasmania is a geographically neat triangle under mainland Australia, containing approximately half a million people. The local tourism industry and Tasmanian government’s official and officious line is that the island is a pristine landscape of impeccable visual and cultural credentials; here, you’ll find charming people, quaint towns, gourmet produce and fascinating heritage. What’s not on the glossy brochure is that Tasmania is also what academics like to deem a ‘contested landscape’ – and they’re not just referring to bitter environmental wars; there are the undisputedly deeply divisive social ones as well, as Heineken knows all too well. The physical boundaries of Tasmania have created a hothouse of ideological battles and archaic, impossible to navigate conventions. For many on the island, to live here is to find oneself in an antipodean Groundhog Day, forever watching the repeat of mistakes while hoping for a different result.

So it’s refreshing to see the state through the baleful eyes of Heineken, where the bureaucratic version of Tasmania’s landscape, history and people is peeled back – and what’s revealed, without fear of favour, is a true and complicated character worth knowing.
Heineken has lived in Tasmania for thirty years; currently in upwardly mobile, yet still bohemian, South Hobart. He's far from stupid and is under no illusions about the fact that he is still — and forever will be — an outsider. Interestingly, he could have had a way ‘in’, so to speak, being Dutch. If he'd been the kind of man who needed support networks, he could have ingratiated himself with the state's large Dutch community. But it’s a coincidence that evades definition, and his sheer power is striking through wind-weathered scrub. In Heineken’s internal dialogue is like standing in the south, the brutal highlands). A moment spent with Heineken’s internal dialogue is like standing in the course of his investigations, as he is wading into the varying landscapes he is thrust on South Bruny, which we’ll come to), and in the current in upwardly mobile, yet still bohemian, life. Heineken is his constant companion, and sometimes his unlikeliest ally in catching criminals.

Heineken is Heineken’s constant companion, and sometimes his unlikeliest ally in catching criminals. With his independent spirit, the police force and its machinations are almost an afterthought for Heineken. Certainly, he’s a ready and protective (if gruff) mentor to young detectives Rafe and Faye, but you won’t find him out socialising with them at the pub after work. And he’s particularly difficult relationship with Walter D’Hayt, his immediate superior, is not earning him any brownie points, but it’s also revealing in that it shows Heineken’s utter disinterest in ingratiating himself. While the besotted, Stepford-married, family manned D’Hayt insists on putting up a PR show for the Tasmanian people, Heineken doggedly pushes back on any bureaucratic plans to scale down his Major Crime South squad. He has no need to play the game that D’Hayt does, since he doesn’t plan on climbing the internal police force hierarchy or Tasmania’s colo- nial social ladder. He doesn’t need, or want, D’Hayt or anyone else like him. He is, always, the independent, intractable outsider.

This is a man with an effortlessly, elegantly strat- egyic brain, and it’s an impressive thing to see in action — whether Heineken is coordinating faked roadworks to cut violent drug runners off at the icy bridge on the way to Strahan, or cold-calling at the Huon Valley home of dignified career crims like Fink Mountagaret, he can foresee all the possi- bilities unfolding in front of him, knows how to wait patiently to get what he wants and never lets his guard down. (Well, almost never…)

What does Heineken do with his time when he’s not chasing them — in fact, he’s tiny in D’Hayt’s policy-and-procedural demands? Well, he likes a second-hand bookshop and a Tasmanian red. Loves liquorice allsorts (a particular British variety, to be found in a shop in North Hobart). He knows his geography and history better than most Tasmanians you’ll ever meet. He doesn’t own much, just a two- roomed apartment on stilts with glimpses of a tip, so he’s certainly not burdened with possessions.

And this is where the waters get murky. No man is an island, although Heineken tries hard to cultivate a void around him. Despite being able to dig up the dirt on others — generally criminals, as he’s not particularly interested in small talk, gossip and the affairs of his fellow men — he’s intensely private and self-sufficient, and it seems unlikely that many of his acquaintances, such as Magnus Salubi- bury (Heineken’s closest male friend, disgraced ex-copper and now happy sax player in over-sixties jazz band, The Swingin’ Todgers), know much, if anything, about his student daughter, Nora, or his casually intimate, satisfyingly visceral relationship with colleague, Hedda.

Hedda: kayaking, karate-kick-wielding, four-wheel driving, fit as hell and taller than Heineken. She clearly not fazed by powerful women, has no need to exert clichéd behaviour to feel masculine. She calls him Puff, or mate. A pair of her bathers resides on Heineken’s life turned yet again on a moment. It was thirty years ago when Heineken found himself in a police force at the bottom of Australia. And he doesn’t shrink from this truth, but he undoubt- edly had to sink away from his northern life. But not to Tasmania — yet.

Heineken’s relationship with Hunt is one of silent social respect; they are forever trapped in each other’s debt. On the face of it, Heineken could be ruined, to some he would seem as villainous as the crims he pursues; and the respected Hunt is only alive because Heineken saved his drunken arse. They are the keepers of each other’s dark secrets. It seems, however, that the isolation of Tasmania was not enough for Heineken. Early on, he secured a hideaway off the ‘mainland’: a shack on a South- ern-Ocean-battered part of Bruny Island, an island off an island. Once part of a rundown ‘resort’ and now roomed apartment on stilts with glimpses of a tip, so he’s certainly not burdened with possessions. So why and how did he end up in Tasmania?

The Past is Imperfect

It was thirty years ago when Heineken found him- self in Tasmania — not through active choice to make a sea change (a context that barely exists in the early eighties, anyway) to a lovely isolated island, but via something of a necessary, urgent escape from the rest of the world. To somewhere, presum- ably, he hoped he could lay low. Because, thirty years ago, trainee constable Franz Heineken killed a man.

Seeking retribution for the torture and murder of his fiancée, hot-blooded Heineken, through the help of his Rotterdam colleagues, shot a man in cold blood. The trade-off for this maverick justice was that the young constable had to disappear, taking his pain and his secret to the other side of the world. Yes, he delivered vengeance in circumstances that those of us who value justice higher than the law would have understood, but there’s no getting away from the fact that Heineken is himself a criminal. He doesn’t shrink from this truth, but he undoubt- edly had to sink away from his northern life.

Heineken was not enough for Heineken. Early on, he secured a hideaway off the ‘mainland’: a shack on a Southern-Ocean-battered part of Bruny Island, an island off an island. Once part of a rundown ‘resort’ and now roomed apartment on stilts with glimpses of a tip, so he’s certainly not burdened with possessions. So why and how did he end up in Tasmania?
saved this piece of paradise, with its structurally dubious wooden dwelling, its buffetting gum trees and tiny squeaky beach, by buying it from the resort’s indigenous caretaker, Willard. Despite being from ‘different universes’, Heineken and Willard got on, forming an unusual bond with ‘a shared love of fishing, solitude, and reds’; reds generally consumed beside the night fires at the shack.

Thirty years ago Heineken, like many imports into the island, was given no option but to get away from life for a while, found that Tasmania suited his purposes – and has simply stayed. And even if you think you’ve gotten to know him over the decades, just when you think you’ve got him worked out, he evades your definition, and shows another side of himself. A bit like the island itself.

And the Future’s …
The Tasmania of the early nineteen eighties into which Heineken was unceremoniously tipped is one that, in some ways, seems a long way away. Historically speaking, this litterly divided and happily inward-looking place brought plenty of unpleasants times for people who were different. Now, some would say, things are different. Others would, of course, say that nothing has really changed. Differences are still too hard to swallow for some, there’s no meeting ground for opposing opinions – you’re either for something or against it; you’re either from here, or you’re not … And punishments for not obeying the status quo are made all the worse for being intangible, slippery and meted out by those you’d least expect. Still, there’s no doubt that this ethereal island is being forced, in some ways against its will, to join in and catch up. Heineken, being the outsider, will note the changes but because he operates in a world that is essentially unchanging – the world of the criminal – he’ll view the changes with a detached interest, rather than a passionate involvement in them. Survival instinct, perhaps. But more likely his ingrained philosophical approach to life.

What probably won’t change with the years is Heineken’s ability to live in the moment – policing, by its nature, demands that you live in the present tense – yet also grasp the big picture of the island and its inhabitants with such skill.

His tough exterior will continue to be tested, and who can blame Heineken for being a cynic. Or perhaps he’s simply a realist – he knows and daily sees the continuing disquiet of the landed gentry and convict underclass, the corruption that doesn’t stop at the criminal level; yet despite a career of curtailing major crime, he’s remarkably well-balanced, and will probably continue to be so.

He’s unlikely, for example, to develop an excessive reliance on substances to get through a dreary D’Hayt-filled day or the persistent Tasmanian winters (unless liqueurice allsorts count as a vice).

And there are whispers on the wind that Heineken’s not done yet, not by a long shot. The very near future has some unpleasant surprises in store for the man and the island; troubled times are ahead, and you can expect to be hearing a lot more from Heineken.

But looking beyond the immediate, it’s hard to imagine that the future holds promotions and great accolades for Heineken, not being a player of the game. He’s just finished his third stint of long service leave, and he’s probably got about fifteen years left at the force – if he’s lucky enough to dodge the bullets that come his way. He’ll continue to do his job, what he’s paid (and seemingly personally motivated) to do, until the state retires him.

And then you can bet that, if you want to find him for a talk about Tasmania, its crimes and its mysteries, you’ll have to head to Bruny, and wind your way through a couple of kilometres of bushland. Heineken, if he’s not having his daily dip in the freezing sea, will be sitting on the dilapidated porch of his shack with a lunch of just-caught southern rock lobster, washed down with a tinnie. Or he’ll be on the edge of the beach, watching the changeable weather do its thing as he pushes his bare feet into the damp sandy soil, the pink pigface and native coastal grasses underfoot.

And, if you truly want to know what lies beneath the surface of Tasmania, try to convince Heineken to take you on a drive – what he has to say about the sunny edges and the dark heart of the island is like nothing you’ll hear anywhere else.\n

Carmen Cromer is the pen name of Amanda Cromer. She has worked as a professional writer and editor for 15 years – mostly in Sydney. She now lives back in her hometown of Hobart and is currently dragging her heels on publishing her first full-length crime novel, set in Tasmania.

www.carmencromer.com
With luck I wasn’t accustomed to, I beat the assault charges on account of the CCTV footage from the pub showing Bulle whacking me over the head with a billiard cue and trying to gnaw my ear off. Fortunately, there was no footage of me beating him senseless once we’d taken the fight to the street. I found myself free to walk the streets of the town again, which left Bulle a little nervous. He avoided me for weeks. By the time I caught up with him I didn’t have the anger to break wind. We passed each other on the street out front of the post office. I nodded, he nodded, and that was it.

I asked around about China. Nobody’d sighted her or heard a peep. She’d done a serious runner. Maybe interstate. I would sometimes think of her, mostly when I was near the ocean, and could smell the sea and salt air. By the time I went inside again, two years later, for a handful of smash and grabs on servos, I’d been shackled up with three or four local girls, and mocked as sort of myself, chasing whatever dollar I could get my hands on. Clean or dirty, it made no difference to me, although if I were pushed I’d have to say dirty money smelt a little better.

All that time I never stopped thinking about China.

My first night alone in the narrow cell I was kept awake by a sad moaning calling me from across the yard. I didn’t sleep that night, or many of the nights that followed. I kept to myself in prison and wasn’t troubled at all, but it didn’t stop me hitting the mattress full of fear I couldn’t recognise. Some nights I wouldn’t sleep at all, but when I did I would dream about China.

We were together again, under the pier, wet and in love and happy.

I left prison a year and a half later with a travel pass and fifty dollars in my pocket and a knitted red rug that I’d made in the tapistry shop tucked under my arm. A gift for my mother. I looked out of the window of the bus at the dots of sheep on the side of a rich green hill, knowing I had fuck-all to return to. I didn’t have a place to live and my mother was uneasy about me moving in with her. While I was away she’d finally shackled up with her long-time boyfriend, Bob Cummins, a weed of a fellow who ran the supermarket. They weren’t married, which even in this day is enough to cause scandal in a town with more churches than pubs. The talk around the town worried him and he suggested they get married. My mother wouldn’t hear of it.

‘I’ve been married. And it was a disaster from day one. If I wanted a life of misery, Bob, I’d will myself a stroke.’

She’d always been a tough woman. But she wasn’t rock-hard. She talked Bob into letting me stay with them and he okayed it for me to move into the garage, which meant his precious fishing boat was shifted onto the driveway, in the weather. I did my best to stay out of his way and only went into the house for meals and to shower. I also made an agreement with them that as soon as I found a permanent job I’d be on my way.

The deal on my release included me seeing a parole officer once a fortnight and finding work. The week after I was out I caught the bus in front of the post office to the nearest big town, a thirty-minute ride, to have a meeting with my parole officer, Jim Lack. He doubled as a JP, Protestant Minister, and a newsagent. Jim sat me down in a small office behind his shop and assured me that it was his job to set me on the right path. He had the features of a budgerigar and whistled like one when he spoke.

‘We’re going to work together, son. The last thing we want to see is a local boy falling through the cracks and going back to prison.’

He smiled and put a hand on my thigh, a little too familiar for my liking. He also gave me the number of a ‘good Rotary man’ he was friendly with who owned a timber mill outside town. When I went for the job interview with the Rotary man, Reg Ling, I quickly worked out that the number of a ‘good Rotary man’ he was friendly with who owned a timber mill outside town.

I started work at the mill a week later, riding an old pushbike, an hour each way, that I’d picked up at the local tip. I’d spent the weekend taking the bike apart, repairing and cleaning and oiling it. After a week at the mill I sat at the kitchen table with my mother, explaining that if she could have a word in Bob’s ear and get him to let me stay in the garage for a little longer than he’d expected, maybe three months or so, rent free, I’d be able to save enough money to get a place of my own to rent. She agreed, but cut a tough deal with me.

never stopped loving China. We got together in the summer we turned seventeen and spent warm nights under the pier drinking cider and smoking weed. Some nights we walked the back roads to the ocean and lay naked in the dunes looking up at the stars. One night China rolled her salty skin onto me, dropped warm tears on my shoulder and asked that we pray that our love would last. I told her there was no need for prayers. As it was, I didn’t believe in any god, but swore we’d always be together.

I really did believe we could make it, as long as I could stay out of trouble, which wouldn’t be easy. I’d been fucking up since I started high school, and was forever deep in shit, with teachers and the local police.

When word got out that we were together, China’s family and friends both warned her off me. The town was small enough that we couldn’t be together without word quickly getting back to her father, a sheep farmer and champion shooter. He went after me like I was a bush dog that had crept up on and torn the throat out of one of his sheep in the night. We were left to meet under the pier of a night and disappear into the shadows, where China would whisper against my skin that she loved me and trusted me and was ready to take a chance on me. For most of the year we were together I did stay out of trouble, not counting a fight here and there, which was no more than most local boys got up to on a drunken Saturday night.

China came to hate our hometown, the whispers and the gossip. She decided our future lay in escape. She took me by the hand down at the beach one night and told me that if I could in any way get herself a second-hand fishing boat was shifted onto the driveway, in the weather. I did my best to stay out of his way and only went into the house for meals and to shower. I also made an agreement with them that as soon as I found a permanent job I’d be on my way.

The deal on my release included me seeing a parole officer once a fortnight and finding work. The week after I was out I caught the bus in front of the post office to the nearest big town, a thirty-minute ride, to have a meeting with my parole officer, Jim Lack. He doubled as a JP, Protestant Minister, and a newsagent. Jim sat me down in a small office behind his shop and assured me that it was his job to set me on the right path. He had the features of a budgerigar and whistled like one when he spoke.

‘We’re going to work together, son. The last thing we want to see is a local boy falling through the cracks and going back to prison.’

He smiled and put a hand on my thigh, a little too familiar for my liking. He also gave me the number of a ‘good Rotary man’ he was friendly with who owned a timber mill outside town. When I went for the job interview with the Rotary man, Reg Ling, I quickly worked out that the number of a ‘good Rotary man’ he was friendly with who owned a timber mill outside town.

I started work at the mill a week later, riding an old pushbike, an hour each way, that I’d picked up at the local tip. I’d spent the weekend taking the bike apart, repairing and cleaning and oiling it. After a week at the mill I sat at the kitchen table with my mother, explaining that if she could have a word in Bob’s ear and get him to let me stay in the garage for a little longer than he’d expected, maybe three months or so, rent free, I’d be able to save enough money to get a place of my own to rent. She agreed, but cut a tough deal with me.
I don’t think he’ll mind, Cal. But if you miss just one day of work, or if you bring any trouble here, if the police get on your tail, you’ll have to go. Bob won’t stand for trouble.

I felt like screaming ‘fuck old Bob,’ but knew better.

‘I understand that. I want no trouble with Bob. Or you.’

From the day I got out of prison I hadn’t had another dream about China, although I did think about her a lot of the time I was riding to and from the mill, seeing as it was the same road we’d walked beside the dunes. I tried convincing myself that the footprints I sometimes spotted in the sand by the side of the road could only be hers. I had a half-crazy idea to take to the road and go searching for her but my parole conditions didn’t allow for it. Not for another year, at least. I couldn’t venture more than fifty kilometres from the town without written permission, and it was illegal for me to spend a single night away from my ‘primary residence’, even if it was camping out on Bob’s front nature strip in a tent.

I’d never driven a forklift before but picked it up in less than a day at the mill. My job was moving sawn and dressed logs from the mill to the storage yard. About fifty men and half a dozen women worked at the mill, a few of them from the town, but most off surrounding farms that had become unproductive in recent years on account of the drought. They were an unfriendly bunch. None of them ever introduced themselves or spoke to me any more than they needed to. I guess it was on account of me having been in prison, although they didn’t seem to have much to say to each other either.

There was one fella in the mill who looked a little familiar from the first time I spotted him, marking up sawn logs with a brush and bucket of red paint. After that, I’d often notice him eyeing me too closely. I’d always been good putting a name to a face and it got to me that I couldn’t remember his. He could be an old enemy who might get it in his head to jump me.

I was riding home into the third week on the job, when I took a puncture in the back wheel. I had no spare tube or a repair kit and was still a good way from home. I had no choice but to walk the bike. I was pushing it along the side of the road when I heard a car horn behind me. A battered red utility pulled up alongside me, driven by the familiar face from the mill.

‘Your bike fucked?’ he yelled.

‘Yep. A puncture.’

‘Throw it in the back and I’ll drive you to town.’

I put the bike in the back and hopped in the passenger seat. He offered me a calloused hand.

‘Never thought you’d get back here, Cal.’

‘I know you?’

‘Of course you fucken know me. Bruce Conlan. From high school.’

I remembered Bruce Conlan as a whippet of a kid who smelled of piss and hid himself down the back of the classroom. We’d never been mates, but I’d felt a little sorry for him and had given a couple of boys a belt for standing over him in the yard. He had a lunatic for an old man, who was forever knocking his kids around. While I was in prison I read in the newspaper that he’d gone berserk in the main street and shot up some shop windows before turning the gun on himself and blowing his head off.

Bruce had filled out. And none of it was muscle.

‘I wouldn’t have known you, Bruce. You’ve changed.’

‘Well, they say married life’s good for you, but I don’t know. She can cook, my wife. And I can shovel it away. You look fit enough though. Did you throw the weights around while you were in … in …’

‘I never lifted a finger in prison. Didn’t eat much either. What you see here is skin and bone and not much more.’

We turned onto the town road.

‘Cal, when we were in school together and you cleaned up those arseholes picking on me all the time. I never thanked you for that. No one has laid a finger on me since. They must have seen I was done for animal cruelty.’

Bruce hadn’t quite landed yet. The family was sweating on the old man dying.

‘Still got his first quid in his pocket. Gives his kids fuck all. They hate him and can’t wait to bury him.’

‘I heard about your old man knocking himself in the main street. Tough on you?’

‘Waan’t tough at all. I was glad to see the mad cunt dead. And happy he never took anyone with him. My mum especially.’

‘He asked if I minded talking about prison. I said no, but assured him there wasn’t much to tell.

‘You in your cell fifteen hours a day, staring at the wall.’

‘What’s the food like?’

‘We eat airline food.’

‘Airline food? You having me on?’

‘It’s true. It’s a private company that runs the prison. Their other business is catering for the airlines. They run this industrial kitchen out of the prison. We’re the slave labour. Our job is making and preparing the food, which we also have to eat. In the same packaging. Saves on washing the dishes. Think of that, Bruce. You’ve got some businessman tucking into a meal at 30,000 feet cooked by poor cunts like us who can’t walk two steps without hitting a brick wall.’

Bruce cackled like an old girl. He couldn’t stop for a bit and was looking at me kind of funny.

‘I was just thinking.’

‘Thinking what?’

‘He smiled like a goose. ‘I was thinking about you and China.’

I shifted in my seat. ‘What about us?’

‘You two were like Romeo and Juliet for a while there.’

‘Maybe we was. Nothing worked out for them either.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying so, Cal, she was the hottest chick in town. I saw her down at the beach a few times in that red bikini she wore. She drove the boys crazy. What a body she had.’

‘Yeah,’ I tried shrugging. ‘What a body.’

‘Most of the girls we went to school with let themselves go. Tribe of kids. Ton of weight. Not that I can talk,’ he laughed, grabbing a handful of fat. ‘Not that China Doll.’

‘She’s most likely gone the same way,’ I said, while hoping I was wrong. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘But she hasn’t, mate. Not her. Not when I last seen her.’

‘You saw her? Bullshit.’

‘Oh, I did. About six months back. I was after a new dog, a heeler, and went through the stock classifieds in Farmer’s Weekly. I came across some pups for sale, a litter of blues. I gave the number a call and drove the hundred clicks across west to pick them up, at the old lion park on the Western Highway.’

‘The lion park? Those poor scabby animals still there? I thought the bloke who ran the place was done for animal cruelty.’

He was. He went broke and sold up to this bloke with the dogs. He runs a few horses, some sheep and these heellers that he breeds. When I got there he let the pups run around in the yard so I could get a look at them and pick one. I’m on my hands and knees playing with this pup, a lovely dark blue, Jhedda, that’s what I named her. I picked her out of the litter and brought her home. While I’m playing with the dog I hear a screen door slam and this woman comes out of the house holding a mobile phone. It was a call for him. I look up and see China.

‘You sure it was her?’

‘Sure I’m sure. She looked a bit heavier. There was a kid running around. I suppose it was hers.

‘You sure it was her?’

‘Yeah, I tried Shrugging. ‘What a body.’

‘She say anything to you?’

‘He dropped me at the front gate and offered to pick me up of a morning, which suited me, as

the bike was on its last legs. We had little to do with each other during the days at the mill, but did plenty of talking on the drive to and from. Bruce had married one of the Marstons’ daughters of the same Marstons who ran the milk tankers between the dairy farms and the biggest milk producer in the district, a business they also had a slice of. The family was loaded.

Bruce said his father had rubbed his hands together when he started dating Shelley Marston.

‘You’ll land on your feet there, son. That family bleeds milk and shits money.’

Bruce hadn’t quite landed yet. The family was sweating on the old man dying.

‘Still got his first quid in his pocket. Gives his kids fuck all. They hate him and can’t wait to bury him.’

‘I heard about your old man knocking himself in the main street. Tough on you?’

‘Waan’t tough at all. I was glad to see the mad cunt dead. And happy he never took anyone with him. My mum especially.’

‘He asked if I minded talking about prison. I said no, but assured him there wasn’t much to tell.

‘You in your cell fifteen hours a day, staring at the wall.’

‘What’s the food like?’

‘We eat airline food.’

‘Airline food? You having me on?’

‘It’s true. It’s a private company that runs the prison. Their other business is catering for the airlines. They run this industrial kitchen out of the prison. We’re the slave labour. Our job is making and preparing the food, which we also have to eat. In the same packaging. Saves on washing the dishes. Think of that, Bruce. You’ve got some businessman tucking into a meal at 30,000 feet cooked by poor cunts like us who can’t walk two steps without hitting a brick wall.’

Bruce cackled like an old girl. He couldn’t stop for a bit and was looking at me kind of funny.

‘I was just thinking.’

‘Thinking what?’

‘He smiled like a goose. ‘I was thinking about you and China.’

I shifted in my seat. ‘What about us?’

‘You two were like Romeo and Juliet for a while there.’

‘Maybe we was. Nothing worked out for them either.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying so, Cal, she was the hottest chick in town. I saw her down at the beach a few times in that red bikini she wore. She drove the boys crazy. What a body she had.’

‘Yeah,’ I tried shrugging. ‘What a body.’

‘Most of the girls we went to school with let themselves go. Tribe of kids. Ton of weight. Not that I can talk,’ he laughed, grabbing a handful of fat. ‘Not that China Doll.’

‘She’s most likely gone the same way,’ I said, while hoping I was wrong. ‘It’s been a long time.’

‘But she hasn’t, mate. Not her. Not when I last seen her.’

‘You saw her? Bullshit.’

‘Oh, I did. About six months back. I was after a new dog, a heeler, and went through the stock classifieds in Farmer’s Weekly. I came across some pups for sale, a litter of blues. I gave the number a call and drove the hundred clicks across west to pick them up, at the old lion park on the Western Highway.’

‘The lion park? Those poor scabby animals still there? I thought the bloke who ran the place was done for animal cruelty.’

He was. He went broke and sold up to this bloke with the dogs. He runs a few horses, some sheep and these heellers that he breeds. When I got there he let the pups run around in the yard so I could get a look at them and pick one. I’m on my hands and knees playing with this pup, a lovely dark blue, Jhedda, that’s what I named her. I picked her out of the litter and brought her home. While I’m playing with the dog I hear a screen door slam and this woman comes out of the house holding a mobile phone. It was a call for him. I look up and see China.

‘You sure it was her?’

‘Sure I’m sure. She looked a bit heavier. There was a kid running around. I suppose it was hers.

‘You sure it was her?’

‘Yeah, I tried Shrugging. ‘What a body.’

‘She say anything to you?’

‘He dropped me at the front gate and offered to pick me up of a morning, which suited me, as
She shifted on her feet, reached behind her head with her hand and pulled a clip from the back of her hair. It dropped, bunched and rested on her bare shoulders.

‘Where are you heading to?’

I heard a car engine, turned and spotted headlights at the end of the drive. China nervously smoothed the front of her dress.

‘Here’s my husband now.’

I had only seconds left to me.

‘China, I just wanted to tell you that when I was inside I thought about you. A lot. It sounds stupid but I need to tell you that you were a good person. I never understood that before.

I was too wild to know anything when we were going out.’

I scraped my boot in the dirt.

‘And I want to also tell you that you were beautiful. You are beautiful.’

‘You told me that plenty of times,’ she laughed. ‘You were pretty nice yourself.’

‘Oh, I was trouble. I’ve always been trouble.’

‘You were not.’ She leaned forward and brushed my arm with a fingertip. ‘You were sweet. Most of the time.’

The car pulled into the yard and the dogs ran to meet it. The driver hopped out. He was tall and thin and fit looking, full of purpose, and no doubt suspicious of me.

‘Oh. You cut across country. Take the fire road out behind the speedway. It gives you a straight run to the highway. It’s about another forty K on from there. You thinking of catching up with her?’

‘No. The lion park.’

‘Oh. You cut across country. Take the fire road out behind the speedway. It gives you a straight run to the highway. It’s about another forty K on from there. You thinking of catching up with her?’

‘Sorry I’m late, Marg. It went on longer than I expected.’

I hadn’t heard China called by her proper name since school rollcall. He took out his wallet and handed me a business card.

‘You give me a call around December and I’ll let you know what we’ve got. Should have some pups then.’ He offered his hand. ‘Tom.’

‘Bruce,’ I answered. ‘I took the card.’

He relaxed a little.

‘Your wife was just explaining to me, that they’re out of season.’

He kissed China on the cheek.

‘Sorry I’m late, Marg. It went on longer than I expected.’

I stepped back and took a last look at China, arm in arm with her husband.

‘And thank you, Marg.’

‘You too,’ she answered, looking down at her bare feet.

I sat in the car for an hour or more. I couldn’t get my mind off her. I got out of the car and watched the house. A honeyed glow framed a narrow window on the side of the house. I walked quietly behind a row of apple trees until I reached the window and stood among the trees, listening to my own heavy breaths as I watched China through the window. She stood naked before a mirror, brushing her hair. Her husband lay back on their bed, smoking a cigarette and admiring her until she turned to him.

I walked back along the driveway to the car, gunned the engine and turned onto the highway. The country gradually flattened until the dark horizon fell away. Although the air was cold I wound down the window to keep myself from fading away. I could smell the sea in the wind and thought of China and the nights we’d spent in each other’s arms. I could see her hair glowing against the moon and hear her laugh.

I didn’t want the highway patrol bearing down on me. I turned onto an irrigation road. It was about another forty K on from the speedway. The country gradually flattened until the dark horizon fell away. Although the air was cold I wound down the window to keep myself from fading away. I could smell the sea in the wind.
The Thesis

after Alain Badiou’s hypothesis

by ALI ALIZADEH

People are? They desire seemingly, prosperity and democracy

and something called happiness.

(Evil is not an Other but the simulation of our Good.)

People live and believe capitale-parliamentarianism
or its agitprop. Stalin
invoked to revoke contemplation
of a Rupture. Mao, a bogeyman
and people know. They work, borrow and consume. What sweats, falls apart
to produce our surplus (inexistent
things: so inexplicable) the Void
filled with religion, sport, entertainment
to sustain the State. Truth?

Justice can’t be

a desire. An aleatory drive

suddenly reveals, say, a farmer

in Andhra Pradesh, drinking pesticide:
a garment factory worker jumping to her death
from a burning workshop

in Bangladesh; Sri Lankan maid
with 24 nails heated and hammered
into her body by her master; a man
in Disney’s dream town, Celebration

shooting himself after firing at the cops sent
to foreclose his house; jobless

26 year-old Tunisian set on fire
with his own hands. These just in from news headlines, traces
of our State’s jackboots. Charity
and philanthropy help clean the bloody footprints. But what if
the Voids are brought in to Being?

Imagine

farmers, factory workers, prostitutes,
the indebted and the unemployed emerging, uniting.

An Event.

If in love we become Two, egalitarian axiom
makes us One. Because the people think. Because
the people are.

Ali Alizadeh’s last book, Ashes in the Air was shortlisted for the 2012 Prime Minister’s Award for Literature. His new novel, Transactions is forthcoming with University of Queensland Press in 2013. He lives in Melbourne and is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Monash University.
Ode to Dogs:
Hopeful as any in an empty night,
Trusting as a mouth blindly opened to kiss,
Patiently causing my fevered melancholy,
Smelling of toast, teardrops and rain.

Yes. Welcome. Yes. I wrote that myself, by the way. Well, this is my lounge room. It’s a mess, I know. You cannot see it, of course; I don’t want you to. You wouldn’t understand then. The eyes never understand. The ear is better, yes, gentler, gentler, slower to decide. Anyway. I’ll describe it to you.

I’m standing here in the lounge. It’s a large room; it joins onto the kitchen. The walls are yellow, a yellowy white. I think it was called Season of Sunflowers. I’m not sure of that though. The blinds are all closed. I don’t open them. Sunlight ruins everything. It takes all the soul out of things.

There are dogs everywhere. There are three on the couch and others dotted around on blankets on the floor. There are, let’s see, four, five, eight, eleven. Yes, there are eleven, eleven dogs in here.

There are as many again in the parlour and in my bedroom.

It is a lot, I know. Of course, a lot of them are dead. Probably, mostly dead. I haven’t done my rounds yet. You’re probably horrified that I don’t know. It can be harder to tell than you think. After a while, it is easy. Their eyes stare out, dead open. The surface of the eyeball goes dull and bits of dust and hairs stick to their gaze. Dishwasheried, I call it, all grey like old glassware. Their coats fade. They lose their gloss, the rippling moonlit-water gloss. It’s the grease in their coats. When they’re alive, their body heat keeps it all liquid and oily. And that keeps the hair shiny and agile. It could be the motion too, yes, perhaps the motion too. But after death it cools and hardens. Their coats become bristlier and the oil congeals to a thankless matt. It stops being warm and virile and alert as it passes under your hand, and becomes flat and cold. It’s a second death. Yes, the passing of their coat is a second death. It makes me cry. Oh, they are loved, these dogs. They are loved very much.

But I’m sorry. I’m wittering. In front of each of the dogs, there are three bowls: one for minced beef and one each for milk and water. Yes. Even in front of those who have passed away – I remain faithful even after they have left me. They have all been washed and groomed, and I keep the area just around them clean. It is nicer for them. Despite my cleaning, the building reeks of death and dung. People have noticed the smell. It could be my downfall. I like it though. It is a smell you can live in and, I think, love in. Cleanliness is next to godlessness. That’s what I say. I despise them all, the rub-a-dub-dubbers, washing and sterilising the world away. I love the dung. I love even the death. I love these dogs.

I am full of love.

Sometimes, in the morning, I am not. I lose it and I am alone, as alone as a housewife in an empty spotless house. Yes, that’s when I prepare them. That’s when I prepare them for love. They are not ready for it. It’s not strange. They are just like us. Though they are, perhaps, a little more thick-skinned to start with. But we are all walled in, peeping out from little towers of selfishness. We are Teflon-coated and we need to be scratched a little if anything is going to stick.

I’m sorry, where was I? Yes. I prepare them in the morning. Though I prefer it when it happens naturally. Or, at least, when it arises outside my horizon of power. Yes, that is better. That is best, but one cannot wait for miracles to happen. Poor creatures. Poor, poor creatures. My whole chest is bursting with love for them; its roar silences my own heartbeat.
But I am being rude. I should introduce you. This is Collin. He is a border collie. Isn’t this coat incredible? I have written a poem about him. Unrhymed, of course. I detest rhymes. Detestable. Tawdry. Would you like to hear?

Ode to Collin:
Your hair rustles, a meadow of scratchy silence;
Your small eyes gleam with mercy as you face my hand.
I bear the kisses of your teeth like a lover’s token.
I bold your paw and stroke the bone that I have fixed.
Oh, it’s nothing, I know. Doggerel. Ha. It’s not worthy of him. When I found him, he was a great bouncing ball of puerile love. He had burrs and twigs in his coat and lots of rusty, silky lashes of his tail. Disgusting. Yes. He was always kindly. Though not truly prepared, not really ready for love. No. So, I opened him up here. Just two inches, along the lower abdomen. I have extracted a small length of intestine. I do most like this now.
In the past, I experimented with heads, ears, backs and eyes, but this is the best. It is the least traumatic. Occasionally, if I have the supplies, I use arsenic, but it is difficult to get these days. It is a little trick I picked up off Flaubert; he and I would understand each other I think. I control the infections with antibiotics.
Yes. He is wonderful, isn’t he? He gave me this. Look, here, on my arm. A love bite. Can I confide in you? Well, he is my favourite at the moment.

This is Charlie. She is half-bulldog, half-Rottweiler. Oh, formidable. She was a true little Miss. I had to keep this puzzle on her for months. I prepared her two months ago. Yes, it’s incredible. If she remains with me for another week, it will be a new record. Seventy days is the current record. Held by a bitch named Shelley. Jack Russell. She was a sweetheart. I have a little seat dedicated to her in my yard, and a plaque: ‘For a friend who saw my heart and cried.’
I’m awfully sentimental, but they deserve it.

Some give up more easily than others, though I make a point of treating them all equally. All love weighs infinitely in the cracking scales of the heartbroken.
It is difficult to keep them fighting. Some are so resigned. You have to make them mad. They need a kick in the ribs to get them going. Sometimes I cry about this. Sorry. Teresa here. She was like stone. I thought I’d never get through to her, but one day, as she began to dry up inside, she howled. I thought I wouldn’t be able to hear it. She wouldn’t let me help and then I placed a hand on her head. She was muzzled of course, and she quietened. I stayed with her throughout her difficulty. I kissed her. Oh, it was beautiful.

As I said, it is better when I do not have to prepare them. It happens so rarely, nature is stingy with her blessings and I augment as necessary. That, of course, was how it started. It was a long time ago, a few years after my mother died. A horrible illness, prolonged. After her death, I had been unable to feel anything. I had become like a rubber bone, a dog’s toy, oblivious to everything. I felt like a limb that had gone to sleep. I pinched myself, slapped myself, but I was numb.

That was when Frencie came into my life. A standard poodle. I found her on the road. She was the victim of a hit-and-run. Beautiful, no, no she was more than that, she was majestic. Her eyes were dark and damp, and her body was covered in a fleece of platinum curls, now dyed black and red on her right hip. I knocked on doors, but no one knew anything, no one would help. So I took her home. She was crying. Whimpering. Whining, painful and sweet, like cheap Riesling.

I took her home. She was crying. Whimpering. Whining, painful and sweet, like cheap Riesling. I started to think about her. I had met her on the road, and I had searched for her. I had wanted to find her. I had searched for her.

She whimpered and whined and the vibrations, tuned to the very frequency of life and love, bound up to me. He was a great bouncing ball of puerile love. He had burrs and twigs in his coat and lots of rusty, silky lashes of his tail. Disgusting. Yes. He was always kindly. Though not truly prepared, not really ready for love. No. So, I opened him up here. Just two inches, along the lower abdomen. I have extracted a small length of intestine. I do most like this now.

In the past, I experimented with heads, ears, backs and eyes, but this is the best. It is the least traumatic. Occasionally, if I have the supplies, I use arsenic, but it is difficult to get these days. It is a little trick I picked up off Flaubert; he and I would understand each other I think. I control the infections with antibiotics.
Yes. He is wonderful, isn’t he? He gave me this. Look, here, on my arm. A love bite. Can I confide in you? Well, he is my favourite at the moment.

This is Charlie. She is half-bulldog, half-Rottweiler. Oh, formidable. She was a true little Miss. I had to keep this puzzle on her for months. I prepared her two months ago. Yes, it’s incredible. If she remains with me for another week, it will be a new record. Seventy days is the current record. Held by a bitch named Shelley. Jack Russell. She was a sweetheart. I have a little seat dedicated to her in my yard, and a plaque: ‘For a friend who saw my heart and cried.’
I’m awfully sentimental, but they deserve it.

Some give up more easily than others, though I make a point of treating them all equally. All love weighs infinitely in the cracking scales of the heartbroken.
It is difficult to keep them fighting. Some are so resigned. You have to make them mad. They need a kick in the ribs to get them going. Sometimes I cry about this. Sorry. Teresa here. She was like stone. I thought I’d never get through to her, but one day, as she began to dry up inside, she howled. I thought I wouldn’t be able to hear it. She wouldn’t let me help and then I placed a hand on her head. She was muzzled of course, and she quietened. I stayed with her throughout her difficulty. I kissed her. Oh, it was beautiful.

As I said, it is better when I do not have to prepare them. It happens so rarely, nature is stingy with her blessings and I augment as necessary. That, of course, was how it started. It was a long time ago, a few years after my mother died. A horrible illness, prolonged. After her death, I had been unable to feel anything. I had become like a rubber bone, a dog’s toy, oblivious to everything. I felt like a limb that had gone to sleep. I pinched myself, slapped myself, but I was numb.

That was when Frencie came into my life. A standard poodle. I found her on the road. She was the victim of a hit-and-run. Beautiful, no, no she was more than that, she was majestic. Her eyes were dark and damp, and her body was covered in a fleece of platinum curls, now dyed black and red on her right hip. I knocked on doors, but no one knew anything, no one would help. So I took her home. She was crying. Whimpering. Whining, painful and sweet, like cheap Riesling.

I took her home. She was crying. Whimpering. Whining, painful and sweet, like cheap Riesling. I started to think about her. I had met her on the road, and I had searched for her. I had wanted to find her. I had searched for her.

She whimpered and whined and the vibrations, tuned to the very frequency of life and love, bound up to me. He was a great bouncing ball of puerile love. He had burrs and twigs in his coat and lots of rusty, silky lashes of his tail. Disgusting. Yes. He was always kindly. Though not truly prepared, not really ready for love. No. So, I opened him up here. Just two inches, along the lower abdomen. I have extracted a small length of intestine. I do most like this now.

In the past, I experimented with heads, ears, backs and eyes, but this is the best. It is the least traumatic. Occasionally, if I have the supplies, I use arsenic, but it is difficult to get these days. It is a little trick I picked up off Flaubert; he and I would understand each other I think. I control the infections with antibiotics.
Yes. He is wonderful, isn’t he? He gave me this. Look, here, on my arm. A love bite. Can I confide in you? Well, he is my favourite at the moment.

This is Charlie. She is half-bulldog, half-Rottweiler. Oh, formidable. She was a true little Miss. I had to keep this puzzle on her for months. I prepared her two months ago. Yes, it’s incredible. If she remains with me for another week, it will be a new record. Seventy days is the current record. Held by a bitch named Shelley. Jack Russell. She was a sweetheart. I have a little seat dedicated to her in my yard, and a plaque: ‘For a friend who saw my heart and cried.’
I’m awfully sentimental, but they deserve it.

Some give up more easily than others, though I make a point of treating them all equally. All love weighs infinitely in the cracking scales of the heartbroken.
It is difficult to keep them fighting. Some are so resigned. You have to make them mad. They need a kick in the ribs to get them going. Sometimes I cry about this. Sorry. Teresa here. She was like stone. I thought I’d never get through to her, but one day, as she began to dry up inside, she howled. I thought I wouldn’t be able to hear it. She wouldn’t let me help and then I placed a hand on her head. She was muzzled of course, and she quietened. I stayed with her throughout her difficulty. I kissed her. Oh, it was beautiful.

As I said, it is better when I do not have to prepare them. It happens so rarely, nature is stingy with her blessings and I augment as necessary. That, of course, was how it started. It was a long time ago, a few years after my mother died. A horrible illness, prolonged. After her death, I had been unable to feel anything. I had become like a rubber bone, a dog’s toy, oblivious to everything. I felt like a limb that had gone to sleep. I pinched myself, slapped myself, but I was numb.

That was when Frencie came into my life. A standard poodle. I found her on the road. She was the victim of a hit-and-run. Beautiful, no, no she was more than that, she was majestic. Her eyes were dark and damp, and her body was covered in a fleece of platinum curls, now dyed black and red on her right hip. I knocked on doors, but no one knew anything, no one would help. So I took her home. She was crying. Whimpering. Whining, painful and sweet, like cheap Riesling.

She whimpered and whined and the vibrations, tuned to the very frequency of life and love, cracked my crystal heart and set it beating again. I lay with her. I wanted to rise and call a vet, but I couldn’t leave her. I held her and stroked her. I was covered in her, her blood and her ichor. When I finally moved and went to leave she howled, and I returned to her. She needed me. Her eyes swallowed me whole, I was all the hope in the world, but I could not give enough. She asked for more. Her eyes looked at me with infinite pleading, infinite love and need. Under the pressure of that gaze, I felt myself crack like an egg. I was new born, as delicate as a yolk. She was no longer just a dog, and I was no longer just a human. We were Tristan and Isolde. We needed each other like planets need their orbit. I was there for her, I held her and kissed her. For a few minutes near the end, she settled and she licked my hands and face. And then she shuddered and spasmed out of life. It felt like I had died, too. I felt the teardrops streaming down my face, carving channels through the dying blood of my love.
A giant game of Marco Polo played out over the late summer months of 2013. In this game the backyard pool takes the form of the expansive Ross and Davis Seas edging the Antarctic ice shelf; the seeker is a small boatload of scientists and the caller is the elusive Antarctic blue whale.

To describe the blue whale as iconic is no mere cliché. The largest animal ever to occupy the Earth, more colossal than even the biggest dinosaur, the Antarctic blue whale can measure up to thirty metres in length. However, we know very little about the animal, a situation that scientists assembled by the Antarctic Blue Whale Project have endeavoured to rectify.

One hundred years ago, the Southern Ocean whaling industry was in full swing, providing whale parts to make into a range of products, including whale oil for lighting and baleen for trussing up women in corsets and crinolines. All species were fair game, but the acquisition of Antarctic blue whales was particularly lucrative. Whaling operations occupied many of the subantarctic islands scattered along the higher latitudes, such as Macquarie and Heard Islands, until the invention of factory ships in 1925 allowed whalers to roam further afield. These longer journeys liberated them from the expensive logistics of maintaining stations and increased their profits.

From this point onward the killing accelerated at a ferocious pace until, in 1964, the International Whaling Commission (the global body charged with the conservation of whales) banned the slaughter of blue whales. By then nearly one-third of a million of the blues had been killed. It is estimated that, at its lowest ebb, the population plummeted to just 360.

Antarctic Blue Whale Project has further illustrated that whales do not need to die in the name of science. Virginia Andrews-Goff was one of the taggers poised on the bow of the Remora, hurling above the heaving Antarctic waters trying to get a perfect shot at the whales below. ‘This was a big chance and I was acutely aware of the expectations,’ Virginia said. ‘We bounced along trying to keep pace with this fast-moving whale. I aimed carefully just as the whale surfaced alongside the boat. Time seemed to slow as I spotted the perfect site for the tag. For optimal performance, the tag should be forward on the body, just in line with the pectoral fin. To my relief I deployed the tag in a great spot.’

The Antarctic blue whale voyage has collected data never before gathered and, for this reason, even before the analysis has begun, it is already a success. In just seven weeks the voyage surveyed nearly one-sixth of the Southern Ocean, identifying fifty-seven Antarctic blue whales, recording 626 hours of acoustic recordings, and analysing 26,545 calls of Antarctic blue whales in real time. Most thrillingly, two Antarctic blue whales have been tagged with satellite transmitters, one of which sent signals for several weeks, providing previously undocumented information about the whale’s movements.

The Antarctic Blue Whale Project has showcased the excellence that can be achieved through international scientific collaboration. Tasmania has become headquarters to both the secretariat for the Southern Ocean Research Partnership and its lead project, attracting top-order acousticists, observers, data managers and scientific survey designers. The impressive data set collected during the voyage has shown the success of tracking the whales through their calls, and the viability of conducting science with living, active, vibrant animals. In short, the Antarctic Blue Whale Project has further illustrated that whales do not need to die in the name of science.

Stephanie Cahalan is the communications co-ordinator for the Southern Ocean Research Partnership at the Australian Marine Mammal Centre. She also writes about the arts and is a regular contributor to Art Month Australia and the Tasmanian review blog Write Response.

www.writeresponse.blogspot.com.au
My small nephew is teaching me how to learn our world; his chief instruction being question everything. Each day gifts him pieces of life not yet known—leaf, ant, northerly wind, eagle—of which he asks names, reasons and stories, and which he then pockets within his small frame. Should they meet again, he can recognise these new acquaintances, and greet them by name.

We lift our heads from a game of tackles one evening to watch crimson rosellas racing the dusk in a sudden red pulse of song.

What are the birds saying? Why are they birds? I distract him by pointing to the almost full moon arising over his heart shoulder, and execute a stealthy tackle. He pops up with grass in his hair and the inevitable question — why does the moon come? I tell him that question is too big for me, and drop beside him to watch it rise over the top branches of the old pine tree. In his quietness I feel another question looming, so switch tack, asking my own, curious to hear his explanation.

What is a tree?

He is four years old, his preferred medium pure physical so he does away with words. Instead he jumps feet together, draws torso straight and stretches one arm up towards the sky, his right arm askew with an elbow crook. For magpies, he informs me. He is all tree. A blue-eyed laughing tree.

Were I to take this question to more conventional, learned realms, I would no doubt receive a wordy answer of Oxford dictionary lineage:

‘a tree is a woody perennial plant, typically having a single stem or trunk growing to a considerable height and bearing lateral branches at some distance from the ground.’

These words bewilder me — within them I find no trace of trees.

Nor do I find traces by trawling through my education and schooling in conventional Euro-Australian institutions. I have received no guidance or instruction on how to know a tree. Define yes, classify, even describe — but know? My head is full of figures from end-of-semester cramming: trends in deforestation, in climate induced forest migration. Books of numbers and words to pull out in the frenzy of exams to illustrate a point, clarify an argument, but I cannot feel them in their light exact objectivity, nor comprehend the swathes of emptied land and decapitated stumps they signify.

In 1968 at the General Assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature in New Delhi, Baba Dioum, a representative from Senegal, spoke these words:

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand.

1968 was an explosive year for environmental awareness. Garrett Hardin’s Tragedy of the Commons was published, so too Paul Ehrlich’s The Population Bomb, and the first Whole Earth Catalogue. The decades since have been populated with scientific studies, books, articles, movies, campaigns and global summits alerting us to pressing environmental issues, calling for action and pleading for change.

Forty-five years later I am sitting on the grass beside a four-year-old blue-eyed laughing tree; climate change predictions for the patch of Australia we call home tell us that we are tracking for a temperature increase of between 1.5 and 5 degrees Celsius (depending on the IPCC emissions scenario) in his lifetime. We don’t know what this means for the world he is learning by sight, question, story. We are unsure how much it will be altered, tree by bird by lizard. It is likely that some, if not most, of the names and forms he has stored away will be obsolete.

This vast global scale and rocketing pace of change shrinks me whisker width. I grasp for the light thrown by the conversation with my nephew, by his joyous physical answer, bent magpie crook. His embodied
knowing — intimate, relational, individual — that travels further than word and number knowledge, and resonates.

We will conserve only what we love.

Over summer we lost a towering old lean of a candle bark to lightning strike in a sudden evening storm that raced east from the mountains. My father mourned its passing for he had known this possum-hollowed tree all his life. It was an anchor point in an open stretch of country. The rain dried up again following that lightning storm, and the country burnt yellow. So every evening after feeding the dogs Dad watered the cluster of tree seedlings marked for autumn planting — as part of a design to link remnant pockets of vegetation and seed further biodiversity across our landscape. The working day on a farm is long in summer; he made it yet longer for those trees, telling me we have a forest at our feet.

Pathways are lit by these acts of love, of knowing, and I follow their lead to trees I know at skin level, palm to bark.

I am told there weren’t many trees on the family farm when my grandfather arrived early last century to take charge.

Their scarcity we think is due to a number of factors. Firstly the farm lies along a weave of naturally treeless plains called the Monaro, where basalt soils and cold air drainage discourage forest growth. It is understood that the use of fire by the Ngarigo of the region may have helped or further enforced the big unbroken horizons. Narrawallee is their word for this country — long grass country.

I am told there weren’t many Ngarigo left either, by the time my grandfather rode down the main street of Cooma in 1928. The official story spoke of removal, and those convicted of felling trees would lose their heads.

I read that there was a Sultan in Niger long ago who created the following law: people found guilty of pruning a certain tree would have their limbs amputated, and those convicted of felling trees would lose their heads.

My abhorrence of the death penalty aside, I find a beautiful sense of natural justice in these barbaric laws. They recognise a kinship and equal value — paying for a limb with a limb, a life with life — that our wake of destruction belies.

I lose this kinship when I relocate to a new city, where trees are unknown. A new process of scouting out trees and ways to fit them into my days begins, and I realize I have to be systematic in this urban jungle scarce of trees. There’s a slender spotted gum that marks the halfway point on my ride to work. It breathes wild elegance into my mornings. A sprawling slash of black wattle saplings at the top end of my local park bolster me up when I feel less substantial than a seedling. Lithe, vital and full of dance they send me springing. I am yet to locate a big question tree.

These efforts are teaching me that there is nothing quite so steady after a computer-rimmed, human-bounded day as bustling out of the office, heading straight for a tree and taking time to get acquainted. It is so easy to forget in this people-classing, drafting, branding in their shade.

The twisting pale snow gum we assume dates back pre-European invasion, whose trunk provides the ideal perch for watching the weather roll in from the mountains, a wizened pillar for contemplation. I take big questions to this tree.

The golden ash at the front of homestead that for each generation provides the base for Hide and Seek and Spotlight feuds, and plays host to treehouses and hammocks, initial tree climbing attempts, leaf fights: a natural marquee for celebrations.

This list of home trees, of known trees, stretches back through childhood — and is augmented with each bush exploration and sheep muster.

Ask me now what is a tree, and I will follow the lead of my nephew, will indicate their shape, map the imprint left inside by these trees I know.

I read that there was a Sultan in Niger long ago who created the following law: people found guilty of pruning a certain tree would have their limbs amputated, and those convicted of felling trees would lose their heads.

The 2012 State of the World’s Forests Report found that if deforestation rates continue at their current level, it will take 775 years to ‘lose all of the world’s forests’.

Can anyone truly comprehend the reality of a forestless world?

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand.

The urgency makes me tremble. I want to climb to the top of the towering mountain ash forests that mark my way home and holier, awaken us all from slumber. Slice through passivity and crumple apathy, but these approaches haven’t worked; so far nothing, be it apocalyptic visions, cautionary tales of extreme weather events, global campaigns has worked on a big enough scale to force a sizeable shift to the current steady course.

I sit beside my blue-eyed laughing tree, so small against the sky, and ponder his big questions. Only when he tells me this chamber are we more likely to water the little forest at our feet.

In his famous essay titled ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that ‘being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright geographic calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind.’

The wealth and assured certainty of information in this saturated age is blinding us to a bright world. We no longer know — bodily, at heart — depth, and so distance grows. A distance that enables us to call up the honour roll of extinctions, environmental degradation and mass destruction, and yet feel detached. So detached that we pause only briefly before marching on.

To remove this distance we need all available spaces within to be crammed with tree knowing, bird trace, star book, wind map, so that we glow with all the ‘bright calendar[s] of the year’.

The alternative is horrific. Experts say we have fewer (far fewer) than ten years to prevent the un-thinkable — a planet pushed beyond the point of life for many organisms.

The 2012 State of the World’s Forests Report found that if deforestation rates continue at their current level, it will take 775 years to ‘lose all of the world’s forests’.

Can anyone truly comprehend the reality of a forestless world?

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand.

The urgency makes me tremble. I want to climb to the top of the towering mountain ash forests that mark my way home and holier, awaken us all from slumber. Slice through passivity and crumple apathy, but these approaches haven’t worked; so far nothing, be it apocalyptic visions, cautionary tales of extreme weather events, global campaigns has worked on a big enough scale to force a sizeable shift to the current steady course.

I sit beside my blue-eyed laughing tree, so small against the sky, and ponder his big questions. Only when he tells me this chamber are we more likely to water the little forest at our feet.

In his famous essay titled ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that ‘being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright geographic calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind.’

The wealth and assured certainty of information in this saturated age is blinding us to a bright world. We no longer know — bodily, at heart — depth, and so distance grows. A distance that enables us to call up the honour roll of extinctions, environmental degradation and mass destruction, and yet feel detached. So detached that we pause only briefly before marching on.

To remove this distance we need all available spaces within to be crammed with tree knowing, bird trace, star book, wind map, so that we glow with all the ‘bright calendar[s] of the year’.

The alternative is horrific. Experts say we have fewer (far fewer) than ten years to prevent the un-thinkable — a planet pushed beyond the point of life for many organisms.

The 2012 State of the World’s Forests Report found that if deforestation rates continue at their current level, it will take 775 years to ‘lose all of the world’s forests’.

Can anyone truly comprehend the reality of a forestless world?

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand.

The urgency makes me tremble. I want to climb to the top of the towering mountain ash forests that mark my way home and holier, awaken us all from slumber. Slice through passivity and crumple apathy, but these approaches haven’t worked; so far nothing, be it apocalyptic visions, cautionary tales of extreme weather events, global campaigns has worked on a big enough scale to force a sizeable shift to the current steady course.

I sit beside my blue-eyed laughing tree, so small against the sky, and ponder his big questions. Only when he tells me this chamber are we more likely to water the little forest at our feet.

In his famous essay titled ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that ‘being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright geographic calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind.’

The wealth and assured certainty of information in this saturated age is blinding us to a bright world. We no longer know — bodily, at heart — depth, and so distance grows. A distance that enables us to call up the honour roll of extinctions, environmental degradation and mass destruction, and yet feel detached. So detached that we pause only briefly before marching on.

To remove this distance we need all available spaces within to be crammed with tree knowing, bird trace, star book, wind map, so that we glow with all the ‘bright calendar[s] of the year’.

The alternative is horrific. Experts say we have fewer (far fewer) than ten years to prevent the un-thinkable — a planet pushed beyond the point of life for many organisms.

The 2012 State of the World’s Forests Report found that if deforestation rates continue at their current level, it will take 775 years to ‘lose all of the world’s forests’.

Can anyone truly comprehend the reality of a forestless world?

In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand.

The urgency makes me tremble. I want to climb to the top of the towering mountain ash forests that mark my way home and holier, awaken us all from slumber. Slice through passivity and crumple apathy, but these approaches haven’t worked; so far nothing, be it apocalyptic visions, cautionary tales of extreme weather events, global campaigns has worked on a big enough scale to force a sizeable shift to the current steady course.

I sit beside my blue-eyed laughing tree, so small against the sky, and ponder his big questions. Only when he tells me this chamber are we more likely to water the little forest at our feet.

In his famous essay titled ‘Self-Reliance’, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that ‘being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright geographic calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind.’

The wealth and assured certainty of information in this saturated age is blinding us to a bright world. We no longer know — bodily, at heart — depth, and so distance grows. A distance that enables us to call up the honour roll of extinctions, environmental degradation and mass destruction, and yet feel detached. So detached that we pause only briefly before marching on.

To remove this distance we need all available spaces within to be crammed with tree knowing, bird trace,
before he became a rabbi and master
and said all he said he’d heard from his teacher,
was hungry and wanted to learn. He was twenty-
two years old, the son of a farmer
he told he was leaving the land to study
in the city, though he wasn’t ready.
His father forbade him from eating that morning,
and leaving, until he had finished plowing
a long furrow filled with stones.
Then he was gone. Such was his hunger—
he still hadn’t eaten—that while he was walking
he picked up a stone to put in his mouth.
He’d eaten dirt all his life.
Eliezer was hungry. The son of a farmer
unfed by his father’s furrows and future.
He reached an inn and spent the night.
At dawn he went to Ben Zakkai,
famous already as Wisdom’s father,
and sat at his feet, there in the dust.
A stench wafted up from his mouth.
“How long has it been, my son, since you’ve eaten?”
Silence. He asked him again; and again
nothing. And Ben Zakkai taught him:
“Only when hunger becomes insufferable
not just to oneself, but to others,
will it bear fruit it doesn’t devour.
As the odor is rising from your mouth,
so your fame for learning will travel.”
And he would confess, a lifetime later—
“A single dog can lick from the sea
more than I’ve managed to take from my teachers.”

And now, of course, the worry poem,
the not-just-now but all-your-life,
childhood cancers, backyard pools,
jerked reversals down a drive.
Hostages-to-fortune clichés
apply, of course, to grandkids too.
Distances in time and space
are prone to fuel imagination,
the day-to-day catastrophes
a calendar might bring each year.
I choose to think your chirpiness
will, like a parasol, protect you.
Your smile will be your best defence;
a third grade bully, so disarmed,
refrains next day from pulling hair.
And so straight on to adolescence,
the labyrinth of its close companions,
its sudden tangle of the senses

American poet Peter Cole’s many volumes of translations from Hebrew and Arabic include The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition (Yale, 2012). A new volume of poems, The Invention of Influence, is forthcoming next year from New Directions. Cole was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2007.

Geoff Page has published twenty collections of poetry as well as two novels and five verse novels. He’s won the Grace Leven Prize and the Patrick White Literary Award. His recent books are A Sudden Sentence in the Air: Jazz Poems (Extempore, 2011), Coda for Shirley (Interactive Press, 2011), Cloudy Nouns (Picaro Press, 2012) and 1953 (University of Queensland Press, 2013).
Last year I made my first trip out to Cape Raoul, on the Tasman Peninsula, Tasmania. This had been a long time coming. There’s a small canon of walks that local bushwalkers hope to stride before their knees give out completely, from short hikes on Mount Wellington all the way through to multi-day hikes like the South Coast Track or the Western Arthurs. Like any canon, it expands as you experience it further. And the classics nag away at you until you finally put them to bed.

I’ve walked all over the Tasman Peninsula, but Cape Raoul had always passed me by. Twice I had taken the alternative route sloping down to Tunnel Bay. More recently I was in the far south-west, searching for shells on an unmarked track at Salters Point. Naval shells, that is.

There are few pieces of folk history passed among Tasmanians, no great number of informal tales bypassing official histories or transcending community anecdotes that die as the generations pass. Perhaps just the macabre tale of the convict escapee Alexander Pearce, who ate his companions on the route from Sarah Island – but this is well documented, you can read books full of it.

As these accounts are so rare, it’s appropriate that in Tasmania, where concern for the environment dominates recent history and strongly determines local identities, one such account concerns an environmental travesty. For if you mention Cape Raoul to many Tasmanians, the first thing you’ll hear is: ‘The bastards. You know the story...’

The story? Well, it varies, as folk histories do. Sometime in the First, or perhaps the Second World War, the Royal Navy, or perhaps the Second Australian Navy, used the magnificent dolerite columns around Cape Raoul, or perhaps, after all, it was Cape Pillar, for target practise. I can’t remember where I first heard this. Nobody can. But it’s commonly told, and Cape Raoul is often linked to images of foolish environmental destruction and, at times, anti-imperial sentiment.

Cape Raoul is the first of the eponymous headlands glamorised by the controversial new Three Capes Track, a government proposal to link three major edges of the Tasman Peninsula in a single bushwalk. There are perfectly adequate tracks to each of the bluffs as they stand, but a single track collecting them together paints on the prestige. And perhaps it will expand the views, which are really something, for this is no ordinary coastline.

The Tasman Peninsula includes the highest sea cliffs in Australia, sea cliffs that are like nothing you’ve ever seen. Their structure is as striking as their scale; towering columns, pillars extending to huge fingers pointing into the sky. Early travellers observed them from the waters below. In the early 1800s, the zoologist François Péron, on his voyage of discovery with Nicolas Baudin, stared up in awe at ‘Cape Raoul, bristling all over with projecting crests, prisms and needles, though he found the cliffs around Cape Hauy ‘more horrible still’.

Horrible, perhaps, and unspeakably high. When I stand close to the edge of cliffs like these, particularly if there’s nothing above me, I feel the swell of vertigo and struggle to come up with reasons why I shouldn’t throw myself off the edge. There’s a series of opportunities on the hike out to the cape itself. Leigh, my companion, was less concerned; he would lower himself to the horizontal, inching closer till his head could peak over the edge at the drop falling away beneath him. He encouraged me to have a look. I kept a safe distance.

The walk down from the ridge brought a tremendous seascape, and the heath appeared to lower itself to open up the views along each coast. Each step reminded me of how good it was to finally make it out there. I’d built up something of a connection with the place. In the previous year, I’d been working on a series of poems responding to paintings, one of which featured the columns of Raoul, rusty against the sea. I managed to incorporate the naval bombardment into a fairly weak piece, but decided that I should at least get my facts right. Which war was it? I couldn’t remember what I’d been told, so I began to look online for information.

Just a few blog and forum references, the online equivalents to telling the story around a campfire. I began checking history books and then emailing local historians. Many of them had heard the story; some
doubted its accuracy, others were more open-minded. What had happened? Who shelled Cape Raoul, and when did they do it? How could a story that everyone knows be so hard to pin down? Comparing modern photographs with early paintings proved inconclusive. I checked archives and old newspapers online. The events were mentioned in passing in a couple of recent reports discussing the conservation of Tasmanian coastlines, without references. Both proved to be red herrings. The story began to feel like it was slipping away, as though there was no reality behind the outbursts, no bedrock.

Finding the issue in an old Argus newspaper. On 29 April 1939, Russell O. Atkinson, writing about the schooners and ketches plying their trade on Bass Strait, the body of water separating Tasmania from the Australian mainland, observed: ‘Well to leeward were the wonderful fluted pillars of Cape Raoul – pillars which ships of the navy once used for gunnery targets until people protested against such vandalism.’

At the very least, this demonstrated that the story had been circulating for some time. The writer was not a Tasmanian, he mentions no date or context, but he has clearly heard the story and it is colourful enough to print in his column. Someone else, at an earlier date, clearly felt the same way. A traveller on the Onah, a ferry working the tourist route from Hobart to the old convict settlement at Port Arthur, reported in a New Zealand newspaper, The Otago Witness:

This marvellous headland calls forth cries of admiration from all on board as we steam slowly by. Giant basaltic columns tower above our heads, some standing up like organ pipes above the rest, clearly defined against the cloudless sky. Truly it is a wondrous piece of Nature’s handiwork, and one can scarcely believe that Englishmen could have such vandals as to do their utmost to destroy those tapering pinnacles of rock. Yet such is the case — the men-of-war-men [sic] having been actually allowed to use Cape Raoul as a target to practice on, greatly to the destruction of its beauty.

It’s basically the same story as can be found rumoured on bushwalks, sailing and rock-climbing expeditions today. How could those vandals have fired on such a magnificent coastline? But there’s a repetition in the rock? Because that’s not the same story, and the same outrage.

On the negative side, so far as establishing the facts are concerned, these are travelling reporters, passing on hearsay. Could this just be a striking anecdote that journalists stumbled across? If it had been in their position, I know I would have included it for the readers of my newspaper or publication. I’ve told the story to others countless times, barely thinking about it. It always seemed appropriate, given our history, given the strength, determination and identity over the past century.

Perhaps it was simplistic, but to my mind it seemed fitting, an archetype for the kind of protests that have lacerated Tasmania over the destruction of beautiful landscapes. In the 1970s the damming of the pristine Lake Pedder in Tasmania’s south-west for hydro-electricity led to the formation of the world’s first Green political party, the United Tasmania Group; in the years that followed, the Franklin River blockade made international news and helped determine the outcome of the 1983 federal election. Greg Backman writes that ‘some commentators argue the Vietnam War forever polarised the United States – the same can be said of early Pedder’s effect on Tasmania. In many ways, each new wilderness battle in the state is a repeat of the Lake Pedder experience.’

But here was a protest as an antecedent to them all, when community attitudes were very different. Did it actually take place?

We made it to the headland proper after two or three hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers. When we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?

On Tuesday 19 December 1882, as the HMS Velox, a convict ship of the Royal Navy, was steaming around the south-eastern point of the island in the general direction of the Pillars of the Promise, a small party of officers and men was sent on a little foray into the wilderness. The party was under the command of Lieutenant R. E. C. G. Perceval. After landing on the eastern side of the Pillars, the party circumnavigated the point before applying our loose navigation skills and dropping back to the small flat at the head of the bay. After a few hours of walking, distracted by wildflowers, we finally found the edge, the view was initially disappointing, but only because we were staring at the wrong spur into the sea. We continued along the track and eventually came upon the true columns that dwarfed their ships. The arches and deep cut bays that line the eastern coast of the peninsula are remarkable enough, but having seen them regularly as a child, they were all too familiar. Cape Raoul is new and different. What immediately strikes you, as does any huge thing which has been domesticated by language and your mind, is just how huge it is. How vast it is, and in this instance how far it extends out into Storm Bay. Leaning in great series of pillars, it seems an exaggeration. If it was shelled, and if the shelling substantially altered a number of columns, what on earth must it have looked like before?
At any rate, my lack of success notwithstanding, the presence of the shell and impact on the dolerite had settled the question. The cliffs along the southern coast of the Tasman Peninsula were used for target practice by naval vessels. However, one thing that Leaman observed remained puzzling. The radial shatter on the cliff behind the columns where an off-target shell had slammed was no longer clearly visible.

Physical processes are the explanation; when the rock gets cracked, water gets in, frost and ice wedge the damaged pieces away. Erosion will do its work. In other words, it doesn’t last. But could, I asked, it have lasted one hundred and forty years?

‘No,’ Leaman replied.

The newspaper reports, and many of the stories, assume that the complaints of Tasmanians put a stop to the naval bombardment once and for all. Perhaps it did for a little while.

But Paul Fannon, a peninsula resident, recounted to me in a personal email that his father, also Paul Fannon, a turret trainer on the HMAS Australia, had spoken to him about firing on Raoul in the years following its 1927 launch. Anecdotal rumours from two further sources suggest that the cliffs may have been targeted with naval guns up until the 1960s — remarkable, given that Bob Wyatt, of the Hobart Walking Club, has stated to me that walking parties have been visiting the Cape as early as 1962.

The evidence for these events remains tantalisingly partial and suggestive. People don’t want to talk about it; it’s too close to home, particularly in an environmentally divided Tasmania. At the very least it appears that we can’t blame everything on the English. The anti-imperial rhetoric, while appealing, has to be toned down.

It’s no longer a question as to whether Raoul and its coastline were targeted, but rather, how often. What does seem clear is that there have been Tasmanians who have always valued the natural beauty of their island. Who would not have their heads buried in the presence of the shell and impact on the dolerite.

Yet there’s a sad irony in the fact that in an age of greater environmental awareness, even as the story of Cape Raoul was passed on and spread through newspaper articles, commending the locals for putting a stop to it, the practise may well have been continuing.

Tired on the way back from our walk, Leigh and I have a short argument and I’m reminded again of the fragility of our relationships with other people and the world around us. It never takes much for us to strike, but it is much easier to sit on a log and reaffirm a friendship than it is to build dolerite pillars back into the sky.

Cape Raoul image courtesy State Library of Tasmania

Ben Walter is a Tasmanian writer and poet, whose work has appeared in Island, Famous Reporter and Country. He is the author of the melancholy wilderness story anthology, Below Tree Level, and edited the recent craft/fiction anthology, I Sleep in Haysheds and Cottars.


Brunswick Falls

by GIG RYAN

It’s not deliberate, but tracks part, meander, your lot disseminates a moral code
placemat opinion
that curlicues, where smudged despair encrypts
horizon’s dashboard, scissored, serrated
A door eeks each came and went
below fortified windows that music powder
Arms spring air, again, squander either
Panoply of leaves rent, above the drama car’s
dreamboat mechanic listening to its flakes of oil.
Couples screech from flats’ crepuscular light
A cat leaps to its prey, fur shuffled,
paws the TV’s plastic, the laptop’s veldt
flopped on a couch
Pizza deliveries whirr to their procurers
Where are the albums, the ornament mantelpiece
the closet of travels that rasps open,
instead, haste boxes and failed rossettes
marked sleep’s cormorant
A nobled roof slants to poised foliage
Peved drugs pulley the IGA’s clamped chocolate and off for afters
wastrel packs’ shrunk zephyr blowing through a bead twistie
through decibel aisles
where gag and undulate
a rogue download’s chunked splatter, and fall
Neighbours snark love, howl dread
on the despot balcony, as scratched rap patters
Plasma’d altar screens through windows
An icon nods, true nature scrabbled
Regards to the Corinthians’ facsimile of identity
that digs upwards from a grave
Childhood’s exotic fan unpleats a world
now amassed in the 7-Eleven’s nosegay of commerce
Initials sewn into a handerchief
Pizza deliveries whirr to their procurers
Neighbours snark love, howl dread
A door eeks each came and went
dandscape screens through windows
An icon nods, true nature scrabbled
Regards to the Corinthians’ facsimile of identity
that digs upwards from a grave
Childhood’s exotic fan unpleats a world
now amassed in the 7-Eleven’s nosegay of commerce
Initials sewn into a handerchief
Grey sun whose canticles hang in longer air
trees plead into
who bundles the phone’s family’s scraped screen,
whistles and tin, in pal night

Gig Ryan’s New and Selected Poems (Giramondo) won the NSW Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry in 2012. She is poetry editor of the Age, and reviews for the Age, Australian Book Review and the online Sydney Review of Books.

100 101
Things I Remember

by Suvi Mahonen

The weirdness finally wears off when there’s only five minutes remaining. It takes the dregs of my limited self control to stop myself from jumping off the nutter couch and pointing triumphantly at Laura and shouting ‘Ha!’

I don’t move. But my face must have. Because she pauses in the middle of her sentence.

‘You wanted to say something?’ she says, arching her eyebrow in the way that she does so that it disappears behind the thick black upper rim of her funky Gucci glasses.

I think quickly. ‘I was wondering what happened to your old pot plant?’

She glances over her shoulder at the empty space on her desk between the computer and the inbox tray where a tall, spiky, phallic cactus used to sit. She turns back. ‘It died,’ she says simply.

I can tell she doesn’t believe me. I don’t care. I’m still pissed off she suggested Olanzapine just in case.

I knew I shouldn’t have told her what had happened at the hospital. As soon as I did I realised I’d made a mistake. It was the look she shot me. Something about it said here we go again.

Her chair squeaked as she leaned forward. ‘What did you say you saw?’

I laughed to show it was nothing. ‘It was nothing,’ I laughed again. ‘I knew as soon as I saw it that it wasn’t really there.’ I looked out along the jagged line of building tops that crossed the breadth of her office window. When I looked back she was scribbling on her pad.

Sand ran down my skin.

‘What?’ I said. ‘You’ve never seen something out of the corner of your eye that just turned out to be a shadow?’

She stopped and looked at me. Her nostrils twitched. I felt like grabbing that Montblanc pen of hers and ramming it up one of those nostrils.

Then she smiled. ‘Of course I have.’ Then she capped the pen and put the pen on the coffee table and covered the pen with the pad. Face down. Then she told me a pithy anecdote about a snake in her garden turning into a stick. Then she brought up the Olanzapine.

I knew I shouldn’t have told her.

‘Are you going to get another one?’ I say, wishing I’d thought of something better than the cactus to try and distract her with.

Her Rubenesque lips pucker a fraction. ‘No.’ She crosses her grey-wool-skirted, black-stockinged, high-heeled, quite-well-shaped-for-fiftyish legs and frowns. ‘I’m trying to understand why you’re still refusing to sign this contract,’ she says.

Laura and her contracts. A year’s gone by and she’s still stuck on them. I know the easiest thing to do would be to give in and say yes. But I always thought they were ludicrous. I mean really, just because you sign a promise with your shrink not to harm yourself, or not to purge, or not to steal, or not to be a compulsive sex addict, etc., doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll keep it.

Anyway, I have another reason now.

I lean back into the couch. I run my hands over my belly, feel the reassuring swell of my uterus beneath. So different to three years ago.

I smile.

‘Because you can trust me.’

‘I do trust you,’ she says. ‘But I’d still like you to sign this contract.’ She holds out her pen to me. I keep my hands folded.

‘If you trust me, why do you want me to restart the Olanzapine then?’ Laura sweeps back a strand of hair that’s strayed onto her face. ‘Because as I explained to you before, pregnancy and the post-partum period, especially the post-partum period, are a high risk time for recurrences of prior psychological problems.’ She pulls her glasses down a fraction, making her eyes grow larger.

I’d avoided those magnified eyes of hers when she’d called me into her office today. I was hoping that she’d forgotten what I’d yelled as I stormed out a year ago, slamming the door so hard behind me that the handle hurt my hand. And as I walked the short distance from the door towards the centre of the room – where the same nutter couch and the same squat coffee table and the same purple rug with the wavy yellow trim sat waiting for me – I kept expecting her to say something. Something like ‘I knew you’d be back eventually’.

But she didn’t.

Instead, as the nutter couch enveloped me in its big, soft, brown, leathery-smelling hug, she just stood next to her desk, holding her elbows, gold bracelets and gold earrings jiggling.

‘So,’ a kind of smile creased her cheeks. ‘Can I touch it?’

‘All was forgiven.

Until she mentioned the Olanzapine.

I knew I shouldn’t have told her.

Things I remember:
– a short, sharp, shiny knife;
– the cold night air on my breasts;
– hearing the mournful hoot of a train whistle as its bright beam transected the linked wire fence above my head;
– the sticky treacle of blood in my eyes;
– the salty smell of his sweat;
– the painful rocky ground;
– the crinkle of litter under my back;
– reaching out, trying to grasp the line of distant houseights in my hand;
– the blazing sting as he stubbed out his cigarette on my clt.

Things I don’t:
– the broken bottle;
– whether he was circumcised or not;
– what he was saying when he tried to set my hair alight;
– if his tie was plain or striped;
– the name of the person who found me curled up next to my car;
– Mark holding the phone to my ear while I cried to Mum;
– signing the police statement;
– testing my urine three weeks later;
– slashing my wrists.

This last bit isn’t exactly true. I can remember fetching the box cutter from the garage. Then watching as the bright red spickled patterns splashed across the white-tiled bathroom floor. But I can’t remember the bit in between. Laura calls this a classic example of dissociative fugue in a depersonalised state secondary to a severe reactive depression.

I call it not wanting to be me.

Suvi Mahonen holds a Master of Writing and Literature from Deakin University in Australia. Her writing has appeared in a number of literary magazines and online in Australia (Island, UnQ, Verandah), the United States (most recently in Grasslimb, Canada (All Rights Reserved) and Chile (Southern Pacific Review). Her short story, ‘Bobby’, which was originally published in Island (#118), was included in The Best Australian Stories 2010 and was nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.
the address book that slips inside my pocket…

after the war bravery lost its occasion, all the jokes that were yours were one by one replaced by secrets.

from the window seat of your usual flight back and forth above the Rockies, you laid down the colors in short brush strokes, following the round shadows the clouds cast on the perfect squares of the plains.

take out the marrow, put in the marrow, save a life, save another life— the slight slope, you thought, was better than the rise, to be in a hurry somehow childish, degrading.

'great blue heron— your totem I saw one this morning and thought how weird to say 'feathering an oar,' and remembered your sail's quick thuck-a-thuck-a-thuck, the thing I miss most is Nature, you said, in the nature of arguments these days.

A life spent tending to beasts then unspeakable agony months of agony mute as the non-human world as you turned and were turned in strangers’ beds. And now your names together on the cold stone face, a veil draped over the pasture.

'I will never again suffer an Eastern winter’ or summer blowing in on the laughter of fools.

in Paris, where you never were, a girl with red hair half way down her back is reading a poem about your drunken father, the drummer, a loud to a metronome’s tock.

an idea was better than writing it down, but flagging a taxi called for manifestation, on tiptoe legs akimbo, and a two-fingered whistle, stark and shrill as a swallow’s— now your bold face has joined the death masks you so admired for their perfection.

on the phone I heard the white pines wind- ing, curiosity shining through a bridled courtesy.
Sitting in a car outside a hospital, waiting to go in to see my partner and young son who was stricken with scarlet fever, an uncommon sickness in these times, echoing with the trauma of loss in nineteenth-century literary (and other) texts, I briefly heard an interview on the radio with a guy who’d won an essay competition. At the time, I felt welded to the car-park, the place of the hospital, because of our son’s inability to be anywhere but where he was. My place was his place, temporary (hopefully, and it was). I didn’t catch much, but one line I did make me prick up my ears. The speaker said (claimed?) only indigenous peoples, certainly in Australia, could legitimately write of place. In essence, I wouldn’t argue with this, as his essay was (it seemed) on trauma, dispossession and loss. And that is the legacy of colonialism, of the European attack on Australian Aborigines throughout the continent.

As said, I didn’t get much of the context and maybe I misheard, so I am obviously extemporising, but the point I wanted to pick up on was this idea of legitimacy of writing ‘place’. Obviously the author in question (or the way I construct my memory of the soundbite) was using ‘place’ in a literal and absolute way, in terms of articulating (totemic?) connection to specific locations, and intimating that the non-indigene, in not being directly connected with the long-term negotiation of that space, must necessarily remain outside it. And does this extend to the artist or poet or writer (e.g. an essayist) seeing through the layers of presence (seen and hidden) and articulating them in ‘art’? Is it an inclusive observation or does it set up a binary?

Now, whether the speaker on the radio meant this or not is not my issue. What I am taking as my point of departure is the frequent claim (whether from him or others), that only the indigenous can legitimately talk of place. Maybe it’s a matter of definitions, or the agency we ascribe to a word, but ‘place’ will never (in English) work in such a specific and exclusive way. Place is a quantifiable register, not an ethical divider. One can argue that the dispossessed have more moral right, and inevitably a more experienced and more informed means of talking of ‘place’, but surely not the only way of talking of place. Anyone making contact with any co-ordinates on maps in any way is in a position to articulate a relationship to that place. Where the problems begin is when that contact denudes or deletes others’ contact with that place. Really, if one pushes definition, just the deployment of a term like ‘place’ is a colonising or at least territorialising act. ‘Place’ is such a western concept in its terminology. But not necessarily in its application. We can argue a more self-critical and deconstructive application of the term. When many of us write ‘place’, we do so aware of these problems of usage and application, and seek to use it as much as a term of resistance to that invasively possessive and occupying urge, as one of affirmation of the special, unique and particular (and overlapping, for that matter).

Place is the most effective means we have of defining agreement and disagreement on how a set of co-ordinates is related to. As I have written elsewhere (such as in the Cambridge History of Australian Literature, Disclosed Poetics: Beyond Landscape and Lyricism, Contrary Rhetoric, Activist Poetics: Anarchy in the Avon Valley), non-indigenous writing of place in Australia is necessarily anxious, and creates an instigational causal anxiety. I have long subscribed to Hodge and Mishra’s concept of the paranoid reading (see Dark Side of the Dream). There can be little reading of place in Australia without an awareness of violent dispossession, but this does not preclude other readings of place, or even very different configurings of place that might be ignorant of the damage done, or intentionally avoidant (thus the necessity of the paranoid reading, to reveal the hidden layers of denial and affirmations of an ongoing colonisation). In a sense, it is not in the interests of one trying to affirm indigenous rights and presence to deny alternative and/or other readings of place (in their place). Revelation, understanding and restitution will arise from being able to read and decode such a complex montage of ways of seeing and experiencing ‘place’.

So, say, in the occupation of Nyungar lands in what is now known as the Western Australian wheatbelt, to state only Nyungar people have the right to claim and even discuss place is actually to obfuscate necessary conversations between occupiers and dispossessed, and between intruders and in some cases
coexist with their desire-lines of presence and the crimes of occupation (though those, valent spatiality. Not one informed only by human but in recognising this, we extend the meaning of and we know theirs. There are, I recognise, different choices about their (highly) violated space, and 
don’t believe in ‘property’), I do claim that we live though I don’t defend our presence here (for one in which indigenous writers bring to the ‘cause’. In recognising theft and damage, a necessary restitutive (though not always healing) act is occurring. But it might also fail to register the complex-overlapping claims to property (whose learning?), jobs (to contribute to the imperialism of companies), and ‘health’ (as in opening new uranium mines in Western Australia – that’s the world’s health at risk, as well as locals’ health). Jack Davis was one of Australia’s greatest poets. Four major books of poetry, as well as poetic interludes throughout his many plays, and poetic prose among his other non-fiction works, provide us with a body of substantial achievement. This work has never been collected before, and is largely out of print. All of his poetry books are out of print. Jack Davis was an intensely political poet. I aim to highlight his relationship to country, his north-west ancestry and southwest experiences with the Nyungar people, and consider his personal biography in terms of Western Australian history, especially in terms of a ‘black timeline’. For example, Davis’s early experience at Moore River, his work that led him to become director of the Aboriginal Advancement Council, and the publication in 1970 of The First Born and Other Poems, are all deeply connected. Place is cross-hatched, interactive, with borders crossing and moving. There are different places working in conjunction with places with which he self-identified (complex in itself). I want to trace those connections. Poetry on Rottnest Island and John Pat don’t exist as artworks separate from the history, stories and trauma that led to their creation: Davis always had a purpose.

The early colonial use of Rottnest Island as a prison camp for Nyungar men changes the nature of the ‘place’ in so many ways. I find it a crime that people visit there with little care or even consciousness of this. Because Nyungar people were taken from their place, a different kind of place was made, and for all those who come into contact with it, ‘place’ is altered, but still remains place. There is what’s transient only by human presence and the crimes of occupation (though those, primarily), but also one in which the desire-lines of animals are paramount, where remnant native vegetation guides are best on how to replant and repair, and even the feral animal passing through is given rights to life: we are of its face as well.

What brings me to this? Well, I have just started editing a collection of Jack Davis’s poetry. It has me thinking a lot about overlapping claims to place and the simplistic views many well-meaning non-indigenous writers bring to the ‘cause’. In recognising theft and damage, a necessary restitutive (though not always healing) act is occurring. But it might also fail to register the complex-overlapping claims to property (whose learning?), jobs (to contribute to the imperialism of companies), and ‘health’ (as in opening new uranium mines in Western Australia – that’s the world’s health at risk, as well as locals’ health). Jack Davis was one of Australia’s greatest poets. Four major books of poetry, as well as poetic interludes throughout his many plays, and poetic prose among his other non-fiction works, provide us with a body of substantial achievement. This work has never been collected before, and is largely out of print. All of his poetry books are out of print. Jack Davis was an intensely political poet. I aim to highlight his relationship to country, his north-west ancestry and southwest experiences with the Nyungar people, and consider his personal biography in terms of Western Australian history, especially in terms of a ‘black timeline’. For example, Davis’s early experience at Moore River, his work that led him to become director of the Aboriginal Advancement Council, and the publication in 1970 of The First Born and Other Poems, are all deeply connected. Place is cross-hatched, interactive, with borders crossing and moving. There are different places working in conjunction with places with which he self-identified (complex in itself). I want to trace those connections. Poetry on Rottnest Island and John Pat don’t exist as artworks separate from the history, stories and trauma that led to their creation: Davis always had a purpose.

The early colonial use of Rottnest Island as a prison camp for Nyungar men changes the nature of the ‘place’ in so many ways. I find it a crime that people visit there with little care or even consciousness of this. Because Nyungar people were taken from their place, a different kind of place was made, and for all those who come into contact with it, ‘place’ is altered, but still remains place. There is what’s transient only by human presence and the crimes of occupation (though those, primarily), but also one in which the desire-lines of
Country, they might also acknowledge it as Hewett space. But of course, it’s many others’ country, and many of those lost access to their place, and even died in the colonisers’ assault on it.

Country is such a mediated word now, thanks to indigenous Englishes among other things: it is used in a way that best equates to an intimacy of place. To call anything someone’s ‘Country’ takes this with it, and I am sure Dorothy would have baulked at such a description. Wickepin is better not being called Hewett Country, though it is vital to recognise that it was an important place for Hewett, and part of her mapping of life, a mapping understood for what was stolen, and an implied knowledge of the required restitution. As Hewett writes (in Wheatlands) her construction of ‘one place seventy-three years in the making – the story of the Great Southern of Western Australia’ is a place shared, but it is a colonially constructed space categorised as ‘place’, but it’s not all places; nor does it defeat the places that it claims.

In fact, its claims are the loudest declaration for other, more emphatic and long-term readings and claims of place. We can all hear that if we listen, and even partially hearing it or overhearing it is enough to trigger our own participation, our own contribution to a manifesto of place that means liberty, respect and restoration.

'I believe that only through dialogue and respect can due acknowledgement of rights over land and culture be consolidated, and presenting poetry to the world is one way of achieving this.'

John Kinsella's most recent book of poetry is Jam Tree Gully (WWNorton, 2012). He is a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia and a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University. He is poetry editor of Island.
