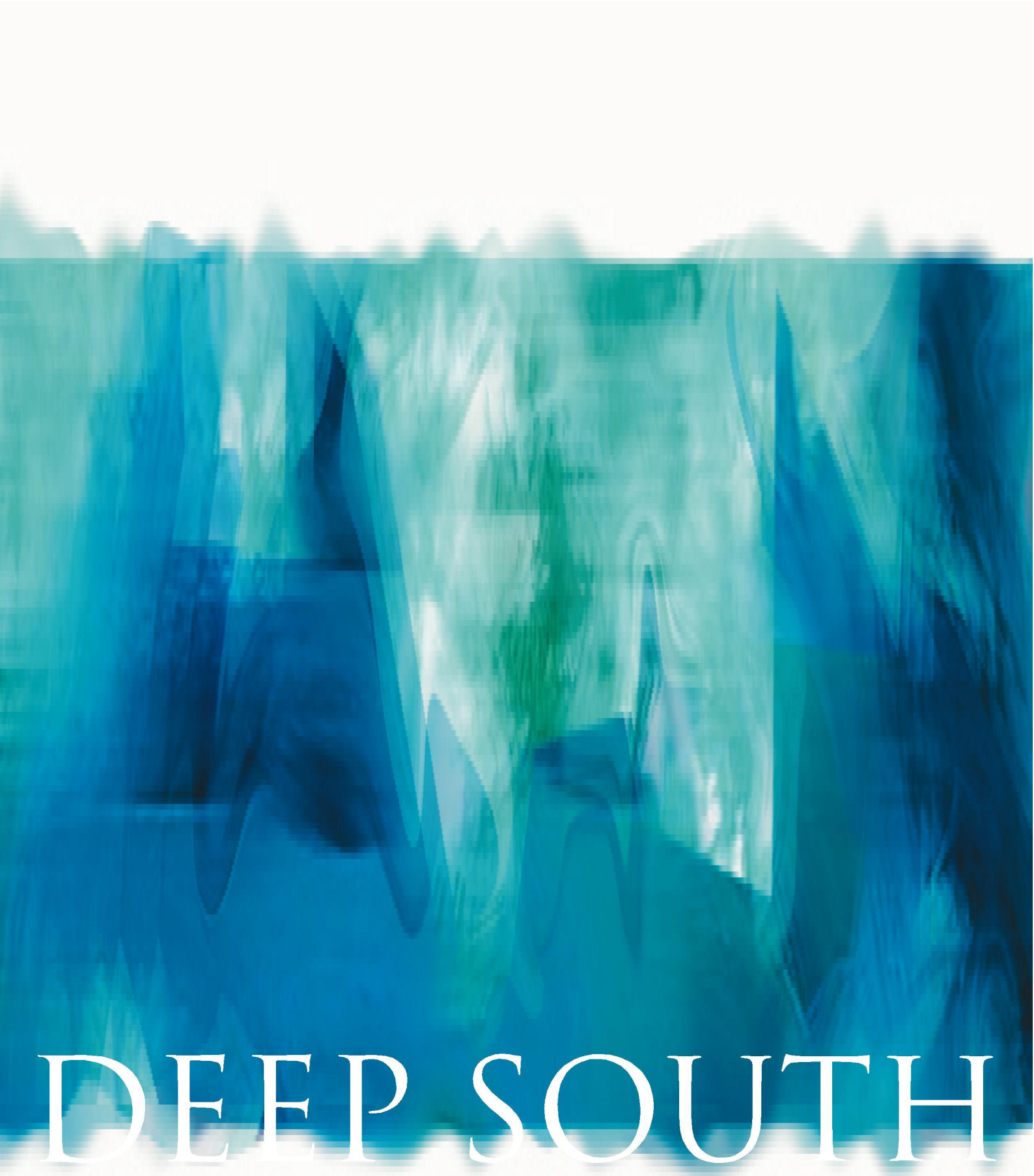

DEEP SOUTH

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT E-ZINE

UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO

DEEP SOUTH 2010

Good things take time. At least, that's what I tell myself when reflecting on the fact that this issue, originally planned for late 2009, has stretched out into mid 2010.

In this case, however, I think the adage is true. This issue contains the most varied selection of poetry, fiction and critical prose I have had the pleasure to present to the world. I hope the world (you, that is) enjoys it.

My thanks go out to all those involved, especially to our patient contributors. To our readers; any praise for this issue can be laid at the feet of my assistant editors. Any errors, omissions, and flaws, on the other hand, can be placed on my head.

Yours,

Cy Mathews, General Editor

Assisted by:
Poppy Haynes
Anna Kelly
David Large
Cassie Ringland-Stewart
Brandan Wessling

Cover art and design by Larry Matthews

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MARIANA ISARA

Self portrait as Everyday Samoan (Samoan Grammar)

It is the time the pretty sun
says in a cloudy blanket

and the rain is out blowing minutes
of cold. I searched the ground

about half a gentle hour
as if we died

3 years ago, before
a mountain of sunrise.

Gone sea, lest, time, etc. Waves.
Come in out of the umbrella.

MARIANA ISARA

Self portrait as Ode to Chang Kung, Recipe

Fresh black safflowers
an ode

over your chest
to sliced water

& rooms of salt
who sprout shoots

a small heat each
drained until

tender you taste
& taste

MARIANA ISARA

Self portrait as an Anagram of her name

I am a lute
a rain's
aria

MARIANA ISARA

Self Portrait as Mughlai Curry Corner Indian Takeaways Menu

Days dip
in deep saffron

& mix
the boneless honey.

Nights coat
all salty

& sweet
black spiced

over
a low flame.

Mariana Isara's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Sport, *the* Lumiere Reader, Otoliths, *and* Blackmail Press. *She is currently working on a zine inspired by the mesmerising street performance* My Heart is a Beast.

DAVID EGGLETON

The Tall Man

At the Dunedin First Church Service for Hardwicke Knight, (1911 –2008)

The tall man stoops,
becomes the nonagenarian,
bending into a question-mark, a spiral,
child-like,
an embryo curled round time's injuries.
The great rock they crushed the ore from
has gone.
Into that box.
A long white cloud of hair is streaming,
tufting into wings,
into a twinkle-toed walker,
on a clean-swept floor,
in the stillness of the starry sky.
Are six enough to carry out
the funeral rites of the mind?
The iron tongue of some great bell
is tolling its doleful chant
to the hand-me-down city.
Wombed, then housed, then coffined,
daylight secretes its silences,
and expires like a flame.
Any life is a story to be told
in shadows thrown by a lamp:
under lunar light, a dark halo,
a trembling staccato of shadows.
After winter trees, spring
will bud to feel the gnarled future.

DAVID EGGLETON

The Burnt Text of Banks Peninsula

All over Banks Peninsula in the middle of the Nineteenth Century,
sure-footed on slopes, forest shook out wings;
could not flee; began to singe:
the white cloak was not feathers but smoke —
a hinaki of creeks twisted and broke.
Axes more weighty than an adze split bark;
tackles harnessed to bullocks dragged logs apart;
peat exposed beneath fallen kahikatea began to rot.
Steam sawmills chugged to life; wairua shrank away:
great trunks of totara wallowed down gullies,
stumped up to blades spinning in light and shade,
were cradled so the timber sawn would not warp —
wanted for floors, walls, bridges and wharves.
Wreathes of flames combed gullies to char strewings
and bare blunt brute land: its broken-off stands
reduced to shadows, scars, and a few nikau palms —
the gallows haze of carbonised trees, intended to purify
and fertilise, hung over paddocks until Gallipoli.

David Eggleton is a poet and writer whose articles, reviews and essays and short stories have appeared in a variety of publications. He has had published five books of poems and a book of short fiction, and has written or contributed to many works of non-fiction. He has also released a number of poetry recordings featuring his collaborations with musicians. His most recent book of poems is Fast Talker, *published by Auckland University Press in 2006. His most recent book, published in 2007 by Raupo Publishing, is* Towards Aotearoa: A Short History of Twentieth Century New Zealand Art.

TALIA MARSHALL

Lagoon

My little white dog has been seeing ghosts again, that's why he has tender dark wings on his face. We walk the lagoon to see what the yin yang birds are doing, they take flight by walking on the water, I'm so jealous I'll have to build myself an aeroplane but I hate flying like my dog loves rabbits. One of these days he'll tear one to pieces in the funny dance of the unrequited. What I need is a good lie down, here under the pines on their bed of rusty needles. I would call them a cathedral but I know better, there is no choir here either, no sea, but the sound of waves.

I like to think of him looking out to sea not thinking of me, ah grace is a leaving thing, there now, don't cry, he's gone. I remember kissing is a velvet thing and would tie us up a little, there is nothing new in this except the bruise, it gets darker before it fades to that sick green colour.

The older I get the more I think there must be another place where things turn out. There are palm trees there and I can do the hula forever.

It's my dog that knows how to get on with things. He ripples through time but I am wading, stuck on the thought that a swan's neck is a snake waiting to happen

JENNY POWELL

Silly Old Jenny

Jenny dropped a timepiece down a deep well. She obsessed over the loss and spent the rest of her days and night trying to fish up the timepiece, right up until the day she died.

From Lloyd Jones' Elsewhen, 'Are Angels Ok?'

She's waiting out her days
trying to make up for lost time.
She's waiting for the right time
to scrape the bottom of the well
to recover the time of her life.
There is a time for every purpose
she was once reliably told
but time doesn't stand still.
The seconds grow harder to hear
and time takes off and flies beyond
her reach it is only when Jenny dies
that the time for every purpose
is under heaven.

JENNY POWELL

Farewell Spit

Homeless
on a thin road, the end
delayed by Collingwood,
Pakaurau, Puponga. Brief
islands of respite.
Sea of steel
needling the sky, spearing
the loose land, leaving
a jagged trail
of lost time.
The long arm
of goodbye shapes the horizon,
curves our letters of love
into one last line
of shifting sand.

JENNY POWELL

Tone Poems

Interval I

Not at regular
intervals
these are notes
on the other side
of everything

Interval II

4.30 Wyeth Wednesday
time turns
into a note
for the memory

Interval III

he aims for a G
lips pull into
a pucker he
turns the air
into a C

Interval IV

my G is a straight
arrow
a note to pierce
his black
armour

JENNY POWELL

Interval V

his C wavers
into an E
he is not holding
my note

Interval VI

no trumpet
to hurtle the air
from wall to wall

from wall to floor

Interval VI

no intervals no
scales no steps
only this note
I am holding

4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday
4.30 Wyeth Tuesday

Jenny Powell is the author of three books of poetry, Sweet Banana Wax Peppers, Hats, *and* Four French Horns *(all from HeadworX.)* Double Jointed *(Inkweed, 2004) is a collaborative collection between Jenny and ten other poets, and* Locating the Madonna *(Seraph Press, 2004), is a collaborative work with Anna Jackson. She was a finalist in the UK based 2008* Aesthetica Creative Works Competition, *and she can be heard in New New Zealand Poets (Auckland University Press, 2008). Her latest collection,* Viet Nam, a poem journey *is due out from HeadworX.*

NICK ASCROFT

What to Do with the Exiting Hair

Shave me like you'd shave a pig to make a fancy lather brush,
Or stuff it in the lavatory, weigh it down and jab the flush.

Lop it off and bottle it, then hawk it as a cheesy snack,
Or leave it on a pillow as an anti-aphrodisiac.

Don't pawn it just to plug some wig, rent single strands for single moles,
Or tie them end to end for near-transparent puppeteers controls,

Or make a line across the world for Peace in the Sudan, although
We could just knit some hoods and jumpsuits, sell them to Guantanamo.

Smelt a hairy medal for 'tantamount to bravery',
Or clone me from the follicles and sell me into slavery.

Craft a carefree snood for jetset businesswomen on the go,
Or darling little overalls for Emma and Geronimo.

Dapple it in weasel pee, paint it puce and call it art,
Or post it up to Shortland Street to screen-test for a major part.

Burn it, eat it, shred it, boot it, stick it in a letterbox.
Just spare me it, a short-hair schlub with sour glares at better locks.

NICK ASCROFT

Posh Poem on Wine

Orally, the Syrah slips
(And wakes up black along my lips).

Astride my point, with stirrups stuck,
I slurred and slurped its syrups up.

How louche and gauche,
How loose it goes,
My purple tongue
Speaks weeks of prose.

Nick Ascroft has two collections of poetry available on Amazon. Born in Oamaru, he now lives in Oxford, England.

KAY COOKE

Mallard and Teal

By the glitter of a schist-dusted lakeside,
hills smoking cold with the tricks of mist
or crackling brittle with heat, I've watched

the ducks how they like to get about in pairs,
the mallards' peaceful paddles,
she in homespun sparrow-patterned tweed,

he more dapper in buff-grey, indigo feathers
on his wings, the peek of a white skivvy
ringing the shimmer of an emerald neck.

And the baby-faced teal ducks,
their silent-filmstar looks, semi-autistic
smiles from cold beaks a faint blue,

compact as corks they bob like twigs
above the trail of limp-lettuce feet
until as if on an invisible spit they upend

to dive underwater, their feet now sturdy rudders
and their wings fins to guide their flight.
Dark as bats they skim the lake's bed. Then

KAY COOKE

the pop-to-the-top, as slick as gel,
to mingle mute among the mallards'
crescent spanner's ratchet-click.

By the time I leave the lake behind
the ducks are tucked-up like kettles
to sleep until dawn when as if on crippled feet

they stumble back to the swell of the lake's
safe breathing, the swing
of its deep and sombre bell.

Kay Cooke is from Dunedin. She has had two books of poetry published with Otago University Press; Feeding the Dogs *(2002) and* Made for Weather *(2006). Work committments as an EC Teacher force her to use the slower conveyer belt as far as writing output goes. She is at present pottering away on her third book of poems, as well as making intermittent forays into a slow-moving short story collection. A novel continues to simmer at the back of the hob and may never reach boiling point. But she's okay with that for now. Her blog can be found at* andbottlewasher.blogspot.com.

EDNA WEEDON

Old-Fashioned Stock

Its spicy fragrance
transports me
back to nineteen hundred and fifty five
sharing new concrete
steps with my friend
in Sunday sunshine
on the foothills of

the Ureweras
looking down the valley
across farms
to my home
edged by the adult Kaingaroa forest
Tarawera and Edgecumbe blue
on the horizon

Angela's long black plait
slaps the length of her backbone
as we run barefoot through grass
to the dammed stream
to the secret sack of rotting corn:
a few more weeks to kanga pirau

she cradles a warm pink-brown
turkey egg in her hands;
"for your dinner," she says,
duck eggs aren't always
safe for eating

EDNA WEEDON

we sit in the new kitchen
eat Maori bread and home
made plum jam, drinking
orange cordial
under the table a kune kune lies on
his side grunting in ecstasy as we
trace his belly with our toes.

"Since moving from the hilly suburbs of Lower Hutt to the comparatively flat landscape of Invercargill at the end of 2001, I have been continually surprised and delighted with the glorious sunrises and sunsets, cloud patterns, double rainbows of intense hues, and changing rural scenes. It has been almost a return to Nature and the rhythm of the seasons, which almost compensates for the short daylight hours of winter.

Since graduating from the Aoraki Polytechnic Creative Writing Course in 2006 (tutored by Diane Brown), I have participated in poetry festivals and workshops, receiving encouragement from the Otago Poetry Collective members, and gaining places in local poetry competitions.

In January this year I was invited, as guest poet, to read my poems at the Summer Arts Festival at Lawrence, South Otago. I am working towards publishing a collection of my poems."

SIMON PERCHIK

Three Poems

This dead root, its light
handed up — the sun
accepts the offering :mornings

are weightless and the stump up-ended
— what's in these bleached fingerbones
beside the shattered wind
frail as quivering moss
still aches for leaves — the sun

lets my yard lift
by the elbows — a child
hugged by uncles to cousins, aunts
circling on light, on warmth and overflowing

while birds blown around and around
and always the dead root
pulled from a kiss, another and another
clenching — the sun too

must have been slashed at the wrist
and these axe-marks
where the shade was struck
on its way to the ground, homesick.

It's dark half the time now, all night
my eyes left open, lit
so the Earth can see
will find the sun as once I was warmed

SIMON PERCHIK

tumbled into orbit, taught around and around
a child how this morning star
exalted above all others
is the same Venus each evening looking off
the first to sight the darkness and goodbye

— the root dead and I
still move my hand over the stars
who at least have a name — the sun

now someone else's star
someone bravely, far off
who sees it first and alone.

These leaves although the sunlight
fluttered, each branch
tightening some birdcall

eaten alive — the leaves
still thin, will prowl all winter
for roots almost bones
almost dry :each leaf

brackish, sharpening itself
will strike through the Earthd
as if it could overflow
and you drink without a cup

or hands. Or lips. All night
a river, unbreakable — you break a branch
as paths still fork
reaching for leaves, still mark

SIMON PERCHIK

where lightening buttresses the Earth
with fountains — you will kneel
lift each leaf, your hands

greener than each day
half out some mountainside already warm
already loose and singing.

I still dress in the fire
in a ceiling bulb
letting off steam, the walls
almost standing — a pull-string

as once a letter could chain your hand
and you sift for shoes, the green tie
— it takes hours to button one sleeve
the other folds into paper

midair, leaping from a mirror
deformed by panic: a fireball
yanking a dog's collar

and under the shirt the Earth
on its feet — my hand can't open.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in Partisan Review, The New Yorker *and elsewhere.* Family of Man *(Pavement Saw Press) is scheduled for Fall 2009. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website* at www.geocitices.com/simonthepoet.

MARCO POLIDORI

At the Harbour of Fiumicino

Here we are, at last; here the Tiber dies.
Blond river, long ago, as blond as the corn
growing on the gentle slopes around Rome,
who flew under an endless blue sky of hopes,
of sacrifices and of virtues,
and blond as the hair of the centurion
on guard at the door of the camp,
and at Rome's law; and now it's flowing,
muddy menses from bellies of concrete,
smelling of dish soap and pushers' corpses,
enough to wrinkle one's skin; and, on the dock,
homeland of cowardly rust which bartered
the pure salt waves for a troubleless death,
the absurd son of an absurd country;
a gate, closed in front of the sea.
Maybe they feared that when people came
to the terminus of this drain
their vision could range too far afield,
and they could smell too clearly the scent of freedom?
A wall, that's what they really needed.
The sea, so huge, so lacking in gates and jails
is a perverse symbol; better a wall,
that could prevent even the sight of the sea.
As a matter of fact, that sail now pregnant
with doubtful wind and with foolish hopes,
cutting floods, sailing towards the north
can still be seen by everyone: a lapse !
Even now I wonder where it'll be
in a day and night – don't you?
That boat can reach its final destination –
what's more, in a free country!

MARCO POLIDORI

Saint Valentine

Silence, please. Here again comes
Saint Valentine, bored with the turmoil
made by money, chorus girls and flowers,
and disdaining all drums, he wants to ask
for silence. Let us sit down on this damp bench
belonging to the Spring, who's lost her watch,
and is now parading her fine jewels
on the branches, pathetic old lady
covered with acne and gold, so eager
to see somebody steal her precious goods,
provided that the burglar is young and handsome.
Wait.
Look how Time is anxious for his rhythm,
give him rhythm yourself, make him quiet
tell him we are still alive, tell him that we'll never
have enough of dances and flower crowns,
that make all of us look like kings,
and pretty fat Zephyrs blowing petals.
Time, you damned wind-soled burglar,
if you are unable to stand still
at least try to find your own rhythm,
and be a bit more elegant about your race.
We want to stay just here, sitting down
in this immortal island that love
saved from the coarse twist of haste;
on this marble remnant crashed down
from a huge arch overlooking nothing,
ever burning with wisteria and moss.

Marco Polidori was born in Rome on November 15th, 1948. He studied Law at the University "La Sapienza" of Rome. He speaks (and translates from and into) English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese. His work was short-listed in the 2009 Bridport Prize.

GARY LANGFORD

The Country of Our Body

The country of our body is beyond the coastline,
even if many of our people live there.
The urban eye gathers them in daily judgment.
Customs lie, and lie, at the border of us all.
Words are missiles launched over the walls.
Clouds move across the plains; crops of hair.
We hurry over the main bridge.
We are still the young country, or so we say.
The mine of bones has not completely decayed.
We seed in the minefield of expectancy.
Years pull the heights down; rivers spread; banks fall;
windows collapse in the hardening pavement of skin.
People wander down Freedom Street.
We boldly state, the country is ours.

GARY LANGFORD

Sky-gods

They have the clarity of sky-gods.
Paradoxically they pray to be rescued.
The world sees the membrane of success.
They are not even on the air's breath.
Pessimism opens like a shoe box.
They cry that the shoes will not fit.
The shoes do, neater than make-up,
and more indifferent than a scowl.
They are packed away like potatoes.
Bidding will only peel hope away.
They stand up to sell what is left.
Nobody buys sound in a distant cloud,
floating higher. They call nothing.
Sleep makes them as still as toys.

GARY LANGFORD

At the Shelter

She brushes her hair back and forth, back and forth.
Years go by like sleek. She is a postcode.
Smog slowly covers her hair.
The brush fades before her hands are still,
hair in silent waves on the ground.
She becomes a lamppost, heavily wired,
leaning towards the traffic.
Her clothes are sold at the corner store,
at the shelter where the city groans,
coughing up its problems at night.
Dogs admire the lamppost, moon-like howls.
Conferences are held there. Each participant
aims and wears away her ankles in the soil.
Finally she is cut down to become firewood.

Gary Langford is the author of 25 books, the dominant forms being 12 books of fiction and 9 books of poetry. Apart from being a writer based in Melbourne and Christchurch, he is an international poetry consultant for Kritya (India) and is coordinator, Selected NZ Poets, The Poetry Archives, England. Presently he is working on his next novel.

AMY BROWN

Poems based on Saint Augustine's Confessions

Words

I came to be by nothing
but his utterance.
He said the word, I arrived,
wanting instantly
tools for enunciating. Speech
plunged me in deep
to the storm-tossed lives of grown-
ups. Words, the first sign

of infants' sin, the honest
creatures God uses
to make beauty, and the show
ponies I groomed to distract
from ugly riders, the gists
they carried. I taught a whole
stable of young trainers how
to strap lies onto

polished backs, slap a sentence's rump
and send it galloping
into the world, tail swishing.
Some men distrust dressed-
up slogans because of dog-
and-lemon dealers
like me. Others can't resist
listening to pretty

things or are attracted to
tongue-tied underdogs.
I always sought beauty and
later decorum,
but was a fool to believe
I could train a tall phrase
to rear me up to his level.
Now I know the eloquent

need not be true, nor
the stammered false. If
it were possible to make
meaning walk on its own two
feet, steedless, life would be
easier. Perhaps
God should have reserved
the right to breed words.

AMY BROWN

Massadamnata

First I wanted words.
Next I wanted sex.
Concupiscence

consumed me and
I consumed it, so
consumed myself. My

putrescent flesh rubbed
against whatever,
scratching this itch with that

false shortcut to love, lust.
It can't have been love I felt
for the woman who wasn't

my wife but mothered my boy.
We were young and manic, just bodies
worshipping each other as gods. How

stupid to be a man and resent
the condition. My lovely
distraction of thirteen years, grafted

to my heart, kept me from reflection
that would alleviate the pain
inherited from Adam. That push-

me-pull-you affliction. *Grant me*
chastity and continence but
not yet. Not evil, I lacked

goodness. As a sleeper is not dead,
just lacking vim, I would wake one day
and rise. *Give up indulgence*

and drunkenness, give up lust
and obscenity, give up strife and
rivalries, clothe yourself in Jesus

Christ the Lord, leaving no allowance
for fleshly desires. This sentence
flung me out from the bed of disgrace.

AMY BROWN

The Classroom

The human intellect is full of its own emptiness.
At school I learnt to preen giddily via rhetoric.
I continue to be a show-off desperate for praise.

At an inter-school competition I recited
Juno's speech and won! So many ways
we find to honour the dark angels,

teaching our children to ravel out their hearts'
young ringlets and let them become the rotten
lunch of vultures. Never gladder was I than

on leaving my classroom in Milan for the last time.
Once, in Carthage, I would've adored my eager
Milanese boys, who listened and did their homework.

But, worse than the rabble of naughty no-hopers
is a group of haughty sycophants
who reminded me of myself.

At ten, I lapped up stories of men succeeding
superhumanly, as a cat consumes broken egg.
Fantastic acts tickled my ears and made them itch

for more. This was my early education. To think
I gave the same to a hundred or more boys fills me
with ignominy. I taught essentially good children

AMY BROWN

to garner a hopeless sense of importance
from using words to impress and confuse.
If a man is wise, correcting him will make him

love you. If a man is wise, he will scorn a tutor
who teaches at great length by saying nothing.
If a man is wise, he will pack his school bag

and leave as soon as he feels his vanity twitching.
In God are all the treasures
of wisdom and knowledge. These are what I seek.

Amy Brown's first collection, The Propaganda Poster Girl *(VUP), has been nominated for the Jessie Mackay Best First Book Award for Poetry 2009. She is currently six months into a PhD in creative writing at the University of Melbourne. These poems, based on Augustine's Confessions, are part of a long poem about Christianity, which will make up half of her thesis.*

CAROLYN MCCURDIE

Sky Dive

Wakeful on the beach,
her sleeping bag scratchy
with heat, salt, sand,
heavy eyes,
surprised
by the oceanic blaze of stars,
whirl and pull of constellations,
vertigo.
She rolls over, sleeps.

Now, a shift
in the balance.
'Don't fall,'
her children say, 'be careful,
get a walking stick. '
She won't.
But the years
are faster,
gravity fiercer,
sky-dive that began in the birth canal,
illusion of flight,
plunging toward hard fact.

Sleepless, by the back door;
there'll be a frost tonight;
the stars so close
over the hedge,
like a fine knitted shawl,
in place, and ready to catch.
Her scalp prickles with cold
and distance,
as if her fontanelle
is open.

Carolyn McCurdie lives in Dunedin. Her poetry has been published previously in Deep South and has appeared in several publications. She also writes for children, and her novel The Unquiet was published by Longacre Press in 2006.

FERNANDO SORRENTINO

The Ushuaia Rabbit

I just read this in a newspaper: "After long months of futile attempts and several expeditions, a group of Argentine scientists has succeeded in capturing an Ushuaia rabbit, thought to be extinct for over a century. The scientists, headed by Dr. Adrián Bertoni, caught the rabbit in one of the many forests that surround the Patagonian city. . . ."

As I prefer specifics to generalities, and precision to transience, I would have said "in such and such a forest located in such a spot in relation to the capital of Tierra del Fuego." But we can't expect blood from a turnip or any intelligence whatsoever from journalists. Dr. "Adrián Bertoni" is yours truly, and of course they had to misspell my name. My exact name is Andrés Bertoldi, and I am, in fact, a doctor of natural sciences, specializing in Zoology and Extinct, or Endangered, Species.

The Ushuaia rabbit is not actually a lagomorph, much less a leporid. It's not even certain that its habitat is the forests of Tierra del Fuego. Moreover, not one has ever lived on the Isla de los Estados. The rabbit I caught – I alone, with no special equipment or help from anyone – showed up in the city of Buenos Aires near the embankment of the San Martín railroad, which runs parallel to Avenue Juan B. Justo where it crosses Soler Street in the district of Palermo.

Far from looking for the Ushuaia rabbit, I had other worries and was headed down the sidewalk of Juan B. Justo, a bit downcast. It was hot, and I had some unpleasant, not to say worrisome, business to do at the bank on Santa Fe Avenue. Between the embankment and the sidewalk there is a wire mesh fence supported by a low wall; on the other side of the fence, I spotted the Ushuaia rabbit.

I recognized it instantly, how could I not? But I was struck by the fact that it remained so still, for this animal is normally jumpy and restless. I thought it might be wounded.

Be that as it may, I backed up a few meters, climbed the fence, and lowered myself catlike to the ground. I advanced stealthily, fearing at each moment that the Ushuaia rabbit would take fright, and in that case, who could catch it? It is one of the fastest animals in creation; though the cheetah is swifter in absolute terms, it is not in relative terms.

The Ushuaia rabbit turned and looked at me. Contrary to my expectations, however, it did not flee, but kept still, with the sole exception of the silver tuft of feathers that shook as if to challenge me.

I took off my shirt and waited, stock still and bare-skinned.

"Easy, easy, easy . . ." I kept saying.

When I got close I slowly deployed the shirt as if it were a net, and suddenly, in one quick swoop, I had it over the rabbit, wrapping it up in a neat package. Using the sleeves and the shirttail, I tied a strong knot, allowing me to hold the bundle in my right hand and use my left to negotiate the fence once more and return to the sidewalk.

I could not, of course, show up at the bank shirtless, much less with the Ushuaia rabbit. Thus I headed home. I have an eighth-floor apartment on Nicaragua Street, between Carranza and Bonpland. At a hardware store I picked up a birdcage of considerable size.

The doorkeeper was washing the sidewalk in front of our building. Seeing me bare-chested, with a cage in my left hand and a restless white bundle in my right, he looked at me with more astonishment than disapproval.

As bad luck would have it, a neighbor followed me in from the street and into the elevator. With her was her little dog, an ugly, disgusting animal. Upon picking up the smell –unnoticed by human beings – of the Ushuaia rabbit, it erupted in earsplitting barks. On the eighth floor I was able to rid myself of that woman and her stentorious nightmare.

I locked the door with my key, prepared the cage, and with infinite care began unwrapping the shirt, trying not to upset, or worse, to hurt the Ushuaia rabbit. However, being shut in had angered it, and when I opened the cage door I couldn't stop the rabbit from hitting my arm with a stinger. I had sufficient presence of mind not to let the pain induce me to let go, and I finally managed to maneuver it safely back into the cage.

In the bathroom I washed the wound with soap and water, then right away with medicinal alcohol. It then occurred to me that I ought to head to the pharmacy for a tetanus shot, which I did without wasting any time.

From the pharmacy I went straight to the bank to conclude the cursed business that had been postponed because of the Ushuaia rabbit. On the way back I picked up supplies.

Since it lacks a masticatory apparatus during the day, the most practical thing was to cut up the lights into little pieces and mix in some milk and chickpeas; I then stirred it all together with a wooden spoon. After sniffing the concoction, the Ushuaia rabbit absorbed it with no problem, just very slowly.

Its process of expansion begins at sunset. I therefore transferred the few pieces of living room furniture – two modest armchairs, a loveseat, and an end table – to the dining room, pushing them up against the dining table and chairs.

Before it was too big to get past the door, I made sure it left the cage. Now free and comfortable, it was able to grow as needed. In this new state, it completely

lost its aggressivity, and now became apathetic and lazy. When I saw its violet scales pop out – a sign of sleepiness – I headed for the bedroom, went to bed, and called it a day.

The next morning the Ushuaia rabbit had returned to the cage. In view of this docility, I felt it was unnecessary to shut the door. Let it decide when to be inside or out of its prison.

The instincts of the Ushuaia rabbit are infallible. Every evening it would leave the cage and expand like a fairly thick pudding on the living room floor.

As is well known, its feces are produced at midnight on odd days. If one collects (in the spirit of play, naturally) these little green metallic polyhedrons in a sack and shakes them, they make a lovely sound, with a rather Caribbean rhythm.

To tell the truth, I have little in common with Vanesa Gonçalves, my girlfriend. She is considerably different from me. Instead of admiring the many positive qualities of the Ushuaia rabbit, she thought best to skin it in order to have a fur coat made for herself. This can be done at night when the animal is elongated and the surface of its skin is broad enough that the cartilaginous ridges are displaced to the edges and don't get in the way of the incision and cutting. I did not want to help her do this operation. Armed with only dressmaking scissors, Vanesa relieved the Ushuaia rabbit of all the skin on its back. In the bathtub, with detergent and running water, a brush and bleach, she washed off any amber or bile that remained on the skin. Then she dried it with a towel, folded it, put it in a plastic bag, and very happily took it off to her house.

It only takes eight to ten hours for the skin to completely regenerate. Vanesa had visions of a great scheme: each night she could skin the Ushuaia rabbit and sell its fur. I would not allow it. I did not want to convert a scientific discovery of such importance into a vulgar commercial enterprise.

However, an ecological society reported the deed, and a paid announcement came out in the papers accusing "Valeria González" – and, by association, me – of cruelty to animals.

As I knew would happen, the onset of autumn restored the rabbit's telepathic language, and although its cultural milieu is limited, we were able to have agreeable conversations and even to establish a kind of, how shall I say, code of coexistence.

The rabbit let me know that it was not partial to Vanesa, and I had no trouble understanding why. I asked my girlfriend not to come to the house any more.

Perhaps in gratitude, the Ushuaia rabbit perfected a way of expanding less at night, so that I was able to bring all the furniture back to the living room. It sleeps on the loveseat and deposits its metallic polyhedrons on the rug. It never eats to

excess, and in this as in everything else, its conduct is measured and worthy of praise and respect.

The rabbit's delicacy and efficiency reached the extreme of asking me what would be, for me, its ideal daytime size. I said I would have preferred the size of a cockroach, but I realized that such a small size put the Ushuaia rabbit in danger of being stepped on (though not of being killed).

After several attempts, we decided that at night the Ushuaia rabbit would continue to expand to the size of a very large dog or even a leopard. During the day, the ideal would be that of a medium-sized cat.

This allows me, when I am watching television, for example, to have the Ushuaia rabbit on my lap where I can stroke it absentmindedly. We have formed a solid friendship, and sometimes we need only look at each other for mutual understanding. Nevertheless, these telepathic faculties that function during the winter months disappear with the first warm spells.

We are now in the last month of winter. The Ushuaia rabbit is aware that for the next six months it will not be able to ask me questions or make suggestions or receive advice or congratulations from me.

Lately it's fallen into a kind of repetitive mania. It tells me, as if I didn't know, that it is the only surviving Ushuaia rabbit in the world. It knows it has no way of reproducing, but – though I have asked many times – the rabbit has never said whether it is bothered by this or not.

Moreover, the rabbit continuously asks me – every day and several times a day – whether there is any use for it to go on living like this, alone in the world, with me yes, but without other creatures of its own kind. There is no way it can kill itself, and there is no way I could – and even if there were, I would never do it – kill such a sweet, affectionate animal.

And so, as long as we experience the last cold spells of the year, I continue to converse with the Ushuaia rabbit, stroking it absentmindedly. When warm weather returns, I shall only be able to stroke it.

Translated from the Spanish by Michele Aynesworth.
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FERNANDO SORRENTINO

Problem Solved

Who hasn't heard of the Insignia Financial Group, a lending institution that underwrites vehicles, agricultural and industrial machinery and, generally, all types of manufacturing products?

I spent three years working at the branch office over in the Parque Patricios neighborhood located on Avenida Caseros. After I was promoted to a higher position, the company transferred me to the Palermo branch on Avenida Santa Fe. Since I already lived over on Calle Costa Rica, just six blocks away, the change worked out very well for me.

Although prohibited by regulations, every now and then we were visited by a few vendors and sales representatives who peddled a variety of articles. Our bosses tended to be lenient and let them in, and so it had become routine practice for the employees to buy things from these people.

This is how I met Boitus, an exceptionally odd person. He was thin as a wire and balding, wore antique-style glasses, and always dressed in the same grimy, threadbare gray suit, all of which gave him the air of a man who had escaped from a silent film era movie. He had a speech defect, causing his "r" to sound like "d".

He sold encyclopedias and dictionaries in installments and took cash payments for other less costly books. I became one of Boitus' clients because it proved to be a convenient arrangement: I would ask him for a certain book by a certain author and a few days later Boitus would show up, always reliable, with the book in question and at the same price as at the local book store.

It didn't take me long to figure out that Boitus was not only extravagant in the way he looked, but also in the way he moved and talked. The vocabulary he used was both peculiar and exclusive: when speaking of Juan Pérez, our nation's president, he referred to *Chief What's-His-Name*. He didn't use the sidewalk, but rather *the public walkway*. He didn't ride on the underground rail, microbuses or trains; instead he traveled on *the public passenger transportation system*. He never said, "I don't know"; it was always, *I'm unaware*.

One day, as I listened to a certain exchange, I could hardly believe my ears. While at my desk, concentrating on some work related matters, I heard Lucy, one of our most veteran employees on the verge of retiring, ask him, "Tell me, Boitus, have you ever thought about getting married?"

My curiosity forced me to look up and glance over at Boitus. He broke into a smile that was considerate, perhaps even indulgent.

"Why, my dear Ms. Lucy, there's a simple answer to your question." He paused for effect. "I can't marry for three reasons: in the first place, I'm not in an economic position to do so; secondly, I lack the funds; and thirdly, I'm broke."

Boitus' answer and, especially, the bewildered look on Lucy's face caused me to burst out laughing, although I tried my best to contain it. "Well, well," I told myself, "this Boitus guy is quite the comedian."

I got used to Boitus' periodic visits, during which, besides finalizing book purchases, I was entertained by his eccentricities, paradoxes, logic and outlandish ideas.

He always showed up carrying a brown leather briefcase, so worn that it had become gray, in which he kept invoices, receipts, brochures on encyclopedias, business cards... anyway, a collection of business related papers which, God knows why, he generically termed his *judgment tools*. But besides the briefcase, he always carried five or six packages with him: cardboard boxes filled with books to be delivered.

The day came when our branch manager, Mr. Gatti—an easy going and understanding guy—was promoted and transferred to the head office. His replacement, Mr. Linares, wasn't really a bad person; however he had a baroque way of speaking, loved circumlocution and was a stickler for rules and regulations. The moment he took over, he laid down the law and from them on, neither Boitus nor any of the other salesmen were allowed over the threshold of the Palermo branch of the Insignia Financial Group.

It was a minor problem, quickly resolved. Boitus and I exchanged phone numbers and thus, my purchases and his sales could continue, but with one difference: instead of delivering books to the office, Boitus brought them to my house.

At some point I realized that I'd now been working at the Palermo branch office a full year and that, consequently, I'd known Boitus for a year and that I bought books from him at fairly regular intervals. But at no point did he ever refer to himself as a "bookseller". He called himself a *cultural disseminator*.

The cultural disseminator would arrive at my apartment weighted down by his dilapidated briefcase, packages and cardboard boxes to deliver my books, after which he would usually rattle off a string of surprising sophisms and, after about 15 minutes, would leave.

I remember well his final visit. Boitus had unleashed an especially strange and extended monologue aimed at instructing me in the use of an absurd taxonomy of his own invention. According to his schema, coffee was a brew, tea was an infusion and boiled mate leaves, a tonic. However, I couldn't get him to explain the grounds for these classifications.

Then something weird happened: his ideas, which had seemed funny to me at first, suddenly started to irritate me, undoubtedly because of the visceral rejection I feel toward irrationality and error. And, despite suppressing my aggravation,

I watched happily as Boitus finally departed with his shabby briefcase and his boxes and packages.

Being that the ground level entrance was permanently locked, I had to follow him down and let him out of the building. Returning to my apartment, I realized Boitus had forgotten one of his parcels on a chair.

It was a round cardboard container, very similar to the ones used to store men's hats. Two green ribbons, originating along its edges but now fallen against each side, functioned as a way to carry the box comfortably.

I removed the lid and, although he couldn't possibly have arrived home yet, I immediately called to inform him of the forgotten merchandise. The phone rang five times before the answering machine picked up. I left a message, the tone of which—polite, yet urgent—left no room for doubt.

That night, Boitus did not return my call. The next day, either. I tried calling and leaving messages for several days at different times.

When I called a week later the phone rang I don't know how many times but neither Boitus nor his answering machine picked up. "The phone must be disconnected," I told myself.

A few hours later my calls were answered by a female voice that recited: "The number you have dialed does not belong to any client within the Telecom network." A while later, dialing Boitus' number produced nothing but silence, as though both the number and the phone itself had disappeared.

At the office, I mentioned all this to Rossi, whose desk adjoins mine, and he offered to come over to my place.

"As long as it isn't a bother," he added.

"Quite the opposite," I said, "I'd appreciate your help."

And so it happened that, having finished our workday, Rossi visited my apartment for the first and last time. Opening the box he drew back with a distasteful look on his face.

"Oh man. Looks like this is going to be complicated."

"Definitely. Can't say I didn't warn you."

Then Rossi completely lost interest in the box and became distracted as he looked around. In a matter of seconds he had me feeling nervous. He's a restless guy and started walking the length of the apartment offering different criticisms or suggestions which I had never asked for, such as, "This would be a good place to hang a mirror," or "Aren't your doors sealed against draughts? There seems to be air getting in."

He stopped in front of a framed picture of Cecilia Capelli, picked it up for a moment, put it back down in a slightly different location and then commented, "So this is your girlfriend? Cute girl, congratulations."

I told myself that he could have dispensed with both his remark and the con

gratulations: my love affair with Cecilia was in a state of deterioration and several times I had been tempted to get rid of the picture since its presence only served to upset me.

He then inspected my library and seized the opportunity to ask to borrow *A History of Argentinean Soccer.* I detest lending books (or borrowing them, for that matter) but as he had been so kind as to come over and help me, I couldn't say no.

I had ascertained that Rossi was restless. A few days later I found out that, in addition, he tended to talk too much. Consequently, on Friday, Mr. Linares called me to his office and closed the door after I'd entered. Through the intercom he commanded, "Flavia, no calls until further notice."

He had me sit facing him over his desk and then, with a smile that was intended to look congenial but was obviously forced, he told me, "My dear Sainz, it's not that I want to involve myself in something that's none of my business, but in a certain way, you being a young man of 28, relatively new to the company, and seeing how..."

"I'm about to be heaved down into the labyrinth of his meandering prose," I thought.

"... I'm somewhat older, with more years under my belt, and your manager on top of that, a kind of father figure within the company you could say, I have a kind of—how should I put it?—moral obligation to help you. Am I right?"

Since Mr. Linares was waiting for an answer, I immediately agreed, motivated by the desire to get him to stop talking as soon as humanly possible.

"Well then," he continued, "if it is acceptable to you, tomorrow, which is Saturday and will give us some free time, I'll take a little jaunt over to your house to see what we can do..."

I had no choice but to accept his offer. Back at my desk, Rossi avoided eye contact. However, a few minutes later he approached me and muttered in my ear, "Don't think I'm the one who told him about it. He already knew. It's hard to hide these things."

I wondered how Rossi knew that Linares had found out.

On Saturday I had to get up early. I couldn't have Mr. Linares over to a typical bachelor's apartment that hadn't been cleaned in at least two weeks. I spent most of my morning on detestable chores: vacuuming the floor, dusting the furniture, cleaning the bathroom and kitchen... Finally by 11 my house was in a presentable state for receiving Mr. Linares.

When he showed up he wasn't alone. With him were Araujo, our office errand boy who was fond of gambling, and another gentleman I had never met who wore a suit, tie and spectacles.

"Dr. Venancio," said Linares, introducing him. "He's a legal representative, or,

if you prefer, an attorney, who will certify the affidavit. As for Araujo," he added affably, "he needs no introduction. Who doesn't owe Araujo a favor or two, right?" Araujo, dressed in his office uniform, smiled shyly.

"Araujo is only here as a witness, so that Dr. Venancio can get his signature on the affidavit."

"Fine," I said. "Sounds good."

Mr. Linares took the lid off the box and, holding the lid in his right hand, carefully examined the contents. Dr. Venancio and Araujo immediately did the same.

"Everything in order, Araujo?" Mr. Linares asked.

"Yes, Sir, no problem."

Dr. Venancio spread the affidavit out on the dinning room table. It was three pages long. He signed his name in the margins of the first two and at the bottom of the third. Then he turned to Araujo and indicated he should do the same. Araujo signed slowly; it was obvious he was not very seasoned at working with papers and documents.

"Should I sign?" I asked.

"It's not necessary," replied the notary public, "but it isn't prohibited, either. It's up to you."

"I'm going to sign just in case."

I took a moment to read the affidavit and confirmed that it rigorously conformed to the truth. Then I signed it.

"And you, Mr. Linares? Would you like to sign?"

"No, Doctor, it doesn't appear to be necessary. Or even prudent."

After exchanging a few platitudes about the weather, my visitors left.

I had planned to go to the movies that night with Cecilia but around six in the evening she called to cancel the date.

"The problem is my father," she explained. "Well, that is, if you want to call it a problem. I don't think there's any reason for concern, but he does. He thinks that your situation might affect his chances of getting elected mayor."

I felt like telling her to go to hell, along with her distinguished father, a power hungry political schemer, but I held back and only said, "Fine, sounds good."

I thought, "It's just as well, I'm fed up with her."

I looked up Boitus' telephone number using a directory on the Internet and found out he lived on Calle Fraga, in the Chacarita neighborhood. Sunday morning I headed over to the house in question. There, I found a wooden barrier around the building with a sign that read: NOTICE: BUILDING TO BE COMPLETELY DEMOLISHED. NEW CONSTRUCTION OF ONE AND TWO BEDROOM APARTMENTS.

With the exception of a few unexpected events, my life continued its normal path.

It wasn't long before I was given another promotion that entailed one advantage and one drawback. The former involved a substantial salary raise: suddenly I was earning practically double what I had been up to now (which already was no small sum). The drawback resided in that I had to carry out my new duties in the suburb of Béccar, quite a distance from my place on Calle Costa Rica.

I added up the pros and cons and, after finally accepting the promotion, resigned myself to a long commute between Palermo and my new destination. The ideal situation would have been to buy a place in Béccar or in San Isidro, but to come up with the money I first would have had to sell the apartment on Calle Costa Rica.

Without meaning to I had also gained a certain notoriety and I discovered that having it wasn't all that bad. Photographers and feature writers showed up from the newspapers La Nación and Clarín and from the magazines *Caras* and *Gente*. I was subjected to interviews and was photographed—now smiling, now solemn—next to the round box. I was also invited to talk on television news programs, something I did with some degree of vanity. I didn't even turn down invitations to appear on frivolous talk shows filled with gossip and tabloid stories.

In the end, "Doctor" Ignacio Capelli didn't succeed in being elected mayor of Tres de Febrero County, a fact that pleased me to no end. At this point I had had it with Cecilia, so a few days later I found a random excuse to break up with her. On the other hand, something wonderful had happened. I had gotten into the habit of having an afternoon snack after work at a café near Béccar station. At the same time of day, several teachers from a nearby school would come by after finishing with their classes. They were lovely girls who spoke loudly and always roared with laughter.

I was attracted to one of them (I already knew her name, Guillermina) and, more than once, our eyes—hers a crystal blue—met across the tables. One day as I was leaving, I arranged for an "accidental" meeting out on the sidewalk and was able to strike up a conversation. Straight away I accompanied her home, first by train until we reached the Belgrano neighborhood, then by foot a few blocks. She was 25 years old, her name was Guillermina Grotz and she still lived with her parents.

Things went well and it didn't take me long to become her boyfriend and, a few weeks later, begin intimate relations.

One afternoon, as we lay on a hotel bed, she asked me, "Wouldn't it be cheaper for you to invite me to your apartment?"

Surprised, I looked her in the eyes. "Aren't you aware of the problem I have...?"
"How could I not know? Everybody knows about it. But it can't be all that bad."

The generosity I saw in her eyes moved me. I felt a tear welling up, but quickly wiped it away.

The following Saturday I took Guillermina out to a movie in Belgrano. Afterward, I treated her to dinner at a restaurant on Avenida Cabildo.

"Well," I told her, "now we're going back to my place to end the night on a dignified note."

As we entered the apartment and I turned on the light, Guillermina cried out, "At last, I get to see Mr. Sainz's mysterious bunker!"

But before she had a chance to get to know the place, she stopped in front of the round box. She hesitated for a moment, and then lifted the lid. The expression on her face didn't change one bit, but she said, "You were right. We should go back to what we were doing before..."

I wanted her to define her terms, so I asked, "Should we go to the bedroom or do you want to leave?"

"I hope I don't offend you, but I prefer to leave."

"Why should I be offended? You're completely within your rights..."

Guillermina lived near the corner of Cuba and Mendoza. I stopped a taxi coming down the street and bid her farewell.

But not for good. There was no reason we should break up. On the contrary—the experience had drawn us closer together.

Three months later we were married and went to live in a tiny apartment we had rented outside the city, in San Isidro, a place that was soon crammed with all the belongings Guillermina and I had brought from our respective former homes. My dinning room set consisted of a table and four chairs, but I could only bring three of the four to San Isidro.

At my workplace I was subjected to questions that were as naïve as they were predictable, and, as well, faced some slightly troublesome bureaucratic snags, none of which kept me from continuing to rise in the company.

In fact, I'd say that in this regard I couldn't complain. Each new success brought me a higher position and I continued to climb the hierarchical ladder and earn more money.

One Friday afternoon (the best moment of the week) I was summoned to the head office. No less than the senior director himself offered congratulations and assured me that, without a shadow of a doubt, within the year I would be named manager of the Mar del Plata branch office.

"So, Mr. Sainz, it would be best for you to begin getting your affairs in order ahead of time."

Mar del Plata is a magnificent assignment, although being so far down the coast, it will mean Guillermina has to resign her teaching position and the two of us will have to move. Once there, it won't be hard for my wife to get a job at another school.

Guillermina and I have become frugal to the point of greediness. We want to have enough money to buy a relatively spacious apartment in Mar del Plata, and I believe we will. The only possible way is to save and save and save, since we can't

count on the money we would get from the impossible sale of my former residence on Calle Costa Rica, which—by the way—had all its utilities cut off: electricity, telephone, gas, water... I also stopped paying the building maintenance fees and the municipal taxes.

"They're going to take you to court and foreclose on the apartment," Guillermina often comments.

Without fail I answer, "But they'll never find a buyer."

"That's true," Guillermina always replies in turn, "but it's not our problem."

Translated from the Spanish by Jonathan Cole.
Finalist in the 23rd annual Hucha de Oro *Competition (FUNCAS), Madrid, Spain.*

Fernando Sorrentino (1942) was born in Buenos Aires. He is the author of an extensive narrative corpus, including books such as Imperios y servidumbres *(1972),* El mejor de los mundos posibles *(1976),* Sanitarios centenarios *(1979),* En defensa propia *(1982),* El rigor de las descidhas *(1994),* Costumbres de los muertos *(1996),* Existe un hombre que tiene la costumbre de pegarme con un paraguas en la cabeza *(2005),* El regreso *(2005),* Costumbres del alcaucil *(2008),* El crimen de san Alberto *(2008). He is also responsible for two interview volumes:* Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges *(1974) and* Siete conversactiones con Adolfo Bioy Casares *(1992). His works have been translated into English, Portuguese, Italian, German, French, Finnish, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tamil, and Kabyle. The English version of his Sanitary Centennial and Selected Short Stories was published in 1988.*

MARK ROBERTSON

Ecstasy

My father usually arrived home before lunch, bringing the morning's catch with him. Together, he and my mother would decide which fish were to be pickled and which dried out in the sun. My sister and I would watch this ritual, imagining that those fish destined for the pickling vats were being saved, while those sent out into the sun were doomed to die a fiery death. My parents knew this, and would toy with us accordingly.

"What about this one?" my father would ask my mother.

"I don't know," she would say. "What do you girls think?"

"Pickled! Pickled!" we would scream, cheering when the fish was placed on the pickling pile. In those days, everything was a game; the house echoed with laughter even when no-one was inside. My sister and I would often arrive home from school to find it empty – my father out fishing and my mother outside hanging up the damned fish or tending to her berry-trees – and hear the windows giggling in the wind.

Bedtime was my favourite part of the day. My sister and I would lie in our shared bed, blanket over our heads, whispering to each other. After a while, my father would sneak silently into the room. We always knew he would come, and tried to listen for his footsteps, but never once did he fail to surprise us. My sister was convinced that he flew in – like a fairy. He would creep right up to our bed and shout, "Who's making all that noise?" We would erupt in fright, fling the blanket off and jump into his waiting embrace, screaming, knowing that a bedtime story would follow. My mother would sometimes watch this scene from the door-less entrance to our room; but most of the time she would be sitting outside the door – our guardian angel – making the beaded necklaces and earrings that she sold at the weekend market.

"Can't you girls get to sleep?" my father would ask. "Maybe a story would help?"

"Have you heard about the man who was swallowed by a whale?" he would say. Or, "Did I ever tell you the story of the Indian magician who turned people into camels?" We would always shake our heads. In truth, my father only had six stories and, since he told them using exactly the same words each time, we knew them off-by-heart. Still, we shook our heads, trying to conceal our smiles as he began the night's narrative. At the end of the story, my father would kiss my sister and me good night and we would sleep, full of magical dreams. Snug as two bugs in a rug.

MARK ROBERTSON

My father was always gone when we woke in the mornings. Being a fisherman, he worked from the last hours of darkness until midday – when the sun became unbearable – returning to the water for a few hours before sunset. We would rise with the sun and eat a breakfast of home-made bread and jam. But this was no ordinary jam: it was made from the fruit of the berry-trees that my mother had skilfully managed to grow – despite the climate and to the amazement of our neighbours. In fact, when the berry-trees grew and flourished, a rumour started in the village that the trees were magical, and that the jam made from them would bring good luck to all who ate it.

After our breakfast, my sister and I would help tidy the house, sweeping out the previous day's sand and making sure that our few belongings were neatly packed away – "to protect them from the elements," my mother would say – before walking to school.

Occasionally, we played a game while we walked where we each had to pick an animal – my sister would always choose the whale – and imagine what sort of conversations they would have with one another. I prided myself on the accuracy and variety of my animal voices, my most accomplished being the elephant's. My sister's impersonations were equally as varied as mine, which always made me laugh; and I never figured out exactly how whales spoke: one day, they sounded like camels; the next, like crows or crocodiles. Of course, we had never seen most of these animals; but my father told us about them so often, that we felt like we knew them each personally.

We walked home from school just before the hottest hours of the day, rushing on our way to avoid missing out on my father's arrival with his morning catch.

One blisteringly hot day, with the sky so blue and bright you felt like it was turning you inside out, we were delayed at school. No clouds were present to offer relief from the sun, and our teacher asked all the children who had to walk a long way home – which was most of us – to wait until she found something to shield us. We sat bunched together under the tree where we usually took our lessons, waiting. After some time, our teacher returned balancing a pile of big palm leaves on her head. She shared them out equally and patiently instructed us in the art of making what she said were "emperor's treats." I had never heard of these before, but I dared not admit this. Instead, I watched closely with the other children as we were taught how to weave the leaves into each other, creating a mat. My sister and I had, we realised, seen these mats before at home: my mother had constructed her berry-tree protector out of the same material, although we hadn't seen her do it. How pleased she would be to discover that we had learnt her trick!

As soon as our emperor's treats were completed, we bounded off, racing home, eager to display our new creations. We burst into the house, waving our emporer's treats around triumphantly.

"Mama, Mama. Look!"

My mother didn't move, but continued to gaze blankly out the doorway across the vast space between our house and the ocean. My father would normally have emerged from this distance: first a dot, then a blur, and finally a figure, growing and growing as he neared the house. Now, though, there was nothing but space and sun. It was impossible to tell where the earth ended and the sky began.

"Where's Baba?" asked my sister, tugging on my mother's skirt.

No answer.

We waited in silence through the afternoon and dusk, and into darkness. Eventually, my mother turned towards us.

"It's time for bed."

We knew from this new sound in her voice – like the sound in a crocodile's voice – that there was to be not debate, and slunk off to our room. We shed our clothes and slipped under our blanket. My sister was crying, so I held her hand and told her the story about the man who ran so fast that his skin turned white and crows started following him around, thinking he was a giant worm. But I couldn't tell it like my father did. I missed all the pauses and rushed the funny bits. Nevertheless, she fell asleep; and some time after that, I did too.

I dreamt of an open field, extending forever, eternally flat. There was nothing but dust on the ground, and the wind whipped it up into a rage all around me. I was naked and helpless, my screams drowned immediately in the sandstorm.

When my mother woke my sister and me up in the morning, I could see that she had not slept. I looked at my sister. There was sand suck to her top lip underneath her nose – she must have been in the same dream as me. My mother dressed us and sent us out to find my father.

He was easier to find than we had thought. We saw his figure sitting cross-legged – like the Indian man in one of his stories – on the shore. He was stripped of all his clothes and stared vacantly towards the sea. We helped him to his feet and supported him, draping his arms across our tiny shoulders as we made our way home. My mother, seeing us approaching from afar, ran out to meet us and took over as his crutch.

He ate nothing and said nothing, allowing only water to pass his lips. My sister and I tried to show him the emperor's treats we had made the day before, but he was unresponsive. He stayed like this, nearly comatose, for three days. Our house was cold, then, like it had never been before. And it was hollow, feeling and sounding like an empty stomach, growling in the bowels of the night.

On the third evening, my sister and I were asleep, dreaming our fears. My father shook us awake roughly, terrifying us. He said nothing for some time, and an

uneasy silence, like a breath held for too long, loomed around the room. Eventually, he spoke. His first words in three days.

"Do you know the story about the fisherman and the wind funnel?"

My sister and I shook our heads. It was true, we had never heard that story. Out of the corner of my eye I watched my mother shade into the door-less doorway, her eyes alive with hope.

"There was a fisherman, once, in a land not unlike ours. One day, he was sitting in his boat. It was the hottest day he had ever experienced and there was not a cloud in the sky to ease the sun's heat. The fishing had not been good, as fish don't like to get caught when it is too hot, but he persisted. After a while, he found himself gazing at his hands' reflection in the water by the side of the boat.

"He looked at their creases and scars, trying to recall the entire treasury of stories they contained. He brought them up to his face and smelled them, trying to imagine all of the places they had been, all of the things they had touched. He thought of his beautiful little girls' hair, like princesses'. He thought of his wife's face. He smiled.

"Suddenly, as he was thinking about his family, the world around him blurred and he was spun and twisted upwards into the air, floating above the boat, supported by a wild wind which surrounded him, carrying him. Gently as a kiss, it deposited him on the shore, facing the sea. He knew where he was immediately, but his senses were confused and he couldn't move. The wind funnel, which had appeared out of the bluest and hottest sky in the history of the land, had vanished. All he could hear was the gentle lapping of the water on the edge of the shore. To him, it sounded like music from the place of his birth. Looking out to the sea, he saw pieces of his boat, floating directionless, irretrievable. He was so shocked that he couldn't speak. He had lost his most prized possession, his fishing-boat, but the wind funnel had saved him, like a guardian angel, placing him safely on the shore where two dazzling fairies found him and led him home.

"After three days, he felt normal again. He could no longer fish, because his boat had been destroyed, but he had a plan to earn money for the family. You see, his wife was an expert berry-tree tender, and his daughters were expert shade-weavers. Together, they would grow an orchard of magical berry-trees – trees whose fruit would make jam that gave whoever ate it good luck – and they would make jams to sell to the whole land. They would live happily together forever after."

My father finished his story and looked at his daughters. They were asleep, and they were smiling at their dreams. He kissed them gently on their foreheads, stroking their dark hair. My father turned to his wife. He walked towards her, raised his weathered hands to her face, and ran his fingertips along her cheek, rubbing his thumb across the softness of her lips. My mother took his hands, and let him out of our bedroom. I closed my eyes again, this time falling asleep for real in the warm

house whose windows giggled in the wind. I dreamt of elephants and whales, of guardian angels, of princesses with emperor's treats. I dreamt of the fisherman who was sucked up a wind funnel out of the blue. My father's seventh story.

Mark Robertson was educated at Nexus (England), Rhodes and UNISA (South Africa), and most recently St. Andrews (Scotland). Having worked briefly as a teacher and subsequently in an investment management company, he now works as a strategy consultant inJohannesburg, and try to write in the little spare time that he has.

BILL DIREEN

Three song-lyrics from the 'Realist Set'

The German Miserere (trans. from Brecht)

One fine day our superiors issued orders
To capture a town called Danzig,
For the safety of our borders
Our planes & tanks went to Poland,
We invaded guns a-blaze
And the job was as good as over
— in twenty-one days

One fine day our superiors issued orders
To take pretty France & Belgium,
For the safety of our borders
Our planes & tanks went to Belgium,
We invaded guns a-blaze
And the job was as good as over
— in thirty five days

One fine day our superiors issued orders
To march into mighty Russia,
For the safety of our borders
Our planes & tanks rumbled Eastward
To mow down the Russians
And for years we've been lucky, lucky to save
our own skins!

One fine day
Our superiors will issue orders
To conquer the ocean or the moon,
For the safety of our borders...
Ah! but it's hard going in this place called Russia, the enemy is strong,
we're completely lost
and we're frozen to the bone.

God save us!
God! — show us the way —
Show us the way home

BILL DIREEN

Samuel Hall (trad. adapt. Direen)

Well my name is Samuel Hall, Sam Hall (2)
My name is Samuel Hall
and I hate you one and all
You're a bunch of muckers all, blast your eyes!

I was born meek and mild (2)
Born meek and mild
but the eighth-too-many child
I was born meek and mild, blast your eyes!

J' suis né doux et tendre, tendre et beau (2)
'suis né tendre et beau
mais c'était encore un d' trop
... tendre et beau, All-ez au diable!

I studied the law of thieves (2)
I studied the law of thieves,
There's an honour and there's a creed
If you break it you will bleed, blast your eyes!

J'ai suivi la loi des voleurs (2)
J'ai fait mon chemin dans l' crime
J' marchais au bord de l'abyme
... la loi des voleurs, All-ez au diable!

I learnt a life of crime, life of crime (2)
I learnt a life of crime life of crime
And I learnt it just in time
I learnt a life of crime life of crime, blast your eyes!

I killed a man, they said, that's what they said (2)
Well I killed that man
I left him lying dead
I bashed his bloody head, blast yr eyes

J'ai tué un homme (2)
j'ai tué c' bonhomme,
Pour quelques bagues et un peu d'rhum
J'ai tué ce bonhomme, All-ez au diable.

They're gonna hang me from on high from on high (2)
They're going to hang me from on high,
& they'd better hang me till I die
Hang me from on high, blast your eyes!

On va me pendre haut et court, haut et court (2)
Jusqu'à c'que mort s'ensuive
A demain! sur l'autre rive!
... haut et court, All-ez au djable!

'Cause my name is Samuel Hall, Sam Hall (2)
Well my name is Samuel Hall
and I hate you one and all
You're a bunch of muckers all, blast your eyes!

BILL DIREEN

Dans La Rue (Aristide Bruant)

Moi, je n'sais pas si j'suis d'Grenelle,
De Montmartre ou de la Chapelle,
D'ici, d'ailleurs ou de là-bas
Mais j'sais ben qu'la foule accourue,
Un matin, m'a trouvé su' l'tas
Dans la rue

Well I wouldn't know if I come from Grenelle
From Montmartre or from La Chapelle
From here over there or down the way
All I know is a crowd rushed by
There was me, on a pile of trash
On the street

Y a ben des chanc's pour que mon père
Il ay' jamais connu ma mère
Qu'jamais connu mon daron,
Mon daron qui doit l'avoir eue,
Un soir de noc', qu'il était rond,
Dans la rue.

There's a pretty good chance that my da
Never knew – my forgotten ma
She'd have hardly got a look in at the old man
As he had his way with her
When he was consummately pissed
On the street

J'm'ai jamais connu d'aut' famille
Que la p'tit' marmaill' qui fourmille,
Aussi quand ej' m'ai marida,
J'm'ai mis avec un' petit' grue
Qui truquait, le soir, à dada,
Dans la rue.

Me I've never known any other family
But the dirty brats who mill about me
The same could be said of my employee
Business was good with that pretty piece
Who worked evenings at what she did best
On the street

C'était un' petit' gonzess' blonde
Qu'avait la gueul' de la Joconde,
La fess' ronde et l'téton pointu
Et qu'était aussi bien foutue
Qu'les statu's qui montrent leur cul
Dans la rue.

She was a blond beauty to a half-blind geezer
She looked a bit like the Mona Lisa
Shapely ass and pointed tits
And she was no less an exhibitionist
Than the nude statues that flaunt their bits
On the street

C'est ça qu'c'était ben mon affaire!
Mais un beau soir a s'a fait faire:
Les mœurs (meuss) l'ont fourrée au ballon
Et, depuis qu'alle est disparue,
J'sorgue à la paire et j'fais ballon
Dans la rue.

And that was the sum of it, our fruitful scheme
But one summer's night she vanished from the scene
The vice squad took her down central
And ever since that raid took place
I sleep where I can and live off the waste
On the street

A présent, où qu'vous voulez qu' j'aille?
Vous vouderiez-t-y que j'travaille?
J'pourrais pas... j'ai jamais appris...
Va falloir que j'vole ou que j'tue...
Hardi! Joyeux, pas vu... pas pris...
Dans la rue.

Now what can I do but live like a stray?
"Get a job" I hear you say!
But I never learned to be like that
I steal if I can, I'll kill if I must
Tough! Enough! Unblessed, uncursed!
On the street

Et puis zut! et vive les aminches
vive les escarpes et vive les grinches
Un jour faudra que je passe aussi
Dans la foule encore accourue
Pour voir ma gueule, en raccourci
Dans la rue.

A long life to all my rotten friends!
A long life to who never make amends!
One day I really must take a tour
A day trip with the crowd; but who looks will see
On a pile of trash the likes – of me
On the street

Notes:

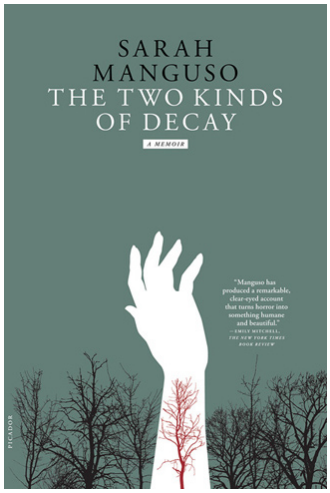
These three song lyrics offered to Deep South are part of a performance "set" of realist theatre songs which I have been performing from time to time in Europe accompanied by a second musician. Samuel Hall (also known in one version as Johnny Hall) was the name of a real person, a thief and murderer publicly executed in England around 1840. On the scaffold he is reputed to have cursed those who had come to see him die, and this formed the basis of a popular music hall act. I have adapted this nineteenth century hit for my own purposes, suggesting something of the social conditions of London at the time. Aristide Bruant, (1851 – 1925) composer of Dans la rue (On the Street), wrote in Parisian argot, which he taught himself from the street personalities and café ghosts after coming to Paris from the provinces. Argot has a long history that may go back as far as François Villon (1431–1463). The hard socialist realism of early twentieth century theatre practitioner and theorist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) provides a soldier's version of Hitler's campaigns – the soldier's lot has hardly changed since the time of similar descriptions by Aeschylus. To these songs we add in pieces I've been drawn to in my researches into song, such as the dark comedy of Georges Brassens' (1921-1982) humble gravedigger (it's hard not to listen to this without thinking of the Gravediggers scene in Hamlet?). The so-called "realist set" is made up of works in different languages, some sung in their original English, some in my English translations and some in their original foreign or ancient languages (apparently my New Zealand accent is not off-putting). (NB: Please bear in mind that, particularly where translations are concerned, the texts are often developed from performance to performance.) Two early French poems by François Villon find themselves set to music that crosses genres between hard folk and experimental country (Ballad of the Hanged, and Ballad of the Lords of Ancient Times), while some of James K. Baxter's (1926-1972) last verses (one of which makes specific mention of François Villon) are set to downhome chord patterns (a spontaneous recording of this one called "Baxter's Testament" is on the internet site YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVvPDvQhXrg). We have recently incorporated a performance of a poem by W. H. Auden (1907-1973) into the set – his 'Epitaph on a Tyrant' was written during the Fascist epoch and I set it to music all of thirty five years ago (it was never released). This is proving to be quite well received in Europe. Some subjects never grow stale! Finally, a few songs from my theatrical song-cycles (Dial a Claw, Raoul [also now called Rau], Fawkes Alive (originally Fowkes Alive!) and Bride of the Wheel (after works by Artaud, Shelley and Stendhal) easily find their place when scribbling out the set before a gallery opening or some small event. The realist set usually finishes with a recent composition about wider Europe – its story begins north of Bulgaria in a place called Bukovina, which has been Rumanian, Ukrainian, Moldavian and Austro-Hungarian over the years. The story passes from Turkey to Greece and on to Paris, ending in Cork, Ireland. It is called 'Citizens of Nowhere'.

Bill Direen 21 November, 2009

Bill Direen's work includes poetry, fiction (stories, novels, prose-poems, science-fiction), over 300 songs and at least four music-theatre pieces. He is guest editor of New Zealand literary journal Landfall 219: the music issue.

CY MATHEWS WITH SARAH MANGUSO

(Yes): An Interview with Sarah Manguso



Sarah Manguso is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Captain Lands in Paradise* (2002), *Siste Viator* (2006), *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape* (published in 2007 with books by two other authors in a set entitled *One Hundred and Forty-Five Stories in a Small Box*) and the memoir *The Two Kinds of Decay* (2008). She lives in Brooklyn. This interview was carried out via email in 2009. – *Cy Mathews*

What are your thoughts on academic approaches to literature, which can be bound up in convoluted theory and complex jargon – or, for that matter, on creative writing which is itself grounded in such theories?

Jibber-jabber jargon bores me. To quote Franz Wright's poem "University of One," "I have been spared / the fate of those who love words / more than what they mean!"

Intellectualizing about the "meaning" of a piece of writing bores me. I might as well write out the multiplication tables.

What great mystery, though, that a piece of writing can make us *feel*!

CY MATHEWS WITH SARAH MANGUSO

In the introduction to the anthology you co-edited with Jordan Davis, Free Radicals, *you wrote of the dangers of "becoming mired in the stability-enforcing, niche-assigning public consciousness," contrasting this against "the terrible freedom of not yet having published books." Having now published four books which have received a significant amount of public exposure, how do you feel about your own stability and/or freedom as a writer?*

For one thing, I'm more aware than I was in 2003, when I wrote that introduction, that on a practical level, I am quite free to write what I want. I am now a member of PEN International, a group that helps writers who have been imprisoned for writing what they want.

In your short prose piece "But the Order of Lives is Apparent," there's a paragraph that reads:

"When I first opened the small white envelope that said for S–– M– in Oscar's rectangular letters, I took out the letter and immediately smelled it."

I'm intrigued by the elision of what is (presumably) your own name in this piece that, otherwise, reads as openly autobiographical. What motivated you to perform this partial, almost symbolic erasure?

At the time I thought it would be less distracting to the reader to read the initials S and M rather than to worry about the theoretical significance of an author writing about herself as a character in a story.

In "The Dunes in Truro," from your first book, you write:

"A girl walks up the dunes with the aid of a cane, trying not to get sand in her heart."

When I first read this line, prior to the publication of your memoir The Two Kinds of Decay, *I came to the conclusion that it was a piece of surrealistic, possibly chain-of-association, playfulness. After reading the description of the chest catheter in your memoir, however, it's hard to read the line as anything other that a literal description of experience. How do you feel about the possibility of people re-reading your earlier books using* The Two Kinds of Decay *as a kind of interpretive guide, a "primary text" with which to unlock otherwise hidden or oblique meaning?*

CY MATHEWS WITH SARAH MANGUSO

Being read at all is a privilege I would enjoy under any circumstances.

In past interviews, you've mentioned you tend not to think in terms of 'genre' while writing. When your work is published, however, genre inevitably seems to come into play, The Two Kinds of Decay *being classified as a memoir, for example, while* Hard to Admit *and* Harder to Escape *(which also seems to be highly autobiographical), is marketed as a book of 'short short stories.' Would you prefer that these books remained genre-less?*

Genre is irrelevant to my work because I don't write on assignment -- I'm an artist, not a journalist. No one tells me what to write or how to write about it. Genre "comes into play" when publishers need to sell their books to the massive bookstore conglomerates that offer only so many shelf inches to each so-called genre.

Do you try and avoid or lessen the impact of those commercially-imposed genre categorizations? It seems to me that Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape, packaged as it was with two other collections of stories "in a box," did a good job of avoiding such straightforward categorization.

I'm not a publisher, so I don't participate in those decisions. I just try to affiliate myself with publishers who are intelligent and courageous enough to abhor the shallowness, sentimentality, and total poverty of imagination that afflict the world at large.

When I first read your work, one of the adjectives that sprung to mind to describe your writing style was "clinical": even when your writing is ambiguous, it's a very precise type of ambiguity, cool and controlled. Do you think it's possible that your extensive experience of the actual medical "clinic" may have influenced this aspect of your style?

I think it's coincidental.

CY MATHEWS WITH SARAH MANGUSO

This is something of a nebulous question, but how do you view the act of writing: as self-expression, self-construction, representation of reality, construction of reality, or....?

I'm not interested in "expression" or "constructing." Merely expressing for the sake of expressing, or constructing for the sake of constructing -- those are empty gestures. I write to make sense of what I see in the world, or as my friend Zadie Smith has said of herself, "I write so that I do not sleepwalk through my entire life."

That seems to relate to the sense I get in your writing of a very personal, private voice; it's as if I, as a reader, am overhearing something not primarily intended for anyone other than the writer (I hope that doesn't come across as an insult, as it's not intended to be). To what degree to you think about your audience when you write?

I think you read my response backwards. I don't write except to deliver sense, to communicate, to be read.

Sorry if I misunderstood: it's just that writing "so that I do not sleepwalk through my entire life" seems to me to be a very personal, introspective project. I guess I'm thinking more of your first three books here. For example, that line I've already mentioned about the girl being careful not to get sand in her heart, a line that is very hard to understand unless the reader already knows your personal history. How would you reconcile details like that with a desire to communicate?

I wrote the "sand in her heart" line to communicate something other than the literal sense of rock dust in a circulatory organ.

Do you have any plans for another book of poetry? I've noticed some very good poems, like "What Is the Correct Subject?" and "The Lyric Moment" cropping up in journals now and then. If these are any indication, your next book of poems is going to be a stunner.

Thank you. At present I'm working on a story collection called 'My Friends'. A poetry collection called Finally is on the far back burner.

CY MATHEWS WITH SARAH MANGUSO

What poets/authors are you reading at the moment?

The best books I've read in the past two months were 'Glover's Mistake' (N. Laird), 'Speedboat' (R. Adler), 'Bluets' (M. Nelson), 'The Boatloads' (D. Albergotti), and 'Snobbery' (J. Epstein).

What value do you put on poetry readings as compared to the printed page?

None whatsoever. What's on the page is what interests me.

A friend of mine believes a writer's mature style can be traced back to their favorite books in childhood. Can I ask what your favorite books were?

I liked Laura Ingalls Wilder, Andersen and the Grimms, and Ellen Raskin, particularly her book The Westing Game. I like to visit her haunted house at No. 8 Gay Street in Manhattan. It strikes me only now that Edward Gorey, another favorite, also lived at No. 8 -- Strawberry Lane, in Yarmouthport, Massachusetts. His house is now a museum. I hope they make one of Raskin's house, too. (It's under construction on the inside.)

If you were interviewing yourself, what question would you ask - and what would the answer be?

Wouldn't I already know the answer? (Yes.)

SARAH PATERSON

Review: Mom's Canoe *by Rebecca Foust*

Texas Review Press
Huntsville, Texas
2008
31 pages
Winner, Robert Phillips Chapbook Prize, 2008

As the spelling of the title would suggest, *Mom's Canoe* by Rebecca Foust is laced with Americanisms, place names unfamiliar to those outside her childhood locality and her poems have a decided accent. In spite of this unrecognizable context, Foust is able to draw her readers into her world, allowing us to feel nostalgic warm fuzzies about Wopsonock and "that damn greyhound bus". This collection is a loving gravestone for a family, written in memoriam of the poet's recently deceased parents, which laments the waste in their lives, remembers a backward but familiar town and poignantly illustrates a childhood from both the girl and the woman's perspective.

Given the autobiographical nature of the collection, Foust often runs the risk of becoming overly self-indulgent. At times the poems can lapse into repetitive and bitter elegies, seemingly written to satisfy the poets lingering adolescent frustrations. In *Things Burn Down*, Foust's raw anger over her parents' and grandparents' hardships obscures any kind of accessible meaning. Instead the reader's focus is drawn away from the story by insistence on structure and refrain (the words "damask" and "don't ask" forcing themselves into each equal stanza), and poignancy is lost under a blanket of damask and teenage angst.

Rebecca Foust is more than capable at other times of turning this anger into well-crafted and affecting poetry. *Backwoods* is a painful poem to read. The poet's anger and sadness are clear, but unlike *Things Burn Down* this anger is illustrated in vivid and eloquent verses which disturb in their simplicity. "You'd go back to him, then, your swaggering full-bird second husband?"

I found Foust's tendency for cliché can be a distraction from the emotional power of *Mom's Canoe*. *Altoona to Anywhere* finds her "aspiring to transcend your hardscrabble roots" yet ultimately returning to that home town "in your dreams, your syntax...Kansas will turn out to be Oz/ and Oz Kansas." At places like this I found myself getting bored of 'there's no place like home' style revelations. *Altoona to Anywhere, Kinship of Flesh* and *The Dream* I saw to be disappointing interludes in an otherwise refreshing collection. One of this book's greatest strengths

is the unique way in which it allows us to view the life of a family. The aforementioned poems however drift back to cliché and tired, overdone themes.

Despite these aspects of *Mom's Canoe* which I struggled to get past, Foust was often able to catch me off guard, to feel her own personal tragedy and to stun me with innovative and affecting phrases. From her extended metaphors such as the bees in *The Bees are Inside*, a moving story of gossip and of loss; "the town whisper-buzz", to electric shocks of expression like the doctor who "rolled the stone over the mouth/ of any talk/ about the need to not prolong pain," Rebecca Foust is certainly capable of eloquent communication with her audience.

The continuing mood through this collection is of profound sadness, yet also of celebration. I see *Mom's Canoe* as something like a eulogy for a family that has now passed, leaving behind its only daughter to express her love and grief. Rebecca Foust tracks divorce, the death of friends and family, domestic violence and the loss of innocence. Although her hurt is evident, likened to *How the Fish Feels*; "Gutted, cut to the bone," her love for her family and "hardscrbble roots" is equally so. The title poem perhaps exemplifies this more than any other. The canoe is affectionately likened to its owner, "You, birdsong, watersong, slanting light/ following river bend, swallowed from sight." The overall mood of the poem is of fond memory, yet it is haunted by the memory of the same canoe's earlier appearance in *Backwoods* where Foust again addresses her mother:

...your beloved canoe still lies on its side
Split like your lip
Where he kicked it,
The night you ran home to us
In your nightgown and only one shoe.

This mingled atmosphere of love and affection coupled with grief for the family that died long before her parents in whose memory the book is dedicated, is allowed to build at each poem and create a cohesive whole.

A part of this eulogy is connected with the mining town where this family lived. Foust demonstrates a preoccupation with remnants, physical remnants in the earth and the memories they represent. These remnants are often to be found in the old mine she refers back to, such as the poems *Strip Mine* and *The Quarry*. The latter describes her childish disregard of the death and waste to be found in the mine, but how she was like the "frantic Tarantella and the Mayflies" who "splurged their thirty days" at the abandoned relic. The mine is not her only source of remnants. *Archeological Record* is essentially a list of "each loved thing lost," putting the poet in the position of archeologist with the power to document and judge this society and this family. I believe this is the core of Foust's fascination with anthropological remnants; this collection is one itself. The sub-

jects are her family which is always in the past tense, a thing referred to as lost. *Mom's Canoe* becomes its gravestone and its own archaeological record.

Mom's Canoe is at its best simply but effectively written. It is childlike but with the sad wisdom of an elderly woman. It is an elegy for the town and people Rebecca Foust knew as a child, but it gives them new life in her often unexpected way of carving out their figures. Like the mine and the fossil records she describes, Rebecca Foust gradually reveals her own history with each poem, layer by layer.

Sarah Paterson is in her third year of an English and French degree at the University of Otago. She graduated as Dux from Columba College in 2007 where she also won the Cillia McQueen poetry award several times. Her poetry has been published in Deep South and in Critic magazine where she was also briefly Poetry Editor before the section was inexplicably culled. Other interests include her role as Otago President of the United Nations Youth Association of New Zealand, singing in the Southern Youth Choir, occasional theatre roles and playing with her kitten, Mrs Dalloway.

OGAGA OKUYAGE

Rage, Anger and Indictment in Recent Nigerian Poetry

Without any anticipatory doubt, the disturbances that attended the early years of the newly independent countries, the civil wars, the military coups, the prevalence of political, economic corruption, and the culture of impunity became the cataclysmic developments that dealt a severe blow on the negritude ideology, which has been the touchstone of inspiration for Africa's early writings. It became glaring that one of the leeway out of the political chaos of the immediate postcolonial era was to forge poetic expressions with combative force.

However, self-rule tactically destroyed the relevance of anti-colonial agitations as a literary theme in the artistic vision of the new poets. It became obvious that the new poets should look beyond the colonial devastation of Africa and discover new themes and new approaches to help check the growing internal crisis in the continent. For example, instead of romantically glorifying an abstract concept of negritude, the poets explore and analyze the actual predicament of ordinary people in the new African society. Thus one of the vibrant voices of this era, Funso Aiyejina dubs the poetry of the era as "poetry of an Alter – Native tradition" (112).

The burden of memory and the disenchantment of the people with Africa's independences have no doubt established a symbiotic relationship between the African artist and the continent. Over four decades since most African nations attained self rule, the continent remains in a fixity engendered by the inability of African rulers to translate the bountiful treasures of independence to socio-economic bliss. Chimalum Nwankwo argues that in Africa the only "thing fixed is its desert of pain and despair" (11). The despair and bureaucratic failure of African government have created a permanent mood of depression for the African people. Although African writers continue to resonate the triumph of the people over their adversaries (rulers) and the need to cement their hope in the belief of a better tomorrow in their arts, the current global economic melt down has become a Sisyphean task to overcome since African rulers lack ideas on how to unbound the tangle. Western nations are organizing various packages to stimulate their economies, Africa, no doubt, has nothing to stimulate, because their economies are public driven, that is if there is any.

Africa's biggest burden remains that of corruption. Although, the phenomenon is both endemic and global, its effects on the world vary in degree and form. The problem is "trans-systemic; that is, it inheres in all social systems – feudalism, capitalism, communism and socialism" (Alatas 11). In sub-Saharan Africa, the phenomenon has become the tripod on which public power/office is negotiated and sustained. The pandemic has reached cancerous proportion and become an issue of global concern, because it is the brick wall that has left the continent stunted since the enthronement of self rule.

Scholars and critics have continued to insist over the years that Africa inherited corruption from the bureaucratic ordering of colonial powers dangerously moored on capitalist exploitation. Mumea Mulinge and Gwen Leseted, argue that the "internal context is rooted in Africa's colonial past and its associated legacy while the external context focuses on internal actors" (53). Uzochukwu Njoku, equally locates the emergence of corruption in Africa on the colonial legacy of "the British institution of the Warrant Chieftaincy" (104). Although, the question of corruption in Africa has deep historical roots and legacy, African rulers cannot be exonerated from the disaster of state failures in the continent which William Easterland Ross Levine describes as Africa's "growth tragedy" (1203). An empirical study of corruption will no doubt explain why African democracies are rooted on the politics of allegiance. The politics of allegiance details a system/scheme, by which public/political offices, positions and appointments are shared, distributed or allocated through the degree or magnitude of involvement in fraudulent acts during electioneering process to ensure the victory of one's party. The acts range from carting away ballot boxes, orchestrating violence, manipulating electoral results, truncating justice during electoral cum legal protestations to holistic destruction of electoral materials in order to stall electoral results and allowing oneself to be used to contest offices for which one is not qualified. By this design, the one who sponsors a candidate to victory at the polls dictates how the government is run. The Oyo state gubernatorial tussle in Nigeria between Senator Ladoja and Chief Akala with Chief Adedibu sandwiched between them readily comes to mind here.

The concern of this paper is not corruption, but it provides a methodological approach and a theoretic channel which enhances a conceptualization of the conflictual relationship between African leaderships and artists, especially poets. This approach will equally answer a barrage of puzzles which are indexical to the explication of the relationship between the duo. The questions are why are African leaders unable to deliver the dividends of self-rule? Why do bad policy, corruption, and venality seem so endemic? Why are African states so ineffective? And Chin Ce's all important question on the significance of art to the well being of the society: ''But how further has the literature gone towards the education of society or the political reengineering of the continent?''(4). The thrust of this paper is therefore, geared towards interrogating how artistic expressions expand discursive space and dialogue on national issues and gives us alternative constructs and possibilities about Nigerian realities, cultures, and identities.

Since Nigerian poets have been able to identify fault-lines in the political systems of their nation, the language of their poetry changed from the private interest it assumed during the late 1950s and early 1960s to a vehicle for mass activism and orientation. The battle line is drawn and the masses must know that their whiter than white brothers are responsible for their deplorable plight. Biodun Jeyifo captures the transmogrification at the level of language when he remarks that:

> For while the older poets generally deployed a diction and a Metaphor, highly allusive universe but a small coterie of specialists, the new poets have taken the language of poetry, diction of figurative expression, to the market place... (315).

This innovation finds voice in Niyi Osundare's first poetry collection, *Songs of the Market Place,* which Dan Izevbaye describes as "programmatic" (321) in organization. It begins with a manifesto and ends with a note of the birth of an African renaissance:

> Poetry is
> Not the esoteric whisper
> Of an excluding tongue
> Not a claptrap
>
> For a wondering audience
> Not a learned quiz
> Entombed in Grecoroman lore
> ...
> poetry is
> no oracle's kernel
> for a sole philosopher's stone
> poetry
> is
> man
> meaning
> to man (3)

This poem innovatively redefines the poetic possibilities of African poetry at the level of language and message. If the Nigerian masses are to be galvanized into action the medium for dispersal of information should be situated within the scope of their linguistic capacity. Osundare's position here articulates the importance of mutual intelligibility during communication. If the dialogue between a reader and a text fails to establish a field of sheared experience, the conduit of communication between both has therefore, broken down and the entire exercise becomes baseless. Poetry should not just serve the purpose of entertainment but it should address burning issues in the society and the reader should be able to make the lines of the poetry not only utilitarian but motivational and arouse questions bordering on existence. As stated earlier, the new trend of poetic expression emanates from the dismal economic dilemma of most African countries, which lay bare the hiatus between the rich and poor. In order that the African predicament does not linger, poetry must be functional rather than being a mere political instrument for propaganda. If the utilitarian function of African poetry has to be efficacious, like Ojaide suggests, the language has to be public oriented. From this perspective, one

can recall the charming rhapsodic evocative lines of Odia Ofeimun's poetry. In the "prologue," one notices a voice addressing his audience directly with clarity of vision and mission:

> I have come down
> to feel for ears and hearts and hands
> to rise with me
> when I say the words
> of my mouth
> (Poet Lied: 1)

The idea of coming down is very important for the poets of the present generation, because the poetry of the preceding generation alienated the people and it equally created the room for their isolation because their employment of language spans beyond the language capacity of their readers thereby confining poetry to the ivory towers. Ofeimun's personae resonates the voice of not just a story teller, or a griot, but one willing to tell his tales by the fireside. Fireside here is indicative of the popular location and province of the marginalized people of Africa who are usually found around the abject corners and basements of the society.

This demystification of language, re-orientation and re-conscientization of the masses is geared towards exposing the burdens of Africa enveloped in the history of the time. Osundare in "Udoji" recounts the yearnings and aspirations of the people against the provisions of government:

> We ask for food and water
> to keep our toiling frames
> on the hoe
> but they inundate us with udoji
> now pockets burst with arrears
> but market stalls are empty
> gari is dearer than eyes
> a naira cannot buy a yam.
> ...
> Tell the givers of this bribe
> That what we need
> Is more than money can buy (36).

The poem is a mockery of a government that is insensitive to the plight of the people. They know what the people desire, but because of greed, they will rather make them have what they think they should have. This way, they may keep something for themselves at the expense of the voiceless majority.

The masses doubt government's intentions even when they are sometimes sincere. The doubt is a demonstration of the people's sense of anguish over the monu-

mental failures of the rulers. Although, they are responsible for the emergence of some of these rulers through democratic processes which are usually hijacked by the vocal minority, the people see themselves as exiles at home because they are never allowed access to the commonwealth. This exposition of the dismal plight of the masses and their abysmal loss of hope is captured in Osundare's "Excursions 1" in *Songs of the Market Place:*

> We see the farmer shaving earth's head
> with a tiny hoe, his back a creaking
> bow of disintegrating disc
> from dawn's dew to dusk's dust
> offering futile sacrifices
> to a creamless soil (8)

Nnimmo Bassey's "We thought it was Oil but it was Blood" becomes a travesty of the expectations of the masses. Sometimes the poets in their exploration of the plight of the masses adopt post-structuralist binarism in their approach to address the dismal conditions of the people. This technique gives the reader an opportunity to easily distinguish the rulers from the ruled and make glaring the consequences of the insincerity of government on the people. In Osundare's ''*Moonsongs* xxii," the tone is not only propagandistic, but a testimony of the social divides between the *high ups* and the *low downs*:

Ikoyi

> The moon here
> is a laundered lawn
> its grass the softness of infant fluff
> silence grazes like a joyous lamb,
> doers romp on lazy hinges
> the ceiling is a sky
> weighted down by chandeliers
> of pampered stars.

Ajejunle

> here the moon
> is a jungle
> sad like a forgotten beard
> with tensioned climbers
> and under growths of cancerous fury:

cobras of anger spit in every brook
and nights are one long prowl
of swindled leopards
The moon is a mask dancing . . . (42).

The poem addresses post-independent Nigerian crises and appraises the social realities and problems previously ignored. The continued betrayal of the African masses by the rulers begins to calcify the poetic lines of these poets, yet, they are not drowned in their rage.

Onookome Okome a recent poetic voice also remarks about the insensitivity of government in 'Family of Stone':

Lips hang high and cloudy, and you, the
Dreaded Olorogun, sting the air
With your words of blood.
You have cast me out of
The territory of my nation and
I grow in sacrifice and distance (Mammi wata :46)

The poem above is an indictment of the Nigerian rulers for their depravity and idiocy and their inability to meet the needs and prodigal desires of the ordinary people who they claim they represent. Governance for these African rulers is characterized by self-centeredness to the exclusion of the masses who are supposed to be the employers of the rulers. The idea of government has become so frustrating that the people are beginning to flee their primordial base and source of livelihood to seek alternatives outside the continent. The poem carries the tone of unquestionable and inextinguishable defiance and the mood is that of dejection because the personae has been forced into exile -a condition created by the absence of basic amenities which should make life relishing, engendered by the insensitivity of government.

Tanure Ojaide in "*The Fate of Vultures*" frowns against the progressive plundering and degradation of Africa's wealth by insatiate rulers and begs his memory god, Aridon to come to the rescue:

O Aridon, bring back my wealth
from rogue – vaults;
legendary witness to comings and goings,
memory god, my mentor,
blaze an ash-trial to the hands
that buried mountains in their bowels
lifted crates of cash into their closets. (11).

This poem is written to mock government. The occasion is the funeral ceremony of an ex-governor of Benue state. While the masses mock the occasion and see the funeral ceremony as laughable, because the governor while alive was very egocentric and forgot his duty to the people and he never anticipated the pains and mortality of mankind, the political class celebrates him as they are equally self-centred as members of the exploitative class. The poem equally cautions these leaders that their fate will no doubt be like that of their dead comrade if they do not adjust their perception of governance. Ojaide employs predatory imagery and avian metaphor to make the message lucid.

These poets do not chant their songs only with a raging temper; they are also visionaries in the suffocating walls of their country. African poetry from the 1980s to date becomes a package of rage and hope. These poets recount the history of Nigeria faintly, but with an urgent need for the truncation of the exploitative tendencies of the rulers.

One other issue that continues to attract attention in recent Nigerian poetry especially those written by poets from micro-minority states where oil exploration and exploitation is gradually reducing the area to a waste land is the Niger Delta question. This question gives expression to the ecological devastation of the Niger-Delta area, a marginal scape in Nigeria which the government continues to rudely ignore regardless of the fact that the area is responsible for the country's economic survival and its geopolitical placement in the world. John Ejobowah gives the question a more conceptual outlook when he describes it as a question that has to do "with conflict arising from the federal government's control of oil recourses and the distribution of their revenue among the constituent states of the federation, and oil communities' ownership claims to the resources"(29).The crisis in the area has attracted both international and local media; however, when issues of this turbulent-scape are relayed in the media, it is the violence in the area that is hegemonised or forgrounded. Making the Niger-Delta people look mean and bloody especially when headlines of media capture the abduction of foreign expatriates or their gruesome murder and the vandalization of pipelines and oil installations in oil facilities located in the area. Poets who capture the turbulence in the area push the debate a bit further, by making their art a little journalistic in order to conceptualize the violence to enable a sincere and critical appraisal of the issue. Currently the administration of President Umar Yar'Adua has sanction air raids in Delta state, precisely the Gbaramatu clan one of the micro-minority states in the area because of the recent confrontation between the youths and the special military task force in the area (Joint Task Force). The speaker of the lower house of the National Assembly has recommended that the raid should be extended to other Niger-Delta states. Sanctioning air raids on local civil societies for resisting government ploys to reduce them to exiles at home aptly expresses that government's sense of inhumanity to fellow men and the gross devaluation of human right in refusing a people a sense of attachment to their primordial base.

Tanure Ojaide occupies a canonical and inaugural position when issues of the Niger-Delta are discussed in literature. He is a conscious poet, whose canvas is inundated with the history and the extent of devastation on the ecology of the area occasioned by the greed of the Nigerian government and their foreign collaborators. The dominant mood of the poems in his collection of poetry, *Delta Blues and Home songs* is depression and the tone is that of lamentation occasioned by the mindless rape of the ecology of the area. Ojaide's ability to capture the extent of devastation of his home land is informed by his strength of memory. Through childhood remembrances, he documents the gradual disappearance of a once pristine idyll to the craving and craze for wealth powered by industrial capitalism. This foregrounds the increasing gap between the fortunes of the exploited and exploiters. What the poet observes as an idyllic and pellucid site of a stable childhood experience has become an anathema to the continuous existence of the Niger Delta people. The poems in the collection embarrass one with the images of a lost landscape and the chaos of recollecting childhood memories engendered by the calculated exploitative activities of oil prospectors. Ojaide vibrantly contest a system that breaches the law of distributive justice and isolate a people from their primordial attachment and economic lifeline:

> Snails and *koto* lured me
> to tear through tangles
> that seasoned my soles
> to defy every distance.
> *Urhurhu* grapes coloured
> My tongue scarlet,
> The *owe* apple fell to me
> As cherries and breadfruit
> On wind-blessed days.
> The cotton tree made me
> fly for tossed-out fluffs;
> the gum tree took fingerprints
> before invisible policemen.
> *Ikere* froglets fell from skies
> that covered the land
> with tropical sheets;
> the skipper-fish overflew
> culverts into fisher's ambush(12-13).

In ''When green was the lingua franca'' Ojaide evokes the power of memory to reinvent the Delta of his childhood ''teeming with life'' (12). He creates a balance between the greenness of his naïve childhood and that of the Deltascape before the devastation of the region through oil exploration. The poet equally reveals stability or stable relations between man and his natural endowment/habitat. This ideal

between man and the environment, whereby he benefits from it to sustain himself is truncated by what Charles Bodunde describes as a ''violent history of multinational exploitation helped by the military has upset the communal bonds of the Delta''(198). Ojaide makes emphatic the symbol of shell as the predominant agent of the gradual destruction of the landscape through oil exploitation. Through images of nature and the imagery of destruction, the poet reconfigures the changing fortunes of the landscape. This is shown through the shift from the green landscape to a shell made ''hell of flares'' (13). The severance of the organic relation between man and the Deltascape is aptly captured as the ''eternal rift'' (13) by the explorations of shell'' (13). This rift becomes the disruption of normal life in the Delta and the continuous crises in the area.

Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of The Delta* does not only capture the destruction of the landscape, lifescape is equally threatened. In ''Oil rivers'' the poet personae laments the pains of being a Deltan:

> I am of
> The Oil Rivers,
> Where rivers are
> Oil
> and can
> neither,
> quench my thirst
> nor
> anoint my head (20).

The poem lucidly demonstrates that the large deposit of oil in the area does not effect any reasonable change or development of the inhabitant of the Deltascape. The lamentation of the personae vibrantly reflects the grievances of the people directed against both at the state and the oil companies who have been accused of contributing too little in return for the huge profits they rake into their coffers from oil exploration. Nnimmo Bassey's *We thought it was oil but it was blood* tackles more of environmental problems, his poetry details the consequences of the mindless rape of the landscape. The collection makes very frantic appeal to the gross devaluation of the Deltascape. It brings to the fore the hazards of spillage and gas flaring which accompany the oil exploration and exploitation and its effect –the degradation of the environment which has left the area desolate. In ''when the earth bleeds'' Bassey demonstrates that oil exploration only destroys the environment and reduces the opportunity for human survival in the area:

> *The oil only flows*
> *When the earth bleeds*
> What shall we do?
> What must we do?

Do we just sit?
Wail and mope?
Arise people, Arise
Let's unite
With our fists
Let's bandage the earth
Because

The oil only flows
When the earth bleeds

The oil only flows
When the earth bleeds (17).

These poets' rage and anger only explain the galloping grievances which the Nigerian government continues to ignore. The Niger Delta people, responsible for the wealth of the nation are still the most backward group in the country. Their backwardness is total because they are not only deprived access to their wealth which the majority ethnic groups use to develop their areas; their sources of livelihood are equally vanishing. As the environment is degraded by the day, the people loose their attachment to their primordial base. As long as oil explorations continue they cannot farm or fish, because the effects of oil exploration are the waste land and the polluted rivers in the Niger Delta. As long as revenue allocation is not premised on the basis of the principle of derivation, the Niger Delta will remain backward and the Nigerian government will continue to encounter perennial truncation in the flow of oil from the area and like Eghosa Osaghae opines, ''There is therefore an even urgent need to address the grievances of these areas if the country's oil-based economy is to be sustained'' (344).

Nigerians are no longer in the unending search for the origins of their deplorable conditions. Robert Young suggests: "Poverty and starvation,..., are often not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but arise from a failure to distribute them" (135). These poets call for a new Pan Africanism which brooks neither external dependence nor internal despotism and social deprivation. The poetry of the moment expresses a renaissance that could metaphorically refer to a 'second independence' which has found voice in recent Nigerian poetry. Bassey in ''We thought it was oil but it was blood" carries a resilient tone, but points to regeneration after the incessant battery and plundering of the poor and their commonwealth respectively:

They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will rise
We may die

And Yet stay alive. (*We Thought it was Oil*: 15)

The idea is radiantly articulated in Osundare's "I sing of change":

I sing
of the beauty of Athens
without its slaves

of a world free
of kings and queens
and other remnants
of an arbitrary past

of earth
with no
sharp North
or deep South
without blind curtains
or iron walls

of deserts treeing
and fruiting
after the quickening rains

of the sun
radiating ignorance
and stars informing
nights of unknowing
I sing of a world reshaped. (90)

This could seem glints of utopia and the exigency for its translation into actionable programmes cannot be contested. Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 and recently experienced for the first time in the geo-political history of the nation a transition from one democratic regime to another. Could that occasion be the touch-stone for Africa's 'second independence'? Ezenwa Ohaeto in the *Chants of a Minstrel* asks a question whose answer is a question mark to the African renaissance:

Just one request Mr. President
Now that we are democratic
Now that we have equal opportunities
Can I have your seat for one day only? (Chants:9)

The excerpt above carries an uncompromising tone of doubt. The incessant failures,

governmental misrule and bureaucratic inefficiency displayed by African rulers are what have created the room for this doubt. The poem, which vibrantly accentuates and resonates the voice of the people, articulates their frustrations over their inability to have access to government, hence on most occasions, they boycott elections and the political class distributes offices amongst themselves and appropriate resources as they desire, because the masses regard elections as exercise in futility and mass intimidation.

As seen from the ardent struggles for democratization attendant to the disillusionment with independence for close to fifty years, Nigerian poets have continued to resist dictators, and their poetry exposes them to a battery of revelations, which have made Africans spend an inordinate amount of time writing about despotic leadership and corruption in Africa. This is very palpable in African scholarship to the extent they have been blamed for being long on criticism at the expense of positive suggestions. Little wonder, Okome's "Poetry" in *Pendants* hopes poetry in Africa assumes a very pragmatic stance:

> I have often slept empty.
> I have walked marooned streets and arcades
> with this slim thought:
> When shall I witness the violence
> of the poetry of my generation: this gift
> That the times place upon our brows?
> A living expectations of a generation's poetry:
> An expectation that poems would one day
> Walk into streets
> Shy and spiritless as the streets may be and
> Slap some faces into true knowledge
> of man and things;
> finish the sentences begun,
> open the faith ways of unbelievers,
> rework this wonderful pathos to forget,
> To steal the present that is us,
> To steal the future in its foetal cradle
> and make poetry make things happen.
> O *my epoch is a silent saddle. Idiots ride* (Pendants: 50).

Recent Nigerian poetry treats themes of Africa's political history, themes not in themselves new, yet now so presented as to give the poetry a new significance and dimensions, revealing springs of action showing the important bearings of Africa's political currents, and some features that are but briefly explored in previous poetic engagements. As seen from the manifestation of contemporary Nigerian poetry, memory helps in the evocation of emotions because poetry points man to a better world. African poetry continues to be poignantly political because of the changing

pulse of the continent's socio-political history. Nigerian poetry captures the historical experience to which the nation has been subjected. Above every other thing, the poets do not just witness the historical burdens of Nigeria in their arts, they equally interrogate them. Contrary to George Nyamndi's contention that ''Africa goes where its literature takes it'' (566), this essay insists that African literature, poetry in particular gravitates towards where history directs it, considering the fact that artistic expressions are braided into historical phenomena. African literature remains undoubtedly the pulse of the continent because it has continued to function as a pie chart where the cultural and socio-political life of the people are aptly captured and appraised. Tanure Ojaide establishes the above position when he asserts that ''the direction of a national literature depends not only on the writers, but also on sociological factors, the condition of the people and time, and economic, political and other realities'' (84). Ultimately, historical happenings determine the direction of African poetry.

To sum, the counter-narratives appraised in this paper are eloquent testament of the dramas of everyday existence in Nigeria. They equally negate the dominant prescriptions of a national culture the government offers. Presently, the Nigerian government continues to assert its position on the issue of national regeneration through the president's Seven-Point Agenda and the politics of Re-branding popularly celebrated by the 'squealer' of the administration. A critical appraisal of these two politics will only accentuate the fact that they are mere assertion of private will devoid of any pragmatic political ideology or will. Nigerian poetry offer an alternative to these politics and government agenda through hidden messages and direct indictment articulated in allegories, images, metaphors, innuendos which are coded allusions geared towards exposing what Timaya designates as "True Story."

These counter-narratives are very utilitarian and functional because they help in the enhancement of knowledge of the politics of civil society which the dominant ideology struggles to shield from public glare. This function of the artist as Apple puts it becomes "a conscious collective attempt to *name the world differently to* positively refuse to accept dominant meanings and to positively assert the possibility that the world could be different and seen with different lenses." Thus, a new politics of identity and belonging, one which reflects postcolonial Nigeria boldly has become a signpost for articulating the idea of political representation. It also addresses the issue of naming and defining what it takes to be Nigerian in both postcolonial and global context and what self-rule holds for the postcolony.

These poetic expressions are therefore, not just counter-narratives but artistic rebounds occasioned by the inefficiency of Nigeria's fiscal institutions and the bureaucratic deficiencies of the country's political systems stirred by the politically barren rulers. There is so much rage and anger in the poets discussed in this paper and the theme of accusation inundates them. One other important feature of these arts is the obsession with message and the medium of delivery. This is strictly because the rulers are on assizes in these arts for their inglorious attitude. However, the perspective from which these artists create is socialist, which axiomatically advocates

egalitarianism and a just equitable distribution of resources. Nigerian creative arts therefore, remain poignantly political because of the socio-political temper of the time and the dismal economic conditions of the people.

The idea of bridging the hiatus between the performer and the artists is an important aspect when considering the poetry under review in this paper in articulating how Nigerian poets from the 1980s have employed performance as a means of reaching their audience, thereby giving poetry back its soul which has been wrung in the poetry of Okigbo/Soyinka/Clark generation because of the eccentric and private currents of the poetry. However, I do not insist that the poetry of the preceding generation lacks this attribute which one can easily recognize in the poetry of Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark and Okara, the present generation of poets employ performance as a dominant technique to make their poetry people oriented. The rage and the anger in recent Nigerian poetry may be confused for an exhaustion of poetic materials to articulate the socio-political problems in Nigeria. However, in order to understand the nature and reasons for the diatribe in this poetry, one must consider the fact that Nigeria, since independence continues to remain in a permanent state of tentativeness. The anger and rage become an emphatic expression of the frustration of the people over the in ability of government to make things function beyond a provisional state. The poet, therefore, becomes the moral guardian of his/her people's conscience. As long as the government continues to fail in their duty to provide functional system, the writers will continue to expose their bureaucratic failures and inefficiency. Recent Nigerian poetry is not only characterized by rage and anger, the poets call for socio-economic justice as a route out of the labyrinthine socio-political sodden the leaders have plunged the nation into. Invariably as the poets rage and criticize, the equally propose a vision of hope beyond the current problems.

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ELIZABETH SMITHER

The Question of Plot

This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm, this England.
(William Shakespeare, 1564-1616.)

A friend, a genre novelist – too good to be merely that – has been e-mailing me on the subject of plot. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, a comment comes and I add it to the debate. Is the genre-novel, for instance, *too* plot-driven? She is about to submit her latest novel to a huge international publisher, which last year sent an open letter to its authors saying it wanted best-sellers. My friend is an habitué of the British Library, nodded at by the guards and sometimes writing strange piebald letters to me from there – pencil when a guard hovers, pen when he moves on: a breach of this rule would mean her expulsion – and over time she has made a certain historical period her own. So real in fact that as she walks along the London streets she can plot markers and signifiers from the research she has just lifted her head from. What a layer of ghostly footprints floats above a single cobblestone.

The demand it seems, behind the insistence of plot and plotting, is that the reader, like some courtier hanging on the favour of a monarch or high official, should have the work of page-turning done for her. Or at least the effort is firmly back in the author's court. Say 80% the fault of the author if the pages, especially those vital ones at the beginning, do not catch. If London does not catch fire and the flames race through straw and falling roof beams.

'So you perhaps have too much plot? Too much need of plot?' I e-mail and she groans that she feels she needs more. More and more, like Oliver Twist. And then, for I am nothing if not a devil's advocate kind of friend and a producer of irritability, I begin to argue against plot as if it is a boil that needs lancing, and she should get herself an apothecary.

For it seems to me whenever I am reading anything good – Antigone Kefala's *Sydney Journals; Reflections 1970-2000* (Giramondo, 2008) at the moment and before that *An infinity of little hours; five young men and their trial of faith in the Western World's most austere monastic order* by Nancy Klein Maguire (Public Affairs, 2006) – that the desire to slow down while I am reading is the surest guide to quality I know. Of course neither of these books was plot-driven, though they were gripping and caused me to frequently look up from the page I was on and *think*. In the case of the Carthusian novices the word might have been *meditate*.

But lest you think I a) have no sympathy for my fellow-author or b) that my reading is always of the highest level, let me reach down my hand for the Sue Grafton which is lying to one side of the pile of books. *A for Alibi* ends with the serial nov-

elist's sleuth, Kinsey Millhone, trapped inside a giant trash bin, squashed down on wrappers and peel and unmentionable squelchy objects, firing her trusty .32 automatic into the face of the villain the second he raises the lid.

Here's the finale:

'I shrank, pulling the gun up, hands shaking. Maybe I was crazy. Maybe I was making a fool of myself. I hated hide-and-seek. I'd never been good at that as a kid. I always jumped right out when anyone got close because the tension made me want to wet my pants. I felt tears rising. Oh Jesus, not *now*, I thought feverishly. The fear was like a sharp pain. My heart hurt me every time it beat, making the blood pound in my ears. Surely he could hear that. Surely he knew now where I was.

He lifted the lid. The beams from his headlights shone against his golden cheek. He glanced over at me. In his right hand was a butcher knife with a ten-inch blade.

I blew him away'.

I e-mailed my friend the next day, after I'd finished *A* and was reaching out my hand for *B is for Burglar*.

'I think there's a point at which plot contrives to destroy the writing. At least, by causing the reader to skim on to the raising of the trash bin lid, the other writing that Sue Grafton indulges in – the descriptions of a California lifestyle, the desert, the silence inside houses when they are being burgled, the strange Hungarian cooking at Rosie's diner – are almost obliterated, so keen is the reader to turn the page. Now it is the reader who is 80% page turner and the author who is practically redundant'.

Take this piece of description that seems to constitute a genre-type pause:

'Living with the climate in Santa Teresa is rather like functioning in a room with an overhead light fixture. The illumination is uniform – clear and bright enough – but the shadows are gone and there is a disturbing lack of dimension. The days are blanketed with sunlight. Often it is sixty-seven degrees and fair. The nights are consistently cool. Seasonally it does rain but the rest of the time, one day looks very much like the next and the constant, cloudless blue sky has a peculiar, disorientating effect, making it impossible to remember where one is in the year. Being in a building with no exterior windows gives the same impression: a subliminal suffocation, as though some, but not all, of the oxygen has been removed from the air'.

I draw my friend's attention – she hardly needs this, it borders on her period of expertise – to those 18th century novelists with their alternating moralising chapters where the reader – (perhaps a forbidding father with a low opinion of novels has just come into the room – 'I'm just reading the *moral* bits, Pater) – took or ignored a reflective pause. Like a quiet patch in a symphony that is going to end in cacophony. You can tell I am the most irritating e-mail correspondent and my connection with these often-skimmed chapters is obvious. I simply want writing slowed down, and I think even genre-writing should have this freedom.

My friend is now frantically cutting and excising, looking for the next plot pothole into which the horse can stumble, the villain can be thrown, or maimed, or per-

haps a romantic rescuer appear. (There are genre-types like styles of clothing: full fig, cloak with dagger in the stocking, a dress made entirely of fast-working zips.) 'Try to be subversive,' I e-mail. 'See if you can get away with a little lethargy.'

There's another memory, of a festival at Harbourfront years ago, at which I met Jane Gardam. We talked about plot there too, after listening to a writer we both decided we disliked – not because the writing lacked quality – but we both felt everything was over-explained. 'Prose needs air, it needs room for the reader to come into the room and take up a position behind the curtains,' Jane said, as we strolled, looking out at Lake Ontario. In the excerpt the criticised author had read, a forty-plus woman scooped a little glob of makeup onto her palm and applied it, with each stroke lovingly recorded. Admittedly she was facing a very difficult dinner party but Jane was adamant it was too much. The top of the bottle was screwed on again, or it may have been left off (another instance of spoiling). The air in the dressing room was decidedly stuffy and excluding.

I can't help thinking of Anita Brookner, none of whose plots are particularly convincing. Parents quietly die while having a cup of tea and leave hesitant daughters, whose boldest exertions seem to be looking out the window as night comes on, or changing their library books (an occasional one works in a very undemanding bookshop which cannot make enough to pay the rent).

And yet Anita Brookner has caused me to re-read her long cadences (it is simplifying their merits to merely call them sentences) more than almost any other writer I know. She has a special vocabulary of her own in which words re-appear – resembling old friends – opacity, solipsism, insouciance.

She also she has this mean ability with the little dialogue she employs. Considerable cattiness will be present and the desire to manipulate others. Innocence has its pitfalls – the tortoise and the hare is a theme – and a very little happiness may have to suffice. But the plot is minimal and, as I insist to my friend with her manuscript now spread out and being cut like a dress pattern and parts re-stitched together, she is *very popular* in America. (This is too insufferable to warrant a reply).

Regard these grave beguiling sentences: 'The flat had represented a new beginning when he had first seen it .That new beginning had not materialized, or rather it had materialized into an eventless existence which he had had to fashion for himself. This had not been entirely unrewarding, although without the kind of passionate engagement that he found he still desired. Now that it might be threatened he felt his latent attachment to the place ready to burst forth, to proclaim his right to remain in exactly the same circumstances that had appealed to him at the outset of this particular adventure'.

After tactlessly mentioning Anita Brookner, the next e-mail changes the subject. My friend merely states she is taking a week off to rest her brain. Perhaps the quantity of plot required will become clear when she resumes. Some of the research from the British Library will be subsumed or jettisoned. All research must, of course, be worn lightly. There is no need to enumerate what is on the 18th century dressing table since everything is familiar to the character who reaches for her wig pomad and flour powder.

I go on thinking about plot, though. How does it compare to furnishings or character analysis, to landscape and setting, to modes of travel and ways of earning a living? Is it, compared to the lives we live, after they have been mulled over and scrutinised for clues, something important and underpinnning or something as artificial as a silk rose pinned on a coat lapel? Would we be wiser to say, as Shakespeare does, 'this plot of *earth*'. And if plot in its unearthed state is in short supply in our lives, why should it assume such importance in writing?

I suspect this longing for plot is seen more in readers than writers. In those who do not write fiction there is often a longing for a shape and plan that life can rarely provide. A popular word is 'closure' but for many something less crime-infested is being sought.

'I wanted to see how you'd turned out,' a school friend, insisting on paying a visit, said. We spent a mildly pleasant weekend, talking, dining, and all the time I felt like a character in a novel. Was I measuring up? Did I have enough plotlines of my own to offer to make her visit worthwhile? Was I being added, like a minor plot, to her life?

Perhaps this is responsible for the great hunger at literary festivals. As if authors might be able to show how to bring this about. As if there are templates – are there not said to be a mere seven types of novel? – to which our lives could roughly fit.

The opposite – leaving aside my friend's ongoing effort to conform – is more likely to be true. Authors, once they have their hands in the mess that is fiction, hardly believe in comfortable closure and are rightly suspicious of plot. Think how suspicious of it Ian McEwan must have been in writing *On Chesil Beach*. Of course there is a plot: two inexperienced people marry. But the conclusion of the novel reveals, besides the limits and misunderstandings of love, the limits of plot. The two characters cannot simply be 'plotted' back together. What opens before them is the rest of their lives, in fact, time. The most moving part of the novel, beside the delicacies of misunderstanding, is this wide physical and mental landscape that opens, like a Turner painting, onto a scene of mist and doubt.

The e-mails continued back and forth. The genre-novel *must* be strongly plotted, my friend insisted. It was no use trying to convince her otherwise. Its direction must be firm and easily grasped. The details of what characters are wearing, how they are earning a meagre wage, how they are attempting to rise in the world, are the icing on the cake. (I sensed it was these parts my friend loved. Just as Elizabeth Knox does and will explain in her lectures on how to furnish a novel). Where did I read recently that doing the washing before there were washing machines took one day a week from the life of a woman? Surely that was an important day. Plotless, the genre-editor will say. The author might well want to riposte: a day when thinking got done as well as stirring the copper.

I decided to stop tormenting my friend –'a great plum pudding' one reviewer had written of her previous novel – and thought instead of all she managed to sneak in, under the radar of the regular drumbeat of the recurring plot. If her readers had the sense to slow slightly they would be rewarded with plum-like riches.

We often talk of our separate careers, our divergent, as she imagines, styles. We have e-mailed on this, more often than on the plot question, and are no closer to solving it. It's as if we are both nurses in training and she has gone off to some lowly-regarded non-teaching establishment and I have skipped through the portals of St Thomas's and am looking at the carriage Florence Nightingale took to the Crimea. It's nonsense, I want to say. Utter nonsense. But then I look down and see I am wearing a red cloak with crossover ties.

'It's not so bad in New Zealand', my friend suggests. You can get a manuscript onto an editor's desk and he will pick it up and read it. It is true I have no agent and she has a fiendishly clever one. But it is this agent who is telling her how lucky she is and how she must adapt. If they want more plot, she must give it. Or she must cut some of her fine paragraphs to the bone. At her back is the ghostly press of good moderately-selling authors who no longer make the grade.

I read an article about one of these writers recently. She had a lined but not unattractive face and wore a drifting scarf. Her publisher is no longer so keen on her work and she has had to shift for herself. She still presents herself as successful at the festivals she attends – probably wearing the scarf – and she still has her loyal readers. She doesn't like to tell them that royalties have shrunk year by year and she is forced to teach night classes just to keep her head (proudly) above water. For young writers coming on, she is fearful.

It does seem better in New Zealand. An editor might phone and tell you he is halfway through your novel and is enjoying it. (You wait a few agonising weeks, wondering if the second half will hold up.) And publication is usually quicker.

My friend, when she has gone through all the hurdles, will join a queue with a lag of eighteen months. She might have less say about the cover; she will promote more tirelessly. She will feel, however well she performs, like a suppliant.

When I was in Britain three years ago, on a little book tour, organised by a small poetry publisher – festivals, libraries, bookshops, the upper rooms of pubs – I felt exceedingly sorry for the books he had to collect up again from the Borders' chains – they were allowed a certain shelf-occupancy time and no longer. At the end of a reading in Tottenham Court Road – twenty or so people sitting on plastic chairs, a buzzing microphone, and ten or so books forlornly scattered on a signing table; a few people passing leaned their arms on shelves and lingered for a time –

I could sense my publisher's weariness as he manoeuvred two large suitcases stuffed with his books through the door. To cheer me up he pointed to a glass case in which fifteen or so copies of my book were sealed. 'These will be gone by morning,' he said. 'Punters who like to take a chance on new editions.'

Perhaps they sold them later on eBay.

My friend that night cooked a chicken and the publisher and his managing editor and I, after we'd hauled the suitcases through her front door, celebrated with a New Zealand wine. There was no question of taking the author to dinner and the relief on his face when I passed on the invitation was palpable. Later we trundled the suitcases to the bus stop, the start of their long journey back to Lancashire. Together

we cleared the table, stacked the dishwasher. The world with plot which my friend inhabited and mine, the poetic one, with no plot and hardly any sales at all.

In Antigone's *Journal VI* there is a reassuring quote from Patrick White. He says, in an ABC interview that 'Australian literature can be developed only from inner experiences, when there are people making inner discoveries in this landscape, and have the courage to write about them'. I think of my friend, now bent over her fourth or fifth draft – the first she regards as something like a dressmaker's dummy, the pattern pinned up in old calico – and wonder what she would think of this opinion. I think she would barely have time to raise her head, so intent must she be on isolating the climaxes of plot, ensuring that the preceding action leads cleanly to them (despite the protests of the characters who are dragging their feet) and that there is not too much time before the fading away of one crisis, like water escaping down a drain, is built up again by another downpour. How much plot does Janet Frame have, I ask myself? Or Maurice Gee? (I am presuming that Patrick White's words apply here as well). Isn't it possible, if his prescription is to be followed, that plot might lead to a clear moment of insight, a psychological truth resisted and almost obliterated by action, but then revealed. I think of the psychologies at work in *Plumb*, even the Katherine Mansfield story, *Bliss*, where a blossoming pear tree is a counterfoil to adultery. Not only that, but its match, its long-term proven superior.

There's another quote to e-mail, one that will appeal after hours of research at the British Library, the painstaking lowering of the head and then raising it, heavy and seemingly full of blood. Isabel Allende speaking of the world view of Latin American Indians 'who believe that one's past is always before one, providing knowledge for the acquisition of wisdom, while the future is just a black pit behind'. I feel sure this will cheer.

Plot, of course, may be nothing more than the human longing for a story. This happened and then that. May you live in interesting times, as the Chinese say to those they do not count as friends. May there be invasions, floods, disturbances of climate, political unrest. Linking them together, since they are the most obvious peaks and troughs, provides a continuum. It is not the continuum that Patrick White recommended but no one can say it is not there. The continuum White wanted for his native country was to run alongside the events as they occurred, thinking, musing, being changed. When the events recurred – the bush fire, the drought, the wife leaving for the city – they would be seen as not the most important things even if they felt so at the time.

My friend has worked very hard, in a mode that would like to relegate the humdrum, at showing that her not-so-well off characters must earn a living. It's strange to find a parallel here with Anita Brookner whose characters have the leisure to make themselves into genre-heroines if they desire. Instead, with White's approval, they spend their time thinking, watching, observing, wondering about success and why it eludes them. And then whether the success that eludes is worth having. The wicked, in Brookner's novels, are often waited on by the thinkers who take the role

of the moralising chapters in Fielding or Richardson.

All this, I suppose, shows that the novel, whatever labels are applied to it: literary fiction, genre fiction, mutants of both, is as varied as its readers. No one can subsist on a diet of aspiring monks or gossamer diaries; the hand reaches over the bed to the pile of thrillers, the historical novel that wears its research like a low-cut bodice. We do not always want to wade through the thoughts of others. And, in any case, shouldn't the thoughts of others constitute a plot in themselves?

'It's something I can't solve,' I write in my next email. 'The novel's an artificial thing. Perhaps that is the most important thing to remember. And the artificiality is our own creation. Each novel its own artificiality. Artificial you. Artificial me.'

The editor my friend is dealing with is very active, decisive. He can speed read and cut to the core of what is lacking in very little time. His opinions tend to be brutal. The whole novel shakes like a building in an earthquake. He may say the foundations are wrong. Or a character is aberrant. He may criticise a road taken, as in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*

> *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*
> *And sorry I could not travel both*
> *And be one traveller...*

I imagine right now, as she straightens up from her primitive but oddly satisfying cut-and-paste that my friend has not given away too many items of clothing, too many splashes from hansom cab or too many outdoor or interior settings. She will slow the plot down, as much as she can, by stealth.

In the beginning we sat around in caves – deep inside them where paintings could be inscribed on walls – paintings full of action and bold outlines – the manes of animals positively wave in the breeze. The stories told then must have included a good deal of plot. But they were told in circumstances that were slower than the daily life. As the fire died down or smoked, and they prepared to sleep. Tales that sank into the mind and were revisited in dreams. But in the telling there was just the faintest trace of Brookner consideration and my friend was right about plot.

My own understanding of plot is far feebler, more sketchy. I rely on my unconscious, as I write, to suggest the next turning. I tend to get absorbed in the thoughts of the characters so they tangle with mine and become a hybrid. 'Something must happen,' a little voice says in my ear. There are too many sentences starting with 'Perhaps.' Is this the character's confusion or mine? It is easy to see it is the author, clutching at a rudiment that is missing. Not that this can be defined: in a novelist with a poorly-honed sense of plot, it feels like more like a malaise, a headache coming on.

'Our requirements are entirely different,' my friend says when she phones very late. She has been thinking about plot when she should have been sleeping and has come to the conclusion it is essence. 'There is no comparison in what we both require.'

We argue about this for a while and then distract ourselves by talking about Dickens. She frequently walks past his house at 48 Doughty Street and I, too, have been inside and found it oddly comfortless.

'Remember Little Nell,' she laughs, and the great crowds who waited for news. The groan that must have gone up. The black armbands. If there is anything truer than plot it must be character and the ability of the reading public to attach themselves to one.

'And Sherlock Holmes,' I offer. The plot that killed him off and the public who rescued him from the bottom of the Reichenbach Falls – with who knows what damage and bandages? – Conan Doyle doesn't go into it – back to 222b Baker Street. The funny thing is we both long for what the other has. I wish I could plot better. I wish I more firmly understood what plot means in the life of a human being as well as in the life of a novel, for that is a long life too.

A wild surmise, before I go to sleep after midnight, returns me to the kind of plot Shakespeare had in mind in Richard II. *This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm, this* New Zealand. Might the attitude of the European settlers who wished to better themselves and be consoled for all that was raw and missing with a fenced security resemble the genre-novel? And the Maori who regarded a small tentatively-tended fire, even in a vacated tribal home, an inviolable sign of occupancy. Like the passionate unconsummated core of On *Chesil Beach*?

But that is too fanciful for literature and where it might go in the future. I suspect plot, given its attraction in the caves, will always have a varying prominence. And inner discoveries, because after the story there might have been questions to the author, as at a modern writers' festival, and the whole excitement died down into a sense of satisfaction, will survive as well.

It's strange and rather humbling to think that our earliest narratives may have required both kinds of plotting: the quick and quickening event: the chase, the kill, the escape from an enemy and then the reflection, the drawing of breath, the sharing of food or spoil. Nor is there a reason they should always have occurred in this order: the tumult might have arisen quickly out of a time of companionship: conversation could have come first. Energy and reflection: the monks being tested on their ability to withdraw into silence, the Sue Grafton thriller of crime-solving and target shooting. There must have been long periods of one or the other, though in something as long as The Hundred Years' War, to take an obviously-long case, surely there would be a sense of becoming accustomed, snatching at some kind of equilibrium?

It seems to me – while my friend wrestles with her fifth draft and prepares to carry her manuscript across London to the glass-walled swept-up offices of the publisher who wants best sellers and is liable to call in an internist if the prospects are unpromising – there can be no accurate measurement, no infallible golden rule. There are lives lived in quiet pockets of centuries when the concerns were largely domestic. And isn't it true that we love most to read of blood and danger and horror from the safety of our warm beds? There are lives that are domestic in the heart of chaos:

someone putting on a coffee pot when there is a lull in the bombing.

'So what did the editor say?' I e-mail. 'Plot enough?'

'It sags a bit. I have to do some re-writing. There's a section in the middle that goes flat. I need to keep up the impetus.'

At least it is not back to the drawing board. The characters are vivid and articulate, argumentative, forcing their way through the period they are set in, determined to make a mark. They speed along the cobbled streets, as intent on business, as Keats'stoat or field mouse – 'the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it'. Everything, despite the demands of genre-fiction, is eminently salvageable. Perhaps a garment or two will have to come off or some piece of historical knowledge gleaned from the British Library.

I wish I was in London, raising a glass of wine, perched on a stool in the kitchen. The great labour of a novel is almost at an end. The unrolling of plot, the easy links the genre-reader prefers – or at least ones that are signalled, like a stake in the heart of a vampire at a crossroads – have been taken care of. Privately I rejoice at what else my fellow-author has got in. In each paragraph in which the action is for a moment subdued – half a page, a journey by coach, wind or rain whipping at the face of a character – something more thoughtful is going on. A respite where the writing is no less vivid – the editor must not sense a slackening, there is a pace to be picked up – where, like the drawing of an energetic animal onto a cave wall, the impetus and pleasure of writing is conveyed.

Despite the drafts, the cut-and-paste – there was an e-mail saying how pleasurable this old technique was – you only need a good space of floor –
it has come together in the end. I think what it finally conveys is something I stumbled on in a notebook kept years ago of Keats' excerpts.

'This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm, this England'. Shakespeare, a true genre-playwright of his time, knew how to make phrases rise and take wing.
But he also conveyed the pleasure of writing itself, something that cannot be clipped by genre demands or lack of plot entirely – as Keats does in his description of eating a nectarine.

'Talking of pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine – good god how fine – It went down soft, pulpy, slushy, oozy – all its beautiful embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry.'

When the acceptance finally comes and the contract is signed and the cover design underway this is the last e-mail on this particular subject I shall send.

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DUMBI OSANI

Ecology and the Creative Imagination: The Poetry of J. P. Clark Bekederemo

It is generally known that there is usually a relationship between a writer and the physical environment in which he lives or of which he is native, a relationship that is normally reflected in his creative works. The environment determines his experiences, influences his thoughts, ideas and attitudes, and defines the scope of his imagination. It also acts as the source of the materials out of which his images are fashioned. This essay examines the influence of the Niger Delta region on the early poetry of J.P. Clark – Bekederemo. It does not seek to investigate whether or not the poet is concerned with the sanctity of the environment, but concentrates on the impact of the ecological peculiarities of his natal locality on his creative imagination by examining the content and form of his poetry as well as his artistic devices.

Like his drama, Clark–Bekeredemo's poetry has unmistakable marks of the environment from which it springs. His poetic works, especially the earliest ones, have recognizable regional identity, as they reflect the peculiarities of his natal locality. The concern of this essay is to explore the ways in which the ecological character of that locality has impacted on his creative imagination and consequently defined his poetic practice in terms of both the content and form of his works as well as the artistic devices which he employs.

The focus is on these early poems, especially those published in *Poems* and *A Reed in the Tide*. Arguably, these collections contain his best poems in terms of imaginativeness and control of poetic language. However, a few other poems are extracted from later collections on the basis of their artistic designs and their relevance to the subject of this study. For the purpose of analytical procedure, Okpewho's comment on the link between art and landscape serves as the point of departure. In his introductory chapter to *The Epic in Africa*, he remarks:

> There is a subtle but discernible link between art and the landscape out of which it grows. If we concede that the earliest art was a response to the immediate pressure of man's living condition – whether these pressures took the form of hunger, self-defence or any other form – then we see clearly why the environment would make a difference to the form or quality of art. And it would appear that much of the aesthetic nourishment of traditional African art derived from the nature of the surrounding landscape and the concomitant throb of animate company within it (19).

It is true that, usually, there is constant interaction between a writer and the environment of which he is native, or with which he has had an intimate contact. The environment determines his experiences, contributes to the shaping of his ideas and influences the direction, scope and depth of his imagination, while serving at the same time, as the source of his imagery.

The Niger Delta region where Clark – Bekeredemo comes from, is characterized by thick rain forests, with giant trees and dense luxuriant undergrowths. The land has a network of rivers, rivulets and streams, in addition to numerous swamps and creeks. The sea, whose influence is pervasive, marks the southern limits of the area. The entire region swarms with animate beings – aerial, terrestrial and aquatic. The region is also a theatre of natural turbulences as the rainy seasons witness violent storms and huge floods. The ubiquitous activities of man, the ceaceless flow of the waters, the countless spectacles in nature, the many movements and changes within animal and plant habitats, the discernible manifestations of organic and elemental events are all interrelated forces operating within Clark – Bekederemo's native land, and forming the basic components of the people's total experience. No doubt, the multiple varieties of life, and the compelling uniqueness of this echo-world, its spectacularity as well as its dynamics have been assimilated into the poet's creative consciousness, hence his poetry throbs with the rhythm of nature.

An obvious mark of Clark – Bekederemo's consciousness of his ecological environment is the portrayal of physical setting. This is a notable feature of his poetry and it sets him apart from some of his contemporaries. Udoeyop has rightly observed that his poetry "relies on setting to a considerable extent," and that a number of "his best poems show a remarkable power of description of setting and landscape" (59). In his early poems such as "Abiku," "Night Rain," "Ibadan Dawn," and "Return of the Fishermen" (*A Reed in the Tide*), the poet achieves remarkable effect through his direct, though not elaborate, depiction of physical setting. But characteristically, these settings are more than mere portrayals of environment and locale; they are also externilizations of thoughts, mood and feelings; nostalgic memories of his cradle and passionate expressions of love for his ancestral land. Beyond the expression of love however, Clark-Bekederemo's riverine native countryside is at the centre of his consciousness. Thus, his description of setting is a manifestation of that consciousness.

In "Abiku," the poet recreates a painful experience. The afflicted woman in the poem lives a lonely life which is evident from the poet's description of her home; and by this description, he is able both to inspire the emotional involvement of his readers and to achieve authenticity of representation. In her hut, the "thatch" roof "leaks" during the rains, "bats" and "owls" frequently "tear in at night through the eaves," and the bamboo walls are "ready tinder for fire" during the harmattan. These details, which are deliberately provided, reveal the poet's empathy for the woman. Yet, he knows too, with a sense of satisfaction, that in spite of the poverty in the home, many healthy children have been raised there. Thus, the poet urges the "spirit child" to stay, and not to return to the spirit world:

Then step in, step in and stay
For her body is tired,
Tired, her milk going sour
Where many more mouths gladden the heart.

These lines complete the story of the woman's suffering: she is materially impoverished and physically sapped. The image of "floods" that "brim the banks," of "fresh fish up on the rack," and of "bamboo walls," leave no one in doubt that the poem is set in a rural settlement in the Niger Delta. The environment may be challenging, but there is warmth and vitality in the life of the people.

But, there is an aesthetic dimension to the poet's depiction of setting and locale in this poem. He evokes and an eerie atmosphere by means of the image of the baobab tree, bats, owls and floods. The baobab becomes a mythical tree, the macabre abode of spirit children; floods are associated with disaster, while bats and owls are nocturnal creatures often believed to be connected with evil. The prevailing atmosphere does become a fitting medium for the mysterious and sinister "coming and going" of the spirit child. In this and other poems, the materials of the poet's physical surroundings naturally become the sources of his imagery.

The success of "Return of the Fishermen" lies largely in effective description of setting. The situation represented in the poem would be familiar to anyone who has lived in the Niger Delta region because it depicts fishing activities and the communal spirit of the rural people. Fishermen are returning to the village in the evening after the day's catch. The men are seen paddling gently to shore, with their fishing equipment gleaming in the evening sunlight. Sunset is rapidly approaching and the "Tick-twit" noice of squirrels can be heard as the animals "stow their seeds." The Kingfisher, a bird of omens, gives positive signals and the quay is filled with people waiting to welcome the fishermen.

Dan Izevbaye has remarked that the "strength of the poem is primarily onomatopoeic" (159). The assonance consisting of vowel sounds in the first line of the poem, "pins and needles effervescent up heel" and in the end-rhymes in each of the three stanzas suggest the deepness of the sea from where the fishermen are returning, their silent progress shoreward and the quietness that comes with the end of the day. The alliteration in the second line of the first stanza, "Dabble, dabble dip paddle blades," is in mimesis of the lapping sound produced when the men's paddles come in contact with water. But, the poem also has visual appeal. The gleaming pins and needles, the paddle blades, the tired men paddling gently from sea, the villagers waiting at the quay and the village profile are all distinct sights that constitute the scene which the poet so epigrammatically describes and it is these that capture the imagination of the reader even more than the sounds do. In the final analysis, it is with a combination of auditory and visual images that the poet achieves the unity of impression which the poem evokes and this derives from his conception of, and attitude to, his environment.

Beyond the dramatic appeal realised through skilful scenic presentation, the poem reflects the phenomenon of eco-synthesis in a way that reveals the poet's intellectual apprehension of his ecological surroundings. The poem shows the interrelation of man and nature in a rural setting. The activities of man and animals are regulated by the diurnal rotation of the earth round the sun: when night approaches, squirrels hide their seeds and fishermen must come back home to rest, but the men need the Kingfisher to assure them that all is well, while the communal spirit is expressed by the presence of the villagers who have come to welcome them. For the poet, nature is benevolent, hence he expresses a strong vision of harmony in the poem, one which reflects what Asein has described as "his strong sense of locale; an attachment to his homeland, and in particular, the riverine landscape of his native Ijawland..." (69).

The use of nature imagery is a dominant feature of Clark-Bekederemo's poetry and it is one of the most tremendous manifestations of the influence of environment on his artistic sensibility. As Biakolo has pointedly stated, the "richness of nature in the waters, swamps and forests of Ijaw and Urhobo land" influences Clark-Bekederemo's "poetic sensibilities" and this is manifested in "the devices of imagery" which he employs (177). Indeed, the poet's intimacy with the elements of his riverine landscape gives rise to the development of an aesthetic disposition that is close to Wordsworth's sensitivity to his organic world, a condition that informs his passionate love of nature. But Clark-Bekederemo is not a lover of nature in the same way as Wordsworth is. Nature is the subject of Wordsworth's poetry; it is for him a source of intellectual delight, philosophical insight as well as moral and spiritual nourishment. It is not so with Clark-Bekederemo, as nature is the context of his poetry and the source of his imagery, which gives his poetry the special qualities of energy, vitality and evocativeness.

On Clark – Bekederemo's attitude to his environment, Echeruo has this to say:

> Clark is indeed always conscious of his environment... But his environment becomes his subject only because it brings him back to his person, because it provides the moment for his reflections. Hence, even in the poems of nature we find not a reflection on nature but a reflection on the poet who is aware of the symbolic implication of nature (150).

In fact, nature induces reflections not only on the poet himself but also on other people and on life in general. In traditional Africa, man is closely tied to his environment and thus, to nature. Consequently, any reflection on man and his experiences must inevitably entail a consideration of nature, which is an integral element of his total consciousness. Clark – Bekederemo's nature images are not just devices for the communication of meanings, but are also, perhaps more importantly, expressions of his apprehension of the Izon landscape to which he is intimately attached.

His most celebrated poem, "Night Rain," like "Abiku," evokes a strong sense of place through his use of a series of nature images. It opens with dramatic suddenness:

> What time of night it is
> I do not know
> Except that like some fish
> Doped out of the deep
> I have bobbed up bellywise
> From steam of sleep
> And no cocks crow.

The image of the "fish" that is "doped out of the deep" and of the "stream of sleep" reflect the riverine experience of the poet's childhood. They are followed by auditory images realised through carefully chosen onomatopoeic words. The poet notices that it is "drumming hard" and "droning" insistently on "our roof thatch and shed." The source of the noice is soon identified as he affirms that "Great water drops are dribbling/Falling like orange or mango/Fruits showered forth in the wind."

With the image of orange or mango fruits blown down by the wind, the poet describes the size and sound of the rain drops; but the image also portrays the specific flora of the poet's vision, especially with his mention of the iroko tree, the mythical king of the tropical rain forest. In the midst of the storm, the poet's mother is heard moving household items away from water puddle which "like ants filing out of the wood" will eventually cover the floor. The poet sympathises with the owls and bats that are also caught in the storm. These creatures usually evoke fear or dread, but not so for the poet in his innocence. For him in this poem, they are partners in the same experience; "faunal" components of the environment to which he also belongs.

The experience recreated in the poem is one in which man is faced with the challenges imposed by the forces of nature. But he has leant to reconcile himself to these forces, deriving his strength and tenacity, perhaps, from the waters around him, as water is the source of life. Consequently, in spite of the darkness and the lightning and the rain, the poet is neither frightened nor worried; but instead, he urges his brothers to huddle together and sleep on.

> So lets roll over on our back
> And again roll to the beat
> Of drumming all over the land
> And under is ample soothing hand
> Joined to that of the sea
> We will settle to our sleep of the innocent and free.

The sea image suggests cleansing and purification. The children have a "sleep of the innocent and free" under the "soothing hand" of the rain, which is "joined to that of the sea." For the children, the rain becomes in the end, a means of cleansing and purification. The reconciliatory conclusion of this poem justifies Adrian Roscoe's assertion that Clark-Bekederemo "is sensitive to Africa's pains, but enjoys inner peace and contentment, enjoys celebrating the harmony which he feels between himself and his African environment" (38). The harmony that exists between the poet and his environment is also an expression of that vision of eco-synthesis, the consciousness of which is ever present in his psychic reservoir and projected in a good number of his early poems.

Clark-Bekederemo does not only see, feel, smell and touch nature in his poetry, but he also hears nature distinctly. As in many of his poems, "Night Rain" has rhythm that echoes the natural rhythm of rainfall. Paul Theroux makes a valid point when he states that:

There is a natural rhythm in "Night Rain" which the subject demands... Not only does the subject, rain, demand rhythm, it also gets it in the best possible way (133-134).

It is the poet's perception of the natural rhythm in rainfall that enables him to recreate it in his poem in a way that is particularly fascinating. No doubt, the success of "Night Rain" lies essentially in its setting, its imagery and its rhythm.

The nature images in "For Granny (from Hospital" are not exactly of the same kind as those in "Night Rain" and the purposes for which the poet employs them are also different. Cast in the form of an apostrophe, the poem is an imaginative inquiry into what may have "stirred within" his grandmother's "soul" when he was alone with her on "a dugout" one night "on the Niger." In his reflection, the poet recalls two different visions of nature which he had in his childhood days. The image of elemental turbulence ("...the raucous voice/Of yesterday's rain/Tumbling down banks of reed/To feed a needless stream") resembles the loud quarrels and "endless dark nights of intrigue" in his father's polygamous home. This image contrasts sharply with that of the magnificence of "the footless stars" whose translucence permeates the sky, the earth and the sea floors. Each of these images can, in different ways, stir the human soul. It is the first time that Clark-Bekederemo has presented two opposing visions of nature side by side, and it seems that his design is to offer man the opportunity to reflect on the undesirability of domestic chaos and to embrace the harmony which the other side of nature represents.

In the rural African world, time is measured by the rhythm of nature, but the environment determines the particular element of nature by which the measurement is made. This explains why the poet, being a native of a tropical riverine region, recalls an incident "fifteen floods today." The dugout on which he was with his grandmother is described as a "lettuce" floating on the Niger. The vegetable nature of the lettuce suggests, not just the shape of the dugout, but its vulnerability also; but the lettuce is a "pilgrim" and therefore it is assured of divine protection in its voyage of purification.

In poems with public themes, Clark-Bekederemo also relies on nature imagery to describe events, communicate his thoughts and articulate his comments. In "Emergency Commission," the political turmoil that provokes his outrage is described as a "storm" that "howls on" with "heads, rock and roof adrift." These images of chaos in nature resulting in destructions and waste reflect the poet's familiarity with the seasonal storms that occur in the Niger Delta region. Prominent political figures are at the centre of the civil strife which the poet describes:

> And before cock crows a third
> Time, yet another tree that
> Seemed beyond reach of wind
> And bolt, topples down,
> Or shows the blast.

The representation of prominent politicians with the image of the tree may seem too obvious, or even banal, yet the image is an effective device in the context of the poem as it evokes the awesome presence of giant trees that loom above twigs, shrubs and grass in tropical rain forests. By using the familiar image of trees uprooted by storms to depict a political crisis and its consequences, the poet brings his subject closer to his readers in a way that would not have been possible with exotic references.

The poet's criticism of the political class is embodies in the botanical image of mahoganies with a rotten centre which eventually crash to the ground in the storm:

> ...when mahoganies
> Show a centre too rotten
> For rings, and twigs and grass
> Already denied room and sun
> Carry the crush and shock?

The society is represented as a "groove," and the exploited and oppressed masses are the "twigs and grass," who invariably suffer most in the crisis. The entire poem is a metaphor, one which is constructed, not with words in abstraction, but words in their figurative clothing. Similarly, in "The Flood" (*The Poems*) Clark-Bekederemo captures the violence and disasters of the Nigerian Civil War by using images that are created from observable nature. Like "Night Rain," the poem has a dramatic opening, one whose immediacy is reinforced by the image of "the rain of events" pouring down. The national turbulence grows to a sinister proportion as shown by the image of "Gusts of rain" sweeping through the whole land and culminating in a huge "flood." The last two lines of the poem state the tragic consequences of the war as the poet laments that the rain and the resultant flood lead to drifting and drowing. Like "Emergency Commission," the poem is a sustained metaphor, one whose appeal derives from the poet's power of comparison.

That Clark-Bekederemo's images are fashioned out of the materials of his immediate environment does not in any way limit the subject of his poetry to matters of private, local or regional concerns only. Indeed, the poet has used some of these images to explore issues of universal relevance. This is why one is surprised that Theroux says he is unable to find a "general theme" in Clark-Bekederemo's poetry (135). His use of the mythic image of "the ferryman" in "For Granny (from Hospital)," is derived from his knowledge of the culture of his people and of the riverine locality in which they live. As Biakolo has pointed out, among the Urhobo and Izon, the transition of the living to the underworld is thought of as a journey by water in a canoe of Death who is the ferryman of the underworld (178). But the myth of the ferryman exists in many traditions the world over, and the poet is well aware of this. His use of the image therefore evokes local and general interest, particularly because of its reference to death, a universal experience.

The river or stream, either as a setting or a symbol, or both, features prominently in Clark-Bekederemo's poetry and it is one of the means by which he has explored some ideas of universal importance. The setting of "Streamside Exchange" is the side of a nameless stream. Literally, the first stanza dramatizes a child's anxiety over the return of his mother who has gone to market. In his romantic imaginings, the child sees the river bird as a friendly creature that knows all the secrets of the waterways and therefore could tell him about his mother's return. The second stanza is an adult answer to a childhood question, and with the answer the underlying meaning of the poem emerges. The setting is symbolic as the stream represents life, and thus, a journey on it is a journey of life. At the level of myth, the river bird takes on the status of an oracular being who knows the secrets of life, by its primordial relationship with the river, a relationship that earns it its name. This poem evokes the feelings of loneliness, anxiety and uncertainty. The last two lines reveal the universality of its theme:

> Tide and market come and go
> And so has your mother.

Tide, which represents the ebb and flow of life in the same way as the market does, is a recurrent image in Clark-Bekederemo's poetry. In this poem, he combines a nature symbol and a social one to reflect on the reality of the impermanence of life and of the eternal cycle of life and death.

In "A Sighting on the River" (*Once Again a Child*), the poet describes an experience that is at once horrid and apocalyptic. He and is mother suddenly come upon a floating corpse while traveling by canoe. The first stanza describes the sight while the second represents a comment on life, inspired by the sight:

> "Paddle on, my mother urged,
> "One mother salt does not season
> A stream." And the river, which

For my people is life,
Took us our separate ways.

By a remarkable creative insight, the poet transmutes a visual experience into a poetic statement of enduring philosophical import. From the poem itself, it is made clear that the representation of the river as a symbol of life is rooted in the world-view of the Izon people. This is reminiscent of Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun." This view, no doubt, derives from their timeless association with their riverine homeland. The Izon concept of destiny is also embedded in the poem, and it is bound up with the river symbol. The destiny of an individual is exclusive to him, hence in the journey of life, each one pursues his own course. That is why the poet's mother urges him to "Paddle on." The exclusiveness of individual destiny is conveyed by the proverb, "One mother salt does not season/A stream." This is reinforced by the last line of the poem in which the poet recounts that the river "Took us our separate ways." The belief in individual destiny is not exclusive to the Izon people; other traditions also share that belief.

"The River" (*A Lot from Paradise*) also has a symbolic meaning. In this epigrammatic poem, Clark-Bekederemo adopts his usual deliberate simple style, even though the poem makes a profound statement about life. Concrete details in the poem such as "a boat," "a man," "a ferry" and "banks," all indicate a riverine setting and therefore the poem is situated in an authentic locale, but its central statement is universally true. The river, which is its main subject, remains mysterious, inscrutable and intractable as "nobody says which way the river flows." The poet expresses an ontological idea that human life is indeterminable. This is not a new idea, but the poet gives it a literary freshness by encapsulating it in a parabolic medium.

For Clark-Bekederemo, every feature of his surroundings is a potential source of imagery. Thus, the thick forest of the Niger Delta provides him with the resources for the imaginative representation of his thoughts, but these thoughts often transcend the immediate creative moment and ecological context. In "A king of Tress" (A Lot from Paradise), the poet develops the theme of the inevitability of death and the impermanence and futility of earthly attainments through the story of the tree. The tree had an intimidating size, and its was richly foliaged:

...When it stood, it rose
Three hundred clear feet into the air,
And several hundred branches assembled
There at the top, placed upon it
A crown of emerald that was
For all below, upon the bank
Of a river, a shelter for all seasons.

The poem has a familiar tropical setting, but it meaning is not located in that setting. The tree stood on a river bank and to the poet, it loomed large "like a god" whenever he saw it on his way to school "in a boat" at the beginning of every term. But "it just tumbled down one day" on its own. Like "The River," the poem is parabolic: all that live must obey the eternal law of organic decay. The last line, which has a Christian religious undertone, conveys the poet's ultimate message, which reinforces its universal appeal: The gigantic tree fell down "A mere truckload of dust."

Clark-Bekederemo's imagination never strays from the landscape of his native countryside, such that even when the setting and the subject of his poem are not directly concerned with nature, he automatically draws from the pool of nature images long accumulated in his mind. In his well-known poem, "Ibadan," the brown and bright colours of the countless roof-tops in the city of Ibadan are described in terms of flowing water or fluid, which reflects the poet's internalized experience of the flowing waters in his home.

> Ibadan,
> running splash of rust
> and gold - flung and scattered
> among seven hills like broken
> china in the sun.

The image of "running splash," which is kinetic, auditory and visual at the same time, effectively conveys the impression that the colours have been splashed on the roof-tops like water or any other liquid. And, as the numerous roof-tops produce a picture of contiguous vastness, the colours are presented as "running" or flowing like a stream or river. This image of flowing water is further reinforced by the poet's deliberate use of run-on-lines. The fluvial image is particularly striking for its unusual deployment, as a familiar sight assumes a fresh quality through the poet's inventiveness.

Similarly, "New Year is not about nature but it is a reflection on the problems of living, in the form of suffering, unfulfilled aspirations and ageing; yet, it is constructed with a series of nature images. The poet complains that another "flood is finished." He and his partner in the poem are "two reeds on the bank," and they go "dipping hungry blades" in the flood's wash. Sands "rear up... like manatees," and "even the water lettuce, "...drift hand in hand to the sea. The "two reeds" sway on "The banks with the wind of world-blight," and there is likelihood that they may remain "aberrant on the beach." Apart from the meanings which they convey, these images also reflect a sea-side setting, even though the experience that is explored is independent of such a location. The poet uses the images essentially for their figurativeness, and also because he finds them appropriate for his purpose.

"Fulani Cattle" could have been set anywhere, but the poet's allusion to the "storm which brim up the Niger," springs from his knowledge of the floods that oc-

cur in his homeland. "The Imprisonment of Obatala" is based on a Yoruba myth, but as Frank Mowan rightly observes, the poet incorporates into the poem "images from his own riverine background rather than that of the setting of the myth" (172). The images, which include "stick-insects," "mangrove stance," "stream" and "angry waves," are spontaneously drawn from the poet's riverine locality because they are part of what have become integral elements of his creative imagination. Similarly, "Agbor Dancer" has a cultural theme, but the poet develops the subject by means of ecological imagery which reflects his continuous imaginative contact with the Niger Delta region.

The dancers limbs are "like fresh foliage in the sun." This image captures the poet's admiration for the dancer's youthfulness and flexibility; while the image of entanglement located in the lines, "See how entangled in the magic/Maze of music," is drawn from his familiarity with the dense undergrowths that characterize the thick rain forests of the Niger Delta. It is an image that is particularly apt, for it creates a mental picture of the dancer's complete involvement in the nuances of her people's culture.

The poet describes the girl's dancing movements, again, by means of fluvial imagery:

> In trance she treads the intricate
> Patterns rippling crest after crest
> To meet the green clouds of the forest.

The rhythmic dance movements are seen as "ripples" on the surface of water and the crests of the ripples increase in number as the dance progresses, until they rise high and become contagious with the green foliage of the forest trees. Here, the poet's vision is one of a harmonious bond between dancer, music and nature, a vision which reflects the close relationship between the traditional African, his culture and the natural world.

Although landscape is the dominant influence on Clark-Bekederemo's creative imagination, his poetry does not become stereotypic as a result, because he does not rely only on nature imagery for his expressions, but sometimes employs other kinds of imagery as well. In "Ivbie," for instance, he employs a variety of images, some of which are exotic. And, in fact, not all the images in "Night Rain," "The Years First Rain" and "Olokun" are created from ecological sources. Besides, as part of his literary techniques he utilizes classical, religious and historical allusions as in "Cry of Birth," "Olokun," "Service," "Boeing Crossing," "Ivbie" and others. Thematically, he explores various kinds of experiences, often with passionate commitment.

Clark-Bekederemo's poetry resonates with the living elements of the riverine landscape of the Niger Delta. His thematic subjects are profound, and his images are as rich and varied as the sources from which they are created. Belief in the sanctity of the bond between man and his surroundings is at the centre of his artistic sensibility. Thus, human problems remain his primary concern, but these are seen, felt and explored in the context of the ecological character of his native land.

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HAYDEN WILLIAMS

The Shameful Sickness: The 'Cleavage of Personality' in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas and Hone Tuwhare

> One of the first questions that arises for a Welshman face to face with the English tongue is: What is my true feeling for these words? Am I fascinated, repelled, resentful? I think we will find that the manner in which the contribution is made will vary according to the writer's attitude toward his medium. Where he is a willing exile, associating his native speech and locality with a backward stage in man's progress towards the English millennium, he will delight in the newly discovered riches of English words. Where he has a real love and respect for his native traditions, he will regret his enforced separation from them, and resent the necessity of having to use words, which to all intents and purposes are those of a foreign people. (From the 1964 lecture *Words and the Poet* by R. S. Thomas, cited in Lloyd 100).

R.S. Thomas's observations regarding the Welsh encounter with the English language would work equally well if the word 'Maori' were substituted for 'Welshman'. Although elements of Hone Tuwhare's poetry and the criticism surrounding this suggest that he belongs to the first category of Anglicised indigenous writers – those "willing exhiles" – there is much in his work that places him in the second category also.

In Thomas' work, regret and resentment at his encounter with the colonial process are obvious. Harm caused by Anglicisation is the primary theme throughout his collection *What is a Welshman*? He deals with this specifically in the poem 'It Hurts Him To Think':

> The decree went forth
> to destroy the language - 'not cariad'
> they said, 'love'. The nursing future
> saw the tightening lips
> of the English drawn on the hard sky
> to the east. 'You can have the job,
> if you ask for it in the right

words'. 'Come buy, come buy',
tolled the bells of the churches
in the new towns. The Welsh
put on their best clothes
and took their produce
to market, and brought it back
with them, unsold. 'We want
nothing from you but your
land'. The heiresses fell
for the velvet businessmen
of the shires. The peasantry
saw their pastures fenced in
with the bones of heroes. The
industrialists came, burrowing
in the corpse of a nation
for its congealed blood. I was
born into the squalor of
their feeding and sucked their speech
in with my mother's
infected milk, so that whatever
I throw up now is still theirs.
(*What is a Welshman?* 12).

Thomas's bitterness at having his native language and culture actively destroyed in order to clear the way for the exploitation of his people and land is undisguised and unapologetic here. Being forced to write and speak in the language of a 'foreign people' invades the very personhood of Thomas, so that "whatever [he] throw[s] up now is still theirs." The images of 'throwing up' and 'infected milk' clearly evoke sickness, and emphasise that Thomas considers his identity poisoned or wounded by Anglicisation (Markham 139). Lloyd writes that, for Thomas, the disjunction between his Welsh identity and "vocation as an English-language poet results in what [Thomas] terms a 'cleavage of personality' " (Lloyd 100). Given Tuwhare's status as a Maori poet writing in English, one might reasonably expect to find evidence of a similar "cleavage" in his poetry.

The situation of Maori has much in common with that of the Welsh. Both peoples have experienced a loss of independence in the wake of crown legislation which proved near fatal for both cultures (The Treaty of Waitangi in the case of Maori, and The Act of Union in the case of the Welsh). "Maori have not been passive victims in their colonial, post-colonial worlds" (Paterson), and neither have the Welsh, but in both cases, many individuals continue to be alienated from their original cultural identity, raised in environments where the dominant culture and ideology is Anglo-centric rather than indigenous.

Critics seem to have avoided applying any kind of post-colonial reading to Tuwhare's work, perhaps because of tensions still existing between Maori and Pakeha

within New Zealand. Bernard Gadd comes closest in this regard, noting that "the New Zealand critical response [to Tuwhare] over the years, even more than is customarily the case, reads like school reports on a student whose promise is never quite fulfilled as the pedagogue has guided and anticipated" (83). The patronising attitude Gadd reffers to echoes the imposed, paternalistic brand of "love" in Thomas' poem 'It Hurts Him To Think'. Additionally, Gadd finds evidence in Tuwhare's work of "the sense of an ancient past which is dead beyond reviving or even rediscovery, the sense of how the courage, the self-respect, the soul of a people have been afflicted, and the hidden, inward connections of its life ripped asunder" (84-85). Unfortunately, however, he does not explore this any further, or even explain where in particular he sees this evidence. In an interview with Bill Manhire, Tuwhare claims he understands the motivation of Maori radicals, but wishes they could discover the 'medicine' of poetry and write themselves into more balanced people (Manhire 281). But the fact that he states a need for 'medicine' implies he is aware of a sickness or wound which requires healing in the first place. Tuwhare then goes on to talk about a need he feels to bridge the devide he experiences within bi-cultural New Zealand (274). This wound-like gap recalls Thomas' 'cleavage of personality'. In order to better reach and connect with Pakeha, Tuwhare is obliged to at times become what Bhabha terms a 'mimic man' – something less alien, more recognisable, and most importantly *acceptable* in the eyes of the dominant culture. Tuwhare wants his poetry to be medicinal, to benefit not only *his* people but the *whole*; but he still has to please the 'pedagouge' – the patronising colonial mindset – in order for his contribution to be deemed legitimate.

The journalist Jenny Chamberlain describes Tuwhare as a man of "contrariness" and "contradictory impulses", finding that "he seldom responds to a direct question with a straight answer" (Chamberlain 45). She declares him a shape-shifter, "impossible to define" (47). This observation acknowledges Tuwhare's dexterity, his ability to shift seamlessly between subjects, voices and styles, and even personae. But Chamberlain also implies an untrustworthiness in this and makes the telling statement that "If Hone Tuwhare's poems are lies, then they are the lies that tell the truth about the world" (50). The cheerful, playful Tuwhare we see on the page rarely reflects his true inner state. Often it reads as a mask, possibly constructed to hide the wounding spoken of by Thomas.

Iain Sharp takes a celebratory, 'matey' approach to Tuwhare's work, but ends up reverting to the 'school report' style noted by Gadd, chiding the poet for – amongst other things – his overuse of adverbs (Sharp 50-61). Sharp is insightful, however, when he suspects "that Tuwhare, as a Maori proletarian, doesn't like the idea of bowing down and grovelling too much to the Queen's English" (Sharp 59). This anti-Royalist sentiment is seen in the poem 'Mother of very Earthly Gods', which ridicules the authority of the British Crown:

> 'Send me clitorious, happy and glorious
> Long to reign over me -

Deliciously implorious.'
(*Piggy-back Moon*, 55).

The Queen and the English national anthem are revered emblems of the British Empire. This empire has been the cause of much "epistemic violence" (to use Gayatri Spivak's term) against Maori via documents such as the Treaty of Waitangi. Connecting these symbols with the act of cunnilingus is therefore a deliberate retaliation against British imperialism. Tuwhare may often write affectionately of oral sex, but the Queen of England would surely not be amused with this poem. Yet still there is the glaze of humour here, tempering the politically subversive sentiment and softrening its impact. It is as though Tuwhare feels he needs to be able to pass off any serious political comment with a smile and a wink; to maintain the refuge of being able to say 'it was only meant as a joke' should anyone be offended or become upset.

The poem 'Warawara, Pureora, Okarito' is a message of protest to those exploiting Maori land and resources, and to the government agencies which enable them. Here, Tuwhare is humourless. He manages a rare directness, but loses most of his poetic skill in doing so. The brief poem concludes: "Bastards:/ Stop your raping of the land./ Fuck off." (*Making a Fist of it*, 21). The anger is real and unadorned here, and sophistication in this case might have diminished the force of the sentiment. But this could just as well have been written on any public toilet wall or door as in a book of poetry. If this is Tuwhare's own voice, then does he too often veil this anger with poetic pretentions? Critics have frequently suggested that Tuwhare is too often pretentious (Gadd 84), and the poet certainly sometimes seems to feels something quite different from what he is actually expressing.

Iona McNaughton interviewed Tuwhare after the opening performance of his play *In the Wilderness Without a Hat* in 1989 (McNaughton 19). According to Tuwhare "The play is about a reassertion of our identity ... It's really a rediscovery of our ancestral values and the need to know who we are" (19). He speaks of his struggle to relearn his native language, and hopes that one day he can write more in Maori (19). He gives an important clue to his inner state when he describes his emotional response to the play's warm reception by the Wellington audience, an audience that included the Governor General, Sir Paul Reeves. Tuwhare confesses he was reluctant to greet this government official and bring him into the theatre to be traditionally welcomed. And this was his reaction when the predominantly white audience gave him a standing ovation at the end: "I was so overwhelmed I couldn't get up to thank them ... I was laughing and crying at the same time" (19). The 'cleavage of personailty' is apparent here, with two contradictory emotions (happiness and sorrow) present simultaneously.

Tuwhare describes an almost exact emotional response in a poem dealing with the overt and covert facets of racism. Here is the poem, 'A Pakeha Friend Tells a Maori Joke' in full:

I can't explain why I can't resist listening
to your fund of racist jokes. This one's about the
Maoris, right? I ready myself for it; my eyes lit
up and creasing.

I mean, it's got nothing whatever to do with
me, personally. Some other Maori is copping it, not
ME.

Your eyes begin to water. You are laughing long
before you come to the end of the joke. Well hell,
I can't help myself either. There's a nudging kind
of connivance when I join you in the laughing.

But, I think - for me at such times, laughing
becomes the closest thing to crying: and it is begin-
ning to worry me just as if I'd caught clap or V.D.

Ever had clap, or V.D.? I say.
Nothin' to it, old son, you say. You have to
cop it a few times before you can call yourself a man.
A few shots of penicillin, and you're okay again.

I dunno. I want to walk away. Go tell your
racist jokes to someone else. You're a heapa shit, man.
(*Year of the Dog*, 34).

Tuwhare, like Thomas in "It Hurts Him to Think", associates a sickness and infection with the relationship between coloniser and colonised. Here, as in many of Tuwhare's other poems, there is a show of humour – a public face presented to conceal or curb underlying feelings, a discordance or "cleavage" between what is expressed outwardly and what is experienced inwardly (as in the case of Tuwhare's response to the reception of his play). For Tuwhare, sorrow often seems to coexist with humour, and the humour itself becomes the only way this sorrow can find a socially acceptable form of expression: "for me at such times, laughing becomes the closest thing to crying" (Ibid., 34).

Perhaps the 'medicine' of poetry was not enough to heal the psychological wounds in Tuwhare caused by colonialism. The shameful undercover illness that the poet describes in 'A Pakeha Friend Tells a Maori Joke' should not be overlooked amidst all the celebration now that Tuwhare has secured his place in the New Zealand literary canon. It is an important, though often hidden or avoided aspect of the poet and his work and, according to Williams, an experience familiar to many Maori even today. Tuwhare should be remembered as a complicated character rich with

hidden depths; defiant, sensitive, angry and bitter – as well as kind, jovial and loving. God forbid he should be eulogised into just another charming, happy-go-lucky 'Hori'.

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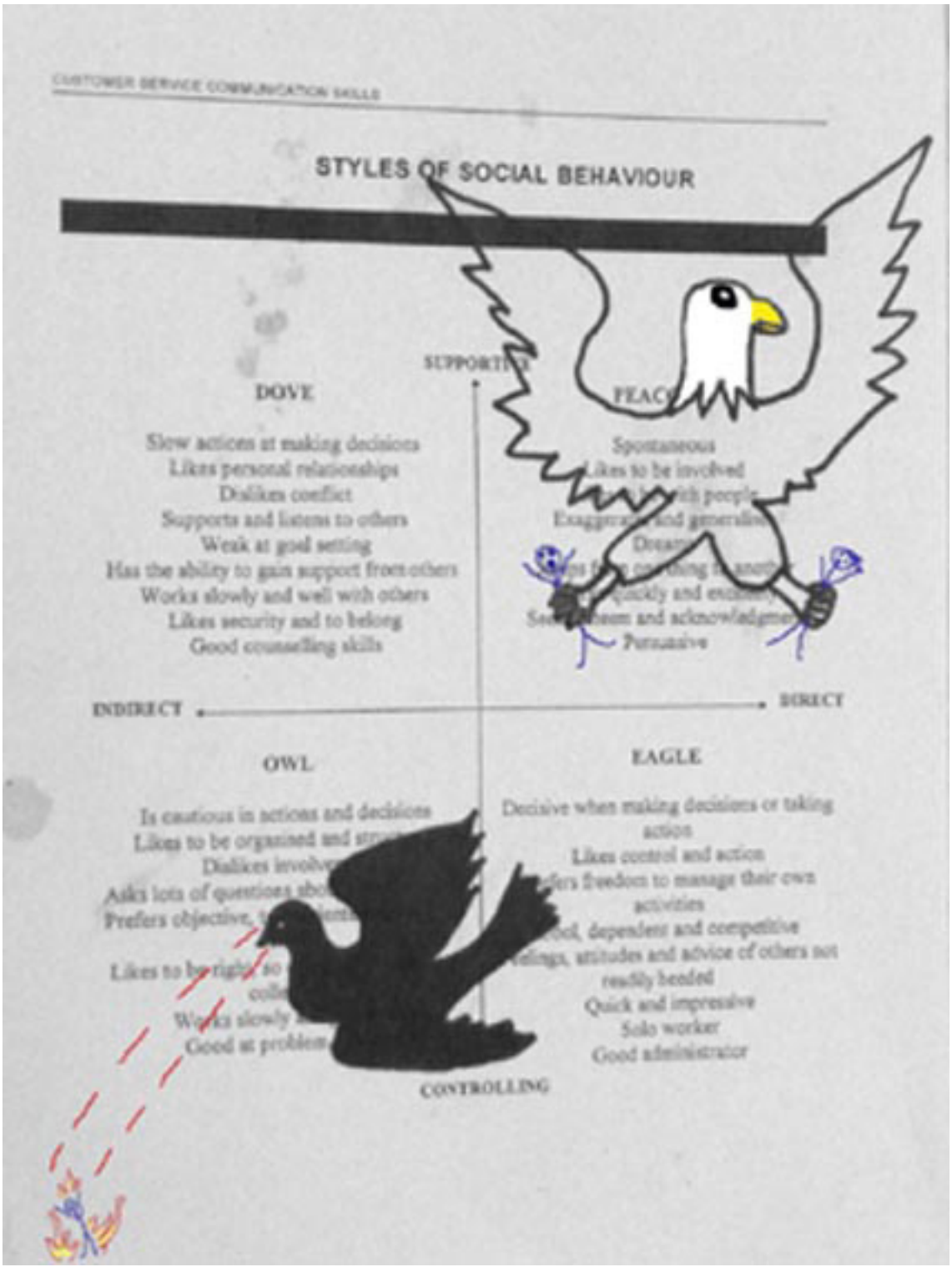
Styles of Social Behaviour



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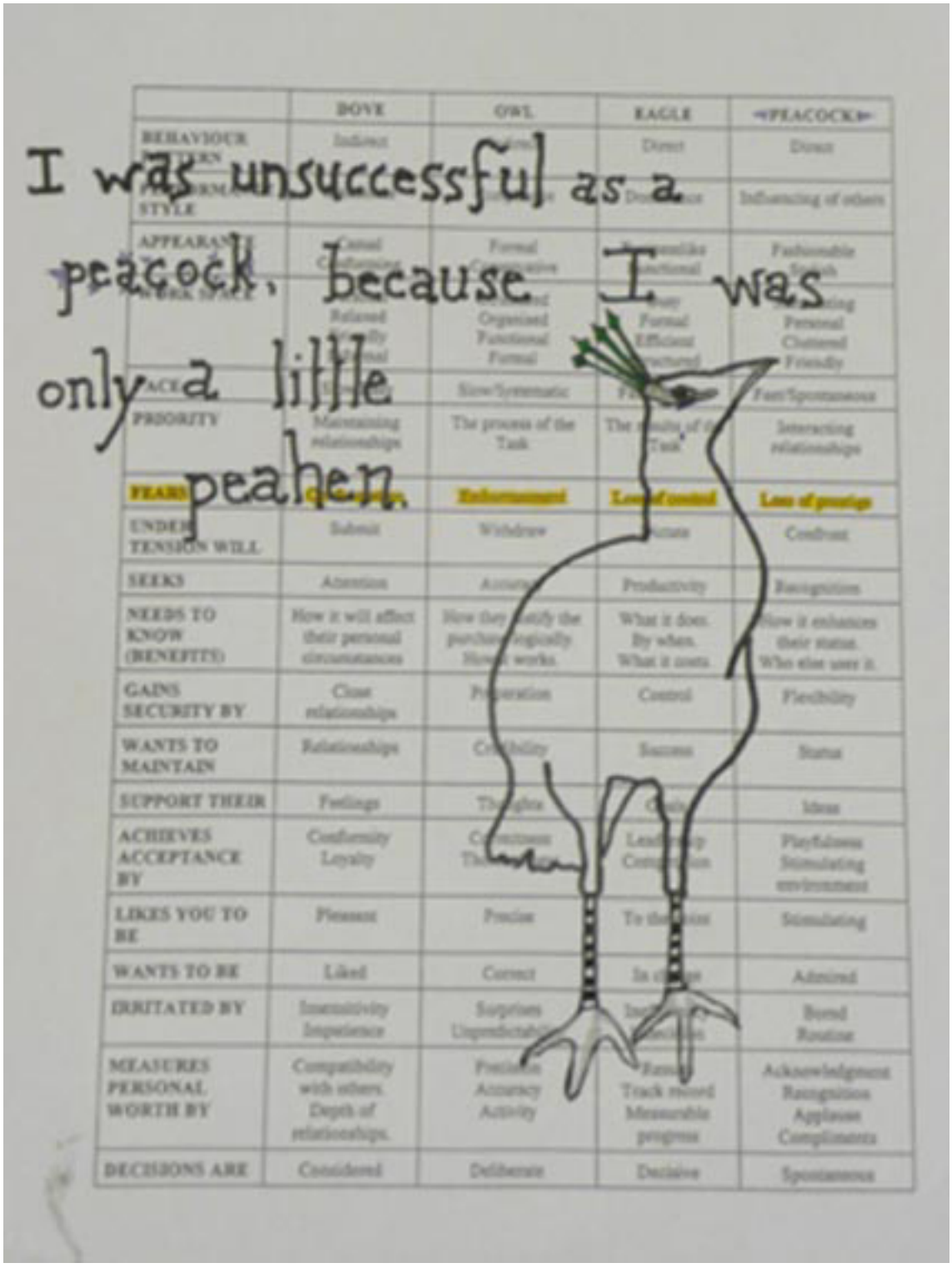
Unsuccessful Peacock



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