

SMOKE

smoke encrypted whispers

DOWN

samuel wagan watson



whisper

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UQP

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smoke encrypted whispers

Samuel Wagan Watson, born 1972, is of Bundjalung, BirriGubba, German, Scottish and Irish descent. He lives in his childhood domain of Brisbane, but still feels the lure from time to time of his teenage stomping grounds of the Sunshine Coast. He has worked as a door-to-door salesman, a public relations officer, fraud investigator, graphic artist, law clerk, film technician, actor, and arts bureaucrat.

His first collection of poetry *of muse, meandering and midnight* won the 1999 David Unaipon prize for unpublished Indigenous writers. In 2001, he published a collection of 'road poems' titled *itinerant blues* and a chapbook 'hotel bone' for Vagabond Press. He is also the co-author of the award-winning website, 'blackfellas, whitefellas, wetlands'. In 2003 Samuel toured throughout Australia, New Zealand and Berlin.

acknowledgments

Several of the poems in the new section, ‘Smoke Encrypted Whispers’, appeared in *Heat* and *Southerly*.

of muse, meandering and midnight

a prelude

dropping a knife
on one's foot
is nothing like
dropping tequila
on one's tongue

yet
her floral dress
begged me to...

whereas the night
well,
it just stayed outside

magnesium girl

I was kissing the girl
with magnesium breath,
all over me
her burning hot magnesium

ahh to touch

the boundaries of delight
and pain
for you only hurt those you can love
when lust becomes a mercenary
for the weak hearted of humanity

the magnesium breath
inviting me to her bowl of splinters
nothing but the frozen tears of her last love
picked up in the rain
and our relationship,
a shrouded threesome,
death always being
that silent partner

oh that magnesium girl
with the strawberry hair
how my black flesh and rye once lingered
to be one with you
my magnesium girl

after 2a.m.

I wept along with the night
two
black
hideous dimensions—
myself and 3a.m.
releasing a crystal tide of bottled insanity
while the shadows mocked
our embrace
and from then on
I knew that forever
night
would be my mistress

back seat driver

love me
oh back seat driver
love you
into a state darkest under covers
and wilful damage of day

entice me
oh back seat driver
to the dove of peace
maybe your bulldog tomorrow?
with any luck from yesterday

save me
oh back seat driver
from the bitterness
of phobia waste
and packages of human frost

kill me
oh back seat driver
for an older audience at dawn
and with my blood taken
make a name for me

nothing else matters...

on the river

it was a drive through the sleeping industrial giants
and thirty minutes before a flight
along Brisbane's vein of union disputes
to a secluded spot on the river's edge
with its cold sea breezes and dead things,
we kissed
and said goodbye
discovering that we both had feelings for deserted factories
and abandoned mechanical bits
and for each other
thirty minutes before a flight
and two writers can't find the words
to ease the tearing of departure
serenaded by a blow-torch on a rusting iron hulk upon the water
grey smoke billowing from the old power station
the landscape studded with electric fences and weeds
her and I at home amongst it all
we kissed
and said goodbye

waiting for the good man

we kissed goodbye at the terminal
and upon seeing you for the last time
I felt the good man leaving,
the good man that existed in the hotel room
the good man that loved you across the table, linen and fine wines

the good man that appreciated your perfume
and ran his fingers gently through your hair
catching in his rings as for you he listened
for the laughter while resting in your breasts

I felt the good man leaving
as if I couldn't convince him that I'd changed
that you had made a difference
and that I could breathe easy in the darkness of early morning
I felt the good man leaving
and now
I'll be missing both of you

raindrops fall in vain

for Rebecca Edwards

raindrops fall in vain
and abuse
the kindness of my soul

I hear them landing outside,
an audience to a short-lived affair

continuum of vertigo, a song

soothing,
yet, absolute
a spiral dance to an unwelcoming ground
where they are of little regard
but slaves and remedy to dry spirits
that one can envy such courage to fall
in the open
and share their end
alone

chloe in the window box

in the darkness
it's increasingly difficult to find the corkscrew
and Chloe in the window box
with that bottle of pinot noir

or the memory of her
that left six months ago
and light no longer shining through
her window
where as a sentimental act
we clasped and watched the stormbirds
that no longer cross the shoreline
Neptune no longer taunting
peering through his transparent keyhole
no more 2am's
cut out of the darkness with a corkscrew

and as time stretches on
a distorted picture of Chloe,
an empty bottle of pinot noir

the postman's privilege

most typewriters spit out
that exact decibel
like the coughing silencer
of an assassin's weapon

or the sound of the postman's bike
through the walls of my boardinghouse room
through the walls
the postman is my assassin

blah, blah, blaaaaah, blaaaaah, blaaaaaaah

the maddest allegro to haunt me,
I dare not look out
I am a ghost of my own doing

waiting
for the knock-backs from editors
for the "we'd like to pass your work on to the senior
literary editor
before we make a decision"
for the debt collectors
and finally
the letter that says,
"please come home"

musings: the graveyard shift

for Sarah

as I enter a writers' graveyard shift
sheltered by a desk lamp

a lover is nesting within the covers
breathing softly

paper and pen on the window ledge
third floor

overlooking the river,
dark wet stretching leather

red buoys flicker
on/off

signal thoughts to the writer
on graveyard shift

looking for inspiration
in poorly lit boats shuttling past

the crew all strangers to me
as I am almost a stranger to the person in my bed

promises made as solid as the murkiness before us
where sharks hide amongst it all
vicious, devouring, still-life anecdotes
the ideal machine of consequence

and still, still
with all this darkness
no inspiration

a day of sweet caressing,
the best of my thoughts

whispers in the linen
across her body

into her eyes

chases away the dark creations

filled with something that felt like love a long, long time ago
hands left shaking

unable to paint,
a dark portrait of self

new farm is closed

the ex-muse is on her way home for good
to the walls of stale inspiration
her little boy in tow

while a lone figure of the shadows he has cast
stands in the doorway of an upstairs balcony, waiting

rain falls of this morning
cleanses the streets of the valley
water upon arduous attempts to dream

this rain is his last witness
as the car is packed
typewriter and clothes await the still room across town
yet, his smell will linger for some time in the halls

and it has been quiet

and there will be nothing good to come
of his presence here
and there is no love poem preserve,
goodbye magnesium girl
the debate has faded
with the feelings of eternity
drowned in the misguidings of gringos and dingos

the typewriter waits, a patient mistress
he says goodbye finally to the emptiness
darkness ever and always faithful
but in the surrendering there is solace

and the last parody in this passing is conducted
he locks the door and hangs a sign out-front
NEW FARM IS CLOSED

white stucco dreaming

sprinkled in the happy dark of my mind
is early childhood and black humour
white stucco dreaming
and a black labrador
an orange and black panel-van
called the 'black banana'
with twenty blackfellas hanging out the back
blasting through the white stucco umbilical
of a working class tribe
front yards studded with old black tyres
that became mutant swans overnight
attacked with a cane knife and a bad white paint job

white stucco dreaming
and snakes that morphed into nylon hoses at the terror
of Mum's scorn
snakes whose cool venom we sprayed onto the white stucco,
temporarily blushing it pink
amid an atmosphere of Saturday morning grass cuttings
and flirtatious melodies of ice-cream trucks
that echoed through little black minds
and sent the labrador insane

chocolate hand prints like dreamtime fraud
laid across white stucco
and mud cakes on the camp stove
that just made Dad see black
no tree safe from treehouse sprawl
and the police cars that crawled up and down the back streets,
peering into our white stucco cocoon
wishing they were with us

the crooked men

my Dad straightened out the crooked men
in the old laundry shed
above the fishing gear and jars of nuts and bolts
where on a rack
their naked, twisted forms did hang
from the neck
body hair like pine-needles
restrained by welded g-clamps
and steel-trap teeth
hydraulic arms and pulleys
and a shiny drip-tray on the floor
to catch the expelled, blackened hate

sometimes eight sometimes ten
the crooked men
with faces like prunes
tattoos and scars
and tongues that could no longer work
but engulfed by obscenities
as they leaked night and day
in that old laundry shed

and they were not grateful
or ungrateful
the crooked men
nor were they in debt to my father
and his amazing rack
in these days when their hate
would trickle through my backyard haven
drowning the smells of Saturday afternoon
and freshly cut grass
and the yap of the labrador
and innocence lost
to the crooked men

brown water looting

hardly stopping to think
that adults can hurt you
we'd wander the mudflats alone—
brown water looting
make-shift fishing poles
and mosquito song
for hours and hours
wandering
away from our parents
away,
looking for where the feral pigs slept
or where swamp wallabies crash through
and us, never thinking
about the kids who don't make it home
kids who were just like us,
innocent explorers
brown water looting
with no shoes, no money
no fear

just the eternity of the mudflat
the sun never setting

jetty nights

it was an arm that stretched over the mud and sharks
from under the song of the swaying pines in the darkness,
the night water fondles the pylons
as mullet dance in the cold blackness afraid of nothing
we too, walk against our curfew
we see the eyes under the jetty,
phosphorescence and ectoplasm
under the death of the floorboards
looking up from the muddy grave
stealing a glance at the clear cover of stars

a fishing boat drones somewhere out there on the water
and in the distance a buoy flashes red lights and green
and you suddenly feel the loneliness out there
that's where you can escape to

the smell of mashed potatoes and chops hang in the air
drags our attention back to the shoreline cottages
Ray Martin chatters somewhere in the glow of sixty watt lighting

we turn and face the clatter of dead wood
our lifeline home
and leave our jetty,
leave away the mystical squawks of curlew in the swamp
that eerie bleakness we came to love,
this innocence we behold
that we had nothing to fear but our parents' scorn

carefree

you'd never forget the pelicans
because it was their home too
and that occasional one who'd try and swallow your baited hook
while we cast out into an endless mould of brown and blue skin
sometimes catching our line in its enormous and clumsy wingspan
floating around the jetty constantly boasting that huge gullet
so close to the pylons covered in poison oyster shells
that waited for the bare flesh within our gait,
inviting our bare flesh to dance
Mum worried that we'd get sick from eating them
Dad saying the sewage from the caravan park
would sometimes flow near where we fished
and that the oysters bathed in it too

little buckets of a few bream
silver catch of a meal
and the persistent cats at our ankles
lapping up the smell
running up past the shop
a front window necropolis of stonefish in vegemite jars
suspended in a vault of clear alcoholic brine
still deadly in death
and us in bare feet all the time
three kids in stonefish-infested mud
playing Russian roulette—
one good pair of running shoes between us

deadman's mouth harp

walking along a bitumen shoulder
'round the witching hour
it comes through the darkness
an unwelcome companion
that levels the grass and foliage,
a whistle
like a crystal spear
cuts the stillness into fine pieces
a maiden carried in the wind
sultry, yet hollow,
a tune from a deadman's mouth harp
a cry that follows the night
chilled and evil
it echoes the little spirits in the breeze
black lips and diamond teeth
it strays beyond the ebony cover of sky

spat out of a deadman's mouth harp,
played over and over
a monotone symphony
from the tired beast
of damned and lonely eternity

a verse for the cheated

growing up on the southern fringe of the Sunshine Coast
we often heard adults rambling on about the local economy
and saw the bright plumage and wealth of tourists
those who came with an odd hunger for visitation
and soon left as tourists
some who copped the brunt of our youthful grievances
those buying postcards of pristine beaches
that were nowhere near us
and purchasing painted coral stolen from hundreds of miles away
and branded with the tag, MADE IN TAIWAN,
they arrived in their brand-new cars that sparkled
upon a strip of bitumen that we regarded as a petulant beast,
a highway that carried some of us away
forever
young and unaware of the finality of death
its greedy black claws lubricated on the nectar of broken dreams

my mate who had his licence for only a week
...the sister of a friend on a casual drive home
...an academic in the senior class, the world at her fingertips
...another mate taken on a motorbike

and a friend who ended up as a plaything for the monster
pulled from the wreckage screaming, fed on painkillers and nightmares

all of this and the tourists taking photos of the roadside crosses
thinking how fortunate and cool we kids looked in this haven
how carefree it must be approaching adulthood on the Sunshine Coast

and the recalcitrant animal
prepared to deliver us on our future paths of success
and to pick a few off on our way

the fatal garden

don't judge me by my skin
at 4.30am
under
the street-lit madness

black—white—yellow—red
all the people
of the spectrum,
like an arrangement of flower-show blossoms

peace is plausible
but
it seemed easier to create
a mockery
of the human condition
born
of immortal Greek philosophers

well, how immortal is it?
it didn't last long,
until the tulips and the roses
and snapdragons
and poppies
began slaughtering each other
the killing season
bitter harvests:

spring

summer

autumn

winter

and

escape

radio thick blood

I sit in my room
as they advise
that another united nations envoy
has been captured to the shock of their country
by another country
another suffering

we kill a few of theirs
so they kill a few of ours
and the beers won't pour all night
but five dollars will get you a look
at the darkside
in all our hearts
to a charlie parker tune
and even he had his own hell
that we're still looking after here

when someone else visited china
people committed to bring about change in chile
and the beer is going down twice as fast
but the contraband didn't even make it past airport security

and someone praises botulism in our hemisphere
and radio thick blood
while I just sit here and get narrow
like a crowd at the bullfights
where hemingway made it,
approaching the dregs like a slow dawn,
tears inconceivable

midnight's boxer

midnight's boxer he has become
that the ghosts from the 'tents' of long-ago pay homage
memories that fill a boardinghouse room
busted knuckles soothed endlessly with goanna oil
and on the soul, scars that can't

stories in his eyes
could have been an olympian

try and extract the truth from his fists,
although
he wouldn't know how to sink in the boot
a tender honour picked up off the battlefields of assimilation

midnight's boxer he has become
fifty-seven-year-old gas tank that can't see empty
blackened skin like blackening memory
and hard
plain hard,
the urecognised pillar of his mob
and
after midnight has gone
way gone
and his time is over
will he be missed
and his triumphs mentioned,
midnight's boxer he has become

surgery music

they're always cooking bacon in the cancer ward

it's tuesday

and head injuries last

until monday

but they're still cooking bacon on a patient's bed

a face blistered in fat

as screams reign unchallenged

until the surgery music

softens all

but the few

few to die

few to live

few to cry

and darkness takes care of the rest

few to die

to feast on the bacon with death

eyes to eat with

hands to choke

white sheets to catch pain

soaked in purity on a stick

and a corner in which to breathe

a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee

deadened crow with eternal lockjaw
a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee
not as gracious as a magpie,
neck bent into the wind
and bitumen madness that claimed you
scorched mark
and tears
fallen into the blackened tar and earth
blood soaked earth through massacre
war
and plague

this is someone's land
played host to someone's lust of
a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee
ants scream
wage war
and curse the rain
black feathers scatter the highway
teasing the frozen bitumen spirits
locked in the heat and tar
sealed forever
like the constant anger
and sorrow within
a bent neck black and flustered feather mallee

the gloom swans

and they found shelter in decay
as the morose ballet
danced across the wreckage of metropolis lost

fingering the broken glass, dreams and wind
constantly fuelling the graceful progress
of the gloom swans

a death march of sinister beauty

drawing survivors back through ruined hearts
seeing a blend into the melted, living forms of day
and crawl back to shadows smooth of night
appearing only to undertake the execution
of sky's foe

why so vicious, oh gloom swans?
why so death?
why do the children weep
in contempt of your sterile feather?

why so pardon the corpses
laid out in the cleansing of your mockingbird departure

a black bird of my mind

migrating thoughts
of bitter sweet anxieties
come once
in a curse
or on a
road
of stone

harshly cut rocks
of little chance
that attracts a man
of word
of time
of sacrifice
to lay against the grain

but why walk a road of bitter sweet?
when easier
to cut one's throat
and watch a sea of
death
red
swimming in the
rain

fly-fishing in woolloongabba

facing the mirror
and having a shave
in the near darkness
after an evening of watching the wine disappear

listening to traffic outside
rivers of exhaust and light
white light upstream
red light downstream

schools of syringes
wade in the shallows
needle packets float in the gutter
absurd fish scales in the breeze

my partner understands it better,
better than most
understands the intersecting flow
gently, she understands

as a young girl living on a remote, black community
a minority of her
in a majority
understanding, she is too gentle for this river here

and back in the mirror again
a spot of blood appears on my face
the water running down the drain with my blood
night-juice into the underside of the current on our doorstep

a small fire is ignited up the street
we hear the faint pop
when someone has lost it
tossed a chemical bomb on the steps of the Serbian church

and just what did it solve?
as they escaped down one of the side streets
down one of a thousand bitumen estuaries
of the big river

when tomorrow I'll stand on our doorstep

cast out a line in the comfort of full 'contents' insurance
the sharks motionless in the disguise of the undertow
and the little fish sighing, for the want of better

shout-me-a-wine requiem

let's just say
it is a little more
than an obligatory action of mine

this person from outside my circle
a colleague with whom I visit
in a room of four walls and melancholy

bed linen unshaken for some months under a retrospective painting of poker-playing dogs
in the tobacco-stale atmosphere his unshaven haven
and I feel the end of it all when I arrive

his words composed in a collection
rudely on top of each other
like the swaying tower of bourbon bottles in the kitchen,

shoves some red wine into my 9am face,
the tip-toeing around his verses and luck
and mine and politics and protocols

and amidst the death march he asks, within a staccato of our banter
“so how do you get published?”
over and over like an echo, this sour requiem I endure

and yes, yes I am glad
there is no longer heroin in this place
no sharps, no nothing

yet, cheap red wine and regurgitated
memories of a young woman
who once touched us both

wakes a bad taste in my mouth
“you have to submit your stuff to the literary mags...”
“I have!”

sun trying to bend the dust-caked blinds
little death hands down my back
knowing I could write better in there with him

but no, whilst there are more negotiations as I reach for the door

some plans to have dinner with Sarah and I in the future, sometime
“can I grab some money from ya ... shout me another wine?”

crust

man in the glass crust
walks up to the bin on the street and rummages

10am traffic and oblivious
vitreous and dirty and open

no one builds a nest for him,
him in his stained denims

and glass crust
and vitreous ways walks the sidewalk alone

probably fought until it got over him?
maybe still fighting?

maybe victorious already
but then again, we all figure

you never really get over the big punches
the glass crust
or the vitreous demise

the writer's suitcase

it spilled out onto the bitumen
like the bursting stomach of a consumed beast

the writer's black suitcase
bleeding onto the pavement

where he fell for the last time
and the black moths within escaped

fled for cover in the light they'd been deprived of
witnesses and prisoners unto his pain

secrets into the wind
onlookers gasping in shock

the writer in a ball of terror
his state exposed to the world

and little immortality to come of anything
light shining on the darkest of journeys in the suitcase

nights of drunken ramblings
where the writer fell lower than ever

body convulsing
thoughts fleeing the open air

pages scatter amongst the breeze
the writer dies lying in a pool of his words

a mess of lies and truths
a crowd of condemnation and little comfort

finally a spectacle of his art
the art in dying alone

an external soul of tattered black cardboard
picked up in the ruthless breeze of the city

he dies like his ideas
in a bundle on the sidewalk

where the children find his writings in the gutter
and laugh them off as discarded letters of love

midnight's plague

with a head full
of bad tunes
and
wanting to attack
the cerebral cortex
with a pair of scissors,
cutting the black squares
that keep appearing
multiplying, mutilating
in the room
that never sees sunlight
and
a clock set to midnight
repetitively
thoughts incubate
gestate
pictures from
an out-of-tune television screen
rotate, ignite
the sorry memories
spread like midnight's plague
the constant visitation
of places without phone numbers
where the wrong moments
have left their mark
and an immune system frail,
reminder notes manifest
into death threats
macabre melodies rise
to the roof of the skull
fall into the covers
nose bleeding
midnight's plague
taking another victim
the mind infected
with suggestions
like
fortune cookie disasters

labelled

the doctors probed
while I persisted stamping my hooves
on the cold floor of the locked ward

“Mr Watson ... you don't eat grass!”

“Crap!” I flared.

hooves tap, clop, tok, tap...

“Molasses, salt tablets. Now!” I snarled.

“Mr Watson ... why these antics?!”

“Let me out of here ... I'm a winner ... I have a Cup to win!”

“Mr Watson ... you're not a race horse ... you're a human being!”

Oh yeah?

all my life I've been under some kind of label—

full blood?

half blood...

half breed!

half caste—

and even questioned about being

a quadron

well

with magnificent bloodlines like that

I decided

I must be a goddamned pedigree of some sort!

for the wake and skeleton dance

the dreamtime Dostoyevskys murmur of a recession in the spirit world
they say,
the night creatures are feeling the pinch
of growing disbelief and western rationality
that the apparitions of black dingos stalk the city night, hungry
their ectoplasm on the sidewalk in a cocktail of vomit and swill
waiting outside the drinking holes of the living
preying on the dwindling souls fenced in by assimilation

the dreamtime Dostoyevskys ponder
as dark riders in the sky signal a movement
for the wake and skeleton dance
it's payback time for the bureaucrats in black skins
and the fratricide troopers before them
with no room to move on a dead man's bed

is it all worth holding onto these memories
amidst the blood-drenched sands?
better to forget?

the dreamtime Dostoyevskys feel the early winter
chilled footsteps walk across their backs in the dark hours,
the white man didn't bring all the evil
some of it was here already
gestating
laughing
intoxicated
untapped
harassing the living
welcoming the tallship leviathans of two centuries ago
that crossed the line drawn in the sand by the Serpent
spilling dark horses from their bowels
and something called the Covenant,
infecting the dreamtime with the ghosts of a million lost entities
merely faces in the crowd at the festival of the dead,
the wake is over
and to the skeleton dance the bonemen smile
open season on chaos theory
and retirement eternal for the dreamtime Dostoyevsky

the dingo lounge

those of the brown-skin lycanthrope
have merely become the forgotten offspring
from the dark ages of the dreamtime
the black man's beliefs
are being swallowed up and regurgitated in foreign lands for a
dollar
the night creatures sucked into a vacuum of the techronic abyss
the shapeshifters skulk around the dingo lounge
haunted by the screaming engines of the machines of
consequence
longevity just a whisper in the wind
as their numbers dwindle
and the dark hours are stolen by the monsters of new:
drug addicts, paedophiles and killers
the spirits have almost lost their foothold
the children of the rainbow serpent have no use for demons
scientific justification has rationalised their roles with prozac
and institutionalisation
the dreamtime can be resurrected anytime
and found on the video store shelves
while in the dingo lounge
redundancy and health in death escalates
the bonemen have performed their last dance
and the shrieks of the black dingo go unheard in the night
as the ferryman has already gone down with his ship
and Morpheus in his arduous attempts to dream
has taken to anti-depressants
there comes no stormbird to deliver them to another side
as they fall into the landscape of the shadowmead
and the faded memories of the storytelling damned

valley man

He had rough hands
street hands
black hands
hands

that reached out
and felt the dark places

but
feeling the dark places
He would always return
with something in his face
his face that held abuse
served in an irrational way by society
the material society
a society existent on the dark places

the dark places
places that could not harness him
but only create temporary peace with him
for so many moments
He destroyed the dark places' grasp

and finally
He danced up a wind
and mocked the dark places
until He laid silent,
waiting...

for when the broilga met his breath
inviting his dance to join hers
when,
once again
He felt the dance of the young

cheap white-goods at the dreamtime sale

if only the alloy-winged angels could perform better
and lift Uluru; a site with grandeur
the neolithic additive missing from that seventh wonder of the world expo,
under the arms of a neon goddess, under the hammer in London,
murderers turning trustees
a possession from a death estate
maybe flogged off to the sweet seduction of yen
to sit in the halls of a Swiss bank
or be paraded around Paris' Left Bank
where the natives believe
that art breathed for the first time;
culture, bohemian and bare and maybe brutal
and how the critics neglect the Rubenesque roundness of a bora-ring
unfolded to an academia of art
yes, that pure soil in front of you
the dealers in Manhattan lay back and vomit
they're the genius behind dot paintings and ochre hand prints
rattling studios from the East Side to the Village
and across the ass of designer jeans
porcelain dolls from Soho wanting a part in it so bad
as the same scene discards their shells upon the catwalks
like in the land of the original Dreaming
comatose totems litter the landscape
bargains and half-truths simmer over authenticity
copyright and copious character assassination on the menu
sacred dances available out of the yellow pages
and
cheap white-goods at the Dreamtime sale!

the mosquito room

a melody on the edge
of monotone madness
rampant
unstoppable
uncompromising
in the mosquito room

it knows not an end
out of respect for the thunder
it does not pause
for the seductive summer rains,
millions of black, micro-winged demons
playing violins at break-neck speed
zipping through the air
malicious
flirtatious
at home
in the mosquito room

mudflat

dried up and cracked
remnants
of prehistoric reptile scales
huge and menacing,
a chocolate flesh
that twists along the shores of the wetland

—but waiting for the veil of the incoming tide
is the monster
content when cold and hungry for
the mass that rolls with the current

it never sleeps

it starts

it starts
from the darkness of mangrove dreaming
unable to surrender to time,
later stalked in death,
the stoic's domain is the open marshland
under a red sky looming
where the arthritic bones refuse to bend
broken in the blatant malice of the elements,
and even then
its dignity is only served
by the chilling shrieks of stormbirds
astride crumbling limbs
whose space is a waiting graveyard
and valuable a wooden tear
where no mercy spills from the thousands
of lush, green enveloping peers,
so laden with life
so unsparing
that no two trees help one another
amid the birth and dying cycle of this wetland

if only it could speak
and touch human ears
someone may then appreciate
the frozen insanity
that accompanies
the greying presence
of a decaying mangrove tree

1986

he pays no heed to the thunder god
yet he is wary and tired
'cause you see funny things out here
as the heat gets you,
twigs snapping behind him
when suddenly in some places the breeze just stops!
all his hair stands to attention
this black man from a northern people
whose world has nothing to do
with the road ripping through
the wetland

but he is sensitive
is conscious
with dealings and bills
and mouths to feed,
a witness to the machines eating the tea-tree
clawing the soil
burning this patch of bush
for someone else's lust of bitumen and noise
well, he just has to keep moving
despite the dark shadows of ochre and skin
that tempt the mind's eye to ponder
what was
and never may be
again

boondall wetlands

poem 9

how do you know?
that the mud doesn't feel the pain
of your weight upon its resting place
how do you know?

like the snake that rushes before your feet
and you the only audience
a gift only for your eyes
from the old people
maybe?
how do you know?

the tree that moves in the breeze
its branches caressing your head
maybe a touch of recognition?
maybe?

how do we know that this could be
our final resting place?
or sacred to someone else
but how can you tell?

is it voices or wind that pushes
the afternoon tide?
does your shadow talk to the land
or is it just a shroud of light?

are we asking the right questions?
and can they only be answered here on the
wetlands?
are the answers here for our blindness
or was blindness the only answer
our ears were content with?

once was a rifle range

all that remains now is dirt
always dirt
where so many years ago
adventurous young would fill it with lead
and heat
for the sovereign
eyes fixed in the cross-hairs of victory
on foreign soil
and something called honour

but this is also where
on the muddy banks of the creek
a father shared some final moments
with his little boy
and advised him to watch the mystical water
to wait, and never shed a tear
while his father travels away to fight the Boers
in a land called Africa

finally the man took his carbine rifle
fired several shots into some distant mounds of
earth
the child's frame jolting with every hideous blast
until this father was content
ready for the long haul
trying to ignore the tears in his little boy's eyes

watch the tide my son
and wait for me to return
upon a distant tide I will be home
but until then my son
wait
and watch the tide...

the kabul manifest

there is no stopping
the brutal freight-train of pure muscle
that manipulates billai dhagun
the likes of kabul

a wise old man
the last of the great contortionists
upon a dogmatic path
where many have tried to cross
to capture
to thwart
the shape-shifting
shedding skin
that comes with the immortality
that is kabul

unpredictable in his sudden appearance
disrespectful to the laws of gravity
yellow eyes the dominion
and has kept the old one's language
his song of slither through the grass
constantly dreaming without horizon or
parameter
uncompromising his force to the marsh

loathing at human tramples
waiting for the hunt at dusk
free in billai dhagun
and honest to his foe
endless in campaigns
the almighty kabul...

hotel bone

the job

B R Dionysius knocks on my window one morning
flesh on glass seems to create its own separate taste
upon the middle-eastern-mayhem blasting from a radio somewhere
in the vicinity of this maze
and I almost mistake the tapping for someone else;
asking me to move my car again
people being restless,
restless, restless

into the Ramadhan air
and my dreamtime has little chance
of getting me into *that* party

but B R is present now
to offer me an assignment,
some cash and more cred.

we sit in my mouse-trap kitchen, my boardinghouse atmosphere,
nothing short of a Casbah
as we gesture and negotiate the terms of a future poetry reading
with the flair of African mercenaries
over drinks out of tainted crystal
it reminds me of the reason
for why I came here in the first place
and B R with his good vibes
as always
neglecting to comment on the ectoplasmic-urine of this stucco shell;
this chasm for my reinvention
taking it day by day
and just accepting it,

as a job.

hotel bone

the street resembles a neck
from a wayward guitar
with Hotel Bone sitting idle on a vein,
wedged between two frets
where the bad tunes can reach her

these white stucco walls, I imagine, once carried a vision of pearl
now a gourd for asylum seekers

Iraqi, Indonesian, Sri Lankan
and one crazy Aboriginal ... who lives with a typewriter
but not with the brevity of a visa on my head; no,
my longevity was guaranteed before I was born
in the 1967 referendum
the freedom to practice the voodoo of semantics
within the marrow of Hotel Bone

existence only 2 minutes walk
from some of the best latte lounges in the city
yet, white faces don't come down here
until they've been classified unfit for duty
no longer permitted upon the chorus line
of the cappuccino song
where multi-culturalism is in an airline format
first-class, business and economy seating
but those of us who submit to the chance of mystery-flights
end up on the tar, of Hotel Bone

a haven from Saddam, Suharto, the Tamil Tigers
and One Nation
this Hotel Bone;
it is hard

it is reachable

it is home

when dogs gamble

lying on the floor
with its concrete and ammonia tongue
reaching Charles Bukowski, "Living On Luck"
my split-level mind and its contradictory ghosts
at once condemning his ribald desires of flesh
and praising the simplified schematics of his Richard Nixon landscapes,

I've placed a block of cheese on my doorstep
and the ants are drawn to it,
I have no couch to lie on and read
thus, the ants attack my flesh
and I reciprocate, squashing them between my fingers
to produce a gasoline inspired perfume,
the smell of victory

some guy is at it, upstairs, screaming at an accomplice
but between breaths he allows the other tenants movement
and loads a fresh tirade into the breach
under the smoggy glow of tube lighting
frozen images of dogs playing poker

accommodating the warm reception
of a surprise attack
from within the whites of their eyes
tambourines tied to their feet

(untitled)

the late shift erupts;
Greek boys in turbo-fitted 4s
open the back streets
of bitumen lines built for mice

a gear-crunching
nightscape howl

simultaneously
embraced and ejected
into the dire congestion of the city's spectral pitch

like the fading trumpet oratorio
of an emphysema-riddled jazz musician

bone yard, south brisbane

the swings in the Musgrave Park night
rattle a morose and deserted song
throwing their voices
silhouettes across an abandoned canvas

a jungle-gym resembles the half sunken remains
of a prehistoric beast
ribcage reaching for the moonlight
or an arthritic fist
frozen in protest

the stoic in this wilderness
feeding on the scraps of light
tossed down from the pedestals
of the city's neon gods.

itinerant blues

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

From *Four Quartets*
by T.S. Eliot

cold storage

bussed it into Mitchell
from out of nowhere
and found it on ice

to the horizon line
a smothering layer of cold political rhetoric
the hopeless arguments of history palpitating
gently into the cracks
of stoneware earth

hurting is the season here in the bush
and winter is the additive that comes with it,
the storm shutters are up—
every second store closed or having a closing-down sale

the hunger pains of the city end here
the spirits are being sucked away into this gas-pipeline
as the Beast just keeps taking ... tak *ing* ... *taking*...

black and white struggle to reconcile
slashing their own bloodlines
the kids packed off to the Big Smoke
where all the opportunities now manifest

a rainbow-serpent dormant on cryogenic dreams
chilling over into the landscape
while a secret war is fueled on urban innuendo
as a country-town loses another generation of its young
to the lust of the city

a main street void
of the laughter of its children

the dusk sessions

the pyromaniacs of the gods were kicking it
into that desert sunset
upon a fire-pink, burner-blue horizon line

blossoms cherry red
and naked solar flares drowning into hibiscus hell-flowers
dancing a wake for the dying light
above a necropolis of mulga and spinifex

fueling until darkness

when the tourists overdose on shooting stars
the lark of min-min lights
on the petals of midnight bloom
as the ghostriders take up watch

illuminated into the pitch
by the sun-bleached bones
of dry-spell roadkill

kangaroo crossing

I know this stretch in my blood

this is where the *Megaleia rufa* song
cries louder than any car stereo

the dreaming that suddenly crawls onto the road
and takes it
out of the living—
the ones who fantasised constantly on their own immortality
behind the wheel

but this stretch of road ... *this stretch*
is where the extroverted angels turn their heads
as the flash that is stronger than steel
launches onto the highway
and brings those of the present
forward to their own judgment day

refraction of light
from split seconds
to eternity

what more

what more can one say
on the cruelty of an arid summer's day
that cannot be surpassed
in the arias of the dry season;

*dust storms wreaking havoc
amongst the ivory wind chimes
of a steer's ribcage,*

*bleached and abandoned
upon the cracked pedestal
of a salted claypan*

we're not truckin' around

upon the dining table of the Invader
there were those who thought
that they could simply mimic creation
and plough through this land
inventive
but blindfolded

—*where'd ya get ya license!*

and the bitumen vine of wandering impetus
drove right through the bora-ring
and knocked our phone off the hook
forever

forcing us to stand out on the shoulder of the road
looking for a lift,
even though
we weren't really lusting
that 18-wheeler of a lifestyle
driving into the next millennium

we've been too used
to feeling a kinship
with the discarded and shredded
black pieces of truck tire
on the fringes of the big road

us 'damper-feet' may just pull up a seat on the shoulder
watch
and observe
how you lead-foots fend for yourselves
as the surfers twist before the white squall ahead

the encroaching absalom before us all
an electronic highway

nil by mouth

the salt creeps in
grain after grain

destructive in its microbe-brevity,

you see patches of evidence;
grey and relapsing
skeletal stance of scrub
liver spots on a once flourishing skin of
natural algorithms,

and the mouths out here will murmur, *die-off!*
the saline schematics of slow death

that are very hard to swallow

the golden skin of cowgirls

at the end of a brief Warrego sojourn
hungry and gravel strung
after searching for days and only finding emptiness
accompanied by road-trains heading for the slaughterhouse

little piggy eyes staring
through the slats of the trailers
with a beige, yet invisible shit-mist that stays up your nose
and gets into everything

and like the classical lion with a thorn in its paw
Brisbane lurks on the other side of those hills,
smooth green monoliths
tickled by the arias of Harold Blair
as they reflect the silky breeze
that sometimes carries the perfume
from the golden skin of cowgirls:
award winning, lightly browned pastry,
best pies and cream-buns this side of the Great Divide
where the road-trains pause
and truckers chow down on sausage rolls and waves of sweet,
darkened milk

letting piggy buy some time
before the boners get the best of him

nothing out here at the moment but crackling radio waves
that deliver piggy his requiem;

Charlie Pride, easy-over-agriculture-blues

floodlight sonatas

white spark backdrop
off the forms seduced by blackness,

I hate travelling at night

unable to stomach the singing of the lonely road
or the whispers
of a deadman's mouth harp in the breeze

bringing on premonitions of sudden engine failure

and,
how the halogen lamps ruin the night
and sometimes expose the
memories you're running from

I see the faces
I dare not speak of in focus
as my ritual humming of nursery rhymes
keeps in time with a pounding in my chest
desperate, until I reach my destination,
that the hairy hands in the back seat
won't materialise from my
retrospective sins
and take a deserved piece of me

or merely,
just a taste

abandoned factories

the dark sentinels passed on the road

silent and empty

and what was discarded
or didn't fall under the auctioneer's hammer
is stuffed into industrial bins
like entrails at a meat works

the beast was gutted,
a victim on the chopping block
of economic rationalism
when the bosses called it quits

now a quiet and morose tune threads
through the broken windows
like silenced bullets fired into a grand old elephant
as it stands; the losing favorite

unable to move
start a new life, progress

as the ghosts have all
but moved on too

scenes from a getaway car

another late Thursday night ... and I'm wondering
why I bothered to use expensive cologne
when the stench of the bar drowns it out

me and four other passengers tonight...
in the getaway car...

escaping the crimes that eat us away,
one of my brethren looks at my dark-skinned gait
I acknowledge his staunch Mediterranean jaw,
lines in his face like a topographic map
the cuneiform of worry, from the old country and centuries of killing

here she comes! fake blonde along the linoleum counter ... this driver that calls everyone 'love'
how are ya, love?
what will it be, love?
'nother pot, love?

she's at the wheel now ... this getaway car of many campaigns ... used, abused, restored and rigged
and everyone wanting a window seat

you can name your poison
but you can't choose who'll sit next to you

and Christ! the punter on the other side
he's got a face like the dartboard in a country pub
he's taken a few hits over the years
he'll definitely be in for a long run tonight
an interesting companion for this trip

then the driver asks me what cologne I'm wearing
what ya been up to, love?
what ya been doing?
and suddenly I'm riding shotgun in the passenger seat
getting death stares from four lonely men,
all dreaming of 'love' and that supermarket blonde rinse

everyone taking in the fumes of the bar
as they do every other night between the blue flashes
of either greyhounds or trotters
and the fading smell of lamb chops and countermeal mash

everyone running and trying to win
on two legs and all-fours
bets on
bets off

night racing

night racing through the suburbs
of white stucco dreaming
the menacing glow of the city's tainted body behind us
as the custodians of the estate domiciles
spy through the holes in their lace curtains
at the howl of our twin-cam war party
drowning out the dying heartbeat of this captured landscape
our small bodies shivering a *techno* pulse

hugging into corners
accelerating onto the straights
a growling junkyard dingo under the bonnet,
the beast made up from parts here and there
born for the walkabout rally
black feet pumping racing pedal to floor
breaking the silence of the settlers' sacred sites
enveloped in shadows when not haunted by the silhouettes of urban myth

mind navigation into the bitumen labyrinth
these areas we treat with the same contempt as laid upon us
as middle-class Australia prepares for another evening
darkness and the dreaming of jaywalkers and nightstalkers
yes, it cradles us too
like the Earth Mother did the warriors of old
but we're too scared to look behind us or in the rear-view mirror
to catch a wink from Voodoojack

and his perpetual black grin

3a.m. escape

got up off the couch
and immediately the room cleared of its winged creatures
flapping in time
to an abdominal exercise machine on the glowing box,

ahhh!
falling asleep again without turning off the television

the evangelists would be up soon
with their healing tentacles
of credit card lust
my mind cleansed by amber spirits,
leaving a pallet as rough as cindery thongs
the last remnants of yesterday
hanging off my crumpled clothing

flashbacks of a late-night telephone call to the ex-wife
like a scientist hell-bent on an answer for cancer

the sun was on the way up
over a cloud-splangled banner
as the jury slept

time to get on the road again
and grab a radar-gun breakfast

pre-flight

It's 5a.m. in August
and the cold floor of the bus depot is occupied
by the rampant and naked feet
of snot-nosed pygmies

a static background
that resembles a single-mother's symposium

everyone has packed in haste and is now ready to bail
while the force that has driven them here
remains absent

a pre-flight environment stirring
to the waking groans of a cappuccino-making slave
and an honour guard assembled for the dearly departing;

the smooth peanut-butter-coloured skin of European
backpackers armed with translation books

95 cents a litre

he nurses this big ol' sedan into the service station
going about the business of a regular consumer
shrugging off that 95 cents a litre in fuel prices

and it may as well be 99,
but there's no point complaining

when something in his eyes flash
like he too, right there, has just aged to 99 points

putting the hose into the gas tank
he's almost unconscious in his stance, almost grey
as if clouds have hijacked his mind's eye
and he doesn't even notice the petrol spilling under his car
like an oasis seeping through the texture of a desert floor

it massages the concrete
it brings us all to lick our lips at the sight

a naked, refined body of fuel
wasted at 95 cents a litre,

the station attendant screams
at the rising sea of gasoline
and our aging friend comes back

sorry, he says, in the waking, my father just died...

deo optimo maximo

for Matt Foley

lurching onto the highway
sporting a rushed pair of \$5.95 truck-stop sunglasses
facing off with this intermittent black line,
its cusps hidden in gullies forging south
as it does northward

curvaceous segments of road
like black smiles and frowns
either gazing in the direction of the Pacific or the hinterlands,
dark horses upon the clearing of the dreamtime tabernacles

this stretch from Brisbane to the Gold Coast
since the 70s, its character has been raped too
in what was briefly Joh's country
yes!

multi-lane monument to the Gods of old and new,
the bandits touched by the spiritual fingers of radar guns
and speed cameras,
the all-knowing, all-seeing
deo optimo maximo; on the tongues of the rogues
—*to God, the best and greatest*

yet, by God's hand
what happened to the beasts that inhabited the African Lion Safari?
and did the UFO above the roadhouse just fly away?
or can we even recognise the cemetery
where the solitary Anzac stands
that the surfers would salute
to secure a pact with Huey and his crystal palace on the early morning tide?

protected from the glare by \$5.95 truck-stop sunglasses
no one respects the speed limits
and no one owns up to the roadside crosses

'cause I know
there is no God—

there is only the living
and trailers of the dead

gasoline

you just know where it will lead to—
the prelude of a lingering kiss
upon the fumes of a heated and ravenous breath

and you're already a weary veteran of this road

'cause it's going to combust,
the spirits of her mouth
entering yours
with that *NO NAKED FLAMES* tattoo
falling from her lips
into the curves of her chest

the fragrance of a weathered fuel tank
leaking unleaded desire

literary festival bump-out

pictures of bloated lions fill these halls
chewing all night
on the remains
of their last kill

triumphant
in the now-stale surroundings

bags packed

more of these entities emerge
from closing-night interludes
these painters of words prepare
to return
to the rigmarole that
landed them here

depression and success sitting uniform
on the bedside table

statues in a world of observations
and intensity

now with little thought or care
for emotional good-byes

itinerant blue

it comes to that morning
when finally you realise: *it's all going to collapse*

there is a conclusion that's yet to be seen
while loose ends are stacking high to a volatile degree

eyes peering through sun-kissed slits
at a landscape bathing in a varnish of itinerant blue
as if the sky has reminded the earth of loneliness
and the old days of communion

a dawn when gamblers get slapped into remission
and the ball starts rolling again with rogue impetus

time to move and abandon what is built
and may later bleed
after days and nights of bargaining into the mirror's subversion

as the only muse that serenades you
is a computer generated mirage

wishing to advise
you have limited credit to make this call...

products of mexico

been trying to write for days
and now pushing towards the border
to escape serenity,
a mind turning to cheese

heading north
a backseat full of notes
written down-south,
my products of Mexico
that came in the Byron Bay nights so dark
I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face,

let alone write

a body depleted
of 24-hour white-light Brisbane
the never-ending glow of the city
that completes my usual ingredients for sleep
and language of black-rain thoughts

crossing the boundaries
smuggling ideas solid and fatal
as flying bricks
as my mind tried to reason
the heights of Bundjalung dreaming

the night creatures' endless songs,
praise and condemnation
of attempted human magic,
dialects so foreign to my own native ears

white matter foam
picked off the brain,
in which I carved my products of Mexico

making a mad dash for the border

gas tank sonnets

1 hour out of Byron Bay
and no dreams for three days
when the snakes in the engine
hatched a mutiny

the radiator hose was the first to go

a roadside heart-attack,
meatball surgery with a swiss-army knife
and almost hijacked by hitchers

the days and days of service station pies
finally ripped through my spare tire
and cocktails of on-edge nerves did their work

while all the time
across the hills, the Pacific
looking good enough to eat

feelings of withdrawal
leaving
Byron Bay and the muse,

for the likes of Brisbane-town
and this want of becoming a writer

tongue dragging along the bitumen
regurgitating yesterday's gravel,
the mind aflush
with gas tank sonnets

sunday

an unwanted cadence
beats on the roof of the car

salty and cold

brought in on the off-shore breeze
as the stale windscreen wipers awaken
screeching
like a pair of dying mutton-birds being pulled across the glass

the sugarcane burning on one side
and the river swelling on the other

acidic grey ash mixes with rain—
fallout across the paint work,
a collaboration that will finally eat
its way through

ahead thick savannah forests of sleep
block the voices of hundreds of thousands of spawn
—silver counterparts at my watery flank
blinded by the wider blue

and just like a lot of us,
some of them must ponder
the freedom
to float in one spot
on a lonely Sunday afternoon

immune from any stagnation

the last bullfighter

walking alone into the ring,
stamping ground
of uncompromising traffic,
northbound off the mighty Tweed River

a water dragon sat
upon the hot tarmac
body across the white-dotted line

flaring its frilly pink appendage
like a cape

at oncoming traffic
these huge, stainless-steel cannonballs,
complements of human creation

claws working the plain
in a half-baked flamenco

it obviously knows the nature of these soulless beasts
leaping into harm's way
without even a picador to assist

just a loaded gas tank in the morning sun
with no time for
mindless animals on wheels

confessions of a reptile,
last stand of the matador

back road

revisiting childhood
through that time-gauze of greying feather,
back to a time
when the road seemed wider
but had the same volume of insanity

Dad always concrete at the wheel
Mum in the 'Worry' seat
sharing with Dad,
the worries sometimes reaching the backseat
as the sporadic vapours got too heavy
and did their backdraft thing
upon our small foreheads
breathing in the pockets of blackness

yet, we ride
our little bodies fading into the upholstery

the rear-view mirror
keeping its eye on us

sultry gridlock musings

sitting in traffic

sweat beads crystallise across her forehead
like soldier crabs on a marble cliff-face

and as they fall,
gathering momentum the likes of
downhill piano races,

smashing my cache of reflections and regrets
endowed by past love

brunswick st blues

Brunswick St
sits like the continental shelf just below morality

rain washes the bad scenes
off the street
the killers still get the air
for free
yet upon the working girls
the evil shadows linger
while the decision-makers bottle the blood
and facelift the Valley

Voodoojack waits at the end of Brunswick St
like some kind of licorice addict;
paved bitumen runs straight into his mouth,
congested with exhaust fumes
and scummed in the beard of night

whistling through blackened teeth
like some patron saint of the red-light militias
that perpetuate the Brunswick St blues tune

a black singing snake gripped by the neck—
can't bite back

ambulance chaser

somehow, I lost the faith;
'cause the girls in Sunday school knew so much about sex

and now, I find the subject so hard to dismiss
in all its vital importance

but the ambulances
scream past
at all hours
big red-eyed wolves
stomachs wrought with pain

and the contradicting heretic in me starts to lag
makes the sign of the cross
whispers prayers for the wounded
and their curers

as for a moment
my heathen heart travels with them

talking to the airplanes

buses pass in a cold shrill
while cars simply *snap!*
motorbikes cast
into red-belly black snakes
fast and all-consuming

but talking to the airplanes
you want to tell them, please don't crash
or burn
carrying angels in their nose
photos of your children under their wings
close to their heart

cruising across the earth in silence
innocent as the wake of peanut butter spreading
across freshly baked rye

three-legged dogs

I live in a neighbourhood
of physically challenged canines

tough, three-legged dogs roam the streets,
taking every day as it comes

staunch tripods of muscle and mut
still as big, still as mean, just less maneuverable

the gutters, pot holes and cars give no concessions
and a local council doesn't even provide special amenities

three-legged dogs caught in a vicious trilateral world
of the right, the wrong and the cheated

hoping to greet in doggy dreaming
a warm, little pile of legs

fire

for David Gilbey

fire-engine flash of fox pelt
and a plume of tail
fluffy ... like some oil-well ablaze on a Gulf War postcard
and from the body
it was fleeing at a 2 o'clock incline

almost innocent in the ebb of dawn
above the vineyards at Booranga
sauntering erratically
as a red beacon
across the screen of a life-support monitor

up and down and away
this alien enigma upon Wiradjuri skin

the night house

the dingles of branches paint the night house
while the smoky residue formed in the hate of its past
changes the shades of shadow
from black to red

as if Dante himself had tattooed
the limbs of humanity, those who came here to conquer
or as urban myth relates
those black women who once upon a time
had their babies in this yard
before the bulldozers mowed down the birthing plain
and erected the doomed foundations of the night house
unable to stop
the curses falling

the lips of primal vengeance
camouflaged in an eternal apron of midnight's plague

and just what is left, after night has devoured it?

it is not the smell of Sunday roast that lingers in the air
but other flesh that emanates from
the night house

and the crows that cackle in its unkept grounds
they too have witnessed the decrepitude
and shallowness of love
as the trail leading to the front door
is the sinewy line between life
and burdening tales of death

the inhabitants left wondering
why nothing has gone right here
and just how do the walls manage to stay upright?

old dishes under the verandah
where man once tended beast
wind rattles an abandoned dog chain
now a bloodless umbilical to the dreams
of children who play nearby
while the demons clear the longevity of this place

and all the other night houses
built in the aftermath of heartless atrocities;
the demonic icons of irreversible history,

the sepia images of memory
in a landscape formed
along the blackened fringes
of this sunburnt country

jaded olympic moments

for Jennifer Cullen

they made their way through the sliding-door
and stole the lot
video, mini-disc equipment, fly-fishing reels, my
son's piggy bank
and my literary award
all on the eve of the Games
capping off a *sterling* period of post-funeral melancholy
after my young cousin's passing

then, sitting on Jen's couch
as the ochre-kissed women came out
and did their thing in the center of the stadium
we had tears in our eyes
thinking, *that's our mob!*

but no,
only a romantic would think that
it's still very much an US and THEM kind of deal in this modern dreaming,
we're city people without a language
and some of us have even less

but then the coppers rang
said they'd caught them
three smack-head white boys
18, 19, 20

the gear was gone without a trace
the video, the piggy bank, the literary award
and it made sense
'cause if blackfellas had broken into the house
they would've taken Dad's 10ft Landrights flag

'cause it was worth just as much
as Cathy Freeman's gold

without regret

we sit there
night after night
until the close of being

draining the last dregs of amber fluid
in a realm of tungsten candle-light

swollen men
and consumed women
we dance

without regret

telling our feet
at every daybreak
that they are
without a doubt
Aboriginal

and not of ethnocentric natives
who own the paved streets of Paris

future primitive

melted ore from the earth
twisted
shaped
cooled
into the vortex of the material coil
to be born
back onto the land

the black afterbirth of the mother
lubricating
your veins

and yet

your senses will never stand to attention off your metal skin
as you pass over the sacred places

the fathers just couldn't place in you
a soul
or find a copy of the Earth Mother's,

the optional extras can only carry you from here
and save you, your identity

hungry across the land
chewing
tearing
screaming
as the fathers continue to copulate
and pour from the factories
more
and more
of your siblings
that are the new flesh of the earth:

the reinvention of the wheel
the Earth Mother's lot, the vicious circle

the night train from newcastle

like being in the stomach of an alloy-coated python
caught in the beard of a violent pepper storm
this 15 hour journey to Brisbane

and depleted I am

there is the flowering of post-literary-performance syndrome
fed on toxic hangover: the oratorio of itinerant blues

herded onto the night train from Newcastle

I am almost reborn,
the three-year-old tonsillitis-suffering frame I once possessed
waking alone in the sterile darkness of a hospital ward
amongst a sea of crying children

back again

into the corridor of narcoleptic peddlers
all making their escape

eyes barely able to stray two feet from our own reflections
prisoners of our own window-seats
yet everyone taking the opportunity to reflect,
becoming a 15 hour Narcissus

we are at most and in solidarity
dishevelled emissaries
who smile a lavender facade
into the stale air about us
all aboard the night train from Newcastle

sortie

flying low now
minimalist altitude maintained

'tis better to stay low on the night run
with an attitude set on auto-pilot
we stay on alert

every retail-corner in this Australian landscape
has a liquor store

and thus,
an undeterminable charge of electricity
the kind of energy that snaps
a person
in two

good and evil
for better or worse

the spirit of the suburbs is exposing its dependency for booze
but
the suburbs are far
from asking for any help

the finder's fee

it's a dark little shoebox
of some human conditions,
the negative housing of thoughts, memory and pictures
of that single moment
that changed you
forever,
that finding of a body
the refuse of an evil act
milky dead eyes upon your living
and what you inherited
in that pool of blood and membrane
never fading but swirling
within midnight's plague

the unconscious rituals and lusting
to hold that person

you were before,
before someone renovated the inside of your head
so more dead bodies can be stored there,
or just replications of that same body maybe

one on top of the other
a light bulb left gently swinging in the center of the room
hanging
playing that same early morning glow
over and over
the picture of a thousand dark words and sins

a scene that money can't buy,
a finder's fee that can't be claimed

skeletons in the trunk

the lone riders can't escape the tunnel vision
cruising until the rubber subsides
and the bitumen is
no more

this is an endless midnight run for the driver
through the white of the eyes
as the closet at home has become overcrowded
and the skeletons are starting to appear
in the trunk

building a tar-scorching laureate of escapism
reality balanced on the needle of the fuel gauge
skeleton song to the black magic of the road,
a catatonic shell of rogue impetus

made slave to the demons of loneliness
a spirit purged on the bitumen pantomimes ahead

the thousand-yard stare

for Loretta

I remember Lou-Lou in a blue sarong
and a tow-truck driver
whose dirty jokes couldn't go wrong,
'cause at the beginning of the journey
there are no bad memories
of roadside love

but now, I've got the thousand-yard stare
'cause the breakdowns are just too frequent
stuck out here
on a fractured highway of angst

there's no more emergency phone calls,
the dial-tone has gone cold,
dead as the bitumen
no longer can I pick from the tar
inklings of love

so now, I've got the thousand-yard stare
down the endless road in my head
that I have to walk back alone
retinas burning
flanked by a red, rabbit-jacked landscape
while the crows swoop and pick
I'm wanting to say sorry, for all those breakdowns
I was just going blind
and now, on my own
it's hard,

finding it hard
finding my way home

king

leaving Bris Vegas
1am, Eastern Standard Time
my butt 10 inches off the bitumen
travelling at 100 klicks an hour
feet up on the dash
acting every bit like I think an immortal would
maybe?

for now though
this is living,
sun roof open
jet-stream preening the cigarette composites off my white suede
muse,
Georgia's in her own world
by my side
modelling a steering wheel
and a white straw cowboy hat,

she's wiggling to the woofers
this is living
ejected from the smoke-infested nightclubs
Kylie Minogue is taking us both home tonight
so I should *be so lucky!*

yet, all I can think about is the King;
I THINK,
THEREFORE I AM...

heaven is framed in the sun roof,
and as I look up and salute

the stars wink back
across Elvis' rhinestone ceiling

last exit to brisbane...

Boundary St

that forged black scratch

a vein from Southbank to West End
with a tail swallowed by the chocolate river

this is the line, the limit
where the dark-skin were told—

DO NOT CROSS!

a fence raised to protect the colonial domiciles of angels and
gadflies

and even today, at rush hour
that tar permanently keeps the scar alive
and the dead languages buried
to only escape in the bitumen heat-haze
and fall upon deaf ears
as this boundary continues to stay true
to its makers
denying the junkyard dingo
the treasures of the city
no access to Easy St
fringe-dwelling in white-light static
on the last exit to Brisbane.

hollow squall

Scarborough Marina, August 2001

Twilight is for the communion of soil and water. For a brief moment the hemorrhaging skin of the bay shares no separation with the failing land. This dark monotone body is redundant of inner-detail, sheltered by a violet ceiling and blessed by the evening star. A lone witness to the silent transformation, I had no intention of paying homage to the panorama of ink and sky. There was a blacker pool in the wake. A vision of my own emptiness for which there is no horizon line. This was a special place once, *but now*, all that resides here is a black and white photograph. A single frame of an embraced couple before a listless tide. The man was convinced that love is forever, unlike the fading picture in my mind's eye. As for the woman ... she set sail, to an ocean beyond, beyond the waves I tend.

My heavy heart beats for you; a black rock at the bottom of the sea.

smoke encrypted whispers

new poems 2004

warning:

The smoke from some of the pages in this collection contains, on average:

8 milligrams or less of tar—condensed smoke containing residue of life experience, including some agents that cause anxiety;

0.8 milligrams or less of nicotine—a poisonous and addictive drug that stains the settings within, encrypting moments with a semi-permanent fixture of tungsten glow;

10 milligrams or less of carbon monoxide—a deadly gas reducing the ability of blood to carry oxygen and a substance capable of inducing whispers that stutter across the conscience.

smoke signals

I remember construction cranes like herds of frozen praying-mantis, high on the steamy Bjelke-Petersen plateau above a brown snake-coiled river. It was from this view, at the age of 4, that I learnt to read the columns of Brisbane city. And from this view, I came to recognise the segregation of *Smoke*. *Black smoke* darkened the blue-collar suburbs, covering the workers in burnt-rubber cologne. Black smoke was saved for industrial accidents, or when a lower-income family had their fibro-lined house smothered in winter flames. But *white smoke*, white smoke plumed from chez-nouveau, white-collar fireplaces. White smoke belonged to European engines with a smooth choke. White smoke stayed behind the construction cranes where I imagined a life that would *never* depreciate. A place where children weren't scared of the dark. Beyond the white smoke was where I thought I would discover the *Lucky Country*

highrises dictate

a crow punctuates the sky

clouds await error

tigerland

for Graham Nunn

*'We didn't win many games,
but we never lost a fight!'*

Dad

I was born in Tigerland, on the south-side of Brisbane. Saturday mornings smelt of hardware compost and the static of horse racing. As kids, we bought nails for the cubby-house, grifted lucky-dips and scoured through Trash & Treasure. Under the orange and black stripes of sunset, bouncing off Mt Gravatt, were the colours on the jersey of Easts Leagues Club. That growling big-cat patch that really meant something to us all. My Dad, my uncles, my cousins, my memories all wear that jersey at one time or another. Those colours paved our streets. And from those streets, I was inspired by my first ghosts as they rose from the bitumen like O-rings of smoke.

*play hide and go seek
like colour within the petals
of a midnight bloom*

scared of the dark

I saw my first ghosts in Tigerland through halogen globes; Council buses projected spectral images onto my bedroom walls. I was often woken with static vision to see spirit-dances pepper my surroundings. Pneumatic hisses from the road outside, spitting through the darkness. Teeth-baring monsters; fangs that remained on the cogs working my mind, keeping me awake for years to come...

Dracula, witches, Bigfoot and
Bjelke-Petersen-police at my parents'
backdoor.

I covered my tracks with plastic army men but was only comfortable lying in the light on the cool floor of the backyard lawn, wondering who was a hero and who was a villain in the solar-flares of my consciousness. Who was I looking up to? In the light of day, they were probably the same dark horses who carried the eyes of my night...

*Every night prayers would be said
Within the gauze of a little boy's bed
When, lights out, a plague of darkness did spread:
The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost Keep us.
The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost Protect us.
The Father.
The Son.
The Holy Ghost, Amen.*

wecker road

for Ross Clark

The school nurse condemned me with her simple prognosis, ‘tree-trunk legs’, and they *were* heavy too, but ever inquisitive, I had them drag me down Wecker Road, that one unsealed road on the fringe of my childhood. It contained every urban legend conceivable: devil worshipping, *hoons* in cars, bodies in mangled wrecks, bunyips that swam in its creeks. Brown haze shadowed the sky from deliberately lit grass fires; explosions rumbled the eastern horizon from the nearby rifle range. We even uncovered broken and discarded tombstones underneath one of the high-voltage towers down there. That buzzing we’d feel in our teeth from the static charge after we’d stand there too long, frozen, as the cables sang *wind-blow*, while we pondered the unknown which stifles the world of adolescence ... that same buzzing reverberated in my nightmares.

*mysteriously
moving the world around us
an unknown power*

cribb island

For a while, Dad worked in a ghost town. He'd take us there on weekends after the government moved an entire community. Empty building after empty building, like some big science-fiction filmset. Wandering through deserted houses we were the first Aboriginal people to analyse the remains of the first Europeans to be cleared from this soil. Streets strewn with all sorts of treasures; Armageddon with its apocalyptic merchandising. Earthmoving equipment droned in the distance, always closing in. And the birds: dark-wings scuttled from silent twisters of smouldering debris and detritus. Doorways whistling breezes, a cadence of toothless old skeletons that filtered the smoke encrypted whispers of this mass grave. I think of those whispers every time my plane lands on the unmarked tombstones of one of Brisbane's least known burial grounds.

*on deserted streets
forgotten newspapers dance,
dust keeps its appeal*

capalaba

At Capalaba down by the bay, we had a house on a lake. I hated the trees there. At twilight, twisted human faces peered at me from the bark of their trunks. An old uncle from Arnhem Land came to visit and taught us how to make spears from saplings. He passed on the riddles of fire, that the peak of the flame hardened the spearheads the best, and that the ghosts of time were all around us. Weeks after he left, a blaze engulfed the bush. Trees toppled in the middle of the night. I ran into Mum and Dad's bed chased by the heavy groans of falling giants. Years later, one of my brothers saw that same house on *Australia's Most Wanted*—about the unsolved murder of a woman in the kitchen. Mum and Dad could never explain why all those years ago we moved out of the house at one in the morning ... And that's why that old uncle from Arnhem Land would never sleep under our haunted roof.

in all directions

night speaks in the darkest tones;

a little boy hides

rip

standing under the ex-wife's house concrete pillars covered in the hieroglyphics of grubby little hands hanging pieces of antique chairs that we had planned to restore together arm-rests of that old couch, the old dining table that belonged in our first house, silent in this elephant's graveyard of carved husks there are the spider-legs of a hotplate that fed the guests at our little boy's Naming Ceremony when suddenly I realise, I'm caught! gazing over the past this ensemble of assorted relics she's been busy under here making the sander scream the electric plane has been driving the kids nuts as she shaves the timber the skins of furniture from one of my lives golden curls of treated pine sit at the floor of the workbench I remember reading Robert Adamson's poetry the day she called it quits over and over, I read the poems about a troubled boy and his blond mop of curls I look down and my own little boy has found a pile of shavings grabs a handful in his muffin-fist holds it at me falling through his grasp these curls, What are they Daddy?! They're pieces of my brain, I tell him and he tosses his fist into the air particles swab us like pixie dust the afternoon sun steals through catches the golden flakes and my little boy's toothy grin he wakes me before I drown in a tide of old regrets

Look here Dad ... I'm playing with your memories!

smoke water

for Mum

Sitting with a colleague in a bar, she turns to me, sort of puzzled, ‘You don’t say much sometimes ... I never know what you’re thinking.’ After World War II, my Grandpop didn’t say much either. When Mum was a little girl, she said he would come home, silent and black, after a day in the smoldering sugar-cane fields. A resonance of sweet smoke followed him. He only ever talked to me about fishing. After dinner, we’d sit on the front steps of the old house where he’d roll a smoke, and then, only then, he’d really come to life. I was amazed by his old body, constant bloody cuts from labouring in a brick-works, and yet his mind was always elsewhere. I’d like to think his thoughts stayed on the water, quietly tending his line. And that was the greatest gift my Grandpop would ever leave me ... his gift of silence.

*fish swallow mirrors
cloud water reflections,
the past drowns in grey*

author's notes #1

Childhood anxieties would eventually help me realise the power of imagination.

For a better part of my life I was terrified of the dark. A black, stagnant pool that I named 'Midnight's Plague' smothered me at bedtime and paved the way for many hideous characters, which I met nightly when I tempted to cross the bridge of my mind.

To counter these fiends, I built machines in little boxes—fantastic contraptions that I made from the components of old televisions, radios and motorised toys.

For years I rigged these gadgets, hoping to snare the whispers of my demons as they crawled out from under the bed, drawn to the warm, uneven breath from my tonsillitis-ridden throat.

The chance encounter of hearing these whispers was what I feared most.

But, as chance encounters happen, it was ultimately the construction of a poem that enabled me to finally capture a whisper. One breath, deep inside of me, always within my possession.

darkroom

I had to grow up someday ... so I moved to Boundary Street, West End, in the last residence on the old bitumen line. I'm in a forgotten hotel that's croaking grey, like a decaying plantation in Indochina. Now I live on the brown river, this is *my* outpost on the dark snake. And at 31 I may not speak the rhetoric of ghosts, but here, I can understand the tongues of mangroves, or what mangroves there are left ... not enough of them to cleanse the brown waters of the darkroom in my head, developing countless images of everything I see. Rain falls on my first night here, so I have wine and a cigar on the balcony in praise of my dark water muse and toast the matrix of her ephemeral dot paintings.

*Small brown whirlpools spin,
away from the dock,
reminds me of the Mundagurri
that creature that haunted every waterhole
in our childhood;
when our parents weren't watching us*

fisherman islands

It was where my brother caught the tiger's skin, shoved his entire arm down this hole and pulled out the abandoned mojo of a venomous snake. Fisherman Islands on the gape of the brown river, land reclaimed from the sea. This place was a construct of dirt, sewerage works and shipping terminals, scarecrows of smokestacks. Void of life ... void of soul. The deadest soil you could ever walk upon. No substance. No song. But we explored the shoreline anyway, turning up the jetsam of Brisbane, listening to the mystic whispers from the mouth of the river. Slowly, fishermen waltzed on the pipes of the dredging-lines, their forms a distorted mirage in the midday heat. Maybe they too were props? Cardboard cut-outs on this man-made archipelago. Artificial land with its artificial spirits, and the luck that floated here, with nothing to guide it.

*the anglers are poised
like hungry cranes on the tide,
fish lift their spirits*

paper trails to midnight

One day, you try to get up ... 'cause your own darkness tides at your feet. I've had high-water lines at my ankles, the dreams of cement shoes, and when I'm stuck, I can't move. Dreams leave their spawn in the mixed-up sheets, but *she'll* come home one day to change them, and unexpectedly *she* came home, telling me to get up, 'cause I hadn't been moving. While the sun is free, *she* said, 'Move!' Marking my way, a spent cigarette on Boundary Street ... and how a snail trail can reveal a glint of silver, burning the retinas of your mind's eye blind when you write for days, on the paper trails to midnight

the butterfly's wings
a lifetime to fold the seams
of a day and night

author's notes #2

All good wordsmiths get 'the thousand-yard stare'. That's when you're looking beyond the page. Some writers never cross beyond the second or third dimension of a page. After a while, writing on a 'rack' is like reaching into yourself and arranging the words on the inside of your ribcage ... you're looking out ... visualising the rack and how those words translate to the reader, how those words feel on you. You're always looking out, in and beyond.

The ribcage offers some choice 'wire' for the word. But if you're going to use the ribcage as a rack, don't use permanent ink, and what I mean by 'permanent' is overloading your rack with the dark ink that stains for life. I started making my own rules about writing and devising my own nomenclature: a 'rack' is a page, a 'wire' is a blank line. A 'hump' is a full-stop.

After words are yanked from the pool in my head, I hang them out on the 'wire' to dry, and then after the sun goes down, I throw them on the 'rack' and stretch them out a bit.

ghosts of boundary street

New year's day, 2003. The sun was loud, but as bland as yesterday, last year, 2002AD. In the early postmeridian hours, the temperature took advantage of the deserted streets, spirit-dancing inches above the bitumen, a seductive helix that undulated on the horizon, like an exotic dancer, *you can look ... but you can't touch!* And the breeze was curt, as scarce as traffic on this public holiday. Houses side by side vibrated ever so gently. The lizard rhythms of lounging bodies behind screen doors, lethargic organic masses that slither, physically and emotionally depleted in the lull of celebrations. The siesta of new year's day ... the only moment on the Australian social calendar when every citizen is almost equal; *hungover we are united!* Trekking down Boundary Street, West End, Brisbane, the residue of Moet on my forehead, the cinder of last year's resolutions in my scalp. I needed coffee to pull me up as the bitumen pulled me down. One litre of milk was going to cost me 10% extra for wisdom: a public holiday surcharge worth the returns of a frown. When suddenly my ears popped! A lone shark hooked the rise in front of me, tearing through the glutinous skin of Dreamtime and Earth, scattering the wings of those haze-angels with a high-octane Beowulf growl. Veering past me, I did not wave, because none of the passengers wore a face—expressionless. Just white linoleum wrapped from foreheads to jowls. I stared down into the puddle in the gutter. It was decorated with a petrol-based rainbow. My reflection was disappointing. I hadn't changed since last year. But if I'd stayed long enough, my reflection might vary. Oil takes longer to evaporate. The litter in the street ruffled briefly in the car's wake. There was a saunter of hooves from synthetic leviathans. A cool vent of air stroked my ankles as the car disappeared into a solar flare on the next rise. The silt of silence resettled.

*empty coffee cups
blown across the gutter
song of city ghosts*

dog tired tune

Maroon tentacles languished upon a surface pledged for human trampling. Veneer walls held up ceiling that was originally pearl before the tincture of cigarettes invaded it. A window hampered by vintage blinds was reinforced with a lifeless drape of lace curtain. Natural light was prohibited, but traffic and insect noise presented itself to the room at unregulated intervals. For what should have been a sterile environment, it lay strewn with the bric-a-brac of a forgotten fashion. A gang of string instruments, rudely piled against a wall, necks sprained and bellies bloated. Grey soot-caked frets smiled dog-teeth ivory. And as sleeping giants are portrayed, a grossly inflated antique television was the most formidable furnishing of the room. It wept an odour of electrocuted dust through aged vacuum technology. *He* was placed in the opposing corner: the Proprietor. An old man of tubes, frail body commissioned by synthetic vines. The ruins of a cursed temple outwitted by a jungle of life-support equipment. The rhythmic portions of his machine-aided breath sang in unison to the cricket-beat of the excluded dusk air.

*broken guitar string
falling upon the floor
makes little music*

when I crossed the ditch...

my arrival in Aotearoa, Wellington, *New Zealand*: I checked into a room at Booklovers B&B, positioned in the hills above a turquoise harbour. A cable-car rattled past and the world shook, and then a radio spluttered, ‘the second Gulf War has begun...’

Nothing could have prepared me for the *marae*. Amongst a group of visitors waiting some distance from a great hall of wood carvings, wondering all the time what the Maori elders would do with me. Large pines towered in the hills around us and poles carved in respected totems studded the landscape, sentinels of an old, quiet spirit. A young woman emerged from the *marae* calling, wailing, and as a group our footsteps automatically carried on her haunting cry, reeling us in ... *te hongī, te haka* and the elders, all waiting to meet us, ‘We knew your spirits were out there ... we’ve known that you’ve always been out there. Welcome home.’

On my first reading in a Wellington bar, I was caught in a reef of wordplay. Some words jagged, some soft; this poetry of allsorts. And as I floated a multitude of coloured smiles played with me. Smiles like schools of small, beautiful fish. This bartender, with a grin as wide as a semi-trailer, kept me stocked on a good Australian red—‘Your money’s *no good* here, Bro!’

author's notes #3

I remember one of my first jobs. I was published in a magazine with a bunch of established writers, most of them with several novels under their belt, whilst I had a handful of unpublished poems. As contributors to this certain issue, we were all invited to read at an official launch. I'd only read once before, in a small art gallery on the Gold Coast, and there I was, amongst a group of writers with their short stories and articles, about to perform in my first literary cabaret. I had only one poem in the magazine. I had one shot. The stage lights were bright, like I was shooting straight into the sun. I picked my target. He was the biggest, most obnoxious-looking punter in the audience; a man who sipped his Chardonnay with the air of someone well-read and cultured. Each writer before me had read with spirit and arrogance. I breathed easy, and squeezed the poem out gently. I had this punter's blank face in my cross-hairs and as the poem hit its conclusion, his complexion exploded in sheer appreciation. Applause followed. I hit my target. One message, one story, one stanza.

the dust company

It was labelled a 'meteorological anomaly', a dust cloud red banking the southeast Queensland sky; afternoon a crimson dusk. Inspecting Boundary Street, the air lathered rouge, the view distorted beyond the tunnel's arch of Dornoch Terrace. While in the house, the television showed similar dust storms: American artillery barrages in the hills of Afghanistan. Presented with the cobble stones and rustic mortar around Boundary Street's bridge, I am also drawn elsewhere, my mind inspired by Victorian architecture and Jack the Ripper's dark paved streets shrouded in mist. Through filters of red dust, I imagine his fog-tainted whispers, '*Catch me if you can?!*' But this is not London, this is far from Afghanistan ... though red dust fills the air that is occupied by Osama Bin Laden's phantom and George Bush Jnr has got everybody by the tongue.

*our world is clouded,
the dust smiles evenly,
who is friend or foe?*

from boundary street, west end, to the berlin wall, east germany

0.1

In East Berlin, I lost my fear of the dark, as easily as someone who might lose their passport or a shade of identity that has defined them for so long. I did not hear any whispers here. I met Nick Cave's stick-insect babies fingering the grey palette of the streets; every shade of grey was alive! The kill-zones were left bare, these blocks of dirt where the landmines had been removed like an unfinished pock-marked canvas of Western Desert dot-paintings. Boundary Street, West End, was our Berlin Wall, lavish signs depicting the redundancy of ghosts.

0.2

Concrete sentinels stand to attention on both sides of Karl Marx Allee. The old headquarters of *these* secrets and *those* secrets, reminding me of the midden-mounds back home, shell upon shell, where the great chiefs once feasted, discarding the charges of their hunger. In East Berlin, I began to renovate my Dreamtime, stripping the veneer of my engine room and all the skins of my past. A journalist welcomed me home(?) *'If you have one drop of German blood, you are ALL German!'* And it was as casual and as sure as being black, like I'd never left the placebo of Boundary Street.

0.3

From Boundary Street, West End, to the Berlin Wall, East Germany, entropy caught me. Now, the atmosphere of Communist 'curfews' are lost, especially when you step into an American-franchise 24-hour service station with 30 gas pumps and microwave tacos. I wanted to taste so much more! Walls and boundaries are the blemishes of our history and the flavour is generic. We are all given band-aids to place over the wounds of our ancestors; used band-aids will be the bookmarks of my history. I was looking for something in Berlin, but a colleague told me I should just relax and have another drink before I go. I'm not going to find it. *'When the Communists left, they took the barb-wire, they took the missiles, they took the tanks. And the ghosts of our loved ones they had killed.'*

snapshots

On Boundary Street, the police painted the outline of a homeless man's body on the pavement where it stayed until it was overpowered by the shadow of a stylish townhouse complex

On a remaining segment of the Berlin Wall, children's paintings cover a sacred place where artists once risked their lives to paint poetic gestures of defiance

Fireworks shoot from retired gun-nests in celebration of an infamous bridge and its macabre role during the Cold War

During a street festival, a group of Aboriginal adults and children welcome strangers to their country, dancing barefoot on the black tarmac of Boundary Street, where only 40 years ago their ancestors would have been shot at.

aunty grey smoke

On a dank afternoon, an old tribal woman, shrouded in society's skin, raised a heavy head and shook the silt in Brunswick Street Mall. She peppered a weary audience with a volley of hard moans. Peak-hour traffic was forced into a saunter of whispers. Joe Public don't know how to relate to tribal people, and now there was one weaving a dreaming-throat at them, almost alien in this occupied land. Sitting in a bar with my eyes closed, I pictured a cloud of red earth spiralling from pursed, deep-purple lips. With my eyes closed, I actually noticed the sudden cackle of crows. Dark birds gathering above, whining along in the grey-cloud drizzle, mimics to the haunting chant of an old tribal woman. 'Smoke?' she asked the audience, 'You got a smoke for me?' breaking into a howl that fed a low rhythmic pulse. Her eyes swept the domain, and I'm sure, right then, she cursed us all.

*curses touch the sky
higher than any car horn
bad moon arising*

author's notes—conclusion

My bedroom back at my parents' house is a cemetery for virtual-reality pets. Laptop, palm-top, mini-disc recording equipment, cameras, guitars—all these things that I thought years ago would help me to write ... but no, when you're in the field all you need is a reliable pen, plenty of notepads and a good dictionary. Maybe I'm still rigging those gadgets trying to catch some whispers?

Travelling around the place, experiencing the darkness of different hemispheres, I lost my fear of night. Living on the Brisbane River, I can attest that it has its own sirens, like those in the old Greek classics, and their songs at night helped me write and showed me that night can't sit still on the tide.

Living back in Tigerland, the only whispers I hear in the night are on the breath of my little boy when he mumbles to the spirits that playfully encroach upon his dreamtime.

When we smoke the houses that our loved ones have lived in, and say 'Yenandi' in the old tongue, we're not evicting them from this plain, but in the smoke, we're ensuring their whispers continue the journey beyond ... beyond this secular world.

revolver

From my balcony I can read a strong poem that the moon has pasted on the river. Everything is quiet. Now and then, a wave breaks the message, temporarily changing the font from **bold** to *italics*. The moon in its crescent appearance is the precision blade of a Shaolin warrior. I'm concerned that if I gaze too long, I may carelessly jag my retinas on its razor points, pierced globes adding vitreous humor into this serious stretch of river. A mullet leaps from the water and reconstructs the moon's message; it is now the sound of one silver hand clapping. Above, an anonymous comet breaches the sky a small eternity, but shooting stars don't have the recoil of a poem executed in the lull of moon fire.

oval mirror lights
seduction on night-water,
flagrant moon kisses

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